

Phoenix

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CAREERS AND STUDENT WELLBEING

**Closing the gap: Careers support
for students with mental health
conditions**

**Beyond business fundamentals:
Supporting graduate freelancer
resilience**

**Put on your own oxygen mask
first: Creating cultural shifts to
prioritise wellbeing**



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In this issue of Phoenix, we profile the interaction between careers and employability support and student wellbeing and explore how careers professionals are increasingly supporting students to develop resilience when facing career uncertainty and anxiety. We have seen widespread reporting on the impact of the pandemic, uncertain labour market and cost-of-living crisis on student wellbeing and mental health. Careers services are working with students and graduates with increasingly complex needs, potentially accessing support from a range of professional services teams. Over the following pages, read how AGCAS member services have responded to these myriad challenges.

Cross-institutional working is a theme throughout this issue. Careers services are working in changed ways with student wellbeing services to provide holistic support. There are examples of cross-university working groups, new roles spanning teams and co-delivered workshops and courses to deliver maximum impact. We have a guest article from TASO on their research into student mental health interventions. Read in this piece how cross-university interventions, involving a range of experts, build communities of staff and ensure better student engagement.

We also profile initiatives introduced to develop student resilience, informed by student voice. These include innovative leadership and skills programmes, online hubs to maximise accessibility and a collaborative programme for prospective freelancers to create entrepreneurs with the mindset and skills necessary for success. You can read about targeted resilience interventions for different student groups, including international students and disabled students.

Staff wellbeing is also paramount. In this issue, members reflect on the notion of 'putting on your own oxygen mask first', describing how they are ensuring staff are in a good position to support students and graduates. Articles share examples of how to sustain morale, reduce stress and share practice within teams. King's College London share their experience of gaining University Mental Health Chartership and explain the contributions made by the careers service.

We have a new 'Developing you' feature from Dr. Tania Lyden, CEIGHE course leader. Read about unhelpful thinking habits and how to overcome them. I hope this issue gives you a lot to think about and inspiration to take some steps for your own wellbeing. Thanks to everyone who has contributed.

Lucy Begley, Editor

Mission impossible? DEVELOPING RESILIENCE AND WELLBEING SKILLS FOR FUTURE LEADERS



CATHY MOORE, Employability Consultant at Ulster University in Belfast, outlines how she collaborated with employers, graduates, academic staff, and a student wellbeing project manager to create and roll out a graduate resilience programme for final year students in 2019. Over five years, the programme has been implemented across three out of four faculties, eight schools and 16 disciplines.

The lightning pace of workplace change and difficulties posed by the pandemic went beyond imagination, and for transitioning students this contributed to increased wellbeing challenges. Nevertheless, employers expect graduates to be 'work ready', with resilience being one of [the top desired skills](#). Our graduate resilience project aims, through emancipatory pedagogy, to develop transitioning students' understanding of resilience and wellbeing and prepare them for the workplace.

CREATING THE PROGRAMME

I worked with academic staff, our student wellbeing project manager, a mindfulness and trauma coach and the head of human resources in a global company over five months to co-create and produce materials. The range of experience across the team facilitated agreement that [emancipatory pedagogy](#) would be key. This approach ensured that the activities produced meaningful personal reflections on existing behaviours.

The two pilot workshops, each lasting three hours, were titled 'the resilient graduate' and 'the mindful leader'. They aimed to define and polish professional leadership competencies and facilitate the journey into the world of work. The resilient graduate workshop was about being present and focused – students had to submit mobile phones! Students also undertook a range of activities including grounding exercises, self-awareness as a leader, a [Lego team building challenge](#) and learnt emotional resilience. The second workshop covered topics such as effectiveness as a leader (incorporating a 'mirror triangle' activity), workplace conflict, and fixed vs growth mindsets.

ROLLING OUT THE PROGRAMME

The workshops were piloted in spring 2019 with 119 students on two core business modules. I co-delivered the first with two academic staff and three external experts, then held a focus group including all facilitators, three academic observers and participants. A similar focus group including two observing employability consultants was held after the second workshop. Student feedback requested more activities and fewer facilitators, and staff suggested re-ordering several activities. This feedback informed the re-design of the second version of the project which was delivered across three faculties to 409 students on ten courses in 2019/20. I trained four of my fellow employability consultants to co-deliver across our four campuses.

The pandemic necessitated migration to a virtual platform, but we wanted to retain integrity of student attainment. We met through the summer of 2020 to re-visit learning outcomes and re-design both workshops. This version was delivered to 350 students across seven courses in three schools. Student participation was high (90%) as they could remain anonymous while contributing to sensitive subjects. Student and staff feedback indicated that, despite concerns, subject content lent itself effectively to online learning. One student offered:

"I loved the interactivity, and being online I could participate in everything without people seeing me. I liked being anonymous for whiteboard activities, I feel we could all be totally honest."

The most up to date version of the programme is face-to-face, with further participant feedback integrated into new active sessions. This has included seeking an alternative material for team building (after Covid, no-one wanted to use sticky Lego parts) and a deeper exploration of the fixed/growth mindset has been popular.



SUCCESSSES AND CHALLENGES

The collaborative approach worked well, drawing on the team's strengths to successfully deliver the project. As a central department, we could upskill colleagues and embed the workshops more widely. Focus group evaluations indicated that the workshops actively embedded practical coping strategies for resilience and mindfulness. Graduates expressed how transformative the workshops were in developing self-awareness and resilience. For example:

"I have to learn to deal with my anger. I was so stressed and ... angry with the rest of the team when it was me that was the problem!"

"It is easy to blame others ... and so challenging as you could shout all you wanted at others but ... it's about understanding what other people are thinking..."

Mentimeter provided excellent quantitative evaluations of learning. The 2020/21 and 2021/22 feedback reported shifts in level of understanding of stress and coping strategies to calm down (pre-68%, post-94%), appreciation of emotional self-awareness (pre-31%, post-66%) and capacity to use techniques to enhance resilience and wellbeing (pre-68%, post-95%). Overall, 91% of students stated that the workshops were useful.

A quote provided in July 2021 from a 2019 graduate further evidences longitudinal impact:

"I just wanted to highlight how much the workshops helped me become work-ready and a resilient leader ... Being able to understand how to deal with stress, rejection, trauma ... and meditation has all been so useful since entering the workplace. These skills have transformed how I manage myself and the wellbeing of the teams I now lead..."

“ Graduates expressed how transformative the workshops were in developing self-awareness and resilience ”

Challenges included the emancipatory learning approach taking some academics outside their comfort zone and resistance to teaching time being used to embed into the curriculum. We were also concerned about student apathy and disengagement where they 'don't know what they don't know' regarding resilience. However, we recognised that embedding fully in the curriculum results in higher attendance and more meaningful engagement alongside aligning the workshops to an element of assessment credit.

Involving module coordinators was also key as they established a relationship with the students, further encouraging attendance. An important lesson learned was the need for faculty staff to work collaboratively with employability consultants to draw on their expertise. Academic staff involved in co-delivering needed to appreciate the sensitive nature of the content and signpost to student wellbeing services for appropriate safeguarding.

SECTOR RECOGNITION

This programme has been shared at the Advance HE Employability Symposium (2021), AGCAS Annual Conference (2021), CABS Teaching and Learning Conference (2022) and AHECS Conference (2024). It was also included in Advance HE's Literature Review on Employability 2016-2021 as an example of specific impact in relation to embedding employability. It has been a labour of love for us but rewarding to see the longer-term impact of embedding employability skills and resilience within Ulster University's curriculum. This year's final-year students are the seventh cohort to experience the graduate resilience programme so we will continue to gather longitudinal evidence of impact.



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EVOLVING CAREER WELLBEING SUPPORT



HANNAH WOOLLEY, Careers Consultant and VICKY HARSANT, Advantage Award Manager, share how the career wellbeing offer at the University of Nottingham was established and has since grown. Below they show how the university has responded to shifting contexts and listened to the student voice, as well as detailing their plans to continue its development by combining professional expertise and offering holistic support to students.

In 2019, we noted an increase in students expressing anxiety or exhibiting stress in relation to exploring career options and making decisions. We also saw students feeling under pressure to secure employment, transition to the workplace, and forge a successful career path. Around the same time, the university's counselling service spotted similar themes cropping up during their interactions with students.

Over the next 18 months, in consultation with counselling colleagues and the university's support and wellbeing team, we developed an online hub in Moodle that students could dip into 24/7 to find resources, activities and forums that would help them to navigate career-related challenges.

“ We encourage students to prioritise wellbeing when engaging in career-related activities ”

Topics include navigating uncertainty or pressure from others when making career decisions, overcoming negative self-talk when making applications, managing interview stress, bouncing back after receiving a rejection, being kind to yourself when starting a new job, and dealing with impostor phenomenon in the workplace. The hub launched in 2021, along with an optional Nottingham Advantage Award module for students who wanted to engage more fully and accredit their activity.

SPOTTING HOT TOPICS

The feedback we gathered through consultation with colleagues helped us to identify and prioritise the development of resources for inclusion within the hub. The resources were split across three key sections: exploring options, applying for jobs and wellbeing at work. Over the years, Moodle engagement data, along with our own observations, has helped us to see which themes have resonated most with students. Topics relating to perfectionism, procrastination, external pressures, and aspects of the recruitment process including interview stress and managing rejection have been steadily popular across time. During the pandemic, students engaged more frequently with topics relating to career uncertainty and overwhelm, and post-pandemic, we noted an increase in engagement with topics relating to impostor phenomenon and self-perception.

EMBEDDING STUDENT VOICE

Based on these insights, we felt there was potential to create additional resources to help students explore popular topics in more detail. So, keen to include student input in our ongoing design and development, during the last academic year we undertook a student co-creation project and worked with six students from different faculties to design three new interactive resources for the hub. This provided paid work experience and an opportunity for students to share their lived experience whilst contributing to the creation of new education tools.

We found this hugely valuable because it gave us detailed and authentic insight into current student concerns and ideas for future projects. The student evaluation at the end of the project was also really positive. Students highlighted that the experience had allowed them to utilise and develop creative skills, make a valuable contribution and to think more deeply about their own career wellbeing. Students also valued the opportunity to collaborate with staff and other students, develop communication and feedback skills and build their own self-confidence.

ANCHORING IN UNIVERSITY STRATEGY

The university's [Student Mental Health and Wellbeing Strategy](#) sets out a whole institution approach to creating a healthy, supportive and inclusive environment that enables students to thrive and to reach their full potential. Working with colleagues from other departments to share insights and pool expertise has allowed us to align our career wellbeing offer with this vision. Through consultation, we agreed that resources would adopt a positive tone that encourages students to prioritise wellbeing when engaging in career-related activities and highlight a range of university services so that students could make quick connections and find any additional support they needed.



More recently, we have engaged with colleagues who are leading the university's efforts to gain University Mental Health Chartership to discuss how we can continue to contribute to wider efforts to support the overall wellbeing of students. This approach has proved helpful in terms of increasing buy-in and visibility.

LOOKING AHEAD

This year, we're again collaborating with the university's counselling service. To complement the existing self-directed activities offered within the career wellbeing hub, we plan to co-deliver a workshop that focuses on applying self-compassion when exploring the concept of career success. Drawing on both career guidance and therapeutic counselling approaches, we hope to offer students an opportunity to identify strategies that will help them to dial down negative self-talk and adopt a kinder, more mindful approach; introduce playfulness, creativity and freedom to their career thinking; build trust in their own capacity to thrive in the workplace and develop a meaningful and satisfying career.

Additionally, we're also keen to continue to offer students opportunities to explore emerging topics that could present career-related challenges. For example, the growth of artificial intelligence and how this is used in recruitment.

ONGOING REFLECTIONS

As careers professionals, we know that students' perceptions and expectations of work change over time, so building a digital resource has proved successful as it has allowed us to pick up themes and explore questions as they emerge. Plus, it provides a vehicle to offer accessible and inclusive wellbeing and careers support to students, whilst also encouraging the development of resilience and self-motivation, which are seemingly increasingly cited by employers as priority attributes for the future workforce.

Today, the Moodle hub has 544 enrolled students, and 87 students have engaged with the Nottingham Advantage Award module. However, our work is not finished. We continue to see this as an evolving offer and are excited to see it grow further. Watch this space!



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What do we need TO DELIVER BETTER MENTAL HEALTH INTERVENTIONS?



TASO Transforming Access
and Student Outcomes
in Higher Education

TATJANA DAMJANOVIC, Research Officer at the Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO), considers how TASO's research on student mental health might inform future interventions. Though there is no silver bullet for mental health support, she outlines some possible strategies that would improve the way interventions are designed and delivered in the face of resource constraints and changing student needs.

