

## Lessons in Readiness: Self-Determination and Student Agency in Careers, Employability, and Success

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Career Readiness, Employability, Employability readiness, Agency, Self-determination theory

Many university careers services sit structurally within the broad family of “Student Success”, but in practice, their strategic drivers often look quite different. While university student success strategies often claim to be focused on the student’s holistic journey into and through the university, then out into the world, careers services’ success in supporting students’ transition out is often reduced to data measuring and judged by the outcome of that journey in terms of work or further study after graduation (e.g., Gasevic et al., 2019; Knox, 2017). Consequently, careers services can find themselves unwittingly trapped within a contradiction. On one hand, they are existentially motivated to support the student’s individual journey and the diversity of their future outcomes. On the other hand, they—and the student—are judged on the nature of those outcomes. This contradiction has—in the United Kingdom (UK) at least—led to some important and innovative approaches by university careers services to enabling students’ agency through their readiness to progress on that journey. But I think those approaches also surface some important questions with relevance to all student services about what we mean when we talk about *agency*.

### *Who is in the room?*

Student engagement is a common priority for all teams within the Student Success family. Wherever we work, we might sometimes feel that we only see students when they are in crisis or reacting to a difficult situation. Over the last 15 years or so in the UK, university careers services have explored various ways to increase student engagement and move away from the “crisis footing”. This has included deployment of the *Career Readiness* model. Career Readiness is based on the idea that we all go on a journey of self-discovery to find out what is meaningful to us in terms of work, and to make decisions about what we want our working lives to look like. While there are many reasons why students might come to university, the majority will at some point after graduation start, rejoin, or continue in a workplace—hopefully one of their choosing. Career Readiness models propose to the student that this journey has stages through which they will progress while at university. At King’s College London, where I was Head of Careers & Employability, I developed a Careers Readiness journey model called *Discover – Focus – Action*. The model’s stages are defined in Table 1.

**Table 1***Career Readiness and Employability Readiness Learning Journey, King's College London 2017*

	DISCOVER	FOCUS	ACTION
<b>CAREERS:</b> Who am I and where am I going?	I'm uncertain about who/what I might become? What's out there for me?	I've got some ideas now but need to learn and explore more to help me choose what's right for me.	I've got a really good understanding of myself and have a plan to put into action.

Research has shown that students in the stage of highest readiness with a career plan when they graduate are much more likely to enter a meaningful, high-quality job after graduation (Shury et al., 2017; Cobb, 2019). Everyone with a stake in this conversation might agree that we all want this to be the case. Consequently, careers services have built highly sophisticated strategies to enable this outcome, which also recognise that there are barriers to student engagement when activities to support career planning occur outside the curriculum. Those barriers might be time, other responsibilities, confidence, or barriers created by exclusion in various forms. So, one key pillar of these careers service strategies is often the embedding of career development learning in curriculum: all students must engage with that learning because it is taking place in a structurally unavoidable and structurally inclusive part of their university experience. That does not remove all barriers, particularly if curriculum delivery is itself not inclusive (Manoharan, 2021), but it does address many of them.

But in many universities, getting time in curriculum for what is sometimes perceived by academic partners as “non-academic” content can be very difficult. So, in the UK, university careers services have recognised that it would also be useful to know which students have lower Career Readiness. Not only can they then target their extra-curricular services and resources to those students, but they can also take an evidence-led case to academic partners for finding space in curriculum. In almost 100 universities in the UK, this is achieved by asking all students during the annual degree programme registration process about where they are on their Career Readiness journey (Gilworth & Thambar, 2013). This approach has become dominant in the UK, not simply because of the usable data it generates but also as a consequence of having a mandated graduate outcomes survey (GOS). The GOS judges universities—and by extension, implicitly careers services—on the quality of graduate employment. Funding and even institutional existence are linked to that outcomes data, so it has become a very high-stakes situation. Some UK universities have proved that Career Readiness data is a predictor of graduate outcomes data (Cobb et al, 2019), which while helpful strategically and operationally also embeds the dependency on student Career Readiness.

This situation also creates some tension when we think about student agency. On one hand, careers services now have enormous capability to build data-led strategies that are genuinely intended to be student-centred. At King's College London, for example, our entire service strategy and delivery was structured around the student's chosen starting point on their Career Readiness journey, and many other UK careers services do something similar. On the other hand, that is not the same as centralising the student in such a way that they own their agency and experience. Owning their agency and experience might actually mean they don't want to graduate into a meaningful, high-quality job, and that their goal is very different to ours in the institution.

### ***Tell me what you want, what you really, really want...***

We could look at this conundrum through the lens of Self-Determination Theory (SDT) and the four levels of intrinsic and extrinsic motivation defined by Ryan and Deci (2000). While these have been applied to students' academic experience—and so are incredibly useful for understanding and enabling student success—I think there is a useful way in which we might also look at careers services and Career Readiness through this lens too. In Table 2, I have shown Ryan and Deci's four levels and simplified definitions, with the highest level of self-determination at the top (adapted from Ryan and Deci, 2000; Bureau et al, 2021).

