From uncertainty to clarity: A career plan task empowering first-year university students

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Abstract

This study explored the development and implementation of a Career Plan assessment task within an undergraduate degree. The task was designed to support first-year university students in exploring and positively developing their professional identity and confidence in achieving their career goals. Embedded within the curriculum, the assessment required students to complete five structured steps: Source, Analyse, Identify, Develop and Reflect. Through these steps, students identified, explored and demonstrated their self- and career-opportunity awareness, recognised and developed their employability skills and career aspirations, and clarified their sense of purpose for their future career direction. Evaluation of this task highlighted its positive impact on students, revealing growth in their confidence and professional identity. The structured nature of the task provided a clear framework for career planning, equipping students with practical skills and fostering a deeper understanding of their career aspirations. Overall, the findings demonstrate that this career planning intervention was both effective and highly valued by students, supporting their vocational development and career readiness during their transition into university life.

Keywords

career planning assessment, first-year university students, professional identity, career readiness, employability

Introduction

Investment in education – whether by governments, communities, families or individuals – is widely recognised as a cornerstone of personal and societal advancement. However, in recent years, the direct relationship between education and prosperity has been increasingly questioned (Brown et al., 2020). Despite this evolving debate, the value of higher education remains a key focus for governments, communities, graduates and employers, who continue to assess the expected returns on university degrees, particularly in terms of employability and economic outcomes. Employment prospects, as evidenced by job-related factors, remain a central motivator for most students pursuing higher education (Norton & Cakitaki, 2016). This emphasis on economic returns highlights the broader pressures facing higher education systems worldwide.

These pressures are particularly evident in the challenging and dynamic environment in which higher education institutions operate. Rising costs, increased competition for enrolments, diverse student demographics and funding constraints shape this landscape (Van Antwerpen & Van Schalkwyk, 2024). In Australia, where 44 universities serve a highly varied student body, these challenges are further intensified by governmental expectations to improve student retention, degree completion rates and graduate employment outcomes (Tertiary Education Quality and Standards Agency, 2025). These metrics are critical not only for institutional success but also for aligning educational outputs with the nation's workforce demands (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). The alignment between education and workforce readiness reflects a growing focus on the economic and societal roles of universities.

Student retention, a key metric for institutional performance, highlights the intersection of these challenges. In 2022, 21% of domestic students in Australia deferred or discontinued their studies, despite public universities receiving over $22 billion in government funding the previous year (Norton, 2023). This high attrition rate has significant consequences for both individuals and institutions. For students, non-completion often leads to limited job prospects and reduced lifetime earnings (Deloitte Access Economics, 2016). For universities, attrition results in lost revenue, reputational damage and diminished capacity to address skill shortages in critical fields (Jobs and Skills Australia, 2024). These interconnected outcomes emphasise the urgency of developing strategies to improve retention, linking institutional performance with national economic and societal needs.

To effectively address these challenges, fostering students' engagement, sense of purpose and professional identity is crucial. Research consistently highlights the pivotal role of purpose in enhancing academic persistence and success (Lizzio & Wilson, 2010; Damon, 2008). According to Damon et al. (2003, p. 121), purpose can be defined as a 'stable and generalised intention to accomplish something meaningful to oneself and beneficial to the world.' This future-oriented mindset has been linked to numerous benefits, including improved psychological well-being, higher levels of life satisfaction and even better physical health outcomes (Boyle et al., 2010; Hill & Turiano, 2014). These findings underscore the transformative potential of purpose-driven education in shaping students' holistic development and success.

For university students, cultivating a sense of purpose has a profound impact on academic motivation, resilience and sustained engagement (Bundick et al., 2010; Malin, 2023). Purpose-driven curricula and initiatives that integrate personal development with career readiness play a critical role in addressing retention challenges (Astin et al., 2011; Harris-Reeves et al., 2022). Research indicates that structured career planning tasks boost students' self-efficacy and confidence in their professional aspirations (Wei, 2025; Yiming et al., 2024). Engaging in targeted career interventions helps students develop clearer career pathways, leading to greater persistence and motivation (Clydesdale, 2015). Moreover, tailored programs that incorporate experiential learning and career coaching have been shown to significantly enhance students' self-efficacy and career confidence (Gu et al., 2020; Amiet et al., 2020). Notably, such initiatives can increase student retention rates by up to 15% (Tinto, 2017), underscoring the tangible benefits of embedding purpose-driven education within university programs.

Career readiness – closely linked to students' sense of purpose – equips individuals with the skills, knowledge and confidence needed to navigate the professional world (Herbert et al., 2020). In contrast, career indecision – characterised by uncertainty about interests and direction – can undermine self-efficacy and increase perceived barriers to success (Jaensch et al., 2015). According to goal-setting theory, establishing clear and challenging goals enhances motivation and performance (Locke & Latham, 2002), making structured career planning particularly valuable during early university years. Research supports embedding such planning into first-year curricula, with studies showing that integration within Personal Development Planning (Monks & Conway, 2006), career modules (Stebleton & Diamond, 2018) and work-based learning (Rutina & Soika, 2020) improves student engagement, confidence and career preparedness. Waddell et al. (2015) further demonstrate that these initiatives strengthen resilience and planning skills. Collectively, these findings support the implementation of holistic career development programs that incorporate self-assessment and goal

setting – approaches that not only reduce barriers but also enhance well-being, academic outcomes and students' transition into the workforce (Song, 2024).

