Where does this degree take me?

When students are asked whether their current activities at university are preparing them for their future career, the answers split the student body into different worlds. Some see a clear line from what they're doing now to where they want to be; others can't see one at all.

That gap tracks with belonging, intellectual stimulation, loneliness, student voice and personal wellbeing so closely that career preparation starts to look less like an employability metric and more like a barometer of whether students feel their time at university has a point.

And when we ask what produces the gap, the answer turns out to have little to do with careers services and a great deal to do with whether a student is embedded in a community, stretched intellectually, and holding a promise that reality is going to keep.

Executive summary

Just over a third of UK students – 36.5 per cent – cannot say with any conviction that their time at university is preparing them for a career. Drawing on around 13,500 scored responses and thousands of free-text comments across nine polling waves and 178 providers, this report divides students into four groups: the Disconnected (12.8 per cent), the Drifters (23.8 per cent), the Cautious Optimists (35.3 per cent) and the Destination-Clear (28.2 per cent).

Subject explains less than expected. The two-point spread between the most and least career-confident subject areas is matched by an equally wide spread between providers teaching the same subjects, and each accounts for under four per cent of the variation between students.

The strongest predictors are relational: whether a student feels part of a community and whether the course stretches them account for around 28 per cent of the variation, and the belonging gap – 3.57 points between those who strongly agree and strongly disagree they belong, controlling for subject – is larger than any demographic difference.

Three further pressures show up in the data: courses that fall short of what students were led to expect, visible cuts to provision, and students too depleted by heavy paid work to do the things that build career confidence. Careers services barely feature in students' own accounts, and AI hardly at all.

One finding cuts the other way. International postgraduate taught students are among the most career-confident in the survey – and the same cohort's graduate

outcomes are the worst and deteriorating fastest. Their confidence should be read as a warning, not a reassurance.

The recommendations follow from the structure of the problem: move career preparation from optional central provision into the credited degree – placements, professional practice modules, work-integrated projects; locate ownership with course teams rather than central services; resource disciplinary student associations, which connect belonging to career confidence directly; and deploy careers services' specialist expertise through departments rather than a central drop-in.

About this data

This report draws on 18,590 responses to Wonkhe/GTI polling across nine waves (February 2023 to March 2026), across 178 UK providers. Students were asked a career preparation question – a 0–10 scale item asking how far they agree that "my current activities at university are preparing me for my future career." Around 13,500 gave a score.

The question appeared in every wave and was accompanied by an open-text follow-up, which generated a little over 4,000 substantive responses. Thousands more free-text responses on teaching, assessment, community, voice and support – around 7,000 on each – are also drawn on throughout.

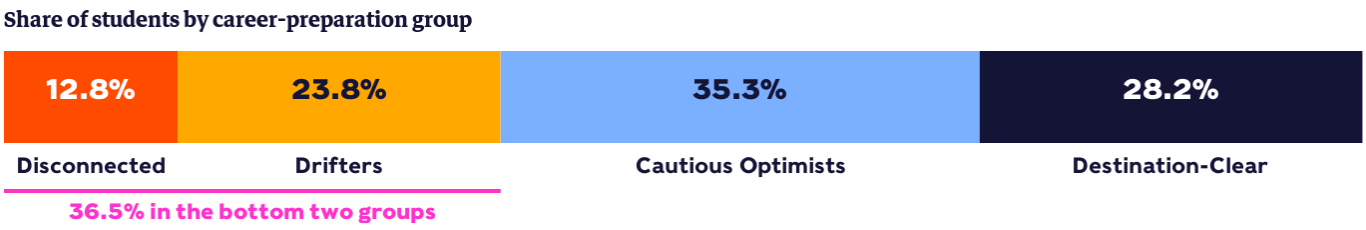
The sample is broadly diverse but not perfectly representative, and we have weighted for gender and qualification level.

Where we report thematic rates from qualitative data (for example, "the Disconnected mention career direction uncertainty at 8 per cent"), the denominator is students in that group who gave a free-text response to the relevant question – not the group as a whole.

For this analysis we classified Medicine & Dentistry, Subjects Allied to Medicine, Veterinary Sciences, Education & Teaching, Architecture/Building/Planning, and Engineering & Technology as vocational/professional, and all other subject groups as academic/generalist. Borderline cases exist – law and business have professional dimensions – but the grouping follows the presence or absence of professional registration pathways and integrated practice placements as standard degree features.

Four groups

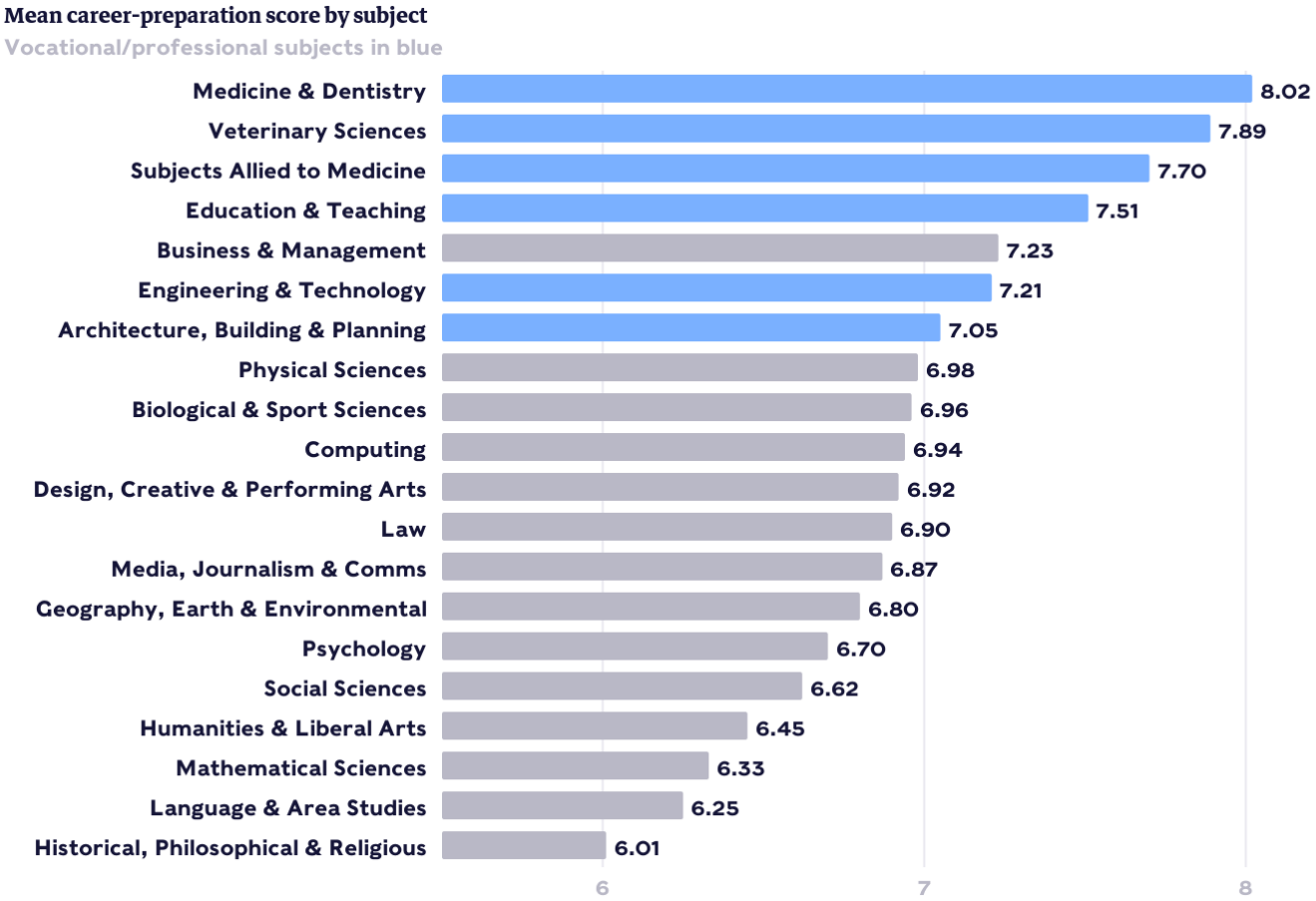
Over a third of students – 36.5 per cent – fall into the bottom two groups.



