

An Evaluation of the Finalist Programme: 2018-2022

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Contextual statement

This report was written to reflect upon and review the Finalist programme, to note changes that have already been made and what trends the extant data shows. It has been used to inform planning for the Access & Participation Plan (APP) 2024-2028. As part of the new APP, the Finalist programme has undergone a full review and refresh.

Executive Summary

The programme

The Finalist Programme, from 2018 to 2022, was an amalgam of initiatives aimed at raising the ambitions and skills of final year undergraduates, especially those from departments whose students were consistently less likely to progress to graduate level employment. The activities included a calling campaign, a simulated assessment centre, an online course, skills workshops and 1-2-1 coaching.

Main findings

The results of the programme were mixed.

On the positive side the calling campaign led to many students having their first interaction with the Careers department, greater focus on graduate success has seen employability considered more actively in departmental improvement plans, and those students who completed the simulated assessment centre and/or online course reported much higher levels of confidence.

On the negative side though, the indicators of success (Graduate Outcomes, Careers Exit Survey and Career Registration) have not consistently shown improvement, student involvement in the activities has been low, and has decreased further over the four years, and other aspects of evaluation were not embedded in the design of some of the activities. It is also fair to say that the graduate landscape has changed in the intervening years, so the activities as designed are no longer fully fit for purpose.

Conclusions/recommendations

It has been recommended that the programmes should be fundamentally redesigned to have a more inclusive set of aims, and be delivered in a way that allows those that need it the most – those who are time- and resource-poor – to access it. The new design needs to have evaluation built in from the beginning, to enable success to be understood.

Introduction

Rationale

In 2017/18 it was identified, through surveys completed on leaving the university, that many students were leaving their degrees unsure of what their next step would be. This was having a detrimental impact on the university's ranking in the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey, which asked graduates what they were doing six months after their course ended. This was particularly true of those from Widening Participation backgrounds¹ as there was a continuing gap between what those students were doing six months after graduation, compared to those who were not from these backgrounds.

The Finalist programme for undergraduate final year students was designed to 'level the playing field' between socio-economic groups with differing employability resources, through increasing engagement with career coaching and group career learning; developing a suite of learning resources including an online course; and collecting, using and responding to job search status data. The markers used to track progression of different groups at the time were Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD) and the participation of local area (POLAR) classification groups.

Interventions

The Finalist programme is actually a variety of interventions and activities, some of which operated every year, that were primarily targeted at students in departments which were performing, relatively, the worst in the DLHE survey results². These departments changed year by year.

The activities and interventions have included:

- *Simulated assessment centres*
These were events where students took part in a group exercise and an interview, designed to be similar to those held in graduate recruitment, and received detailed feedback on their performance. They were designed, organised, delivered and evaluated by an external organisation.
- *An online course (Careers Smart)*
Career Smart was an online course designed by the University's careers professionals and hosted on the FutureLearn platform. It was created as something that students could follow in the Summer before their final year, in order to prepare them for applications to graduate schemes in the Autumn Term. It was also made available to incoming Masters students, and to recent graduates

¹ Widening participation, as determined by the Office for Students, includes students from lower socio-economic backgrounds, ethnic minority, disability and mature status.

² DLHE was replaced by Graduate Outcomes for all graduates who completed a higher education course in the UK after August 2017. Graduate Outcomes looks at the graduate's position 15 months after course end.

during the pandemic. The platform had limitations, such as an inability to record student ID numbers, making the identification of users difficult for data analysis.

- *Calling campaigns aimed at students booking careers appointments*
Final year students who had not engaged with Careers activities were phoned by student workers, and encouraged to take part in careers activities, especially career appointments.
- *Workshops*
In person, and later online, events of up to 1.5 hours designed around developing interpersonal skills, such as leadership, and hints and tips for recruitment success. These were delivered by a variety of external specialists as a way of widening the expertise of the careers service.
- *Career coaching*
As an extension to the careers appointment provision, these sessions were designed to provide individuals with a series of coaching sessions, that would go beyond recruitment technique to areas such as self-efficacy, identifying motivations and values, and empowering independent action.

