The Career Stage Framework: Facilitating enhanced engagement with students, institutional partners, employers, and alumni

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Abstract

Segmenting higher education students into three distinct groups based on their career stage can significantly boost engagement by providing relevant career learning. This approach allows career professionals to tailor the employability curriculum to meet the diverse needs of their students. It also benefits institutional stakeholders by offering a nuanced understanding of impact measures and national metrics. Moreover, segmenting by career stage enhances employer engagement beyond the narrow focus on the graduate labour market and fosters more meaningful and diverse connections with alumni.

Keywords: career education, employability, student engagement, employer engagement, institutional engagement, higher education

Introduction

Graduate employability can be conceptualised in terms of the different forms of capital (e.g. social capital, cultural capital) that enable an individual to be successful in their career (Donald, Baruch, & Ashleigh, 2023). As a result, there are many potential approaches to career and employability education for undergraduate and postgraduate students (Artess, Mellors-Bourne, & Hooley, 2017; Dalrymple, Macrae, Pal, & Shipman, 2021).

Despite this, Holmes (2013) characterises the dominant approach to employability development in UK higher education as 'possessive', focusing on the identification and acquisition of skills and attributes sought by the labour market. This is based on a presumption that learners have limited work experience and are at the start of their careers. These assumptions steer the learning content, with employability curricula designed as an introductory offer to the professional workplace. Across the sector, with an increased emphasis on providing placements, internships, and other experiential learning activities as a way to develop employability skills (Winter & Yates, 2021), the assumption is that students do not already have professional experience.

The risk of these assumptions is that they can limit the effectiveness and relevance of career and employability learning for more diverse student bodies. By mistakenly presuming all students require employability learning designed for individuals with limited experience of the labour market, career educators can miss opportunities to provide students with the chance to learn from each other's diverse range of workplace experience, resulting in career and employability curricula that do not meet the needs of all the participants.

Adopting a 'one size fits all' approach that fails to contextualise graduate employability within the diversity of student experiences, drivers and social capital can lead to students disengaging from career education (Jorre de St Jorre & Oliver, 2018). There may even be evidence that basing one's approach to career and employability learning on the dominant skills discourse can disadvantage non-traditional, mature and international students (Rodríguez, González-Monteagudo, & Padilla-Carmona, 2021; Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Lavender, 2020; Luzzo, 1999; Pham & Jackson, 2020).

For example, an increasing number of students work alongside their studies and are increasing their hours of paid work (Neves, Freeman, Stephenson, & Sotiropoulou, 2024), with a significant proportion of distance and flexible learning students working full-time whilst studying, often alongside various caring responsibilities (Winter, 2023a). This provides significant pressures on student engagement, with students needing to make challenging decisions regarding what they can and cannot dedicate their time to, in addition to their compulsory academic and employment commitments.

As such, career educators need to be especially mindful that their students have often limited time and need career education that is going to be targeted and relevant to their individual circumstances.

Our experience in the University of London Careers Service (UoLCS) for Online, Distance and Flexible Learners (ODFL) made us challenge the applicability of this assumption not only for our institution, but also the wider sector. Distance learners tend to differ from traditional students in terms of age, gender, range of cultural backgrounds and locations,

disability status, life roles, employment status, motivation, and risk-taking propensity (Cao, 2002; Latanich, Nonis, & Hudson, 2001).

To enable all learners to benefit from the career education provided within Higher Education (HE) institutions, we must address this potential disconnect between our assumptions about students' experience and their actual, often substantial, professional and life experience.

Our response to this challenge is the development of the Career Stage Framework, which enables us to categorise the background and learning motivations of a diverse student cohort. The Career Stage Framework works on the basis that learning results from the interplay of emotion, motivation, and cognition (Dumont, Istance, & Benavides, 2010).

There have been a number of attempts to categorise the career-related motivations and employability development needs of different groups of students (Masdonati, Fournier, & Lahrizi, 2017; Pyvis & Chapman, 2007; Monteiro, Almeida, Gomes, & Sinval, 2022; Ng, 2018). However, many of these frameworks categorise the students from the perspective of the educational institution, emphasising likely demands on resources or potential learning strategies using language which students might find hard to identify with when considering their own motivations and needs. Our priority was to develop categories that could be communicated directly to students and would have immediate validity.