What makes the difference

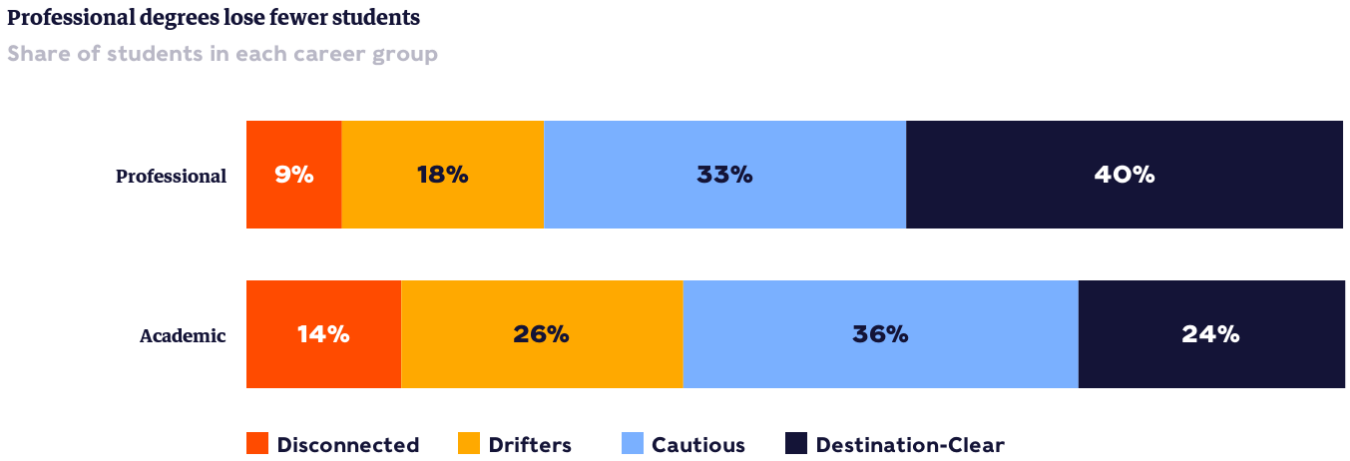
Subject matters – but so does where you study

Subject is a strong differentiator. The gap between the highest- and lowest-scoring subject areas is a full two points – roughly one standard deviation.



Separating vocational/professional courses (25 per cent) from academic/generalist courses (75 per cent), vocational students average 7.60 and academic students 6.85. Nearly 40 per cent of vocational students are

Destination-Clear – only 8.7 per cent are Disconnected, against 14.1 per cent of academic students.



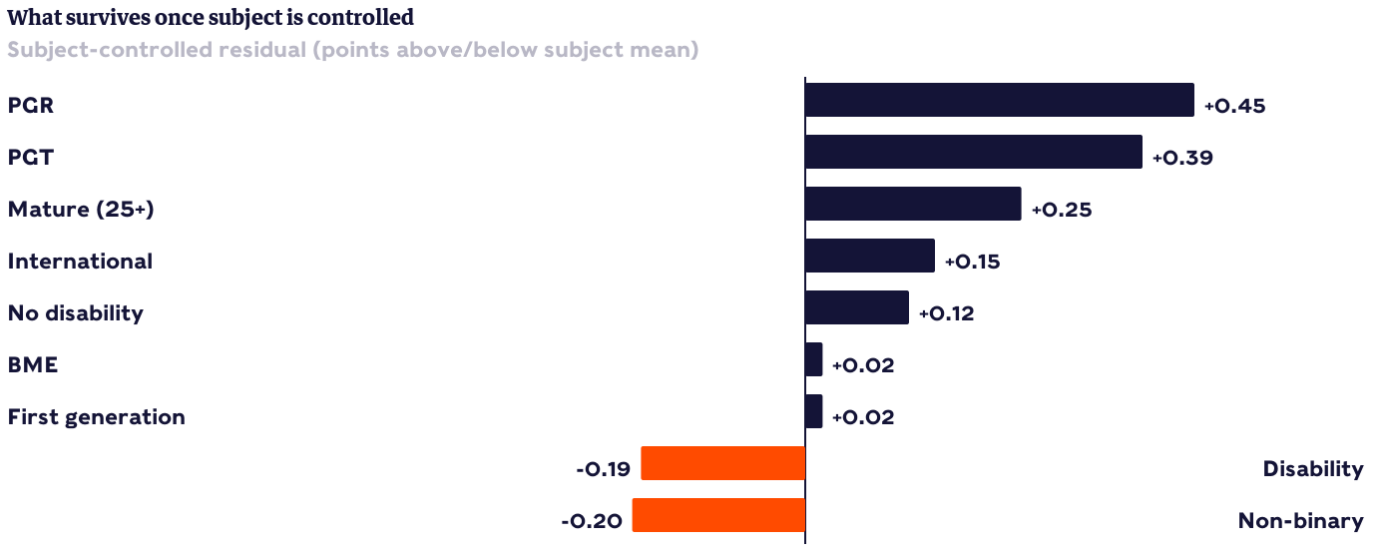
But subject is not the whole story, and it is not even the largest structural difference. Across the 41 providers with at least 50 responses, average career preparation runs from around 6.1 to 8.0 – a spread as wide as the one between subjects.

