Developing Graduate Employability Support in Scotland

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Project aims

Identified in June 2018:

'The project will investigate what groups of graduates are most likely to benefit from employability support interventions and the best way to deliver these. In the short-term, this will lead to the development of graduate employability support initiatives which are designed to meet graduates' needs and will have a higher chance of uptake.

If more unemployed/underemployed graduates receive appropriate employability support after graduation this should improve their chances of obtaining graduate level outcomes as well as helping them to feel supported and valued by their institutions.

If this approach is successful, this will be shared with other higher education institutions in Scotland and further afield in order to continually develop services to students and graduates, potentially improving their overall experience and outcomes.'

The project sought a critical understanding of what creates and impacts on a successful transition for new graduates and the role that careers services can or should play. This collaborative cluster of five Scottish Careers Services aimed to:

- Optimise existing evidence by pooling the knowledge and small-scale data collected to date on the scope and effectiveness of targeted employability support for recent graduates.

- Engage with final-year students and recent graduates to improve understanding of the most suitable methods to support graduating students.

- Pilot and evaluate a range of support activities in participating institutions which will be open to graduates of any Scottish higher education institution.

Executive summary

Data from the 2016–17 Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey showed that 91% of graduates from Scottish higher education institutions were working or studying six months after graduation. However, 25% were in roles classified as non-graduate.[1] Economic factors have led to budgetary cuts in careers services at a time when the new Graduate Outcomes survey has brought additional scrutiny to graduates' early career destinations. The shift from a six-month to 15-month census date is a great opportunity to assess the longer-term impact of higher education. These factors provide useful context for the aims of this project.

Scottish higher education institutions have consistently sought to implement targeted strategies to engage with finalists and recent graduates to support them to improve their career planning and prospects. Approximately half of graduates move location around or out of Scotland, so digital resources have become an important method of engagement.

The duration of support varies, but all 16 higher education institutions offer at least two years' formal support to their alumni, with six offering lifetime access. Targeted activities have included boot camps, webinars, and internship programmes; however, these have had consistently low numbers of participants. Additionally, traditional careers service offerings have been extended to graduates such as one-to-one guidance appointments, networking platforms and access to industry experts.

The primary research (six focus groups with students and 11 semi-structured interviews with graduates) identified four key themes:

1	Students and graduates seek highly-personalised support, available on timescales to suit them; online delivery is the preferred method for most.
2	Understanding of what careers services offer to graduates is low, and even those who have used careers services are not aware of the full range of activities offered.
3	Many students and graduates are reluctant to commit to a specific career path and may be unaware of the range of options open to them.
4	Some students and graduates are unlikely to seek support from a higher education careers service after graduation, perceiving it as 'going backwards'.

The key output as a result of these findings is a graduate support MOOC (free online course) which has been available online since 1 February 2020, with approximately 100 participants taking part during the first formally launched phase February–March 2020 and over 200 during the second launch in June 2020. A review of the motivations offered for doing so, and some of the challenges they have faced so far as graduates, highlighted the following.

Reasons for seeking support included:

- improving motivation and confidence
- gaining direction and focus
- developing self-promotion skills
- reviewing career options and finding a career path.

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1 Higher Education Leavers Statistics: UK, 2016/17, HESA 2018. Available at www.hesa.ac.uk/news/28–06–2018/sfr250-higher-education-leaver-statistics

Challenges faced by graduates included:

- finding credible sources of advice on what to include in a CV
- overcoming procrastination
- finding direction and identifying next steps
- self-promotion
- lacking confidence after job rejections.

During the second launch period, a small number of participants who had clear plans and those seeking direction, also noted concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their careers:

'I thought I knew what I wanted to do once I graduated … However, the economic situation due to COVID-19 has got me worried about job security. So now I'm hoping this course can help me decide how best to use my skills yet still be creative in the job market.'

'I had a graduate job lined up for September but I am worried it will not go ahead due to Covid and am thereby seek guidance within this course.'

