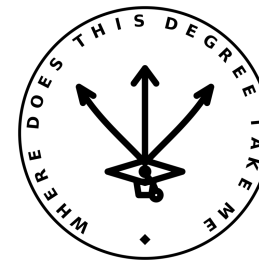




What SUs can do to help students get a job

What 18,590 students told us about career preparation – and where SUs hold the strongest levers.



Your students keep saying the same thing

No.1

priority vote

Greenwich

Students voted employability and graduate prospects the SU's biggest priority.

47%

of respondents

Falmouth & Exeter

Planning to find employment – or already struggling to find it.

1,500

students engaged

Royal Holloway

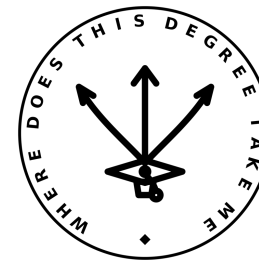
Expect the degree to equip them for work – and rate careers support as lacking.

1 of 3

strategic aims

Birmingham City

“You told us employability is one of the most important areas your SU should focus on.”



A falling premium – but only here

80%

premium over non-
graduates, 1999

45%

the same premium today

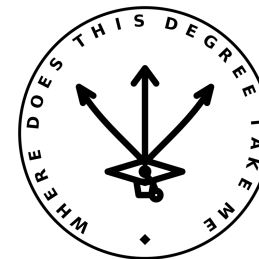
92%

US premium – rose as
numbers grew

58.8%

UK grads in non-
graduate jobs

And that 45 per cent is before loan repayments. The premium held or rose in the US, Canada, France, Spain and the Netherlands as participation grew – only Greece and Estonia have more graduates in non-graduate roles. Mass higher education didn't kill the premium anywhere else. This is a peculiarly British problem.



The demand side stalled – and policy misses it

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

Demand flatlined – growth in graduate skills requirements in the workforce slowed markedly after 2006.

Employers stopped investing – training spend per employee down 36 per cent in real terms since 2005.

The jobs moved – high-paying occupations grew 240 per cent in Inner London since 1993 – and 41 per cent in Cheshire.

WHAT THAT MEANS

Course closures – earnings data often measures the weakness of the local economy, not the quality of the course.

Cutting places – a supply-side answer to a demand-side problem. The countries that kept the premium paired expansion with skilled job creation.

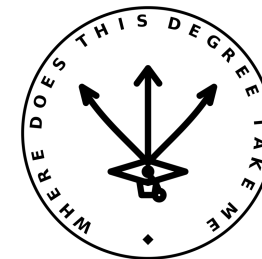
For today – park it. The next 40 minutes are about what is in reach – for universities, and for SUs.



What the students told us

Wonkhe/GTI polling – 18,590 students, nine waves, 178 providers, February 2023 to March 2026. One question: how far are your current activities preparing you for your future career?

THE HEADLINE



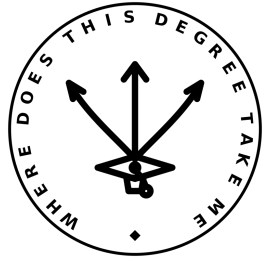
Over a third of students can't see where their degree leads

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

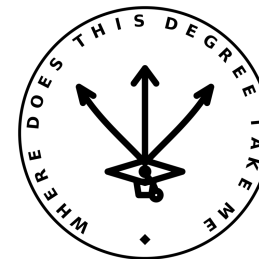
It works – but often through the student's own initiative.