And it is not simply a reflection of subject mix: after we strip out each student's subject-area average, providers still range from roughly –0.7 to +0.7. Two students on the same kind of course at different institutions differ, on average, by more than a point on career preparation purely because of where they study.

Subject and provider each account for under four per cent of the variation between individual students. Both matter, but neither is decisive – and provider, unlike subject, is something an institution can act on.

What survives once subject is controlled

Subject-controlled residuals – the gap between each student's score and the mean for their subject area – clarify which demographic differences are real and which are artefacts of who studies what.



Three patterns survive clearly. Postgraduate level carries the largest residuals in the table, with UK PGT students among the most career-convinced in the dataset. Mature students aged 25 or over score higher within the same courses. And disabled students carry a real, subject-independent gap: they make up 33 per cent of the Disconnected but only 24 per cent of the Destination-Clear.

The raw BME advantage vanishes once subject is controlled – it was driven by BME students being more concentrated in high-scoring vocational subjects. First-generation status shows no effect whatsoever. International students carry a modest positive residual, concentrated at undergraduate level; at PGT, UK students edge ahead. That international-postgraduate confidence turns out to be the most revealing number in the dataset, and we return to it in a dedicated section below.

The year-of-study question

Does career confidence build with time at university? The honest answer is: not obviously, and not in the way an earlier reading of this data suggested. On the best-populated year-of-study variable, first-year students actually carry the highest subject-controlled residual (+0.15), middle years dip (–0.12), and final years land at roughly the subject average. A narrower year variable does show a decline into the final year, but it is populated for only a fraction of the sample, is not monotonic, and explains almost none of the variation on its own. We should not lean on a story of steady decline.

What we can say is that confidence is not something the standard degree reliably manufactures over time – if anything it is highest early, when it is partly imported optimism, and is not built on by the middle years. As one Drifter puts it: "I feel confident in what I'm learning, but terrified at the state of the job market." The implication is not that intervention arrives "too late" by the final year, but that

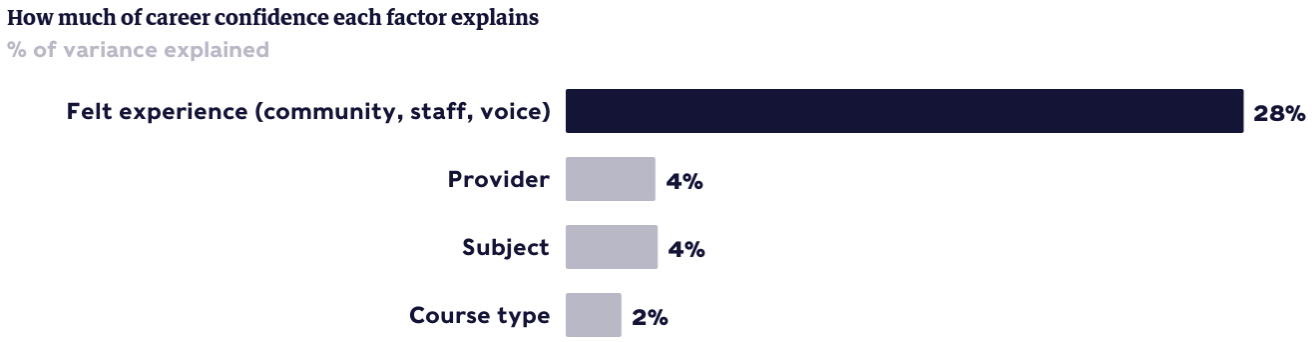
early confidence is a resource that degrees currently fail to convert into anything concrete before it erodes.

What might be driving this

Describing four groups is not the same as explaining why a third of students sit in the bottom two. The survey can't prove causation, but it can rank candidate mechanisms by how strongly they move with career preparation, and rule some out. When we do that, the drivers are not the ones the sector usually reaches for.

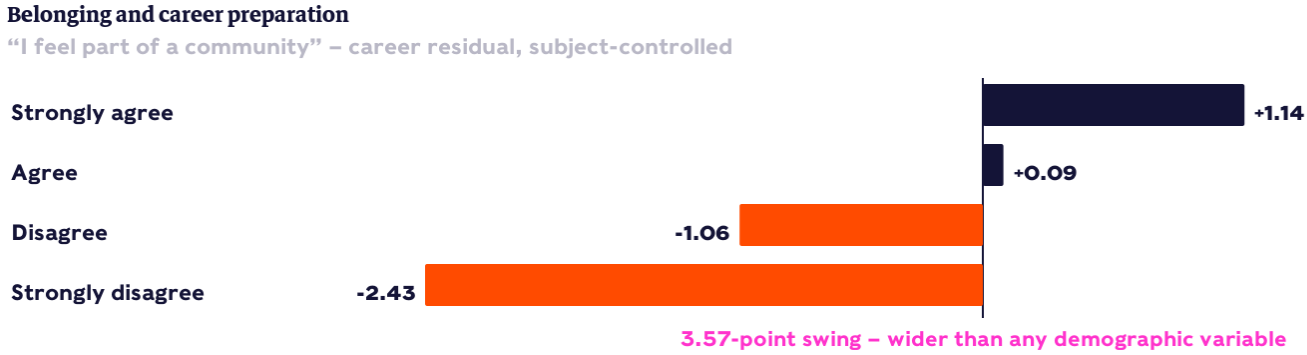
The engine is relational, not structural

Career confidence appears to be manufactured socially. Put the main experience measures into one model and the strongest unique predictors are not placements or provision – they are whether a student feels part of a community and whether the course is intellectually stimulating, ahead of staff support and support services, with voice and feedback trailing. Together this relational cluster accounts for around 28 per cent of the variation in career preparation – roughly seven times what subject or provider explain.



The belonging relationship is the largest in the entire dataset. Holding subject constant, students who strongly agree they belong sit 1.14 points above their subject average; those who strongly disagree sit 2.43 points below – a 3.57-point swing, wider than any demographic variable.