The development of professional identity further prepares students for future careers. Professional identity, which encompasses an understanding of one's professional interests and values, is cultivated through introspection and practical experiences (Jackson, 2017; Harris-Reeves & Mahoney, 2017). Activities, such as internships, mentoring and experiential learning, deepen students' understanding of their chosen fields and enhance their commitment to career trajectories (Johnson & Main, 2020). This process supports the formation of pre-professional identity (PPI), which includes professional knowledge, judgment and adaptability – qualities essential for career success (Trede et al., 2012; Hinchliffe & Jolly, 2011).

Career readiness initiatives that integrate academic learning with practical skill development strengthen students' sense of purpose and professional identity (Lewis et al., 2025). These initiatives build on the premise that bridging theoretical knowledge with real-world applications is essential for preparing students to navigate career transitions and uncertainties. High-intensity, action-based assignments have been particularly effective in fostering career adaptability, a key competency characterised by concern, control, curiosity and confidence (Lam & Santos, 2018; Savickas et al., 2018). Career adaptability, in turn, has been shown to correlate positively with proactive career behaviours and informed decision-making (Rudolph et al., 2017). By cultivating these attributes, students not only enhance their employability but also address the retention challenges identified earlier, positioning themselves for successful transitions into professional environments.

Complementing these efforts is the development of employability traits, such as resilience, adaptability and proactive career management. Dispositional employability, as defined by Fugate and Kinicki (2008), empowers students to maintain optimism about their career prospects and actively engage in job-seeking and professional development activities. Universities play a crucial role in embedding these traits into their curricula through targeted initiatives, equipping students to adapt to rapidly changing job markets and seize opportunities for growth (McArdle et al., 2007; Torrent-Sellens et al., 2016). This focus on employability traits not only benefits individual students but also enhances the broader workforce's capacity to respond to economic demands, reinforcing the direct link between education and workforce readiness (Fajaryati et al., 2020).

High-impact practices (HIPs), such as learning communities and service-learning programs, provide additional strategies for enhancing student engagement and retention (Kuh, 2008). These practices foster academic and social integration, addressing the diverse needs of student populations while supporting their long-term success. Participation in HIPs has also been linked to higher rates of graduate employment, further demonstrating their value in connecting educational experiences with workforce outcomes (Miller et al., 2018). By integrating these holistic approaches, universities can build on the foundations established by career readiness and employability initiatives, ensuring a cohesive and supportive pathway for student development.

The importance of early intervention cannot be overstated, as the beginning of university plays a pivotal role in a student's career development by fostering cognitive growth and clarifying career goals (Super, 1953). Career development programs introduced during the first year of university establish a strong foundation for students' future success (Hoi & Huebert, 2005). Engaging students in career-oriented initiatives from the outset reduces uncertainty and encourages proactive approaches to professional development (Hackett & Betz, 1995; Kuh, 2016). Tailored career assessments and structured plans help students align their academic pathways with career aspirations, addressing existing gaps in career preparation (Herr, 2001; Harris-Reeves, 2023). These interventions provide clarity and direction, reinforcing the critical connections between academic engagement, personal development and long-term career success.

This study explored the perceived value of a Career Plan task embedded in a first-year university subject by examining how the structured activity influenced students' career clarity, professional

identity and readiness for future employment. Specifically, the research purpose was to understand how the Career Plan impacted students' confidence in setting career goals, identifying necessary skills and aligning academic experiences with professional aspirations. By evaluating student perceptions, the study aimed to provide insights into the effectiveness of early career development interventions in enhancing student engagement, retention, and long-term career success.

Method

Context for career plan development

The *Career Plan* task was initially developed and integrated into a first-year subject within the Bachelor of Sport Development. This undergraduate degree offers a variety of career pathways, including event management, sport and facility management, physical activity promotion and roles within grassroots organisations or with elite athletes, all without guidance or oversight from an accrediting body.

The student demographic primarily comprises male, first-generation students who typically possess low academic capital. Given the diverse nature of this cohort, it is essential to design and implement a curriculum that fosters capability, purpose, resourcefulness, connection, and identity. This approach is guided by the principles of the *five senses of success* model (Lizzio, 2006).

Career Plan task design and development

The *Career Plan* task accounted for 40% of the total subject grade and was structured around the SOAR (Self-awareness, Opportunity-awareness, Aspirations, Results) model (Kumar, 2007). This model was selected for its applicability in career development learning and its ability to align students' personal goals with industry demands.

Designed using situated learning theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991), the Career Plan task integrates real-world experiences and resources within enriched learning environments. This approach fosters self-awareness, employability skills, professional identity and purpose through a structured five-step approach (refer to Figure 1**Error! Reference source not found.**):

1. Source Job Advertisements — Students select two job advertisements relevant to Sport Development and their interests.

2. Analyse Job Requirements — Students identify essential and desirable characteristics in the advertisements, including the skills, knowledge and attributes sought by employers.

