



## **Evidence for Enhancement:** Improving the Student Experience

# **Developing Graduate Employability Support in Scotland**

## **Interim Report**

**June 2019**

**Report by the Developing Graduate Employability Support Cluster  
(collaborative authorship)**

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## Contents

1	Introduction .....	1
2	Summary of activity undertaken .....	2
3	Review of existing practice .....	3
	i Generic activity .....	3
	ii Tailored activity .....	4
4	Identification of key graduate groups.....	8
5	Student and graduate views .....	11
	i Methodology .....	11
	ii Results.....	11
	iii Conclusions .....	17
6	Recommendations .....	18
7	References .....	19
	Appendix: Designing focus groups for graduates and current students .....	20



# 1 Introduction

As students leave higher education and its familiarity, friends, peers and clear support structure, and begin to independently navigate a competitive and ever-changing labour market, often in a new and unfamiliar location, the demands can be significant. Establishing a more critical understanding of what creates and impacts on a successful transition for new graduates and, crucially, the role that career services could/should play, is central to ensuring graduate success.

The forthcoming introduction of the Graduate Outcomes survey (the replacement for the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey), which will survey all higher education graduates 15 months after completing their programme, is also a catalyst for higher education institutions (HEIs) to look again at how they continue to support graduates in the initial period after graduation. The 2016-17 DLHE data shows that 91% of leavers from HE providers in Scotland were either working or studying when surveyed six months after graduation, but 25% of those working were in roles classified as non-graduate level [1].

Historically, careers services have provided a range of services to graduates of both their own and other institutions, but this provision varies significantly, and budget pressures have led to the withdrawal or limiting of this service in some institutions. Careers services have also trialled various specialist initiatives to target recent graduates seeking work, ranging from intensive 'boot camps' and webinars to supported internship programmes, but these projects have consistently attracted low numbers of participants.

This consortium of five Scottish careers services have therefore undertaken a project which will allow us 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 HEI
- develop a framework for planning effective transition support which can be used by any HEI.

In the first year of the project covered by this report, our focus has been on capturing and evaluating data to identify the key graduate groups who would benefit from support, reviewing current and past pilot initiatives, and gaining a better understanding of the perspective of students and graduates. This work has informed recommendations which we will test further in phase 2.

## 2 Summary of activity undertaken

A recent graduate was appointed as a Research Assistant and undertook a review of current and past practice through in-person and telephone interviews with careers service professionals from a range of HEIs across Scotland, summarised in Section 3.

Data from Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) surveys, capturing information on what graduates are doing six months after course completion and how this links to their higher education experience, was reviewed in order to identify specific trends about groups of graduates most likely to be unemployed or underemployed. The available data is summarised in Section 4, and the benefits and challenges of targeting support at specific groups of graduates are discussed.

Following the initial data review, a series of six focus groups were arranged to obtain input from final-year students and recent graduates across the partner institutions. Focus groups were impractical for graduates who may be working, studying or living in another location, and so semi-structured telephone interviews were carried out with 11 graduates. Thematic analysis of the focus group and interview findings is presented in Section 5.

Based on these findings, the project team have reviewed their plans and designed recommendations for extended year 2 activity, summarised in Section 6.



### 3 Review of existing practice

#### i Generic activity

All careers services across Scotland offer a range of services to graduates as an extension of the services offered to students, typically including:

- one-to-one careers guidance
- online careers information
- advertising of graduate-level jobs
- employer-led events and job fairs.

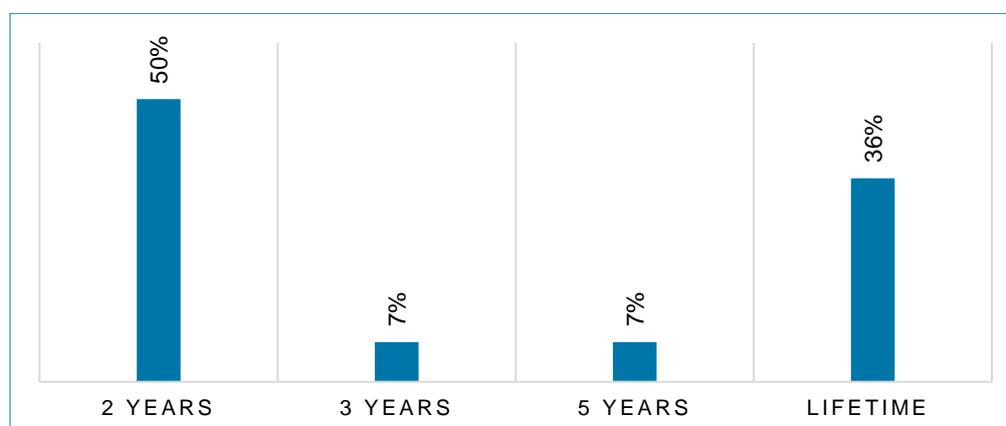
This project focused primarily on the in-person guidance provided to individual graduates by trained careers advisers. All HE careers services in Scotland offer graduates opportunities for both short and longer discussions with careers advisers. Short discussions focus on quick queries such as checking CVs or applications, while longer slots are used for more nuanced discussions about career direction or to conduct practice interviews for graduates. As Figure 1 shows, 43% of HEIs offer appointments lasting 20-40 minutes, and 71% of HEIs offer appointments over 40 minutes long.