Career orientation is not primarily an information problem solved by a leaflet. It develops inside a community – peers comparing notes on placements, staff mentioning where the subject leads, a cohort that makes the future feel possible to plan for. Where that community is absent, no amount of central provision substitutes for it, which is exactly why the Disconnected describe isolation and career confusion in the same breath. Belonging is not running parallel to employability. On this evidence, it may be the mechanism that produces it.



A promise that isn't being calibrated

A second mechanism is the gap between what students were led to expect and what they are experiencing. Agreement that the reality of a course matched expectations correlates with career preparation – when reality falls short, career confidence falls with it. This is consistent with first-year optimism failing to survive contact with the middle years. Its most extreme case is the international-postgraduate paradox set out below, where high in-course confidence sits alongside deteriorating outcomes after graduation.

Institutional distress is leaking into student confidence

A third driver is new to this agenda and points at the sector's finances. Students who say cuts have affected their experience score materially lower on career preparation, and simply noticing cuts is negatively associated too. These are smaller, single-wave samples and should be read as indicative – but the mechanism is intuitive. When modules are withdrawn at short notice, contact hours shrink, staff leave mid-year and specialist facilities are cut, the visible signals that a degree is serious preparation for a future are exactly what gets thinned out. Some of the bottom two groups are not a careers-provision failure but collateral from financial decisions taken well above the careers service.

Career preparation needs time and energy students are running out of

A fourth mechanism is depletion. Read fresh, the Disconnected don't only describe absent guidance – they describe being overwhelmed. Mental-health and burnout language ("exhausted," "overwhelmed," "struggling," "out of my depth") appears in around three per cent of Disconnected free-text responses, falling to under one per cent of the Destination-Clear. Alongside it runs a cost-of-living thread – students describing the struggle to balance study with the paid work they need to live.

The quantitative signal is telling: students doing a moderate 11–20 hours of paid work a week are the most career-confident, while those working 21-plus hours fall

below even those doing none. Modest work builds career capital; heavy work – driven by necessity rather than choice – crowds out the very activities that build it.

What the drivers are not

The data is just as clear about what is not driving this. Central careers provision is not the lever – it barely appears in students' own accounts, and where it does, its perceived value rises with career confidence rather than causing it. Subject is a differentiator but a weak one, and where you study matters just as much, so "some subjects are just less vocational" is not an adequate explanation.

And AI, despite the sector's preoccupation, is all but absent from how students narrate career anxiety. The problem is not that students fear being automated away. It is that too many are isolated, overstretched, watching their institution retrench, and holding a promise nobody has helped them calibrate.

The Disconnected: absence, confusion, and abandonment

The Disconnected aren't just career-anxious – they're having a comprehensively worse university experience. 84 per cent are on academic courses, 16 per cent vocational. They divide into several distinct subgroups, each unconvinced for different reasons.

Academic Disconnected students are characterised by directionlessness. Career direction uncertainty is the most frequently coded theme, but the responses that stop you short come from the no-guidance subgroup – students who describe not a weak careers service but a total absence of career-related communication from their university:

> "I have not been asked or approached about what I want to do after university. No one has mentioned placements. No one has told me whether it will be effective. No one has helped building a CV or a portfolio for myself after achieving my degree."
> "I have no idea what I'm going to do. It hasn't been discussed at all with my university."
> "I am doing a very un-employable degree (Ancient History & English) and have been given next to no advice about how to turn my degree into a career outside of post-grad."

A second subgroup describes courses that are too theoretical, with no practical element.

> "We aren't really being taught applicable knowledge."
> "I think we just learn the academics of our course but are often not told what it could lead to and how to get there."

These students aren't disengaged from learning – they simply can't see a line from here to there. A small but distinct group is studying for personal interest rather than career preparation – retirees, career-changers, or students who simply love their subject.

> "I am close to retirement and my area of study is for my own personal development and not a career move."

For these students, a low score is not a complaint – it's an accurate description of their situation. But they're a small minority, not an explanation for the size of the Disconnected group.

What's distinctive about the Disconnected is the totality of the picture.

- On teaching: "content is just read off old PowerPoints." On feedback: "this is week five and I don't have any feedback."
- On community: "I don't feel like I fit in – I feel like a bit of an outsider and like I am here just for a degree."
- On voice: "I fill in the forms because I have to and perhaps so that the university can tick a box."
- On support services: "they're unable to help me, only refer to the NHS services with long waits."

The picture is of failure on several fronts at once, not career anxiety inside an otherwise happy experience – career disconnection is one expression of a broader disengagement, and for a meaningful minority it is narrated in the language of exhaustion and being overwhelmed rather than simply under-informed.

Vocational Disconnected students know what they should be training for but don't feel the course is delivering. Their complaint is a breach of promise:

> "I'm doing nursing and we're not learning about A&P or anything practical. It's all about assignments."
> "There is no hands-on experience. The first year felt pointless."

Some have been on placement and found the gap between university teaching and workplace reality alarming: "because I learnt more on my placements than I do in uni."

The Drifters: adequate but aimless

The Drifters' academic experience is broadly adequate (64 per cent rate staff as "good") but purposeless. Among those who gave a free-text response, directional uncertainty peaks here – the highest rate of any group – and job market anxiety peaks with it.

Academic Drifters describe ambiguity where the Disconnected describe absence. Their signature register is hedging and self-blame – they sense a gap but attribute it partly to their own lack of engagement:

> "I haven't taken as many opportunities as I perhaps should, such as joining the mentoring scheme, so it's not entirely the fault of the university."
> "I need to do more things outside of my course to help with my future career."

Many acknowledge that the university does things but can't see how they connect: "the activities are engaging however I don't think they are preparing me for the future." Others are waiting for the course to become more relevant: "I assume it's going to become more preparatory the further into the degree I get" – a hope the year-of-study data suggests is optimistic.

When Drifters mention careers services, the framing is mixed rather than uniformly hostile – some are pointed ("the careers advice tends to be quite vague"), others neutral or positive ("some career fairs available and workshops available"). The Drifters are the group most likely to be moved by institutional action, precisely because their dissatisfaction isn't yet entrenched.

Vocational Drifters have lost faith in delivery:

> "The degree teaches more of the concept and content side however fails to address the practical scenarios that can be encountered in the workplace."
> "With nursing it's easy to find a job but uni doesn't do a lot to provide opportunities."

The Cautious Optimists: it works, but...

The Cautious Optimists are where the numbers turn. Staff quality ratings jump to 28 per cent "very good." Community agreement rises to 83 per cent. Placement mentions reach their peak frequency on vocational courses.

