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**OPENING THE GATES TO COLLECTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON CAREER**

*Moving Away from Individualisation to a Holistic Purpose*

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# OPENING THE GATES TO COLLECTIVE PERSPECTIVES ON CAREER

## MOVING AWAY FROM INDIVIDUALISATION TO A HOLISTIC PURPOSE

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### Abstract

The term 'career' holds various meanings, ranging from a pathway to achieve position or status in life to a political concept focused on employability and the development of transferable skills. We suggest that these often individualised and instrumental strategies are narrow and impoverished, given that the individual also enacts and contextualises 'career' throughout their lives. As higher education researchers working with curriculum and career development, we argue that a broader, more holistic approach can be achieved if the focus is instead on what university educators do when they teach. This perspective enhances how we understand and conceptualise careers as embedded in how teaching is practised and how disciplines are articulated - as a future way of being and acting in the world. We seek to open the gates to the collective practices of disciplines and the outcomes they (often) implicitly hope to frame.

**Keywords:** Career Development, Higher Education, Career Learning, Educational Development


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### Introduction

While having a career is a universal experience, its meaning and expression vary according to context (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2019). One significant contextual interpretation is the employability-focused approach prevalent in higher education today. This increasing focus on employability in higher education can be attributed to various factors, including the globalisation of knowledge, the massification of universities, and persistent skills shortages (Rees, 2021). These potential challenges have led to policies designed to align educational institutions more closely with the labour market (Rees, 2021). While such policies aim to bridge the gap between education and employment, they often place the burden of success on individuals — students and graduates — reinforcing an instrumental view of education focused solely on job readiness.

In contrast, the broader career literature, as discussed by, for example, Christie et al. (2024), advocates for a more collectivist approach to career learning. This perspective highlights the notion that a career is relevant to everyone, as it reflects our journey through life, learning, and work, shaped by the intersection of individual psychology and societal structures (Hooley et al., 2019). This approach encourages us to rethink how higher education can support students — not only in finding jobs but also in navigating the changing landscapes of work and life. Additionally, this perspective helps students understand how their discipline shapes their self-awareness and their ability to create value in the world.

In this contribution, we juxtapose employability and career research with an eye toward policy implications, positioning our work within a broader, interdisciplinary dialogue that aims to rethink the role of higher education in preparing students for future careers.



This shift in perspective has important implications for policy, curriculum design, and pedagogy, advocating for a transition away from the current instrumental focus on employability and towards a more comprehensive and contextualised understanding of career development. Thus, we urge stakeholders to rethink how we prepare students for their futures. To do this, we examine career understanding and practices within HE, advocating for a shift away from the current emphasis on employability. In this contribution, we juxtapose employability and career research with an eye toward policy implications, positioning our work within a broader, interdisciplinary dialogue that aims to rethink the role of higher education in preparing students for future careers. This shift in perspective has important implications for policy, curriculum design, and pedagogy, advocating for a transition away from the current instrumental focus on employability and towards a more comprehensive and contextualised understanding of career development. Thus, we urge stakeholders to rethink how we prepare students for their futures. To do this, we examine career understanding and practices within HE, advocating for a shift away from the current emphasis on employability. Instead of viewing careers as static and narrowly tied to job acquisition, we propose a more nuanced approach to career development that embraces the complexities of personal and professional growth.

### **Broadening Perspectives: Integrating Career Development in Higher Education**

As scholars of higher education research, specifically interested in a career perspective, we notice the lack of dialogue between the field of higher education graduate employability research and the field of career research. Therefore, we seek to engage in a dialogue with career research, which is primarily influenced by vocational and educational guidance, as this field offers valuable insights that are worth exploring. Healy and colleagues (Healy et al., 2022) have explored the fields of graduate employability and career development research, highlighting a significant gap between the two. Employability research is predominantly linked to higher education research, encompassing various disciplines, while career development research primarily draws from psychology. According to Healy et al. (2022), graduate employability research focuses on three levels of analysis: social and educational systems and policies, institutional strategies, and individual employability. In contrast, career development research emphasises how individuals make career decisions, navigate their career paths, and tackle career-related challenges. These very different modes of analysis underscore the need for more integrated approaches between the two fields (Healy et al., 2022, p. 801).

It is important to note that our aim is not to criticise the field of employability but to open up a broader view on career learning in higher education via the field of career development research. In the field of career development research, particularly as conceptualised in contemporary discourse, the notion of "career" encompasses our journey through life, integrating learning and work, while reflecting the interplay between individual psychology and broader social institutions (Hooley et al., 2019). This perspective highlights the universal importance of career development, as everyone in this understanding has a career. According to this theoretical understanding, careers are not merely a product of singular decisions made by individuals; rather, they are formed through the myriad experiences and contexts encountered in everyday life.