The progression of communication technology means that all careers services in Scotland are now offering phone and Skype interviews and 88% of HEIs also offer online support, through directly emailing careers advisers or submitting questions through an online system.

Meeting length	Under 20 minutes	20-40 minutes	Over 40 minutes
Higher education careers service offering appointments	100%	43%	71%

**Figure 1: Summary of one-to-one guidance services for graduates (number of HEIs: 12)**

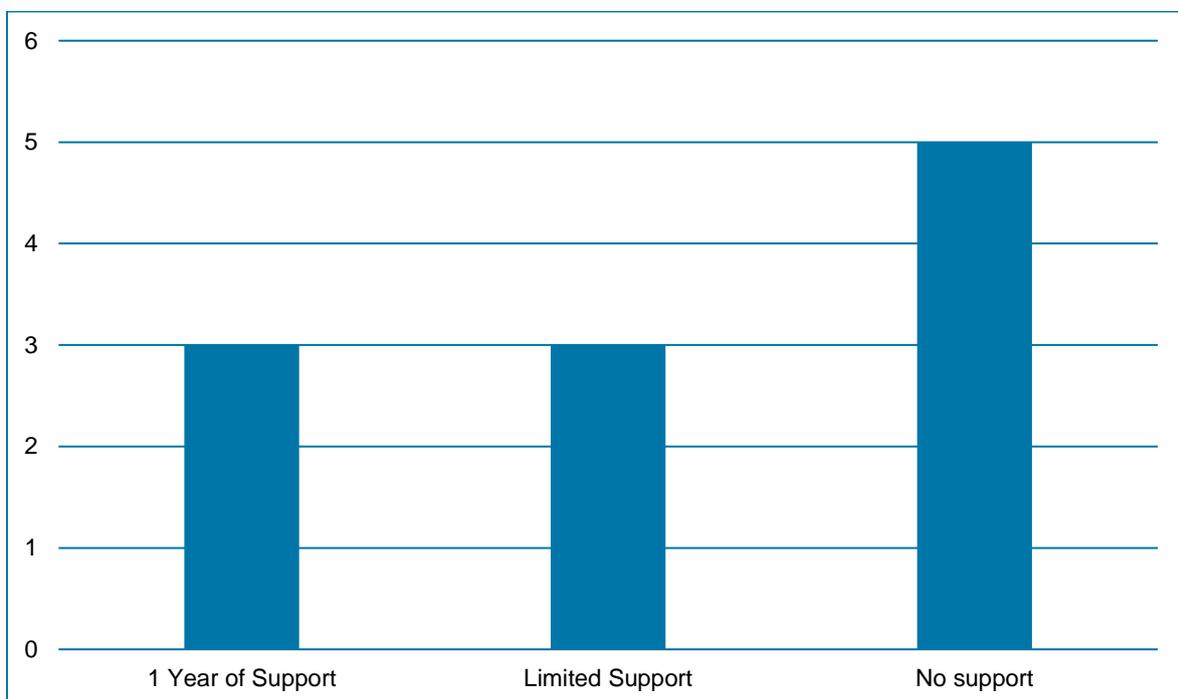
The duration of support provided by careers services across Scotland ranges from two years from graduation to lifetime support for graduates as summarised in Figure 2.



**Figure 2: Duration of graduate careers support (number of HEIs: 16)**

However, interviews with leadership figures within Scottish careers services revealed that HEIs offering both time-limited and lifetime support found a steep decline in the uptake of the services offered. After graduation the number of students looking for support drops significantly, although a small number of graduates return to use the services long after graduation.

As approximately half of Scottish graduates move location after finishing higher education [2], services have historically offered a 'mutual aid' model so that graduates can access another HEI's services if the location is more suitable for them. In recent years, this has become less consistent as shown in Figure 3, with the 'Limited Support' category showing HEIs who allow access to graduates of other HEIs depending on availability, with current students and graduates being prioritised. However, it should be noted that, during interviews several teams noted that demand based on location is less of an issue due to the growth in online and Skype-based services, and also that in practice they would be unlikely to turn away a graduate looking for support.



**Figure 3: Support offered to graduates of other institutions (number of HEIs: 11)**

## ii Tailored activity

In addition to offering graduate access to the standard student provision offered by careers services, project partners have undertaken pilot activity specifically designed to target graduates. A selection of recent activities undertaken by partner HEIs are highlighted below.

### Stirling University, Career Readiness Surveys

Stirling University now has two career readiness questions built into the matriculation process for all its students. The first question asks students to identify, from a set of options, their current stage of career thinking and planning. The second question asks them to describe the types of work experience and contact they have had with employers while at the University - they can tick multiple boxes. While these questions are not compulsory, there has been a very encouraging response rate. The result is an extremely useful data set for the Careers and Employability Service that supports the planning and marketing of appropriate events and activities. The data has also been shared with faculties across the University to aid their planning of employability activity and input across the curriculum and also with students, who have found it engaging and reassuring.