'I'm not sure what I want to do after university, especially because of the current lockdown situation.'

The key outputs from this project include a framework to assess graduate support initiatives, improved qualitative data to understand graduate views and requirements, and the experience gained from piloting a MOOC which we aim to review and relaunch regularly in the future to support graduates from any Scottish higher education institution.

Summary of project activity

Year one summary

In year one, the project team focused on conducting research to gather useful context. Research involved the following:

Gathering existing data

- review of Scotland-wide DLHE data
- engagement with institutional data sources at five Scottish higher education institutions
- evaluation of existing methods to engage graduates from 16 Scottish higher education institutions.

Collecting primary qualitative data

- hire of a research assistant (recent graduate) to conduct focus groups and interviews
- six focus groups (conducted with students)
- 11 semi-structured telephone interviews (conducted with graduates).

Examples of targeted practice to drive graduate engagement were identified within the partner institutions:

- Graduate Exit Survey and follow-up
- Graduate Internship and Graduate Career and Professional Development Certificates
- Graduate Development summer programme
- Graduate Jobs Fair.

Reviewing careers service strategies and accompanying data found that the greatest and most consistent disparities in likelihood of graduate-level employment occur between subjects studied. The research samples were small with imbalances in protected characteristics so no statistically significant data recommended targeting. This suggests central graduate support activities need not typically be aimed at targeted groups.

Overall, the qualitative research suggested that students and graduates are highly satisfied with the quality of services provided when they accessed them. Key findings include the following:

- Students and graduates seek highly-personalised support, available on timescales to suit them; online delivery is the preferred method for most.
- Understanding of what careers services offer to graduates is low, and even those who have used careers services are not aware of the full range of activities offered.
- Many students and graduates are reluctant to commit to a specific career path and may be unaware of the range of options open to them.
- Some students and graduates are unlikely to seek support from a higher education careers service after graduation, perceiving it as 'going backwards'.

Respondents showed a preference for digital guidance in place of in-person support, but many did not know this already existed. There was no consensus on timing of interventions after graduation, with some preferring contact straight after the end of term and some suggesting a break in contact. Graduates prefer communications via their personal email address rather than the university address, however, this raises GDPR compliance questions.

In response to these findings, the project team agreed three relevant outputs:

- a full year one report summarising the findings
- a framework to support higher education institutions to complete a review of their offering
- a 'graduate branded' online resource for recent graduates to access – not obviously associated with university careers services and marketed differently in order to evaluate the uptake and engagement with a resource tailored to the feedback gained from year one.

Outputs from the first year of the project are available on the QAA website.

Year two summary

In year two, the project team created a taxonomy for production of a graduate resource, deciding on a MOOC which participants could work their way through independently and which would be hosted on a third–party platform. After consideration of a few different options and comparison of pricing and support available, OpenLearn Create was chosen as it offers a free package. However, unfamiliarity with this platform meant that a significant proportion of time was spent creating the content, and the final version of the course was limited in terms of the registration data obtained from participants.

A project manager with a background in graduate recruitment and higher education careers advice was appointed in October 2019 to collate existing resources from the five partners, and design and create new materials. Full details on this are available in the Design process section of this report.

During December 2019:

- user testing was carried out in careers services
- a review of DLHE data was completed to identify disciplines most in need of support
- a decision was made to expand the pilot to any graduate requiring support.

In January 2020:

- a 'graduate brand' for the resource was developed with a focus on professional development, lifelong skills, and continuous reflection – perception was a key consideration to ensure it was not perceived as a standard careers service offering
- a marketing campaign was created with the course name *Just Graduated? What Next?* and promotional materials with a neutral and professional appearance
- each partner higher education institution designed a communications plan to work with colleagues in their institution and a promotional hashtag #GraduatedWhatNext? was created.

