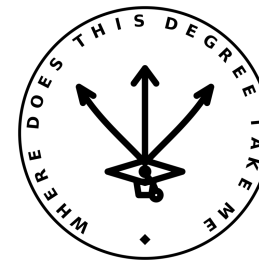




Where does this degree take me?

What 18,590 students reveal about career preparation – and what actually drives it.



About this data

18,590

responses

14,504

gave a 0–10 score

9

polling waves

178

UK providers

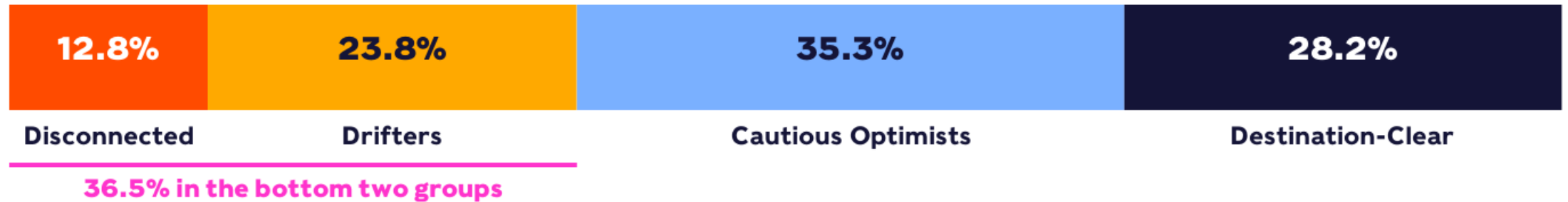
Students answered a single item – “my current activities at university are preparing me for my future career” – with an open-text follow-up that generated a little over 8,000 substantive comments, alongside thousands more on teaching, community, voice and support.

THE HEADLINE



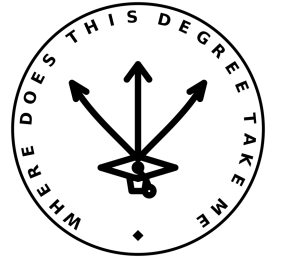
Over a third of students can't see where their degree leads

Share of students by career-preparation group



Career preparation splits the student body into four groups – and the bottom two, 36.5 per cent, cannot say with any conviction that their time at university is preparing them for a career.

Four groups



12.8%

mean 2.78

Disconnected

Failing on several fronts at once – career confusion is one symptom.

23.8%

mean 5.54

Drifters

Adequate but aimless – the moveable middle, not yet entrenched.

35.3%

mean 7.50

Cautious Optimists

It works – but often through the student's own initiative.

28.2%

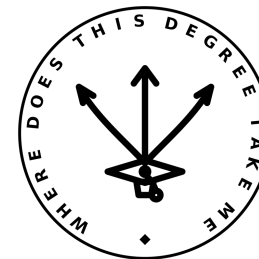
mean 9.61

Destination-Clear

A different university: community, clarity and credited routes.