The advent of the Graduate Outcomes survey and the subsequent need to ensure that the University has up-to-date contact details for our graduates, and that they are receiving appropriate ongoing support, resulted in the introduction of an Exit Survey. From a careers and employability perspective, the questions in the Exit Survey mirror the questions asked through the career readiness questions and also asks for more information, where appropriate, on what their plans after leaving the University. Students can also, through the Exit Survey, give the Careers and Employability Service permission to contact them after graduation.

The Careers and Employability Service has used the data from the Exit Survey this year to design a set of tailored emails for graduating student providing them with the information and resources relevant to their reported stage of career readiness. The service also delivered a 'Know Before You Go' event for graduating students and was able to target the marketing and promotion to the event using the information from the career readiness data.



## University of Dundee, Graduate Careers and Professional Development Certificate

From 2009-18, the University of Dundee delivered a programme aimed at graduates who were unemployed or underemployed, designed to help them obtain experience in an industry of interest. The Internship Graduate Certificate combined intensive career readiness classes with a six-month internship and was well-reviewed by students and employers, with the majority of graduates finding professional-level work or study on completion. However, as economic conditions have changed, demand for the programme has fallen from employers and graduates, and the Careers Service have sought to incorporate the successful elements in a revised programme offering more flexibility and focusing on development within an existing job.

The Graduate Career and Professional Development Certificate is a unique and innovative programme designed for recent graduates employed in internships or short-term posts to improve their teamworking skills, self-awareness and professionalism, and equip them for planning their next career steps. A pilot programme was delivered for the first time in 2018-19 for the recent graduates who form the Dundee University Students' Association (DUSA) Executive team.

The programme is built around understanding personalities using the Insights Discovery psychometric tool, individual strengths assessment and Belbin team roles. It also includes group coaching sessions and peer-led action learning sets as well as mentoring by senior members of university staff. Students develop their self-awareness and career management learning through a combination of online learning materials as well as six intensive call-back days and are assessed through an online reflective portfolio.

Feedback from the pilot cohort has been exemplary, with graduates commenting:

'I have undoubtedly had the best experience of personal development while in a job post. I have loved the structure of the course that has allowed me to flourish as a person. I struggled to value myself personally and professionally while in university and through this course I have come to realise my work and what I contribute to a workplace, a team and to life.'

'This course has enriched my term in office greatly. The reflective practice it encourages has allowed me to appreciate and consolidate the skills I have gained in my role. The professional profiling exercises have aided our team in really understanding each other's personality types and how they fit together as a whole. This experience has helped us to excel within our team dynamic and also as individuals. I can't commend it enough.'

Next steps are to further develop the programme model so that it can be marketed to employers who do not offer formal professional development to new graduates and delivered at scale to graduates in short-term positions.

## University of Edinburgh, Graduate Provision

In recent years, our graduate provision involved a campaign of promotion targeted at students graduating from first degrees. The campaigns have usually included emailing final-year students, some group/online delivery and dedicated webpages. The most significant package of support was the Graduate Development Summer Programme, which ran in 2017. As part of this programme, students signed up to boot camps, one-to-one coaching with an assigned Careers Consultant (up to three appointments) and online sessions.

A 2019 'Get on Board' graduate campaign was designed to engage and support the 2018-19 graduating cohort, targeting those without firm plans but who wish to transition into meaningful employment or further study.

### Methods:

- Design and run a campaign (April-July) to encourage graduating students to use our services. The campaign will involve online presence (through social media, blog posts and temporary webpages, eg landing page); the Graduate Job Fair (GJF); in person 'boot camp' sessions; online sessions (including employer webinars). Reuse the 'Get on Board' theme from 17-18 initiative and #Finalist19 from 'Focus on Finalists' programme.
- Develop (where needed but repurpose where possible) and deliver a suite of support for graduating students. Including boot camp style in person events and sessions delivered online. Bootcamps and sessions will focus on first steps in career planning and application techniques (these topics tend to be the most popular and arguably lay important foundations for career development).
- Create a communication plan for engaging and communicating with target group (recognising the inherent challenges therein) over summer.
  - include how/when we promote our services to all graduates
  - email students who have signed up for 'No idea about your career' sessions throughout the year to invite them to boot camps and GJF
  - email students who sign up to the 'Focus on Finalists' campaign at the start of semester 1 signposting support
  - encourage students to sign up to receive communication from us after they graduate
  - liaise with Development and Alumni and further explore the role of Platform 1 (online alumni community) to promote ongoing communication and engagement with our alumni.
- Graduate Job Fair - promote our graduate support and run selected sessions at the fair. Try to capture employers' quick tips at the GJF for use and syndication on social media, boot camps and sessions. Run a pilot session for students who have found employment but may be unsure how to manage expectations of a professional environment (focus: 'What to expect from your first few months at work'). Harness employer contacts for a Q&A - either before the GJF or afterwards online.
- Webpages - introduce a microsite/temporary webpages for 2018-19 graduating students (adapted from 'Focus on Finalists' page).
- In scope: final-year undergraduates who do not currently have anything concrete (employment/further study) in place or are dissatisfied with current employment (eg underemployed). Open to graduating PGT students too.

