

Work experience and employability support in London's higher education institutions

*A report for The Greater London Authority
by CFE Research*



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Authors: Sophie Spong, Rachel Moreton, Michelle Hansel, David Merrett and Lindsey Bowes

For more information contact:

Rachel Moreton
CFE Research, Phoenix Yard, Upper Brown Street, Leicester,
LE1 5TE
0116 229 3300
rachel.moreton@cfe.org.uk
www.cfe.org.uk

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SUMMARY

London is one of the leading centres of higher education (HE), with universities and specialist colleges a major asset. The Mayor wants all Londoners with the potential to succeed to have the opportunity to study at a higher education institution (HEI) in the capital and to secure the best outcomes. London performs well on key indicators of access to HE, but inequalities in outcomes remain, including those relating to achieving sustained employment after graduation, for some groups of students.

This report suggests good practice in the design and delivery of work experience and employability support in higher education, with a focus on ensuring that students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds are able to benefit.

HEIs recognise the value of opportunities for students to engage with employers and experience the world of work. However, a key challenge is securing sufficient high-quality and accessible opportunities for all students who could benefit. This appears to be a greater challenge for those HEIs where a larger proportion of students come from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds.

Working through membership organisations, employer networks and the informal networks of staff and alumni are key routes to engaging employers. Large employers can provide a greater variety and number of opportunities, but it can take longer and more resource to establish a relationship with large organisations. Engaging with SMEs is important for ensuring work experience opportunities are reflective of the labour market.

Open and ongoing communication is key to maintaining a good relationship with employers. Employers value HEIs taking the time to get to know them, their motivations and needs, and working collaboratively to develop tailored approaches. HEIs should make engagement easy for employers and demonstrate how working together will benefit them and help solve recruitment challenges. HEIs would welcome additional support with getting new employers on board and securing additional opportunities for their students – this could be through financial or other incentives, or a coordinated programme to broker relationships between employers and HEIs.

Students and graduates who participated in work experience opportunities in HE see clear benefits from this and recommend that all students take up such opportunities. However, students also acknowledge that when they first start university, employability is often low on their agenda. HEIs need to take an early and proactive approach to engaging students about the importance of employability. Communication should be clear and concise with messages reinforced throughout students' time in HE. The option to sign-up for placement years while on-course is important as not all students recognise the value of these opportunities when

they apply to study in HE. Working with academic staff and embedding employability support within the curriculum ensures that all students benefit and removes the possibility of some opting out. Furthermore, it also allows employability activities to be tailored to subject areas and associated industries.

Students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds often face additional barriers and do not always make use of all the opportunities available to them. Key barriers include lack of knowledge and understanding of the wider opportunities available in HE, lack of confidence, financial barriers and time pressures that make it harder to participate in internships and placements.

Working with students to understand the barriers they face and then involving them in the co-creation of support helps ensure their buy-in to solutions. Young people are heavily influenced by their peers and word of mouth is a valuable way for HEIs to engage students with employability. Role models who reflect the characteristics of target students can help students understand the value of work experience and be an important source of additional support. Students particularly value peer and employer mentors who have been successful in the field they are interested in. Mentoring can be a cost-effective way of providing employability support but mentors need appropriate training and support to be effective.

Offering paid placements and internships is vital to ensure disadvantaged students can access them. Lighter-touch and flexible opportunities – such as week-long placements or even one-day visits – can provide a more accessible way to introduce work experience and act as a springboard to more substantive opportunities.

Preparing students to undertake work experience is essential for ensuring they get the most out of the experience and that employers have a positive experience and offer repeat opportunities. Preparation might include help with developing applications, mock interviews, coaching and other activities to build confidence. With quality, paid opportunities at a premium, students also value support with finding and applying for placements and internships.

Industry briefs are increasingly being used as a way to engage students in a form of work experience that does not involve leaving their campus. They eliminate travel and financial barriers, open up opportunities to whole cohorts of learners, and provide insights into working in a particular industry as well as transferable employability skills, such as working to a specification and team working.

Students, and those from disadvantaged groups in particular, benefit most from support when it is delivered as a coherent programme throughout HE, rather than in a piecemeal way or as one off, ad hoc interventions. Inclusive, mainstream programmes are important for developing a sense of belonging. However, where funded internships and other work experience opportunities are limited, there is an argument for ring-fencing these for

students who could benefit the most and would be least likely to secure opportunities without additional support from their HEI. Monitoring and evaluating HEI initiatives and interventions is essential to ensure they are effective, deliver value for money and achieve the desired outcomes for students, including under-represented groups.

GLOSSARY

BAME	Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic
CSR	Corporate social responsibility
GLA	Greater London Authority
HE	Higher Education
HEI	Higher Education Institution
LEP	Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP)
Post-92	Higher education institutions in the UK given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 – many, but not all, are former polytechnics
SMEs	Small or medium-sized enterprises – businesses with fewer than 250 employees are generally seen as medium-sized; those with fewer than 50 are small.
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework is the government’s mechanism for assessing teaching quality and student outcomes at higher education institutions in England.

01. INTRODUCTION

This report suggests good practice in the design and delivery of work experience and employability support in higher education, with a focus on ensuring students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds are able to benefit.

Project aims and scope

London is one of the leading centres of higher education (HE), with universities and specialist colleges a major asset. The Mayor wants all Londoners with the potential to succeed to have the opportunity to study at a higher education institution (HEI) in the capital and to secure the best outcomes. The London economy has the potential to provide substantial opportunities for high-quality work experience and support with employability.

The Greater London Authority (GLA) commissioned CFE Research to carry out qualitative research into the provision of work experience and employability support for students at London's HEIs, particularly for those from under-represented groups. The research aims to identify good practice, to explore challenges and how they can be addressed and make suggestions for how work experience and employability support can be developed. The research also considers the extent to which work experience provision draws on and reflects labour market opportunities across London.

Work experience opportunities in HE can take a variety of forms including: work shadowing, internships, voluntary work, project briefs and sandwich placements. They can be a mandatory part of courses or optional, they may or may not be credit-bearing and can be paid or unpaid. In this report we focus only on those opportunities facilitated by HEIs, and not part-time work or other opportunities that students find themselves. We also consider other support with employability provided by HEIs, including help with CV writing, mock interviews, networking opportunities and support with entrepreneurship and self-employment.

The London context

London performs well on key indicators of access to HE. It has the highest levels of progression among young people eligible for free school meals to HE generally and to high-tariff HE providers specifically.¹ However, the non-continuation rate for students at London's HEIs is higher than the English average.² Although students at London HEIs are highly diverse, there are inequalities in outcomes for some ethnic groups. For example, Black students have higher non-continuation rates than other ethnic groups.³ In terms of

graduate outcomes, the picture is also mixed. Unsurprisingly, graduates living in London have the highest median earnings three, five and ten years after graduation. The same is true for graduates originally from London. Yet graduates whose home region is London and those currently living in London are also least likely to be in further study or sustained employment one, three and five years after graduation. A range of factors are related to graduate outcomes, including socio-economic background and prior attainment.⁴

It is widely acknowledged that work experience is vital in improving equality of opportunity in degree outcomes and graduate employment rates. Life skills such as confidence, motivation, and resilience are linked to better prospects in the workplace.⁵ Research by the Sutton Trust focusing primarily on internships suggests that availability of internships is better in London than elsewhere in England, for example 62 per cent of employers in the capital offer internships compared with 31 per cent in the East of England.⁶ However, there are barriers to taking up internships, such as affordability, which are more significant for graduates from disadvantaged backgrounds. There is a clear imperative to increase both the availability and accessibility of high-quality work experience opportunities for HE students from under-represented and disadvantaged groups. And while London presents many opportunities, there is also a need to explore how local HEIs can be supported to make the best use of these.