The MOOC was officially launched on Monday 3 February 2020 but participants were able to enrol in the week leading up to this date. The project team devised a rota to engage with participants in the forum and feed back any concerns raised by users.

The MOOC was evaluated in May 2020 including recommendations for the next launch and the creation of new content as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and considerations graduates will now need to take. Recommendations included the following:

- Creation of additional sections including dealing with uncertainty, understanding recession, adapting career plans, and successfully working from home.
- Review of the marketing campaign to reflect the current economic situation and challenges graduates will face. More positive marketing imagery featuring rainbow colours was used.
- Exploration of the platform functionality to produce reports on users and progression – these options are not offered as standard in the basic functionality.

The MOOC was relaunched on 1 June 2020, three months earlier than originally planned. The team were able to complete the first two recommendations for the second launch, but are still awaiting enhanced data collection rights for the course.

Framework

[The framework](#) identifies key issues in graduate employability and how stakeholders can impact the design of activities. It poses relevant questions regarding design, delivery and evaluation of successful programmes to support the transition of new graduates into employment and can be a useful tool to consider evidence and approaches for designing new content.

It encourages higher education institutions to consider additional factors such as GDPR, targeting of priority groups, duration of support and delivery model, for example, one-to-one or one to many.

It introduces readers to sources of graduate data and how this is used, both in mainstream media and by organisations aiming to understand the picture for graduates. It introduces users to sources like DLHE and Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data, league tables, and alumni records. This also includes reference to Unistats (now DiscoverUni), TEF and league table metrics, allowing stakeholders to gain a wider understanding of the graduate data landscape.

The framework goes further by offering recommendations to address student and graduate concerns found in the research, for example, if graduates feel that 'going back' is a negative step, marketing should focus on the free and quality service available to deter graduates from paying elsewhere, use transition stories and case studies, and demonstrate clear targeting so they feel it is 'for them'. Additionally, it recommends conveying the uniqueness of the graduate offer which is an important marketing factor to improve engagement.

Graduate support MOOC

It was agreed that the MOOC should be framed as an open access resource for all graduates to use, and not directly affiliated with the five universities delivering the project, in the hope of improving engagement given the research findings. For this reason, OpenLearn and YouTube were used as the primary platforms.

Design process

The MOOC was assigned a February 2020 launch date to coincide with university communications about the Graduate Outcomes survey in late January. The project manager was given access to each of the five university's careers resources in order to ensure content could be repurposed where possible, for example, CV advice. However, most of the content is new including scenario-based learning, videos, narrated PowerPoint presentations, quizzes, forums, glossaries of terms, goal-setting exercises, self-reflection activities and many more.

This restricted timeframe meant that some workarounds were necessary to meet the deadline which will be improved upon in future iterations, for example, video content is not subtitled; transcripts are offered instead. To ensure variety, each project team member filmed some of the video content, however, there was varying access to relevant equipment, so the output quality varies. Some quizzes are in complex formats due to the choice of platform. These were part of the learning process of using the OpenLearn platform and will be addressed in future versions.

During the design process, the project team devised four themes around which to build content. Based on the DOTS model[2] with additional content on professional behaviours – which after review were found to be limited at the five universities – the topics are the following:

- What Next?
- Self-promotion
- Finding Opportunities
- In the Workplace

Rather than covering content which is easily available via other sources, participants can take part in activities to encourage deeper engagement and learning. For example, in Finding Opportunities, graduates are introduced to the Business Model Canvas and are instructed to use the canvas to research a chosen employer, its competitors, and the wider sector to develop commercial understanding. In *What Next?* they're introduced to the concept of career resilience, how to reframe past failures, and how to recognise negative thinking patterns. This blended approach of encouraging careers advice alongside the more direct commercial implications from recruitment gives this MOOC a unique selling point.

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2 The DOTS model summarises four key career planning tasks: decision making; opportunity awareness; transition learning; and self-awareness (Law and Watts,1977). This model is well-established in careers guidance and the 2005 AGCAS/HEA Careers Education Benchmark Statement noted 'careers education should be congruent with, and encompass as a minimum, all these four elements, if it is to enable students to implement fully informed and sound career plans'.