The landscape of mental health support within universities and colleges is changing rapidly. Earlier this year, we published findings from an extensive [qualitative study](#) looking at the process of delivering and evaluating interventions. We found that there is a changing student body, and rising demands on services, particularly since the pandemic. Alongside this, we know that the consequences of poor student mental health go beyond a student's time studying: the [Resolution Foundation's recent report](#) shows that mental health difficulties are affecting young people's ability to enter the labour market.

Now, more than ever, there is a need for university departments and services to work in partnership to deliver effective support to students to give them the best chance of success. But higher education providers are faced with a challenge in adapting to these changes in the face of resourcing constraints.

WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Last year at TASO, we conducted research into what works for student mental health and wellbeing by scrutinising the evidence on a broad variety of interventions. We developed a toolkit and resources that aim to support practitioners, policy makers and researchers in making evidence-based decisions when it comes to mental health and wellbeing support. To find out more about this project, check out our [website](#).

Our toolkit clearly shows that there are a number of promising interventions for students, which have been implemented widely and evaluated rigorously, including psychological and psychoeducational interventions. However, there are significant gaps in the current evidence, and for many types of interventions we are missing rigorous evaluations based in the UK.

What we know from our qualitative research is that the delivery and evaluation of student support is caught between resourcing restrictions, siloed organisational structures, inadequate data systems and debates around how to understand and conceptualise mental health. We found that the combination of these factors means that practitioners have to make some difficult choices regarding who to support, how to support them and to what extent. The resulting risk is that students might not receive the mental health support they need.

“ **Practitioners are adapting to the changing needs of students in many creative ways** ”



WHERE DO WE GO NEXT?

Our findings point to the benefits of collaborative working across the university. But what would holistic support mean for careers services? To begin with, support would not be restricted to any one service. We found that interventions that span across the university, involving multiple departments and services to design, deliver and signpost to an intervention ensure better student engagement. This approach builds small communities of staff across the university that work like small networks of care, building bridges between siloed departments and services and easing the pressures off individuals providing support.

Collaborating in this way is not always easy, and we found that practitioners have to navigate numerous hurdles. For example, we found that there can be some debate around the use of clinical language. In one case where an intervention was co-designed between an academic skills service and a wellbeing service, a participant remembered an early conflict between the two departments regarding the kind of language used to promote the intervention. While one department preferred the clarity of clinical language such as calling a workshop 'managing my anxiety', the other department felt this was too negative, and preferred a focus on fitness such as 'writing gyms'. With student consultation showing that the differences in terminology had an impact on which students engaged with the intervention and how they did so, getting the language right was an important piece of the puzzle. Joint projects need to be planned carefully, and preferably in collaboration with student representatives.

WHAT MIGHT WE NEED ON THE WAY?

We found that the stigma around mental health support is a common barrier for students to declare difficulties and engage with support. There were a number of examples of 'stealth' interventions that were not marketed to students as mental health support but instead as interventions aimed at improving skills, confidence and employability. While some practitioners found this problematic because it plays into the stigma by avoiding open discussion regarding mental health, other practitioners argued that this made interventions accessible to populations of students who would otherwise be reluctant to engage with support, such as male students.

These findings show that there are many creative ways in which practitioners are adapting to the changing needs of students. Whether you choose to name an intervention as a mental health intervention or not, each decision comes with its complexities. What is important is how those difficult decisions are made. The first question for careers services may be to interrogate which groups of students they need to target in particular and what kind of support may suit them. These decisions should be evidence based, drawing on multiple resources such as student consultations, consultations with other departments, previous evaluation examples and [TASO's Student Mental Health toolkit](#). From there, a collaborative approach can ensure that interventions fit your students in your institution.

An example of practice

In 2021, the University of East Anglia introduced a student wellbeing training team into its wellbeing department. The intervention consists of the wellbeing training team creating and delivering content related to wellbeing via several channels such as regular social media posts, a monthly podcast, a YouTube channel, pop up wellbeing events, workshop events and timetabled sessions under an early intervention strategy. To do this, the team has worked across the university, collaborating with the Students Union, clubs and societies and academic departments. The team's evaluation has found that this new strategy has led to a significant increase in participation and further evaluation will show the longer-term effects on student outcomes. To find out more about this and many other interventions, see the [examples of practice page](#) on our website.



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The University Mental Health Charter: A WHOLE UNIVERSITY APPROACH



ANNA FAVALESSA, JAI SHAH and SUE MOSELEY, Careers Consultant Team Leaders at King's College London, share what their careers and employability service delivers as part of a whole university approach to student wellbeing and mental health.

In Spring 2024, King's College London was awarded the Student Minds University Mental Health Charter, joining the nine other universities which are currently award holders. We share the actions we are taking to build on the recommendations of the Charter and discuss how we can support our own wellbeing in order to provide high quality careers support.

A WHOLE UNIVERSITY APPROACH

To sustain others, we need to sustain ourselves. Research suggests that 'there is a clear and explainable relationship between staff wellbeing and student wellbeing' (Advance HE Education for Mental Health Toolkit), and there are a variety of ways that we address staff and student wellbeing.

We tap into the resources of the whole university to minimise overwhelm. King's has a pyramid of support for both student and staff mental health and wellbeing, covering a spectrum of mental health and wellbeing concerns. We actively keep in touch with other support teams so that we know where and how to refer students and can do that with care.

We make sure that our team knows what to do if a student is in crisis; the practical step of watching a short video together about the 'student of concern' process and how to use it is an example of how we put our good intentions into practice. The message is that no-one is expected to deal with a demanding situation alone.

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**To sustain others, we need
to sustain ourselves**

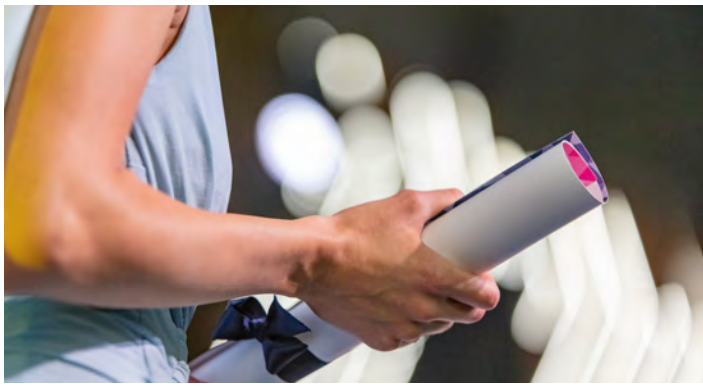
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PUTTING WELLBEING FIRST

As managers and colleagues, we put wellbeing first. We have regular one-to-ones, and wellbeing is part of these conversations. We have immediate mechanisms to alleviate pressures, such as reducing or removing work or getting a colleague in to support. We have a 'back up' careers consultant for student appointments, who keeps their calendar clear of meetings (a wellbeing step in itself, often enabling valuable desk-time!) so that they can support if needed.

Students increasingly share personal challenges with their mental health. While many are temporary and related to recent circumstances like the cost-of-living, some students experience a crisis. After an appointment, this can weigh on our minds as practitioners. A member of staff is always available to debrief, while action learning sets, team meetings and peer reviews give space to explore themes and issues. Our current system is, however, imperfect. Relying on trust and the will to support each other requires a combination of psychological safety and courage from our team towards one another. Trust is critical, especially when we feel vulnerable after difficult conversations with clients. While working hybrid brings both benefits and risks, it can present a barrier for team members who may be newer or have fewer established relationships within the team.





MENTAL HEALTH CHARTER AWARD

King's bid for the award was put together over several months and the careers and employability service contributed in a variety of ways. We recognised the importance of this award and identified a small team to both keep in touch with the project team managing the bid and contribute to meetings and discussions in a relevant way.

Our work (whether in the curriculum or alongside, digital or in person) is informed by learning design principles which include scaffolding learning, encouraging self-efficacy, enabling students to get back on track and positive progression. [Advance HE](#) and King's Academy provide a sound foundation for this approach which we believe applies to careers education as much as it does to degree subject education and is fundamental to inclusive practice. We focus on all year groups and seek out case studies and careers panel speakers who share inspiration along with challenges and the ups-and-downs of real-life experiences. We facilitate workshops on imposter phenomena and assertive communication. Responses to these can be very moving. This all is informed by, and extends into, the work that our specialist team does with the researcher community at King's. Again, all part of a whole university approach.

Lived experience and the systemic barriers that some of our students and staff face can affect their mental health, for example by making it harder to succeed in recruitment processes (see [Black Careers Matter](#)). We can support good mental health by acknowledging that the careers 'playing field' is not level. Staff have had the opportunity to attend talks exploring a trauma informed approach, and they benefit from networks such as the Race Equality Network and Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI) Committee in our Directorate that continues to challenge our perspectives and make sure we are aware of and can deliver our careers interventions in a thoughtful manner. This encompasses many aspects from ensuring our panels have a diversity of professionals on them to providing a 'Careers+' service for those from widening participation backgrounds.

“ **We can support good mental health by acknowledging that the careers 'playing field' is not level** ”

We compiled detailed evidence for relevant themes of the bid, inviting contributions from across our whole team. This meant articulating what we do and how we know it is effective (always a useful exercise). The themes where our evidence was most relevant included progression (learn theme), risk (support theme) and support for staff wellbeing (work theme). We were then among the university colleagues selected to be questioned on panels by the assessors on the day of their visit.

BUILDING ON RECOMMENDATIONS

We are proud to say that King's response to the charter award is to learn and develop rather than bask in getting the 'badge'. The award came with recommendations, and we are actively involved in the working groups brought together across the university to consolidate good practice, make improvements and track progress. A key area that we have identified relates to the 'support for staff wellbeing (work theme)'. We are taking the lead by training all line managers and careers consultants in mental health awareness and have also committed to increase the number of our team who are fully mental health first aid trained over the coming 12 months. We also, of course, continue to work on developing our offer to students and researchers and on evaluating what works. We welcome conversations on any of the topics in this article. Please do get in touch.



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“I’m not sure if teaching is for me!”

A PARTNERSHIP APPROACH TO DEVELOPING CAREER RESILIENCE



HELEN ATKINSON, Career Development and Academic Support Manager at the University of Sunderland, highlights how colleagues are taking an institution-wide approach to develop the career resilience of education students.

As employability and enterprise practitioners, resilience is a word we encounter on a regular basis. Developing resilience – the ability to deal with and bounce back from problems and setbacks – is key to help students navigate their current professional and personal challenges, and those which lay ahead.

This is particularly apparent for teacher trainee cohorts. The difficulties teachers face are well documented, with recruitment and retention remaining a persistent challenge ([Education Committee, 2024](#)). However, the term “resilience” can often feel like a buzzword. How can we support students to develop this on a practical level?

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

As a professions-facing institution we have sought to establish this, working in partnership with our School of Education. In one of our Graduate Prospects Oversight Group meetings in 2023/24 (a formal mechanism to align school and faculty-based employability and enterprise priorities), education colleagues asked for our help. Tutors reported that students were facing challenges during their teacher trainee placements, including classroom management and negotiating relationships with their supervisor. They also highlighted the need to prepare students for setbacks they might face during the teacher recruitment process, with fierce competition for primary education roles in the North East.

We were keen to lend our expertise, but also mindful of our own limitations, and saw an opportunity to partner with our student wellbeing team to provide students with more comprehensive support. Together, we have developed a two-part workshop series on career resilience which will be embedded into teacher training programmes this academic year.

THE POWER OF ALUMNI

Our first workshop will support students to define and understand the importance of resilience. Practical activities, such as a ‘stress bucket’ exercise will enable students to identify how much stress they can individually manage. The second workshop will support students to develop their resilience, both as a student and early career teacher (ECT). Since reflection and reflexivity are key tools to develop career resilience, we have collaborated with our alumni team to gather videos from education alumni to incorporate into our teaching materials:

- Alumni highlight a challenge they faced during their placement or in a subsequent teaching role.
- In groups, students discuss how they would deal with this challenge, followed by a facilitated discussion.
- Alumni then reflect on how they overcame their challenge. A follow-up discussion takes place to prompt students to reflect on how this solution compares with their own suggestions.

The exercise is designed to enhance students’ problem-solving skills and their levels of self-efficacy, as well as reassure them that they are not alone if they experience similar challenges during their placement. It also serves to highlight the range of ways students can articulate their teaching placement experiences in other occupational contexts, including globally, with some videos featuring alumni now teaching overseas.

“

We are dismantling traditional stereotypes of careers support

”

To complement the workshops, we've created a career resilience workbook with student wellbeing colleagues. This includes activities to support students on placement, helping them reflect on team dynamics, growth mindset and mental contrasting to pre-empt and respond to challenges.

