

# PILLARS OF EMPLOYABILITY: IMPLEMENTING AN EMPLOYABILITY FRAMEWORK AT UCL



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## SUMMARY

A UCL bespoke employability framework has been produced known as “UCL Pillars of Employability”. This has been created after conducting a full analysis of the UCL context for employability, and existing sector-wide employability frameworks and literature. To accompany the employability framework a curriculum map and audit tool has been produced to aid programme design and review through an employability lens. The UCL Pillars of Employability also helps students frame their employability learning and track progress. This case study explores how the framework came about and has been utilised at UCL for programme design, review, and student support.

## CONTEXT

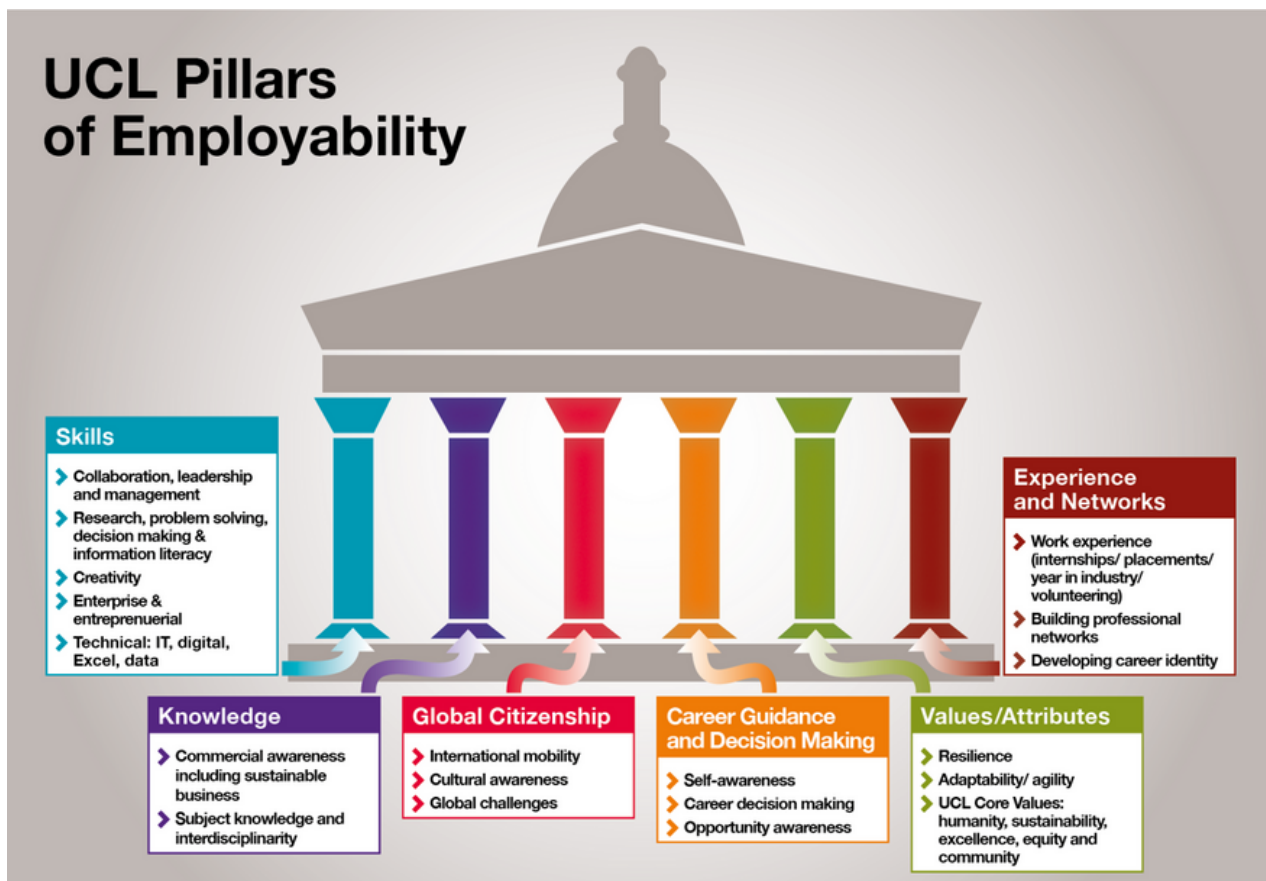
The development of the UCL Pillars of Employability is the result of an extensive literature review conducted in 2020 covering the future skill requirements of global recruiters, the key attributes required for career success, and a wide range of best practice examples from across the sector. Many studies (York and Knight, 2006; Artess et al, 2016) have emphasised the complexity of employability as a concept with lots of different definitions. The UCL Pillars framework draws on an institutional and personalised definition of employability. This is in keeping with the Advance HE’s (2013) recommendation that the first step in embedding employability in the curriculum is to have an institutional definition which includes all stakeholders, is explicit at an institutional and programme level, and is shared with students.