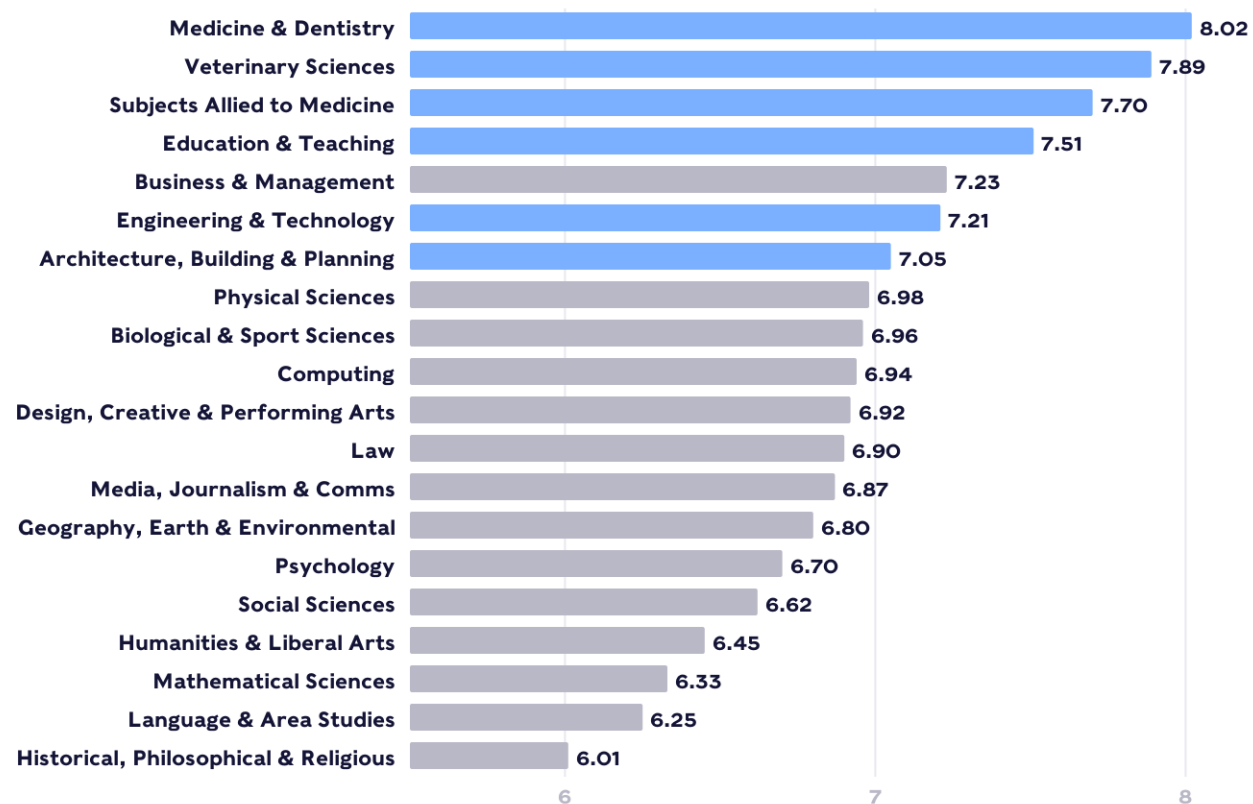
What makes the difference



Subject matters – but so does where you study

Mean career-preparation score by subject

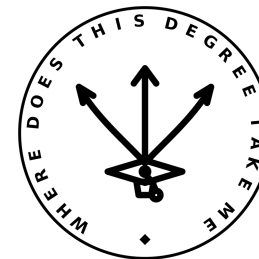
Vocational/professional subjects in blue



A two-point spread between subjects.

But provider variation is just as wide – 6.1 to 8.0 – and survives controlling for subject.

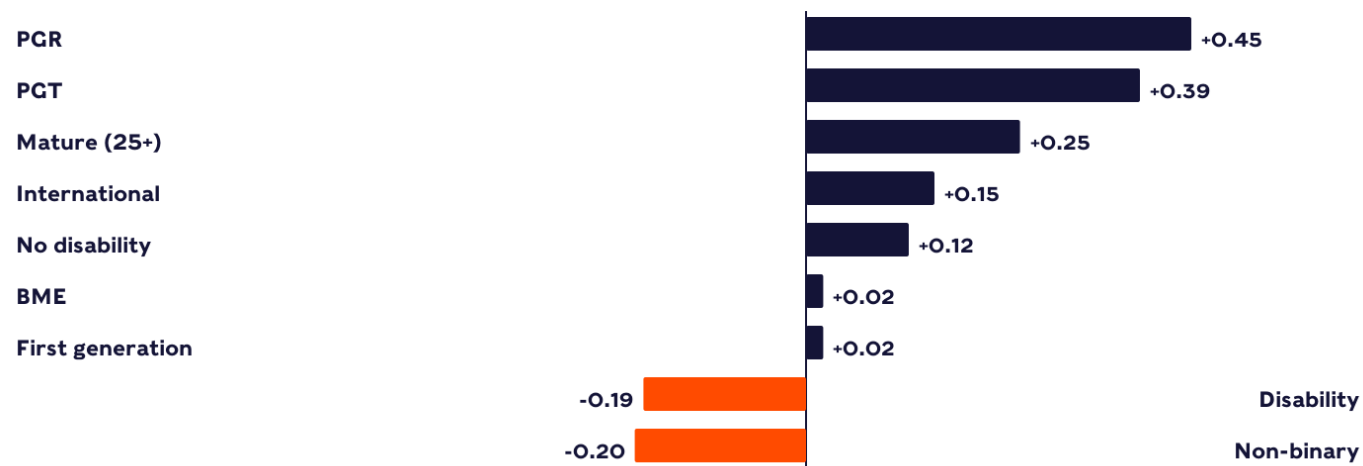
Each explains under 4% of the variation between students. Neither is decisive – and provider, unlike subject, is something an institution can act on.