TRACKING IMPACT

Whether it be with alumni, student wellbeing colleagues or academic staff, collaboration has been critical in the development of this project. It is our aim that these workshops will empower students to manage challenges they might encounter on placement and in their future career. Although multiple factors will influence students' resilience, we are planning to measure impact through pre- and post-placement self-assessments to understand if students feel more confident navigating placement-related challenges as a result of our workshops.

We are starting to see the benefits of this collaboration with other stakeholders and hope to roll out similar training to other disciplines, particularly those which include professional placements. By facilitating more strategic conversations, we are dismantling traditional stereotypes of 'careers support' and encouraging academic staff to explore creative ways for us to engage with their students in the curriculum. Education was a subject area we found difficult to engage with previously; we are now having progressive conversations about building student resilience further through entrepreneurial learning, supported by our new institutional entrepreneurial learning framework.

We are slowly evidencing that career development and wellbeing support are not binary and the benefits collaboration can bring to provide our education students with more holistic support in preparation for their placements.



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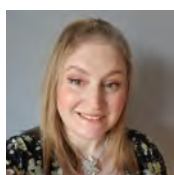
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Incorporating inclusive practices INTO STUDENT- FACING SERVICES



CLAIRE ALFORD, Careers Consultant Disability Lead at the University of Leeds, outlines how the careers service has strengthened collaboration with disability services and other student support teams to provide refreshed, holistic employability support for disabled students, integrating inclusive practices to respond to the unique challenges students face today.

Building on the University of Leeds [Student Opportunities and Futures Strategy](#), in June 2023 a decision was taken to enhance careers practitioner provision for students with disabilities, including neurodivergence, mental health conditions, and long-term medical conditions. As a result, my role transitioned to Careers Consultant Disability Lead. Since then, I have focused on strengthening employability support for disabled students, driving forward the progression pillar of the [Access and Student Success Strategy](#).

At the heart of this approach has been fostering stronger connections between the careers centre, disability services (DS) and other key student support teams. This collaboration has been crucial in offering tailored support during a period when students are grappling with intensified challenges such as the lasting impact of the pandemic and the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. As of the 2024/25 academic year, 20% of University of Leeds students have disclosed a disability.

CROSS-UNIVERSITY COLLABORATION

From the outset, I recognised that establishing more cohesive links with DS would be essential to enhancing the experience for disabled students. One of my initial steps involved researching practices at other higher education institutions by consulting with colleagues in the AGCAS Disability Task Group. This informed how we could create a more inclusive support network at Leeds.

As a result, I initiated meetings with several key contacts within DS to explore how we could collaborate more effectively. These early conversations led to DS allocating a dedicated disability coordinator to the careers centre, providing a vital point of practitioner contact. This direct line to specialist advice has allowed us to seamlessly share guidance, knowledge and training, ensuring staff across both DS and careers are equipped to holistically support students in a more joined up way.

One DS staff member remarked that having a direct link to the careers services has enhanced their understanding of how we operate and thus improved their confidence in addressing employability queries, ultimately providing a more valuable service for students.

In addition, careers staff been asked to take part in a series of events and workshops DS run for Disability History Month as a chance to promote our general services in addition to more tailored approaches.

DISABILITY WORKING GROUP

To further streamline collaborative efforts, I established the Disability Working Group, bringing together representatives from widening participation (WP), mentoring, placements and employer engagement teams. This cross-service group created a platform to share good practice and provide holistic support to disabled students throughout their university journey.

One of our most significant achievements in the first five months has been the development of a comprehensive guidance document to support careers practitioners and those in other student-facing roles in signposting and supporting students. As part of the group, the WP team was also inspired to undertake further research into disability and neurodiversity, with the resulting findings to be discussed by the group.

For the employer engagement and WP teams, this collaboration has sparked new ideas for tailoring events for disabled students, such as offering 'quiet hours' at larger events and offering sunflower lanyards to signal hidden disabilities. Mutual respect and understanding have been central to the success of this group, and we have made it a priority to build positive relationships with DS. To further deepen our collaboration, the working group has visited DS to become familiar with their facilities.

The Disability Working Group continues to evolve as we respond to student needs and implement new initiatives. This cross-functional approach ensures that we address the wide range of challenges disabled students face, from academic demands to career readiness, offering support at every stage of their university experience.



BUILDING RESILIENCE

Research from the Institute of Student Employers' (ISE) [Student Development Survey](#) shows a growing number of employers reporting that graduates did not meet their expectations in resilience (37% in 2024; 30% in 2023), (ISE 2024). We have responded by offering targeted interventions to build resilience for disabled students. One key initiative has been the Next Generation inclusive partnership with consultants [EmployAbility](#), to deliver specialist webinars each semester on recruitment navigation and career resilience.

These sessions, coupled with one-on-one meetings, advocacy services and inclusive opportunities, provide students and graduates with free personalised guidance to help them face the pressures of an increasingly competitive job market. Students have given positive feedback, with one student commenting: "Emma [from EmployAbility] was very supportive throughout the journey. It's such an assurance that they give quick feedback on your performance."

In addition, the Careers Centre is actively supporting the university's broader [Leading Inclusive Pedagogies](#) initiative, which embeds inclusive practices within the curriculum. This approach aims to offer a supportive and equitable learning environment, whilst equipping students with the resilience and employability skills needed to thrive in their future careers.

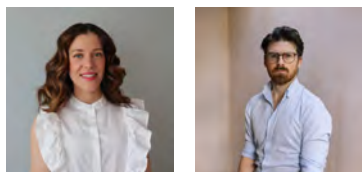
One of the most significant changes we've implemented is piloting one-hour career appointments for disabled students with a careers consultant, available through a referral from DS. These appointments, held in an accessible space within DS, provide a quieter and more focused environment for students to explore their career concerns.

The integration of inclusive practices into student-facing services has allowed us to offer more comprehensive, tailored support for disabled students. By working closely with DS, WP and other teams, we've built a framework that not only addresses student wellbeing but also supports employability in a challenging environment. Through cross-departmental, targeted initiatives, we're helping students build the resilience and confidence they need to navigate their future careers.



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Beyond business fundamentals: SUPPORTING GRADUATE FREELANCER RESILIENCE



CLELIA BEVILLARD, Senior Student Enterprise Manager at the University of Westminster, and MATT DOWLING, Founder of Freelancer Club, share insights into their innovative programme for aspiring freelancers, which incorporates mental health, resilience and core skills to consistently produce well-rounded solopreneurs with a growth mindset.

Freelancer, side hustle, solopreneur, independent worker... call it what you like, running a 'business of one' has become an increasingly attractive and viable career path for graduates. With low barriers to entry, a booming creator economy, and tech-savvy students well-versed in digital tools, freelancing is more accessible than ever. As portfolio careers gain prominence, graduates are shifting their approach to professional development, seeking flexibility and independence. This change requires a new educational framework that goes beyond practical business knowledge to include the mindset and soft skills necessary for success in the freelance landscape.

RESPONDING TO DEMAND

The University of Westminster has recognised this need and responded with a multi-faceted approach. For the past six years, the university has partnered with Freelancer Club, an industry-leading organisation committed to educating, elevating and empowering aspiring freelancers.

Freelancing presents distinct challenges, such as managing instability and fluctuating income, high levels of rejection, isolation, and the constant need for self-motivation. The University of Westminster and Freelancer Club have developed a programme that encapsulates all the key aspects one encounters when setting up and running a business. The focus is on business fundamentals, mental preparedness, cultivating a growth mindset, and building emotional fortitude.

The programme has evolved over the years, with the latest iteration of 'Rise, Freelancer' running from March to September 2024. It welcomed thirteen students and graduates from various disciplines who were 'freelance-curious'. The application process is designed to be inclusive, focusing on applicants' existing knowledge and broad skill sets, without requiring a fully formed freelance plan. The programme guided participants in identifying opportunities that aligned with their abilities, while regular accountability check-ins ensured they made progress.

LAUNCHING THE PROGRAMME

The programme, delivered by a diverse team of experts from the Freelancer Club, kicked off with a dynamic, in-person 'confidence session,' encouraging students to adopt an entrepreneurial mindset, think like a business and feel comfortable asking questions. This session formed the foundation for the broader course, which includes business fundamentals, mindset workshops, peer learning, and personalised one-to-one coaching from the team at the Freelancer Club. The coaching provides students with tailored guidance to help them stay accountable and maintain momentum.

Students were given the flexibility to choose their preferred times and dates within a set window, allowing them to manage other priorities while still completing the assignments at the end of each session. This approach empowered students, helping them feel more in control and reducing anxiety about completing the course.

PERSONALISING THE JOURNEY

Online, on-demand learning modules allow students to engage with course material at their own pace and ensure those who are time-poor are not put under undue pressure. They cover topics such as personal branding, financial management, and client relationship building. Peer learning, both online via an interactive feature on the Freelancer Club platform and offline during in-person workshops, ensures a collaborative environment where students can share experiences and support one another.

“ Graduates are not only entering the freelance workforce but excelling ”

In-person workshops provide an experiential learning platform with hands-on exercises and simulations, such as client objections and negotiation roleplay, to replicate real-world freelance scenarios. These workshops not only build students' confidence but also prepare them for the practical realities of freelancing.

Frederik Daneels, a programme practitioner, explains, *“Learning through trial and error in real-world scenarios is the fastest way to master freelancing. To recreate this as closely as possible, we create interactive environments where aspiring freelancers can tackle common challenges in a safe and supportive setting.”*

MEASURING IMPACT

The partnership between the University of Westminster and the Freelancer Club has shown a clear impact on the Graduate Outcomes survey results. In the last two years, 33% of survey respondents who engaged with Westminster enterprise initiatives reported being self-employed compared to just 15% of respondents who did not participate. Ongoing assessments and data analysis are key to refining the programme. After the most recent cycle, two-thirds of participants plan to register as self-employed, and 83% attribute the programme to helping them secure paid freelance work. Feedback and impact data ensure the curriculum stays relevant and responsive to the evolving freelance market, continuously improving teaching methods.

AI TRAINERS AND FUTURE DEVELOPMENTS

Freelancer Club is staying ahead of the curve by developing AI trainers using large language models (LLMs). These tools allow students to practice essential soft skills like communication, negotiation, and resilience in a low-risk, interactive environment, developing their abilities before applying them in actual client interactions. AI trainers simulate real-world scenarios, adopting personas like a 'tough negotiator' or a 'diligent project manager' for freelancers to role-play. With advanced voice mode, they engage in real-time conversations, playing out various situations. At the end of each interaction, the AI trainer offers valuable feedback, all from the comfort of the student's home. There are plans to roll out AI trainers in conjunction with freelance programmes early next year.

The University of Westminster's partnership with Freelancer Club provides a model for how higher education institutions can support students in preparing for freelancing and portfolio careers. With so much talk about the future of work and a rapidly changing job market, graduates require more than technical knowledge. The ability to adapt, persevere and continuously develop is essential to thrive in dynamic work environments. Through this innovative programme, graduates are not only entering the freelance workforce but excelling within it. From cyber security and translation to filmmaking and graphic design, we're seeing a diverse range of specialisms from various industries thrive. As the freelance economy continues to grow, Westminster's graduates will be well-equipped to navigate its challenges with the confidence, resilience, and mindset required to shape their future.

More on career resilience at Westminster...

The Careers and Employability Service (CES) at Westminster offers a range of support and resources to help students build resilience, enhance their wellbeing and maintain good mental health in the context of their job search and career. This includes hosting workshops on building resilience and dealing with rejection, as well as through working with MyPlus Consulting to provide workshops supporting disabled students.

Westminster staff have access to mental health first aid training and clear referral routes for students to access other areas of student support. Additionally, CES offers 24/7 online support via our Engage employability system and a vast pool of on-demand resources in mixed formats (video, audio, written) to tailor to students' different needs and learning styles. There is also in-person support available to those who prefer face-to-face communication. By fostering a supportive environment, Westminster aims to empower students to thrive academically, professionally and personally.



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Closing the gap: CAREERS SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH MENTAL HEALTH CONDITIONS



JUSTIN RICHARDSON, Careers and Employability Consultant and DR EDDIE TUNNAH, Senior Careers and Employability Consultant from The Open University outline some approaches developed to provide career and employability support to clients who have shared they have a mental health condition.

The Open University (OU) is a large, distance-learning institution with approximately 138,000 students. Around a quarter (25.6%) of our students have shared that they have a disability, with one in eight of all students (12.6%) having a mental health condition. Over the last few years, the proportion of our students in these two categories has steadily increased. Our students are geographically dispersed across the entire UK, the Republic of Ireland and beyond. Most of our students are returners to education, some have few or no previous educational qualifications and an increasing number have complex needs.