HEI motivations

HEIs are ambitious for their students and are motivated to help them to be successful and get the most out of their undergraduate studies. This includes ensuring they have the skills, confidence, experience and social capital to move into work or further study that is right for them. A key part of this is helping students understand the range of opportunities available to them and supporting them to make informed choices.

HEIs are also acutely aware that some groups of students face greater challenges than others in securing positive graduate outcomes. A key objective for HEIs, particularly those with high proportions of students from more disadvantaged backgrounds, is to level-up opportunities and outcomes for these students. Most HEIs⁷ are required to produce an Access and Participation Plan which sets out how they will widen access to HE for students from disadvantaged and under-represented groups and support them to succeed and progress into successful outcomes. These motivations are further reinforced by the main mechanism used to measure HEI performance, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which includes metrics for student employability, transferable skills and positive outcomes.⁸

Method

The evidence in this report is based on research undertaken between March and October 2020. The research comprised the following activities:

- Desk review of HEIs' published programmes of employability support and work experience opportunities.
- Telephone interviews with staff from eight London HEIs, including heads/directors of employability, alumni relations, careers and professional services. HEIs were sampled to ensure a range of geographic locations, sizes and types of institution, including small and specialist providers, with a skew towards post-92 institutions as these tend to have larger proportions of students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds.
- Telephone interviews with 25 final year students and recent graduates from under-represented or disadvantaged backgrounds, including students from Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic (BAME) backgrounds, who received free school meals, care leavers, first in their family to attend university, and who came from a low participation neighbourhood. Student and graduate interviewees were recruited with the support of five of the sampled HEIs.
- Telephone interviews with 4 employers who work in partnership with London HEIs to offer work experience opportunities and employability support.

This report

This report will be of interest to HEIs, particularly those based in London that are seeking to enhance their provision of work experience and employability support and are interested in learning from others in the sector. The report also contains insights that will be of interest to graduate employers and organisations providing support for students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds. The report should also help the GLA to understand the challenges faced by HEIs in providing quality employability support and identify how they can best support them.

The following chapter (2) explores how HEIs go about engaging with employers. Part of this is understanding employers' motivations for working with HEIs. Chapter 3 then looks at how HEIs work to engage students and colleagues in employability support and work experience. We outline some of the barriers that disadvantaged students face in taking up work experience opportunities and how these can be overcome. Chapter 5 provides more detail on a selection of types of employability interventions offered by London HEIs, their benefits and things to consider when using these approaches. In the final chapter we offer a list of considerations for HEIs seeking to develop their employability support provision.

02. WORKING WITH EMPLOYERS

In this chapter we explore how HEIs engage and develop the relationships with employers that are vitally important in ensuring they are able to offer work experience opportunities to their undergraduates.

HEIs recognise the value of opportunities for students to engage with employers and experience the world of work. However, a key challenge is securing sufficient high-quality and accessible opportunities for all students who could benefit. This appears to be a greater challenge for those HEIs where a larger proportion of students come from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds. Among post-92 HEIs in particular there is a perception that major graduate employers are less likely to want to recruit their students and favour higher-tariff, more selective institutions.

Understanding employer motivations

Understanding employers' motivations for working with HEIs and offering undergraduate work experience helps inform the approach HEIs take.

Building a talent pipeline

For some employers, building a talent pipeline is a key motivation for providing work experience opportunities. Placements allow employers to see first-hand how suited students are to roles. As a result, employers may offer employment to successful placement students following their studies. These employers sometimes incentivise students by offering them a bonus if they decide to take up the position on graduation, providing part-time work while they finish their course, or offering them a paid training contract to gain a professional qualification (such as in accountancy or law). Such opportunities support effective transitions from placement into employment for students who may not otherwise have access to the professional networks that can help facilitate this.

You're getting to try before you buy, so you get to see how [students] come across, how keen they are. So, then it's good to know... if it's a relationship you want to continue.

— Employer

It's a really good stepping stone for them, and unless something drastically goes wrong, we offer them an ACA [Associated Chartered Accountant] contract once they finish their last year in university, so, yes, we have a really, really good turnaround with industrial placements.

— Employer

Supporting the community

Some employers regard offering work experience and employability support as a way to help their local community. Larger employers in particular see this as part of their commitment to corporate social responsibility (CSR). One large company we spoke to explained how all staff are given the opportunity to get involved in voluntary activity. Some of this time is spent engaging with universities and helping students with work experience and employment support. Senior leaders within the organisation encourage staff to participate and this helps to nurture a supportive culture.

One of our objectives is to help the community and to help society as a whole... [Company] really strongly believes in corporate social responsibility, having that tone at the top from the most senior staff members, like the partners, really helps in encouraging individuals within the organisation to participate.

— Employer

Promoting diversity

Related to CSR, other employers are motivated to help improve the representation of marginalised or under-represented groups within their sector or profession. They are keen to provide young people with opportunities that they might not otherwise be able to access and to help them gain entry to the sector on graduation.

When you look into the big, media landscapes and who the main representatives are in those industries, you don't see anyone who looks from a BAME background... And- if you don't know anyone on the inside you're not really going to get in. My aim was to try and break those barriers and to slowly but surely create these communities of creatives that are from these marginalised communities

— Employer

Engaging employers

How HEIs engage with employers has an impact on the success of the relationship. HEIs use a range of approaches to engage employers to ensure they can maximise the number of opportunities they are able to offer their undergraduates.

The role of employer engagement teams

A proactive approach is often necessary in engaging employers. Many HEIs have central employer engagement teams to fulfil this role and as such are pivotal in identifying and securing the co-operation of employers who can provide work experience opportunities for students. They make initial contact with employers by phone or using social media platforms such as LinkedIn.

Employers often respond well to proactive approaches but encourage HEIs to be persistent. They explained that sometimes they are unable to respond immediately to enquiries that they might be interested in. Repeated contact from HEIs helps to ensure that opportunities for collaboration do not fall off their radar.

You know, the internal teams, the HR teams are very busy, this isn't the only thing that they're working on, so be persistent. I've had some people that have contacted me and just given up very quickly. You know, there's other things that we do, so just be aware that we might not get back to you straight away, but we are interested.

— Employer

A key aspect of the employer engagement team's role is to keep up to date with labour market trends. Research into the labour market is important for ensuring they pursue work experience opportunities in viable markets. This has become particularly important since the outbreak of COVID-19.

My team does a lot of research into trends in employment. For example we've had to really shift our thinking during lockdown and look at what sectors are thriving as well as the ones that maybe aren't doing so well. So year on year there's a business development exercise to see which areas of growth might be an opportunity for our students and connecting with them that way.

— HEI

Finally, employer engagement teams are responsible for maintaining relationships with the employers and organising and coordinating events and activities for students with employers.