As mentioned, a consistent area of weakness in digital resource across the sector in Scotland was the lack of content related to professional behaviours and how to succeed in the workplace. This section of the MOOC starts with advice for the transition away from education and discusses topics such as what to expect on your first day, rights in the workplace, etiquette, managing up and dealing with difficult colleagues. These topics are intended to give graduates a way to effectively prepare themselves and offer reassurance if they are experiencing commonplace induction and/or transition issues, but also advice for when to seek help.

Content and activities have been designed to ensure longevity and relevance over time, and participants are signposted to external resources where relevant, for example, where the picture is consistently changing. Covered in more detail later in the report, implications for COVID-19 are an exception to this, as current speculation has been added to the MOOC to give participants a trusted source during this uncertain time. This also aims to ensure this resource can be shared with finalists graduating in 2020 who now face a more challenging labour market.

The project team decided to make the MOOC available for a four-week period to increase the sense of value as a finite resource and to encourage graduates to move through the content in a structured, time-bound way. The MOOC takes approximately 30 hours to complete if engaged with in its entirety, however, we worked on the presumption that not all content would feel relevant to all graduates and they could opt to dip in and out of the sections, or work through the sections in sequence.

To address capacity challenges, peer support forums were added as the primary method of interaction between participants, to ask for support and create a community. Project team members monitored the forums on a rota while the MOOC was live.

Marketing

Cohort 1

As the MOOC was made available for a four-week period in February 2020, this gave us a definitive window for marketing activity. Various iterations of the title were discussed, finally deciding on a straightforward, directional title: *Just Graduated? What Next?*

The marketing strategy was devised to be delivered in the cluster partners' institutions through existing channels:

- alumni and careers service communications regarding the Graduate Outcomes survey
- social media
- project team professional networks.

The strategy included MOOC 'teasers'; liaison with internal departments including Marketing, Alumni and Registry to ensure central communications via email could be used; and using university-wide and careers service-specific social media accounts. Facebook, Twitter and email were the main marketing channels to potential participants, with the addition of LinkedIn to share with colleagues in the sector and raise awareness among careers services.

The project team agreed on a design and promotional text. This was used by everyone in both immediate and extended networks to ensure messaging was consistent:

'Life post university can be full of opportunity, but also challenging. Not everyone has a clear sense as to where they're going and what they want to do, and it's easy to get stuck in a rut. This new free online course will inspire and motivate you, helping you move forwards and carve your vision of career success! Covering a broad range of topics, but with a clear focus on short tasks and meaningful action, we hope to answer that burning question, 'Just Graduated – What Next?'

Register now at https://www.open.edu/openlearncreate/course/view.php?id=4560'

JUST GRADUATED?

W H A T ' S   N E X T ?

A free online course to help you plan your next move
Register now - launching 03 Feb 2020

Additionally, straplines were created to grab attention on social media:

- Stuck in a rut? Change your future
- Tomorrow can be different
- Take that next step
- Do something positive today.

Marketing began a week before the official launch date to allow graduates to register and to encourage a high participation rate. This was mutually beneficial for the universities to add to the Graduate Outcomes survey communications as they were able to promote a dedicated resource designed to help their graduates.

Cohort 2

In April 2020, the MOOC was reviewed and updated with the COVID–19 situation in mind, and it was relaunched in June 2020. New topics focused on understanding the implications of an economic recession and adapting career plans.

Promotion in January 2020 capitalised on the 'new year, new me' promotions happening around that time. Relaunch later in the year was originally planned to test whether the resource is more popular at different times of year, particularly around times associated with university transitions such as graduation or a new term. As the COVID–19 pandemic has created economic uncertainty, there may be an increase in uptake as graduates try to find a creditable resource. The team also decided to encourage all higher education institutions in Scotland to promote and use the MOOC – this strategy offered a wider pool of participants to trial the resource.