“ Careers consultants need to fully understand the student’s situation to support clients effectively ”

“ We are supporting staff to manage their own mental health and wellbeing ”

MENTAL HEALTH ACTION GROUP

The OU’s largest progression gap, as defined by the Office for Students, is between students with a mental health condition and those with no known disability, so supporting this cohort is now a careers service priority. The OU’s Careers and Employability Services established a Mental Health Action Group in 2022 to provide direction and steer to this work. The group meets monthly and includes staff and more recently students with lived experience of mental health conditions. Having a student voice has changed the dynamic of the group, bringing new energy and fresh ideas.

“The Mental Health Action Group is changing the mindset of Careers and Employability Services, helping students to engage and be positive with their mental health in finding employment.” Student representative

STUDENT INSIGHTS

One of our first actions was to hear directly from students to inform our thinking. We interviewed a cross section of students and alumni with a range of mental health conditions. The ten interviews recorded yielded over ten hours of rich conversation and several themes emerged.

Students/alumni have complex lives and their mental health conditions are often in addition to other disabilities and issues. Due to this complexity, careers consultants need to fully understand the student's situation to support them more effectively. Only half of the interviewees had disclosed a mental health condition to the university, yet from the discussions it was apparent that virtually all of them had one. This has real implications for how we target support to this cohort of students.

Lack of confidence is an issue for many OU students, but for this cohort it can be even more of a challenge. Issues around how to present yourself and be authentic emerged from the conversations, particularly around disclosure and explaining disabilities to employers and requesting reasonable adjustments.



ADDRESSING CAREER NEEDS

As a result of these findings and to help us support the needs of these students we have produced a range of careers resources. These include:

- A recorded webinar on mental health and your career, which focuses on helping students and graduates understand more about how they can build their confidence with their career and mental health. It helps them identify employers and supports students asking for reasonable adjustments. This featured input from our employer engagement team and real-life case studies.
- A panel session on mental health in the workplace with Network Rail and support organisations Mind and Maximus. Topics covered included how to have open conversations with employers about mental health and how to gain support.
- A range of careers confidence webpages featuring advice, practical activities, a recorded webinar by one of our mental health advisers aimed at helping students and graduates develop strategies for developing their career confidence and signposting to various OU resources on developing resilience and overcoming imposter syndrome.

The resources have received positive feedback so far, with one of our recent Criminology graduates commenting: *"Having Bipolar has knocked my confidence but with the expertise and knowledge held by Careers and Employability Services, I am no longer intimidated at the thought of entering into a fresh new role."*

SUPPORTING OUR STAFF

We have worked hard to support staff helping students with mental health conditions, as well as supporting staff to manage their own mental health and wellbeing. All staff have been encouraged to undertake online training around understanding mental health and several of our staff have completed Mental Health First Aid (MHFA) training. We have also arranged bespoke training sessions for staff. The OU mental health support team delivered a session on how the student-facing team deal with specific student cases and a session has been delivered on working with students with complex health needs.

Wellbeing of staff is something that is valued across the service and we have developed various staff initiatives such as coffee catch-ups with different members of staff, a careers pit stop encouraging various online staff community groups and a quarterly staff session featuring members of staff explaining how they try to improve their own wellbeing.

MOVING FORWARD

This combined approach of enhancing our provision for students with mental health needs and equipping our staff with the skills and resilience to support those students is helping us work towards reducing the progression gap. Going forward we will look at further initiatives such as providing more coordinated follow-up support to students with mental health conditions who have already engaged with us. At the OU, we have a particularly large cohort of students with mental health conditions, but we know all other universities will be supporting students with similar challenges and would love to hear what other careers services are doing in this important area of work.

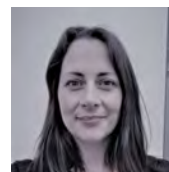


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EMBEDDING SUPPORT IS THE KEY TO WELLBEING FOR STUDENTS AND STAFF

EMILY STONER FHEA and DR. SONALI SHUKLA, Career Consultants at the University of Cambridge, outline how collaborative working between student support services, departments and the careers service normalises and enables wellbeing support for both staff and students.



At Cambridge University, we have been working to normalise the need for wellbeing support, both for students facing overwhelm and for staff facing the challenges of supporting student wellbeing. Working with departments, we have embedded wellbeing support for students through their course modules and, crucially, we have mirrored that structured support in our own careers team.

Embedding routine support into courses or careers team meetings not only normalises the need for support but also scaffolds levels of intervention. Making wellbeing support and reflection routine has helped to keep both staff and students afloat during term time and beyond.

PART 1: WORKING COLLABORATIVELY TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

Nestled within the Student Service Centre at Cambridge, the careers service has the opportunity to collaborate in innovative and mutually beneficial ways. Below, we will outline a collaboration with the newly created Office of Student Wellbeing.

THE PILOT COLLABORATION

Aim

To embed wellbeing and career development into an existing course to provide structured support, normalising the need for this support as part of the course.

Who

A cohort of Masters students on a new interdisciplinary Data Intensive Science course, chosen as postgraduate students are often overlooked by student support due to their short duration of study and individualised content.

What

A series of three hour-long sessions, embedded within the curriculum with mandatory attendance, providing structure for the students.

How

Joint planning and joint delivery resulted in three sessions:

- Belonging at Cambridge
- Sustainable academic practice
- Careers support and considering further study.

OUTCOMES

The collaborative nature of the programme provided invaluable insight to both the careers and wellbeing staff. We quickly drew parallels between career planning and wellbeing, and how each can affect one another. Being a more established service, the wellbeing team found working with us to be “an invaluable addition” embedded within the new wellbeing sessions.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Students felt empowered to seek further support and were quicker to find sources of specialised support within the Cambridge network.

TIPS FOR STUDENT SUPPORT COLLABORATIONS AT YOUR INSTITUTION

1. Choose a specific cohort of students to support, ideally one(s) with evidence of limited support in the past.
2. Collaborate in the planning stages, so that feedback and input can be incorporated into the course development.
3. Incorporate co-delivery: it helps to emphasise to students the nuance between the support offered by different student services, which we found vital in the crowded environment at Cambridge.

PART 2: WORKING COLLABORATIVELY TO SUPPORT CAREERS STAFF

At Cambridge, reflective practice helps us to prioritise our wellbeing and sense of community and in-turn helps us support our clients more sustainably. We recognised the importance of supporting the staff who were delivering the student wellbeing provision. Our reflection sessions have been running continuously since 2021.

THE MODEL

Once a month, teams across the careers service meet for a reflective practice session for one hour, to work through a model of reflection together in small groups. In these sessions, we share examples of clients or situations we would like to get perspective on. This practice has four main outcomes:

Collaboration: working together to solve issues and recognise success.

Sharing: feeling connected through sharing experiences.

Confidence: affirmation of practice or empowerment to do new things.

Practice: influences the way we offer support to clients and care for ourselves.

Annual evaluation of the sessions has shown that colleagues value time in the busy work week to reflect more deeply on practice and this reminds them to return to basic principles of guidance and mitigate the danger of falling into habitual responses. The sessions offer reassurance that challenges and barriers are shared by colleagues.

LEARNING FROM OTHERS

Since 2021, we have invited guest speakers to offer guidance and training on reflection. These have included an academic from our PGCE programme, a trained counsellor in our student services team and an advanced social work practitioner. These guests offer different perspectives on the practical elements of reflection and its professional and wellbeing benefits. It also enables us to work collaboratively with internal departments, supporting each other to provide services to students.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Annual evaluations evidence that colleagues find being part of a reflective practice group makes them feel less alone, improves their guidance practice, and engages them in refreshed critical thinking.

TIPS FOR RUNNING REFLECTIVE PRACTICE IN YOUR SERVICE:

1. Embed sessions into your 'business as usual' meeting structure; put sessions in the team diary and normalise the need for supportive practice.
2. Reach out to colleagues across your institution to share practice in reflection, models and self-care (teaching, psychology, counselling, health and social work course academics and counsellors are a useful place to start).
3. Provide structure and planning to your sessions across teams: a working group that organises the sessions and offers direction is a helpful way to maintain the energy and interest in reflective practice.



Collaborative work between support services and departments maximises the skills of respective groups and recognises careers support as integral to student wellbeing. By making wellbeing topics a routine part of an academic programme and team practice we can build cohorts that feel enabled to explore their shared experiences, and find support in times of isolation, as normal practice.



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Fearless futures: BUILDING STUDENT SELF-AWARENESS AND RESILIENCE



BECKI COMMINS, Careers and Employability Adviser and HELEN MCCARRON, Careers Education Manager at the University of Lincoln explore methods to empower students to build self-awareness and resilience, and embed them as essential skills, offering personalised support for the students who need it most and supporting them in graduate recruitment and beyond.

In a world where mental health struggles are on the rise and the job market demands resilience, careers professionals face a daunting paradox. With 39% of students facing significant mental health challenges during their academic life (Cibyl, 2023), confidence is a challenge facing many careers services across the country. The University of Lincoln is no exception, with a high percentage of students from underrepresented backgrounds, facing real or perceived barriers to the workplace.

Whilst there is an important distinction between careers advisors and student wellbeing colleagues, the aspects are intertwined for students themselves. Whether they feel too anxious to face an interview, are concerned about raising their mental health condition with an employer or need a job due to rising costs of living, these issues are now a regular part of careers conversations.

“ Whilst there is an important distinction between careers advisors and student wellbeing colleagues, the aspects are intertwined for students themselves ”

ARE THEY READY?

Through career readiness surveys at enrolment, a high percentage of students state they are at the ‘explore’ stage and don’t feel ready for their next step. Furthermore, a progression gap exists for disabled students, which can be particularly large for students experiencing mental health conditions. A small careers service cannot tackle this challenge in isolation.

In collaboration with academics, we highlight core skills which can be embedded within all curricula at the university. This includes conversations about developing skills in self-awareness within the curriculum, supporting career decision making. Personal tutors can signpost to student wellbeing and career services. [The Lincoln Award](#), which is an employability framework, keeps the skills conversation going.

The Lincoln Award helps students gauge their confidence and provides a structure for developing skills including emotional intelligence and adaptability. Through developing these strategies, students are enabled to take risks, push their comfort zones, and ultimately make aspirational applications regardless of their fear of failure or rejection.



The Career Readiness Programme was designed to scaffold careers-related learning and expose students to career planning in a gradual way to avoid overwhelm. To fully embed the programme, we needed a mindset change around the role of in-curriculum careers education. Furthermore, it was important to have a cross-university collaborative approach to support all staff to confidently design and deliver career related learning. (McCarron, H. and Strudwick, K. (2023)).

Through the programme, students access [industry-led sessions](#) from employers and alumni covering career rejection and zigzag careers. At all levels, students can engage in topics including global mobility, placements and mentoring.

Content also includes career resilience, reasonable adjustments for disability, building confidence and navigating the cost-of-living crisis, including raising awareness of part-time job opportunities. Student feedback illustrates the impact of these sessions on confidence building:

"I liked hearing from the guest alumni. He calmed some of my fears about applying for jobs even if I don't feel ready/good enough"

"My confidence improved as it highlighted things I was already doing that I didn't realise would be so beneficial."

In the 2023/24 academic year, the Career Readiness Programme saw over 11,000 student interactions and a 46% increase in industry-led co-delivery of the programme. 99% of students fed back that they will take action as a result of the sessions, including exploring career ideas, gaining work experience or making applications.

TAILORED INTERVENTIONS

In addition to activities at scale, we provide targeted interventions for the students who need it most. Research shows students from underrepresented backgrounds are more likely to experience mental health challenges. These include racial diversity ([Olaniyan, 2021](#)), lower socio-economic backgrounds ([TASO, 2023](#)) and neurodivergence such as autism ([Scott and Sedgewick, 2021](#)). The National Union of Students ([2022](#)) also reported that 90% of students felt the rising cost of living was negatively impacting their mental health. The University of Lincoln estimates a high percentage of its student population are from underrepresented backgrounds and empowering these students to manage their mental health whilst career planning requires a collaborative approach.

Our targeted access and participation initiatives include weekly group workshops on topics such as managing rejection, disability rights and building career confidence, in addition to focused one-to-one career coaching to enable students to address real and perceived barriers, access support at the point of need and in a format which suits their individual confidence levels and access requirements. A collaborative session, designed with student wellbeing, focuses on techniques for recruitment, helping students prioritise self-care whilst taking steps towards their future career.

"Attending the workshops has enabled me to take positive steps to manage stress especially in this season when I am working towards securing a full-time role and balancing my finances."

Further collaboration through student wellbeing referrals enables students with complex mental and physical health conditions to confidently access careers support and take small steps to achieve their goals. Students who face barriers to meeting with a careers adviser are referred to a dedicated adviser who takes time to understand their access needs, build rapport and break down barriers to communication.

"I'm looking forward to starting work. My first day is in August. I had been really anxious about the interview but the 1:1 support helped me feel more confident and it ended really positively."



