

INTRODUCTION

University Career Centres are key elements of every Higher Education Institution (HEI). While many students may only turn to them at the end of their studies – when they are about to graduate and embark on their new professional journeys – career centres have a lot to offer to students throughout their studies. By providing students with contacts to employers, advertising job or internship opportunities in relevant sectors, and helping students create a CV or prepare for an interview, career centres play a crucial role in boosting students' employability and improving graduate outcomes (Langher et al., 2018). This includes helping them develop transferrable skills, gain an awareness of the labour market, and develop an understanding of their own strengths and preferences. Now more than ever, career centres are also expected to connect students with opportunities abroad, prepare them for a rapidly changing, and increasingly globalised job market (Paviotti, 2017), and equip them with the skills to thrive in international working environments.

In doing so, career centres should not forget that HE students are becoming more diverse. They may have different needs, expectations, and aspirations, depending on various demographic factors (such as gender, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status), as well as on their personal biographies and previous educational and professional experiences. These factors continue to have a significant impact on graduate outcomes and employability, reproducing social inequality and preventing certain marginalised groups from reaching their full potential (Andrewartha and Harvey, 2017; Green and Henseke, 2021). Career centres can play a crucial role in addressing these disparities, by providing traditionally marginalised students with job-related skills, as well as the self-awareness to recognise their strengths and weaknesses, and the self-confidence to thrive in competitive labour markets.

It is therefore crucial for every HEI to establish an *International University Career Centre* which has the capacity and resources to address these diverse and constantly evolving tasks. While the wider geographical, social and economic context, student demographics, and the potential business partners will vary from university to university, affecting how the Career Centre operates, there are certain *essential elements* which every career centre will need to include if it is to provide a successful launching platform for students into their new careers. Thus, the UniLab project has designed an "Ideal Model of International Career Centres" tool that can help any university to benchmark the current state of their career centre, to identify areas for improvement, and to plan the next steps for the centre's ongoing development.

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From university to labour market in the 21st century: a step forward in work-based placements

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The ten essential elements for an excellent International Career Centre

1) Forming a “bridge” between companies and students

Career centres occupy a unique position in universities, as they connect students with the world of work. They play a crucial role in meeting ever-growing expectations that universities not “only” provide students with a degree, but also equip them with the tools and competencies to succeed in a competitive, global labour market (European Commission, 2015; Šimić and Štimac, 2012). However, as part of a university, they should be equally dedicated to students’ academic and personal growth (Wagenaar, 2014). Therefore, career development should not be viewed simply through the lens of employability, but also as a means for students to achieve fulfilment and satisfaction at an individual level. Balancing these potentially conflicting claims requires a constant re-assessment of the labour market as well as the student body, and can only be achieved by taking on a mediating role between the different stakeholders.

2) Online database with companies’ profiles and job/internship opportunities

Crucial to the functioning of any career centre is the establishment of an online database or portal, which allows potential employers to create a profile and advertise job or internship vacancies. Students should be able to filter these vacancies according to various factors, such as the qualifications required, subject area, location (including national and international opportunities), salary, and type of role. Additional functions may include a platform for students to leave anonymous reviews of companies that they have worked or interned at, as well as the option for students to create their own profiles, through which they can apply more directly and quickly for the vacancies advertised on the platform. Regardless of the specificities of the services that are offered, career services have an ethical obligation to ensure that students’ personal information remains private, unless students have explicitly consented to sharing it with an employer or third party (Shaw and Shaw, 2006).

3) Online platform with tools and services

In addition to the online job portal, an International Career Centre should also have a separate website listing all other activities and services on offer. This online platform is the first port of call for students wishing to boost their employability whilst still at university, and supports graduates-to-be who are about to enter the job market. It should contain up-to-date information on the events and activities the career centre is organising, the contact details of individual career centre staff, and a booking system through which students can set up appointments with staff to review their CVs, conduct a mock interview, or undertake a career counselling session. In order to foster students’ autonomy and to maximise the centre’s effectiveness, the platform should also offer self-guided and interactive learning materials and resources, which students may engage with independently. These may include questionnaires, quizzes, and learning diaries, as well as guides and information on the job application process, job sectors and employability skills. Research has found that online career services are similarly effective to in-person provision (Pordelan and Hosseinian, 2022; Teychenne et al. 2019), and the UniLab consortium strongly advises every HEI to invest significantly in maintaining and expanding its career centre’s online presence.