What is the Career Stage Framework (CSF)?

The Career Stage Framework (CSF) was developed in 2018 (Brammar & Wilkinson, 2022) after textual analysis of 108 career guidance conversations with individual distance and flexible learners, based internationally. Through this analysis of individual student voices and by creating a meta-analysis, it became clear that that the actual experiences, motivations and needs of students in relation to career and employability learning were more diverse than was presumed by the institution.

While some students had very limited amounts of work experience, others had been working for a few years, and others had significant amounts of experience in the workplace. Equally, it became clear that the actual experiences, motivations, and needs of students in relation to career and employability learning were more diverse than presumed by the institution. Students had different motivations for undertaking their academic programme of study in relation to their career development.

This resulted in an understanding that higher education career and employability services must tailor their career education to meet the *actual* experience of their diverse student body, rather than what institutions *presume* the needs of those learners to be.

Through our analysis we discovered the students could broadly be divided into three main groups which reflected these three different stages of experience and motivation:

Career Starters, Careers Developers, and Career Changers

Career Starters were defined as having limited experience, or were working in comparatively lower skilled work to help fund their studies to gain their first professional role after graduating. Career Developers were typically working within their preferred sectors, or even organisations they wished to remain in, and wanted to use their studies to propel them into

more senior roles. Career Changers were those who already had significant experience in one or more fields and were using their studies to prepare for a departure into a new sector, or profession within their sector, including the launch of their own business or consultancy.

Whilst the three categories of Career Starter, Career Developer and Career Changer were developed independently by us as career practitioners, they correspond to the 'career entry', 'career progression', and 'career transformation' categories identified by Caddell and Cannell (2011) and later elaborated by Winter (2023b). These previous researchers (Caddell and Cannell 2011; Winter 2023b) also identified two additional categories; one category is 'career re-entry students', which can be seen as spanning all three categories of the CSF and the other category is 'personal development students', relating to those students who undertake education for intrinsic personal reasons rather than primarily for career development.

The learning motivations of Career Starters, Career Developers and Career Changers also appear to correspond to the three modes of career growth and adaptation – 'performance', 'learning' and 'development' – postulated by Boyatzis and Kolb (2000). These modes illustrate how individuals progress through their lives including, in relation to their careers, how they develop, learn, and adapt. One might argue that Career Starters are likely to be in the 'performance' mode in their establishment of self-validity, Career Developers are likely to be in the 'learning' mode in their focus on self-improvement, whilst Career Changers are likely to be in the 'development' mode as they seek a clearer sense of fulfilment.

Once these three categories had been identified within the student community (and students are also provided with the opportunity to record that they identify with 'none' of the categories), it became clear that career and employability education which is more tailored to these categories is more likely to be effective in achieving its intended learning outcomes. By adopting a social constructivist learning approach (Vygotsky, 1978) and enabling learners to use their individual work-based experiences to build their own understanding of career education, it became clear how we might use these three stages to enable students to 'actively construct or make their own knowledge' (Elliot, Kratochwill, & Travers, 2000) in relation to their employability.

Figure 1: What is your career stage?

Career Stage Framework (Brammar & Wilkinson 2022)

How is the Career Stage Framework Used?

The framework enables us to enhance the perceived relevance of the employability learning activities to students with different levels of experience and different motivations. Additionally, the Career Stage Framework has enabled us to enhance our engagement with multiple stakeholders: students, institutional partners, employers, and alumni. By illustrating to multiple stakeholders that we recognise the diversity of experience and motivations within our cohorts, we demonstrate how we are designing, delivering, and evaluating the impact of work from a comprehensive and nuanced perspective, which in turn helps us to improve our effectiveness. For example, since comprehensively embedding the CSF into both our marketing activities and educational content we have seen an increase of 41% in unique logins to our locally branded careers service management system 'Careers Connect' in 2024 compared to 2023 and a 39% increase in total event registrations in the same period.

