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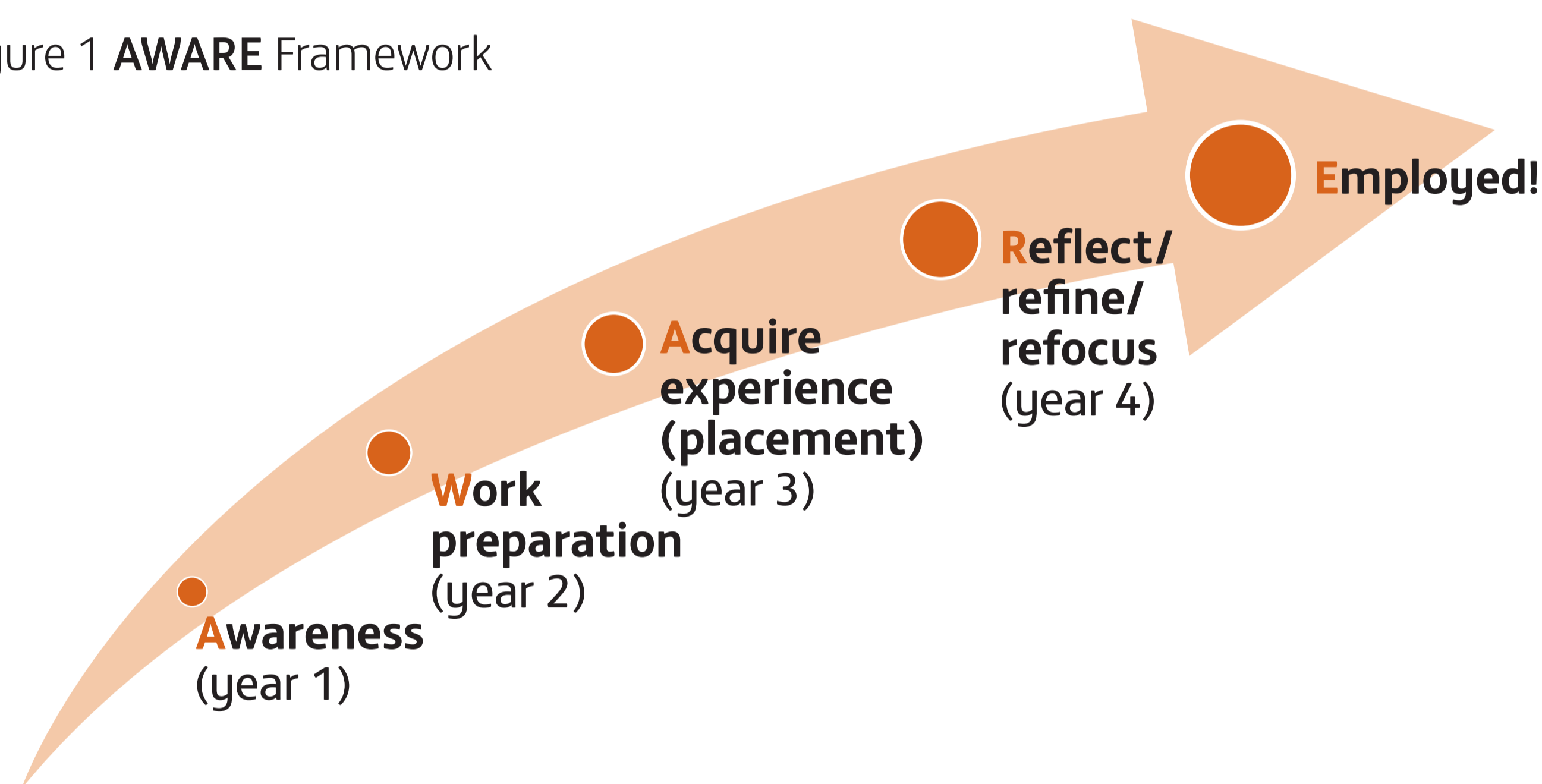
Placement Employability: Challenge and Change in an Evolving Landscape

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Introduction

Computing students have enrolled on a four-year course which has a mandatory 'placement' year embedded into it. Previously we have highlighted an approach to embedding employability in the courses through an AWARE Framework [1]. AWARE offers progressive employability refinement; from year 1 **A**wareness, year 2 **W**ork preparation, year 3 **A**cquire experience (placement) and final year **R**eflect/refine/refocus with the graduate aim to be **E**mployed! (Fig. 1). We also highlighted some practice, in particular in year 2 for Work preparation [2]. Yet many challenges continue to arise in a changing and evolving employability landscape for our students.