As emphasised by McCash et al. (2021), career development is fundamentally an engagement with the social fabric, including a “wide range of activities, situations, and roles” (McCash et al., 2021, p. 9), suggesting that it is a collective endeavour rather than an isolated pursuit. It is also critical to recognise that the ups and downs in one’s career trajectory — whether perceived as setbacks or achievements — do not solely reflect individual failures or successes. Instead, they emerge from a shared process that involves social dynamics and collective responsibilities. This understanding challenges traditional notions of accountability in career development, highlighting the importance of context and community in shaping career outcomes (Hooley, Sultana, & Thomsen, 2018; Hooley et al., 2019).

Based on this broader perspective, career decisions play a crucial role in every aspect of a student's life, especially during their studies. Students must choose a program, select courses, determine when to take them, decide whether to work while studying, and even choose where to study. After graduation, the decision-making continues, including where to work, which field to pursue, and whether and when to start a family. Additionally, students must choose what to focus on during their studies and exams. All these decisions are constantly influenced by the context and social environment surrounding the student. For educators, there is a responsibility to support and develop students’ abilities to navigate these choices and transitions effectively. This can be done by bringing a more structured focus to the learning process and not just to the end goal of the professional career for the student (Felby, 2020).

Drawing on a model developed by Felby (2020), we present a way to think about career development within the teaching context that lies within the enactment of the curriculum. The model is designed as a comprehensive curricular framework, utilising insights from recent career development research highlighted earlier in this article, including those by Hooley, Sultana, and Thomsen (2018; 2019). Three dimensions are presented in the model: The discipline in the world, the world in the discipline, and the discipline in the individual. By making these dimensions explicit through teaching and curriculum, the model supports the students’ development of strategies for action, knowledge about the world, strategies for exploration, and knowledge about themselves. As such, the model – or the thoughts behind the model – are aimed at supporting students' (disciplinary) being and acting in the world.

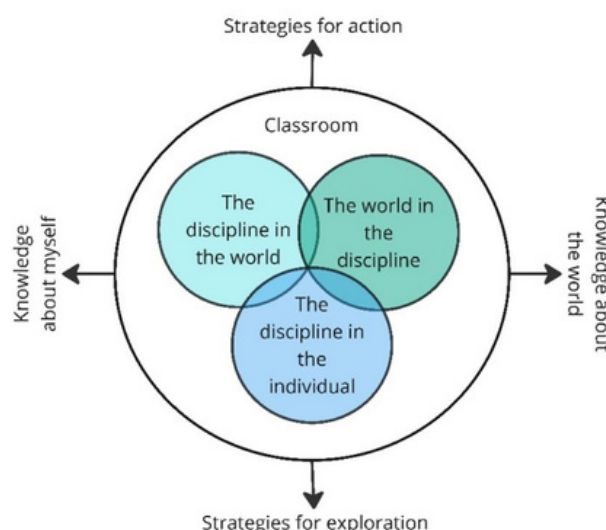


Figure 1. Career learning model inspired by Felby (2020)



The three dimensions of the curriculum offer distinct yet interconnected perspectives on the course content and its delivery. The first dimension, the discipline in the world, emphasises the importance of demonstrating the real-world applications of what students are learning. This aspect seeks to highlight the relevance of academic concepts by relating them to practical scenarios outside the classroom or auditorium. While company visits provide a direct experience of this connection, in situations where visitation is not feasible, educators can facilitate discussions about the labour market and establish links between course material and various industries. This connection enriches the learning experience and helps students appreciate the practical implications of their studies. The second dimension, the world in the discipline, focuses on developing a deep understanding of the disciplinary matter while fostering a professional identity among students. This involves integrating a career perspective into the curriculum. By encouraging students to reflect on their future careers, educators help them draw connections between academic content and the skills and competencies needed in the workplace. This reflection can promote a stronger sense of purpose and direction as students begin to align their academic pursuits with their personal and professional aspirations. Lastly, the third dimension, the discipline in the individual, is centred around facilitating introspection and self-discovery among students. This dimension aims to guide students in understanding their place in the world by promoting reflection on their values, professional aspirations, and overall identity in becoming part of the discipline. Educators play a crucial role in supporting this process, helping students articulate their dreams and hopes for the future. Through guided discussions and reflective exercises, students can gain insights into their motivations and how they can navigate their personal and professional journeys (Felby, 2020). Together, these three dimensions create a comprehensive framework that enriches students' academic experiences while preparing them for meaningful societal contributions. These dimensions influence students' development in tangible ways. Through the discipline in the world, students can begin to recognise practical applications, while experiencing the world in the discipline helps students discover how their academic work translates to professional competencies. Finally, students develop professional identity and self-awareness through the discipline in the individual. Together, these experiences help students construct meaningful connections between their academic studies, professional aspirations, and personal development. Importantly, this curricular framework transcends any perceived divide between individual and collective approaches to career learning. As career perspectives are mediated through the curriculum, students naturally benefit from both personal reflection and shared learning experiences, making these approaches complementary rather than competing.