4) Availability of a physical space/office

While the importance of online platforms cannot be overemphasised in today's digitalised world, it remains crucial for career centres to also offer a physical space, in which students can come together and meet career centre staff in person. By physically separating the career centre from other parts of the university, students are more likely to focus on their career development without being distracted by their academic pursuits. Moreover, a physical space in which students and staff can interact informally is generally associated with improved student wellbeing (Morgan, 2012). If capacity allows, the physical career centre should always be staffed during working hours, permitting students to drop in spontaneously, and should include separate spaces for students to have one-to-one sessions with advisors. In addition, the Career Centre office also provides a space for in-person events to take place, and for the Career Centre to host external visitors, such as company representatives and alumni.

5) Regular in-person and online events

While services such as counselling, CV advice, and mock interviews are the “bread and butter” of any International Career Centre, these should be complemented by a range of additional events and activities, held both in-person and online. For example, job or career fairs, which allow students to get to know a range of employers within a single event, and which also provide employers with important recruitment opportunities, are a time and cost-effective way to boost students' employment prospects. Such employer liaison events can easily be linked to other activities, such as speed interviewing (short interviews which can help employers identify potential employees, and vice versa, without having to go through a lengthy recruitment process), panel discussions with employers and/or recruiters, and Q&A sessions in which students can voice their queries in an informal setting. Career events do not necessarily have to take place on campus, but may also include excursions, for example to company offices, production sites or other locations, during which students can gain valuable insight into various working environments, and may even have the chance to gain first-hand professional experiences in the sector. Such high-profile activities – if promoted well – are more likely to garner students' interest (Paviotti 2017) and in turn lead to them engaging in the other activities offered by the Career Centre.

6) Integration of career services into regular study/academic programmes

As important as it is for an International Career Centre to develop a distinct and recognisable identity within the university, it should also not operate in isolation, but rather work closely with the academic faculties and departments and adapt their services accordingly (Bridgstock et al., 2019). Despite their distinct geographical contexts, UniLab partners all found that students prefer career development activities that are integrated in, and relevant to their studies, rather than a generic, one-size-fits-all approach to employability. This requires Career Centres to establish close relationships with faculty staff, and to undertake regular needs assessments of students by discipline or subject area (Venable, 2010). By integration their services in students' academic trajectory, whether through a separate module dedicated to career development in degree programmes (see Teychenne, 2019; Talib et al., 2015), or through extra-curricular activities that are specifically tailored to certain disciplines or subject areas, career centres are more likely to engage students.

7) Involvement of “career ambassadors”

In order to address students’ lack of interest in or engagement with career services, the UniLab project partners have found that involving students as “career ambassadors” (i.e., students who support and promote Career Centre activities) can be an effective way of promoting the career centre’s activities and raising awareness about the importance of employability among students. These career ambassadors, who, depending on their tasks and responsibilities, may be engaged as interns, part-time employees or volunteers, “represent” the career centre in their cohort, degree programme or study year. This involves informing and updating their peers about the centre’s activities and events, assisting in their organisation and delivery, and collecting feedback from students to improve and further develop the career centre’s services. As students, career ambassadors are naturally more accessible than career centre staff, and through their direct links with the student body, can ensure that career services are relevant, targeted and appealing to students.

8) Keeping track of students after graduation and ongoing involvement of alumni

Besides maintaining regular and close communication with current students, the ideal career centre should also engage regularly with alumni, who can be a valuable resource if mobilised effectively. The UniLab partners have successfully involved alumni in activities and events, such as career fairs, as part of which alumni took part in panel discussions or Q&A sessions. Another, more sustained way of involving alumni is through mentoring programmes, which are beneficial both for alumni and students, and have been found to have a positive impact on the latter’s perceptions of graduate employability and their overall satisfaction with the student experience (Dollinger et al., 2019). Moreover, such programmes can facilitate graduates’ university-to-work transitions, as well as generating a sense of “giving back” to their alma maters among alumni (Osborn et al., 2015). Despite these evident benefits, the UniLab partners experienced difficulties in maintaining contact with their alumni. One strategy which proved successful in cultivating engagement was to create an alumni platform which connects to alumni’s LinkedIn profiles, and which updates automatically in accordance with it. For the ideal career centre, a platform is envisioned which would not only keep records on alumni’s career paths, but would also offer opportunities for networking, inform alumni about events, and incentivise their sustained engagement through exclusive alumni benefits.