This approach is used extensively across each aspect of the pedagogical process in the delivery our career education: from identification of learning needs to articulation of learning aims and outcomes; from segmentation and structuring of learning topics to the design of individual asynchronous and synchronous learning activities. The CSF has also shaped our communication with our learners, with targeted messaging per career stage and has also informed all our data collection and evaluation.

Design and delivery of synchronous careers education (e.g. live webinars, panel events)

Allowing students to recognise their current level of career experience, the CSF supports their learning as it enables educators to provide a consistent strand of teaching through tailored content and learning objectives relevant to different segments of the cohort, reflecting a constructive alignment approach (Biggs, 1996).

Since 2018, the CSF has been woven into all career education initiatives and the UoLCS careers consultant team have been trained in how to teach career stage specific interactive webinars, such as *How to navigate career change in the 2020s*, where learners use e-learning platforms to share their career narratives and illustrate their skills.

We have also cross-referenced all our learning outcomes with the CSF to help students relate the career education to their lived experience. Through embedding the CSF into the learning culture of our career teaching, the students now readily identify themselves by their programme of study, geographical location, and career stage, illustrating how the CSF is now an established part of their career learning environment. For example, in a recent *Employability Skills Experience* series of twenty online workshops for our Technology, Economics, Finance and Social Science students 80% of the students identified themselves by their career stage.

Design and delivery of asynchronous careers education (e.g. virtual learning environment online resources, careers micro-modules)

The value of the CSF is that it can be used to inform the design and delivery of our career education programme, which incorporates both events and asynchronous learning materials, in various ways. Firstly, we can use the CSF to provide opportunities for

students from different career stages to interact with one another and learn from each other's perspectives, such as our '*Got Skills? Prove it! Self-Management Skills*' webinars. Secondly, we can use the CSF to produce tailored provision for specific career stages, providing opportunities for students to connect with and learn from their career stage peers, such as our '*Career Starters: How to bridge the experience gap*' and '*Career Developers: How to successfully achieve your next promotion at work*' webinars. This blend of multiple CSF stage and stage-specific interventions provides diverse opportunities for our students to develop an awareness of their career stage.

Students can self-assess their appropriate Career Stage by completing a brief quiz on our Virtual Learning Environment, which then signposts them to targeted self-directed learning. The CSF is also central to the learning materials within our three career micro-modules, with students finding different self-directed learning activities depending on their career stage.

We also make regular reference to the career stage of our alumni contacts who we interview as part of our podcast series, *Global Careers Calls*. This enables our students to learn how their peers have successfully navigated through their own career stage, both during their studies and after graduation.

Incorporation into our evaluation processes and key metrics (e.g. Careers Registration data)

CSF data is incorporated into all our feedback evaluation forms and is also included in all our end of year reporting. The CSF is featured in our evaluation processes to gain student feedback on its effectiveness in enhancing their career and employability learning. After each intervention, such as a live webinar, we collect both quantitative and qualitative data which includes questions on career stage as standard.

Furthermore, the CSF has been incorporated into existing institution-wide datasets, such as Careers Registration. For example, the range of statements relating to career readiness were expanded to incorporate statements which had greater resonance for those with more work experience, such as Career Developers and Career Changers.

Incorporation into our conversations with our employer and alumni contacts

The particular demographic of our students and recent graduates means that many of our students and graduates are not seeking traditional early careers 'graduate level' roles or 'internships', which are part of large employers' campus recruitment strategies. This provides a unique opportunity for our employer and alumni engagement strategy. Utilising the data from Careers Registration, including the Career Stage Framework, our strategy allows our team to reach out to early careers and experienced hiring teams to seek speakers for live events and asynchronous content.   For example, in our engagement with employer contacts 100% indicated they were keen to connect with our Career Starters, 86% were also interested in our Career Developers and 10% had a particular interest in our Career Changers. This has enabled us to incorporate a wider range of participants in our employer events, incorporating more senior employer contacts who are keen to connect with our more experienced students.