3. Evaluate Self- and Opportunity Awareness — Students reflect on their existing skills, identify gaps, map the relevance of their degree coursework and plan co-curricular activities to enhance their employability.

4. Develop a Timeline — Students create a personalised timeline outlining milestones and goals for skill and experience acquisition throughout their degree.

5. Reflect and Plan — Students articulate their career goals, provide rationales for their choices and develop actionable plans for achieving them.

Figure 1: Five steps to complete career plan assessment

First-year students enrolled in the Bachelor of Sport Development in 2023/24 received structured guidance to support the development of their Career Plan, helping them understand the requirements of each step and its significance for their future. Throughout the semester, students participated in face-to-face sessions covering key areas such as job search strategies, job advertisement analysis and

evidencing relevant skills. These sessions equipped students with practical tools and insights to navigate the job market with confidence while exploring diverse career opportunities within the sports sector.

This experiential approach (Lave & Wenger, 1991) fostered the development of cognitive information processing skills, enabling students to make informed career decisions and reduce career-related anxiety, aligning with the framework proposed by Peterson et al. (1991). Students were also encouraged to connect their degree curriculum to real-world career requirements, allowing them to articulate how their academic experiences positioned them as competitive candidates for future employment.

In addition to these sessions, students explored co-curricular activities, identified as crucial for enhancing their resumes and standing out in a competitive job market. Engaging in these activities helped students gain hands-on experience, develop additional skills and build a well-rounded profile to support their employability goals.

Although the program delivery remained consistent in both 2023 and 2024, the 2024 sessions were condensed into an 8-week format, compared to the previous 12-week structure, due to university scheduling constraints. However, the teaching team remained the same, and the content was delivered consistently, thoroughly and comprehensively, to maintain the integrity of the learning experience.

Ethics approval

This project was approved by the Griffith University Human Research Ethics Committee (Ethics No. 2015/734). Participant anonymity and confidentiality were maintained throughout the research.

Study design

This study aimed to explore the influence of the Career Plan task on students' career planning and professional identity development. By combining multiple data collection methods, the research sought to provide a holistic understanding of how the Career Plan task affected students' career clarity and confidence.

This paper presents findings based on data gathered from:

- The Career Plan survey (2015–2022 and 2023–2024)

- The Career Plan reflection (2023–2024)

- Student Evaluation of Course (SEC) surveys (2015–2024)

From 2015 – 2022, an employability survey was conducted with student volunteers from various health-related degrees to explore a range of employability tasks. Findings revealed that the Career Plan task, alongside other employability tasks, was widely recognised as a valuable initiative for enhancing students' career readiness. These results ultimately led to the publication of the study (Harris-Reeves et al., 2024).

Building on our previous research (Harris-Reeves et al., 2024), a mixed-methods approach was adopted to further evaluate students' perceptions of the Career Plan. Specifically, students from the 2023–2024 Sport Development cohorts were invited to complete an updated version of the original employability survey, now titled the Career Plan survey.

This revised survey*1* retained five quantitative questions from the initial instrument and utilised a 5-point Likert scale – ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree – to assess students' clarity, confidence and perceived relevance of the Career Plan task. Participation was voluntary and the survey questions were:

1) *1*The Career Plan helped me to identify my career goals.
2) The Career Plan improved my clarity around career direction.
3) The Career Plan was useful in planning for my career.
4) The Career Plan was useful in planning for my future.
5) The Career Plan helped me to understand my profession.

The Likert responses from 2015–2024 were included in the current study to evaluate the consistency and effectiveness of the Career Plan task over an extended period, providing a comprehensive understanding of its impact across different cohorts. By comparing the 2015–2022 and 2023–2024 cohorts, the analysis aimed to assess whether students' perceptions of the task remained stable or had shifted due to changes in educational practices, student expectations, or external factors such as evolving workforce demands. This comparison serves to validate the long-term relevance and effectiveness of the Career Plan task in supporting students' career clarity, confidence and understanding of their future profession.

Additionally, incorporating data from both the 2015-2022 and 2023-2024 cohorts provides a robust quantitative foundation for interpreting the qualitative data, enabling the identification of emerging trends and insights.

Qualitative data collection

In addition to quantitative data, qualitative feedback was collected to gain deeper insights into students' experiences with the Career Plan task. As part of this process, students were required to submit a Career Plan reflection alongside their Career Plan assignment. The reflection prompted students to respond to the following questions:

1) Reflect and share how you feel about your future now you have completed the Career Plan task;
2) Reflect and explain the effect the Career Plan has had on your confidence to achieve your career goals; and
3) Reflect and explain the most worthwhile aspects of the Career Plan task to help you plan for your future.

Further qualitative data was obtained from written comments in the institution's SEC surveys. These surveys, designed to capture students' perceptions of teaching, resources, assessments and overall satisfaction, provided anonymous and candid feedback. Open-ended questions encouraged students to highlight course strengths and suggest areas for improvement, offering additional unsolicited insights into the impact of the Career Plan task at the semester's conclusion.

