

ROLLING DICE, BUILDING FUTURES: USING BOARD GAME TO ENHANCE CAREER PLANNING

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Abstract

Higher education institutions face increasing challenges in preparing students for complex and uncertain labour markets. Although career development learning is widely promoted in higher education policy, it often remains weakly embedded in university curricula, particularly in theory-driven programmes. As a result, many students experience difficulties in applying academic knowledge to real-life career planning, financial decision-making, and work-related problem-solving. This study presents an innovative analogue board game, *Study Hard, Work Hard!*, designed to support career development learning through experiential and playful pedagogy in higher education. The game simulates realistic student life situations such as budgeting, student employment, scholarship opportunities, job interviews, and time management dilemmas. It aims to develop employability-related competences including decision-making, collaboration, communication, reflection, and financial awareness. The board game was implemented within a university course focusing on career preparation at a Hungarian higher education institution. A total of 60 undergraduate students from diverse disciplinary backgrounds participated in a facilitated gameplay session. Data was collected using a structured post-intervention questionnaire measuring motivation, engagement, collaboration, perceived learning outcomes, and the realism of the scenarios, complemented by open-ended reflections. Findings indicate that students perceived the board game as highly engaging and educationally valuable. Participants reported increased awareness of career-related choices, financial challenges, and the complexity of balancing work and study. The most positively evaluated aspects were the realism of the situations, opportunities for reflection, and the development of employability-related skills in a supportive learning environment. The results suggest that board game-based pedagogy offers a practical and adaptable approach for integrating career development learning into higher education curricula while enhancing student engagement.

Keywords: *Career development learning, employability, board games, pedagogical innovation, higher education.*

1. Theoretical background

1.1. Career development learning and employability

Higher education increasingly prioritises employability and skill development to meet changing labour market demands (Jackson & Bridgstock, 2021; Healy et al., 2020). This has driven a shift toward experiential approaches, including problem-based, project-based, and work-integrated learning, which enhances active engagement and practical skills (European Commission, 2020). Career development learning (CDL) is increasingly embedded in curricula to support employability (Dean et al., 2022; Bridgstock et al., 2019).

CDL develops self-awareness, labour market understanding, and transferable skills, enabling informed career decisions (Bridgstock, 2009; Tomlinson, 2017). Early integration strengthens career awareness and professional identity while reducing uncertainty and disengagement (Nyström et al., 2008). However, implementation is constrained by overloaded curricula and limited institutional focus on career competencies (Bridgstock et al., 2019).

Although educators are increasingly open to CDL, many lack confidence or view it as outside their core role (Dean et al., 2022). CDL extends beyond CV writing to identity formation, reflection, and career planning skills essential for today's labour market (Bridgstock, 2009).

1.2. Board games in higher education

Over the past decade, higher education has increasingly shifted from traditional instructor-led teaching toward student-centred, active learning approaches that promote autonomy, transferable skills, and “learning how to learn” in response to rapidly changing societal needs (Khalaf & Zin, 2018; Manzano-León et al., 2021). Research shows that board games can effectively simplify complex topics, increase motivation, and improve learning outcomes. They have also been used to develop specific skills such as time management, and in some cases have outperformed traditional teaching methods in long-term impact. Applications in higher education include health sciences, business, and teacher education, supporting skills such as teamwork, engagement, and reflection (Brydges & Dembinski, 2019; Karbownik et al., 2016; Radzi et al., 2020; Vijayakumar & Kulkarni, 2020; Viray, 2016). Student- or educator-designed games further enhance reflective and learner-centred teaching approaches (Brydges & Dembinski, 2019).

Overall, board games remain an underexplored tool in Hungarian higher education. This gap underpins the development of *Study Hard, Work Hard!*, which uses accessible game elements (board, cards, play money, role prompts) to support active learning, creativity, collaboration, and competence development through low-cost, experiential pedagogy.

2. Study Hard, Work Hard! Board game

The *Study Hard, Work Hard!* board game was developed based on previous findings on student employment and institutional needs for stronger experiential and practice-based learning (Kocsis & Pusztai 2025). It responds to the need for improved career support, financial literacy, and soft skill development by simulating real student life situations using empirical data from Hungarian and international studies (e.g. Eurostudent data; Kocsis & Pusztai 2025).

The game is designed for up to six players (or pairs) and follows a 40-field board structure where participants progress via dice rolls. Players start with 250 EUR and navigate student life decisions such as housing, budgeting, studying, and employment. There is no single winner, as the focus is on experiential learning and reflection rather than competition.

Gameplay combines chance and structured learning tasks. Players encounter four main task types: (1) quiz cards based on labour market and student data, (2) decision-making dilemmas reflecting real opportunity costs, (3) task cards requiring practical and creative responses (e.g. CV writing, problem-solving), and (4) interview questions simulating job interviews. Financial rewards reinforce learning and decision consequences. Each task type targets specific competencies: knowledge acquisition, critical thinking, communication, self-awareness, and financial literacy. Interview and reflection-based tasks particularly support metacognitive development and career identity formation. The integration of real labour market data ensures authenticity, while peer interaction encourages discussion and collaborative learning.

Overall, the game transforms complex career-related challenges into a low-risk, engaging learning environment that supports experiential learning and competence development through active participation.

3. Research and feedback

A total of 60 undergraduate students from various disciplines participated in the study. Participants were enrolled in a career preparation course at a Hungarian higher education institution. Data was collected using a post-intervention questionnaire combining Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. The instrument measured engagement and motivation, perceived realism of scenarios, collaboration and perceived learning outcomes. Quantitative data were analysed using descriptive statistics, while qualitative responses were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns in student experiences.

Findings indicate high levels of engagement across participants. Students reported that the interactive and competitive elements of the board game increased their motivation to actively participate in learning activities. Participants indicated that the game supported their understanding of career-related decision-making. Many students highlighted improved awareness of financial planning challenges and the consequences of balancing study and work responsibilities. The collaborative nature of gameplay fostered peer learning and communication. Students reported that group-based decision-making encouraged discussion, negotiation, and shared reflection. The simulation of real-life scenarios was identified as one of the most valuable aspects of the intervention. Students perceived the situations as realistic and relevant. The findings suggest that analogue board games can function as effective tools for integrating career development learning into higher education curricula. The approach supports active learning, reflection, and skill development in a structured yet flexible format.

4. Conclusions

The Study Hard, Work Hard! board game provided students with an engaging, experiential learning environment that enhanced their understanding of employability-related challenges. The results highlight the potential of analogue game-based methods as scalable and low-cost pedagogical innovations that can complement traditional teaching approaches. Future research should explore longitudinal effects of such interventions.

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