9) Continuous improvement and professional development of career centre staff

Based on their experience of delivering career services across different locations, the UniLab consortium would agree with Melrose and Reid (2001) that “quality career centres stem from quality staff” (p. 215). This requires both pre-service and in-service training for career development practitioners. The training should be regularly reviewed to ensure alignment with contemporary practice (Brown et al., 2019), and should ideally amount to a minimum of one year of full-time higher education, or 60 ECTS credits, as recommended by the European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop, 2009). It should provide career centre staff with an understanding of graduate employability and labour market demand and supply, both at the national and international level, as well as the ability to update their knowledge continuously and independently in these areas. It should also cover the necessary soft skills (specifically

in listening, questioning and problem solving), that career centre staff would need in their daily interactions with students and employers.

10) Analysis of feedback to continue improving the service

Staff’s continuous development, and the training offered to them, should be based on a thorough understanding of students’ needs and competencies, the current state of the labour market, and the specific skills and graduate profiles in demand among employers. This requires career centres to undertake regular needs analyses of all stakeholders, using questionnaires, surveys and feedback forms to plan, monitor and evaluate their services and activities. Pre- and post-intervention questionnaires among students may help career centres measure the efficacy of their provision (Teychenne et al., 2019), while regular consultations with industry representatives could provide important input for career centres to develop services, activities and information guides which facilitate students’ entry in the labour market (Donald et al. 2018). Additional stakeholders, including academics within the HEI, local authorities, civil society representatives and recruitment agencies, should also be surveyed regularly for the career centre to gain a more holistic understanding of the private, public, and third sector, and to explore opportunities for collaboration and exchange, including at the international level.



How to use this “Ideal Model of International Career Centre” tool?

This tool consists of a two-step process:

- STEP 1: Evaluating the current state of your HEI’s Career Centre
- STEP 2: Planning the improvement of your HEI’s Career Centre

We recommend you to be critical, impartial and accurate when completing tables 1 and 2. An objective evaluation of the current state of your HEI’s Career Centre is the first step towards developing it and transforming it into an excellent unit that is useful and valued by your students and your alumni.

For completion of Step 1 please fill in Table 1. You can do so by:

- working in a group with your team
- working on your own, asking colleagues to do so as well and then meeting your team to discuss the answers that each of you have given

Discuss and/or reflect on each point, consider the pros and cons of your current unit, and fill in a “definitive” Table 1.

For Step 2, work in a group with your team to complete Table 2. You will need to refer to your answers in Table 1 as you work on Table 2. The objective of Step 2 is for you and your team to identify which areas of your Career Centre you would like to improve, who needs to be involved in the improvement, and at which speed you foresee that the improvement can take place.

TABLE 1: The current state of your HEI’s Career Centre

Name of the reporter	
Date of this exercise	

Essential elements	Does your university have this key point?	Are you satisfied with the quality of this key point?	Do you think it would be possible to improve it?
1) Company-Learners liaison			
2) Online database			
3) Tools and Services			
4) Physical space			
5) In-person and online events			
6) Integration in curriculum			
7) Career Ambassadors			
8) Alumni engagement			
9) Dedicated, trained staff			
10) Continuous analysis and improvement			

Summarise the session: Which key points do you feel can be improved easily? Which are more challenging? Which strategies could you use to address these challenges?	
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TABLE 2: Plan the improvement of your unit

Please use one table as provided below below for each of the essential elements. Indicate which essential element you are addressing and discuss if it needs improvement, and how urgently the improvement should be implemented. Mark one of the boxes (from 1 to 5). In case it needs improvement (options 2 to 4), explain why, how you will do the changes and who should be involved in the process.

Date				
Essential element				
1. It does not need improvement	2. It needs urgent improvement (before 1 year)	3. It needs improvement (before 3 years)	4. Improvement can be reconsidered (in 6 years)	5. We cannot improve it
Why?				
How?				
Who?				

Repeat the exercise with each essential element. Use the “definitive” Table 1 that you completed with your team in Step 1 to help you.

Using a timeline, you can plot the key points in order of urgency for improvement. This will provide an overview of the changes that need to take place and ensure that you are on track to meet the deadlines you and your team have set yourselves for making the necessary changes.

At the end of the this exercise you will have an action plan to make your International Career Centre an excellent unit, with the capacity to boost your students’ employability, facilitate collaboration with various stakeholders and meet the demands of the labour market.

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