Membership organisations and employer networks

Working with membership organisations and networks can help HEIs to reach a large number of employers efficiently, for example, through speaking at events or advertising opportunities in newsletters. Useful networks include professional bodies, careers services, local authorities, chambers of commerce, Local Enterprise Partnerships (LEPs) and sector-specific membership organisations. Connections with these types of organisation are particularly useful for identifying and setting up opportunities within specific sectors matched to students' subject of study.

They've given us slots at their meetings, they have given us advertising space on their newsletters, and as you can imagine their membership went into the thousands. So, we've reached a high number in a very short space of time.

— HEI

It is notable that few of the HEIs we spoke to mentioned working with specialist work experience brokerage organisations. One explicitly said they did not work with third party brokers that charged a fee to ensure that they could continue to offer all of their services free of charge.

Using informal alumni and academic networks

The power of informal networks as a mechanism for engaging employers should not be underestimated. As a matter of course HEIs maintain contact with their alumni. This can offer a gateway to their employers. Academic staff also have contacts with employers and employer networks which are also useful routes to engaging with employers. Joined-up working between employer engagement teams and academic departments and alumni support staff is, therefore, paramount in ensuring this works smoothly.

We have a really good relationship with our Alumni Relations department, who are really good at supporting us [to identify new employers to work with]. We make use of our academic network as well, so the departments who host these placements, quite often they'll either have experience in those areas or have a personal network we can tap into.

— HEI

Engaging with employers of different sizes

HEIs engage with employers of different sizes and sectors to maximise the range of work experience and employability support on offer to students. While both have their merits, HEIs face different challenges when engaging with them.

Large employers

Successful relationships with large employers can give HEIs access to higher volumes and greater diversity of work experience and employability support opportunities. This is particularly valuable as student numbers increase and demand for work experience grows as a result.

We have a good network already put in place, but as [student] numbers go up, companies can't always take students, so we're always expanding it.

— HEI

Larger employers sometimes also have greater resource and capacity to engage with HEIs and thus can sustain deeper engagement with employability support. However, relationships with larger employers can be more difficult to establish and take longer to develop. It can sometimes be difficult for HEIs to identify the right person within a large organisation that they need to engage with.

I would say some of those [relationships with larger employers] are very long-term so we might not see any fruition for 2 or 3 or 4 years. In terms of quick, instant response we get, it's not always as quick as we'd like it to be but that's just the nature of the way some of those bigger conversations go.

— HEI

SMEs and sole traders

Some sectors, such as the creative industries, are predominantly made up of SMEs and sole traders. In these instances it is important that HEIs engage with such employers to ensure that the experiences they are offering are reflective of the labour market students will venture into on completion of their studies.

Whilst smaller organisations are unable to provide as many opportunities for students, the use of SME networks means HEIs can reach and work with many different companies, which can result in a high number of opportunities.

HEIs also find it easier to engage with smaller organisations. This can be because SMEs have greater flexibility and are not restricted by having set criteria or their own employability schemes to fill. Opportunities with SMEs can also give students a broader experience – smaller organisations often have a wide range of roles operating within a single team.

It's often quite difficult if you have a very big, large corporate organisation, they have their own programmes and as our scheme is quite specific in terms of the criteria and all of that, it's often easier to engage with SMEs and often students get exposed to much more than if they would be in a large organisation, especially as it's quite a short opportunity.

— HEI

One HEI expressed concern that opportunities with SMEs may reduce in future if they are more adversely affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Getting the most out of employer relationships

Building and maintaining successful relationships with employers provides HEIs with a stable offer of work experience and employability support opportunities for their students. It is, therefore, vital that HEIs work with employers to maintain meaningful relationships and ensure opportunities continue to meet both employers' and students' needs.

Open and ongoing communication

Employer engagement teams are often responsible for nurturing these relationships. Taking an account management approach, where a named staff member is responsible for establishing and maintaining the relationship with a particular employer, can be effective.

It also ensures HEIs develop a detailed understanding of employers' activities, priorities and concerns and how a student placement could help them. Employers value having a responsive, single point of contact and emphasise how this makes it easier to work with HEIs.

Open and ongoing communication have become increasingly important since the COVID-19 pandemic. One HEI explained how during these testing times they check in on their employers to find out how they are doing and to see how they should adapt their practice to open up opportunities for students.

The one thing that has been really fantastic is all the industry partners that we do work with, they're always checking in with us, and we're always checking in with them [to ask] (A) are you okay? (B) What's happening with you, your organisation ... and (C) if there's room to do stuff, to collaborate and do something new ... it's just not forgetting about them, is the key thing, to keep that connection warm, strong, even if it's just a quick hello, I think that really, really helps.

— HEI

A collaborative and tailored approach

As one HEI remarked, *'every employer is different'* and employers really value it when HEIs make an effort to get to know their organisation. Taking time to work collaboratively with employers allows HEIs to create bespoke opportunities to meet employer and student needs.

One of the primary benefits of building meaningful relationships and a culture of collaboration with employers is that it can result in additional opportunities for students. Employers can offer more than just placements and internships and having a variety of opportunities increases the value of the relationship to both the HEI and the employer.

For one employer, working with an HEI on a mentoring programme has grown into a variety of tailored opportunities for students. This includes open evenings, help with interview skills, industry briefs and the chance to participate in a mini internship. The HEI and employer maintain an open dialogue about forthcoming opportunities. They co-design opportunities and reflect regularly on what has worked well and less well. The breadth of opportunities exists because of the close ties between the employer and HEI that have been built over time. This would not be possible if either partner approached employability support as a one-off transaction.

It's just being open to trying different things... We want to ensure that everyone feels that they are able to take the opportunities that are on offer... each year we've always been able to offer something different... We also take feedback from the mini-internship and some of these other events... we just tailor it to the year and just ensure that we meet the needs in any way we can."

— Employer

Preparing students for work experience

Carefully selecting and preparing students for work experience opportunities is also important for maintaining a positive relationship with employers. If employers perceive that an HEI does not produce the calibre of student that they are seeking, or if the student does not perform well and meet an employer's expectations, they are less likely to be willing to offer placements in the future. However, putting forward the best candidates for opportunities could favour more advantaged students, who are often more confident. The goal of many of the HEIs we spoke to, in particular those with high proportions of students from more disadvantaged backgrounds, is to secure quality opportunities for all students.

Ensuring all students are well-prepared and equipped to undertake work experience ensures they get the most from the any opportunities and motivates employers to continue to work with the HEI. Embedding employability skills within the curriculum is one way to make sure all students are well prepared (see pages 21 and 22).

We want to make sure that when those employers engage with us, we have the right students in front of them. So, we're doing a lot of work on coaching our students with our schools to get them ready, because we have that one opportunity to prove to these employers that we have the right type of students. ... We have a lot of employers that come back and keep engaged with us, which is what we want: return business.

— HEI

Working in partnership

Working in partnership with other HEIs allows institutions to share good practice and helps them to improve the way they engage with employers and ensure that they are offering the best service to their students. HEI networks provide HEIs with a mechanism to do this.

We are part of The Careers Group, which is fourteen, fifteen different institutions... we do have regular meetings and best practice sharing at those events and workshops and webinars at the moment...