What survives once subject is controlled

What survives once subject is controlled

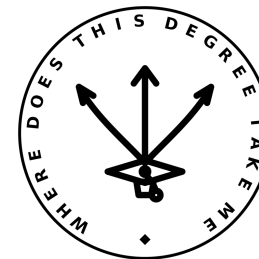
Subject-controlled residual (points above/below subject mean)



Postgraduate level – the strongest advantage.

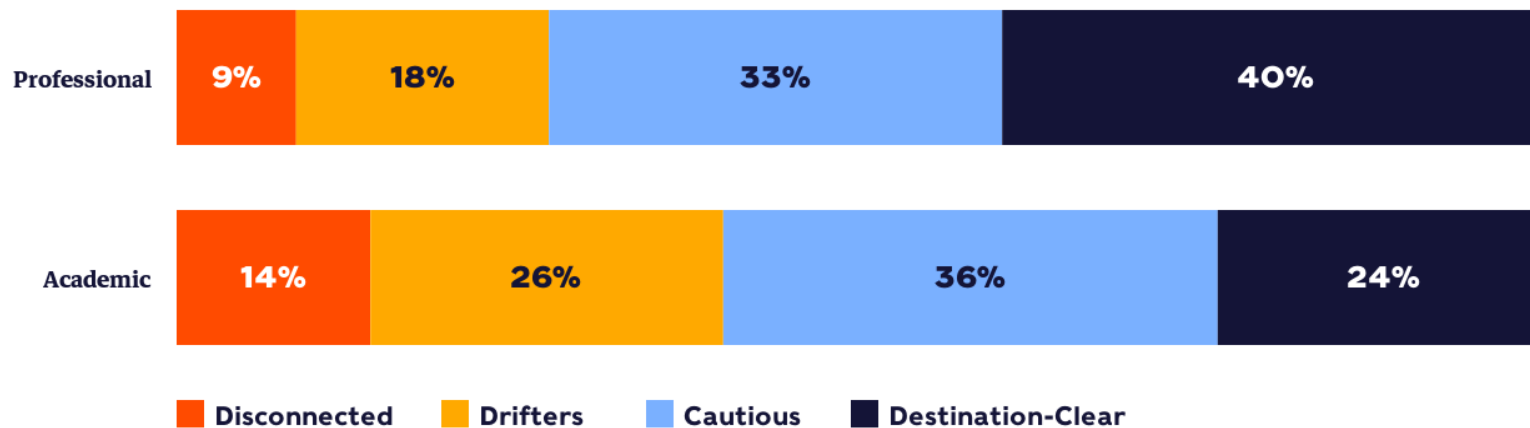
Mature students score higher within the same courses.

Disability is a real, subject-independent gap: 33% of the Disconnected but 24% of the Destination-Clear.



Professional courses lose far fewer students

Professional degrees lose fewer students
Share of students in each career group



Vocational and professional courses average 7.60 against 6.84 for academic degrees. Just 8.7% of their students are Disconnected – against 14.1% – and nearly 40% are Destination-Clear, against 24%.