This short-life project will be reviewed as part of a more comprehensive review of graduate needs and support, informed by GOS (Graduate Outcomes Survey) and projection of longer-term needs and requirements.

## 4 Identification of key graduate groups

As outlined in section 3ii, some HEIs have attempted to design support activities tailored towards graduates who are unemployed or underemployed. In order to develop and target these activities more effectively, and to obtain engagement with students before they graduate, we sought to understand if the available data on graduate destinations could identify student groups at higher risk of unemployment or underemployment.

Until 2018, the Destinations of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) survey was carried out annually by all UK institutions six months after course completion to investigate what graduates have gone on to do after their degrees. Overall, the 2016-17 data for home-domiciled, first-degree, full-time graduates of Scottish HEIs shows that 91% were in work or study, with 5% unemployed and 4% undertaking other activities that meant they were not available for work. However, for those graduates in work, 75% were in employed in roles considered to be graduate-level whereas 25% were working in jobs that are classified as non-graduate [1].

HEIs and other users of this data have previously sought to understand whether there are certain groups of graduates who are most at risk of being unemployed or underemployed. UK and Scotland-wide analyses of destinations data have consistently shown that certain groups of students experience poorer outcomes on average, specifically students with a disability [3,4,5], BME ethnicity [4,5] and those from widening access backgrounds [4,6]. The impact of gender is more nuanced, with slightly higher proportions of female graduates in positive destinations [4,5] but females typically experiencing lower median salaries [6]. It should be noted, however, that the greatest and most consistent disparities in likelihood of graduate-level employment occur between subjects studied.

Project partners have individually interrogated their institutional data to identify local themes and examples are presented below, although the different ways in which HEIs collect and process this data meant that comparison was not possible against all criteria. Overall, the most consistent factor was significant variations in the rate of graduate-level employment between different subjects. There was some evidence that protected characteristics, including gender, disability, ethnicity and social background, were also connected with poorer outcomes but given relatively small numbers and confounding factors such as gender imbalances in many of the subjects considered, we conclude that central graduate support activities should not typically be aimed at specific groups. Instead, we recommend carrying out Equality Impact Assessment in order to minimise barriers to access for any graduates. HEIs considering targeted graduate support should first interrogate their institutional DLHE data to identify specific trends, as well as considering the character of the labour market (locally and further afield) and the outcomes sought by targeting specific graduate groups.

### University of Edinburgh

The University of Edinburgh data for 2016-17 saw 94.3% of graduates in employment and further study (EFS). 75.9% entered highly skilled employment and further study (HESFES) - above the Scottish average of 74.2% (but ranked 11th) but bottom of the Russell Group and well below the RG average of 82.4%.

On a school-level, looking at the last three years of DLHE data, the University of Edinburgh had three schools averaging under 90% for EFS - Divinity; Physics and Astronomy; and History, Classics and Archaeology. A number of schools had a relatively low score for HESFES with Biomedical Sciences; Edinburgh College of Art; Geosciences; History, Classics and Archaeology; Literatures, Languages and Cultures; Philosophy, Psychology and Language Sciences; and Social and Political Science all scoring below 70%. Our Business School also has a relatively low rate of HESFES at an average of 70.7%.

From analysis of our recent DLHE data, we know that graduates with a disability or from a widening participation (WP) background often underperform in EFS and HESFES rates when compared to non-disabled or WP background colleagues.

### University of Dundee

Analysis of the last three years' DLHE data shows that in 2012-13, the proportions of male graduates, BME graduates and graduates with disabilities were lower than the university average. Concerted efforts to embed employability and career planning support throughout the University have led to a significant increase in the proportion of graduates reporting graduate-level work or study since 2012-13, and these groups have seen faster rates of improvement. This means that for graduates of 2013-14 and beyond, the rates of graduate level employment are above the Scottish and UK averages for all protected characteristics we are able to track.

However, the rates of graduate employment or study remain highly variable between subject areas - last year ranging from 30% in our lowest performing creative disciplines to 100% in Medicine and Dentistry. Our key aim is therefore to focus graduate support on the discipline areas with sustained low levels of graduate employment or study, typically found within:

- Art and Design
- Business
- Humanities
- Psychology
- Science.

## Queen Margaret University (QMU)

In order to target careers and employability support effectively, focusing on those who were most at risk of not gaining graduate-level employment, an exercise was carried out in December 2017 to see if we could use existing destinations data to model this. We now have data for the 2016-17 graduating cohort to augment this information.