Context

This evaluation covers the academic years 2018/19, 2019/20, 2020/21 and 2021/22.

During this time the number of finalists (final-year undergraduate students) grew steadily from around 4,500 to around 5,000.

Link to Access & Participation Plan (APP)

This activity contributes to one of the APP aims (Objective 6, APP 2020-2025), to close the unexplained gaps in progression that correlate with disadvantaged backgrounds.

Methodology

Research questions

The research questions:

1. Does the finalist programme raise the ambitions of undergraduate finalists?
2. Does the finalist programme raise the skills and ability of undergraduate finalists?
3. Does the finalist programme lead to improved performance with respect to employability as measured by DHLE & Graduate Outcomes, especially for those from widening participation backgrounds?

Participants

Different aspects of the programme were open to different people, often also differing year on year.

The online course was open to all incoming finalists, plus incoming Masters students, whilst invitations to career coaching and the simulated assessment centres was

restricted, at least initially, to students in departments that were identified as underperforming with respect to careers outcomes.

There are not very clear records of exactly which group of students were able to access which activities each year.

Data collection

Data was collected in different ways for each intervention, as follows:

Simulated Assessment Centres - Students completed a survey immediately before and immediately after the assessment centre. This covered confidence; applying for roles; in assessment and selection processes; and in attending future assessment centres.

Online Course - Students completed a survey immediately before starting and immediately after completing the online course, covering confidence in next steps after university.

Calling Campaign – data was recorded regarding the volume of careers appointments booked and attended.

Finalist Workshops – data was recorded covering the number of finalists who attended these workshops. No evaluation data was collected.

Career Coaching - data was recorded covering the number of finalists who attended coaching sessions. No evaluation data was collected.

Data was also collected via the Careers Registration each September, the Careers Exit Survey each June, and the annual HESA survey (DHLE was collected internally six months after course end, GO is collected externally 15 months after course end).

Ethics and Data Security

All participants were over 18 and were therefore able to give consent to take part in the evaluation. Participants in the HESA processes were informed that by completing the survey they consented for their data to be used for evaluation purposes and published in a report externally in an anonymised form.

Data analysis

Descriptive statistics were generated for each outcome measure.

Type of evaluation

The intermediate outcomes were measured pre- and post- activity, with the same participants. For the other activities engagement levels were recorded.

As this programme was designed to shift the whole University's position with respect to employability data, and especially those from widening participation backgrounds, there was also monitoring of the DLHE and Graduate Outcomes survey results, and whether

there were any changes to the results of the surveys students take as they leave the university.

Limitations

In this review, we found that the original evaluation questions were not well aligned with the stated aims of the programme, and so analysis of the data does not easily map onto the aims.

The nature of the evaluation here means that causal inferences cannot be made from any results – there may have been other factors influencing the students. As with many evaluations of activities in the complex landscape of higher education, it can be challenging to link activities directly to causes.

The users of the online course are not easily identified as the platform could not record student ID numbers. This means that only a proportion of the data we have collected can be used for evaluation purposes.