The Career Plan survey and Career Plan reflection questions were collaboratively developed by three independent academics and underwent extensive review to ensure validity and alignment with the study's objectives.

Quantitative data analysis

Responses to the five Likert-scale questions in the Career Plan survey were analysed using a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) to determine whether there were significant differences between the 2015–2022 cohort (Harris-Reeves et al., 2024) and the 2023–2024 cohort. MANOVA was selected to evaluate differences across the five questions simultaneously, accounting for potential correlations between them.

To prepare the data for analysis, responses were standardised using z-scores to control for differences in scale and ensure comparability across the two groups. The independent variable for the MANOVA was cohort (2015–2022 or 2023–2024), while the dependent variables were the five survey questions (Q1–Q5). Wilks' Lambda, Pillai's Trace, Hotelling-Lawley Trace and Roy's Greatest Root were used as

test statistics to evaluate multivariate effects, as each provides a slightly different estimate of explained variance and sensitivity to assumption violations. Using multiple criteria enhances robustness when assumptions such as normality or homogeneity of variance-covariance matrices may be in question, particularly with modest or unequal group sizes (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019), with the significance threshold set at $p < 0.05$.

Qualitative data analysis

Student responses to the open-ended questions in the Career Plan reflection were analysed using systematic thematic analysis to categorise textual information. The number of times each theme appeared across student responses was manually tallied by the research team. As such, these values represent theme counts, not statistical frequencies, and should be interpreted as indicative of common topics rather than quantitative prevalence. After familiarising with the data and generating initial codes, multiple rounds of review were conducted to identify and refine key themes and patterns, following Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis guidelines (2006; 2022).

For the Career Plan reflection analysis, two researchers independently familiarised themselves with the data, generated initial codes, identified and reviewed themes before reaching a consensus on definitions and naming. This inductive approach allowed themes to 'speak for themselves' rather than being constrained by a pre-existing theoretical framework.

This process continued until no new properties, dimensions or relationships were identified, aligning with the principles of grounded theory (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Additionally, open-ended feedback from the institutional SEC surveys was reviewed and unsolicited comments regarding the Career Plan were identified.

Results

This section includes brief interpretive commentary on key patterns observed in the data. Broader implications and connections to the literature are explored further in the Discussion.

Demographic data

Demographic data from students who completed the Career Plan task during the first year of their Sport Development degree is presented in Table 1. In summary, the cohorts were primarily domestic students (97%), aged 17-19 years (73%), with no significant gender differences.

Table 1: Demographic data for students enrolled in the subject with the career plan

	Participant demographic	Employability survey 2015-2022	Career plan survey 2023-2024	Career plan reflection 2023-2024
N		72	37	118
Gender	Female	33.3%	59%	51%
	Male	66.7%	41%	49%
Age	<16	-	-	1%
	17-19	72.2%	73%	81%
	20-24	26.4%	27%	16%
	25-29	1.4%	-	2%
Status	Domestic	94.3%	97%	97%
	International	1.4%	3%	3%
	First Nations peoples	4.3%	-	4%

Analysis of quantitative data

Students completed the Career Plan task; their survey ratings for this task are displayed in Figure 1 (Q1-5). The Career Plan was highly valued by students for its positive influence on their career planning and direction. Students reported an enhanced understanding of their profession and greater support for future employment success, with average ratings exceeding 4.0 for all five questions.

Figure 1. Student ratings to the impact of developing a career plan
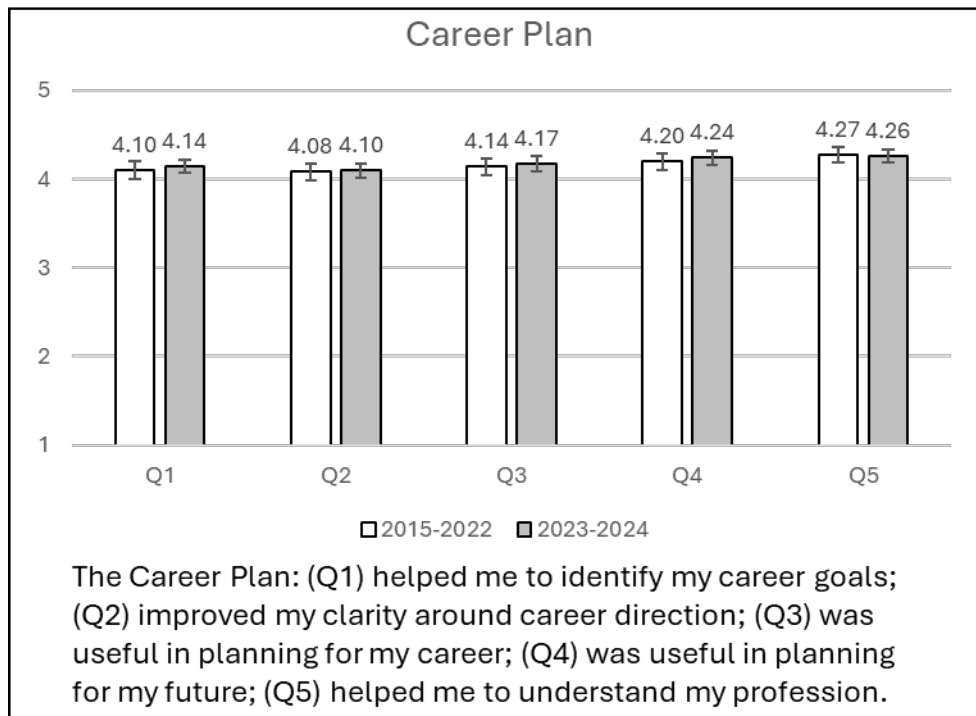
Student responses to the five Likert-scale questions in the Career Plan survey were consistent across both the 2015–2022 and 2023–2024 cohorts, with no statistically significant differences observed (MANOVA). The MANOVA results indicated that group differences did not explain the variance in responses, as reflected by Wilks' Lambda ($\lambda = 0.9980$), showing that nearly 100% of the variance was unexplained by group differences ($F(5, 182) = 0.0731$, $p = 0.9962$). Similarly, other test statistics – Pillai's Trace (trace = 0.0020), Hotelling-Lawley Trace (trace = 0.0020) and Roy's Greatest Root (root = 0.0020) – also confirmed the null hypothesis of no significant differences, all yielding $p > 0.05$.