The biggest challenge facing this approach is the size of QMU. The UK-domiciled graduating cohort in 2016 who responded to the survey was only 458, while in 2017 it was only 388. Of those 2017 respondents, 328 were in employment. This means, for overall analysis, we have enough homogenous exposures for statistical significance. We do now have four years of quality information that highlights four particular groups are less likely to secure graduate-level employment. This information is summarised below:

<b>KPI</b>	<b>2016/17</b>	<b>2015/16</b>	<b>2014/15</b>	<b>2013/14</b>
	<b>72.6%</b>	<b>76.3%</b>	<b>59.1%</b>	<b>60.6%</b>
	<b>238/328</b>	<b>305/400</b>	<b>231/391</b>	<b>197/325</b>
<b>Male</b>	63.1%	67.9%	50.0%	59.6%
	41/65	53/78	39/78	34/57
<b>Direct entrants</b>	56.1%	69.9%	41.9%	52.9%
	32/57	51/73	26/62	27/51
<b>SIMD20</b>	53.8%	69.7%	44.4%	48.1%
	28/45	31/41	21/38	18/35
<b>Articulating</b>	46.4%	66.0%	40.8%	60.0%
	13/28	35/53	20/49	15/25

When we drill down to a programme-by-programme basis, it is more challenging as some programmes have small numbers. On reflection, making inferences by programme is not possible based on our data alone. We are aware through data shared across the careers profession, that graduates from some subject areas are less likely to find graduate-level employment. For QMU programmes these fall into the following areas:

- Hospitality, Leisure, Tourism and Transport
- Creative Arts
- Biology
- Sociology.

## 5 Student and graduate views

In order to gain understanding of students' expectations and concerns regarding graduate support, focus groups and interviews were carried out with final-year students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) and recent graduates of partner institutions as summarised in Figure 4.

Name of HEI	Number of focus groups	Number of graduate interviews
Glasgow Caledonian University	2	2
The University of Dundee	1	1
The University of Edinburgh	1	4
The University of Stirling	1	4
Queen Margaret University	1	0
<b>Total</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>11</b>

**Figure 4: Summary of focus groups and interviews**

### i Methodology

The student focus groups consisted of six discussions across five HEI campuses. The focus group questionnaire is shown in Appendix 1 and consisted of a list of discussion questions for participants about their knowledge, experiences and future interest in the careers service. Participants in each group were all from the same HEI and all were in their final year of study, but were from different subject areas, had different levels of knowledge of careers services and were from diverse groups.

It was not possible to arrange focus groups of graduates given their other commitments, so individual telephone interviews were carried out with 11 graduates. Graduate interviews consisted of 11 semi-structured interviews based on the above questionnaire but designed to allow participants to explore their opinions and for the researcher to probe for details on relevant information and discussion. Semi-structured interviews were most appropriate given the sample size and the assumption that graduates would have diverse experiences in higher education and levels of knowledge about the careers service.

Thematic analysis was conducted using N-Vivo software creating initial and secondary coding, allowing us to assess both the attitudes and opinions of students and graduates in a structured manner which allows for a categorical organisation of data into themes.

### ii Results

#### Satisfaction with current services

One theme which emerged repeatedly across all focus groups and graduate interviews was that participants were highly satisfied with the quality of many services that are currently offered. Particularly, many participants highly-valued their experiences with one-to-one

services. Several participants also mentioned that they valued the convenience of being able to access online services.



**Student:** 'Every time I managed to get an appointment, they were really helpful. They shared a lot of useful information on making my CV better and gave lots of useful links to websites.' (*After this, several participants voiced similar experiences from one-to-one services*).

**Student:** 'The staff are really nice and I really like the careers advice services... I think they're as helpful as they can be... it's just difficult that there aren't many internships in my field.'

**Graduate:** 'It's definitely been helpful to have information to read (*about careers development*) and links to other websites about online tests.'

One theme which emerged repeatedly across focus groups and graduate interviews was that participants would have liked to see more careers support which was directly relevant to their subject area. This was especially common from students studying sciences, arts and humanities subjects, some of whom did not feel that they understood how to pursue a career within their discipline. Several participants expressed that they would have liked to see events such as careers fairs, internship opportunities and career development workshops to be tailored towards them rather than open to all disciplines. Some students also mentioned that they would have liked to hear from their lecturers about how they began and developed their careers.



**Student:** 'We both study biomedical sciences and I've always thought that when the careers service gives talks like that, about how to get a job and improving CV's, they repeat themselves quite a lot? I mean, I get that some people have missed out on their talks, but I'd be looking for something a bit more related to my degree.'

**Researcher:** 'Do you mean you'd be looking for support more relevant to your degree?'

**Student:** 'Yeah I think so, it would be much more helpful to have talks about how to get jobs in sciences and even to know what kind of work we can go into with our degrees because honestly I don't really know, outside of the obvious jobs.'

**Student:** 'I think some of the events aren't really relevant to me personally. I know how to write a CV and how to interview but I feel more lost about how do I get work in a lab after I finish studying? I've been to careers fairs before as well and there were loads of jobs in business or accounting but there were none that really made sense for me.'

