

GILE Journal of Skills Development

Supporting English Graduates Transition to Work: A Sustainable Careers Ecosystem Approach

Emma Lennox

Queen's University Belfast

 ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0000-7671-1982>

Abstract

In an era of accelerating automation, human-centered skills such as critical thinking, communication, and adaptability - hallmarks of an English degree - are becoming increasingly vital in the workplace. And yet English degree enrolment numbers, and value perception in a capitalist society, are both decreasing. This study examines experiences of English graduates, as they transition from a higher education non-specialised degree to the workplace. It uses the Sustainable Careers Ecosystem Theory (SCET) to highlight challenges faced, relevance of acquired skills, and support needed during this transitional period. Employing a constructivist grounded theory approach, the research uses qualitative semi-structured interviews with 21 English graduates. Data was thematically analysed and three core themes constructed: (1) who is responsible for English graduate employability, highlighting key stakeholders including universities, careers services, future employers, and individual students; (2) the importance of identifying a next step and embracing flexibility rather than pursuing a narrow predefined career goal; and (3) the retrospective appreciation of skills acquired through studying English.

This research addresses a gap in the literature by examining the experiences of non-specialist course alumni, focusing on the sustainability of English studies and the relevance of academic skills to the current labour market. It expands the use of the SCET to non-specialist subjects, highlighting its application in diverse sectors.

Findings highlight the need for enhanced collaboration between universities, careers services, and employers to support English graduates' transition into the workplace, addressing options available and articulation of skillset. This research contributes to ongoing discourse on non-specialist degree value in contemporary job markets, influencing educational policy and career guidance practices, highlighting the importance of the SCET.

Keywords: non-specialist careers, English graduates, graduate transitions, sustainable careers, sustainable careers ecosystem theory

1. Introduction

As the global job market becomes increasingly dynamic and competitive, university graduates face significant challenges in transitioning from academia to professional environments (Blokker et al., 2023). The ability of higher education institutions (HEIs) to prepare students effectively for employment has come under scrutiny, particularly for graduates of non-specialist disciplines such as English (Belfiore, 2015). While English degrees develop critical thinking, communication, and research skills, these competencies are often undervalued or misunderstood in the labour market (Williams et al., 2003; Belfiore, 2015; Robiul & Happy, 2023).

Although research has examined graduate transitions in vocational fields such as business (Jackson, 2014), engineering (Baytiyeh & Naja, 2011; Hawse & Wood, 2019), education (Wehbe, 2023) and medical disciplines (See et al., 2023; Smith & Pilling, 2008), studies focusing on generalist disciplines remain limited. Some research has explored career transitions in the arts (Christie, 2017) and creative industries (Haukka, 2011), yet there remains a gap understanding the specific transition experiences of English graduates. Addressing this gap is crucial - English graduates enter diverse professional roles, navigating shifting labour market expectations while leveraging their transferable skills. Despite this diversity, enrolments in English Studies at undergraduate level fell by 20% between 2012 and 2019 (Hopkins et al., 2023). A similar decline occurred at secondary education, with A-Level English enrolments decreasing overall from 2017 to 2024 (English Association, 2025). Although 2024 figures indicate a slight increase, sustained growth is essential to ensure the subject's long-term viability, and that skills gained from English degrees enter the workplace.

This study uses constructivist grounded theory and the Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (SCET) to examine English graduates' career transitions. SCET offers a holistic lens on the interaction between individual agency, meso-level influences (e.g. HEIs and employers), and macro-level labour market forces. Unlike traditional employability models, it integrates structural, personal, and time factors, making it well-suited to non-vocational pathways.

Drawing on semi-structured interviews with 21 English graduates, the research explores transition challenges, perceptions of skill relevance, and retrospective views on support. By applying SCET to a non-specialist field, the study enhances understanding of employability in disciplines with less defined career routes.

Findings offer insights for HEIs, career services, and policymakers aiming to support sustainable transitions. Meso-level actors, particularly universities and employers, play a key role in shaping outcomes. The study contributes to wider employability debates and aligns with SDG 4 (quality education) and SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth). It recommends aligning curricula with labour market needs, helping employers value transferable skills, and enhancing career development initiatives for English graduates.