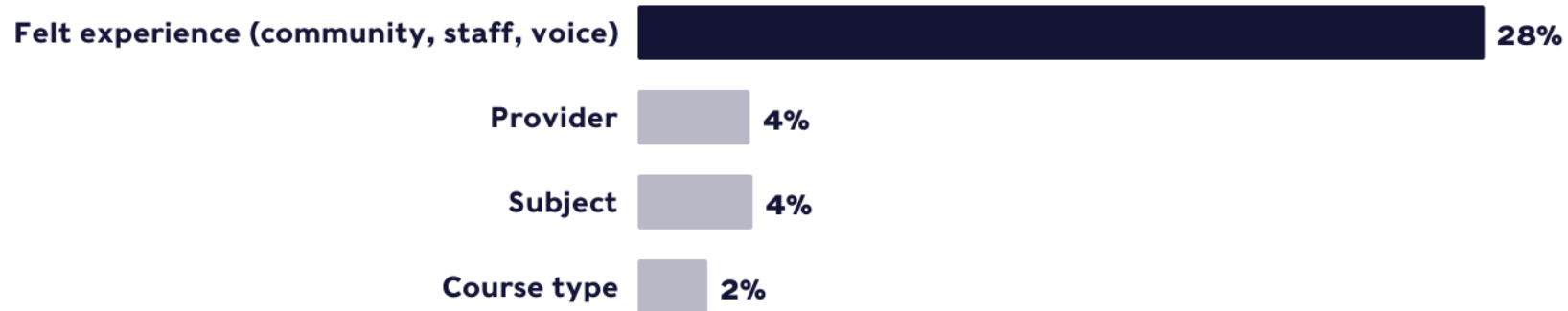
What's driving it

DRIVER 1

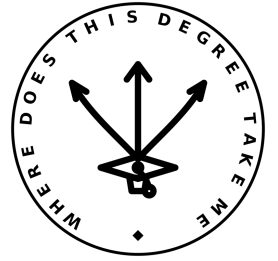


Career confidence is made socially, not structurally

How much of career confidence each factor explains
% of variance explained



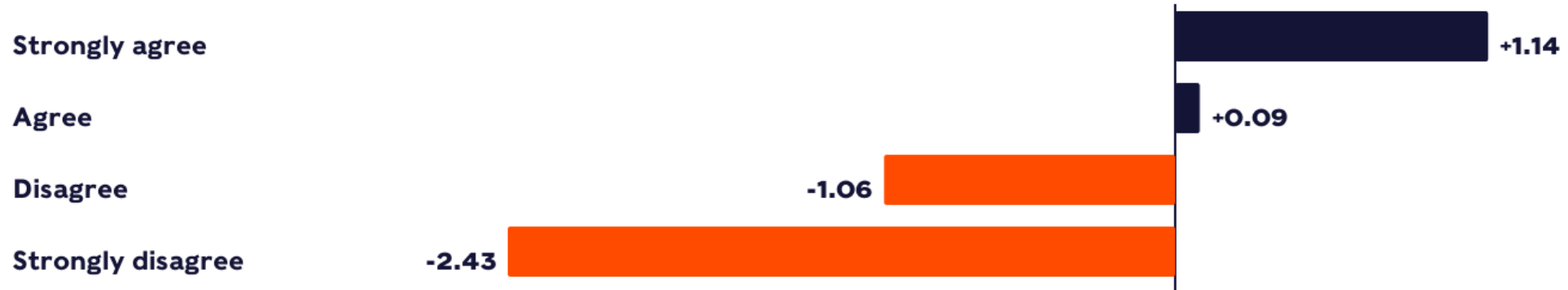
The strongest predictors are relational – whether a student feels part of a community and whether the course stretches them. Together they explain around seven times what subject or provider do.



Belonging moves career confidence more than anything else

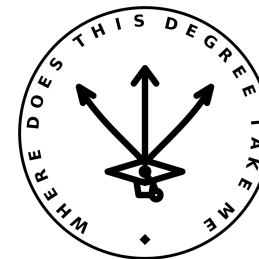
Belonging and career preparation

“I feel part of a community” – career residual, subject-controlled



3.57-point swing – wider than any demographic variable

Controlling for subject, the gap between students who strongly agree and strongly disagree they belong is 3.57 points – wider than any demographic variable in the dataset.



Three more pressures – and three red herrings

WHAT IS DRIVING IT

An uncalibrated promise – when reality falls short of what students expected, confidence falls with it.

Institutional cuts – visible retrenchment thins the signals that a degree is serious preparation (indicative).

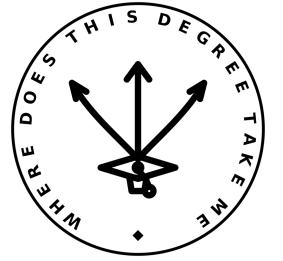
Depletion – burnout language and heavy paid work crowd out the very things that build career capital.

WHAT IT IS NOT

Careers services – barely appear in students' accounts; their perceived value rises with confidence rather than causing it.