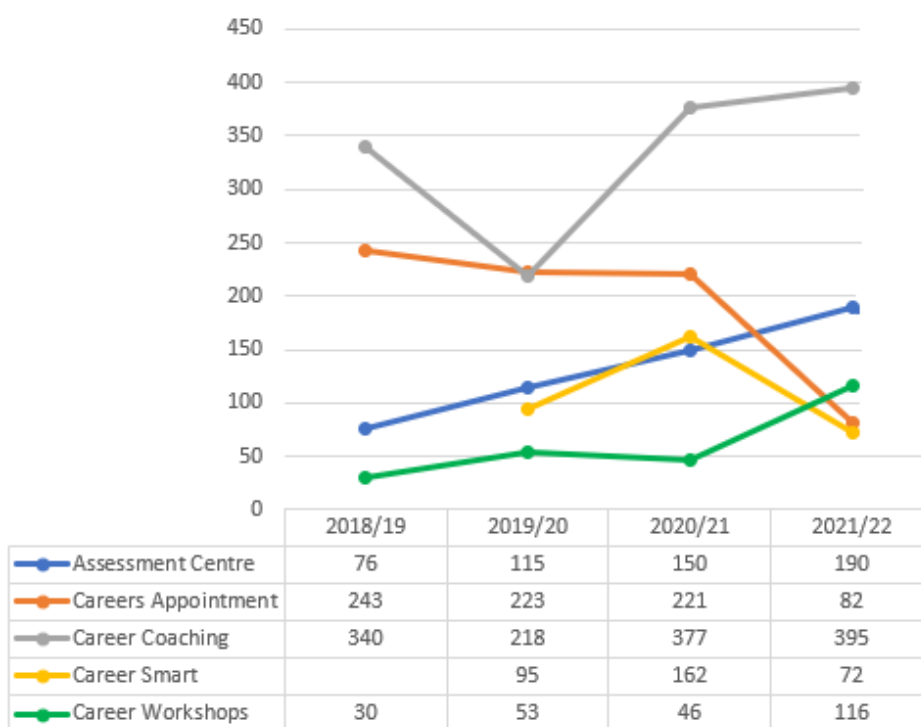
Some students who completed the simulated assessment centre and/or the online course did not complete both surveys, meaning some potential data was lost.

As with all self-reported data, there is the risk that participants report what they think the researchers want to know, rather than how they really feel. Additionally, there was no follow-up, so we cannot be sure that positive effects continued.

Results

Engagement

Engagement Finalist Programme Activities



The diagram above shows the number of students who engaged in each activity in some way. The move to online activity in the pandemic led to more engagement with the online course and the assessment centre, but a proportion of those accessing the online course were recent graduates, not finalists, so the numbers are skewed.

The below table provides an overview of engagement hours, number of 1:1 appointments with finalist students and how many unique final year students have engaged with Careers.

	2018/19	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22
Finalist 1:1 appointment	1556	2023	1789	1459
Unique finalists engaged	1506	1504	1528	1263
Total engagement hours	2855	4833	5250	3147

Note that whilst the number of students who have participated in the online courses is known, the system used does not enable us to identify them, so we are unclear which students have taken part.

Simulated Assessment Centres

The assessment centre aims to increase students' confidence in themselves and their abilities, thereby raising their aspirations, and we can see that for the 4 years we have data, the students have self-reported much higher levels of confidence as a result of attending.

In terms of students feeling confident/very confident about applying for graduate jobs - before and after:

The question was 'How confident do you feel applying for future positions?', and measurement was on a 4 point scale (not confident, somewhat confident, confident, very confident).

This data was collected by the external organisation that ran the simulations, and the raw data was not made available to the University to interrogate.

	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Before	33%	41%	14%	42%
Immediately after	89%	89%	78%	88%

Online Course

Students' confidence was measured through a 'before' and 'after' survey.

As this data is based on the number of submitted survey responses it is likely that the outcomes are skewed due to significantly fewer students completing the post-course survey than the pre-course survey (between 21% and 27% of joiners completed 90%+ of

the course over the 4 years in ran). For the limited number that do undertake both surveys, the Career Smart course does increase confidence.

Confidence when considering next steps after university:

“I feel confident when thinking about taking my next steps after university”, answered over a 7 point scale.