28.2%

mean 9.61

Destination-Clear

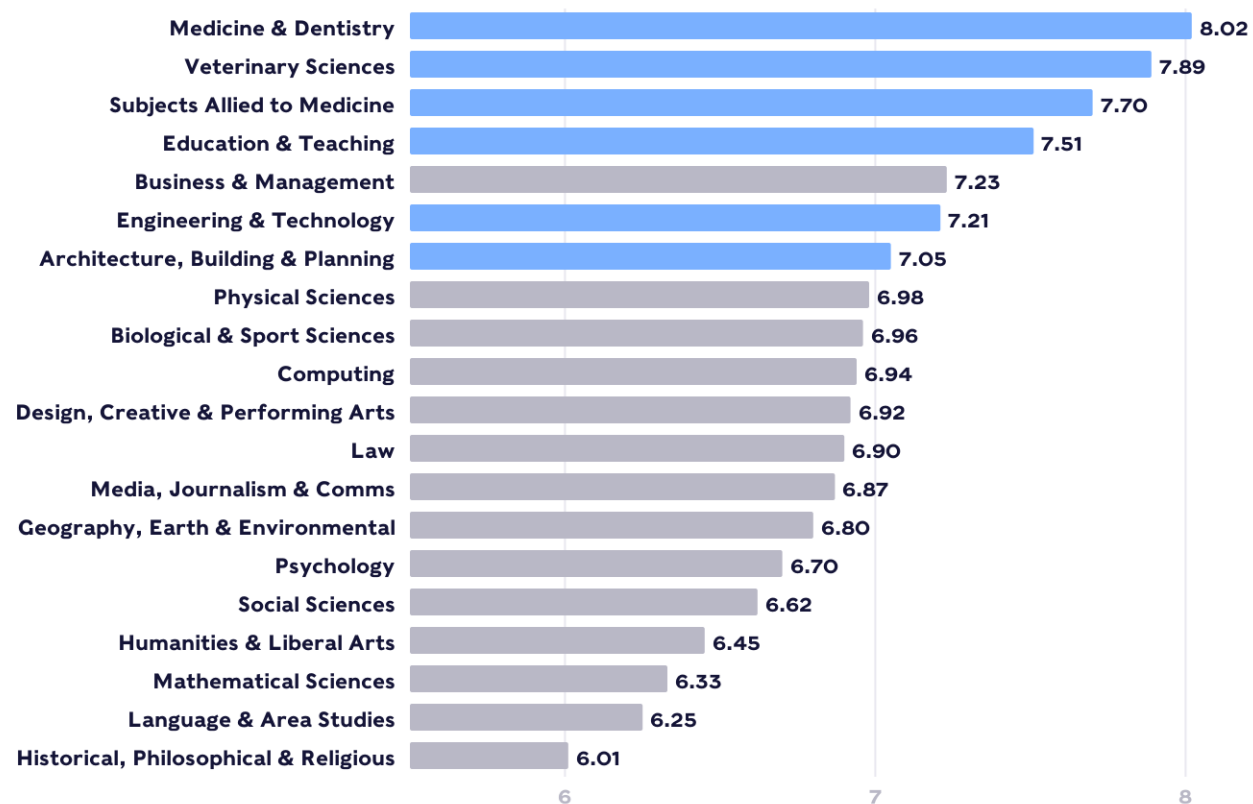
A different university: community, clarity and credited routes.



Subject matters – but so does where you study

Mean career-preparation score by subject

Vocational/professional subjects in blue

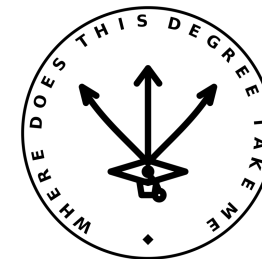


A two-point spread between subjects.

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.

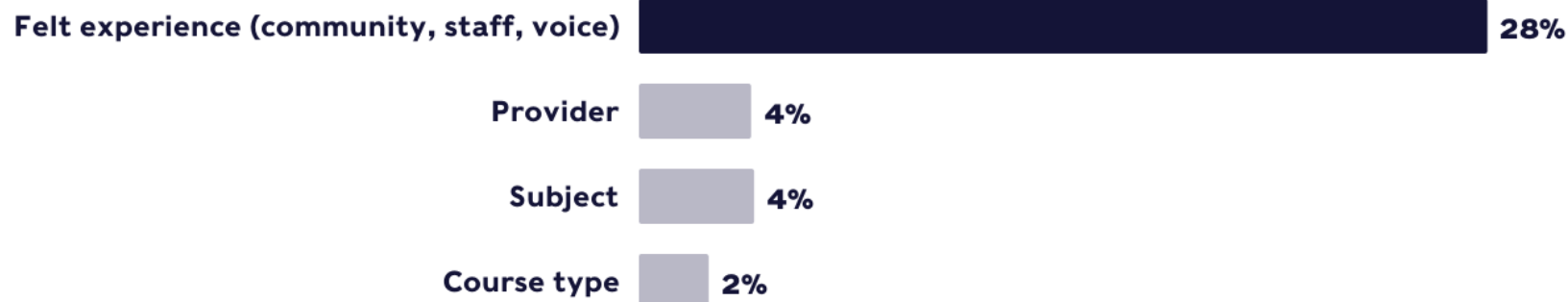
DRIVER 1



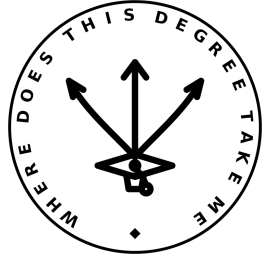
Career confidence is made socially, not structurally