**Table 2**

*Ryan and Deci's Four Levels of Motivation*

<b>Level of motivation</b>	<b>Simplified definition</b>
Intrinsic	Inherent enjoyment and interest
Extrinsic-identified	Personally important and meaningful
Extrinsic-introjected	Motivation to participate in order to avoid feelings of shame or guilt, or to assert pride
Extrinsic-external	Involvement driven by factors outside individual control

In both holistic student success terms, and specifically from the point of view of the student's career journey, we are aspiring to students being intrinsically motivated, or at least recognising that in both intrinsic and extrinsic/identified states they are autonomously motivated (Bureau et al., 2021, p. 48). Autonomy is one of the three psychological needs that are key to our everyday lives and are core to enabling self-determined motivation. Careers services might propose that high Career Readiness sits at this stage, with the student saying, "I know what job I want", as seen in Table 3. This is student agency in its purest sense because neither the sector regulator nor the university nor the careers service is defining what that job actually is nor its "quality".

**Table 3**

*Career Readiness Applied to Ryan and Deci's Four Levels of Motivation: Student Agency*

<b>Level of motivation</b>	<b>Simplified definition</b>	<b>Application to Career Readiness</b>
Intrinsic	Inherent enjoyment and interest	"I know what job I want."  (High Career Readiness)
Extrinsic-identified	Personally important and meaningful	

But lurking in the two lower levels of motivation are the careers services' own motivations which are driven by the regulatory and institutional pressures. At the extrinsic/introjected level, we can hear the student being told, "You need to get a job!" to avoid shame or failure, and the careers

service thinking, “We need you to get a job ...”. And that is driven from the very bottom up by the extrinsic/external state(ment): “Graduates need jobs”.

I think other Student Success teams would recognise a version of the extrinsic/introjected level too: “You need to complete your degree!”; “We need you to complete your degree ...”. So, from the perspective of any Student Success teams creating strategies to enable students to achieve these outcomes, the extrinsic/external and extrinsic/introjected states are unavoidable drivers. I don’t think we can be blamed for figuring out how to respond to them. However, when we see it structured like this (Table 4), we can see the stark differentiation between the drivers for the service (in the bottom two rows) and the motivation and agency for the student (in the top two). It’s not that careers services don’t innately share, support, and enable those top two rows, any more than any student services professional isn’t entirely focused on enabling the student to achieve their definition of success. It is simply that institutional strategy is not the same thing as individual aspiration.

**Table 4**

*Career Readiness Applied to Ryan and Deci’s Four Levels of Motivation: Student Agency and Institutional Drivers*

Level of motivation	Simplified definition	Application to Career Readiness
Intrinsic	Inherent enjoyment and interest	“I know what job I want.” (High Career Readiness)
Extrinsic-identified	Personally important and meaningful	
Extrinsic-introjected	Motivation to participate in order to avoid feelings of shame or guilt, or to assert pride	“You need to get a job!”/“We need you to get a job ....”
Extrinsic-external	Involvement driven by factors outside individual control	“Graduates need jobs.”

### ***Not just who you know, but what you can do***

SDT does, though, throw us a lifeline here if we think not only about autonomy but also about the other two psychological needs identified by Ryan and Deci in their model (2000): *relatedness* and *competence*. Students who experience relatedness will have a sense of connection with those such as teachers and peers in their academic environment whom they see as important. We can apply this idea very effectively to students’ exploration of their career choices and successful application for, and transition into, work. When they feel connected to important figures (role models, network connections, alumni, or even specific businesses) in their chosen future workplace environment, they will feel motivated to engage and pursue those goals. That will undoubtedly feed their intrinsic and extrinsic/identified states and thus their Career Readiness will be higher: they have something (in the form of someone) that they want to move on to.

In the academic success context, students who experience competence have confidence that the actions they take have a positive impact on their academic experience. However, in the context of the transition to a meaningful career outcome of their choice, this is not simply about career management skills like writing a good CV or doing a good interview. Just as in the academic context, this should mean the whole range of knowledge, attributes, skills, and experience that they

have accumulated. In the transition to a career outcome, this includes accumulation from their academic, extra-curricular, working, and life journeys. We could call this accumulation of assets “employability” (Daubney, 2022), which I sometimes think is a term that is only really used in universities, and sometimes only fully understood in their careers services. But the existence and accumulation of those assets is real, their impact is felt lifelong, and they are a fundamental enabler to achieving our goals at all levels of motivation, whether in work or not. I think, therefore, that employability can be understood as competence in the context of SDT. But I also propose that we need to see it differently to Career Readiness.

Firstly, Career Readiness as the journey of self-discovery is bespoke to the individual and is generally focused on values, motivations, and interests. As such, Career Readiness does not measure the accumulation of the assets that make up employability nor the individual’s self-awareness of that accumulation, so we need a separate way of thinking about Employability Readiness. At King’s College London, I developed a parallel readiness journey to Career Readiness which had the same three stages, as shown in Table 5.

