

Changing mindsets - embedding employability in the curriculum through the Careers Education Hub and Careers Readiness

Helen McCarron and Dr Kate Strudwick

Careers Education Manager, Careers and Employability Services
Dean of Teaching and Learning, Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching (LALT)

Abstract

This article presents an overview of developments with careers education conducted in partnership between Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching (LALT) and Careers and Employability (C&E) in the academic year 22/23. Support was provided through developing collaborative opportunities to embed and extract employability and skills within the curriculum and co-curricular, through staff CPD opportunities and the creation of clear frameworks for the successful delivering of quality employability within our curricular which embraces a Student as Producer ethos. With its remit to expand levels of confidence in practice, initiatives were provided for application in teaching and learning by academic schools. Following the project, the career readiness programme is delivered on scale for undergraduate students, which has been evaluated to show positive impact for the development of employability knowledge and confidence. In addition, the creation of accessible and on demand staff training has fostered a community of employability leads increasing collaborative approaches.

Keywords: Employability; Skills, CPD, Partnerships, Student as Producer

Introduction and background

Employability within Higher Education can enhance student experiences and has a fundamental place within the curriculum. This is not a new idea but it has been a debate that has been present within the sector for several years and is seen as a bridge for the application of knowledge enhancing opportunities for students to develop skills and graduate outcomes. These are skills which are integral for all within the learning community and require institutions to take a holistic approach to employability, incorporating the development of a host of categories of skills as part of the wider learning experience. As Tibby and Norton (2020:5) state:

“...All stakeholders, including academic and support staff, students, careers services, students’ unions and employers, have a role to play in embedding employability and should be encouraged to engage in and be involved in doing so. Employability should be integrated into the culture of the institution”.

Advance HE (2019) provides an essential framework for Embedding Employability in Higher Education, presenting supporting guidance to those designing and developing

employability approaches at an institutional level. By acknowledging the complexity of employability, they provided ten broad areas of focus framed with principles of inclusivity, collaboration and engagement stating, *“The framework thus promotes the principles of inclusion and collaboration as key to achieving a joined-up approach”* (2019).

Inclusivity and Embedding Employability – *What and why is this important for student engagement?*

Supporting students in their development to fulfil their potential means preparing students to thrive as professionals in a constantly changing world (Post,2022), radically transformed by the pandemic. This includes working with students to support them to identify their existing skills and attributes to translate these to existing pathways and graduate job roles, some of these may not have been created yet. It is also important to recognise that access to opportunities is not the same for all students. It is therefore imperative that employability is not viewed as a buzz word or simply a tick box exercise, but it is seen as an underpinning theme for student success and experience which crucially empowers social mobility

The external lens on measuring employability is central to the Office for Students’ efforts to connect measures of quality provided on a degree course. The value and importance of Higher Education is increasingly measured, most notably in this context of Graduate Outcomes (www.graduateoutcomes.ac.uk, n.d.), particularly graduate level employment/ employment in highly skilled roles or postgraduate education. With a clear synergy and alignment to Access and Participation Plans (APP) the focus for institutions is to reduce progression gaps for students and ensure that students from less represented backgrounds receive support in terms of equality of careers education and equity of support to close gaps. (Please refer to Spacey and Sanderson (2020) for a more detailed explanation of APP).

Stakeholders including prospective students and industry can use these metrics as part of their key considerations when choosing an institution to engage with. Universities must effectively integrate employability into the overall student experience if it is to feature positively and continue to attract the most ambitious stakeholders. Combined literature from Advance HE (2021) demonstrates the value of universities applying a cross-institutional approach to make employability inclusive, integrating it into the overall student experience, *“it is clear that while studies continue to consider embedded versus non-embedded provision as distinct entities, increasingly the value of a concerted and cross-institutional approach is indicated”* (Dalrymple et al., 2021,p.42).

Through a Student as Producer lens, employability is a key element of the wider student experience and reaches beyond a traditional curriculum. Alongside this there is a shift within the graduate labour market from a ‘know it all’ to a ‘learn it all’ culture, with a need for curious and forward-thinking graduates. In our approach it was important to adopt a model which embraced a Student as Producer ethos and built

partnership approaches, including students influencing the design of programme and content which empowers students be critical, curious and active in their own career discovery. *"Student as Producer unambiguously asks students to be active in their university experience, to challenge themselves and their environment to help them achieve their potential."* (Strudwick and Prichard 2022).