A detailed research report was produced by Amy Lourenco, UCL Careers to accompany the framework. This provided an analysis of the UCL context for employability, a survey of the wide range of employability frameworks utilised across the sector, and a review of the broader employability skills literature. Having this robust research base enabled UCL Careers to gain the institutional backing and academic credibility it needed to implement the framework. Our aim was to ensure that the resulting UCL bespoke employability framework would be adopted by module leaders, programme teams, UCL departments and faculties.

It was designed to give UCL a common language with which to discuss employability and enable the analysis of our curriculum through an employability lens. It also enables the surfacing and articulation of the employability benefits of our programmes to students. This provides UCL Careers with a tool to engage in conversations with programme leads about how employability provision for our students can be improved and embedded. Embedding employability into our programme design ensures that all students have equality of opportunity, including those from widening participation backgrounds who may not be able to engage with the existing extra-curricular employability opportunities (The Bridge Group, 2017).

There are 6 pillars in the UCL framework; namely, Skills, Knowledge, Global Citizenship, Career Guidance and Decision-Making Values/Attributes, Experience and Networks (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: UCL Pillars of Employability (Staff version)



These are the areas of learning and personal development that our research suggested UCL students and graduates needed to prepare them for lifelong learning. All the pillars are interconnected and should be underpinned by the student's ability to reflect on and articulate the learning in each area. The bullet points underneath each pillar provide a starting point for discussion with programme teams. They are not an exhaustive list, and each programme or department will have a different take on what is important for their students regarding that pillar.

A student version of the framework was also created in collaboration with a group of students (see Figure 2). This is used in student careers workshops and appointments.