CAREERS AS A TROJAN HORSE

We are on a continuous learning journey with in-curriculum interventions, integrating discussions on career resilience and wellbeing into more traditional career lectures focused on CV design and interview skills. This has required blurring boundaries between professional services and academia, finding 'the third space' for these discussions ([Whitchurch 2008](#)). Our targeted interventions continue to grow to ensure barriers are lowered for students with mental health concerns and that the nuances of individual student experience are considered. These initiatives allow for an embedded approach which complement extra-curricular activities. By integrating employability support with themes of self-awareness and wellbeing, careers education can serve as a powerful catalyst for building resilience and confidence.



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How further study stimulates new thinking

WHEN SUPPORTING STUDENTS WITH SOCIAL ANXIETY DISORDER



KATE NICHOLLS, Careers Consultant at the University of Surrey and DR TANIA LYDEN, Course Director CEIGHE at the University of Warwick, join forces to describe how the Challenges of Career Work in HE module enabled Kate to discover more about Social Anxiety Disorder (SAD), its impact on students and how further study can help career professionals better support them.

The Challenges of Career Work in HE module, part of CEIGHE, sparked our interest in how careers services support students with social anxiety disorder (SAD). Kate, by studying the module, and Tania, by leading it, were motivated to explore the impact of SAD on student engagement and career development, particularly given their personal experiences.

Kate knew that her daughter was struggling with social anxiety, experiencing panic attacks and refusing to attend school, but little did she know how intense her feelings were. She wondered how social anxiety might impact student engagement with the careers service and their prospects for building employability, resilience and self-esteem. Tania shared a similar concern - her daughter was already designing her career interests around how much social interaction would be involved, and she was regularly avoiding seeking help at school because of her fear of social interaction.

DEFINING SAD

'Social anxiety disorder is a persistent fear of one or more social situations where embarrassment may occur, and the fear or anxiety is out of proportion to the actual threat posed.'
(BPS, 2013)

The likely numbers are staggering. As Kate explored this challenge with her Centre for Wellbeing, they stated that approximately 7% of their students had autism (or were awaiting diagnosis) and that social anxiety is typically associated with this condition. NICE suggests that between 5 and 12% of the population experiences SAD, which disproportionately affects females (Stein and Stein, 2008).

SAD AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

From Tania's initial research into the topic, SAD impacts career development in many ways. Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) reveals the complexity involved, focusing on disorder maintenance and initial cause (Lent, Brown & Hackett, 1994; Yu, 2019). Sufferers anticipate social threats where they don't exist through biased cognitions and adapt their behaviour to avoid social situations. Their attention focuses on the self, negative self-perception, and they are hypervigilant of external threats. Subsequent avoidant behaviours can reduce skill and performance outcomes (Wong and Rapee, 2016), which can make SAD a self-fulfilling prophecy.

SCCT combines personal, behavioural and environmental variables and presents 'interests', 'choice', 'performance' and 'satisfaction' models; SAD can disrupt them all (Lent, et al, 1994; Yu, 2019). The underestimation of coping ability in social situations due to SAD leads to reduced interest in social situations (Yu, 2019). For career development, this could rule out coaching, careers events, mentoring, networking and even interviews.

Similarly, SAD can be a 'distal' (distant) influence on career choices if students avoid jobs requiring social skills. This particularly saddened Kate when she discovered that social anxiety impacts perceived job prospects (Himle, et al, 2014). Reduced self-efficacy can limit graduate-level choices, leading to unemployment or underemployment (Moitra et al, 2011). Students with SAD are typically more indecisive (Miles et al, 2018) - with little or no career goal, they may lack career satisfaction thus making work-related learning less effective (Yu, 2019).

Being overprotective of students with SAD can limit potential recovery and self-efficacy development. The AGCAS Member Code of Ethics requires practitioners to:

'deal with each individual fairly and with respect for their life experiences, abilities and potential. To address and challenge inequalities where we encounter them.'

(AGCAS, n.d.)

Kate's research had clearly identified an inequality that needed addressing.

WHAT ACTIONS CAN WE TAKE?

Autism is considered a lifelong condition and often forms the basis of SAD. However, there may be ways to stem or reverse the downward spiral of negative self, situational assessments and avoidance. Kate plans to work with her Centre for Wellbeing to clarify the numbers impacted and explore the possibility of interviewing willing students.

Further actions Kate suggests include using accessible advice on webpages by focusing on the whole recruitment journey for students with SAD, and writing a blog about how to support them in their job search. This would show that the careers service 'see' those students and acknowledge their needs, making students more inclined to act. Tania plans to undertake a detailed review of the literature on SAD and career development to share this and enhance the CEIGHE curriculum.

“

Being overprotective of students with SAD can limit potential recovery and self-efficacy development

”

WHAT ABOUT CAREER COACHING?

Kate argues for the need to adjust the mindset of those with SAD. By making staff more approachable through improved bios with photos, documenting prior wellbeing experience, and videos so students could 'meet' staff in a non-threatening way, those with SAD may be more likely to engage. Indicating social anxiety on booking forms, bringing a friend along and/or having the option of online meetings with cameras off if preferred could also help. Kate suggests practitioner training to better understand how SAD affects students and to enable them to be open to change. The overall goal should be aligning the student's real and ideal self (Rogers, 1969/1994).

Tania explains this aspiration requires career practitioners to build rapport, identify unhelpful thinking, listen to and challenge negative expectations, and promote gradual social interaction/career development goals, whilst also rewarding risk-taking and supporting outcome assessment. This demands supervision and reflexivity, but with proper training and motivation we could make all the difference.

REFLECTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Kate is excited to see how students experiencing SAD, including her daughter, can receive support to reach their full potential. With her new understanding of SAD, she will take the necessary steps to make that happen. Tania is keen to undertake her own empirical research to learn directly from students experiencing SAD about their experiences with career coaching, aiming to improve career practice for them.



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[Connect with Tania on LinkedIn](#)



Building resilience IN A CHANGING JOB MARKET



RACHEL BEAUCHAMP, Faculty Careers Coach and DIANE RICHARDSON, Careers Student Engagement and Quality Manager from Lancaster University outline how integrating resilience-building with flexible career guidance can help students navigate uncertainty and thrive in their professional and personal lives.

At Lancaster University, we've been exploring ways to help our students build resilience, equipping them with the mental tools to remain positive and proactive. This is especially crucial as they enter a job market defined by rapid technological changes, evolving industries and economic uncertainty. Graduates today are likely to experience career changes, layoffs or unexpected disruptions, and resilience provides the mental framework to stay positive and proactive.

STUDENT MOTIVATION

Over the past few years at Lancaster, we have noted a significant shift in the motivations of our students. No longer are they driven by just salary or job titles, they are seeking careers that allow them to maintain their personal wellbeing, pursue meaningful work and integrate their personal passions with their professional lives.

This notion is called 'work-life integration' and unlike the traditional concept of work-life balance, where work and personal life are kept separate, work-life integration acknowledges the fluidity between these areas. For students entering the workforce, being able to blend their career with personal passions and values can significantly improve their sense of fulfilment, reduce burnout and strengthen their resilience.

“*Promoting flexible career planning is a crucial aspect of building resilience*”

GUIDANCE FOR WORK LIFE INTEGRATION

One-to-one appointments offer us a platform for addressing students' challenges and helping them develop their resilience. By fostering deeper self-awareness through reflective exercises, such as exploring what brings students joy or what they are passionate about, we can help students better understand how their careers can align with their broader purposes. This process not only builds confidence in their decision-making but also enhances their resilience as they face inevitable workplace challenges.

Promoting flexible career planning is a crucial aspect of building resilience. Given the increasingly non-linear nature of career paths, students must be encouraged to embrace flexibility in their professional journeys. During appointments, we can discuss alternatives to traditional career trajectories such as freelance work, side projects or volunteering, that align with students' personal interests. By highlighting diverse career routes, we empower students to explore multiple pathways to success, thereby building resilience as they adapt to an evolving professional landscape.

Time management and boundary setting are equally important in fostering resilience through work-life integration. These consultations provide a space for offering practical advice on how students can structure their day, manage deadlines and allocate time for personal activities. Teaching students how to set boundaries, such as turning off work notifications after hours or prioritising self-care, can prevent burnout and sustain their long-term resilience.

By encouraging self-reflection, promoting flexible career planning and teaching boundary-setting skills, we can play a crucial role in helping students navigate the complexities of the modern workplace while maintaining personal well-being and professional success.

“ We have noted a significant shift in the motivations of our students ”

GROWING RESILIENCE

We also trialled offering resilience workshops with a careers focus, but poor attendance and the blurring of professional boundaries prompted us to explore alternative provision.

We identified a local social enterprise running programmes that support learners to develop a mental health toolkit that they can use in challenging situations. We commissioned them to develop a five-day programme, linked to success in the graduate recruitment market, focusing on:

- Self-awareness, conflict, consequential thinking and self-direction
- Five ways to well-being / Healthy body, healthy mind
- Chaos: Coping with a bad day – making every day good
- Developing interpersonal skills through volunteering.

PROGRAMME EVALUATION

Initially we only offered the programme to students based in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences with widening participation characteristics. We immediately faced challenges as only 22 students expressed an interest and 12 students eventually signed-up. In hindsight, the day-long workshops were a deterrent for students with busy academic schedules.

Also, in trying to link employability and resilience, we may have been attempting to cover too much. A shorter programme, focused purely on developing a mental health toolkit, with less of a time commitment, may have worked better. We had a revolving door situation of students having to dip in and out of the sessions due to other commitments, disrupting the flow of the programme.

Of the students who signed up, all but one saw the programme through to the end and overall, we were pleased with the feedback, including:

‘The meditation and positive mindset activities could help anyone with their future plans’.

‘Tips for coping with stress and overwhelm were so useful’.



Going forward, we still believe there is scope for this kind of activity in our careers portfolio but with less time commitment required on the part of the student, and potentially being delivered in-house by the university’s student wellbeing teams, who can then signpost back into appropriate support services where needed.

The practical toolkit idea was well received by students but maybe these sessions could be scheduled as part of a more general 90-minute career session so that the students are still getting the very tangible career support they are looking for, but with the addition of practical tips from wellbeing experts. Our experience suggests that whilst students are telling us they need this kind of support, standalone resilience activities in a careers context may not be the way forward.

A NUANCED APPROACH

In navigating the complex landscape of student resilience and career preparation, a nuanced approach is essential. While standalone resilience programmes, in our experience, have faced challenges, integrating resilience elements into broader career services shows promise. By adapting our methods, we can better equip students for the evolving demands of the modern workplace.



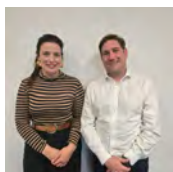
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Growing support FOR STUDENT PROGRESSION



RACHAEL ROSE, Head of Central Careers Services and ANTONY COTTERILL, Head of Student Employability, describe the University of East Anglia's journey to develop specialised progression support for students and graduates, including introducing a progression adviser role to coordinate between careers and student services and work with external organisations as part of a new progression partnership.

At the University of East Anglia (UEA), we have been developing specialised and targeted support for students and graduates to enable their progression into jobs and further study after university. This approach is being led by CareerCentral, the UEA's careers department, on behalf of the wider university.

Like many universities, meeting the specific needs of our diverse cohort has always been a core aim and is of strategic importance to the UEA considering the unique demographics of our student population and our local regional labour market. We now have the highest levels of positive graduate outcomes that we have ever had as a university, but gaps persist for certain students and graduate groups.

Our evolving approach has now spanned two access and participation plan (APP) periods. Our first plan highlighted the needs of students from the lowest POLAR1 quartile and students with a disability. Our recently published plan focuses largely on the same two groups of students and graduates; namely those declaring a mental health condition, with social or communication impairments or with multiple impairments and students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, who all have a lower rate of progression to graduate-level employment or further study.

SOWING THE SEEDS

In early 2021, CareerCentral successfully secured funding for a permanent role working between student services and our service. The role's aim was to improve referral between university departments, catalysing change across the university, and working directly with students in our target cohorts. A progression adviser was successfully recruited by the start of 2022, marking one of the first roles of its kind in the sector.

Over the past two years, this role has effectively bridged the two services, coordinating, promoting and delivering targeted support to students under the WeCan brand. WeCan was based on a pre-existing popular careers initiative for female students called [SheCan](#); the approach has expanded to support other groups, including students with a disability, those from racialised backgrounds and first-generation university students.

Through this approach, we've seen recognisable benefits with regard to our current students' experience, their engagement and their feedback. This has been reported and evaluated through the university-wide APP evaluation team.

BRANCHING OUT

We still see evidence of persistent progression gaps. Alongside the development of the new APP beginning in 2025 and with the regulator's preference for partnerships outside of HE with the third sector, our evolving focus is to extend our specialised support to graduates through collaborative work with local service providers, through our new progression partnership.