How much of career confidence each factor explains

% of variance explained



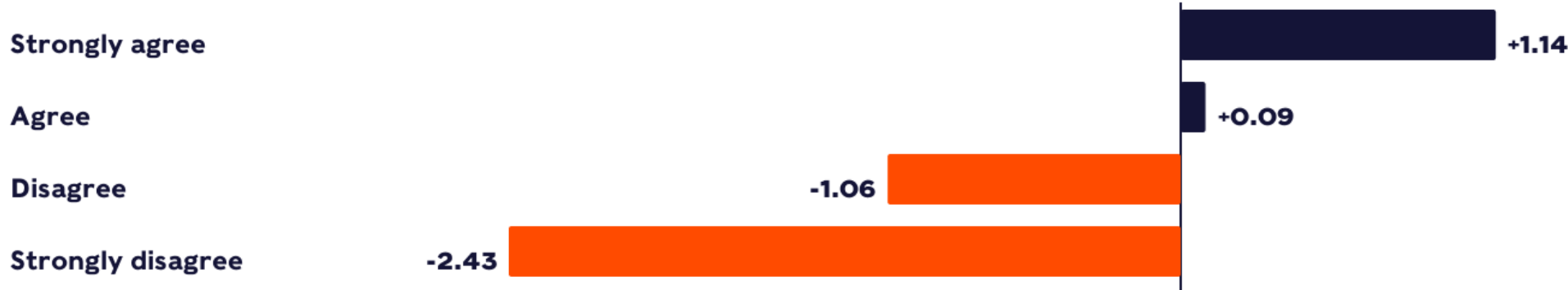
The strongest predictors are relational – whether a student feels part of a community and whether the course stretches them. Together they explain around seven times what subject or provider do.



Belonging moves career confidence more than anything else

Belonging and career preparation

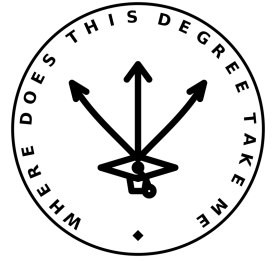
“I feel part of a community” – career residual, subject-controlled



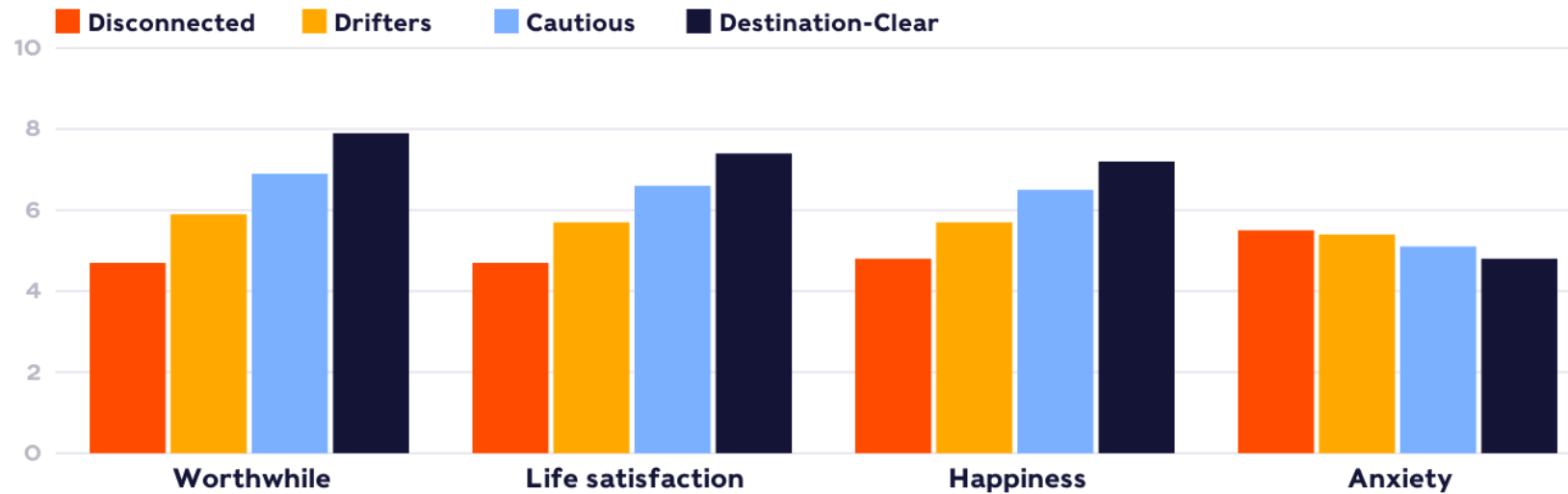
3.57-point swing – wider than any demographic variable

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.