2. Literature review

Career decision-making and transitions are shaped by complex interactions of personal, contextual, and temporal factors (Duffy & Dik, 2009; Patton & McMahon, 2015). These influences don't operate in isolation but evolve dynamically over time - especially pertinent for non-specialist subjects like English, whose graduate career trajectories are less linear and predictable than other vocational professionals (Bridgstock, 2011).

This review explores previous studies relating to post-university career transitions for non-specialised subjects and introduces the Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (SCET) as a theoretical framework. By situating SCET in the context of English graduates, critical gaps in research and practice are identified, with implications for both theoretical advancements in career development, and practical applications in HEI's and workforce integration.

2.1. University-to-work transitions

Moving from university to the workplace is a significant transition for new graduates. Previous literature reviews on this subject highlight the fragmented nature of current research, with variables including development of student identity, student engagement, fit between higher education and labour market, student motivation, student emotions, and learning approaches (Izzo et al., 2022). Existing key themes emphasise the difficulty of changing learning environments which make new graduates feel unprepared and uncertain (Tham & Lynch, 2017), unrealistic views of the labour market (Lopes de Melo & de Oliveria Borges, 2007) and a lack of planning for transition (Teixeira, 2002).

Research into the transition experiences of non-specialised courses is also fragmented. Findings from available studies highlight additional transition difficulties, including applying degree skills to new sectors (Christie, 2017; Bridgstock, 2011) and embracing flexible and protean careers (Shreeve & Smith, 2011; Bridgstock, 2006). These studies accentuate extra challenges which a student from a specialist subject may not encounter.

Several interventions are suggested, with key initiatives including university career services supporting recruitment processes (McIlveen & Pensiero, 2008), HEI's and employers supplying relevant industry work experience throughout a degree (Davis et al., 2009), and effective employer induction programmes (Hawse, 2019). The use of the alumni experience to provide example career paths is missing from the discourse, which could support successful and sustainable transitions.

2.2. Alumni conversations as career transition interventions

The significance of alumni feedback is reinforced by the structured collection of graduate outcome data in the UK. Since 1994, surveys have captured employment trends among university leavers, beginning with the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey and later transitioning to the Graduate Outcomes survey in 2016 (HESA, 2021). These insights inform university decision-making and contribute to institutional sustainability by demonstrating graduate success. However, these standardised metrics often fail to capture the complexity of individual transitions, particularly for graduates from non-specialist disciplines (Fryer, 2022).

Qualitative research examining the alumni experience of post-university transitions has focused on narrative-based studies, highlighting the personal, contextual, and structural factors shaping graduate career trajectories. Fleischman and English (2019) identified three key themes in successful alumni career transition experiences: the importance of work experience, the centrality of resilience, and the need for lifelong learning to integrate into the workplace. These findings align with broader research emphasising proactive career strategies - studies highlight the value of networking (Warren et al., 2016), the versatility of degrees in non-specialist disciplines (Kailanto et al., 2012), and the application of theoretical knowledge in professional contexts (Zhuang & Tao, 2022).

Existing alumni research has predominantly focused on STEM and business graduates (Warren et al., 2016; Zhuang & Tao, 2022; Larsson et al., 2022) or examined career transitions without considering subject-specific contexts (Fleischman & English, 2019; English et al., 2021). Aligning with proactive career strategies, informational interviews have been used with non-specialist STEM students (Lexis, 2021), supporting students to confirm career aspirations. While English degrees develop multiple skills, they do not map directly onto specific job titles or sectors, creating greater uncertainty in career transitions (Williams et al., 2003). Engaging English graduates through similar alumni interviews aims to enable current students to see concrete career pathways, enhancing confidence, preparedness, and decision-making.

Addressing this gap is critical, as insights from English alumni have wider relevance for graduates of other non-specialist disciplines. These students often struggle to identify career options, making alumni a valuable resource in shaping career education, employer engagement, and transition support. This study contributes to a broader understanding of sustainable career pathways, with alumni experiences serving as real-time indicators of how universities contribute to long-term employability.