This innovative project aims to create a supportive and inclusive ecosystem that facilitates the successful transition of recent graduates, particularly those with disabilities or mental health needs, from university to the workplace.

The progression partnership is already underway and has successfully engaged with several external partners, including regional mental health charities and community volunteering organisations. To promote this expansion, UEA will host an employability event and partners meet-up in early 2025, promoting collaborative working and further supporting graduates as they transition into the workforce. We hope to soon expand this project out to work with local employers.

REAPING THE REWARDS

The collaborations that we have formed should have benefits for all involved. For the university and CareerCentral, closely linking need and outcomes, especially for those students and graduates that face significant structural barriers to progression, fulfils our mission and strategic role. For partners, and eventually employers, a shared understanding of the needs of our diverse students can allow them to identify and attract graduates, improve their selection practices and retention, and impact company culture. Most importantly, for students and graduates we are providing access to specialised support at whatever point they need it, throughout their academic studies and student experience, or when embarking on their life as a graduate.



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Put on your own oxygen mask first: CREATING CULTURAL SHIFTS TO PRIORITISE WELLBEING



MARIA DOBRZANSKA from the [AGCAS Employer Engagement Task Group](#) reflects on how by fostering team cultures focused on continuous learning, resilience and collaboration, managers can better equip their teams to handle peak workloads, resource limitations and a constantly evolving external landscape, without compromising mental health.

The phrase 'put on your own oxygen mask first' is a powerful metaphor for self-care, reminding us that we can only help others effectively when we first take care of ourselves. For careers and employer engagement teams to provide the best support to students, graduates and employers, their own mental and emotional health must be a priority. Just as passengers are advised to secure their masks before helping others, leaders must foster environments where their teams feel empowered to care for their own wellbeing. This becomes particularly important during high-pressure periods when workloads peak, resources are stretched and external demands evolve.

In recent discussions with the AGCAS Employer Engagement Task Group, we explored successful strategies for sustaining team morale, reducing stress and fostering resilience across institutions. Below are some of the most effective approaches that surfaced.

“ Leaders must foster environments where their teams feel empowered to care for their own wellbeing ”

SHIFTING THE FOCUS TO 'LEARNING'

Nurturing a workplace culture that values learning, reflection and continuous development is a theme that has been recurring in my wellbeing discussions with the task group. Members were all actively involved in encouraging the development of a 'growth mindset' in their teams. Multiple studies, such as one recently conducted by Morgan et al exploring the perceived impacts of a school-based growth mindset programme – 'Mindset Teams' in Scotland have linked workplace wellbeing, in an education setting, to growth mindset.

Practical ways through which members of the task group had approached this have included:

- Implementing a variety of evaluation criteria that helped colleagues to broaden their definitions of success.
- Encouraging colleagues to focus on their circle of control.
- Building in regular opportunities for colleagues to reflect on their learning and development in one-to-one meetings and team meetings and ensuring 'small wins' did not go unnoticed

BROADENING DEFINITIONS OF SUCCESS

Broadening definitions of success is a topic regularly discussed by the task group. Rather than focusing solely on attendance metrics or 'bums on seats', task group members have been proactively exploring methods designed to shift the focus of their teams and wider university colleagues to the broader impact of their work on students and graduates. Measuring success through meaningful, evidence-based contributions instead of sheer output was believed by task group members to be an effective way to alleviate some pressure from heavy workloads and limited resources.

For example, at Leeds Beckett University, new evaluation criteria are being introduced to shift the focus away from using employer event attendance as the sole measure of success. Instead, staff are encouraged to consider broader impact measures, such as learning gains, long-term student outcomes, and employer net promoter scores.

This approach does present challenges, particularly when collaborating with stakeholders (both internal and external) who still prioritise attendance figures. As a result, successful implementation requires careful expectation management and clear communication.

CIRCLE OF CONTROL

Working with external stakeholders often brings challenges beyond a team's control, which can increase stress. To address this, task group members emphasised helping teams focus on what they can control, especially with employers. For example, encouraging colleagues to reflect on risk-mitigation steps and set clear expectations with stakeholders can reduce anxiety. Transparent communication about realistic outcomes also directs energy toward areas within their influence, helping reduce stress and build confidence.

Encouraging collaboration across teams and institutions was also seen as vital for wellbeing. Task group members found that engaging with networks like AGCAS, which fosters sharing of best practice and challenges, helps keep challenges in perspective and reinforces a focus on what can be controlled.

RECOGNISING SMALL WINS

A final reflection from the task group was how in the fast-paced environments within which we all operate, small successes are often overlooked in the rush to complete the next task. Taking time to reflect on incremental progress and recognise achievements, no matter how small, can significantly boost team morale. Celebrating even minor victories was agreed on as an effective approach to helping staff feel valued. These moments of reflection also help cultivate a learning culture, where progress is measured not just in large milestones but in everyday efforts.

My discussions with the task group have highlighted that by shifting evaluation criteria, fostering collaboration and cultivating a growth mindset, leaders in this field can create supportive, resilient environments where professionals, and the students and graduates they serve, are positioned to thrive. These cultural shifts lay a strong foundation for healthier, more productive and deeply engaged teams.



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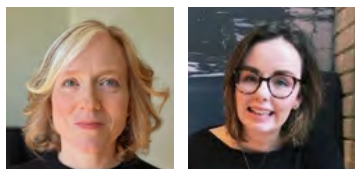


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[Employer Engagement Task Group](#)

Empowering Welsh distance learners: HOLISTIC WELLBEING AND TAILORED CAREERS SUPPORT



SARAH ALBESON, Senior Manager for Skills and LAURA CARTER, Employability Manager, discuss how The Open University in Wales combines employability with other student support services. They highlight how tailored employability initiatives, alongside wellbeing support and resources, have helped students from underrepresented backgrounds studying part-time and through distance learning.

GO Wales: Building Your Career Confidence gives targeted employability support to Open University in Wales (OU in Wales) students who may be underrepresented in the labour market. This is funded through the Commission for Tertiary Education and Research in Wales. While many institutions participate in GO Wales, the OU in Wales has a distinctive student demographic which is different from other brick or place-based universities. There is no such thing as a typical OU student, and our support is tailored to their background, motivation to study and rich life experiences.

- Two thirds of OU in Wales students work while studying.
- OU in Wales students typically take six years to complete a full degree, but it can be up to 15 years.
- There are over 4,000 (29%) disabled students studying with the OU in Wales.
- Forty-three percent of students started studying with OU in Wales without traditional university entry qualifications.
- Forty-eight percent of students come from the most deprived areas of Wales.
- Sixteen percent of our students declare a mental health issue.*

* Stats based on 2023/24 undergraduate students.

BUILDING CONFIDENCE

Many students enrolled in the GO Wales initiative face significant barriers to achieving academic and personal success. We should point out that students do overcome these and achieve extraordinary things personally and professionally. However, confidence is a big issue. 31% of our students in Wales indicated in the 2022/23 OU Careers and Employability Readiness Survey that confidence is a barrier to progressing their career goals.

Tailored support is therefore at the heart of GO Wales. Students meet one-to-one with a dedicated employability advisor over a period of time for mentoring and coaching support, CV and application feedback, and opportunities to get work experience and advice from employers.

“When I first contacted my employability advisor, I had been applying for jobs and not been successful at interview for months and my confidence was really down. I felt really alone and knew that I was having confidence issues and unable to highlight my skills and experiences effectively, I was aware of the issues but felt like I needed some assistance to get over the blocks and barriers I was facing... My advisor listened to what the issues were and worked with me to getting an action plan in place to be successful at interviews.”



“ **Data from across the OU shows a strong relationship between careers service engagement and study success** ”

IMPACT OF PERSONALISATION

When developing an employability programme, the temptation is to continually add to it, to make it all-encompassing. Yet many OU students are already stretched thin, juggling work, study and caring responsibilities, or managing their own health and wellbeing.

Resilience is key for our students, but offering more and more services is not always the best way to foster it. Instead, we've found that a personalised approach has a real impact, with advisors working with students to understand their individual goals and strengths and helping them to navigate challenges.

We've also used data-driven insights to identify priority student groups and create tailored support for them. For example, as a third of our students live in rural areas, we ran a rural careers event with Welsh employers and developed an online resource for them alongside it.

WELLBEING PROVISION

The GO Wales team is part of a wider Student Experience service at the OU, which allows us to work with student support colleagues. This includes setting up a referral pathway to a dedicated mental health casework team, so that if a student discloses any issues to our advisors, we can make a smooth, personalised referral for support.

Our employability advisors have also shadowed education advisors who give students with complex needs ongoing support. Our team has benefited from training on topics such as trauma-informed practice and setting boundaries. This has boosted our knowledge and capability to support students who may be facing a range of challenges.

We've integrated careers topics into existing wellbeing resources for students. For instance, we adapted a resource on looking after your wellbeing while studying to focus on job hunting. We also held a workshop on navigating imposter syndrome in the workplace led by an academic who helps students tackle this issue in their studies.

"I have become more confident when it comes to explaining my disabilities to potential employers and I am comfortable asking for reasonable adjustments when it comes to working."

COLLABORATING FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

Forty per cent of students at the OU in Wales are motivated to study to support their career goals. Data from across the OU shows a strong relationship between careers service engagement and study success, with a 16.1 percentage point higher module pass rate for OU students in touch with careers services compared to those not, as well as fewer withdrawals, higher average assessment scores and fewer assignments submitted late. We have begun data analysis work to understand the picture for students in Wales specifically. Anecdotally, there are good indications that our employability support also encourages retention and success, boosting confidence and commitment to study. During 2024/25 we plan to track the data that backs this up.

Delivering this support is an ongoing, evolving process and there's still much to learn and do. As a small team, we're always trying to do things that make a difference. Recognising how mental health and wellbeing can affect career planning is a priority for us. It's challenging, and we need to acknowledge boundaries with colleagues who give specialist support. But ultimately, it's also about helping our cohort of students in a meaningful way.



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From rejection to resilience: ENHANCING INTERNATIONAL STUDENT WELLBEING



HELEN BRADLEY, Career Consultant and ANNA FISHER, Employer and Placement Consultant at the University of Bradford share their experience of supporting international postgraduate students to manage rejection and build resilience in their career planning through a targeted career development programme offer.

With increased uncertainty for international students following visa policy changes over the last year, coupled with continued rejection, inability to secure work experience and perceived pressure to find a job with sponsorship, the wellbeing of some international students has been at stake. Indeed, the most common theme cited in [AGCAS's April 2024 survey of careers professionals](#) was around international students feeling under significant stress and pressure. As a result, at the University of Bradford, we have integrated some targeted support into our newly designed career development programme for international postgraduate students.

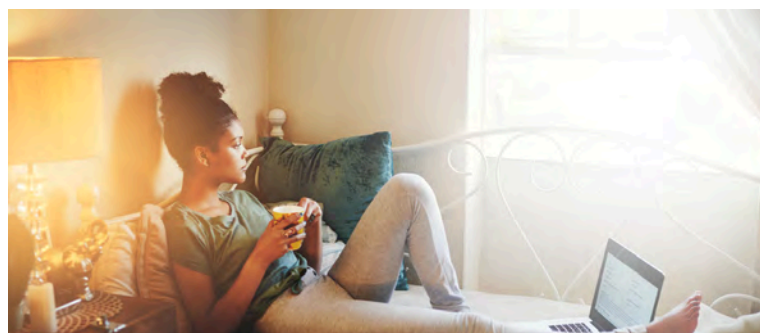
Our bespoke programme was specifically designed with these students in mind, to support them in their UK career journey. We focus on understanding the employability landscape, job options related to their degree, how to tailor applications, prepare for various stages of recruitment processes and visa matters. In addition, reflecting on our interactions with students, and their countless tales of receiving another 'unfortunately' email, we now include a specific session on dealing with rejection. This has become a vital addition to the programme.

“ *We welcome international alumni to the programme to share their own experiences, reinforcing messages of hope, determination and that they are not alone* ”

REJECTION AS AN OPPORTUNITY

In this session we touch on embracing failure as an opportunity; a learning experience and a chance to reflect on where an application may have needed more work, at what stage of the process they were rejected and where more support may be helpful going forward. We encourage students to focus on solutions rather than problems and give regular reminders that they are highly skilled individuals with a lot to offer, and that there are always a wide range of opportunities available to explore, whatever their programme of study or professional background.

We acknowledge that setbacks are part of any journey but discuss the importance of prioritising self-care and taking a break from job hunting when needed. This is a popular session, and we have been delighted to see subsequent social media posts where students have shared the positive learning they have then taken from their 'unfortunately' emails, to support others who might be in the same position:





Our programme is interactive, and we encourage participants to share and discuss, again helping them to connect and empathise with each other in a safe and friendly space.