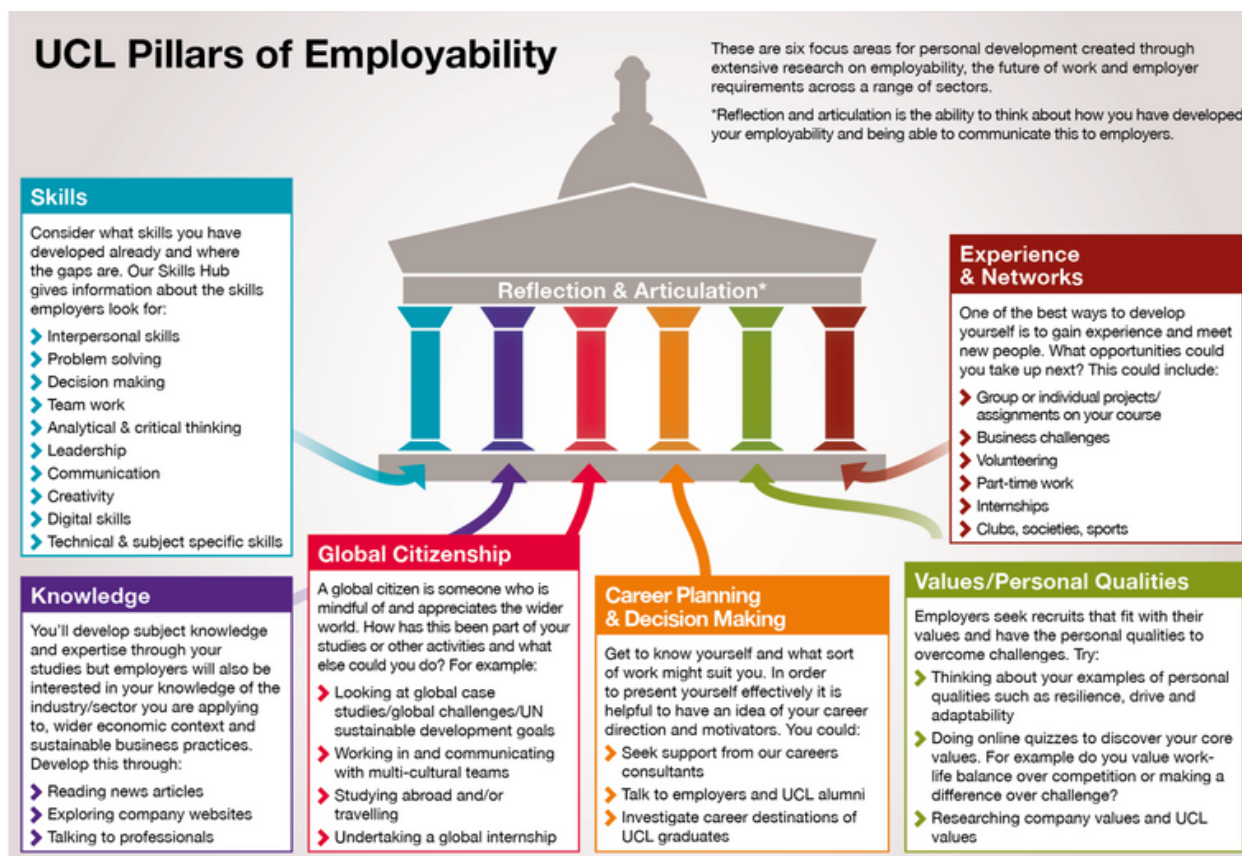


Figure 2: UCL Pillars of Employability (Student version)

## METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

Following the literature review and design of the framework in 2020, the framework was endorsed by the UCL Education Committee in 2021. Since then, the framework has been used in new programme design, existing programme review and student support.

### New Programme Design

In 2022, UCL opened a new campus at Stratford in East London. By 2025, there are expected to be 4000 students studying across two new buildings. In 2021, prior to the opening of the first UCL 'East building' the UCL East Academic Planning team invested in two days a week employability support for new programmes. This support was delivered via a dedicated Senior Careers Consultant. The Senior Careers Consultant met with all new programme teams and used the UCL Pillars of Employability framework to ensure that employability was embedded into their programme design process.

The framework was introduced at several different stages of the programme development journey. For example, during the early stages of development it was used to generate ideas for authentic assessments and employability-related learning outcomes for individual modules, or even for entire programmes. The framework also was used to generate ideas for different learning activities, experiences and topics that would enhance students' employability.



Towards the end of the programme development process, the framework was then used to assess and provide feedback to programme teams prior to final submission to the University programme approval committee. The programme team were provided with a comprehensive 'UCL East' endorsement feedback document, which included feedback on various pedagogical elements of programme design, including employability. Each "pillar" of employability was assessed in detail to identify what employability content was present and where possible gaps might lie. These gaps could then be addressed prior to the final approval process or delivery of the programme. This feedback on the employability content of each programme, also enhanced marketing materials by providing details of the potential employability impact and career destinations of these new, as yet untested, programmes.



Employer feedback was also incorporated into the new programme design process, with programmes drawing upon existing industry boards and connections to gain feedback on the work relevance of modules and programmes, as well as their potential impact on students' career success in relevant industries. In some instances, employer workshops were run by the programme team with employability questions overseen by the Senior Careers Consultant. With one new MSc Public History programme, for example, this involved a lively debate with staff working in national heritage institutions, museums, and media outlets. The focus group discussed the sorts of work and activities a new graduate might get involved in, the current challenges and future trends in the sector, and the skills that new graduates might require. All of these employability-related discussions then informed the final programme proposal.

The Pillars of Employability have also now been incorporated into our institution-wide programme design and 'ABC Learning Design' workshops led by UCL's Programme Development unit in the Arena Centre (UCL's centre for research-based education).