2.3. Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory

With multiple factors impacting the career transitions of non-specialised graduates, the Sustainable Career Ecosystem Theory (SCET) provides a comprehensive framework, highlighting the interconnectedness of multiple actors, and conditions necessary for sustainable career outcomes (Donald, 2023; Donald & Jackson, 2023). Donald (2023) defines SCET as interdependent actors across higher education and workplaces, where individuals' lives and careers develop over time, emphasising sustainable outcomes for individuals, organisations, and society (p. xxvii).

This study focuses on university alumni as key actors operating at the intersection of university and workplace contexts, exploring their contributions to the sustainability of individual careers, university courses and professional sectors.

Importantly, SCET acknowledges the interplay between individual agency, institutional structures, and labour market fluctuations, making it pertinent for understanding how English graduates sustain their careers in diverse and evolving employment landscapes. This perspective is significant in creative industries, where career sustainability often depends on freelance work, short-term contracts, and adaptability (Bridges, 2018; Trier & Treffers, 2021).

This study extends the theory's applicability to non-vocational, humanities-based disciplines, demonstrating how SCET can be used to understand career development in fields where career paths are less defined, extending its relevance beyond traditional vocational areas. The critical role of HEI's within the career ecosystem expands the focus on educational actors, demonstrating how universities can actively contribute to sustainable career transitions and development.

By engaging with course alumni, this project illuminates how career-related resources and capital are accumulated and transferred within the ecosystem, particularly focusing on the role of social and cultural capital in non-specialised careers. This aligns with the theory's emphasis on resource conservation and generation (De Vos, et al., 2020). This application in a specific context could provide insights that help further integrate sustainable career theory (De Vos et al., 2020) with career ecosystem theory (Baruch & Rousseau, 2019), contributing to the ongoing theoretical development in this area.

While other career theories provide holistic views of career influences (Patton & McMahon, 2015; Hodkinson & Sparkes, 1997), they do not sufficiently account for the structural and institutional factors that shape long-term career sustainability. Given the challenges faced by non-specialist graduates, the SCET offers a relevant framework, focusing on the interplay between networks, allowing for a nuanced exploration of how career support mechanisms, workplace expectations, and personal career agency collectively influence successful post-university transitions.

2.4. Alumni as key actors in the Sustainable Career Ecosystem

University alumni play a crucial role within the SCET by bridging the transition between higher education and the workplace. Their experiences provide valuable insights into how graduates navigate career transitions and sustain long-term employability. Research highlights the importance of the alumni voice in supporting student transitions (Donald et al., 2018), helping them connect their perceived employability with tangible employability (Thijssen, et al., 2008).

The SCET framework provides a holistic lens to capture experiences, accounting for the meso- and macro-level influences which are missed in large scale quantitative surveys. Additionally, the time lag between graduation and data collection/publication restricts the applicability of survey findings for current students, highlighting the need for more immediate, nuanced feedback mechanisms to inform support strategies.

By engaging alumni in reflective discussions, HEI's can gain actionable insights that enhance career education, improve programme alignment with labour market needs, and better support students in navigating complex transitions. The SCET underscores the importance of timely, context-specific feedback, positioning alumni as central actors in the broader career ecosystem.

2.5. Research questions

This study seeks to address the identified research gap by exploring three key questions:

1. How do English alumni construct and navigate their early career transitions post graduation?
2. In what ways do English alumni interpret the relevance and application of their academic training within evolving career trajectories?
3. What resources or interventions do alumni retrospectively identify as critical in supporting sustainable transitions to the next stage of their career journey?