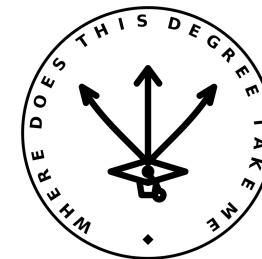
Career confidence tracks wellbeing



Wellbeing rises with career confidence (0–10)



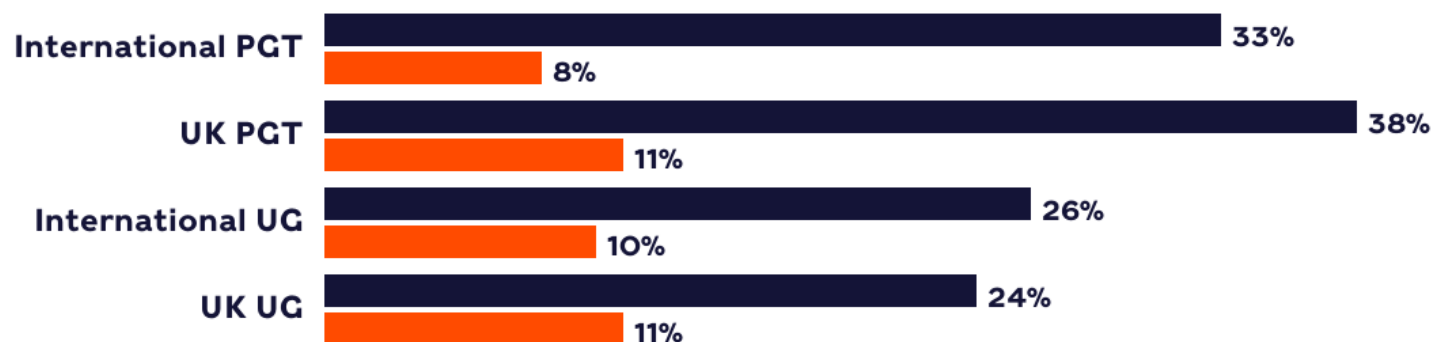
Career preparation correlates $r=0.45$ with feeling life is worthwhile and $r=0.42$ with life satisfaction. The gradient is about low purpose, not acute distress – anxiety runs the other way, but far more gently.



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.

THE PRINCIPLE

Reach beats richness



Tier one · how the discipline is taught

Reaches every student in a lecture

Tier two · credited placements & modules

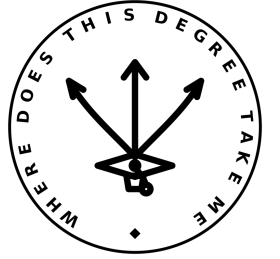
Reaches everyone the degree requires

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.

PROPOSITION 1



Departmental beats central

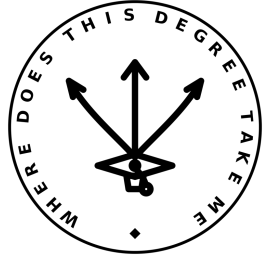
“

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

“

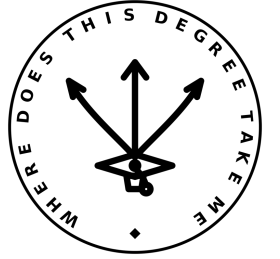
I'm taking a module called Preparation for Placement and I'll be taking a placement year – these things are giving me the skills that will prepare me for my future career.

— 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.

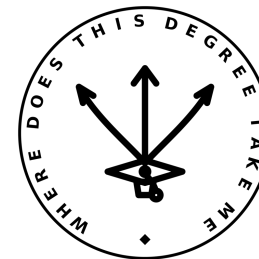
But students in the bottom groups almost never ask for this.

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.

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



“But careers services already do this”

WHAT'S TRUE

Embedded work is real – many careers teams already broker placements, shape assessment and work through academics – invisibly, which is partly the point.

Specialist expertise matters – labour-market intelligence, employer liaison, applications, interviews – no course team or SU replicates that.

