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Career Support for Undergraduates’ Engagement with Services (CUES) – Staff

**IOE, UCL’s Faculty of Education and Society**

# Career Support for Undergraduates’ Engagement with Services (CUES) – For Staff End-of-Project Report

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**Background**

CUES (Career Support for Undergraduates’ Engagement with Services) began as a UCL Changemaker funded project that aimed to identify factors that influence UCL undergraduate students’ engagement with university careers provision. Two third year dissertations (Henry Wang & Chloe Wang, 2022) focused on understanding the employability skills that undergraduates value and undergraduates’ expectations of university careers services through semi-structured focus group sessions with Psychology with Education undergraduates across years one to three (*N* = 28). Study details and resources are publicly available online on UCL Repository ([Wong, 2022](https://rdr.ucl.ac.uk/articles/presentation/Career_support_for_Undergraduates_Engagement_with_Services_CUES_Study/20343201)).

Thematic analysis of the focus group interviews revealed six themes pertaining to factors that affect undergraduates’ engagement with the university careers services:

1. *Professionalism* (how professional and high-quality careers service events are);
2. *Stage of Life* of the undergraduate’s career (their personal interests, alternative available resources; their academic workload);
3. *Interpersonal Factors* (how trustworthy they consider the careers resources to be, peer pressure surrounding attending or not attending events);
4. *Cultural Factors* (career destinations; language/cultural barriers);
5. *Personality* (lazy; proactive);
6. *Self-efficacy*.

Students valued different employability skills as a function of their year group. The following values were developed from the transcripts. Students across years 1, 2 and 3 all valued communication skills, career development learning and subject-relevant knowledge. First year students felt that self-confidence and empathy were important, yet second- and third-year students did not value these skills. Finally, third year students valued work experience and collaboration skills, when first year students did not find these to be as valuable.

Students showed less agreement between year groups of what they expected from the careers support and provision. Students valued the following across more than one year group:

* Alumni events
* Interactive workshops
* More career support from personal tutors
* Moodle page for careers support
* Integration of career support with modules

**UCL Changemaker Continuation Fund 2022/23:**

**CUES – For Staff Project**

Building on the findings from the CUES study, Dr Keri Wong and two student co-researchers embarked on CUES – For Staff, a project that involved communicating findings from the CUES study and in-person discussions on with Undergraduate (UG) (*N* = 9) and Postgraduate (PG) teaching staff (*N =* 8) on how they can better integrate careers guidance into their teaching curricula. The UG and PG workshops took place on two separate occasions, with a third one taking place online for those who couldn’t make the previous sessions (*N =* 5). It was evident from both workshops that the staff were pleased to be there, and they all had lots that they wanted to discuss.

Dr Wong started by asking teaching staff to reflect on what ‘career support’ means to them and what comes to mind when they think about career support. The student co-researchers then explained the origins of the CUES project, the findings from the original CUES study, as well as the aims of the workshop to the teaching staff. Staff were asked to fill in an online form asking about how they have already provided career support to students.

This was followed by a discussion with teaching staff to hear their views. In both UG and PG workshops, staff raised ideas around how they can most efficiently deliver careers guidance to students, how staff can encourage students to think more actively about their careers, and how the central UCL careers service and teaching teams can collaborate more closely.

It was particularly valuable to have staff as well as UG and PG students attending. Teaching staff, for example, were keen to know how the students at the workshop felt about some of their ideas, and the students were able to gain a deeper understanding of the logistical decisions needed to add more career support to the curriculum. The workshops concluded with staff choosing one way that they pledge to better integrate career guidance into their teaching curricula in the next teaching year.

**Undergraduate (UG) Workshop: Outcome and reflections**

For undergraduate career services, the following three suggestions were proposed by teaching staff upon discussing various issues that current students face.

1. **Encourage skills audit** **and self-reflection:** Students’ lack of critical reflection of their own skills or needing to be prompt to reflect on their skills, was a prominent topic of discussion in the workshop. Staff repeatedly voiced concerns about how students seldom reflect on the skills they develop, which was thought to be detrimental to students’ career planning, as a lack of reflection/critical awareness complicates the process of students identifying suitable jobs, crafting personal statements, requesting reference letters, and mapping their individual development trajectories. Two practical suggestions were made on this topic. One suggestion was to create a formative **skills passport** that allows students to make reflections throughout all three years of the programme on the skills they have developed in different modules in the programme and other learning experiences. Another suggestion was to provide **clear lists? of the skills associated with each module** such that students can easily track their progress in developing their skillset. This, in line with the recent Employability Pillars Audit conducted by UCL Careers on the UG programme trialled in the August 2023 and beyond. Students are encouraged to actively engage with these initiatives and make reflections on the skills they have developed.

“So I think they (students) need to come with a career portfolio, and they need to reflect what are the skills, or on a scale from one to five how much confidence they have in each of the skills, and then we present to them the mapping of how each assessment or which skills each module is trying to address.

“They can also reflect on what they have done in the past months that may increase their confidence in these skills … what happens is by the time they reach year three, their personal statement is more or less written because these (skills and experiences) are the things they need to show when applying for jobs.”

1. **Increase personal tutor’s role in career coaching:** Staff also identified the potential to enhance career development through personal tutors in the workshop. Many staff felt that personal tutors should be more involved with their tutees’ career development, given that this is an integral component of the UG programme. Specifically, one staff member pointed out that personal tutors can help to embed career coaching in UG programmes, which will improve service consistency and effectiveness. A key suggestion was to hold mandatory **career development group sessions** between a tutor and all their tutees to encourage conversations on students’ career development. As these sessions would be mandatory, all students would have an opportunity to receive guidance and inspiration on their career journeys. A second potential resource was a **standardized ‘bookmark’ or ‘list’ on career-related topics** that tutors and tutees can discuss at termly 1-on-1 meetings. Students should attend the career development group sessions and utilize the standardized list to facilitate career discussions.