By answering these questions, the study will contribute to a deeper understanding of graduate employability, offering insights into the interplay between individual agency, university structures, and labour market demands.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research design

To effectively explore the transition experiences of undergraduate English alumni as they navigated post-university transitions, qualitative methods were chosen to allow for in-depth examination of participants' lived experiences. Semi-structured interviews balanced consistency in data collection with flexibility, allowing the investigation of anticipated themes and unexpected insights crucial to understanding nuanced experiences. The interviews,

structured around key career dimensions, align with the SCET framework by exploring how individual decisions, meso-level support, and macro-level labour market conditions interact to shape career sustainability. These dimensions are reflected in the interview areas: career paths (macro), influences and advice (meso), and skills and reflections (individual).

3.2 Participants/Sample

To participate, alumni needed an undergraduate English degree from the target university (single honours or joint/major/minor). The alumni office identified 799 eligible graduates, inviting them via email, with additional recruitment through LinkedIn. Of 38 interested alumni, 21 completed consent paperwork. This sample size was deemed sufficient as it allows for in-depth qualitative analysis while ensuring engagement across career stages. Seventeen participants graduated 2–11 years ago, and four over 20 years ago, offering diverse career perspectives. This range provided insights into how sustainable career ecosystems evolve, highlighting interactions between individual agency, institutional support, and external conditions.

3.3. Data collection and analysis

Data collection focused on five key areas - career path and choices, influences and decisions, skills and application, advice for graduates, and personal reflections. Participants were paired with current English students as interviewers, leveraging shared educational backgrounds to foster rapport and encourage honest discussions. Student interviewers underwent a structured training process conducted by the lead researcher to ensure familiarity with the question set and standardisation across interviews. Pilot interviews were discussed to refine questions and ensure clarity.

Interviews were conducted online over two months, maximising participation by reducing barriers related to geographical distance and accessibility. This flexible approach reflects SCET's emphasis on adaptability within sustainable career ecosystems. Student interviewers forwarded interview transcriptions to the lead researcher for analysis.

Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework guided qualitative analysis. This process included familiarisation with the data through repeated reading of transcriptions, generating initial codes, identifying and reviewing themes, and defining them for a comprehensive final report. This was not a linear process, and transcripts were re-read several times to identify and construct key themes. Codes and themes were initially generated by the lead researcher and reviewed with interviewers to enhance inter-coder reliability and reduce individual interpretative bias (Carter et al., 2014).

3.4. Ethical considerations and limitations

Full ethical approval was obtained through the university ethics board with participants providing written informed consent. All details were anonymised, including locations and places of work, and participants allocated a random three-digit number identifier. All participants were offered follow-up conversations with the lead researcher if the conversation identified any areas of concern or further signposting.

Acknowledging the potential for biases in student-led interviews, such as shared educational backgrounds shaping responses, the study implemented standardised training for interviewers to enhance professionalism and consistency. This approach ensured data collection remained robust. Any potential bias from interviewees was reduced through detailed introduction emails and participant information forms, highlighting the need for honest reflections. The lead researcher also considered their own positionality – as an English graduate with a non-linear career trajectory. Braun and Clarke’s six-phase framework was strictly adhered to, and student interviewer feedback confirmed individual bias did not impact the research process.

This study acknowledges the limitation of its relatively small sample size compared to the overall population of English graduates from this established course. However, the diverse and motivated participant group provided rich, nuanced data representing varied experiences across sectors and age groups. Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged in the later interviews, confirming the adequacy of the sample size (Guest et al., 2006).

4. Findings

Findings are presented within three main areas relating to the research questions: challenges associated with transition, perceived relevance of acquired skill sets in current positions, and retrospective reflections on desired support during post-study transition.

4.1. Challenges in Transition (RQ1)

4.1.1. Employment Readiness and Perceived Unpreparedness

When asked about workplace readiness upon graduation, 15 of the 21 respondents expressed feeling unprepared. Reasons included a focus on degree completion (individual-level barrier), lack of innate career direction (individual-level challenge) and an absence of clear progression routes for English graduates (macro-level barrier). Through the lens of the SCET, this illustrates tensions between individual agency (career planning) and macro-level labour market structures (unclear pathways for arts graduates).