These findings suggest that the two cohorts responded similarly across all five questions, reinforcing the consistency of student perceptions about the Career Plan task. The results align with previous research by Harris-Reeves et al. (2024), which also reported consistent feedback regarding the utility and relevance of the Career Plan.

Thematic analysis of qualitative data

Thematic analysis of 118 student responses to the Career Plan reflection identified nine primary themes (

*Table 2*Table 2): Career planning; Industry understanding; Future goals; Confidence building; and Clear pathway.

Table 22: The nine most commonly identified themes from student responses to the career plan reflection

Student feedback themes	Theme count 2023	Theme count 2024
Career planning	50	57
Industry understanding	24	55
Future goals	45	53
Confidence building	47	34
Clear pathway	20	32
Skill development	29	31
Step-by-step guidance	36	31
Timeline	14	27
Electives and co-curricular activities	6	23

The nine themes (Table 2

Table 2) comprised 614 responses from 118 students, confirming that each student reported multiple impacts of the Career Plan in their reflections. For the combined 2023 and 2024 cohorts, *Career planning* was the most prevalent theme in both years, while the prevalence of the other themes varied between cohorts. Each identified theme captured distinct aspects of the Career Plan's impact on students' perceptions of their career readiness and personal development. The five most prevalent themes are described below, supported by illustrative quotes to provide a comprehensive understanding of students' reflections.

The *Career planning* theme was identified in 107 responses (91%), highlighting the importance of the task. Students consistently described how the Career Plan helped them conceptualise and structure their approach to professional development. The systematic process of analysing job advertisements, identifying required qualifications and mapping timelines equipped students with tools to organise their career trajectories. One student noted: 'The Career Plan gave me clarity and a plan of action. It made me realise what I need to achieve and when I need to achieve it.' Another stated: 'The assessment made me feel organised about my future. I now have a structure that I can follow.' These reflections highlight how the Career Plan facilitated a proactive and structured approach to career preparation.

The *Future goals* theme appeared in 98 responses (88%), with students reflecting on how the Career Plan encouraged them to set realistic, specific goals for their academic and professional journeys. Through activities such as creating timelines and prioritising objectives, students gained a clear sense of direction. One participant noted: 'The Career Plan helped me set short- and long-term goals that align with my career aspirations.' Another explained: 'By mapping out my future, I know exactly what steps I need to take to reach my ultimate career goals.' The structured goal-setting process provided students with a tangible vision for their future, promoting sustained engagement and motivation.

The *Confidence building* theme was identified in 81 responses (73%), with students emphasising how the Career Plan boosted their self-assurance in achieving their professional aspirations. By breaking down their ambitions into manageable steps, students felt more in control of their future. One student stated: 'The Career Plan has built my confidence by showing me how to break my goals into achievable milestones.' Another reflected: 'I feel much more confident knowing that I have a roadmap to follow. It made me realise that my goals are attainable.' These insights highlight the role of the Career Plan in fostering a sense of capability and empowerment among students.

The *Industry understanding* theme was reported by 79 students (67%), indicating that the Career Plan helped them diversify and clarify their understanding of career opportunities within the industry. One student reflected: 'Understanding the requirements on a deeper level has taught me to fully comprehend what an employer is looking for and what to expect when applying for jobs.' Similarly, another student noted:

> *Finding two jobs that I would like to do in the future and breaking them down into the requirements needed helped me understand what is mandatory for jobs in the management side of the industry. This was the most beneficial part of the Career Plan, as it gave me a better understanding of the sport development industry. This knowledge will help me obtain employment in the sports sector.*

These reflections demonstrate how the Career Plan deepened students' awareness of industry expectations, positioning them for future employment.