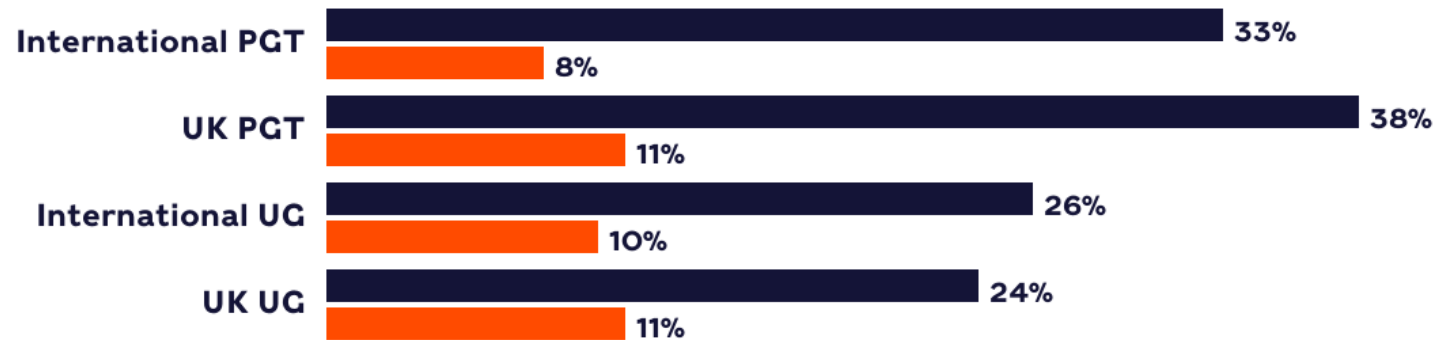
Subject as destiny – where you study matters just as much as what you study.

AI – all but absent from how students narrate career anxiety.



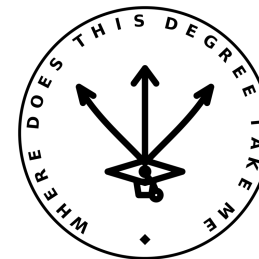
The most confident cohort has the weakest outcomes

The most confident cohort has the weakest outcomes
% Destination-Clear (navy) vs % Disconnected (orange)



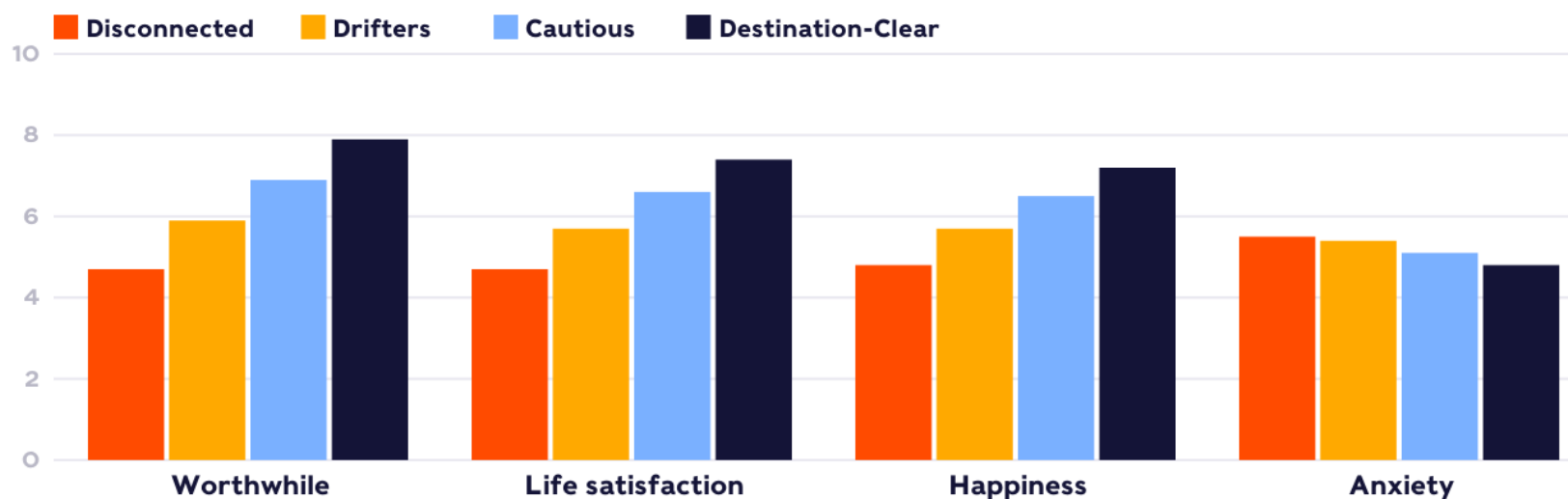
Yet non-EU postgraduate active dissatisfaction has doubled since 2019/20 (Graduate Outcomes)

International postgraduates are among the most career-confident students in the survey – yet their graduate outcomes are the worst and deteriorating fastest. Their confidence should be read as a warning, not a reassurance.

