Delivering the Student Employability Strategy

This report summarises the progress made in 2020/21 against the Key Objectives of the Student Employability Strategy and any impact made by the global pandemic.
Key Objective 1

The University of York will communicate a distinct and consistent employability offer known as ‘York Futures’ to all its students, advocating engagement with a range of development activities.

‘York Futures’ as a title is interchangeable with ‘Employability at York’, and is an umbrella term for all the exciting opportunities and resources that students can take advantage of to support their personal and professional development. The Careers and Placements team have been working with Marketing to position York Futures as a unique selling point for the University, and developing a distinctive employability campaign brand which uses 3D text on impactful imagery.

To help students engage early and navigate their way through the available opportunities, we have developed a high-concept infographic / journey map, 'Your Career Journey', that presents activities, events and calls-to-actions by year of study, accounting for the deadlines and timescales of employers, further study requirements and highly competitive application processes, as well as immovable ‘sign up’ points for University-managed schemes such as the York Strengths Programme, Study Abroad, Placement Year and York Award. It also points to a set of suggested learning outcomes for each year.

On-campus and face-to-face activities captured in the original 2019/20 journey were adversely affected by COVID19; a number of steps on the journey for the summer term were no longer available for students. To ensure students were supported at this very difficult time, a ‘Special Edition’ journey was created for summer term 2020 and the following 2020/21 academic year. We have also developed tailored versions of the journey for postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students. These have been very well received by the postgraduate community, including distance learners.

Potential of the journey

The first iteration of this journey was rolled out initially to UG1 students at the start of the 2019/20 academic year. Hard copy leaflets were disseminated via academic departments and Careers and Placements activities. Electronic, year-specific and accessible versions can be accessed at york.ac.uk/york-futures. The Careers and Placements team delivered sessions in departments that introduced first years to the journey as a starting point for accessing careers provision and opportunities.

Overwhelmingly the response from students, academic staff and other stakeholders has been positive. The journey map provides an attractive and intuitive way to communicate a large amount of information. There has been interest from colleagues to incorporate the journey into central student recruitment and orientation activities, as well as requests from academic departments for tailored departmental versions in the longer term.

The Office for Philanthropic Partnerships (OPPA) would like to see the journey continue beyond graduation. There are many possibilities for further enhancements and outlets to consider for future iterations.

Technology change

As part of Key Objective 1, students should be able to record and monitor their employability journey online. Following an 18-month rigorous selection process we have chosen a new provider for the system we use to host job vacancies, volunteering opportunities, careers events and appointments. This new provider is called Handshake and York is one of a small number of ‘early-adopter’ institutions, along with the University of Liverpool and the University of Cambridge, working with Handshake as they build their UK business. Handshake is a sophisticated, progressive product to better meet the needs of our students, staff and employers. At the end of July 2020, our licence with Target Connect (what students knew as Careers Gateway) came to an end.

Students and graduates have been able to access Handshake since August 2020 to build their profile, connect with employers and search for opportunities. During the pandemic, the Handshake platform enabled us to run our first ever Virtual Careers Fair, which brought together 137 employers and 900 students through one-to-one meetings and group sessions over three days.
Key Objective 2

All undergraduate and postgraduate students will be able to explore and identify their most positive employability characteristics through participation in the ‘York Strengths Programme’.

York Strengths

York Strengths gives all York students the opportunity to discover what they are good at and love to do and how to use this knowledge to plan their time at York and gain the skills and experience required by graduate employers. As strengths-based graduate recruitment becomes increasingly common, our programme prepares students for the reality of the graduate labour market; empowering them to take action to build personally relevant skills and experience and to acquire the confidence to pursue a career that they’ll enjoy and do well in. The programme culminates in the York Award.

Prior to the pandemic, the programme was focused around a face to face ‘Development Day’. During 2020, we developed an online short course to support continued programme delivery. Following the popularity of this course and the positive feedback, we have continued to make this available to all students of the University in the 2020/21 academic year. In 2020/21, 3,370 students engaged with York Strengths Online. We also offered a shortened Covid-safe version of the face-to-face Development Day in summer term with 74 undergraduates and 29 postgraduates attending. First year undergraduate engagement with York Strengths now sits at around 37% (a growth from the 20% figure pre-pandemic). The majority of those who engage with York Strengths Online complete the core content giving an understanding of the personal and professional skills employers are looking for, how to self assess and develop yourself using the nine York Strengths, and introducing the wider employability offer (Your Career Journey).

Academic departments are increasingly engaged in delivery, with around half of departments now making a formal link to the York Strengths Discovery programme; embedding this in their curriculum offer for first year undergraduates, and for postgraduate taught students in the management school. This has translated to c.1,500 first year undergraduates and c.800 postgraduate taught students participating.

For the 2021/22 academic year, we will continue to grow engagement in York Strengths Online as the core of the offer to all students and will also be reintroducing a full in-person offer, with Development Day sessions running across spring and summer term. These sessions will now be a half-day focused on exercises in groups with external feedback, and a one-to-one with a trained observer. These sessions form part of a blended learning offer for UGI and PGT students, and attendance is strongly encouraged. The availability of the online offer allows a level of personal choice as well as an alternative route to completion where this is needed, and a catch up option for students in later year groups.

York Strengths has provided the University with a strong story to tell prospective and new students, which is now being integrated into pre-entry content, IPC programmes and delivery of programmes through Global Programmes. It is clear that we offer a supportive package from the first day of study that will help students navigate the wide range of available opportunities offered by the University to enhance their personal and professional development.

York Leaders

The York Leaders programme supports a group of around 100 students each year to explore how they can become future leaders. It is based on a model which looks at leadership as a set of characteristics rather than a position you hold. Leaders try to improve the groups or communities they are part of.