**Table 5**

*Employability Readiness Learning Journey, King’s College London 2017*

	DISCOVER	FOCUS	ACTION
<b>EMPLOYABILITY:</b> Who am I and where am I going?	I’m not aware of what I have to offer, or how my degree is going to help with my future	I’m beginning to understand how my knowledge, attributes, skills and experience support my future options and what I might need to develop	I’m confident in identifying what knowledge, attributes, skills and experience I have developed through what I study and do, and articulating what is relevant

But there are two key factors which I think make the Employability Readiness journey very different to the Career Readiness journey. Firstly, research into the neuroscience of the teenage brain has made it very clear that when young people lack experience of something, they will find it more difficult to make decisions (Blakemore, 2018). While Professor Blakemore’s research has focused principally on areas like risky behaviours, there are enormous implications for any work in Student Success teams that relates to decision-making for students in the 18–23 age group.<sup>1</sup> In the career planning context, this explains why there is so much emphasis on the role of internships and work experience in career exploration. However, we need to be very clear that even such experiences offer a very limited opportunity for students to develop enough insight to impact big decisions like which sectors or jobs they want to apply for. This means that making a career decision is imbued with a great deal of uncertainty, and that even perceived certainty is only relative to the experience the student has at the time they make their decision.

The other factor is—as many of us have experienced personally—that career decision-making is cyclic. We explore our options, narrow them down, make a decision, and either enter a job and start

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<sup>1</sup> Teenage neuroscience does not, of course, apply to the mature student. Colleagues may find it interesting to read about Brammar and Wilkinson’s Career Stage Framework (2022) which addresses aspects of this difference.

that cycle all over again when we choose our next job, or we doubt ourselves completely and start the process again to consider something new. But the development of the assets of employability—knowledge, attributes, skills, and experience—continues in a linear fashion all the time. We just keep gaining more and more of it. So, we can have a situation readily arise where a student has very high Employability Readiness and knows exactly what they offer an employer, but very low Career Readiness because they don't know what job they want to do.

Furthermore, as Bureau et al. (2021) discovered, competence is “the strongest predictor of self-determined motivation” (p. 49). So, in the context of the student journey to graduate employment, we could interpret competence as students who are aware of, and can articulate to employers, the value and relevance of the knowledge, attributes, skills and experience accumulated through their education and other experiences. Such students are likely to be very highly motivated and confident to enter the employment market—as well as being very competent to do so—even if they don't actually know what they want to do. But once they are in the market and working, their Career Readiness will increase as they learn more about what they enjoy and value.

So, what does all this mean for careers service and Student Success strategies?

### ***Needs-driven, not just engagement-driven***

I would argue, therefore, that we should think about strategies that are needs-driven and not just engagement-driven. Engagement-driven strategies like Career Readiness strategies rely on the student to engage with the aspiration of having a career plan and, thus, with the services we offer to enable that. In addition to the challenges I outlined above, we cannot assume that all students are ready or even able to have a career plan. There might be many barriers to them developing that, such as social, environmental, economic, domestic or technological (see, for example, Gati et al., 1996; Daubney, 2023), making it very difficult for them to look at “graduate work” in the same way as the university and a regulator. We cannot allow that to be a barrier to them entering work feeling competent and confident that they are employable and have something to offer in work; that is all about the needs of the student and graduate. Whether they have a career plan or not, the majority of students and graduates will need to work, so an Employability Readiness strategy is a needs-driven strategy to enable that.

Something that the two strategies have in common is the role of curriculum in developing that readiness and the importance of that as inclusive practice. Career Development Learning in curriculum is valuable and impactful where academics make it possible. However, I developed my extracted employability approach to show that all academic curriculum develops the assets of employability, even without specific additional activities and content being delivered (Daubney, 2021; Daubney, 2022). As educators and academics, we simply need to make sure students know what it is and how it happens. From the perspective of SDT, this is borne out by evidence from Bureau et al. (2021, p. 65) that teachers have a significant role to play in developing both student autonomy and competence. So, when we ask students to reflect constantly on their Employability Readiness journey—on how they are constantly developing their knowledge, attributes, skills and experience through curriculum—we create an ongoing state of self-awareness which is very empowering and enabling for the student, and supports their ability to identify and meet their own needs.

Career Readiness strategies have been transformational in the UK and, as more Australasian universities adopt Careers Registration processes and Career Readiness models, the impacts will continue to benefit students. But I would also encourage colleagues to address Employability

Readiness with equal strategic priority. This will empower all students to enter their Career Readiness journey embracing their uncertainty about themselves and what they want to do, with the confidence that they can also get a good job in which they can succeed. I believe this genuinely creates agency for the student: they are empowered and enabled to achieve what they want when they are ready to do so, and not when our institutional strategy would like them to.

And I think that matters because in a fluid and fast-changing workplace—where career paths are going to be multiple and simultaneous, where jobs will evolve and emerge quickly, where decisions may feel difficult to make or difficult to keep to, but in which graduates may not yet have enough experience to bridge the gap between their aspiration and their motivation—it is essential that they feel completely confident in their Employability Readiness as well.

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