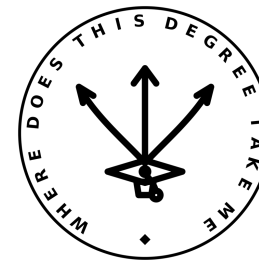


Career confidence tracks wellbeing

Wellbeing rises with career confidence (0–10)



Career preparation correlates $r=0.45$ with feeling life is worthwhile and $r=0.42$ with life satisfaction. The gradient is about low purpose, not acute distress – anxiety runs the other way, but far more gently.



Same activities, different verdict

Same activities, different verdict

% negative among Disconnected (orange) vs % positive among Destination-Clear (navy)



The same lectures, modules and assessments are what the Disconnected blame and the Destination-Clear credit. Even careers-service sentiment is graded by confidence – 70% negative among the Disconnected, 11% among the Destination-Clear.



What works

The evidence points to a structural fix – not a better careers service, but a better-shaped degree, owned closer to the student.

THE PRINCIPLE

Reach beats richness



Tier one · how the discipline is taught

Reaches every student in a lecture

Tier two · credited placements & modules

Reaches everyone the degree requires

Tier three · optional extras

Reaches only those who seek it out

The students who most need career preparation are the least likely to self-select into central optional provision. The fix is to move it up the tiers – into the credited degree, where reach is built in.

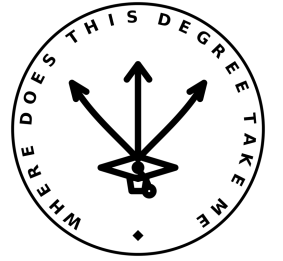
TIER ONE

How the discipline is taught

Whether lectures connect content to professional application, whether assessments build workplace skills, whether lecturers can explain where the subject leads.

This dominates student accounts across all four groups – it is where both the credit and the blame sit. It reaches every student who attends a lecture; no self-selection required.

Same tier, opposite experience.



“Our future career has not been mentioned at all by our programme and lecturers.”

“The way classes are designed tries to match real-life scenarios and techniques.”

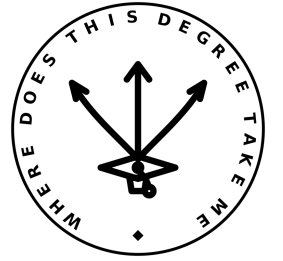
TIER TWO

Credited, but separate from discipline teaching

Professional practice modules, credited placements, credited volunteering and service and work experience that sit inside the degree structure – but aren't the discipline teaching itself.

Barely mentioned by the Disconnected, far more often by the Destination-Clear, and overwhelmingly positive when present. Because it's credited, it reaches beyond the self-selectors.

This is the layer that works – and the layer most academic degrees are missing.



“We had a professional practice module in the first semester which highlighted a lot of opportunities – and since then I have been volunteering and seeking out experience.”



It's the structure, not the teaching

Within any one career group, vocational and academic students report almost identical experience.

Vocational degrees don't teach career skills better. They simply carry tier two as standard – placements, professional registration, a visible endpoint – so more students start higher up.

The academic fix isn't better lecturers. It's importing what professional degrees already have: credited experience built into the degree.

Same experience within the group – professional degrees just move more students into it.

Among the Destination-Clear

Feel part of a community

88% professional

88% academic

Stimulated “very often”

59% professional

59% academic

TIER THREE

The optional layer – and why it misses

Careers services, careers fairs, uncredited workshops, voluntary events.

Tier three peaks among the Cautious Optimists – the self-selectors who found the workshop, joined the society, attended the fair – whose career scores are already above average.

The counterfactual trap: surveying participants tells you that already-confident students found it useful, not that it caused the confidence.



“I’m too busy and tired to engage with the career services at uni, and I always miss these events.”

PROPOSITION 1

Departmental beats central



“

To access the careers service the onus is on you to reach out... the career services feel out of touch and out of reach, particularly for first years.