The *Clear pathway* theme was evident in 52 responses (47%), with students expressing that the Career Plan provided them with a well-defined route towards achieving their professional aspirations. By organising career goals into actionable steps, students felt less overwhelmed and more focused. One student noted: 'The Career Plan gave me a clear path to follow, which has reduced my anxiety about the future.' Another reflected: 'I now have a step-by-step guide that outlines what I need to do to

succeed in my career.' These reflections highlight how the Career Plan can help students to visualise and navigate their career trajectories.

Skill gaps and targeted strategies identified by students

As part of the Career Plan task, students were asked to reflect on the skills required for their future careers and to identify areas in need of further development. The thematic analysis revealed that many students recognised specific skill gaps and outlined personalised strategies to address them. The reflective process of the task played a key role in enhancing their career self-awareness and motivating proactive planning.

Planning was the most prevalent identified skill gap (n = 28; 24%). Students expressed a need to improve their planning skills, including time management, task coordination and strategic preparation for long-term career goals. As one student shared: 'The Career Plan helped me structure my goals clearly, but I know I need to work on staying consistent with timelines.'

Other commonly identified skill gaps included *management* (n = 12; 10%), *networking* (n = 6; 5%) and *leadership* (n = 3; 3%). These areas were discussed by students in relation to taking initiative, managing workloads and building professional relationships.

Students proposed a variety of targeted strategies to address their skill gaps. The most common approach was *setting structured goals and timelines* (n = 110; 93%). Students described setting clear objectives and using timelines or planning techniques to stay focused, manage competing demands, and maintain momentum throughout their studies. As one student reflected:

> *Throughout the career plan I have gained confidence in my future by researching and planning ways I can improve my employability* […] *I have chosen [electives], analysed how they best suit my aspirations, and enrolled myself in the subjects. This also helps me be aware of my commitments and how to plan my schedule beyond this semester.*

The second most frequently mentioned strategy was the importance of *gaining practical experience* through volunteering, internships, or part-time work (n = 86; 73%). Students viewed experiential learning as critical for applying classroom knowledge in real-world contexts and building the confidence needed for future professional roles. One student stated:

> *The most worthwhile aspects of the career plan for me* […] *were looking for the co-curricular activities, for example, the volunteer roles and experiences. This showed me how easy it is to find these opportunities and how it can better my skills as well as how it'll look on my portfolio.*

Choosing relevant elective subjects was another common theme, identified by more than half of the students (n = 73; 62%). Their reflections on this theme often involved a deliberate intention to select subjects that would strengthen specific skills such as communication, leadership or digital literacy, thereby aligning academic choices with career goals. One student reported: 'Before the assessment I had not even looked through the options to see what was available, but now I have chosen electives, analysed how they best suit my aspirations, and enrolled myself in the subjects.'

A small number of students (n = 14; 12%) referred to the value of *networking and mentorship*. These students recognised that building industry connections and learning from more experienced professionals could offer valuable insight into their chosen fields and support their ongoing career development. As one student explained: 'The most worthwhile aspect of a career plan is setting clear goals, creating a timeline, and identifying resources [including] building a network of people and tools to overcome obstacles.'

Integration of SEC survey data

Unsolicited SEC survey feedback consistently praised the Career Plan for its real-world relevance and alignment with industry expectations. One student reflected on how course assessments were directly applicable to their future career, stating: 'The course provides assessment that is relevant to the real world and your future […] which is exciting and relaxing as you feel more set for your future endeavours.' Similarly, another student highlighted the value of completing the Career Plan to understand professional pathways: '[The course is] very helpful in understanding the types of career jobs in the sporting industry. The Career Plan was helpful for future planning, understanding the professional side of the industry, and learning how to become a professional.' These comments underscore how the Career Plan effectively supported bridging the gap between academic coursework and real-world career preparation.

The practical focus of the Career Plan was a recurring theme in SEC survey responses. Students appreciated the hands-on nature of the course and its emphasis on employability. One student remarked: 'The hands-on teaching and assessments – like the Career Plan – are actually useful and help me build my career.'

The personalised nature of the Career Plan task was identified as a key factor to its success. Students valued the opportunity to reflect on their individual career aspirations and receive tailored guidance. One student appreciated the strong teacher-student connection, noting: 'Great connection between students and teacher – really involved in how we developed our Career Plan.' Another student expressed how the Career Plan helped them align their academic pursuits with personal goals: 'Creating a career plan and understanding where I want to take my degree was also beneficial.' These comments demonstrate how the Career Plan task helped fosters a sense of agency and ownership over students' career trajectories.

The Career Plan also served as a motivational tool, inspiring students to think critically about their future and engage actively in their academic and professional development. One student shared: 'Doing a Career Plan has built my confidence for the future, and I now understand what I want to do after university.' This student comment highlights the Career Plan's role in instilling purpose and direction, motivating students to pursue their aspirations with confidence.

The comprehensive scope of the Career Plan, combined with its practical and motivational elements, made it a standout feature of the course. Students valued how it complemented other course components, such as industry guest speakers, coaching clinics, and practical activities. One student explained:

> Through this course, I have increased my understanding of what a career in this industry may look like. It has given me valuable insight into sport development through industry guests, practical classes, coaching clinics, and the Career Plan, all of which have increased my employability.