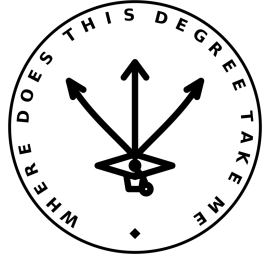
Nobody is arguing for cuts – the case is reallocation towards reach, not reduction.

WHAT FOLLOWS

Deployment, not replacement – an adviser embedded in the school of humanities beats the same adviser in a drop-in centre history students never find.

Partnership with SUs – a psychology society careers panel with specialist support beats a generic central event with student helpers.

Reach is the test – the students who most need career preparation are the least likely to self-select into optional provision.



Whose gift is which

In the university's gift

Credit-bearing work experience in every subject. Employer involvement in programme design. Destination data surfaced by every programme – alumni panels, handbooks that say where graduates go. Provision that starts in year one, not year three. Qualification documents that record more than modules.

In the SU's gift

The belonging machinery – societies, reps, cohort networks. Real work in venues, events and committees. The articulation layer that names what all of it develops. And the demand function – lobbying for everything in the left-hand column.



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

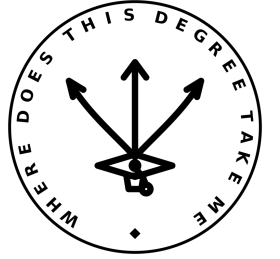
+3.57

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.

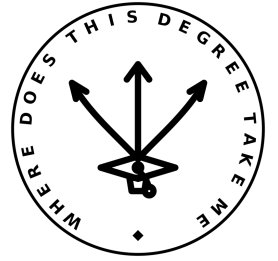
Europe already runs this at scale

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.

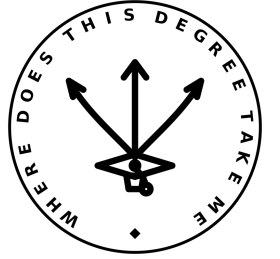
Competitions & fairs at scale

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.”

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.

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



Design for the students who get missed

WHO GETS MISSED

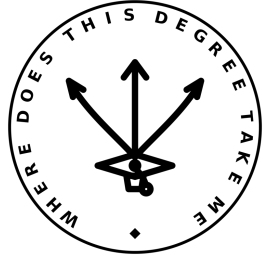
Disabled students – 29 per cent of the Disconnected, a gap no control explains. Students working 21+ hours in paid jobs score below those working none. WP and estranged students undervalue what they've already done.

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

If provision relies on uncompensated time, it widens the gap it claims to close.

DESIGN ANSWERS

Tier the engagement – intensive roles for some, short documented involvement for the rest. Pay where you can. Treat paid work and caring as career capital that needs naming, not obstacles to the “real” offer.



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



Put SU work on the official record

	Section 6.1	The Diploma Supplement space European unis use to record officer, rep and volunteer roles
	90-hour threshold	TUM's standard – three credits' worth of verified work. A sabb year is roughly 1,600 hours
	Records, not exams	Verified accounts of what students actually did – not standardised soft-skills tests
	SU verification	Returning officer certifies the role, committees confirm membership, activity logs show hours
	Employers use it	90 per cent of European HR professionals use these documents – the UK signed up, then drifted

The infrastructure already exists in most institutions. Using it is a registry conversation, not a capital project – a campaign waiting to happen.



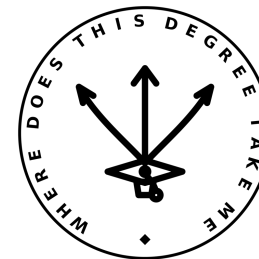
For international students specifically

Inside the course

Embed employability in one-year PGT programmes – embedded students are satisfied at 75 per cent against 43. Start before arrival with offer-holder and pre-session content. Their confidence is highest exactly where outcomes are worst – design for the collision, not the promise.

Outside it

Educate employers – only 3 per cent have knowingly used the graduate route, and “we don’t sponsor” is usually a misunderstanding. Build alumni-to-student mentoring, the most effective support in the evidence. Keep support running through the graduate visa years.



Where to start on Monday

Audit

Map provision against the tiers

How much sits in tiers one and two – and how much is optional tier three that misses those who need it most?

Ask

Put the registry questions

Do we issue Diploma Supplements? Automatically or on request? What goes in section 6.1?

Name

Name skills in every role ad

“You’ll build negotiation skills through committee meetings” – not “a great way to get involved”.

Build

Give one society a careers function

Departmental support plus an alumni panel – then take the credit argument to academic board.



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.