This is not without challenges, as many experienced hiring recruiters are not recruiting at volume and do not have a budget to commit resources to our activities. However, utilising our extensive alumni network we are able to engage with experienced voices to ensure our activities include examples which resonate with Career Developers and Career Changers.

Using the Career Stage Framework in our conversations with Early Careers Talent Attraction Professionals is also proving to be a defining characteristic of our offer and as we refine our engagement strategies. It allows us to open conversations around recruiting from more diverse talent pools that many early career professionals are keen to engage with – particularly as there is contraction in the size of UK demographics who would pipeline into early career roles (Reichwald, 2024).

Does the Career Stage Framework work?

When developing the CSF, we shared it with the University of London Student Voice Group to gain an understanding of a user's perspective on it. This feedback reinforced our aim to use the CSF to enrich career learning, as illustrated by these excerpts from participants: '*I think these career stages are incredibly helpful*'; '*It helps to differentiate*'; '*The stages are comprehensive*'.

This student endorsement of the approach has continued ever since, as shown by the proactive and enthusiastic reference students make to their career stage during teaching. This reflects an accessible and supportive learning environment, where a diversity of careers experience is recognised and valued.

Both academic and professional service colleagues from across the institution have since responded very positively to the approach, enabling us to design programme specific career education curricula - which explicitly references the CSF - and to incorporate the CSF into institution-wide data collection.

Since incorporating the CSF into our data sets consistently, the majority of students have recognised themselves as belonging to one of the three stages (88% choosing one stage, compared to 12% who selected none), further illustrating that this approach is sustainable and resonates with our key cohort, our students. The CSF has also been built into our data dashboards as key management information.

Beyond work with our students, the CSF has, after being presented at both national and international conferences, been adopted by institutions as diverse as City St George's, University of London and Arden University as a way of working with their students in the field of career and employability.

On reflection, in terms of effectiveness, the CSF is now an established and enhancing part of the work of those who learn career education, those who design career education curricula, those who teach career and employability education, those who work with external partners in career education (such as employers), those who oversee institutional metrics relating to career education, and those who lead and manage career education services, both within our own institution and beyond.

How has the Career Stage Framework enhanced engagement?

The implementation of the CSF has enhanced engagement in three distinct contexts: student engagement, institutional engagement, and employer/alumni engagement.

Student Engagement

The CSF engages students, as it acknowledges their lived experience in terms of career experience and acknowledges the impact their amount of exposure to the workplace may have had on their motivation to study and career objectives.

The CSF is a way for career and employability services to illustrate to their student cohorts that their career stage is valued by their institution, which is keen for the career education provided to be relevant to the individual needs and requirements of learners.

By consistently being given the opportunity to self-identify as either a Career Starter, Career Developer or a Career Changer during our live webinars, students learn to articulate their career context and objectives in a professional and engaging way. Equally, the asynchronous career education materials designed specifically for each career stage provide the opportunity for students to access on-demand career education resources and materials tailored to their individual needs.

This matters because as graduates move into labour markets, either as early starters or experienced hires, they need to be able to both own and effectively explain their career narratives to future employers, who are eager to learn more about their applicants' motivations and ambitions.

An additional advantage of the use of the CSF from a student engagement perspective is that it readily encourages the development of both formal and informal networks between the student community. We have had many examples during our live delivery where students have enthusiastically included their career stage during their introductions in the session, enabling effective peer support and learning within session delivery. For example, Career Developers who may already be working in an industry which Career Starters want to enter can provide informal advice to their peers, while Career Changers can learn from Career Starters about the latest recruitment techniques and application process which they may not have come across since their last job application.

In this way the CSF helps to engender a sense of shared community from across the student cohort and provides opportunities for enhanced labour market information sharing, organic exchanges of career-related reflection and valuable peer-to-peer support both within and across different career stages. Feedback from our Careers Student Feedback Panel also confirms that they find the CSF a useful mechanism in their career and employability learning. For example, the student membership of the Careers Student Feedback Panel has consistently included students who have self-identified with all three Career Stages; in the 2024/25 iteration of the Panel we have 29% identifying as Career Starters, 38% identifying as Career Developers, 24% identifying as Career Changers and just 5% not identifying with any of the stages. Furthermore, students have voluntarily highlighted the value of the CSF approach in the chat box of our live career webinar delivery, such as '*I quite like the concept of dividing your careers into stages. It helps bring*

the focus down to those select few important questions' and '*As a Career Starter, I feel more confident in exploring my options*'.