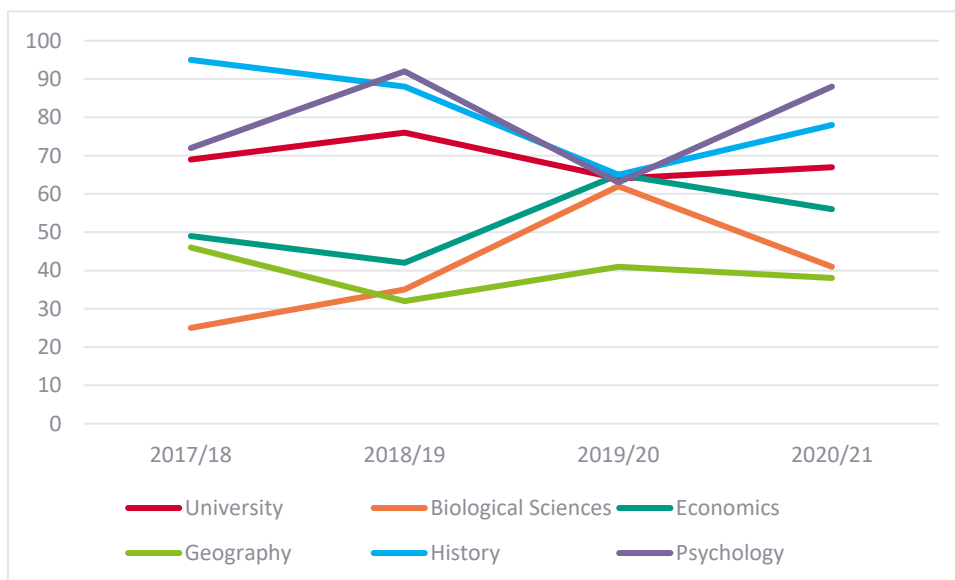
	2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23
Before	3.7	3.6	3.8	3.1
Immediately after	5.2	5.3	5.8	5.7

Graduate Outcomes

To date we only have access to Graduate Outcome data for the three first years of the Finalist Programme, with 2017/18 included for reference.

With the limited data available, it is not possible to draw any definite conclusions regarding the Finalist Programme and its impact on the University’s Graduate Outcomes.

The graph and table below show how the University is performing against the sector (percentiles), with respect to Positive Destinations (i.e. that the student is in a Graduate-Level activity 15 months after the course ended).



Percentiles	University	Biological Sciences	Economics	Geography	History	Psychology
2017/18	69	25	49	46	95	72
2018/19	76	35	42	32	88	92

2019/20	64	62	65	41	65	63
2020/21	67	41	56	38	78	88

Focusing on the Widening Participation categories, the table below shows the gap between the percentage of the cohort registering a Positive Destination, compared to those students without that marker (statistics from HESA).

Gender refers to female compared to male students, and Ethnicity compares students with a BAME heritage to those with a white heritage.

	University (%)	Disability (%)	Ethnicity (%)	IMD 2019 (Q1 & Q2) (%)	Gender (%)
2017/18	77.7	1.1	-2.5	2.9	2.9
2018/19	76.4	1.7	0.5	3.5	0.4
2019/20	76.0	-2.4	2.5	4.5	-0.1
2020/21	Not yet released by HESA at time of writing				

Again, it is difficult to draw conclusions, disability has seen positive and negative changes, the IMD 2019 and Ethnicity gap has widened, and females have improved compared to males each year.

Conclusions & recommendations

Conclusions

It is difficult to say that the Finalist Programme has been a success so far. For the small number of students that have completed the simulated assessment centre and the online course, increased confidence may have led to improved results, but overall, the University's performance with respect to positive destinations for undergraduate students has been mixed, with performance worsening for both ethnic minority students and those from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

It is noted that whilst the aims of the programme were around raising ambitions, skills and abilities, the evaluation questions were focussed on confidence, so there is a disconnect in the way the evaluation was designed. It is also noted that each activity was asking the questions in different ways, and to different scales. On top of this, there were no evaluation questions for a couple of the interventions at all.

Additionally, it is worth noting that the period covers the Covid 19 pandemic, which led to a shift in delivery method to online, more engagement in some activities as students had less choice, and disruption in the graduate employment market.

Recommendations

The Finalist Programme has now been redesigned for 2023-2024 to allow greater numbers of students to participate, in ways that are more suitable for both their aspirations and their resources. Most³ of the elements of the refreshed programme has been designed to enable consistent and thorough evaluation, so that we will be able to undertake Type 2 evaluation, and compare the progression of those who have engaged, with similar students who chose not to engage with the programme.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all the students who completed the surveys and took part in this research.

Notes

This report was reviewed by the APP evaluation team with some suggestions on structure and data reporting.

³ We are keen to utilise the community building and knowledge sharing benefits of social media, but this will mean that we will not be able to track activity and engagement back to individual students. However, we will conduct focus groups to gather qualitative data on the impact of social media.