**Student:** I study costume design and a lot of the emails we get from the careers service aren't relevant to me at all. I'll get an email titled 'Internship opportunities' and it will turn out to be nothing to do with my course. I think it's really hard to know where to start with a degree like mine and it would be great if there was some help with specialist degrees like mine.' *(One participant who studied film strongly agreed with this statement.)*

**Researcher:** 'How could your university have made you feel more prepared for the workplace?'

**Graduate:** 'Well, as I was saying earlier, it would have been nice to have some help about getting into translation work... Even though I studied it I didn't really know how to find work in it once I'd graduated.'

**Graduate:** 'I'm not really sure... But it would have been nice to maybe have some talks from historians or people who graduated in history about what they are doing now. Even if they didn't end up doing a job using history. I realised that I didn't want to work in Archaeology, but I also still don't really feel like I know what kind of jobs I can do.'

One theme which emerged from both the focus groups and interviews was that some students and graduates experienced difficulties accessing certain kinds of support such as CV checking and interview preparation skills when they urgently needed them. Two cohorts expressed positive experiences with accessing careers advice when there wasn't a strict deadline, but some found that if they had an interview and tried to book a mock interview, or to receive advice for an online test, they were unable to in the short time period.

**Student:** 'One thing I've found a couple of times is that if I want help for an interview, sometimes you can't get it quick enough for the interview... The way it works to get an appointment is that you have to go online and book for the following week but they go really quickly... Sometimes it takes weeks to get an appointment but that's not really helpful if you have an interview next week.' *(Several respondents then nodded their head in agreement and expressed similar experiences.)*

**Student:** 'I usually think the services offered are really good and the staff are really nice, but I tried to get an appointment to prepare for an online test and I didn't get an appointment. After the test it was kind of like, what's the point?'

**Graduate:** 'The online booking system could definitely use improving... but I'm not really sure how they could do it... It's just the only time I've used the service in the last year is when I had an interview the week after... but all the appointments had been booked.'

The issues of successfully communicating what careers services have to offer students and graduates was a theme which repeatedly arose, often unprompted, across every focus group discussion and several graduate interviews. It often came up in discussion several times during a focus group and contained the highest number of mentions of any theme. Many students and graduates expressed that they did not know about services that were offered and during focus groups, when participants mentioned workshops they had attended, other participants expressed that they did not know about those workshops.



**Graduate:** 'If I'm honest, I don't think I even knew that the services were available after finishing uni... luckily I didn't really need them, but it might be good if they advertised a bit more that it's there after you graduate...'

**Researcher:** 'I've heard that they mention their services at graduation and with student emails... do you remember being told about it then?'

**Graduate:** 'I don't really remember if I'm honest, there's just so much going on at graduation, it's maybe not the best time to be reminded... Probably an email after graduation as a reminder would be better.'

**Graduate:** 'As I said before, I really like the careers service and what they do, but I've studied three degrees at Stirling University and I only discovered the careers service during my third master's degree. I think that sums it up.'

Across all six focus groups, some students stated that they do not read all of their emails, and suggested Facebook events, links with HEI societies and announcements on Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) as alternatives. However, when interviewing the heads of careers services, all expressed that they try to contact students in all these ways.



**Student:** '... I'm going to be honest with you, I don't read my emails; we just get hundreds of them every day.' (*Participants around the table laughed at this and several nodded their heads in agreement.*)

**Student:** 'We get a lot of emails though, you kind of just switch off after a while. I know it's bad because you end up missing things but I only really read emails addressed to me from my lecturers or students' union stuff.'

**Student:** 'I think you would be best to make Facebook events if you want you want to organise events. They are really useful because you can hit 'Interested' and be reminded about it later on.'

'To be honest I didn't actually know there was a careers service Facebook page... if they want to promote their events maybe they should contact societies and tell them about their events and ask them to share them? I follow a lot of society pages from the University and I'm pretty sure almost everyone on my course does the same.'

## Preferences for delivery of graduate support

A theme relating to delivery of services which was referenced by several graduates was that if they were looking for support, they would be unlikely to seek in-person support from the careers service unless they lived in the same city as their HEI. However, many seemed open to the possibility of some kind of online support and stated that they had used careers service websites to find employment opportunities and to develop their CVs. Some graduates vocalised that they were unaware that one-to-one services could be accessed online and expressed interest.



**Graduate:** 'I don't really feel like I need support right now but it's good to know it's there... If I was in need of support I would probably look online... I'm not sure I would go back to the actual campus.'

**Graduate:** 'As I was saying earlier, I'm living in Germany now so I wouldn't really ever think about getting appointments with the careers service. I mean I did use them before I moved to Germany... I would consider looking for advice online but it's really only relevant to the UK.'

... I actually didn't know that you could book one-to-one meetings through Skype though.'

**Graduate:** 'I'm working in Stirling just now so if there was a workshop on, I would think about going but I think something online might be better really because my hours can be complicated... I don't know if many graduates would go to something in person because a lot of people I know have moved away now.'

**Graduate:** 'I use the job search thing they have online for looking for jobs at the moment and I've found it useful... I've looked before at their website as well.'