Academic Cautious Optimists are the first group where students consistently name specific mechanisms. But they separate what works from what doesn't, often within the same response:

> "Placement is amazing and useful; seminars and lectures rarely teach what is actually necessary."
> "My grades and coursework are preparing me a bit – but the majority of things I feel will help with my career are running student societies and making connections with other students."

These students have found the career connection, but often through their own initiative – joining consulting programmes, seeking out placements, taking on society leadership. The course itself gets partial credit at best.

Vocational Cautious Optimists are anchored by placement, but note the gap between placement and academic content: "My degree is fairly theoretical which is important for understanding; however, from placement experience it does not all translate."

The Destination-Clear: a different university

The Destination-Clear are, on almost every measure, at a different university. 51 per cent rate staff as "very good." 60 per cent are "very often" stimulated. 89 per cent agree on community. Life satisfaction averages 7.4, worthwhileness 7.9.

Before describing what this group attributes its confidence to, a caveat. Some of the strongest responses come from students who arrived with career clarity and used the system well, rather than students whose confidence was produced by the system.

One is unusually candid: "I am aware that I have this preparation because I have actively gone to get it, so it may differ for others."

Two sources lead in this group, roughly level: the purpose students bring with them, and credited provision the degree supplies – placements and professional practice modules. Discipline teaching making career connections comes some way behind both.

Vocational Destination-Clear students describe a direct route. Professional registration and accreditation appear at around three times the rate of the Disconnected. The language isn't hedged or anxious – it's matter-of-fact:

> "It precisely takes me to the role I want to do immediately after graduating."
> "The course is incredibly practically based and geared completely toward the industry – it's fantastic."

Academic Destination-Clear students are the most interesting subgroup, because they've achieved high career confidence without the structural advantage of a vocational course. One group has identified a specific career and can see their course as a pathway to it:

> "I am so excited for the future. I want to be a criminal and human rights lawyer because I want to fight for the rights of under-represented clients."

The other describes a degree structure that has made the effort to connect academic content to professional life:

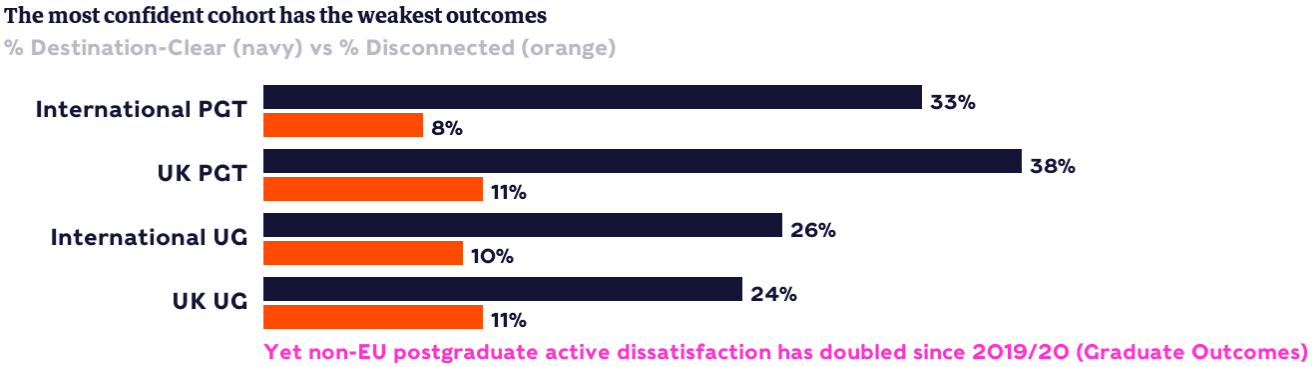
> "There is a very strong focus on employability skills, placement opportunities and thinking about the future here."

The international postgraduate paradox

If career preparation were simply a measure of how well universities equip students for the labour market, one group would trouble us more than any other. Instead, it does the opposite. The cohort the sector spends most time worrying about – international postgraduate taught students, the group that drove the last five years of recruitment growth – is among the most career-confident in the survey.

International PGT students record just 8 per cent Disconnected – the lowest of any segment. The confidence is concentrated exactly where the recruitment boom was. Almost a third are studying Business & Management – the modal international postgraduate experience is a one-year business masters – and the pattern by nationality maps onto the expansion cohort with uncomfortable precision.

Nigerian students are the most confident of all (mean 7.89, 48 per cent Destination-Clear), followed by Indian and Pakistani students. The students most convinced their degree is preparing them are disproportionately those from the countries the expansion drew in largest numbers, who are typically most financially stretched and most dependent on the UK qualification producing an actual economic return. Confidence is highest exactly where the stakes are highest.



Confidence without calibration

This survey measures what students believe about their future around the middle of their course – a reading of expectation. The Graduate Outcomes data measures what actually happened to the same kind of student around fifteen months after they finished – a reading of realisation. The two have come apart. As Wonkhe's analysis of the PGT boom sets out, active dissatisfaction among non-EU

postgraduates on "utilising what I learnt" has more than doubled in five years, from 12 to 27 per cent.

Unemployment among non-UK full-time postgraduates runs above 20 per cent at several of the post-92 providers that did most of the recruiting, against under 6 per cent at the most selective. The graduate route meant to convert a UK masters into UK employment barely functions in practice – only around 3 per cent of employers have knowingly used it. The cohort recording the highest career confidence in this survey is the same cohort whose outcomes are worst and deteriorating fastest.

This needs stating carefully, because it rests on two different instruments measuring two different populations at two different points, and the join between them is inferential rather than proven. But the direction is consistent and the mechanism is coherent. High in-course confidence and poor post-course outcomes are two ends of one timeline.

The survey catches the promise at its peak; Graduate Outcomes catches it after collision with an unfamiliar labour market, employers who barely know the visa routes exist, and a one-year model that leaves almost no room for the placements and networking that produce good outcomes. For this group, career confidence may be less a measure of preparation than a measure of how much is being staked on the degree – and how far the reckoning has been deferred.