Six of the unprepared alumni referenced feeling anxiety or stress when considering entering the workplace with comments including ‘very nerve-wracking leaving university’ (902), ‘I was just so stressed about getting an actual job’ (254) and feeling ‘very lost and unconfident and incapable after graduating’ (115).

Of the six alumni who felt prepared, three pursued further study and three transitioned directly into employment, either needing further sector specific qualifications, or securing a job pre-graduation. Their preparedness reflects a strong sense of individual agency, with clear career objectives and proactive engagement with meso-level resources, including career guidance. This alignment underscores how robust institutional support empowers individuals navigating sustainable career transitions.

Clarity regarding next steps mitigated experiences of anxiety. One participant articulated how the careers service had ‘given me confidence and put me in the right mindset, matching me up with the right kind of opportunity’ and ‘I do remember feeling extremely empowered, qualified and confident to start this new role’ (699).

Of the 15 reporting feeling unprepared, eight pursued further study and seven entered employment. The proportion of graduates opting for further study versus immediate employment was comparable between the prepared and unprepared groups. No discernible correlation was observed between graduation preparedness and the decision to continue studying.

The alumni highlighted different reasons for feeling unprepared. Two stated their primary focus was degree completion, deferring consideration of post-graduation plans - one admitted the university 'had the resources there, I just didn't use them, I was too busy' (492). Four alumni highlighted a perceived lack of innate career direction, stating 'there's no set job' (254) and 'I just kind of felt like I had no clear path' (888). Participant 608 articulated challenges with the absence of career progression assessment, saying 'you're going into a career that you know doesn't have a direct next step, that there was some kind of check-in going' (608). There was a perceived lack of individual agency and confidence against a backdrop of unfamiliar macro labour markets.

4.1.2. Institutional Support and Meso-Level Gaps

Only five alumni in this unprepared group used the careers service, less than one-third of the cohort. Three had engaged with the service at the end of final year or post-graduation. Only two had proactively, rather than reactively, accessed the available support.

Nine of the 15 unprepared alumni reported inadequate preparation from their academic school. Statements concerning the school's attitude towards careers support included 'they didn't see that as part of their role to prepare you for the rest. (It was) their job to get you through the degree and that was kind of it' (812), 'I think a very limited amount (of careers support) was actually coming out of that English course' (171) and 'No criticism of the school, but I just kind of felt like I had no clear path' (888). Six participants emphasised the need for guidance on individual responsibility for employability, illustrating a disconnect between meso-level institutional messaging and the macro-level expectations of labour market readiness. Comments included it was 'up to you as an individual to research the world of work' (160) and 'it felt much more like me going to look for those resources' (171). A sense of isolation in seeking careers support was evident, as one participant highlighted 'but I was the only one that I knew of in my course that was doing that, and I had to find out that information myself' (533).

There was a perceived institutional misalignment, with alumni highlighting support focus on linear career paths (e.g., business, STEM) over non-traditional trajectories. This highlights meso-level gaps where career services and universities do not adequately accommodate non-specialised graduates' diverse career routes. The theme of responsibility for employability will be explored in more detail in the discussion section.

4.1.3. Labour Market Barriers and Employer Perceptions

Respondents viewed employers as favouring specialist degrees over non-specialist subjects, highlighting a perceived macro-level bias, creating graduate uncertainty about market expectations. Seven participants strongly highlighted a lack of meso-level institutional support for English, sensing systemic undervaluation of non-specialist degrees in career development initiatives. This highlights structural barriers within the career ecosystem that may impede equitable access to tailored support for non-specialist graduates. Participant 160 observed that there was 'not a lot of help for non-linear career paths that follow the likes of an English degree. The careers fair was very corporate and geared towards science and business students'.

Notably, participant 907 focused on employer's perceptions of English graduates, advocating work experience 'for companies to get used to having graduates from backgrounds other than the usual pathways such as business or engineering' (907), creating a sustainable, mutually beneficial pipeline between the levels of the SCET. These gaps in institutional support contribute to alumni perceptions of how well (or poorly) their academic training aligns with their careers, which we now explore.