Marketing was reviewed for appropriateness in the pandemic context including imagery, straplines and key messages. New marketing campaigns must cut through the noise of existing content, particularly on social media, so popular culture references were used to targeted different audiences, for example:

- Pivot. That new opportunity is here
- Keep moving forward
- It's a new world.

New straplines included:

- Today is a blank page
- Thinking... What Next?
- Start your story
- Your future starts with a single step. Start today
- What you do matters. Choose this step
- Life feeling a bit different?
- Adapting to a change? It's time to start something new.

Text was adapted to acknowledge the current situation and more positive, colourful imagery was selected to reflect the trends seen during lockdown:

Final year student or recent graduate wondering 'What next?'

Life beyond university can be full of opportunity, but it may feel more challenging in the current climate. Perhaps you have had to change your plans and now feel less certain about the future. Or maybe you are still looking for that moment of career inspiration. Whatever stage you are at, this free online course can help with moving you closer to career success. Covering a broad range of topics, but with a clear focus on short tasks and positive action, we aim to answer that important question, 'What Next?'

MOOC engagement evaluation

Cohort 1

108 participants used the MOOC between February and March 2020 – this number exceeded expectations. Of these participants, 10 engaged with questions about their university, course of study and motivations for enrolling.

Glasgow Caledonian University	6
Queen Margaret University	2
University of Stirling	2
Postgraduate	4
Undergraduate	5
No response	1

Three users identified themselves as being mature learners, aged 39 and 40, with two confirming they are traditional university age graduating at 22. Two confirmed they graduated in 2018, with the rest having graduated more recently.

The following themes emerged on what participants hoped to gain by taking part:

- motivation
- confidence
- direction and focus
- self-promotion skills
- help to find a career path and identify longer–term goals
- CV advice.

Three students agreed to share the challenges they have faced:

- finding credible sources of advice on what to include in a CV
- overcoming procrastination
- finding direction and identifying next steps.

Participants noted their concerns including:

- being 'stuck in a rut'
- 'no clear idea of what I want to do'
- 'not done much with the course since [graduating]'
- 'searching for work is daunting'.

Cohort 2

219 participants used the MOOC during June 2020. Of these, 20 gave information about their prior studies which indicated that opening up the course had led to participants joining from beyond the partner universities:

University	Number of participants
Glasgow Caledonian University	2
Queen Margaret University	5
St Andrews University	2
University of Dundee	3
Strathclyde University	6
University of the West of Scotland	1
University of Aberdeen	1

Again, a mix of learners was evident with 16 undergraduates and four postgraduates registering. Of the 10 who stated an age, two were mature graduates with the rest aged 21–23 years. Two individuals noted they were international graduates.

Review of the reasons given for participating in the course indicated the following themes:

- exploring career options (10)
- confidence (5)
- advice on application processes (3)
- seeking specific career direction (2).

Specific challenges were noted as:

- self-promotion
- uncertainty about direction
- confidence.

Only three participants directly referenced the pandemic as an area of concern:

'I thought I knew what I wanted to do once I graduated … However, the economic situation due to COVID-19 has got me worried about job security. So now I'm hoping this course can help me decide how best to use my skills yet still be creative in the job market.'

'I had a graduate job lined up for September but I am worried it will not go ahead due to Covid and am thereby seek guidance within this course.'

'I'm not sure what I want to do after university, especially because of the current lockdown situation.'

Across both cohorts, the most popular content was at the start of the course in the *What Next?* section. It is unclear whether this was due to the section being of most interest or the first in the series. Data confirmed that at least 96 participants actively engaged with the first piece of video content, however, quizzes and scenario-based were unpopular and completed by a small number of users. Most users did not log-in again after seven to 10 days, however, the course is not linear and takes no more than 30 hours to complete so this is inconclusive.