University of Lincoln's (UoL) Strategic Plan 2022-27 sets out to empower students to thrive as graduates. How we teach and assess our students is central to their development, making 'real-world' approaches, such as placements, employer projects and industry led skills education integral to their learning and development. Within the teaching and learning strategy this is expanded further through the Lincoln for Life wheel, which highlights essential key skills and attributes we need to equip students and graduates with, to grow and succeed.

"We will develop our students into highly skilled and employable graduates, and adaptable, socially responsible citizens."

To develop and operationalise an inclusive employability strategy for careers education, it has required the development of a collaborative framework to aid discussion and to challenge pre-conceptions. This has focused upon changing mindsets, so that employability is not seen as an 'add on' but is identified by all as an important aspect of student engagement and a core teaching and learning activity.

Making change through a collaborative institutional career readiness framework

In 2021, the career readiness framework was designed at UoL to provide an embedded and equal approach to employability within the curricular, setting the foundations to build upon. To successfully empower students to transition from the early stages of career exploration to successful graduate applications, learning needed to be incrementally scaffolded throughout the student journey.

Beginning at Level 4 the framework builds on the development of knowledge and skills through Levels 5 and 6, which students can evidence against the Lincoln Award. The award provides students with a suggested structure to continue their learning beyond the curriculum and includes key requirements such as 'experience-based activity' and an industry led assessment centre to evaluate and test student's ability to confidently articulate their skills. Using the concept of 'Explore, Develop and Apply' (please see figure 1), students can evaluate their preparedness, identify their next steps and access a range of resources. This concept was based on the works of Daubney 'Demystifying Careers Education' and uses a 'three stage journey' mirrored within long-standing universal career development approaches and recent literature from across the sector (Advance HE 2021:15). The creation of University of Lincoln Career Readiness language places career guidance approaches and 'transitions' into relatable and industry ready terminology for University of Lincoln Students.



The model is applied throughout a career readiness framework. The project included the design and delivery of a series of lectures (career readiness programme), a package of follow-up personal tutor 'touch point' support and key principles for implementation:

- *The integration of a 9 – Hour Career Readiness Lecture Series, 3 hours per year group, recommended for school wide core curriculum to maximise reach*
- *Students are exposed gradually to external influences including alumni and industry aiding career transition aiming to raise aspirations and confidence.*
- *Full stakeholder co-design and delivery is integral (students, employers, alumni, Careers Advisers, and academics and all involved in the facilitation of lectures).*
- *Key themes are embedded into the structure to support inclusivity including accessibility of content, internationalisation, and core skills identified in the Teaching and Learning Strategy (www.lincoln.ac.uk, 2023).*
- *Personal Tutor 'developmental touch point' conversations built into the framework to enhance learning from the lecture programme.*
- *Key impact measures outlined per level and mapped against the Lincoln Award.*
- *Flexibility for school specific tailoring whilst maintaining an inclusive and unified structure and working towards embedding within module learning objectives.*

- *New questions added at enrolment stage to collect student perceptions and to measure development through career stages throughout their studies at Lincoln.*

To support the implementation of the framework a CPD plan for academic staff was developed to support confidence when embedding employability. This resulted in close collaboration between Professional Services at UoL, partnerships between Careers and Employability (C&E) and Lincoln Academy of Learning and Teaching (LALT), who hold a key responsibility for supporting and developing all staff delivering teaching and learning activity.

Collaborative Approaches

Academic Co-Design and Delivery

A key challenge in making careers education scalable is academic awareness and confidence to embed learning. In support of this challenge a Careers Education Hub was launched in 2022 to provide on demand support. The hub was developed by the University wide Careers Education and Employability Working Group (collaborative leadership between Lincoln Academy of Learning/Teaching and Careers and Employability).

The Careers Education Hub was developed in response to calls to embed employability within teaching and learning. Initially, in the academic year 2021/22, the group was developed in partnership between LALT and CES. This was established through developing collaborative opportunities to embed and extract employability and skills within the curriculum and co-curricular, through the creation of staff CPD opportunities and clear frameworks for the successful delivering of quality employability within the curricular. In essence, with the remit to provide greater more streamlined support for the delivery of employability across all disciplines.