No graduates perceived the location of the careers services to be important in deciding if they would use the services or not, although some commented that the physical service was hard to find. Several graduates reported that they would be more interested if the services could be accessed online.



**Student:** 'Where the careers service is doesn't really matter to me because I know where it is. But it's not the easiest place to find, I remember once a friend of mine walked past (*final-year student*) and had no idea that was there. I think that must happen quite a lot.'

One research aim was to understand what the best timing would be for graduates to be supported through training schemes and workshops. Students and graduates were asked when they thought would be the best time to run any workshops or classes specifically for graduates, many final-year students suggested that the summer after finishing higher education would be the most suitable time to run workshops and classes. However, others thought allowing students to take a break would be the most effective.



**Student:** 'I can see positives and negatives to both timings. If you put on workshops in June just after exams, some people will be on holiday or just will want to take a break. But if you put them on in September, a lot of people will have moved back home or somewhere else.'

**Graduate:** 'The timing wouldn't really matter that much to me... It's more just if it was online or not and if it was useful because I'm not in Edinburgh.'

Graduates were asked about their preferences for contact after study and all stated that they would prefer to be contacted on their personal email address rather than their student email. It became clear during the analysis that most graduates would like to get some form of communication after graduation, such as an email every few months, as long as they had the option to opt out.



**Graduate:** 'I haven't checked my student email since graduation so I wouldn't mind getting emails to my own email address as long as there was an opt-out option I suppose.'

**Graduate:** 'I'm not looking for anything from the careers service just now, but I wouldn't mind having an email to know what's going on.'

One challenge facing careers services across Scotland is that although there are a range of services available to graduates, the uptake is often very low. Although a lack of knowledge of the provided services is one of the reasons for the low uptake, some graduates also expressed that they felt that they would not use HEI services because of a feeling of having 'moved on'. However, some graduates were open to using the services if they were convenient and others felt that they did not need them anymore but may be interested at a later time.



**Graduate:** 'To be honest, I'm not sure why, but I just... I think that even if I could, I wouldn't go back to the University for help... I'm not sure why I just feel kind of done with university... it would feel like going backwards somehow?... I'm just kind of done with uni.'

**Graduate:** 'I used the careers service a lot when I was a student but... maybe it's because I've moved away... I don't think I would use them again... Not that I really need them for anything at the moment.'

When graduates were asked about the time limit on careers services' support, graduates had mixed feelings on whether a time limit would influence them. Some graduates reported that they would be unlikely to use the services or did not feel that they had any need of the services, several respondents stated that they thought it was a nice safety net in case they wanted to make a change later on.



**Student:** 'I never really used the careers service so I guess two years would be fine for me? I think it sounds good that some universities you have that support for people who might feel stuck later on... if they want a careers change... '

**Graduate:** 'I used the careers service after finishing uni...I can't access the services anymore (*participant graduated three years ago*) ... right now I don't think I would use them, I'm not really looking for a graduate job and haven't been for a while. I might think about this later on... but not for a while.'

**Researcher:** 'Do you think you would use the careers service in a couple of years if you had access for longer?'

**Graduate:** 'I'm not sure really... I don't know what I want to do really.'

### iii Conclusions

The focus groups and interviews have repeated many of the findings obtained by feedback mechanisms within individual services, particularly those relating to ongoing challenges in communicating the services available, but generally high satisfaction with the services when accessed. In terms of support for graduates and ways in which it might be designed to increase uptake, the key themes arising from the focus groups and interviews were as follows below.

- 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 HE careers service after graduation, linking it with 'going backwards'.

## 6 Recommendations

Based on the findings of sections 3-5, the project team have developed the following recommendations in order to respond to the specific requirements of students and recent graduates and have adapted their plans for Phase 2 accordingly:

- i It is difficult to draw clear conclusions about individuals who might benefit most from graduate support solely from analysis of DLHE data, particularly when individual HEIs no longer have responsibility for collecting and processing this data.**

Institutions will develop their own strategy for targeting key groups of students, where appropriate and depending on institutional priorities. Design of the online resource and accompanying promotional materials will incorporate Equality Impact Assessment to ensure they are accessible and beneficial to all groups of students. The project will incorporate consideration of key target groups when reviewing uptake and evaluation data.
- ii Services are increasingly offered and taken up through online modes and the issue of physical location is less significant than previously thought.**

Rather than focusing on delivering a wide range of pilot activities in different geographical locations, the aim will be to create an online resource that can be accessed by graduates at different times of the year.
- iii Students and graduates expect a highly personalised service tailored to their needs and preferences.**

The online resource will be designed to take account of current and recent students' preferences for information delivery, such as video clips and influencer-style case studies. Multiple entry points will be available throughout the pilot year and the project team will use a range of methods and messages to promote the resource throughout the project in order to develop understanding of what features are most effective. Care will be taken that language used and examples selected take account of the career 'hesitancy' demonstrated by many students sampled.
- iv Graduates indicated reluctance to 'go back' to higher education careers services to seek help, and lacked awareness and understanding of the offer.**

A key aim of the project will be to develop a distinctive 'graduate brand' which encompasses concepts of professional development, the gain of lifelong skills, and continuous reflection. External input will be sought to ensure the resource is fresh, appealing and free from internal jargon and assumptions.