— HEI

While HEIs are often unwilling to share work experience opportunities and hard-won employer contacts, a partnership approach to employer engagement can sometimes be helpful. For example, one HEI explained how they had partnered with several local institutions to run a careers fair focussing on equality and diversity. Running joint events like this means the same employers are not being asked to take part in multiple activities. The HEI also piloted the use of video-conferencing technology during the event to engage employers remotely. This helped to gain buy-in from employers and students who did not have the time to physically attend an event and is likely to be of particular relevance in light of the continuing COVID-19 pandemic.

It went well for a couple of reasons. One because we were like-minded institutions working together, but equally, given the current labour market, employers are finding it increasingly difficult to visit a number of institutions. So, the feedback we had was that they welcomed the opportunity to have this joint event which meant that they could talk to students at four universities at one careers fair

— HEI

Making things easy for employers

The key to engaging and building ongoing relationship with employers is understanding their needs and then working to meet these. Employers need to maintain a pipeline of new talent, but often also have ad hoc and short-term requirements for additional staff and skills. Recruiting staff takes time and resource. By providing a full recruitment service for employers, HEIs have something of real value to offer employers. This also benefits students as they receive direct information about targeted job opportunities and get support to apply.

The University of Greenwich's employment brokerage scheme

The University of Greenwich has higher than sector average numbers of students who are BAME, and who are mature. Over a quarter of their students are from areas with the highest levels of deprivation.

The University has identified lack of confidence as a particular challenge for many of their students from under-represented or more disadvantaged backgrounds. In particular, they found some students were often intimidated by large or prestigious employers.

The Employability & Careers Service (ECS) at the University of Greenwich provides a graduate jobs brokerage scheme, matching finalists to local employers. They act as a recruitment consultancy service for local employers. Employers sign an agreement with the University; in return for a degree of exclusivity on graduate roles the University provides them with a comprehensive service to help them fill graduate-level vacancies. This includes advertising the vacancy and identifying the courses whose students who are most likely to meet the employer's needs. The University matches suitable candidates to the role and presents the employer with a short-list to interview. Part of the deal is that employers interview candidates on campus. This helps students overcome their fears as they are on familiar territory and are welcomed and coached by ECS staff prior to and on the day of the interview.

Granted at some point in their lifespan [students] will have to take the leap, and go out there to the big-wide world and apply for jobs and so forth, but this is a nice introduction because it's in a safe and familiar confines of the university campus, ... My team are present before and just after interviews, they have a pep talk with [students]... We've seen how the students have responded well to that and improved their confidence as a result.

Many employers have been willing to offer a degree of exclusivity on positions within the limited three-month window the scheme operates each year. Greenwich have successfully attracted both SMEs and larger employers to the scheme.

Additional support required by HEIs

HEIs value their employer relationships, but building these is time intensive and it can be difficult. HEIs would welcome additional support to get new employers on board and increase the number of quality opportunities they can offer to their students. Institutions suggested several ways this could be achieved.

- Financial incentives for employers, such as tax relief or funding for working with HEIs and offering placements.
- Help with communicating to employers the value to be gained from working with undergraduates.
- Forums or other means of increasing communication and connectivity between London-based HEIs and local employers who can offer opportunities to students.
- A recognised initiative, award or other stamp that employers can use to show they are supporting increased diversity in the workplace and access to quality work experience for students.
- A programme similar to [Go Wales](#), which is centrally funded and organised. The programme matches students who would otherwise face barriers in accessing work experience with tailored opportunities, providing support for both student and employer.

03. ENGAGING STUDENTS

Creating student demand for work experience and employability support is just as important as developing the opportunities. This chapter looks at the ways HEIs ensure as many students as possible can access meaningful experiences during their time at university.

Communicating the importance of work experience and employability support

When students start university they have a myriad of things to think about. Employability and work experience are often not on their agenda, particularly early on when they are focusing on settling in and getting to grips with the academic requirements of undergraduate life. When students approach the university careers service it is often towards the end of their journey for help with applications to graduate schemes; it is less common for students to seek out more general advice and guidance at an early stage in their HE experience.

If I'm honest, as a uni student for my second year of university I was too busy enjoying myself, didn't really listen, but then when it came to the point where I really wanted to apply for the placement year, that's when I called up the services.

— Graduate

The graduates we spoke to emphasised the substantial benefits they had gained from work experience and often perceived this to be as important as academic achievement. They recommended that all students take up such opportunities.

There are loads of different benefits that have come out of doing those internships because they provided me with ... extra evidence of different things that I've done that helped me get onto the fast stream initially. From there my career has sky rocketed. Having more than just your academic qualifications is really important.

— Graduate

So, it is important that HEIs are proactive in engaging students on the topic of employability – relying on students to come forward is unlikely to be effective. Below we highlight key learning points from HEIs on how best to communicate the importance of work experience and employability to their students.

Start to engage students early on

HEIs need to provide students with information about work experience and employability support early in their studies. Getting buy-in from students and ensuring they consider potential employment options at an early stage is important so they can take advantage of the range of employability support opportunities available. This is particularly important for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who often have less prior knowledge of the graduate employment landscape and more limited access to informal sources of information about graduate careers, especially if they are the first person in their family to go to university.

From my background, none of my parents or grandparents ever went to [university], so in terms of just knowing what a degree gets you, in terms of the job world, I wasn't really too familiar.

— Student

Some HEIs start engaging students about employability before courses start so it does not become lost in the plethora of other information students receive once their studies begin. This can also be useful for students who have limited time on campus due to commuting or because they work alongside their studies.

I think as a student you get a lot of messages, and in particular if you're a commuter student, your time on campus is very valuable. You have to use it quite wisely and smartly. ... One of the key things with our strategy is engaging students early on. At either the start or before they start with us.

— HEI

Providing internships at the end of the first year not only enables students to acquire some insight into the world of work at an early stage in their student journey, it can also help them to see the value of employability support. This in turn encourages students to continue to engage with the careers service more broadly throughout the rest of their studies. Early work experience can also help shape student decision-making about course and module selection.

I believe that my true interests arose through actually working [in a particular industry] rather than just reading about it through books and online. ...Encourage [work experience] earlier on... it would have benefited me in the long-run.

— Student

Provide clear and concise information

HEIs need to make it as easy as possible for students to find out about opportunities to ensure information reaches all students who can benefit, and not just those who have the confidence to proactively seek it out. HEIs provide an abundance of information to their undergraduates about the work experience and employability support opportunities

available to them. However, some students find it difficult to navigate their way through this. One HEI collected feedback from students and found that they prefer short, bite-sized pieces of information on what is on offer and when. Another has successfully communicated information via social media (for example, Instagram) and students' informal networks (such as WhatsApp groups), involving those who have engaged in employability support previously.

Make the most of peer influence

Young people are heavily influenced by their peers and word of mouth is a valuable way for HEIs to engage students with employability. In particular, if students see their peers doing work experience and hear of the benefits directly, then their interest in taking part often increases.

People that actually did end up doing [work experience] were convinced because of their peers, like their friends right ... I know my mate who literally [did] a placement year for the sake of the fact that every single one of his friends has done a placement year, so it was, like, yeah I can't be alone.

— Student

Peers are also an influential source of information about career options, opportunities and what different jobs are like. Students reported accessing contacts and opportunities through peer group networks they would not necessarily find elsewhere.

My classmates are very valuable contacts because they would go out and apply for different jobs and they would come back and tell me 'oh I did this, and this is what it was like'. So, also in terms of relevant information the peers also, because they're in the same position as me, they're coming back with knowledge and they share that experience.