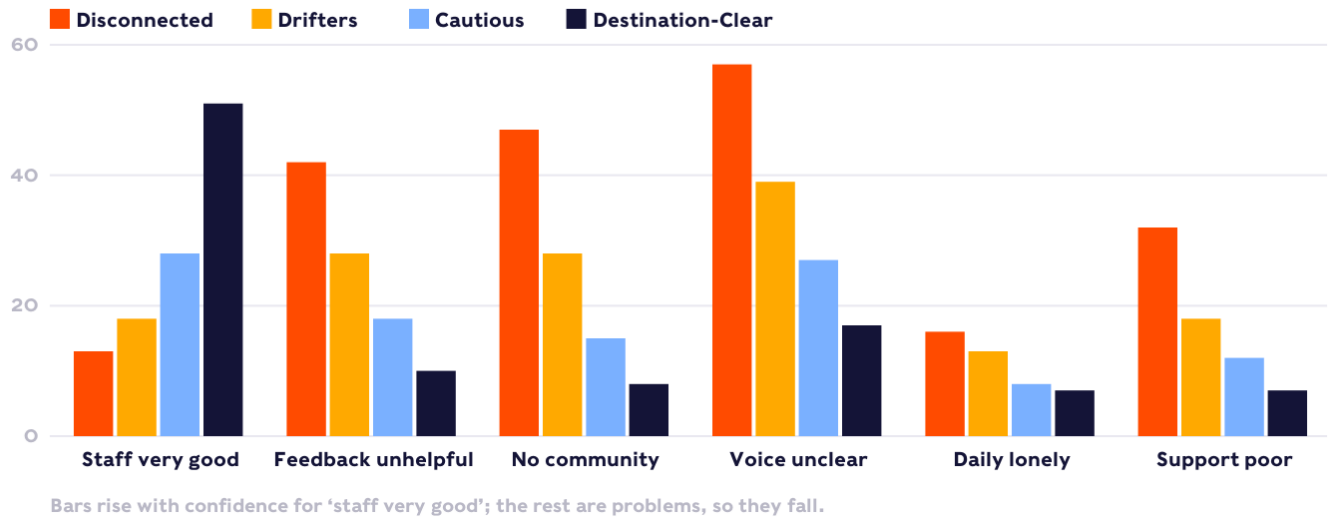
Even inside the survey the confidence sits on softer foundations than the headline suggests: 38 per cent of international PGT students say they felt lonely weekly or daily over the past year, and the few who explain a lower score describe exactly the vulnerabilities the outcomes data would predict – a course that is "very theoretical" with "few practical" elements, time swallowed by reading so there is none left "to make networking," and the stakes only international students carry: "if we didn't get a job we will [be] displaced from the [country]."

The practical warning is against reassurance. A university looking at high international-PGT satisfaction could reasonably conclude this part of its provision is working. The outcomes data says it should not. High confidence in this cohort is a reason to look harder, not to relax – because the gap between what these students expect and what the labour market will give them is wider than for any other group, and inside a compressed one-year degree they have the least time to close it. The only preparation time available is the time the course itself allocates.

The wider experience

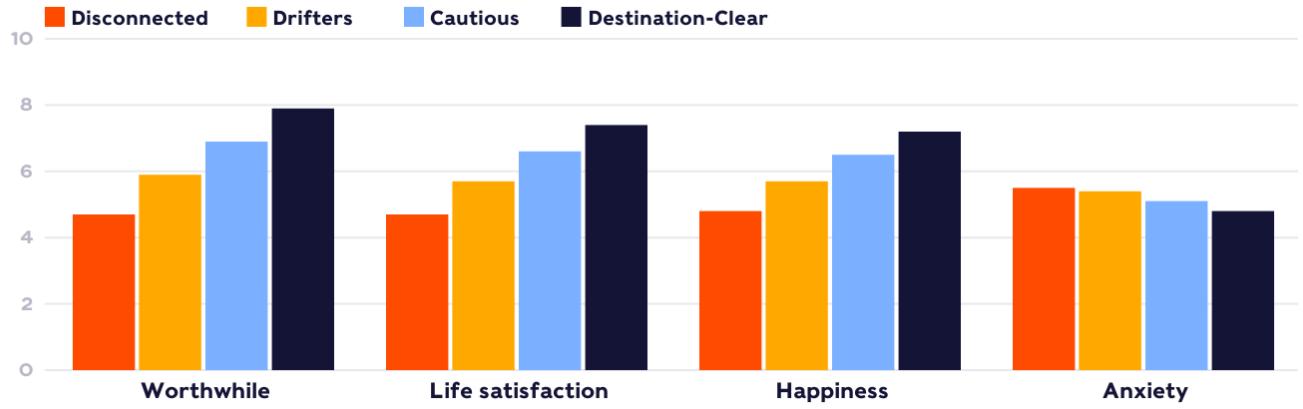
Career preparation confidence tracks with virtually every other measure of the student experience. The gaps are large, consistent, and span both academic and non-academic dimensions.

The wider experience, by career group (%)



Bars rise with confidence for 'staff very good'; the rest are problems, so they fall.

Wellbeing rises with career confidence (0–10)



Career preparation correlates at r=0.45 with feeling life is worthwhile, r=0.42 with life satisfaction, r=0.40 with community and r=0.35 with happiness. The gap on the "worthwhile" measure is 3.2 points, the largest in the table. Anxiety runs in the opposite direction but the gradient is flatter (r=–0.08), suggesting career disconnection is more closely associated with low positive wellbeing – a sense of purposelessness – than with acute distress.

The Disconnected don't describe career anxiety in isolation; they describe it embedded in poor teaching, unhelpful feedback, absent community and

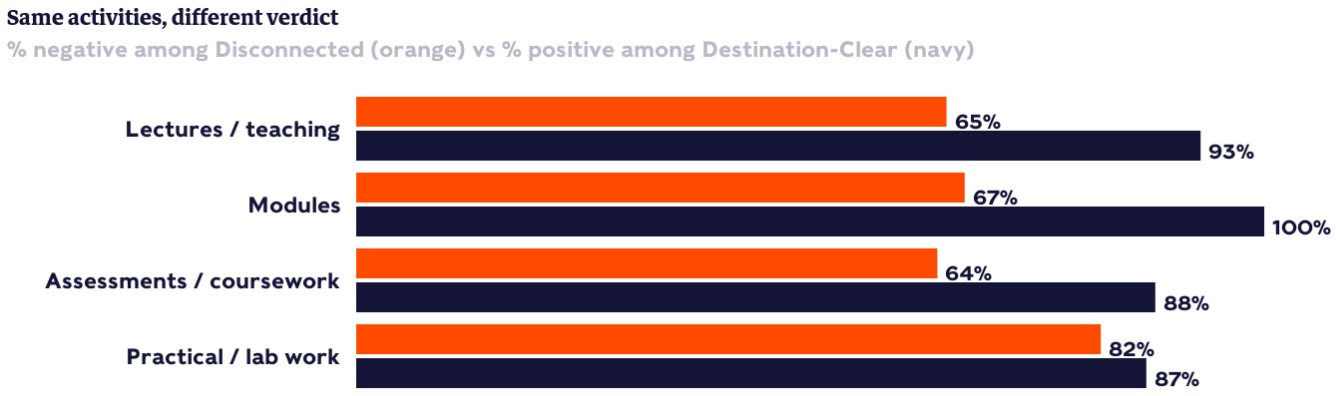
unresponsive voice mechanisms. Whichever way the causation runs, the two are experienced together.