Institutional Engagement

In the evolving landscape of higher education, addressing the diverse needs of students and personalising learning is important for fostering a successful and responsive learning environment. Our experience shows that engagement with the CSF can help both careers professionals and academics to do this. The more we use the CSF, as a careers service, to inform our own learning and teaching environment within the careers and employability context, the greater the interest from our academic colleagues who are beginning to incorporate the CSF into aspects of the curriculum. For example, in a new BSc Computer Science *Professional Practice* module launching in April 2025, the Career Stage Framework has been embedded extensively in the curriculum content, as one of the three lenses used in the transdisciplinary activities (the other two lenses being lived experience and academic studies) and the CSF is highlighted in the topic videos on career planning.

Equally, recognising that students enter academia at various points in their career journey enables institutions to develop targeted interventions, specialised resources, and customised learning experiences. For example, a student entering at the start of their career may benefit from career exploration workshops and mentorship, while a career developer might require advanced coursework aligned to their current workplace.

The current lifelong learning agenda emphasises the importance of continuous skill development and adaptability to be effective in a workplace that is changing due to influences such as artificial intelligence and globalisation. As the professional landscape evolves at an unprecedented pace, graduates of any career stage must be equipped with the skills and knowledge necessary for not only securing initial employment, but also for navigating subsequent career shifts and advancements. By adopting the Career Stage Framework approach, academic institutions can strategically design programmes that align to principles of lifelong learning (Department of Education, 2024) and demonstrate a nuanced understanding of the skills required. For example, Career Changers may benefit from opportunities for experiential learning to enhance their understanding of new sectors which align to the curriculum.

Within the Careers Service we have incorporated the CSF into all the learning outcomes and evaluations of our career education programmes. We have also worked closely with academic colleagues to feature the CSF within academic programme delivery. For example, as previously mentioned, the CSF has been explicitly referenced within a new professional practice module within one of our Technology programmes. This approach has enabled academics to evaluate the skills and knowledge relevant to their students' professional development and measure learning outcomes more effectively from a workplace experience perspective.

In meeting the needs of lifelong learners, higher education institutions could cater to the diverse needs of students at different career stages by offering modular courses, micro-credentials, and opportunities for upskilling and reskilling. This adaptability in program design allows students to acquire new skills incrementally, enabling them to seamlessly integrate learning into their professional lives. Introducing flexible learning pathways,

recognising that lifelong learning is not a one-size-fits-all endeavour, would enable a diversification of the HE offer and appeal to wider numbers of students.

By acknowledging and addressing the unique needs of students at different career stages, institutions can play a crucial role in fostering a culture of lifelong learning extending beyond graduation, empowering individuals to progress throughout their professional lives. The value of the CSF from an institutional perspective is also shown by the incorporation of the CSF in all our end-of-year reporting which we share with key academic stakeholders.

Employer/Alumni Engagement

Outside of career support for MBA programmes, employer and alumni engagement work conducted in the HE employability space focusses predominantly on the Early Career (EC) stage of recruitment. Using the Career Stage Framework has allowed our employer and alumni engagement to widen conversations with our external stakeholders and reframed our approach to building connections with organisations. Using the CSF as a framing device for conversations has allowed a wider range of experiences to be shared with our students. This has the benefits not only of showcasing opportunities not normally seen by undergraduate students, but also allowing those in the Career Starter phase to be exposed to leaders in their chosen sector, talking to them as equals and modelling the career paths available to them further along their journey.

Additionally, this has allowed us to work with more experienced representatives from employers and alumni to develop a more comprehensive range of career education experiences. These are not purely focussed on the traditional recruitment/selection and brand attraction activities, but instead look at the macro-level nuances of sectors and the labour market, boosting the commercial awareness of our student community.