Figure 1 AWARE Framework



Challenges

Environmental challenges

- Computing student numbers have been growing year on year, in our Ulster Campuses and at another local University, creating a more competitive environment to attract the right students.
- Employers are increasingly advertising their opportunities earlier and earlier in the academic year to compete with each other to obtain the best students.
- Recent Government austerity programmes have resulted in significant IT placement opportunity cuts in the public sector [3].

Internal challenges

- All students must be well prepared for their placement.
- Duty of care procedures are followed, in terms of 1) conducting visits & risk assessments, and 2) ensuring students are given health and safety inductions.
- All placement opportunities must suit the learning outcomes of the course.
- Assessments of placement opportunities should help students reflect on both academic and reflective learning, in order to help students recognise and build on their self-development and employability skills.
- Even with a high level of preparation and support for placement learning, students will inevitably encounter problems that they may need help to address. Challenges may include anything from frustration at not being able to secure the right kind of placement opportunity to balancing their placement applications with academic studies.
- Other issues may include worries over leaving their peers and re-joining the course when many of their friends have moved on (in the case of a year in industry or abroad), or just simply that they are lonely, in a strange country or environment with limited support outside of the workplace or placement setting.
- Students may need reassurance that they are ready to participate in placement learning and seek guidance or approval at any stage of the placement process.

Meeting the challenges

Despite the success of the embedded employability modules through the AWARE framework [1] and practice [2], the challenges and evolving landscape required further developments.



Creation of a drop-in employability clinic

This academic year we established and manned a drop-in Employability Clinic on Wednesday afternoons for year 2 students seeking placement; handling queries on CVs, cover letters, specific companies, aptitude tests, interview techniques and "how to improve my..." type queries. This was established in direct response to the challenges of growing numbers on the Computing courses, growing competition for placement from elsewhere, public-sector cuts in IT placements, and increasingly private sector IT companies advertising their placement opportunities much earlier in the academic year to compete against each other for the top students.

Mid-Year assessment of engagement

This year we also introduced a Mid-year assessment placement job search activity exercise. In response to a significant number of students not engaging with placement till the second semester in previous years, this year we introduced a mid-year review in January 2016. This allowed for feedback, and assessment of those not engaging/not engaging enough earlier in the academic year. Traditionally this wouldn't be obvious until year end when those that failed to obtain a placement then applied for placement exemption due to effort, as a significant number of employers handled their application process outside the University PACE/MyPlacement/Recruit systems, and as such, a lack of activity on our systems does not necessarily equate to a lack of engagement. Next year we plan to move this process to Ulster's Recruit system, where a student is required to log their non-Ulster Recruit placement applications, with monthly update deadlines, so we can see and proactively react to non-engagement in near real-time.

Year 1 onwards employability support through studies advisors

This year studies advisors, who have been an integral support mechanism for students for many years now, have also undertaken development and reflection upon their advisee's CVs as part of their regular meetings and support network.

Conclusions

To meet ever increasing challenges and change in the evolving employability landscape, we have adapted our practice further this year to supplement the employability course modules with a drop-in Employability Clinic and studies advisor backing, to have a more adaptive, dynamic and proactive employability support.

References

- [1] Ayre, Nicola, McChesney, Ian and Sterritt, Roy (2015) The AWARE framework - A progressive approach to employability. In: Employability in Action: Opportunities for Developing the Student Experience Conference 2015. Ulster University
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- [3]"United Kingdom government austerity programme," en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_Kingdom_government_austerity_programme (Last accessed 15/04/2016).