TRANSFERABLE SKILLS

Expecting to secure a job on campus or part-time work related to their field of study can also have a negative impact when international students arrive and find the realities to be quite different. Whilst we offer pre-arrival webinars to manage these expectations, and discuss in our inductions and subsequent sessions, we certainly do not reach all incoming students.

Gaining transferable skills is a key message we reinforce during the career development programme. We stress that part-time work in any capacity can help to develop and enhance these skills, and how valuable these are to UK employers. Whether in admin, hospitality, retail or care, part-time work can absolutely enhance a student's graduate employability prospects in the UK.

VISA SPONSORSHIP

This year's changes in requirements have certainly made securing employer sponsorship even more challenging for international students, but we always remind our students that it isn't impossible. Students are often fixated on sponsorship, and less sure of other available options which can prove damaging to their wellbeing further down the line. We remind students that the Graduate visa offers an excellent alternative, allowing them to gain work experience, explore career options, and potentially secure a job that could lead to sponsorship in the future.

We encourage students to take charge of their own career, to read the guidance that we signpost, and to seek further clarifications if they are unsure. We help them to be well informed, not only to navigate their own career journey, but also enabling them to help potential employers navigate the complex system and in turn, facilitate their own hiring process.

"Recently, I applied for a graduate scheme at a major FMCG company in the UK. Despite investing hours in answering situational questions and tricky games, I woke up to a rejection email first thing on a Monday morning. While I knew not to emotionally invest in job applications, I couldn't help but feel disappointed after the time I spent...Receiving a rejection email after time spent tailoring your CV can be disheartening, but dwelling on it won't change the outcome. Instead, taking a step back, reflecting, and learning from the experience can lead to a better application next time. So, if you've recently faced rejection, take a break, indulge yourself, and then reflect and strategise for the future."

We have also had students from the programme who have later secured a graduate role and taken to social media to remind others that you only need that one 'yes'!

"The job market in the United Kingdom is incredibly competitive, and the journey to this point has not been easy. Despite submitting hundreds of applications with numerous assessments, presentations, and interviews, I have never given up. Each rejection, although disheartening, especially after investing time in extensive tasks, has only fuelled my determination to keep pushing forward. However, through consistent effort and perseverance, I have learned that it will only take one YES to change everything. And recently, that YES finally came. My advice to international students and recent graduates who may be seeking a job is to please not give up, as your congratulations are around the corner."

Recognising the importance of the student voice, we welcome international alumni to the programme to share their own experiences and perspectives with students, often reinforcing these messages of hope, determination and that they are not alone.



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CAREERS IN MENTAL HEALTH

Your guide to AGCAS resources...

According to the most recent NHS Benchmarking Network findings, the last few years have seen record numbers of children, young people and adults in the UK seeking mental health support. To cope with this increase, mental health services are having to change and adapt to meet the level of demand.

AGCAS, in collaboration with our partners Prospects, provide a wide range of [Job profiles](#) that offer a valuable insight into key jobs within mental health. These resources are produced to support our members in their work with students and graduates interested in a career in mental health.

Mental health careers covered by AGCAS Job profiles include:

PSYCHIATRY

[Psychiatrists](#) are medically qualified doctors specialising in the diagnosis and treatment of patients with a range of mental health disorders.

MENTAL HEALTH NURSING

[Mental health nurses](#) support people with mental health conditions through their recovery process, helping them to improve their quality of life and live independently.

TALKING THERAPIES

Roles in this area include [psychological wellbeing practitioners](#), who support people with mild to moderate symptoms of depression, anxiety and low mood, and [high intensity therapists](#), who support individuals with moderate to severe depression and anxiety. Other related roles include [counsellor](#). Counsellors see clients with a range of issues that may include anxiety and depression.



Adult [psychotherapists](#) and [child psychotherapists](#) use psychotherapeutic approaches to help people explore and express their thought processes, feelings and behaviour. This can include mental ill health, for example anxiety and depression.

PSYCHOLOGY

Many of the psychologist roles include an element of working with people with mental ill health. [Clinical psychologists](#), in particular, treat patients with a range of mental health issues, conditions and disorders, as well as those with physical health conditions.

EDUCATION MENTAL HEALTH

[Education mental health practitioner](#) is a growing career that helps children and young people to get early intervention for mental health difficulties.



CREATIVE THERAPIES

Graduates with a degree in a creative subject related to art, dance, drama or music may be interested in working as therapists in roles such as:

- [Art therapist](#)
- [Dance movement psychotherapist](#)
- [Dramatherapist](#)
- [Music therapist](#)

The aim of these roles is to help people address their social, emotional, psychological, physical or communication needs, which can include mental ill health, without necessarily having to talk or communicate in the traditional manner.

Finally, [play therapists](#) use play as a communication tool to help children understand their world and deal with emotional distress and trauma.



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Developing you: INSPIRATION, TOOLS AND OPPORTUNITIES



DR. TANIA LYDEN, Assistant Professor at the University of Warwick and Course Director for CEIGHE shares insights that create different perspectives on continuing professional development, member stories to inspire you and learning opportunities to tempt you.

We can be our own worst enemies at times, when it comes to thinking about ourselves and our own career journeys. We often construct walls for ourselves about what we can and can't do, when in reality they need not exist. In turn, these thoughts can eat away at our wellbeing. For me, it was about doing a PhD. I had always loved learning but had never been in a position to do one. It wasn't until an inspirational academic told me that my research project "lacked rigour" and that I should do a PhD that I simultaneously thought "there's no way I can do that" and "I'll show her..."! Since then, I have been on an exciting and fulfilling journey of personal growth, one that I didn't think I had the courage to go on.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MINDSET

I had mulled over doing a PhD for ten years and whereas part of the challenge was about finding a motivational topic, there was also a tug of war in my mind about whether I could do it or not. Cognitive behavioural coaches call this unhelpful thinking, the origins of which lie in the work of Aaron Beck and subsequently David Burns. Such unhelpful thinking habits can be exhausting and damage our development.

THINKING HABITS

We all have occasional unhelpful thinking habits which can undermine our ability to grasp the experiences that help us grow. One such habit is 'emotional thinking'. If we feel scared of failure, we tend to assume we will fail and not even try. Another is 'all or nothing thinking'. This is where I was swinging from thinking I could be an amazing researcher, or I could be terrible, but the reality was that I would probably end up somewhere in between. This constant switching between extremes can deplete your emotional reserves and stop you grasping opportunities. I'm not a big fan of quotations, but at that time I found the quote "you don't have to see the whole staircase, just take the first step" (Martin Luther King, Jr) which made me realise that you have to 'speculate to accumulate' and believe in yourself.

EXPLORE YOUR THINKING HABITS

To explore your own unhelpful thinking habits, try the [Positive Psychology webpages](#) on cognitive distortion to learn more. You may also want to try spotting it not only in your own day-to-day thinking, but in the thinking of your students too. How many learning opportunities have you avoided over the years because of unhelpful thinking? Once you spot them, challenge them with logic and evidence from your prior experience and see where your mind ends up.

REAL-LIFE INSPIRATION

Stella Charalambous-Parsons is researching international students and their perceptions of finding a placement and tells us about her unhelpful thinking.

It has been more than a year since I received the only C in this Master's, and I still think that I am too stupid to finish the MA. That C caused a lot of overgeneralisation to the point I was contemplating not proceeding with the dissertation portion of the Master's – if I can't hack research methods, what's the point of pursuing a dissertation, right? Hello, all-or-nothing thinking. Luckily, with Tania's encouragement and metaphorical nudges, I am now navigating the final weeks. It has not been easy though – once your brain says you are not good enough, you tend to believe it. This is why mentorship and supervision can be crucial in providing an outsider's perspective, minimising the effects of the little self-doubt voice in our heads and moving us forward.

UPCOMING OPPORTUNITIES

If you've realised your unhelpful thinking has trapped you in your comfort zone, why not break free by starting some research, [volunteering for a task group](#), [delivering training for AGCAS](#) or signing up for that 5k run that you've always wanted to do. You never know where it might lead – you just need to take the first step!

STUDY A PART-TIME
POSTGRADUATE COURSE IN

Career education, information and guidance in Higher Education (CEIGHE)

CEIGHE courses are delivered by the University of Warwick in conjunction with AGCAS and lead to an award by the University.

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Boosting student engagement THROUGH A RESEARCH-DRIVEN EMPLOYABILITY CURRICULUM



Over the past year, LUCY AYLIFFE and ANJLI SHAH, Career Consultants at City St George, University of London have been working with DR JULIA YATES from the Psychology department, incorporating cutting-edge research into the employability curriculum. In this article, they share the research and how they applied its findings to work with current students.

Frustrated that existing research didn't offer a clear step-by-step model that explained how students go from 'I don't have any ideas' to 'I'm now working', Julia interviewed 30 recent graduates from a range of different disciplines and asked them to explain the steps involved. Their experiences are outlined in this five-stage model of real-world graduate career decision making:

“ We felt the model had potential to equip students with lifelong career decision making skills ”

1. Pick a job that sounds ok: Students' job ideas come from difference sources – an inspiring teacher, a TikTok video, or work experience. If nothing emerges from their experience they do some research, scanning job boards or attending careers events.

2. Find out more: With a single reasonably appealing occupation in mind, students find out more, through internet research, discussions with people in that field or work experience.

3. Think about whether it would suit: The students then analyse whether the job would suit them considering what they would enjoy and what they might be good at. If the job feels like a reasonable match, they move on to step 4. If it doesn't, they go back to step 1 and find another job idea.

4. Apply: The application process can be a useful way to find out more. It allows students to meet the sorts of people they would be working with, find out more about specific organisations, and get a sense of how they treat their staff.

5. Decide: Once they have a job offer, the students make a decision. Most do this quite passively (If they've offered me a job, it must be right for me) and sometimes take a job even when they don't feel completely committed.

As careers consultants, this model resonated. It is what we see in our students. It made sense to acknowledge how students naturally make choices and build on that, meeting them where they are rather than trying to force them into an alien, albeit 'better' approach. We felt the model had potential to equip students with lifelong career decision making skills.



CHANGING PRACTICE

Previously, our employability modules had broadly aligned with the stages of Law and Watts's Decisions, Opportunities, Transitions, Self (DOTS) model: we started with self-awareness, then opportunity awareness, then transition skills. This traditional approach assumes that understanding personal attributes will naturally lead to insights about career choices. However, Julia's model challenges this assumption, suggesting that a focus on self-awareness may not be particularly fruitful at the start of the process. Students may be able to identify traits such as 'good communication skills' or 'being a team player', but without a frame of reference – without a specific job in mind – these terms remain vague and somewhat meaningless.

Working with our Psychology, Politics, English and Communications Studies programmes, we adapted our approach, structuring our modules like this:

1. Pick a job that sounds ok: We identified a handful of alumni from each course, shared information about their jobs and employers, and invited the students to select one.

2. Find out more: The students did some research, using the person's LinkedIn profile to find out about their role and previous experiences. They got hold of a live job description for a similar position.

3. Think about whether it would suit: Looking at the job description, the students were asked to consider how they would feel about doing the job, what they would like and dislike and what they might be good at. They developed an action plan, identifying steps to make themselves attractive to potential employers.

4. Apply: For the module assessment, the students produced a job application. Once they had decoded the job description and reflected on themselves in that context, we asked them to consider what the employer might want to hear and what they might want to impart. They submitted a tailored CV and a short reflection on their learning and next steps.

ASSESSING THE IMPACT

We know that in-depth career exploration takes time, and it's not always easy to get first and second-years to engage, so we were delighted to see our new approach improve student motivation.

Making the self-awareness sessions more tangible and less abstract increased student engagement with the exercises. With a direct link to an actual job, the students seemed more motivated to deeply reflect on these traits and found it easier to identify and move on to their next steps. A student explained:

"It's so abstract to think about your skills usually and that makes it really difficult to engage – but if you start with something tangible – looking at what the job is day to day – it makes it real."

We compared students' scores before and after the sessions, looking specifically at their career planning skills (which went from an average of 3.1/5 before the sessions to 3.8/5 afterwards), their career decision making difficulties (which reduced from 3.2 to 2.5) and their job seeking skills (up from 2.0 to 2.8). The module marks went up too, the students had really understood what a job description means and how to tailor an application.

Other benefits stemmed from the confidence and respect we gained from delivering research-driven content. It felt as though drawing on a 'model' convinced the students that the content was going to be genuinely helpful, giving us and our sessions inbuilt credibility. Apart from anything else, it was great to give ourselves the time to really think and be more student-centred, redefining what we wanted the students to learn and how we wanted to present it.