The programme was reworked as an online offer in 2020 and 2021, which ran very successfully. For the coming academic year, and following consultation with students and partners, we will offer a programme which combines the best elements of the previous face-to-face and online offers, together with an enhanced range of opportunities for those who have taken part to ‘give back’ to the University community. This selective programme is planned to run in the 2021/22 academic year, with Development Day sessions running across spring and summer term. These sessions will now be a half-day focused on exercises in groups with external feedback, and a one-to-one with a trained observer. These sessions form part of a blended learning offer for UGI and PGT students, and attendance is strongly encouraged. The availability of the online offer allows a level of personal choice as well as an alternative route to completion where this is needed, and a catch up option for students in later year groups.

York Award

York Award is a formal award of the University. A new version of York Award launched in 2020/21 following a consultation process, and integrating it more closely with York Strengths. It can be worked towards through a student’s time at University, and completed towards the end of their programme of study.

The new York Award recognises (and hopefully encourages) participation in the most important elements of the Career Journey. It enables students to pull together and reflect on their experiences within and outside the curriculum, and supports applicants in articulating the positive characteristics they have to offer in a way that appeals to employers and future study providers.

In 2020/21, 118 UG finalists, 34 UG penultimate year students and 39 PGT students were successful in achieving the York Award.

Additional support for final year students

In a difficult year for students graduating into an uncertain job market, we recruited additional professional careers coaches to work one-to-one with individuals within the Class of 2020 who needed it the most. In addition to a range of events and activities, online and over-the-phone support was provided to 70 graduates with widening participation characteristics throughout their final term.
Key Objective 3

All undergraduate and postgraduate students will have the opportunity to gain experiences that will enable personal and professional development.

Placement Learning

Despite the pandemic and general uncertainty in the graduate labour market, the number of York students taking up the option of the placement year or a year in industry module in 2020/21 remained broadly similar to that of 2019/20. The placement year module, which can accommodate students from any academic discipline, increased in numbers from 41 students to 48. Unlike placement students in 2019/20 the majority of students in 2020/21 fully anticipated remote working and the majority were required to do so. Although this created a number of challenges for those attempting to integrate into sometimes complex organisations, the majority of students completed their placements and overwhelmingly passed the final assessment, generally reporting that their experiences had equipped them with skills and resilience they had not necessarily anticipated.

Internships

Due to the pandemic 2019/20 was an exceptionally bad year for the general availability of short term work placements, particularly over the summer months. In anticipation of 2020/21 also being a challenging year for vacation work, the University’s Student Internship Bureau (SIB) was able to access funding from Santander Universities and the Higher Education Innovation Fund to provide some financial support to small businesses taking on York students as interns. A wage subsidy of 50% was offered as the norm, however, 100% subsidies were made available to a limited number of charities and start-up businesses taking on interns. On-campus internships were funded by a combination of APP funding and a special initiative financially supported by York alumni. Demand for internships, both on campus and from local businesses, returned, and slightly exceeded, pre-pandemic levels with 172 projects in 2020/21 and 164 in 2018/19. SIB internships continue to disproportionately benefit students with WP characteristics; 57% of interns had a WP characteristic relative to a cohort average of 45%.

Enterprise

Interest in the entrepreneurial support offer made by Careers and Placements increased across the majority of initiatives provided. There was a record number of applications for the Summer Accelerator programme, which provides financial and coaching support to a student to pursue their business idea over the summer vacation period. Over 30 applications were received and 15 awards were made. This year also saw the first full round of applications and awards for York Venture One. This is a pre-subscription fund that can provide up to £10,000 to enable a student or recent graduate business to prepare for significant investment. One such award was made to Isabella Lee, a former Business Management student and co-founder of a business ‘elxr’, a high quality, skin-friendly sanitiser described by Tatler magazine as “the best sanitiser we’ve found”.

Volunteering

The pandemic impacted on many of the more established ways in which York students have volunteered to gain experience. For example, schools were unable to host students of the YSIS programme and many of the city’s heritage attractions were also closed. However, these conditions did provide a catalyst for the development of different formats of volunteering. As part of the University’s ‘Student Engagement in Knowledge Exchange’ project over 50 students were engaged in a project to conduct virtual environmental audits with SME businesses in the rural areas of Ryedale. Without the need to engage virtually it is unlikely that this project would have developed as successfully as it did. Longer term use of this format is now being considered for use as part of the offer made by the Department of Environment and Geography.

Employers

Without the facility to host graduate employers on campus most interactions were conducted virtually. This included York’s first ‘virtual careers fair’. The format of this event encourages students to book individual or group based virtual time slots with the attending employers. It provides good quality and highly individualised information on an employer but does require the student to prepare in advance and have the confidence to interact in this format. Indications are that many larger employers will be slow to return to on-campus recruitment; if indeed they return to it at all.

Operational activities

In 2020/21 we pivoted to deliver all appointments virtually, delivering in the region of 2,400 one-to-one appointments across our range of appointment types in the last year. We’ve continued to produce our What do you actually do? podcast and since March 2020 we’ve produced 20 episodes covering a range of topics including managing a university, with our own Vice-Chancellor, careers in corporate social responsibility, from TV to tech, a conversation with a junior doctor and working in the archives, with the Head of Historic England.

We’ve also continued to keep our resources updated and in line with the latest labour market information, designed to give students relevant up-to-date advice and guidance. In the summer of 2020 our dedicated teams created over 50 video resources to support our students every step of the way.

Isabella Lee (left) with the elxr sanitiser

Tara Boyd – Selected as Intern of the Year in November 2020 at the virtual SIB Celebration for her work with Glawning, a high end camping equipment supplier

Mary Taylor-Lewis – Intern with Rural Arts: Digital Creativity Research Assistant

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**Mission Statement**

Enable personal and professional development.