

Conversations of Transition: Engaging Student and Alumni Voices in a Sustainable Career Ecosystem

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Introduction

This paper reports on a practice-based research project conducted at Queen's University Belfast to explore how student and alumni voices can be mobilised to support more effective and sustainable transitions from higher education to employment. Grounded in the framework of the Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory, the project investigated how engaging alumni through structured interactions, specifically informational interviews, can address persistent challenges experienced by students following nonlinear degree pathways, particularly within Arts, English, and language disciplines.

The project identified a set of common and interconnected challenges shaping students' career development. These included negative perceptions or limited recognition of the degree's value (stemming from current media discourse which influences public and, at times, students' perceptions); difficulties aligning academic study with job titles and labour market expectations; and a perceived lack of technical or sector-specific skills. Students also reported pressure to pursue careers directly related to their subject of

study, difficulty accessing tailored labour market information, geographic constraints associated with sector hubs, and limited time to engage in career planning. Together, these barriers contribute to uncertainty surrounding career identity formation and a lack of confidence in articulating transferable skills.

To address these issues, the project was grounded in the Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (Donald et al., 2024), which conceptualises careers as evolving within a system of interconnected actors across educational and workplace contexts. This perspective emphasises the importance of long-term, sustainable outcomes not only for individuals but also for organisations and society. Within this framework, alumni are positioned as key actors who can bridge the gap between higher education and employment by offering insights into career trajectories, skill utilisation, and adaptive strategies over time.

The project centered on informational interviews conducted by current undergraduate English Studies students with alumni of their English Studies course. These interviews were designed to maximize the insights provided by the alumni while

minimising time demands, and were conducted primarily online to overcome geographic barriers. The initiative had multiple aims: to expose students to a diverse range of career pathways, to help them understand the relevance of their degree to the workplace, and to support the development of career identity through reflective engagement. The alumni participants had graduated between 2–20 years earlier and represented a wide variety of professional roles, spanning marketing and communications, journalism, education, public relations, consultancy, auditing, the third sector, and self-employment. This diversity was intentionally leveraged to highlight nonlinear career trajectories and challenge narrow perceptions of degree outcomes.

Findings from alumni interviews underscored the breadth and transferability of skills developed through arts and humanities education. Alumni consistently identified key competencies they currently use in their workplace, including writing skills, the ability to adapt communication styles, research proficiency, critical thinking, and effective evaluation as being central to their professional success. Additional transversal skills included digital literacy, multitasking, business acumen, communication with clients, and collaborative working. Importantly, alumni emphasised that graduates themselves did not always immediately recognise these skills as valuable, suggesting a need for more support to help humanities students effectively articulate and translate academic learning into employability language.

Alumni also provided practical advice to students navigating the university to career transition. Key messages included the importance of gaining work experience, taking initiative, experimenting with and

exploring different opportunities, and maintaining an open mindset. Alumni highlighted industry networking and engagement with university career services as critical strategies, alongside reassurance that nonlinear pathways are both valid and common. This emphasis on agency and exploration aligns closely with the ecosystem perspective, which views careers as dynamic and adaptive rather than fixed entities.

Student reflections on the project indicated several positive outcomes. Participants reported significant gains in confidence, professionalism, and communication skills, as well as enhanced digital and interview competencies. Notably, students expressed increased confidence in recognising and articulating the value of their degree, with some highlighting that the experience provided them with a ‘vocabulary’ to describe their skills to employers. The process also contributed to greater clarity in career direction and reduced anxiety regarding pursuing nonlinear pathways.

Concurrently, students identified gaps in their career development. Key requirements included the need for more practical experience, improved access to labour market information, and further development of networking skills. Some students also recognised the need to develop competencies not highlighted within their degree programmes, such as teamwork and business acumen, particularly when industry specific. These insights suggest that while reflective, alumni-informed activities can enhance self-awareness and confidence, they should be complemented alongside structured opportunities for skills development and labour market engagement.

The research findings highlight several practical implications for higher education institutions seeking to support sustainable graduate transitions. First, integrating alumni

engagement into the student experience could be highly effective. This could take multiple forms, including guest lectures, mentorship programmes, case studies, and alumni-led workshops or micro-internships. Such initiatives would provide students with authentic insights into career pathways and facilitate the development of industry-relevant skills.

Second, the findings provide a strong case for incorporating alumni perspectives into curriculum design and review processes. Regular engagement with graduates could help ensure that courses remain responsive to changing labour market demands while reinforcing the long-term value of non-specialist disciplines. Collaborative projects involving alumni could further enhance experiential learning and bridge the gap between theory and practice.

Third, the project highlights the importance of sustaining alumni engagement beyond graduation as part of a broader ecosystem approach. Strengthening alumni networks could support ongoing knowledge exchange, expand opportunities for internships and placements, and contribute to the continued relevance and sustainability of disciplines such as English. Positioning the skills developed through these degrees as adaptable and essential within a dynamic labour market is critical to challenging deficit narratives and enhancing student confidence.

In conclusion, this research project demonstrated that structured engagement with alumni can play a significant role in supporting student transitions within a sustainable career ecosystem. By facilitating dialogue between current students and graduates, institutions can help individuals navigate uncertainty, recognise the value of their skills, and develop confident and adaptable career identities. The findings reinforce the need for holistic, systems-

based approaches to career development that extend beyond the classroom and across the lifespan of graduates.

References

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