NEXT STEPS

We enjoyed this approach and have since used it for our graduate bootcamp, which gained positive feedback. We are also adapting it for 1:1 interventions where appropriate. Testing this approach has sparked discussions on how to help students better understand jobs and job descriptions; our pilot confirmed that grasping different roles remains a significant challenge for them. We have also been thinking about using other theories and frameworks. This approach has highlighted the confidence and credibility we can gain from drawing on external models. It would be great to hear from anyone who has tried something similar.



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Looking to streamline your **mentoring** programme?

Introducing sfG MentorNet – a fully-supported and secure online mentoring platform.

Based in the UK, we're committed to helping universities, charities and businesses streamline their mentoring programmes by reducing administration.

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We currently work with a number of AGCAS members and are always happy to give anyone who may be interested, a demonstration of sfG MentorNet. Whether you're looking for a demo, a 30 day free trial, or would just like to have a chat about your mentoring programme, please get in touch.

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The intersection of careers and employability support with student wellbeing has never been more important. Today's students face career uncertainty, mental health challenges and the lasting impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic. At sfG MentorNet, we recognise that while academic achievement and career readiness are vital, fostering resilience and holistic wellbeing is equally essential. Through our innovative online mentoring platform, we aim to help mentoring programmes create a supportive environment where students can build confidence, gain career clarity and develop strategies to thrive in an increasingly complex world.

The current landscape

Students today face diverse challenges. The pandemic disrupted academic experiences, ongoing economic pressures heighten anxiety, and a volatile labour market adds further uncertainty. Many students juggle work with studies or reduce campus activities to save on travel costs, contributing to isolation. Additionally, the growing number of students disclosing mental health conditions highlights the urgent need for integrated support systems. Career uncertainty compounds these struggles. Navigating modern career paths requires not only technical skills but also resilience, adaptability, and confidence—all closely tied to mental wellbeing. Careers professionals play a critical role in addressing these challenges by collaborating with student support teams to offer holistic solutions.

Mentoring as a catalyst for resilience

This is where online mentoring platforms like sfG MentorNet make a difference. By simplifying the process of connecting students with mentors, our platform ensures mentoring programmes can personalise support to meet each mentee's needs. Mentoring offers more than career advice—it provides a safe space for students to explore anxieties, clarify goals and develop strategies to overcome challenges.

1. Building confidence through connection: Many students struggle with self-doubt, particularly when entering the job market or navigating career transitions. Mentoring helps mentees build relationships with mentors who have faced similar challenges, offering reassurance and practical advice. Hearing how others overcame obstacles fosters hope and empowerment.

2. Reducing career anxiety: Career uncertainty can significantly increase stress. Mentors guide mentees in creating actionable plans, navigating recruitment processes and identifying opportunities. These structured conversations bring clarity, reduce anxiety and help students build resilience for the future.

3. Accessible and inclusive support: Accessibility is critical in addressing barriers like digital poverty. Our user-friendly platform requires minimal resources and allows students from all backgrounds to engage with mentors at their convenience, ensuring equitable support regardless of location or circumstances.

4. Holistic development for long-term success: Mentoring fosters the development of soft skills like communication, emotional intelligence and adaptability. These traits are vital for navigating career challenges and life's broader uncertainties, equipping students for lasting success.

Enhancing graduate transitions

The shift from academia to the workplace can be daunting, especially for graduates entering remote or hybrid roles. Mentoring helps graduates understand workplace culture, onboarding processes and strategies for maintaining wellbeing in professional environments. In collaboration with employers, mentoring can advocate for strong onboarding programmes and mental health support. These initiatives create workplace cultures that prioritise meaningful work and long-term employee wellbeing, ensuring new hires feel valued and supported.

Supporting careers professionals

The increasing complexity of student needs places greater demands on careers professionals. sfG MentorNet provides tools to monitor mentoring relationships and generate insights that inform broader institutional strategies. These tools enable mentoring programmes to refine their approaches, ensuring that they deliver measurable benefits for students and institutions alike. By equipping careers professionals with the resources they need, we can amplify the impact of mentoring programmes, creating a ripple effect that supports students, graduates and the institutions they represent.

A vision for the future

As the relationship between careers support and student wellbeing continues to evolve, platforms like sfG MentorNet showcase the power of tailored mentoring. By fostering resilience, confidence, and clarity, mentoring empowers students to approach their future with optimism and strength. In a world of uncertainty, mentoring provides stability—a reminder that no student must navigate their path alone. Together, we can build a foundation of wellbeing that supports lifelong success, ensuring every graduate is equipped to face the challenges and opportunities ahead.

HOW ARE STUDENTS ENGAGING WITH CAREERS ADVICE?

PROSPECTS

Jisc



Students with mental health challenges have different experiences of careers engagement, explains CHRIS REA, Head of Strategic Relationships at Prospects Jisc.

AGCAS members with long memories will remember hundreds of Prospects publications hitting careers services every year. This was how we operated when I first started working at Prospects, some 30 years ago. As we shifted from paper to digital publishing, my role evolved too but supporting careers services has always been at its heart and this continues into my new position as Head of Strategic Relationships.

Over the coming weeks and months, I will be visiting careers colleagues to help ensure that they get the best value out of their Jisc membership and that we meet their needs now and in the future. This includes sharing data on the attitudes and challenges of students when it comes to career planning and work, as well as the implications on employment.

One of our most valued resources is our annual [Early Careers Survey](#), which provides insight to student wellbeing and careers.

WELLBEING AND CAREERS ENGAGEMENT

The lockdown restrictions severely disrupted education and early career pathways. As a result, we saw declining engagement with careers services, increasing uncertainty and changing career plans became commonplace. So, perhaps unsurprisingly, when students were asked about their biggest challenges, keeping motivated and taking care of mental health came out top in our survey.

Yet as we returned to more typical conditions, other factors came into play. For the last couple of years, the cost-of-living crisis meant that money has overtaken as the biggest challenge. However, for university students and recent graduates, motivation and mental health continue to dominate as issues for more than half of respondents.

Delving into the data, we can see some subtle but important differences in the way students challenged by their mental health engage with careers. Students who reported mental health as their biggest challenge over the last year were more inclined to seek careers support and advice online. This was a significant preference to every other source of support, from family and friends to careers advisors.

While mental health challenges seem to have little effect on whether students have a careers guidance appointment – around half of respondents said they had attended at least one in the last year - they do have a detrimental impact on student propensity to take part in developmental activities such as help writing CVs and job applications or job interview preparation.

Many careers services adopted online and hybrid approaches to advice and guidance as a result of lockdown restrictions. Maintaining some element of this kind of provision and making students aware of what is viable would be an effective way of supporting students who are struggling with their wellbeing.



JISC CAREERS RESEARCH GRANT

As part of our investment in careers advancement, we run an [annual grant](#) fund with £50,000 available to support the research interests of front-line careers staff. You can find [some of the latest projects on Luminare](#) and we are delighted to announce this year's successful applicants:

- Manchester Metropolitan University - tackling racial equity on awarding and employability gaps within higher education, with an EDI career mentoring scheme.
- Lancaster University - how do students find out about employment opportunities?
- Northumbria University - designing a research informed student inclusion guide and toolkit for employability practitioners.
- Queen's University Belfast - exploring informational interviews in supporting non-linear career students from graduate to workplace identity.
- Robert Gordon University - articulating perceived skills gaps in the graduate CV.
- University of Bradford - improving employability prospects of widening participation and underrepresented students with overseas placements.
- University of Gloucestershire – a student perspective of enterprise, entrepreneurship and employability.
- University of Hertfordshire - international students seeking employment within the UK.
- University of Huddersfield - postgraduate careers and co-creation in HE.
- University of Sussex - Increasing the engagement of students with a mental health condition in work experience through a carefully designed 'faculty to careers consultant' referral process.
- University of York - exploring the attitudes of employers recruiting in the York and North Yorkshire area to applicant use of AI in recruitment and graduate roles.

Our next [Research Grant](#) opens on 2 January 2025 with up to £5,000 available for each project. To request an application form or for more information email research@prospects.ac.uk.



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RESEARCHER'S DIGEST



DR JULIA YATES, Associate Professor in Organisational Psychology at City, University of London, shares her latest digest of careers-related research.

01

THE EMPLOYABILITY BENEFITS OF PEER-LEARNING

Christie, F., Allen, M., Burke, C., & Thomsen, R. (2024). An exploration of the impact of different peer learning activities utilised to develop student employability. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1-17.

This paper explores the benefits of employability sessions that focus or capitalise on peer-learning. We know that much of the push towards group guidance activities is pragmatic - a response to increasing demands on limited resources - but it was lovely to read this account which really highlights the value that comes from these kinds of group activities. The authors report a qualitative evaluation of some peer-focused employability sessions within the curriculum at a business school in the UK. The study identified two main benefits that come from peer learning. First, that students are able to develop their own career identity. The authors found that the process of comparing themselves with their peers and identifying shared concerns increased students' work-related self-awareness – described as 'career identity'. Second, that the students enhanced their own cultural career capital. The authors found that mock assessment centre group exercises increased the students' confidence and their understanding of how to behave, as they could observe their peers, and reflect on their experiences together, allowing them to identify the behaviours that are most effective in this context.

02

CAREER WRITING

McNichol, A. K., Lengelle, R., & Poell, R. F. (2024). Career writing interventions for career learning: an integrative literature review. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 1-30.

Career writing exercises can be really useful for clients, and can focus on expressive, reflective or creative writing. The authors of this article trawled through the published literature on this topic and found 45 academic articles which focused on career writing and the impact that it can have on clients. Writing is a very common therapeutic intervention and there is plenty of research that attests to its power to help reduce stress and prevent burnout. Despite what we know about the stress that can be caused by career development, writing is not very widely applied in career support. Career writing can take different forms but often clients are invited to write and then re-write their story. Clients generate an initial narrative, and then they reflect on what they have written (alone, with a career consultant or in a peer group). They are then encouraged to think about the story from different perspectives (for example, asking how would your best friend tell that story?) Writing often focuses on issues of career identity, with clients writing about their life themes and considering how they feel about the uncertainty associated with the modern labour market, but can be applied with different client groups in different ways. Overall, career writing seems to bring some tangible benefits, with evidence suggesting that it can help with personal and professional development, with career development and with mental and even physical health.

03

WHAT DOES 'CAREER SUCCESS' MEAN TO GEN Z?

Jackson, D., Bridgstock, R., Lambert, C., Tofa, M., & Sibson, R. (2024). Subjective career success among new graduates and the role of personal factors. *Education+ Training*.

There has been some focus in the literature recently on the difference between objective and subjective career success. Objective career success is generally conceptualised as salary and seniority, but increasingly it's becoming clear that this isn't necessarily the kind of success that everyone aspires to – particularly perhaps our younger Gen Z clients. This study was conducted with 350 recent graduates in Australia, and explored what would make these graduates feel that their career was a success. The most appealing features were the old favourites of financial security (as distinct from 'financial success') and work-life-balance, but the authors also identified a new long-term trend, away from 'helping others' and away from 'innovation'. The authors put this down to a broader societal move away from collectivist values and towards individualist goals. They also identified three typical graduate 'profiles', grouping their participants into those who strive most for 'humanistic success' with a focus on supporting others, 'balanced success' for those who want to achieve both financial and entrepreneurial success and 'self-made success' for those who want to run their own businesses. There is clear evidence that career success clarity can help students to set their own career goals, so this is a good reminder of the value of asking students to consider what 'success' means to them.

04

COGNITIVE FLEXIBILITY AND JOB HUNTING

Roux, E., Beccaria, G., & McIlveen, P. (2024). The role of cognitive flexibility in job search behaviour: a research agenda. *International Journal for Educational and Vocational Guidance*, 1-18.

This paper looks at the idea of cognitive flexibility and the benefits that it can bring to a job hunt. Cognitive flexibility is all about the ability to make choices about what you think about and where you focus your mind - you might have come across the term or the idea if you have engaged with CBT. If you are cognitively flexible, then you can make the choice not to ruminate on past negative job search experiences and can manage not to dwell on negative 'what ifs', making the choice not to get fixated on what would happen if you didn't manage to get this job. The authors of this paper propose that cognitive flexibility boosts confidence, and that this confidence then has a knock-on positive impact on your job search behaviour. Previous research has shown that if you feel more confident then you are likely to set yourself suitable goals and work harder to achieve them, so anything that can boost confidence is likely to have a positive impact on job hunting. The model these authors propose isn't widely tried and tested yet although they make a convincing theoretical case for it. Psychological flexibility isn't very widely covered in career education, but there are some straightforward approaches that can help people to increase it, including mindfulness and acceptance and commitment therapy, which might be worth exploring.



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VIEW PHOENIX THEMES AND ISSUES



next issue
OF PHOENIX



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THIS ISSUE INCLUDES CONTRIBUTIONS FROM AGCAS MEMBERS AT THE FOLLOWING SERVICES:

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Lancaster University

The Open University

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