Approaching the discipline in this way serves as an example of supporting students' career development without introducing additional (external) elements. Instead, it emphasises using existing classroom and curricular activities in a more explicit career-related manner. The broad concept of careers presented here allows individual educators the flexibility to adopt these perspectives in appropriate and relevant ways, without being criticised for how they incorporate specific competencies into their teaching. Furthermore, a discipline-specific focus on careers, understood in a holistic manner, can be integrated into the curriculum, making it a more cohesive part of students' journeys through life, learning, and work.



## Potential and Challenges

The narrower, often instrumentalised concept of employability is in many ways easier to implement across different fields. This can lead to career-related activities being treated as separate from academic disciplines and curricula, which are typically handled by guidance counsellors or others outside the study or discipline. Consequently, students may be left to navigate and apply these concepts independently, resulting in a highly individualised and sometimes detached process.

However, adopting a broader and more holistic approach to career development presents both potential and challenges. We advocate for a career development approach that emphasises collective learning and reflection and democratises the concept of having a career. A holistic perspective views education as part of an ongoing career trajectory, rather than merely a stepping stone to future employment. This shift broadens the focus beyond acquiring specific skills or competencies, encouraging students to deepen their understanding of their discipline and how to apply it in the broader world.

From our viewpoint, the potential for a more collective, democratic, and holistic approach to career development is already inherent in most disciplines and educators' teaching methods. Many educators understand how their discipline can influence and transform the world and the student. However, this understanding often remains both vague and implicit for educators and internalised within the disciplines. As a result, the potential to integrate this approach to career development into teaching remains underutilised and invisible to both educators and students. Therefore, it is crucial for educators, curriculum developers, and students to actively recognise and leverage this existing potential and create a learning environment where transition(ing) is possible.

All stakeholders must share this process: the institution itself, programme developers, educators, and students. It should be a joint responsibility with each having a distinct role to play:

- Institution: There should be structures and systems in place that support and create a space of openness based in and on human qualities. The institutions' overall strategies could support this, for instance, through strategic action plans.
- Programme developers: Their task is to create a curriculum that allows room for career development and personal growth. The curriculum should teach employability skills as well as offer opportunities for students to engage with broader career and life contexts.
- Educators: Educators are responsible for making the implicit explicit. They possess deep knowledge of how their discipline relates to the world, but making these connections more visible to students is challenging. Educators could work to highlight and integrate into their teaching how their discipline can shape life, learning, and work beyond the walls of the university.
- Students: For students, the opportunity lies in truly engaging with the discipline — not just learning facts but "being and becoming", identifying as belonging to the discipline. This requires transitioning from 'being a student of X' to 'belonging to the discipline of X', a transformative process that helps them develop the capacity to engage with real-world challenges later in their careers and motivates them to see their education as integral to their career (development).

All stakeholders in this process share the need to make the so-called "soft" aspects of education more explicit. A discipline exists and evolves because it is oriented toward the world, life, learning, and work. This holistic perspective must be consciously integrated into teaching, curriculum design, and student learning to realise its potential fully. We argue that if the stakeholders use the elements from the model presented above in their curriculum development, teaching practice, and reflections this will ease the shift towards making the connections in and out of the university more explicit.

### **What's Next?**

This contribution opens up many new questions of how to support career learning throughout higher education. How to approach this depends on which role you have in which field of study, at what level of study, in which educational settings, and so on. By closely examining what the educator does and what real world practices remain implicit in teaching the particular discipline, we hope that support can be found for each of the stakeholders involved by taking this perspective.

There is much potential for future perspectives within the research of career development in higher education. While research in higher education has often been concerned with the implementation of elements in specific courses or other initiatives from outside and into the programmes, we seek to open up an orientation, also for the research, to engage with the disciplines as they are and investigate potential to develop career perspectives from inside the disciplines.

In the sections above, we acknowledge that educators are discipline specialists and that they have a huge potential to further career development within the programmes. However, educators must feel empowered to utilise their expertise from a career perspective in their engagement with the students. Therefore, research could help illuminate how educators might be supported in bridging the gap between the discipline and the world of work. And as such would help build a more holistic methodology that fully integrates a broader understanding of career described in this paper.

Finally, we argue for research that engages with questions of career development, which are not necessarily assessable but create value for the students and their development into the field together with the discipline, educators, and peers. This could be done by highlighting smaller details of the already practised curriculum, teaching, and learning to highlight the potential for developing career learning. We suggest a broader perspective on the concept of career within the field of Higher Education, which shifts the focus from the individual to a more holistic, democratic, and collective understanding of career that could have a significant impact on policy, curriculum design, educators, and ultimately on how to prepare students for the future.



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