— Student

HEIs are looking at ways to harness the power of peer influence. Peer mentoring schemes, where alumni provide support, advice and guidance to current students are one way of achieving this. Peer mentoring is particularly successful if students can relate to their mentor and have similar backgrounds and ambitions for the future (see page 35 for further information).

Continue to reinforce messages

Simply providing information once is not sufficient. HEIs need to continue to reinforce message regularly throughout a student's time with them. Even when information is clear and easily accessible, some students still miss out on opportunities if they are not ready to engage or are focused on studying. Regular reminders and clear signposting are important so when they do need information and support, they know where to go.

People miss out on really good opportunities, but I think it's also because some people generally don't know where to look, or if they do, if you're not looking at a job at a certain time and someone tells you where to go, you're not really thinking about it, and then when you do need to look for a job you don't remember what that person said.

— Student

Get faculties on board

HEIs achieve better buy-in from students when faculties have an active role in the employability strategy and support delivery. Employability teams work closely with academic schools and faculties, as well as support staff, to effectively engage students.

We also want to make sure that the placements and work experience and careers in general is endorsed and really championed within the department.

— HEI

One strategy is to embed employability staff within each faculty. This allows them to gain insight into the students' employability support needs, be more targeted in their approach and to offer direct support to students.

When you do have staff identifiable in an academic unit, it really does help with that student engagement and buy-in with the opportunities.

— HEI

Offering the expertise and support of specialist employability teams can help secure the buy-in of faculties and ensure employability forms a core part of the curriculum. These arrangements may be formalised in service level agreements between the employability team and academic schools.

We do a service-level agreement with each one of the schools to look at what delivery they do within the curriculum, if any. If they do delivery within the curriculum, we would say, 'What do you need from us to actually support that delivery?'

— HEI

Embed employability support within the curriculum

Embedding employability support within the curriculum is an effective way to engage students right from the start and grow their awareness and interest in the topic. Including employability within the curriculum removes the possibility of students 'opting out' and ensures parity across all students. It also means provision can be tailored and made applicable to students' subject of study.

We have dedicated members of staff aligned to different faculties, and they have a programme each year where they deliver on course teaching of the curriculum for students, highly tailored to the degree discipline in question, [and] employability.

— HEI

Going further, HEIs are developing employability modules within courses, which include credit-bearing assignments, to develop key skills and competences. Students are more likely to actively engage in a module that is assessed formally than an activity that is not. Structured employability components within courses also present an opportunity for HEIs to provide information to students on wider work experience and employability support.

We embedded [employability] into core modules so that when they had a module that talked about employability or career management skills we spent ten, fifteen minutes talking to them [about] what employment support was offered at university, how to access it, and what was relevant to their course in particular. ... And we've seen that have an impact again on engagement.

— HEI

HEIs and students alike emphasise the importance of activities being tailored to the particular needs of courses and industries, rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. If students perceive activities as irrelevant to their course or career interests, they are more likely to disengage. Ways to embed employability within the curriculum include:

- mandatory placements (and preparation) as part of courses
- career choice workshops as part of teaching
- assessed modules involving CV review, making live job applications and mock interviews
- careers service staff sitting on academic development committees
- employers working with academics to shape the curriculum

Advance HE has frameworks and accompanying guidance for HEIs on embedding employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship within learning and teaching policies and practice: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/launch-embedding-employability-framework-guide>

Engaging disadvantaged students

While all students can face challenges engaging in work experience and employability support, students from disadvantaged and under-represented backgrounds often face additional barriers and do not always make use of all the opportunities available to them. In this section we explore the main issues students face and how HEIs are working to address these and ensure all students can benefit from work experience.

Key barriers

HEIs identified four key barriers that can inhibit disadvantaged learners in particular from engaging with work experience and employability support:

- **Lack of knowledge and understanding:** Students, particularly those who are the first in their family to go to university, can lack understanding of the wider opportunities available in HE, including employability support and work experience, and the benefits of taking part.
- **Lack of confidence:** Disadvantaged students often lack the confidence to seek out information about employability support as well as confidence in their ability to undertake a work placement.
- **Financial barriers:** Many students from disadvantaged backgrounds face financial difficulties and work part-time to support themselves while they study. These students are not in a position to cease their paid work in order to undertake unpaid or low-paid work experience or internships. The cost (and time) involved in traveling to a work placement can also act as a barrier. Students may be deterred from undertaking more substantial work experience options (for example, a sandwich placement that extends the length of their studies) given the additional course fees they may incur.
- **Time pressures:** In addition to working part-time, disadvantaged students may have other responsibilities, such as caring for family members, which can limit the time they have to engage in extra-curricular activities, including employability support.

Overcoming barriers

Co-creation of opportunities

It is important that HEIs first understand the barriers students face before developing solutions. Different groups of under-represented students are likely to have differing needs and tailored and targeted support is required. One institution hosts ‘think-ins’ once a term to inform the development of their employability support programme. These focus groups enable the HEI to capture views and opinions from students from under-represented backgrounds. This ensures provision capitalises on students’ existing strengths and responds to their needs and interests.

[The employability team] will ask them questions about what they know, what they don't [and] what they find difficult. And we'll use this information to help us develop our programme as well.

— HEI

Taking things further, engaging students in the co-creation of support helps ensure buy-in to solutions. Students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds often feel interventions are ‘done to’ them rather than with them. Working with students to develop employability support is a way to increase feelings of ownership.

We ask them to help shape projects that we're working on. So, that if there are factors that they identify that are barriers to participate they can then help us shape [provision] so that it's relevant and they're able to come along.

— HEI

The Creative Shift at the University of the Arts London has been developed using such an 'asset-based model'. See case study on pages 29 and 30 for further details

Using clear, jargon free language

The terminology of employability may be very new to or misunderstood by some students. In addition to ensuring information is accessible and easy to navigate (see above), it is important to use clear, jargon free language in communications which clearly articulate what work experience and employability mean in practice. This helps to dispel student concerns and reduce uncertainty:

I think there's a bit of misunderstanding on the part of some students, especially first generation, widening participation students, what do we mean by work experience? The terminology placement, internship, work experience [are not always understood], and unless you've had someone at home, or in your network that has been through it, and can explain it to you, it can be really daunting, so I think there is a role for institutions to play in developing confidence, and breaking down the barriers of understanding.

— HEI

Role models

Using positive role models to convey information about employability support in marketing materials and industry talks can help students to understand the value of work experience and enhance their confidence in their ability. It is essential that these role models reflect the characteristics of the students so that they can identify with and relate to them and their experience. Some HEIs are achieving this through peer mentoring and student ambassador programmes.

I got the chance to meet somebody that was already in the professional world and that had studied in the same university and was applying to the same placement that I did... It was really helpful to meet somebody.

— Graduate

I'd encourage teams that are trying to design programmes, they need to have representation... We're undertaking a piece of work around black students, and seeing black employers, and our students actually asking the questions of those employers... developing some podcasts ready for the new academic year. So, I think to broaden the messaging that we provide across [the HEI], to make it more accessible to students, so they can actually see themselves in those positions.