— Disconnected students

Students locate their whole experience in the course, the lecturers and the departmental community – for both credit and blame. When careers staff say students don't turn up, that's the symptom: the question is why the provision requires attendance at all.

PROPOSITION 2

If it's credited, it's better



“

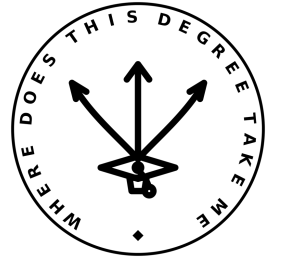
I'm taking a module called Preparation for Placement and I'll be taking a placement year – these things are giving me the skills that will prepare me for my future career.

— Destination-Clear student

Credited provision reaches students because they have to do it. A history degree with 20 credits of work experience reaches every history student; one that relies on an optional fair reaches only those who show up.

PROPOSITION 3

The degree, not the module



WHAT THE SECTOR IS TRYING

“Injecting” employability into existing academic modules – asking the history lecturer to bolt a CV exercise onto the Tudors.

But students in the bottom groups almost never ask for this.

Students aren't asking their lecturers to teach differently. They're asking their degree to include other things.

WHAT STUDENTS ACTUALLY ASK FOR

Placements, guidance on where the degree leads, practical experience. Change the structure of the degree – not the content of the modules.

The history professor should teach excellent history and be able to say where it leads.

Who owns it



Course teams

Own the degree structure – credited professional experience alongside excellent discipline teaching.

Student associations

Own the peer community and disciplinary network within which career orientation actually develops.

Careers services

Provide specialist support – labour-market intelligence, employers, applications – partnering with staff and students.

The strongest accounts describe all three working together – specialist support delivered through departments, not around them.



Disciplinary student associations

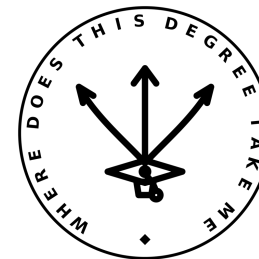
+0.47

subject-controlled career residual for students who mention a disciplinary student structure – larger than the postgraduate (+0.39) or maturity (+0.25) effects.

“I’m on the committee for the student-led Psychology society, which has strong links with the school – a bridge between the school and the students.”

“The law school was isolating and there was no community.”

Almost mandatory across much of European higher education, rare in the UK as a supported structure. Give these networks institutional backing and a stated career-development function.



What each group needs

Disconnected

Tell them where it leads

Destination data, alumni panels, degree handbooks that say where graduates go. Costs little, reaches everyone.

Drifters

Put it in credit

Short credited placements or employer-briefed projects they must complete to graduate.

Cautious Optimists

Extend and connect

More of what already works – and starting in year one, not year three.

Destination-Clear

Protect and scale

Make the routes the default rather than relying on the student's own initiative.



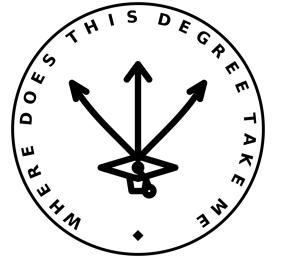
University leadership & course teams

University leadership

Rebalance from optional central provision to the credited degree. Audit every programme against the three tiers – if it's weighted to tier three, it won't reach the students who most need it. Watch two groups: disabled students, and international postgraduates whose confidence masks weak outcomes.

Course teams & departments

Design the degree to include credited professional experience alongside excellent discipline teaching – placements and professional-practice modules written into the regulations, not offered as extras. Make sure lecturers can explain where the subject leads.



SUs, associations & careers services

SUs & student associations

Resource disciplinary student societies and give them a stated career-development function – they connect belonging to career confidence directly, and the students who run them develop from the organising itself. Reframe representative roles as developmental, not just representational.

Careers services

Keep the specialist expertise – labour-market translation, employers, applications, interviews – but deploy it through departments and associations. Where budgets are tight, reallocate from central fairs and generic workshops rather than cutting.

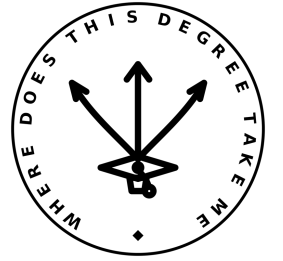


For SUs: build it – and demand it

The SU owns the layer that produces career confidence – which makes employability an SU agenda, not a bolt-on.