Could the CSF be utilised with non-distance and flexible learning cohorts?

We feel strongly that the CSF could be utilised effectively by institutions who do not have DFL cohorts. Indeed, the adoption of this approach by other HEIs in the UK illustrates this fact. Campus-based institutions attract a diversity of students, many of whom may be working alongside their studies or at different stages of their career.

For example, postgraduate taught programmes often attract students who have experience of the workforce and are returning to education to advance their career or formalise their specialisation in one area of their work. By utilising the CSF, institutions are better equipped to tailor their career education, enhancing engagement with multiple stakeholders both internal and external to the institution.

The CSF can enable all institutions to demonstrate a way to deepen their understanding of the entire student journey, which could be helpful in terms of recruitment and completion by providing a way to refine metrics such as the Graduate Outcomes Survey, adopt a more nuanced approach to student recruitment, supporting work with alumni and employers, and informing the work of careers services.

What are the limitations of the CSF approach?

The CSF is still in in its relative infancy since its creation in 2018, despite its extensive use and impact from that point. This means there is still more we can learn about how the CSF can be interpreted and utilised by multiple stakeholders.

Furthermore, the CSF relies on students self-reporting which of the CSF stages they most identify with at various points during their studies, both during enrolment and re-registration, as well as during live delivery of career education sessions. It would be helpful for us to understand more about how and why students self-select their career stage and which perimeters they are applying to make that selection.

Also, whilst the majority of students (88%) self-report as one of the three career stages (Career Starter 41%, Career Developer 31%, or Career Changer 16%) some students select 'None' (12%) when given that choice. It would be helpful to learn more about the reasons behind that choice.

What future studies could be applied to the CSF approach?

Beyond further investigation into the reasons why students select their respective career stage, in addition to the 'none' category, it would also be useful to learn more about the sub-categories within each career stage. For example, Career Starters may encompass students who have a very clear sense of their future career direction, as well as those who have very unclear ideas about what they may want to do after their studies. Further research could enable us to see if we need to further refine the framework, either by sub-dividing the three categories or potentially by adding new categories to reflect deeper understanding.

As we are gathering increasing amounts of data on the CSF across multiple academic programmes, we may also want to explore whether certain academic programmes attract particular career stages and if so, what the implications may be in terms of recruitment and marketing.

Finally, we may also want to see if we can map career stage against rates of non-completion and non-continuation to see if we can design intervention strategies tailored to groups of students to support and retain them during their studies.

We work closely with our Careers Student Feedback Panel to further inform and refine how we utilise the CSF in all our work and source ideas from them for future developments to the approach. Furthermore, as more institutions adopt the CSF approach, both for their ODFL and campus-based students, more data becomes available to further explore future research topics.

Conclusion

From our experience the benefits of adopting the Career Stage Framework have been multiple, both as career educators, managers, and senior managers within higher education.

As we have outlined, students proactively engage with the approach and respond positively to the offer of more tailored employability support, rather than glib reassurances that institutions eschew a 'one size fits all' approach. Student segmentation facilitates a more targeted and meaningful engagement with the Careers Service, enabling them to access specialised guidance, industry insights, and networking opportunities tailored to their career stage. Better tailoring of career education allows for better outcomes throughout the student journey and allows for greater collaboration within institutions, including with academic colleagues.

Effective collaboration between academic programmes and the career service is essential to provide students with comprehensive support for their career development. The linking of existing large data sets such as Careers Registration and Learning Gain (Cobb, 2019) will also provide richer data analysis, leading to more effective resource allocation and strategic planning.

The CSF also enables much broader and richer conversations with both employers and alumni, adding benefit to our students and career service colleagues, by equipping them with labour market knowledge and insights, beyond the early career space and contextualising how a career can evolve over time.

Whether it is used with ODFL students or campus-based learners, due to the enhanced engagement with multiple stakeholders which we have outlined, we argue that the CSF enables more sustainable and impactful value for career and employability services, to the benefit of all stakeholders. For this reason, we wholeheartedly recommend it to the HE career and employability sector and community.

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