This integration of theory, practice and career planning created a holistic learning experience that effectively prepared students for the demands of the professional world.

Discussion

This study examined the impact of a purposefully designed, guided Career Plan task, building on previous research that identified the Career Plan as a critical tool for enhancing career readiness (Harris-Reeves et al., 2024). The findings from the current study highlight the effectiveness of the Career Plan in fostering career clarity, confidence and skill development. This is supported by the analysis of student responses to the Career Plan survey (Figure 2) and the thematic analysis of insights from the Career Plan reflection (**Error! Reference source not found.**Table 2).

The start of university or college is a critical phase in a student's career development, fostering cognitive growth while helping refine career aspirations (Super, 1953). However, this journey is

uniquely shaped by societal demands that influence how students experience and navigate this transformative period (Savickas et al., 2009). Recognising personalised career development as a key factor is essential, given the significant influence career decisions have on an individual's overall life outcomes (Hackett & Betz, 1995). A deliberate process of identifying and committing to a career plan enables students to align their personal, academic, and vocational aspirations cohesively (Fouad et al., 2016). While such decisions are particularly salient during higher education, career planning and adjustment remain ongoing and dynamic processes that evolve throughout life (Hartung et al., 2005).

To achieve these outcomes, the Career Plan task was designed using situated learning theory, which emphasises engagement in learning environments enriched by real-world experiences and resources (Lave & Wenger, 1991). These environments, guided by educators, helped students achieve their learning goals more effectively. This personalised approach was further tailored to align with each student's individual interests, ensuring the Career Plan task was both relevant and meaningful. By grounding the learning process in real-life applications, this method significantly boosted students' motivation, as evidenced by the strong agreement reflected in the Career Plan survey results (See Figure 2). The Career Plan task also encouraged students to engage with a wide range of employability resources while requiring them to conduct a personal audit and reflect on their own career readiness skills using the five-stage plan described earlier. This approach required students to develop their cognitive information processing skills, informing their career planning and reducing career anxiety, as proposed by Peterson et al. (1991).

The study's findings – demonstrating improved scores in career direction and goal clarity, along with frequent references to career planning in student feedback – suggest that the Career Plan task significantly enhanced students' confidence in navigating their career paths. This aligns with existing research on early career planning, which highlights the benefits of structured interventions in supporting career self-efficacy and informed decision-making (Gu et al., 2020; Monks & Conway, 2006; Rutina & Soika, 2020; Stebleton & Diamond, 2018; Waddell et al., 2015). For students with lower academic confidence, engagement in such tasks can play a critical role in sustaining motivation and increasing the likelihood of degree completion (Harris-Reeves et al., 2024).

Embedding initiatives like the Career Plan within the curriculum offers educators a practical means to connect academic content with real-world skill development (Harris-Reeves, 2023). Research shows that these integrative learning experiences enhance students' belief in their ability to achieve career goals (Amiet et al., 2020; Reese & Miller, 2006). Furthermore, emerging evidence links self-efficacy and career development to broader psychological outcomes, with life satisfaction and positive affect shown to mediate career adaptability (Yiming et al., 2024).

Grounded in the SOAR model (Kumar, 2007), the Career Plan task enhanced self-awareness and opportunity awareness by aligning students' personal goals with industry demands. Our research highlighted that this structured approach equipped students with the confidence and professional identity essential for effective career decision-making. This aligns with previous studies emphasising the value of career clarity, demonstrating that intentional interventions significantly improve student engagement and persistence by linking academic objectives to long-term professional aspirations (Bundick et al., 2010; Clydesdale, 2015; Wei, 2025). Notably, action-based assignments like the Career Plan have been shown to better support students' career exploration (Wei, 2025).

The findings of this study underscore the importance of fostering career clarity and purpose through structured learning experiences. Specifically, students reported that the Career Plan task helped them visualise their career paths, reinforcing motivation and commitment to their studies. This suggests that a clear sense of purpose enhances academic engagement and supports successful transitions into professional roles, consistent with previous research (Fouad et al., 2016; Trede et al., 2012). By aligning their studies with their future careers, the Career Plan task bridged the gap between academic learning and real-world applications, promoting a proactive, goal-oriented mindset essential for career readiness.

The establishment of specific and challenging goals, central to goal-setting theory (Locke & Latham, 2002), is a powerful mechanism for enhancing both motivation and performance. This framework was effectively applied in the design of the Career Plan task, transforming abstract career aspirations into concrete, actionable steps. By utilising structured goals, the task actively engaged students, empowering them to take ownership of their future career trajectories. This empowerment was reflected in predominant qualitative themes of *Career planning* and *Future goals*, highlighting the task's impact. Additionally, this systematic approach fostered a sense of agency while simultaneously enhancing readiness and self-confidence – critical factors closely linked to career satisfaction and adaptability (Reese & Miller, 2006; Savickas et al., 2018). This study highlights the importance of structured goal setting in preparing students for the complexities of their future careers, suggesting that such frameworks can lead to improved career outcomes by enhancing individuals' sense of control and adaptability in a dynamic labour market.