— HEI

Preparing students to undertake work experience

Preparing students for work experience helps to build confidence, increases the likelihood that they will apply for opportunities and enhances their success while on placement. This also helps to ensure a positive experience for the employer too, as outlined previously. Preparation activities include workshops and lectures to build transferable skills, support to find opportunities and write applications, coaching and mock interviews. Hosting work experience interviews on campus as part of an employment brokering service allows HEIs to provide immediate pre- and post-interview support which can help to reduce some of the anxiety students may feel (see case study on page 16). Students and graduates clearly value this type of support.

The employability team helped me do mock interviews ... I was so prepared when I came in, I completely knew that I had smashed it, it all went well

— Graduate

Light-touch opportunities

Use of short, light-touch opportunities can provide a way to introduce work experience to students in a way that is more accessible and less daunting than a full internship or placement. This can include week-long placements, job-shadowing and workplace visits, which provide a taste of work experience and can act as a ‘springboard’ to more substantive opportunities.

Even just to get a little internship they expect you to jump through so many hoops, so it would be easier if companies offered smaller opportunities that you could build up your CV.

— Student

Paid work experience

Offering paid work experience placements and internships is vitally important to ensure disadvantaged students can access them. However, not all employers are in a position to offer paid placements. Access to external funding can help to meet the costs of a placement where payment presents a barrier. The [Santander Universities SME Internships Programme](#), for example, provides part-funding for students undertaking internships with SMEs. The SME or university is responsible for matching this funding. This helps SMEs to provide work experience opportunities for students without the burden of paying the student’s entire wage. Such programmes benefit SMEs, HEIs and students.

I ended up taking an internship at [company name], and I was only able to access it because it was under... the Santander programme, which [HEI] was paired up with.

— Student

In addition, HEIs aim to ensure that students are reimbursed for their travel and subsistence costs when undertaking volunteering opportunities.

Student funding and in-kind support

Providing students with access to additional funding or in-kind support further helps disadvantaged students to take up work experience opportunities. Hardship funds are available for students who feel they cannot take part in employability opportunities for financial reasons. One HEI offers a placement bursary to cover travel and subsistence costs for students attending placements in particularly competitive sectors where unpaid work experience still prevails. Another HEI provides food for students if they run any employability activities around meal times.

So that they're not out of pocket for attending or taking part in our offers... We make sure that whenever possible – especially when doing stuff in the evening or around lunchtime – we always offer food just to make sure students aren't having to think about, 'When do I eat?' or 'I can't afford to eat if I come along to this thing'.

— HEI

Student incentives

Incentive schemes can help to encourage students to engage in multiple work experience and employability opportunities. Several HEIs use award schemes where students collect points for each opportunity they complete. Once they reach a certain threshold students achieve an award. These may be tiered, for example, bronze, silver and gold. Including a requirement for reflective elements, such as a session with a careers adviser, helps ensure students get the most from their participation.

I think take up [is increased], but [students] also reflect on the learnings from those activities, because we've made that one of the core requirements of the Employability Award. So, they do a skills audit at the beginning and at the end of the award. And they can see the distance they've travelled.

— HEI

Embedding employability support within the curriculum

As previously outlined, embedding employability support into course delivery helps to ensure equal access for all students. This also removes some of the financial and time barriers associated with extra-curricular work experience placements. Embedded and on-campus opportunities include industry briefs delivered during lectures (further information in the following chapter).

We got some really interesting feedback and some of the barriers that [students] encountered. The big one was that if it lay outside of their curriculum, they didn't have the time. The response to the work based and placement learning project was very positive. The fact that it was going to be embedded in their curriculum was of great interest because the feedback we got is that having it in the curriculum would definitely make more sense and make it more accessible to them.

— HEI

Flexible work experience

Another solution is to provide more flexible opportunities. One HEI runs a flexible internship programme where hours can be worked at a time that suits students. Opportunities are offered both on-campus as well as at employer sites. This enables students to fit opportunities around their other commitments. Some students have undertaken remote ‘virtual’ internships during COVID and this has also helped overcome travel barriers.

A lot of the opportunities are on campus, so it's really easy for them... The internships are really flexible so any employers or internal departments that take part in the scheme have to agree that the fourteen hours can be worked flexibly.

— HEI

Maximising the benefits of employability support

Comprehensive packages and progression pathways

Students, and those from disadvantaged groups in particular, benefit most from support when it’s delivered as a coherent programme throughout HE, rather than in a piecemeal way or as one off, ad hoc interventions. Several of the HEIs we spoke to are running programmes that comprise a series of activities that build on each other and develop students’ knowledge and skills over time. For example, one HEI, whose student body is predominantly made up of under-represented students, is piloting a programme to support students to successfully apply to the graduate schemes of large employers that traditionally recruit from more selective institutions and attract students from more advantaged backgrounds. The programme includes on-site visits from the employer, employability workshops, mentoring, coaching and work-experience and work shadowing. Students work with a selected employer to develop in-depth understanding of their business with the aim that they are well prepared to apply to and secure places on their graduate schemes. As a pilot programme only a few students are currently participating but the HEI see this as an important starting point for developing similar opportunities with more employers.

[Employers] would take maybe ten students, and do something with them in their second year and in their third year, so maybe six different interventions. ... By the time they graduate they understand this organisation. They've been coached a little bit and our careers teams will also do some coaching with them. We're trying to funnel them into the graduate scheme that way.

— HEI

Open to all versus targeted support

There is often debate around the extent to which student support should be targeted at students from under-represented and disadvantaged backgrounds or available to all. There

is a risk with highly targeted support that students feel ‘singled out’ and ‘stigmatised’. Furthermore, evidence suggests that inclusive mainstream programmes, rather than targeted interventions are important for developing a sense of belonging and this maximises the success of all students.⁹ However, where funded internships and other work experience opportunities are limited, there is a clear argument for ring-fencing these for students who could benefit the most and would be least likely to secure opportunities without additional support from their HEI. One way to balance tensions between targeted and open support is to ensure disadvantaged students engaging in an inclusive / universal programme receive tailored support that addresses their particular needs.

We do tailor the support, so even though the opportunities are open to everybody, we try to provide extra support for students from priority groups or minority groups.

— HEI

Evaluating impact

Monitoring and evaluation are essential to ensure interventions and initiatives are effective, deliver value for money and achieve the desired outcomes for students, including under-represented groups. Institutions use the graduate outcomes survey to monitor graduates destinations and this provides a useful indication of overall direction of travel. Monitoring data allows HEIs to identify inequalities and target their interventions accordingly. For example, one HEI used insight from destinations data to improve outcomes for teaching students.

We noticed that most students that are doing to teaching, were ending up as teaching assistants rather than teachers in the destinations survey. So, we put programme workshops and a teaching fair to address that, and it's flipped over. After a couple of years of [support] being in place, there were more people going into teaching than working as teaching assistants.

— HEI

However, as HEIs do not always have complete records of which activities students have participated in, attributing positive change to interventions is not possible. An important first step here is consistent recording of participation in activities. Before and after surveys of career readiness used by some HEIs provide stronger evidence of positive impact on participants in specific employability activities. The best evaluation designs are those where there is an appropriate comparison or control group.

We would use our internship students and do a little comparison using ... a control group. And it did show without a doubt that graduate employment outcomes were higher for students that had been on the internship scheme. There was a slight improvement for attainment as well.

