

## Submissions Abstract Book - All Papers (All Submissions)

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Career Readiness and the Transformational Journey of Higher Education: are they linked?

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**Research Domain:** Employability, enterprise and graduate careers (EE)

**Abstract:** This paper reports on work-in-progress in examining students' career-readiness and goal aspirations and how this develops and changes during the course of their studies (from entry to and exit from the university). In doing so, it aims to identify how students' university experiences influence and impact their decision processes and preparedness for graduate employment. A longitudinal approach to tracking individual's progress enables milestones to be identified to inform institutional policy related to support provision for students and provides evidence to support the preparation of TEF narratives. It aims to creatively explore, and potentially challenge, the assumption that a good university experience is measured by securing a graduate level job on exit. Initial findings indicate that during the course of their study, students become less, rather than more, decided on their final career choice. This indicates that policy makers need to be creative in measuring successful outcomes for higher education rather than conforming to a measure based solely on graduate employment.

**Paper: Background and Context**

Higher Education (HE) has arguably witnessed a seismic shift in recent decades in respect of what should be valued about higher education and how this is best measured. Robbins (1963) dedicated a whole chapter of his report to teaching excellence, with the Dearing (1997) report shifting the focus to learning. The Leitch (2006) report *consolidated the view that post-compulsory education in general should concentrate on the skills components of its qualifications to prepare the future workforce. This coupled with the introduction of fees, the associated marketization of HE (Levidow, 2002) and a focus on value for money has arguably created a situation where the value of HE has been reduced to market measures. This is requiring universities to conform to developing provision around success measures that are based on the percentage of students progressing into graduate employment. The developmental aspect of the learning journey and its potential to shape and change aspirations are under threat as they are difficult to measure and capture and speak less to marketization measures.*

*Primary objective 3 of the Office for Students (2018) indicates that 'all students from all backgrounds are able to progress into employment, further study and fulfilling lives.'*

Sector discourse and metrics determine success as being measured by a student entering graduate level employment with an unspoken assumption that a student's learning journey across a 3 or 4 year degree has enabled them to achieve this. Implicitly this conforms to a view of higher education as a linear process in personal development and in career decision-making resulting in graduate employment within the defined period of a course. In reality, students are at very different stages in their career goals and aspirations upon entering HE. Many wrestle through the messy, convoluted decision-making processes as they engage in HE, valuing the exploratory and self-discovery opportunities. It can offer students a period of reflection where they can challenge their own and others' conventional thinking and change their career aspirations. For many this may result in a change of direction where they decide, and probably for the better, not to progress on their originally intended career. In many cases, such students speak passionately about the transformational power of HE. However, the current employment metrics would reflect this as a lack of fulfilment and a negative.

This study explores these issues in detail and examines whether aspect of a 'transformational journey' in HE can be measured or captured through structured 'career readiness' survey data collection points.

## **Methodology**

Data were collected via an online survey from all students upon registering for the new academic year. This was to gauge their views on their preparedness to apply for and enter the graduate job market. Based on their responses, students were categorised as *deciding*, *planning*, *competing for* and *sorted* in terms of their progression towards securing employment. Student IDs were captured as part of the process and hence the research enables the institution to track changes in individual student responses as they progress through their course and examine differences by course and various demographic data. Students consent to the completion of the career readiness questionnaire as part of the registration process and have the option not to participate.

As this is work in progress, data have been collected through one registration point to date with responses from over 9000 students. Currently the analysis is pseudo-longitudinal in that it only enables a comparison between levels; going forward the data will support an examination of changes at individual student level. By cross-referencing with other available data, such as key NSS data questions, the analysis so far is supporting an exploration of trends within the student responses.

Through a longitudinal process of examining student opinions about their career readiness and their

confidence to plan routes to achieve their goals, this study aims to challenge current perceptions in 3 ways:

- 1) That the journey for students is linear in that during their university experience they move from a less-formed notion of the future careers to a more decisive position.
- 2) That the impact of the university experience on this decision-making process can be quantifiably measured.
- 3) That a graduate career is the only perceived valuable outcome by students as a result of completing a course in Higher Education.

### **Initial results**

Results to date indicate that students change their minds during the course of their studies and, at the end of their undergraduate course of study, may be further back in the career readiness process than they were at the start. This pattern is similar across all courses with some notable differences. Linkage with NSS data is suggesting a possible link with perceived satisfaction with academic support in terms of students becoming more decisive in the career readiness responses.

### **Implications**

The implicit assumption that students know what they want to do for a career upon entering HE or that the experience at university will help them to decide in a linear fashion is a flawed hypothesis for some students. For many the purpose of attending university is not solely the collection of a degree, but a personal, developmental and life-changing journey that allows them the opportunity to pause for thought and to consider what they really want to do in life. This journey is not linear nor always conclusive. Our data shows that students often leave university with less of an idea of what they want to do and not more. Employability metrics do not illuminate this aspect of HE or its value. Lack of decisiveness and securement of graduate employment is considered as a 'lesser' outcome rather than a developmental process resulted in changing goals. For some, progress is measured by their alignment with career readiness and goals on exit. For others progress is measured by a clear articulation of why their goals and aspirations have changed. Consequently, the sector needs a more creative understanding or definition of '*progression from HE*' which values the roles of the inputs and outcomes on the resulting individual student outcomes.

Currently 995 words

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