4.2. Perceived Relevance of Academic Training (RQ2)

English alumni identified 22 distinct competencies cultivated through their academic experiences, which they actively apply in their professional roles. These competencies illustrate the interaction of meso-level institutional learning frameworks, individual agency, and macro-level labour market demands within the SCET. They have been categorised into five domains:

4.2.1 Writing proficiency

Twelve participants discussed writing abilities, the most frequently mentioned skill and highly valued in their current roles. Related competencies included editing written work and speech writing. One participant remarked 'my English degree developed my critical and analytical reading, which I now use in editorial work'. (363).

4.2.2. Interpersonal communication

Nine interviewees emphasised their ability to adapt communication styles to diverse audiences, cultivated through meso-level flexible learning structures, and essential for navigating the macro-level demands of increasingly diverse and globalised workplaces. Additionally, alumni highlighted skills in active listening, diplomacy, and delivering presentations. One interviewee reflected 'the English degree really teaches you how to communicate properly, how to evaluate things. With the role that I'm doing at the minute, communication's really key for everything' (492).

4.2.3 Self-efficacy

Interviewees discussed enhanced confidence and independence, noting that studying English facilitated the development of self-motivation and discipline. They felt confident making decisions, taking initiative, and responding constructively to feedback. Participant 171 highlighted how the limited contact teaching hours characteristic of non-specialist courses fostered independence and self-discipline, stating

When I reflect on friends on specialist courses, they've struggled when working isn't disciplined, whole-diary-is-filled, someone else is teaching you. So I think that's a real skill set that the non-specialist students don't emphasise enough, it's valuable and valued in the workplace (171).

Meso-level pedagogical structures in English can equip graduates with the self-efficacy required to thrive in uncertain professional environments, contributing to their sustainable career trajectories.

4.2.4. Cognitive and Creative Competencies

This encompassed critical thinking and evaluating and analysing information, competencies addressing labour market demands for adaptable and innovative problem-solvers. English graduates contribute to a sustainable career ecosystem by navigating complex professional

environments with agility. Four participants asserted that studying English enhanced their capacity to view situations from diverse perspectives, adapting to new concepts in professional roles. Participant 812 reflected

all those thinking skills and analytical skills are really important, being able to look at something or a situation and be able to quickly analyse and get to the root of whatever somebody needs. It's having vision and leadership and drive and determination.

This sentiment was echoed by Participant 151, who noted 'reading beneath the surface and understanding different perspectives and cultural experiences during the degree helped me to deal with people and problems during my job' (151).

4.2.5 Research proficiency

Ten interviewees highlighted transferable skills in research and planning, for example 'it's not just writing, you become a really good researcher. I think with an English degree, that gives you the tools to do that' (254).

The alumni exhibited reflective capacities to analyse academic experiences, articulate transferable skills they acquired, and critically assess the applicability of these competencies in professional contexts. Participant 750 encapsulated this skills awareness, stating 'I definitely wouldn't be in my current job if it wasn't for the refinement of my skills that I learnt throughout the English degree' (750). The SCET allowed the interviewees to frame skills as part of individual agency, leveraging their degree learning in contrast to macro-level constraints within the labour market and the full recognition of their abilities.

4.3 Resources and Interventions Identified for Sustainable Transitions (RQ3)

Alumni identified three key areas for enhancing support during the transition from academia to employment: purposeful work experience, assistance with recruitment processes, and access to comprehensive labour market information. These recommendations underscore the need for coordinated approaches at the individual, meso-institutional, and macro-systemic levels, as proposed by the SCET.

4.3.1. Work Experience as a Catalyst

A majority of participants ($n = 13$) emphasised the transformative potential of purposeful work experience in bridging the gap between academic study and professional practice. Participant 812 advocated 'the practical element of understanding the work environment,' while Participant 907 reflected on initial challenges, stating, 'I had no idea what was in store with the learning curve of 9–5 work.' Providing work-integrated learning opportunities aligns with SCET's focus on meso-level interventions, enabling students to develop sector-specific competencies and reduce macro level uncertainty. As Participant 254 noted, 'You don't actually know what you want to do until you start doing the job,' highlighting the importance of experiential learning in fostering career adaptability.