— HEI

Other data collection, such as surveys, feedback forms, focus groups and student interviews provide important insights into the quality of activities and student and employer satisfaction. HEIs acknowledge that more impact evaluation is needed. Guidance and resources on effective evaluation to improve student outcomes can be found on the Office for Students website: <https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/promoting-equal-opportunities/evaluation>

Creative Shift, University of the Arts, London

UAL's *Creative shift* supports students from under-represented groups to develop their skills and attributes to enhance their employment and self-employment prospects. Located within the Careers and Employability department, Creative Shift provides a bridge to the creative industries by connecting students with creative organisations through live projects. Students develop an understanding of what life as a professional creative is like as well as the confidence and networks to make their career aspirations a reality.

In addition to mentoring, industry visits and masterclasses, Creative Shift provides opportunities for students to engage with the creative industry, including through:

- *Connect2*, a student-led creative network bringing together undergraduates, staff and industry professionals from different disciplines at monthly sessions focussed around community building with career-related talks and activities
- *Women+ in Leadership*, a series of events including talks, networking opportunities and live briefs, which support female students to aspire to leadership positions and break through the glass ceiling within the creative industries
- *Future Women+ Leaders*, as part of the *Women+ in Leadership* series, a nine-week project with publisher Raconteur where students designed a magazine with support from a leadership coach
- *Take your ideas to the next level* which supports students to evolve their ideas into a business in partnership with social enterprise The Kusp

The student voice is at the heart of the development of Creative Shift. It has been designed to build on students' strengths and interests and evolve in response to feedback to ensure it remains fit for purpose and delivers benefits for target groups:

It came from this idea of using asset models, so as opposed to looking at what students lack and what they're in need of, it was about building on the things that they're really interested in or great at.

The team has successfully engaged creative organisations through networking at events and via Instagram. As many of the team are also creative practitioners, they have also drawn on their own contacts. Key to its success is engaging relatable role models, who come from similar backgrounds to the students and who understand the barriers they may face getting into the industry.

The team promote Creative Shift to students through mass and targeted promotional activities and by working with course leaders and support staff. Many students from under-represented groups face financial challenges which have been exacerbated by COVID-19. Many of the opportunities through Creative Shift are paid in recognition of the time and skills students bring to the projects.

Students who take part grow in confidence, develop new creative and transferable skills, gain experience of job roles and sectors they are interested in and produce work that enhances their CV and portfolio.

These programmes have definitely pushed me and given me motivation, I'm like 'Yes, I can! I'm in designing and this is what I do'. When I'm looking for opportunities, I've got things I can really use on my CV that will make me stand out.

They also have the opportunity to develop connections within the industry which can lead to more substantive offers including internships or graduate positions.

04. WORK EXPERIENCE AND EMPLOYABILITY SUPPORT INTERVENTIONS

The spectrum of work experience and employability support HEIs can deploy ranges from light-touch activities, such as employer talks, to long-term placements. In this chapter we explore some of the more substantive interventions and how they can support HEIs' employability goals.

HEIs provide students with an array of London-based work experience opportunities. The varying levels of time-commitment associated with each helps to ensure that there is something for everyone.

Placements and internships

Placements and internships are typically what people think about when they consider work experience at university. These terms are often used interchangeably by students and although they have similarities, there are some important differences.

Placements are full-time, assessed, work experience episodes that typically last for a year. They are usually undertaken by students in their third year of study during term-time. Students undertaking a placement are usually paid a salary and are considered an employee by their placement provider.

Internships typically last for a shorter period of time than placements. They are not an assessed or compulsory part of the course and students often undertake them outside term-time, for example during the summer between academic years. Most HEIs strive to ensure these opportunities are paid, but this is not always the case.

HEIs use a variety of approaches to ensure that as many students as possible can access these opportunities. An important element in ensuring accessibility is providing paid opportunities and covering expenses, as highlighted in the previous chapter.

Students who have completed placements and internships clearly value them as a way to develop new skills and build confidence.

I was in charge of a lot of projects there, so multi-tasking along with time-management, was especially important. But the main thing was that I was... talking to people and just networking and communicating with people ... I had a lot of fears before about taking new things on. I think that working in a busy place conquered that fear for me.

— Student

Flexible sign-up

Traditionally placements form part of a sandwich degree, which students apply for when making their university application. Whilst some students know exactly what they want to do before they apply to university, others will not be as sure. Allowing students to sign up to a placement year whilst at university helps more to consider doing a placement. One HEI is launching optional placement years to their undergraduates to ensure that students do not miss out.

Some [students] are really focused, they know that they want to do a particular career ... others aren't sure what they want to do at the end of it, so knowing that it's not too late, that if they change their mind they still can do that year out.

— HEI

I didn't apply for the sandwich year ... because I thought why would I do it in four years if I can do it in three. [Then at] the beginning of my second year, they started talking about the idea of doing a placement ... the university gave us a few lectures that were optional on this topic, which I attended and then saw the benefits of doing a placement year.

— Graduate

Reduced tuition fees during placement years

Reducing students' tuition fees during their placement year helps to reduce financial concerns. Tuition fees at most universities continue to be levied while students are on a placement year. Although the majority only pay a percentage of the usual fee, this can still be upwards of £1,000 for the year. This covers the cost for student services and the supervision and support students have access to throughout their placement year from their HEI.

Supporting students to find opportunities

Offering support to help students source and apply for placements and internships reduces this burden. Even proactive students reported that they had to apply to numerous placements before they were successful, particularly where placements were not offered on their course through an established network of employers. The need to be proactive and persistent can be off-putting for students who lack experience and confidence.

I wanted to pursue [a placement] from ... before I applied to university. I was actively searching since then, so it took me about ten months of searching, applying to positions and interviews before I was finally able to actually get one

— Student

Some HEIs have dedicated staff within faculties who are responsible for sourcing placements. The benefit of this is that staff develop subject-specific networks of employers.

Others have central teams that are responsible for helping students to find placements. End-to-end support, where students receive a gradual introduction to the requirements of their placement year early on, help to find a placement, support with their applications, and preparation for interviews and assessment processes is likely to be valued by students. There is evidence from some HEIs that full brokerage of internship opportunities results in greater take-up than placements where the onus is on students to find and approach employers themselves.

Promotion of transferable skills

Promoting the wider transferable skills that students will develop through a placement or internship helps to encourage students to consider a wider range of opportunities rather than focussing on those that are specific to their subject of study. Students sometimes talked of dismissing opportunities that were not clearly aligned with their course or desired career path. However, others who had taken up unrelated work opportunities had benefited from these.

Obviously childcare is nothing to do with sciences that I want to do, but the skills that I gained from [the placement are] something that I can use ... I learned a lot more about communicating effectively. I learnt a lot more about reflection on my work, which is something that goes with every other career.

— Student

Promoting the value of developing transferable skills helps to increase the chances of students taking part in a placement or internship and thus improves their graduate employability. Embarking on any kind of work experience can introduce students to a wider range of careers than they had previously considered, even if this helps them decide a particular route is not for them.

Going to [employer] I didn't even know what an Insight Analyst was before I applied. Once you [are] there, hearing about all the other departments, it just opened my eyes so much, in terms of what my degree could let me do.