“One thing that has been actively discussed is giving the personal tutor a series of things that they can work through with students at different levels. For example, in year one, tutors can hold a group session on career and conduct, for example, mapping exercises, explaining that the skills that are seen as important and how well the experiences of students map on them. Simple exercises like that with reflection and collaboration would help tutors get to know their tutees better in terms of career.”

**Promote career motivation:** Another heavily discussed topic in the workshop was aboutincreasing students’ motivation to use university careers services Staff members explored a few reasons behind students’ lack of motivation, including a lack of career awareness development early on in the programme, complex pathways to access career information, and complicated communication mechanisms for career services. Two main suggestions were developed consequently. One of them is to create **compulsory milestones** that students need to complete each year such that they build up an awareness of career development steadily throughout the programme. Another suggestion was to set up **simple communication pathways**, such as standardised procedures to request reference letters, to improve students’ access to career-related services and information. Continuation of **Supper Club** (i.e., small group lunch sessions with one faculty member discussing their career journeys) was welcomed. Students can actively engage with these resources (e.g. attend a Supper Club session) to further their awareness on career development.

“The thing that worked well for my university when I was a student was that they told you what was going to happen for your three years. So, they told us about the career events and milestones in year one, two and three. Students worry less because they have a framework at the beginning on how to navigate and progress throughout the course.”

“I think, if there’s anything, it is to make the information easier to digest and having standardized procedures to facilitate the access to career information.”

“We (staff/researchers) are all very passionate about our individual careers. And I think if you wouldn’t have a conversation with us, you wouldn’t know that. So, I think something along the lines of Career Speaker events, like Supper Club, would work very well.”

**Postgraduate (PG) Workshops: Outcome and reflections**

The following three suggestions were proposed as a result of the postgraduate staff workshop:

1. **Separate personal tutors and dissertation supervisors:** While undergraduate students at UCL receive support from academic and personal tutors, it was noted that postgraduate students only receive support from an academic tutor. The academic tutor’s role is to support them through the dissertation module, rather than to provide postgraduate students with careers guidance. Postgraduate students therefore have no clear staff member to turn to in order to receive guidance around careers or professional development. In light of this lack of support, postgraduate staff members and co-researchers at the workshop supported the existing suggestion to have distinct academic and personal tutors for postgraduate students.

*“Because we’re mostly talking mostly about the dissertation it lends itself less to more pastoral relationships”*

*“Because I have so many dissertation-related questions to ask my supervisor in the half an hour slot, there is no time really to talk about careers stuff”*

1. **Host careers events earlier in the academic year:** The typical postgraduate teaching year at UCL ends around March, yet postgraduate careers events typically only take place after this. Staff and co-researchers at the workshop suggested that this is too late for careers events for postgraduates to start, since many students will have already made crucial decisions and plans surrounding their immediate career plans. Further, it is possible that some postgraduate students will leave the UK after the teaching year ends and will miss the in-person careers events. Introducing postgraduate careers events earlier in the year will enable a larger number of postgraduate students to benefit from UCL careers support, as well as provide students with useful information about careers at a more apt time.

*“It would be helpful to have that in the beginning. So that you have time over the year to plan out, if I want to go in this direction, I need to build more technical skills.”*

*“Maybe people are a bit more active as well because they are still going to uni and not just focusing on writing their dissertations in maybe different countries.”*

1. **Extending Supper Club to PGs:** Supper Club, which is a series of events within which students listen to an academic’s career story over tea and cake, was designed to help undergraduate students get to know their lecturers better and ask questions about careers. Staff and co-researchers agreed that the events were a great success, and that postgraduate students may enjoy the events equally as much as undergraduate students. Staff suggested extending the Supper Club invitation to postgraduate students and noted that it will be a good opportunity for postgraduate students to spend more time with staff during what for postgraduate students is typically a shorter amount of time at UCL than for undergraduate students.

*“I think that Supper Club was really useful. It was beneficial not just for the students, but it was beneficial for us, to hang out with the students, to get to know them better and hear about what they are expecting and what they want.”*

*“I think we should definitely do it for postgrads. In first term it sounds like.”*

**Plans for the 2023/24 academic year**

Throughout this academic year, we aim to implement these findings across the PHDE department, wider IOE, and UCL, especially with Careers Services. This includes sharing the findings with current students, as we are interested in their opinions on the findings and check whether this addresses their experiences regarding career services. We would also like to take CUES findings to education conferences, as students’ perceptions around engagement with career services are vital in order to design effective careers initiatives in the future. Finally, given that this original study was conducted with UG students, it will be useful to conduct a similar study with PG students, which some of the PG staff welcomed. With staff delivering these commitments, the aim is for students to feel equipped and empowered to think about and plan their own careers in during their time at UCL.

**Infographics**

**A poster of a course

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**A poster of a career services

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A poster of a career services

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**Poster invitations for undergraduate and postgraduate staff**

A white and blue invitation with text and images

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**Link to the presentation:**

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# Declaration

We would like to thank *UCL Changemakers* *2021-23* for funding both of our projects. The CUES projects received total funding of £1,700 from *UCL ChangeMakers* (2021-22) and the *UCL Changemakers Continuation Fund* (2022-23) and have since disseminated findings internally within the Department of Psychology and Human Development and wider UCL, specifically UCL Careers Services.

https://rdr.ucl.ac.uk/articles/presentation/Career\_Support\_for\_Undergraduates\_Engagement\_with\_Services\_CUES\_-\_For\_Staff/24553288