### **Existing Programme Review**

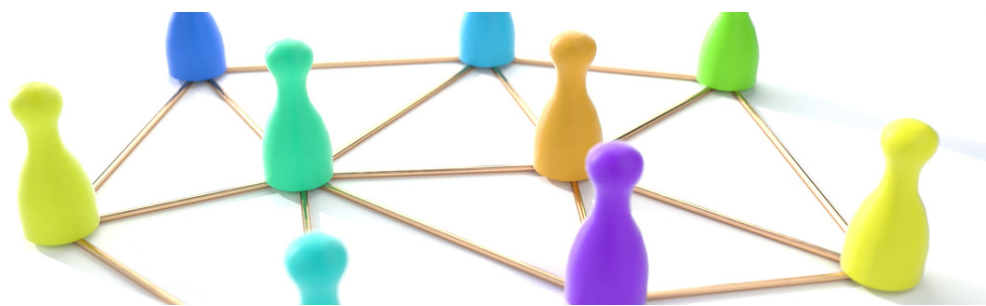
Starting in summer 2021, Careers Consultants at UCL have also been using the framework to review the existing employability provision in their allocated departments. Approximately 16 programmes have been reviewed so far. Using the pillars as a starting point, they have each reviewed one of the main undergraduate programmes in their departments to ascertain where employability content is already present and where some of the gaps might lie. The review process included interviews with staff and alumni as well as desk-based research of departmental reports, online learning materials and module specifications.

This process of review has enabled Careers Consultants and our work-related-learning staff to develop careers education relevant to a subject areas' particular employability gaps. It also enables them to make recommendations for future changes to the programme leads.

Specific examples of recommendations that have already led to changes, include the switching of computer programming languages advised by feedback from alumni questionnaires, introducing alumni-led case studies on a range of relevant industry areas, and a new alumni-led mentoring programme and workshop.

### **Student Support**

The development of a student version of the framework also enables our careers consultants to use it as a reflective tool when working with students. For example, in a workshop or appointment our careers consultants can ask students to fill in a blank copy of the framework reflecting on their own development. Students are then provided with a structure to help them reflect on where they have developed employability skills through their degree, where they might need to develop further, and actions they may need to take next, as a result. Students can even use the framework to repeat the process to support their next steps after graduation.



## ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

### **New Programme Design**

All 30 new UCL East programmes were reviewed prior to programme and module approval committee (PMAP) using this new audit process. This was an effective way to get programme designers to think about employability from the outset, rather than as an add-on at the end. It also proved an effective way for academic planning and careers teams to come together to work on programme design. This collaborative design process was recognised in our nomination for a UCL Education Award in 2022.

We have now recruited a UCL East Careers team leader to provide ongoing support to these programmes and to help them implement their plans for future development. In some instances, this increased focus on employability has even resulted in departments recruiting new staff to resource these areas. For example, in our new School of Creative and Cultural Industries programme teams have developed ambitious plans for work-related learning in the curriculum, including placements and industry related projects. To resource this activity, they have appointed a Work-Related Learning Manager and have the budget to recruit a further three Work Related Learning Officers in the future. Similarly, our Global Business School for Health which includes a focus on professional development, careers coaching and industry mentors, have also recruited a new Careers Education Manager.



### **Existing Programme Review**

In November 2022, UCL Careers Consultants came together to evaluate and share progress on the process of reviewing existing programmes using the UCL Pillars of Employability framework. Some of the key findings on the strengths of this process included:

- Staff reported that it was very helpful to become so well acquainted with a programme in one of their allocated departments. Despite some staff having worked with a department for many years they were still able to uncover skills, personal development modules, and other employability elements of their programmes they had never encountered before. This increased awareness of the learning students were encountering significantly helped their interactions with both students and academics in the department. It also revealed opportunities to enhance the careers consultant offer or embed careers education into the newly discovered modules. This process of embedding into core learning helped with the perennial problem of student engagement in optional and add-on workshops. Reviewing their own careers education programmes and work-related learning activities as a result of these employability audits, also provided a catalyst for change and introduced new initiatives, such as our alumni careers events.
- One perennial issue reported by our Careers Consultants was the additional support required by students to connect their studies to the world of work and to recognise the skills they had developed. This support is addressed through the 'reflection and articulation' aspect of the framework. At the end of the review process, our Careers Consultants realised it would be good to capture their own reflections on the employability content of the programmes they had reviewed with a view to feedback this information to students. It has been agreed that this could be achieved through the development of a student workshop which communicates the findings of the analysis the consultants have completed.
- Staff also reported that it would be useful to collaborate with students themselves and bring them into the programme review process in the future.