WHY SUS

SUs sit on the biggest lever in the data



+3.57

the belonging swing on career preparation, controlling for subject – wider than any demographic variable in the dataset.

+0.47

the career residual for students in a disciplinary student structure – bigger than the postgraduate (+0.39) or maturity (+0.25) effect.

Belonging produces career confidence – and the SU owns the community where it forms. That puts SUs, not the careers service, closest to the lever.



Put careers at subject level

Resource disciplinary societies to run careers activity themselves – alumni panels, subject-specific fairs, case competitions, employer visits.

Students trust events run by other students, and the format is calibrated by the people who actually need it. A central service can support and fund this – but the activity belongs at the level of the discipline.

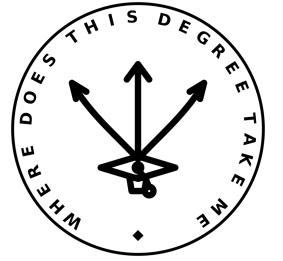
Europe already runs this at scale

D-Dagen (KTH) – CS chapter fair, 100+ companies

ETH Fachvereine – each subject runs its own recruiting fair

Iceland – 60+ subject associations run company visits

Juristdagarna – law students' fair, 2,500 visitors



Run real services – and ventures

Student-run consultancies

Paid client work delivered by students – THS Consults at KTH, ISCTE Junior Consulting. Employability and revenue in one.

Competitions & fairs at scale

Create Tomorrow – 140 teams. The SASSE Business Committee has run for 30 years and funds its parent union.

Placement offices & the board year

Bratniak has run a job placement office since 1998; Integrand's paid board-year model turns running it into a career in itself.

Built once, these persist across cohorts – a founding idea becomes permanent infrastructure rather than dying when its cohort graduates.



Make roles developmental – and keep alumni close

REPS AS DEVELOPMENT

Reframe course reps and committee roles as professional development, not just representation – the students who organise gain the most.

“Representing peers sharpens leadership, communication, and advocacy.”

The peer network the belonging data rewards is the same network that carries careers – and alumni relationships.

A RELATIONSHIP PAST GRADUATION

In these systems the SU and its foundations keep alumni in active relationship for decades – placement offices, mentoring, professional networks, the company visit that is also an alumni reunion.



Lobby for credit the lecture theatre doesn't own

Campaign for academic credit that attaches to participation, leadership, mentoring and volunteering – owned by the institution, recorded on the transcript, not bolted onto a discipline module.

It is the practical answer to “the degree, not the module”: recognition for roles that genuinely serve the academic mission.

Live models to point to

DCU – Uaneen module, recorded on the degree parchment

Twente – 15-ECTS governance minor for board members

Luxembourg – 10–15 ECTS engagement & leadership certificate

Finland & Iceland – ECTS for tutoring and mentoring



Lobby for credited work experience in every degree

Push for an internship semester or credited placement written into academic degrees – not just vocational ones – and treat placement quality, pay and cost as a student-rights issue.

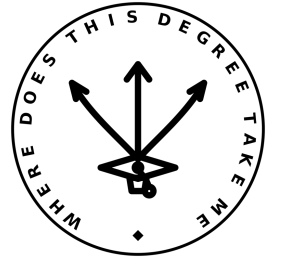
SUs across Europe are already leading this campaign, with the evidence to back it.

SU campaigns that work

Uppsala – “What Will You Become?” calls for an independent internship semester (45% of humanities grads took 3+ months to find work)

Uppsala VFU – campaign for 100% placement-cost reimbursement

VVS (Flanders) – placement quality labels and non-assessing mentors



Demand the conditions that make it possible

	Legal standing & mandate	A constitutional right to organise, be resourced and be consulted
	Operating budgets	Revenue and multi-year funding – not grants squeezed each cycle
	Continuity	A board-year or paid structure so ideas outlast the founding cohort
	A subject-level unit	Societies small enough to feel like a community students belong to
	Recognition	Treated as junior partners in academic life, with a stated careers remit

Where most of these hold, the rest becomes possible. In the UK they mostly don't – yet. That is the lobbying agenda.



The fix isn't a better careers service.

Put career preparation into the credited degree – and into the community that produces it. That is where the students who most need it actually are.