4.3.2. Recruitment Process Support

Six participants identified gaps in institutional support when navigating the recruitment process. Participant 812 highlighted the absence of practical guidance, stating, 'understanding how to interview, write a CV, complete an application form weren't things people spent much time on.'

Similarly, Participant 115 described application processes as ‘daunting,’ reflecting a broader meso-institutional failure to embed employability-focused learning within non-specialist degrees.

4.3.3. Labour Market Information and Networking

Both prepared and unprepared graduates reported lacking accessible and actionable labour market information, underscoring its critical role in career navigation. Eleven participants highlighted the need for industry-specific guidance, while six would prioritise professional networking. Participant 695 proposed mentorship as a vital resource, explaining, ‘having somebody I could shadow or seek advice from would have been immensely helpful.’ SCET’s macro-level perspective emphasises the necessity of systemic partnerships between universities and employers to provide students with timely, relevant, and sector-specific insights. Participant 533 reinforced this, advocating for ‘more career sessions and businesses coming into classes to speak to students.’

These findings illuminate a pressing need for HEI’s to adopt holistic and interconnected approaches, fostering sustainable career ecosystems through enhanced collaboration between academic schools, career services, and industry stakeholders. These implications will be explored further in the discussion section.

5. Discussion

By employing thematic analysis methodology (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to the research questions in this study, three principal themes have been constructed, showcasing the reflections of the participants. Recommendations for best practice are proposed, emphasising the alumni voice as an essential actor within the SCET.

5.1. Responsibility for employability: stakeholder roles

The alumni raised significant questions regarding responsibility for developing employability skills among English graduates. A subset of participants expected their academic department to assume a leadership role in embedding employability within the curriculum. They expressed disappointment and a sense of unpreparedness for workforce transitions when such initiatives failed to materialise. Some alumni compared their department’s employability provisions unfavourably to those of other disciplines, with perceived disparities eliciting frustration.

However, another group of alumni demonstrated greater agency, independently engaging with career opportunities. Notably, no discernible pattern emerged explaining why some students were proactive while others were not. Within the SCET, this could highlight limitations on personal agency within structural constraints, for example access to resources, awareness of career services, or socioeconomic factors.

From a SCET perspective, effective employability development requires alignment among stakeholders, including academic departments, career services, and students themselves (De Vos et al., 2020). This study underscores the importance of transparent communication addressing roles and expectations of each stakeholder in fostering employability. Alumni consistently emphasised their desire for subject-specific resources and parity with disciplines providing career support at every level. Such alignment would empower students towards proactivity, experiencing self-efficacy while benefiting from structured institutional support. Embedding employability initiatives into curricula reflects SCET’s framework’s principle of

interconnected stakeholder responsibilities, addressing the alumni call for greater institutional accountability. Furthermore, subject-specific employability efforts would support the SCET premise that ‘lives and careers evolve over time,’ (Donald, 2023, p. xxvii), allowing students to gain experience incrementally and reduce career-related anxiety (Davis et al., 2009).

5.2. Incremental progress over long-term objective

Alumni reflections reveal a recurring theme: the significance of incremental progress during post-university transitions. Participants recalled initial uncertainty applying academic qualifications to career development, often compounded by anxiety over undefined long-term goals, confirming the findings of Christie (2017). However, with hindsight, they emphasised how a series of micro-decisions and gradual steps led to their current professional positions. On reflection, the first step was the most difficult - with decision-making and workplace immersion, they reported a commensurate increase in self-efficacy regarding career decision-making.

This perspective aligns with the SCET, which prioritises adaptability, experiential learning, and ongoing skill development (De Vos et al., 2020). Participant 254 reflected ‘as soon as you have any job or experience, your foot is in the door. Just try to climb the ladder, take your time, and you’ll land where you want to be.’ This highlights how early, exploratory career behaviors increase confidence and reduces pressure to articulate definitive career objectives prematurely.