An accompanying framework has been developed to provide a series of more detailed considerations and prompt questions for institutions to incorporate when developing graduate support programmes.

## 7 References

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## **Appendix: Designing focus groups for graduates and current students**

### **Designing informed focus groups**

From interviewing careers services across Scotland and analysing online services and previous reports, it can be seen that there is a service gap for graduate support and, although universities have piloted many new and innovative services, uptake of services could still see improvement. This could be because of a number of reasons including the graduate's knowledge of services, types of services offered not suiting graduates, or services not being offered in the right way. The best way of answering these questions is to ask graduates and current students directly through the medium of focus group discussions. The focus group questions will cover a broad range of topics informed by the research in this report to address the variety of potential reasons for a lack of uptake of graduate services.

### **Sampling**

When careers services aim to improve the uptake of services, one of the key groups are those who are unemployed or underemployed after graduation. There are many ways in which these groups can be categorised. From DLHE it can be seen that unemployment and underemployment vary depending on subject area. It is also known that inequalities within student groups impacts the likelihood of facing barriers in future career progression. However, as expressed during interviews with careers staff, getting in contact with graduates is a challenge. As a result, it has been decided that focus groups will be with broad groups of both graduates and final-year students.

### **Data protection**

It is important to consider how best to store data of participants, especially any identifying information. Data from focus groups will be stored under two separate files. One set containing the names of students, the second containing the audio files and anonymised transcriptions of the focus groups.

### **Size and length of focus groups**

Given the nature of the research aims are somewhat broad, a medium-sized group of around 8-10 participants would be most appropriate.

### **Getting to know participants**

Before asking questions as part of the focus group, it is important to build some group cohesion by explaining the purpose of the research and the role of the researcher. Also, it is important to explain to participants that their participation will be anonymised, stored safely and only used for the purposes of this research project. Then invite participants to speak, starting with the researcher - ask participants to introduce themselves and tell the group what they are studying/what they graduated in.

## Focus group/interview discussion questions

### Outcome 1: What knowledge do participants have of the services provided to them? (15 minutes)

**Question 1:** Just to start off with, thinking about your experiences in higher education, what do you know about the careers service and what they have to offer students?

*Areas to probe: And what about one-on-one services (careers advice, practice interviews, CV support), online (advice and job search functions), careers fairs/workshops. Did you know that these services are offered to graduates as well?*

**Question 2:** Thinking about our previous discussion, how did you find out about these services and about the careers service in general?

**Question 3:** What about in the classroom, did you have any careers advice or training in your department?

*Probe: What kind of advice/training? Was this from the careers service or from your department?*

*After question 3, the researcher will run through an outline of the core services offered by the careers service to refresh participant's understanding of the role of the careers service and to inform the next set of discussion questions.*

### Outcome 2: Do participants use the services they have discussed? (5 minutes)

**Question 4:** Drawing on our previous discussion and also adding any other experiences you can think of, what services have you used from the careers service during your time as a student?

*Areas to probe: And what about... face-to-face appointments, online career development skills information, online job search functions, experiences of the careers service within subject area, any other experiences with the careers service, job fairs.*

### Outcome 3: What barriers are there to limit graduates' use of services? (10 minutes)

**Question 5:** Do you feel that you can easily access the support you look for as students?  
*Probe: What could the careers service do to help improve your access to their services? (eg timing, method of booking appointments, online support)*

**Question 6:** And when you graduate, do you feel that you will still be able to access the support and services you would want?  
*Probe: In what way?*

**Question 7:** What kind of things limit your use of the support offered by the careers service?  
*Probe: And what else?*

#### **Outcome 4: How could services be improved to encourage student and graduate uptake? (8 minutes)**

**Question 8:** What kind of support would you like to see from the careers service that you aren't currently being offered?

**Question 9:** When you graduate, would you like to see the same support you currently have as a student or are there other services you would like to see?

**Question 10:** How would you like to see currently-offered services improve?  
*This could include face-to-face interviews, support or training sessions, online information, in class, job fairs.*

#### **Outcome 5: Do students feel prepared and informed for the workplace or further study? (8 minutes)**

**Question 11:** As final-year students, do you feel that your time in higher education has prepared you for what you wish to achieve after study?  
*Probe: In what way? From classes, careers service, student services, internships and any other experiences.*

**Question 12:** How could the HEI help you to feel more prepared for the workplace?  
*Probe: From classes/lectures, careers service, student services, any other experience.*

#### **Outcome 6: Exit discussion/any other comments (4 minutes)**

Does anyone have any other comments they would like to share about anything that we have discussed today?

#### **Closing comments**

The researcher will thank participants for their time and ask if anyone has any questions about the focus group or the wider project. Remind them of project email address in case anyone has any further queries relating to the project or about their anonymity/consent form that was signed at beginning of focus group.