With the objective to expand levels of confidence and awareness of staff, the sharing of good practice was delivered through CPD material and the creation of a number of support packages, notably:

- a. Careers & Employability – Career Readiness Programme Overview
- b. Provision of Off the Shelf Resources
- c. A holistic CPD offer- meeting the demands as identified by staff feedback and training needs.

The creation of the hub was key to the dissemination of information and guidance so that schools were aware of key frameworks and services and had the necessary autonomy and flex to adapt content to student and industry needs. It was essential that all key stakeholders, Employability leads, Programme leaders and Directors of Teaching and Learning, were knowledgeable on how they could use/ apply approaches and resources within their Schools. Therefore, such embedding was to

be led at a local level in Schools, under the leadership of 'Employability Leads'. These roles were created as an important academic leadership function within schools to support the dissemination of key activities, to champion best practice and to integrate key initiatives such as the career readiness programme.

The repository of training materials was created to be a mixture of online and face to face delivery, with content being flexible and applicable for different contexts, for example in personal tutoring sessions, teaching induction, integration into the Academic Professional Apprenticeship and PGCHE and employability lead reflective practice to ensure our educators, as learners, were also prepared and knowledgeable to embed within their own practice.

The creation a learning guide and repository to support the design, delivery, and signposting of careers education was provided as a support pack to academics. To date the hub has 500+ web hits and resources are implemented by personal tutors. Academic co-delivery has increased on the career readiness programme by 40%, which has had a cumulative impact on student engagement and participation.

Student Collaboration, Co-Design and Delivery

A 'Student as Producer' philosophy was applied through a co-design and co-delivery approach from the start of the project through collaboration with C&E and LALT (See work on Student as Producer by Neary et al, 2014, Strudwick 2017, Strudwick and Prichard 2022). Data from the internal career's education review was presented to a group of students in a teaching and learning panel in 2021. Student feedback demonstrated they felt mandatory careers education from level four would be beneficial, as it needed to be staged/built over time using a combination of a confidence boosting and realistic motivational messaging.

Peer to peer learning provided a new angle for the programme in 2022/23 and allowed for it to be not only shaped by student voice but delivered by students for students. Through the recruitment and training of a pool of Careers Ambassadors, C&E implemented students into the co-delivery of sessions for first year students to support community building. Furthermore, through retrospectively sharing their experiences these students were able to see their own distance travelled with employability skills.

"Taking part in the Career Readiness was a valuable opportunity to develop my professional skills. In the beginning, I could not even imagine myself speaking to a crowded lecture hall. It took me a while to become familiar with the process. However, things got better, and I really understood that my role was beneficial to my personal development. Now, I am so proud of myself for not giving up and happy to help students to do the same." LIBS PG Student (collected through internal feedback processes) (Student Careers Ambassador).

Across the sector there is limited research into the value of a student collaborative approach for employability, with the risk that through this approach students are seen as ‘novices’ rather than ‘agents’ (Advance HE 2021). In addition to importance placed on student voice, the programme ensures that all schools have alumni involvement in at least once session in their university journey. Following the sessions students can connect with graduates through an exclusive mentoring platform ‘[Lincoln Connect](#)’. This applies a wider community approach and in turn supports the growth of networks and social capital. This impact can be seen in feedback from the students who took part in the programme:

“Listening to a student’s experiences was helpful and allowed me to understand how I can boost my skills and experiences.” (College of Social Science Student Quote)

“It was useful Hearing from somebody who had recently been through the process of graduating.” (College of Social Science Student Quote)

This important learning point and impact was further evidenced within an internal evaluation of the careers ambassador role, where they reflected on their experience as a student co-facilitators and student receiving the programme. *“Guest speakers were seen as inspiring, as one ambassador pointed out “it’s just so, so helpful to see actual success” (Mallinson and Rose, 2023)*