As part of the Career Plan task, students identified potential skill gaps and outlined targeted strategies for addressing them, emphasising both personal and professional growth. Student feedback highlighted how the reflective process encouraged them to seek out certifications, workshops and other co-curricular activities aligned with their career aspirations. These proactive behaviours align with Bridgstock's (2009) concept of career management competencies, which include self-awareness, strategic career planning and adaptability – skills increasingly recognised as essential for success in a rapidly evolving job market. By actively engaging in these activities, students are better equipped to navigate the complexities of their professional futures, positioning themselves for success in competitive environments. While our findings provide valuable insights into the immediate impacts of the Career Plan task, they are drawn from a specific cohort of Sport Development students. As such, the applicability of these results to other disciplines or contexts may be limited, and future research should explore the effectiveness of similar interventions across diverse student populations and institutional settings.

This study highlights the critical role of early interventions in developing professional identity – a clear, coherent understanding of one's career path and professional aspirations. Establishing a strong professional identity early in university significantly enhances students' career confidence and decision-making self-efficacy, both of which are essential for navigating career-related challenges. A well-formed professional identity fosters resilience, personal agency and sustained engagement – key factors contributing to both academic success and career preparedness (Harris-Reeves et al., 2022; Trede et al., 2012; Fouad et al., 2016). Participants in this study reported an increased sense of professional identity, which was closely linked to a sense of belonging within their chosen disciplines despite the diverse employment opportunities available to graduates. This reinforces the importance of integrating career development initiatives and professional identity-building strategies from the beginning of a degree program.

Governments, communities and universities alike recognise the pivotal role of higher education in shaping graduate success and employability. Universities provide comprehensive learning experiences, valuable resources, expert educators and thoughtfully designed curricula and assessments to empower students in building career readiness. However, universities must also emphasise the essential role that students themselves play in their career development, fostering a collaborative approach to professional success. While universities offer a wealth of resources, career readiness is ultimately shaped by a combination of personal traits – such as career decision-making styles and personality – alongside education-trainable skills (Fugate & Kinicki, 2008; McArdle et al., 2007). This highlights the importance of informed curriculum design and educator leadership in fostering student engagement with career planning and success.

Limitations and future research

While this study provides important insights into students' experiences with a structured, curriculum-embedded career planning task, several limitations must be acknowledged. First, the research was conducted with first-year Sport Development students at a single Australian university, limiting the generalisability of findings. Although the task was implemented within a diverse cohort, the results reflect a specific disciplinary and institutional context. Future studies should examine the applicability and impact of similar interventions across different programs, institutions and student demographics to assess their broader relevance.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data collected through reflections and surveys. While these methods captured rich, subjective insights into students' perceived growth in clarity, confidence and professional identity, they do not offer objective measures of behavioural change or long-term outcomes. As such, claims regarding the Career Plan task's role in equipping students for workforce success – while supported by short-term data – should be interpreted cautiously. Longitudinal research is required to determine whether the confidence, clarity and planning developed through this task are sustained over time and translate into improved graduate outcomes.

Third, the absence of a control or comparison group limits the ability to draw causal conclusions about the effectiveness of the intervention. Future research would benefit from incorporating control groups or quasi-experimental designs to evaluate whether the Career Plan task directly contributes to observed changes in student perceptions and planning behaviours.

To extend the impact of this research, future studies should incorporate additional outcome measures beyond student self-report. These may include indicators such as graduate employability rates, course progression or attrition rates, engagement with co-curricular opportunities and academic performance. Importantly, gathering feedback from employers about graduates' preparedness and skills alignment would offer valuable external validation of the Career Plan's effectiveness in bridging academic learning and workforce expectations.

Finally, tracking students over time through longitudinal methods – such as follow-up surveys or interviews after graduation – would provide a clearer picture of whether early career planning translates into tangible long-term benefits. Such evidence would strengthen the empirical foundation for structured, purpose-driven career development tasks and inform the design of scalable, evidence-based employability interventions in higher education.

Conclusion

This study demonstrated the value of embedding structured, reflective career planning tasks into the first-year university curriculum. The Career Plan provided students with a clear, scaffolded framework for identifying industry expectations, clarifying career aspirations and developing targeted strategies to enhance employability. Students reported increased clarity, confidence and self-awareness, along with a proactive approach to addressing skill gaps and setting realistic goals. These outcomes highlight the potential of early, discipline-relevant career interventions to foster professional identity and agency.

While this study focused on student experiences within a specific program and context, the findings offer valuable insights for designing scalable and purposeful career development initiatives. By integrating real-world relevance, self-assessment and structured reflection, the Career Plan model presents a practical approach to preparing students for the dynamic demands of the contemporary workforce. Future research can build on these foundations by exploring broader applications across disciplines and evaluating long-term impacts on graduate outcomes.

Conflict of interest

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

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No AI tools were used for data collection, coding, or analysis. All interpretations and conclusions are the result of the author's own academic judgement.

Author contribution

Harris-Reeves: Conceptualisation, methodology, investigation, writing – original draft and review & editing, project administration. **Pearson**: formal analysis, writing – original draft and review & editing, visualisation. **Massa**: formal analysis, writing – review and editing.

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