The vocational difference

Within each career group, the experience measures are very similar regardless of course type. Vocational courses don't protect against disconnection so much as produce fewer disconnected students in the first place (8.7 per cent versus 14.1 per cent) – not because vocational lecturers are better at teaching skills, but because vocational degree structures include placements, professional registration pathways and a visible career endpoint that academic degrees typically don't.

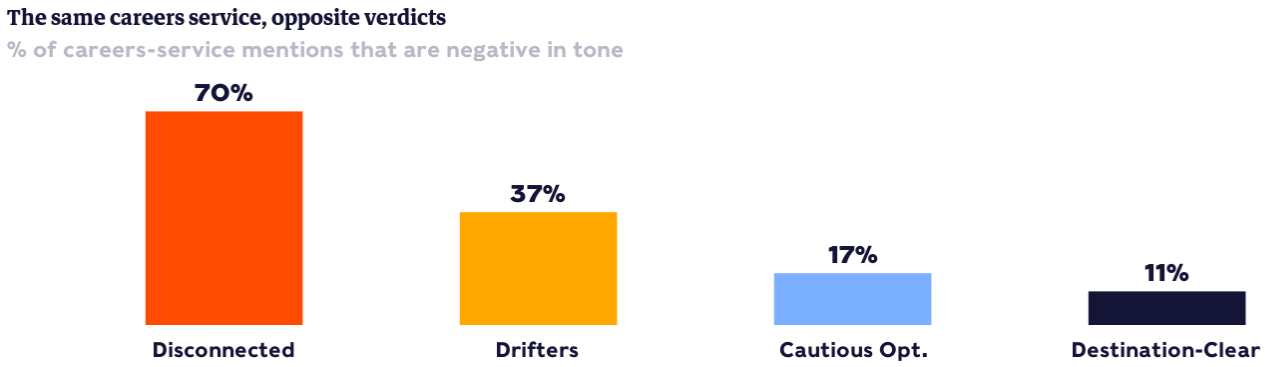
Same activities, different verdict

Sentiment coding of activity mentions produces a clear typology. The core academic activities – lectures, modules, assessments, practical work – are simultaneously what the Disconnected blame and what the Destination-Clear credit.



Placements are 85–94 per cent positive in the top two groups, and dedicated employability modules are overwhelmingly positive. With careers services, sentiment is graded by career confidence itself. Among the Disconnected who mention a careers service, around 70 per cent are negative in tone; among Drifters, 37 per cent; among Cautious Optimists, 17 per cent; among the Destination-Clear, 11 per cent.

The same service is described as a failure by the disconnected and a help by the confident – which tells us less about the service than about who reaches it, and reinforces a counterfactual problem: measuring impact by surveying participants tells you that relatively career-confident students found careers activities helpful, not that the activities caused the confidence.



What the bottom groups ask for

Among academic Disconnected and Drifter students who gave a free-text response, what they complain about or request is practical experience and real-world application, guidance on where the degree leads, and access to placements and internships. They rarely ask for a skills module or an employability module – even with the coding frame broadened to "skills training," "employability content" and "embed employability," such requests barely register across the bottom groups. Students ask their lecturers to tell them what their degree is for; they don't ask for their discipline teaching to be retrofitted with employability content.

> "It would be helpful if they could offer or help with placements – give a list of available ones that relate to my course."
> "I need help building a roadmap but no one seems to want to help with that."

Three tiers of provision

An emerging question in the sector is how career preparation should sit within the degree structure. The qualitative data maps onto three tiers, each with different reach.

- Tier one: how the discipline is taught. Whether lectures connect content to professional application, whether assessments develop workplace skills, whether lecturers can explain where the subject leads. This dominates student accounts across all four groups – it's where both the credit and the blame sit, and it requires no self-selection.
- Tier two: credited but separate from discipline teaching. Dedicated employability modules, professional practice modules, credited placements and credited work experience that sit within the degree structure but aren't the discipline teaching itself. Tier two is barely mentioned by the Disconnected, much more often by the Destination-Clear, and is overwhelmingly positive when present. Because it's credited, it reaches beyond self-selectors.

- Tier three: entirely optional. 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. That is the counterfactual problem again: the students reporting benefit are disproportionately those who were already confident.

The critical structural point is reach. Tier one reaches every student in a lecture. Tier two reaches every student whose degree requires it. Tier three reaches only those who seek it out. The Disconnected and Drifters – just over a third of the sample – are overwhelmingly describing failures in tier one and the absence of tier two, not the absence of tier three. And the students who most need career preparation are, by the relational logic above, exactly the ones least able to self-select into optional provision.

Three propositions

Departmental beats central

Across all four career groups, students frame their career preparation in terms of their course, their lecturers and their department. This holds for both credit and blame. When careers services are mentioned by the lower groups, the access problem is structural: "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." When people who work in careers services report that students don't turn up, they're describing the symptom. The question isn't why students don't attend, but why the provision requires attendance in the first place.

If it's credited, it's better

The credited separate provision that top-group students describe – placement years, professional practice modules, credited internships – reaches students because they have to do it, or see credit-based value in it. A history degree that includes 20 credits of credited work experience reaches every history student. A history degree that relies on an optional careers fair doesn't.

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

The degree, not the module

When students in the top groups describe what worked, they describe placements, professional modules and their own career clarity – not their history lecturer

adding a skills exercise to the Tudor module. And when students in the bottom groups describe what's missing, they ask for placements, guidance and practical experience, not employability content inside their discipline teaching.

This suggests the emerging approach of "injecting" employability into existing academic modules is solving a problem students don't have. The history professor should teach excellent history and be able to explain where it leads. What should change isn't the content of the modules but the structure of the degree – whether it includes credited work experience, surfaces destination data, and supports a disciplinary student community. Students aren't asking their lecturers to teach differently. They're asking their degree to include more.

Who owns this?

Central careers services

Barely visible to the lower groups, and negatively framed when it is. Even in the top groups the language is additive – the foundation is always the course. Central services carry specialist expertise – labour market translation, employer-facing infrastructure, application and interview support – but this is most effective deployed through departments rather than from a central drop-in that the students who most need it never find.