To integrate these findings into the SCET, institutions should emphasise directional progress over fixed career destinations. By supporting students in breaking long-term objectives into manageable steps, HEI’s can address the transition-related anxiety identified in this study. Ultimately, this approach underscores the importance of cultivating a mindset of continuous learning and directional growth.

5.3. Retrospective recognition of skill acquisition

This study underscores the crucial role of alumni reflection in bridging academic training and professional application. While alumni recalled initial anxiety, they retrospectively recognised how academic experiences shaped their long-term success.

Interviewees noted their degrees cultivated transferable skills that became evident only with time. Participant 254 stated, ‘I feel like I learned so much from my degree, and you don’t even realise it at the time.’ Similarly, Participant 888 noted, ‘sometimes you’ll think, ‘I didn’t learn anything in uni,’ but then you realise it’s been a gradual thing that’s instilled in you.’ These reflections highlight how career-related anxiety may overshadow recognition of skill acquisition during the student experience.

The findings align with the SCET by emphasising the importance of reflective practices in career adaptability (Savickas, 2013). Alumni insights suggest fostering self-awareness among students during studies could help improving articulating employability capital. Participant 708 described the study of English as ‘cognitive training’, developing specific modes of thinking and working essential for professional success. This highlights the dynamic interplay between academic preparation and evolving professional demands, reinforcing the link between education and work, emphasising the lasting value of non-specialist disciplines like English in preparing graduates for adaptable careers.

6. Recommendations for best practice

This study highlights the key role of alumni perspectives in fostering a sustainable career ecosystem for non-specialist graduates. Operationalising these insights, three key areas of action are proposed:

6.1. Supporting current students

Integrating alumni experiences into the student journey offers a practical means of enhancing career readiness. For example:

- Alumni guest lectures, providing real-world career perspectives.
- Mentorship programmes for personalised guidance.
- Case studies and workshops, linking and bridging theoretical knowledge and workplace skills.
- Micro-internships developing industry-specific skills.
- Digital platforms sustaining alumni-student engagement, providing accessible career resources and real-time contacts.

6.2. Curriculum development

Alumni feedback ensures curriculum relevance in a changing job market through:

- Alumni inclusion in curriculum review panels, aligning courses with industry needs.
- Regular alumni surveys, collecting targeted insights on curriculum applicability.
- Collaborative projects connecting students and alumni for real-world learning.

6.3. Wider subject sustainability

Engaging alumni post-graduation strengthens talent networks and sustains non-specialist disciplines. Key actions include:

- Developing alumni partnerships to highlight the value of English graduates' skills.
- Positioning English degrees as essential for critical thinking, communication, and adaptability, skills needed in a dynamic job market.
- Expanding internships and placements through alumni connections.
- Providing incentives or recognition for alumni supporting student employability.

These recommendations align with SCET's principle of stakeholder interdependence by ensuring that alumni, institutions, and students collaboratively support sustainable career transitions. Embedding alumni engagement is not just an optional enhancement, but a core strategy for sustainable career ecosystems, supporting HEI's to elevate the profile of English degrees, and ensuring their relevance in higher education and the professional landscape.

3. Conclusion

Skills gained from studying an English degree are needed in every sector - from communication and interpersonal skills, to the ability to research, project manage and build relationships. When subject interest declines, or students cannot articulate their skill set to an employer, the

workplace risks losing vital skillsets. Alumni reflections offer a key career development tool, not only to encourage current students but for HEI's to assess their curriculum against ever-evolving workplace requirements. This method has implications beyond English to supporting other non-specialised subjects and their graduate employability. HEI's must engage all elements of the careers ecosystem, valuing diverse stakeholder contributions and fostering collaboration to support sustainable employment, meaningful career development, and future-ready career pathways that benefit both individuals and society.

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Declaration Statements

Conflict of Interest

The author reports no conflict of interest.

Funding

This project was supported by JISC funding.

Data Availability

No dataset is associated with this article.

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Corresponding Author

The corresponding author for this manuscript is Emma Lennox who can be contacted by email via e.lennox@qub.ac.uk