Industry Collaboration

To develop a framework appropriate for the graduate labour market, and to ensure students are ready for the world of work, the importance of industry collaboration cannot be under-estimated. The career readiness framework ensures that sessions have Industry led learning outcomes and at least one session is co-delivered with a graduate employer relevant to the subject area. Q&A based lectures and mentoring opportunities bring alumni experience full circle and employers are provided with a clear bridge to the curriculum through the co-design and delivery of skill development sessions. To date the framework has allowed for over 50 industry speakers to be involved in sharing up to date industry knowledge with students over the two years of the project. This includes a diversity of sectors, company sizes, localised and national agendas. To support the continuous development of the framework, industry stakeholders are invited to an advisory board to ensure no content remains stagnant and is informed by constantly changing labour markets. Examples of principles for industry engagement is also signposted throughout the careers education hub, providing best practice examples in the repository.

Two Years In: Current impact and findings for student engagement

The career readiness framework is currently implemented across 23 out of the 25 schools at the UoL, and to date the programme has engaged over 18,000 student interactions over the last two years, reaching over 7,000 unique students who participated in multiple lectures.

In the academic year 22/23 the programme of lectures has resulted in an increase in student participation with all careers education with C&E via the curricular and an increase in industry co-delivery. This has been a result of greater academic, student and industry collaboration.

	21.22	22.23
Student Interactions	8,579	12,188
Industry co-delivery	26	40

Feedback in 22.23 demonstrates knowledge/confidence gain (n127 responses):

- 97% of students stated an increase in knowledge
- 91% stated their confidence in career planning had increased
- 43% stated that they will explore career planning
- 28% stated they will develop their career ideas
- 26% stated they will make applications

Motivation beyond the programme has resulted in a rise in first year engagement with the Lincoln Award (50% award participation after attending). Careers ambassadors (n18 student co-lectured) stated confidence and skill development through sharing their experience, and the feedback indicates that the programme has increased confidence and career adaptability.

Career Readiness Stages

Utilising the method of enrolment questionnaires, we actively ask students about their career stage each year, we can evaluate student perceptions of their career stages and any changes throughout their studies at Lincoln.

Whilst findings contain challenges, it enables an insight and snapshot into student feelings about their own journeys. Following the pilot there was an increase in Level four students stating they are within the 'Explore' stage. This could indicate that students through the career readiness content and wider course initiatives felt more confident and 'ready' to explore their career ideas. A decrease was seen in students identifying with the pre-explore stage, 'not ready to start thinking about their career yet' showing a further positive change and motivation to engage in career exploration.

However, the findings also demonstrated that students were less likely to make significant moves from the explore to develop stages, with low numbers of final year students at the 'apply' stage. Alongside this, national research acknowledges that student confidence in career planning often decreases throughout their university journey (Post, 2022).

Such findings open challenges for building and measuring career confidence and highlight the benefit of the active incorporation skills development and experiential learning, which are integral to the career development stage.

Conclusion

Initiatives and changes to the employability strategy developed by C&E, and through collaborative projects with LALT at the UoL, have shown significant and noteworthy results in the extent to which academics have engaged with employability within their teaching and learning, and the level of engagement from students. By adopting an institutional and centralised response the positive impact on knowledge/confidence gain has been both rewarding, and of value for future opportunities for changing mindsets and practice.

To maximise student engagement post covid such approaches discussed in this paper have utilised innovative methods for participation, channelling resources into academic CPD, industry collaboration and new student engagement methods. There is benefit to adopting a co-delivery approach with all stakeholders.

Whilst encouraging, results do open a few questions for consideration.

- a. What more needs to be done to raise confidence and ensure students' progress through university?
- b. How do we ensure we build student career readiness in a realistic way, but maintain their aspirations and career confidence?

Perhaps, the answer lies in small mind shift changes and a reminder about the diversity of each student journey. Careers are rarely linear, professional development is often a circular ongoing process, evidenced by the career planning model (fig 1) and the 'squiggly' career highlights the continued fluidity of roles and industries (Tupper and Ellis, 2020). Embedding employability is clearly a long-term strategy and by starting at Level Four we can incrementally build in self-awareness and career curiosity, empowering students to be active in their development. We must build upon this with embedded and accessible real world and industry experiences to support students to make informed choices and apply career related learning beyond their degree.

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Appendices

Career Readiness Framework – Proposed 23.24 Design.