Course teams

This is where students overwhelmingly locate their experience. The course team's job isn't to teach skills in place of the discipline – it's to design a degree structure that includes credited professional experience alongside excellent discipline teaching, and to make sure lecturers can explain where the subject leads.

Student associations

Almost mandatory across much of European higher education but rare in the UK as an institutionally supported structure, especially around careers. The association with career confidence is strong: students who mention a disciplinary student structure – a course society, cohort network, departmental peer group – carry a subject-controlled career preparation residual larger than the postgraduate or maturity effects.

The presence and absence of these structures shows up vividly, from "I am lucky to be part of the committee for the student-led Psychology society, which has strong links with the school" among the Destination-Clear, to "the law school was isolating and there was no community" among the Disconnected. Students are already building these networks informally – "if we are a community it's through our own

efforts rather than efforts of the departments" – without recognition or resource. If belonging, as this analysis suggests, produces career confidence rather than trailing behind it, giving these structures institutional backing and a stated career-development function could reach students that no other provision currently reaches.

What Europe already does

Two of this report's conclusions – that credited provision reaches students optional provision misses, and that disciplinary student associations connect belonging to career confidence – are not hypothetical. Both are ordinary across much of European higher education. The examples below are drawn from the Wonkhe SUs European study tour. The legal standing, constitutional mandate and operating budgets that let these bodies work at scale do not transfer wholesale to the UK – but the design principles do.

Case study: careers, run by students at subject level

Across much of northern Europe the unit that runs careers activity is the subject, not the institution. At the University of Antwerp, careers work runs on two tracks – a central Career Week and a parallel programme run by subject associations – and students told the study tour they were far more likely to take part in events run by other students, so most careers engagement happens through the subject associations rather than the central service. The mechanism isn't preference alone: peers are trusted to understand what students actually need, and the format is calibrated by the students who designed it.

These are not small events. At KTH Stockholm the computer science chapter runs D-Dagen, a single-discipline careers fair with over 100 companies, alongside Framtidsveckorna, in which each subject chapter runs its own fair. At ETH Zürich individual subject Fachvereine run their own recruiting fairs – VIS's Kontaktparty alone draws around 100 companies – on top of the union-wide one. The University of Iceland has over 60 subject associations running their characteristic vísindaferðir company visits, and Stockholm's law students' association runs Juristdagarna, the largest legal careers fair in the Nordic region, with 2,500 visitors. Careers partnering with academics matters – but this is careers partnering with students, at the level of the discipline, and it reaches students a central service never touches.

Case study: credit the lecture theatre doesn't own

The tier-two argument – credited provision that sits inside the degree but isn't discipline teaching – is routine in European systems, and often attaches to exactly the roles that build a disciplinary community. The University of Twente offers a 15-

ECTS minor in the governance of student organisations for association board members, and issues a rector-signed recognition certificate for board and committee service. Dublin City University's Uaneen module credits extracurricular engagement and records it on the degree parchment. The University of Luxembourg awards 10–15 ECTS through a Certificate in Student Engagement and Leadership. Others credit mentoring directly: Iceland's Sprettur mentors earn 5 ECTS and are trained as academic mentors, and several Finnish institutions award ECTS for peer tutoring and for volunteering in student associations.

What these share is that the credit is owned by the institution and attaches to roles that genuinely contribute to the academic mission – governance, mentoring, service learning – rather than being bolted onto a discipline module. It is the practical answer to "the degree, not the module": credit that the lecture theatre doesn't own.

Case study: placements written into the architecture

Where the UK treats the credited placement largely as a feature of vocational degrees, several European systems build it into the standard shape of any degree. Finland's universities of applied sciences carry five months of mandatory work experience as standard; most Hungarian bachelor's degrees run seven semesters with the final one given over to an internship; Škoda Auto University requires a paid 20-week placement; the University of Luxembourg requires every bachelor's student to complete a semester abroad to graduate.

And where degrees are not vocational, students' unions are making the case to add it: Uppsala's "What Will You Become?" report on humanities and theology graduates – 45 per cent of whom took over three months to find work, and a third of whom had no internship during their studies – calls for an independent internship semester built into every programme. That is the tier-two fix, argued by an SU, for precisely the academic and generalist degrees this report is most concerned about.

Recommendations

University leadership

Over a third of students are in the bottom two career-confidence groups, and this isn't a problem a better careers service can solve. It requires rebalancing where career preparation sits – from optional central provision to credited degree-level provision, and from institutional ownership to departmental ownership with student-association involvement.

Audit degree programmes against the three tiers above: if the balance is heavily weighted to tier three, provision is structurally unlikely to reach the students who most need it. Two groups warrant specific attention. The disability gap (–0.19 residual, 33 per cent of the Disconnected) isn't explained by subject choice and can't be met by generic provision. And high international-postgraduate satisfaction should be treated as a warning rather than a reassurance, given the Graduate Outcomes trajectory for exactly that cohort.

Course teams and departments

The data doesn't say redesign your discipline modules to include skills exercises. It says design your degree structure to include credited professional experience alongside excellent discipline teaching – placements, professional practice modules, short work-integrated projects that appear in the degree regulations as requirements, not optional extras.

Lecturers should be able to explain where their subject leads. They shouldn't be asked to turn subject teaching into employability training – students aren't asking for that.

SUs and student associations

The 3.6-point career preparation gap between those who strongly agree and strongly disagree on community – controlling for subject – is larger than any demographic variable in the dataset, and belonging looks less like a companion to career confidence than its cause. Disciplinary student associations connect the belonging and career agendas directly.

A psychology society running alumni panels, a law society running case competitions with employer partners – these are structurally different from a central service running the same events with student helpers: discipline-specific by default, drawing students already in the community, and developing the organisers themselves.

Where student-facing roles in central services are being cut, investing in disciplinary student associations may be both more effective and longer-lasting. Representative systems should be reframed as developmental, not just representational.

Careers services

The data doesn't support a central service as primary owner of the career-preparation agenda, but the specialist expertise described above – reading the labour market, running employer relationships, supporting applications and

interviews – can't easily be replicated elsewhere in the institution, and works best deployed through departments and associations rather than from a central location.

Where budgets are under pressure, the counterfactual and self-selection problems above suggest reallocation rather than reduction – resources spent on central fairs and generic workshops are reaching students who were already relatively career-confident, and may do more good supporting departmental teams and disciplinary student associations to deliver career preparation inside the communities where students already are.

That means partnering in two directions at once: with academics, to embed provision in the programme; and with disciplinary student associations, to reach students through the peers they already trust. The European examples above suggest the second partnership is at least as powerful as the first, and the one UK careers services currently invest in least.