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Citation: Ayliffe, L., Shah, A. & Yates, J. (2024). Boosting student engagement through a research-driven employability curriculum. *Phoenix*, 172, pp. 40-41.

This is the accepted version of the paper.

This version of the publication may differ from the final published version. To cite this item please consult the publisher's version.

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Boosting student engagement through a research-driven employability curriculum

Lucy Ayliffe, Anjali Shah and Julia Yates, City St George's, University of London

Over the past year, Lucy Ayliffe and Anjali Shah, Career Consultants at City St Georges, University of London have been working with Dr Julia Yates from the Psychology department, incorporating cutting-edge research into the employability curriculum. In this article, they share the research and how they applied its findings to work with current students.

Frustrated that existing research didn't offer a clear step-by-step model that explained how students go from 'I don't have any ideas' to 'I'm now working', Julia interviewed 30 recent graduates from a range of different disciplines and asked them to explain the steps involved. Their experiences are outlined in this five-stage model of real-world graduate career decision making:

- 1) **Pick a job that sounds ok:** Students' job ideas come from difference sources – an inspiring teacher, a TikTok video, or work experience. If nothing emerges from their experience they do some research, scanning job boards or attending careers events.
- 2) **Find out more:** With a single reasonably appealing occupation in mind, students find out more, through internet research, discussions with people in that field or work experience.
- 3) **Think about whether it would suit:** The students then analyse whether the job would suit them considering what they would enjoy and what they might be good at. If the job feels like a reasonable match, they move on to step 4. If it doesn't, they go back to step 1 and find another job idea.
- 4) **Apply:** The application process can be a useful way to find out more. It allows students to meet the sorts of people they would be working with, find out more about specific organisations, and get a sense of how they treat their staff.
- 5) **Decide:** Once they have a job offer, the students make a decision. Most do this quite passively (*If they've offered me a job, it must be right for me*) and sometimes take a job even when they don't feel completely committed.

As careers consultants, this model resonated. It is what we see in our students. It made sense to acknowledge how students naturally make choices and build on that, meeting them where they are rather than trying to force them into an alien, albeit 'better' approach. We felt the model had potential to equip students with lifelong career decision making skills.

Changing practice

Previously, our employability modules had broadly aligned with the stages of Law and Watts's Decisions, Opportunities, Transitions, Self (DOTS) model: we started with self-awareness, then opportunity awareness, then transition skills. This traditional approach assumes that understanding personal attributes will naturally lead to insights about career choices. However, Julia's model challenges this assumption, suggesting that a focus on self-awareness may not be particularly fruitful at the start

of the process. Students may be able to identify traits such as 'good communication skills' or 'being a team player', but without a frame of reference – without a specific job in mind – these terms remain vague and somewhat meaningless.

Working with our Psychology, Politics, English and Communications Studies programmes, we adapted our approach, structuring our modules like this:

- 1) **Pick a job that sounds ok:** We identified a handful of alumni from each course, shared information about their jobs and employers, and invited the students to select one.
- 2) **Find out more:** The students did some research, using the person's LinkedIn profile to find out about their role and previous experiences. They got hold of a live job description for a similar position.
- 3) **Think about whether it would suit:** Looking at the job description, the students were asked to consider how they would feel about doing the job, what they would like and dislike and what they might be good at. They developed an action plan, identifying steps to make themselves attractive to potential employers.
- 4) **Apply:** For the module assessment, the students produced a job application. Once they had decoded the job description and reflected on themselves in that context, we asked them to consider what the employer might want to hear and what they might want to impart. They submitted a tailored CV and a short reflection on their learning and next steps.

Assessing the impact

We know that in-depth career exploration takes time, and it's not always easy to get first and second-years to engage, so we were delighted to see our new approach improve student motivation. Making the self-awareness sessions more tangible and less abstract increased student engagement with the exercises. With a direct link to an actual job, the students seemed more motivated to deeply reflect on these traits and found it easier to identify and move on to their next steps. A student explained *"It's so abstract to think about your skills usually and that makes it really difficult to engage – but if you start with something tangible – looking at what the job is day to day – it makes it real."*

We compared students' scores before and after the sessions, looking specifically at their career planning skills (which went from an average of 3.1/5 before the sessions to 3.8/5 afterwards), their career decision making difficulties (which reduced from 3.2 to 2.5) and their job seeking skills (up from 2.0 to 2.8). The module marks went up too, the students had really understood what a job description means and how to tailor an application.

Other benefits stemmed from the confidence and respect we gained from delivering research-driven content. It felt as though drawing on a 'model' convinced the students that the content was going to be genuinely helpful, giving us and our sessions inbuilt credibility. Apart from anything else, it was great to give

ourselves the time to really think and be more student-centred, redefining what we wanted the students to learn and how we wanted to present it.

Next Steps

We enjoyed this approach and have since used it for our graduate bootcamp, which gained positive feedback. We are also adapting it for 1:1 interventions where appropriate. Testing this approach has sparked discussions on how to help students better understand jobs and job descriptions; our pilot confirmed that grasping different roles remains a significant challenge for them. We have also been thinking about using other theories and frameworks. This approach has highlighted the confidence and credibility we can gain from drawing on external models. It would be great to hear from anyone who has tried something similar.

Contact details

Anjli.shah@city.ac.uk; Julia.yates.1@city.ac.uk