Some of the key findings on the challenges of this process included:

- As Careers staff we don't "own" the curriculum and can only make recommendations, which may not always be implemented. This is a particular challenge if programmes are very traditional in teaching, learning and assessment methods and reliant on extra-curricular offerings for their students' skills development. In this instance, the key to success is to have good departmental relationships and staff who are very engaged with careers and employability.
- Some Careers staff got bogged down too early in the desk-based aspects of reviewing and analysing modules. In retrospect, they felt it was good to get an overview at the start, but that it was better to get an understanding of current conversations regarding careers and employability with programme staff at an earlier stage, so that they had the right questions to ask later when returning to the analysis and writing up of the reports.
- The alumni interviews which we used as part of the process were felt to be useful but it was often difficult to engage alumni in the first place, occasionally leading to findings based on the views of only one or two former students.
- It was important to emphasise with programmes that the framework is flexible and the bullet points under each heading are just starting points and not meant to be a 'one size fits all' approach. For example, one department reported that they felt some of the categories were not relevant to them as a literary subject area. These included areas such as commercial awareness, technical skills, and enterprise.





## REFLECTION/CONCLUSIONS & NEXT STEPS

Progress in implementing the UCL Pillars of Employability across an institution as large as UCL has had its challenges. The large number of programmes at UCL (currently over 1000) with many optional modules means that Careers Consultants have had to focus their initial analysis on their allocated department's main or largest undergraduate programmes. UCL is about to embark on a programme architecture project as part of the UCL Strategic Plan 2022-27. This new approach will hopefully streamline the number of programmes we need to work with and make this work more manageable.

In 2022/23, our Careers Consultants will also trial partnering with students on the programme analysis process. We will be supported in this process by the UCL's Arena Centre (UCL's centre for research-based education) and their Student Quality Reviewers team. We hope that this new student input will enrich our analysis whilst also helping with the identification of other current students and alumni for interview.

Due to difficulties in gaining traction with a few particular departments, our staff have recommended that future analysis be baked into existing institutional processes. This is currently being considered and our new UCL Strategic Plan 2022-27 includes projects that could support this. One of these projects is the creation of Faculty Education Teams which will involve all staff members that support education for UCL's faculties. These teams will be responsible for developing and embedding the new UCL education framework, programme architecture and other priority actions related to education that are identified by the faculty. These might include, student feedback, continuation and completion rates, graduate outcomes and the BAME awarding gap.

In a period of intense change over the pandemic period it has sometimes been difficult to get the timing of these conversations correct to ensure optimal departmental engagement. We hope that in the post-pandemic period, more time for these programme development and review conversations will be available.

One major benefit of the Pillars of Employability Framework has been the creation of a shared language around employability, in addition to its use as a tool in programme development and review. Rather than endless debate on the meaning and definition of employability, we can instead focus on improving outcomes for students. Implementation of the framework has been very timely with a new UCL Education strategy just published and a closer working relationship between UCL Careers and UCL Arena Centre for Research-Based Education giving a renewed institutional focus on employability.

# HYPERLINKS & SUPPORTING DOCUMENTS

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Yorke, M. and Knight, P.T. (2006) Embedding employability into the curriculum. Learning and Employability. Series 1 No. 3. Higher Education Academy. Available at: [http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/employability/id460\\_embedding\\_employability\\_into\\_the\\_curriculum\\_338.pdf](http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/employability/id460_embedding_employability_into_the_curriculum_338.pdf)

[UCL Careers – Staff Support for Embedding Employability at UCL](#)

[UCL Careers – Student Support for Developing Employability Skills at UCL](#)

[UCL East](#)

[UCL Arena Centre – Programme Development Unit](#)

[UCL Strategic Plan 2022-27](#)



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