A specific aim of the course was to engender a sense of community among participants, and several activities were designed with discussion forums in order to allow participants to share challenges and suggestions. However, although 38 separate comments were posted by users, none were replied to by other participants despite many expressing similar challenges. Course tutors attempted to stimulate discussions by posing linked questions but did not receive any responses to these.

The course appealed to participants from a range of degree backgrounds. Postgraduate subjects included Diagnostic Imaging, 3D Design for Virtual Environments, Health and Social Care, Arts, Festival and Cultural Management, Physiotherapy, Gastronomy and Medical Art. Undergraduate disciplines included Psychology, Business, Geography, Geology, Civil Engineering, Computing, Mathematics, Chemistry, English, Economics, Sociology, Film and Media, Heritage and Tourism, and Building Surveying.

An Equality Impact Assessment was used in course design to consider and mitigate against barriers to participation; however, it was not possible to review uptake by protected characteristics such as gender, ethnicity and disability status as these are not logged on OpenLearn.

Learnings

Coupled with an ambitious launch date and limited staff resource, unfamiliarity with the virtual learning platform led to challenges in the creation of the resource:

- Opportunities were missed to explore enrolment and reporting options – the team is exploring options to add these for future launches, but this could not be completed in time for the June 2020 launch due to pressures on the platform support staff.

- There was a high administrative workload creating the course without templates.

- Quizzes and other dynamic content were created, however, were not widely used by participants.

- ·Media file size is limited so it was difficult to make dynamic content the norm – a YouTube channel was created to host the videos and link from the course.

- As there are five project partners, ownership had to be assigned to one – the University of Dundee – to register with the platform. This has been reviewed for the second launch to give joint permissions and editing rights.

The original MOOC taxonomy was ambitious given the timescales for creating the content:

- Themes from careers registration data were due to form part of the enrolment process for participants who would select at which stage of their journey they were (I have no idea, I have some ideas, I know what I want to do) – structurally this was difficult to achieve on this platform.

- Graduate stories were not included in the first version of the MOOC to give the partner universities time to generate unique content for this section.

- Subject-specific content is signposted to rather than included as sections in the MOOC.

There was a drop-off in engagement after the first section, particularly with interactive content, demonstrating a need to review what would encourage participants to progress through the materials and whether there were any barriers to completion. Initial suggestions for further investigation include:

- It is possible that participants would prefer straightforward text and video-based options.

- Graduates may only select sections which feel relevant to their immediate situation.

- The course may feel too formal and study-like, leading to lack of engagement with quiz and discussion elements.

Conclusions

As set out in the project scope, this project successfully:

- collected new evidence
- improved the use of evidence by staff
- contributed to a culture in which evidence is utilised
- developed a Scotland-wide picture of graduates most in need of employability support
- reviewed current and previous employability support
- gained feedback from final-year students and recent graduates on perceptions and preferences of careers and employability support
- piloted a graduate support course based on project findings
- refined the approach for a second cohort
- ensured additional universities engaged with the approach.

The experience of offering two runs of the MOOC with different cohorts has shown there is demand for online support and some consistency in the requirements of graduates seeking support – the main reasons of which are to consider career options and find career direction. A significant proportion of graduates also state that they wish to build their confidence and become better at self-promotion, and a small number are seeking advice on succeeding in application processes. These findings will be used and shared to further inform the design and development of support offerings for graduates. The current set-up of the MOOC does not allow further engagement with the graduates who registered for the course, but this will be explored for further repeats.

Recommendations

This project has generated insight into the support requirements of recent graduates, and demonstrated that there is clear demand for online provision with a focus on exploring career options and gaining career direction and confidence. With the full impact of COVID-19 on graduate employment as yet unknown, we recommend that this MOOC should be further developed and shared as a continuously evolving resource to reflect rapidly changing labour markets. With this in mind, the project partners are giving active consideration to how updating, promoting and staffing the MOOC can be resourced and funded in future.

References

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