— Student

Industry briefs

Industry briefs are increasingly being used as a way to engage students in a form of work experience that does not involve leaving their campus. This eliminates travel and financial barriers which can present a particular challenge for under-represented groups. Employers provide a brief or challenge for students to work on. Briefs may be creating a particular output, a report, product or design, or tackling a particular problem. Industry briefs are particularly prevalent in institutions and courses with a creative focus. Students often work in small teams to respond to the brief. Briefs can be major projects, taking place over several weeks, or short 'micro-challenges'. Employers assess the results and provide

feedback. The best responses may be rewarded, for example, by being taken forward and used by the employer, or by the team receiving additional opportunities such as a more substantive internship or placement with the employer.

We had an employer work with our marketing course and this employer had a horse box that he wanted to use at the races in an innovative way. And the marketing students worked with him to convert that horse box into a mobile bar. ... It's looking at creative development in response to an employer's business need.

— HEI

Industry briefs enable students to gain insights into working in a particular industry and to develop important employability skills, such as working to a specification, meeting deadlines and working within a budget. Briefs can also have an entrepreneurship focus, with students asked to develop a business plan to accompany their product or solution. HEIs' and students report that industry briefs can be engaging and exciting to work on and help develop students' confidence.

Because whole cohorts of students can work on a single brief, this approach is an effective way to offer a taste of real-world work scenarios to a large number of students and helps to overcome the challenge of the limited availability of placements. Industry briefs still require close working with a range of employers who are willing to offer their time to create and develop briefs that are relevant to them and the students. But this can be an efficient way of supporting students with employability.

One of nicest examples is where we had a literary agent who put a challenge out, ... students were going to write 200, 300 words, and he would assess their writing, give them some feedback, and ... he took the one that did the best in the writing through to work experience with him. Okay, so that's great because it engages lots of students, lots of people get involved, and get that experience of doing something that's closely related to working life, and it's scalable. We'd never have found fifty places at literary agents to do that.

— HEI

Industry briefs can also be designed to encompass a focus on related topics that form part of the curriculum or develop other aspects of employability, such as leadership. As well as developing transferable and sector-specific skills, students research and develop their understanding of particular issues, such as sustainability. To maximise the benefits of working on a brief, some HEIs provide additional employability activities alongside, such as coaching or careers advice.

[Company] set a creative brief for fifteen students ... to design a magazine which addresses leadership, female leadership, sustainability, diversity and inclusion. This project was supported by a leadership coach, and every week for nine weeks, the leadership coach would be teaching them, and getting them to engage in practical and

interactive sessions, understanding what leadership meant, and also how they can apply it to the creative brief. So that was fantastic, to watch them learn and grow.

— HEI

Mentoring

Mentoring can be used for a variety of purposes, including developing academic skills and helping students to develop a sense of belonging. We are concerned in this report with mentoring specifically used to support employability.

Most institutions have some form of mentoring programme in place to develop students' employability. Mentors provide support, advice, guidance, inspiration and encouragement for their mentees. Mentoring is generally provided on a one-to-one basis but can be delivered to small groups. Mentoring may be delivered in person or through remote means. However, in the context of the pandemic, many HEIs' mentoring programmes have moved online.

Peer / student mentors

Different types of mentors are used by HEIs, and all have different strengths and benefits. In some cases mentors are current students or recent graduates. These approaches capitalise on the value of peer influence and role models, as outlined on pages 20 and 24. Matching mentors and mentees with similar backgrounds and experiences is beneficial as it helps to build rapport and ensures the mentees feel their mentor 'speaks their language' and understands them.

Mentors should agree clear goals with their mentees so both parties understand what they are seeking to gain from the relationship. Mentoring can be effective in encouraging self-reflection and developing mentees' self-knowledge and confidence – important tools in enhancing their employability.

I luckily had the support from my mentors and lecturers and the employability office to help me reflect and dissect my experience in a way that I could send it to an employer. ...I struggled during that period with blowing my own trumpet, because it didn't come naturally to me. And I guess ethnicity-wise, my family's always said, 'Be humble, don't snoot about your achievements.' And I had to learn to do the opposite during the recruitment process.

— Graduate

Mentors can also offer practical support and guidance, for example, advice on completing applications for placements and jobs. Graduate mentors can be particularly useful in providing students with insights into particular careers and industries based on their own experience. Mentors can also help signpost other opportunities and encourage mentees to engage with them.

Providing training and support to student/peer mentors is important to ensure mentees get the best out of the support they receive. However, this is also beneficial for the student mentors themselves. Through their involvement in supporting others, they grow in confidence and develop skills and experience that are useful additions to their CV and help them to provide tangible examples of their skills during job interviews.

We have our student leadership programme, and the idea of that is to try and not only get a bit more peer to peer leadership in terms of encouraging their friends [but mentors also] get some tangible benefits from being involved. ... The feedback we've had from future employers is that actually [being a mentor is] something that is of interest when [students] talk about it in interview etc.

— HEI

Employer / industry mentors

Some HEIs offer mentoring by employers or industry experts. Most undertake the role in a voluntary capacity so this provides a cost effective way for HEIs to develop students' employability. Employer / industry experts can provide students with valuable insights into different careers and sectors, as well as expert advice and skills development, encouragement and access to other contacts and opportunities. Students appear to value and respect the input of people who have been successful in a field they are interested in.

What worked well with the mentorship, is having somebody who works in the field that I want to work in. Having them give advice and talk about their industry. Also being able to like apply a certain language that you have within the marketing field that, it just feels more like the person understands what they're talking about, and also it's easier to explain what do you do on a day to day basis, and stuff like that.

— Student

Mentoring from an employer or industry expert is particularly useful for students from more disadvantaged backgrounds who are less likely to have access to professional contacts and networking opportunities. Accordingly some HEIs are targeting mentoring provision at particular under-represented groups, such as BAME students.

HEIs report mentoring programmes are popular with students and have high levels of engagement. Although one HEI reported challenges in reaching all those who could benefit from the scheme. In some cases mentors and mentees develop lasting relationships that continue to offer benefits beyond the student's time in HE.

And of course your relationship with your mentor doesn't have to end when the programme ends. I continued mine since graduating.

— Student

As with student / peer mentors, it's important that employer / industry expert mentors are properly trained and supported. However, this, along with the demands of the role must be proportionate given most give their time for free in addition to their full-time job. One HEI has adopted a lighter-touch approach, facilitating networking between alumni, recent graduates and students. In this way, participants can access ad hoc support, get answers to any employment related questions they have and make professional connections.

The thing that we've recently launched ... is a LinkedIn-type situation just for [our] alumni and students, so it's not quite mentoring, it's more just asking the occasional employability related question and maybe having a coffee, or Skype call, or something like that.

— HEI

To maximise impact, mentoring should be integrated with other support, rather than delivered as a standalone activity. Mentoring can be packaged with placements or industry briefs for example, to deepen students' understanding, help them make the most of work experience opportunities, and think about how they take forward and develop new interests and skills.

05. THINGS TO CONSIDER

Work experience and employability support are increasingly important for a rounded HE experience. To conclude our report we outline the key things HEIs need to consider when developing an inclusive and effective employability offer for undergraduate students.

Based on insights from the HEIs and students, we have developed a list of points for HEIs to consider when reviewing and developing their employability offer. This is intended to provide prompts for reflection and discussion.

What are our students' needs?

Understanding the student profile and their differential outcomes is essential for developing tailored and effective employability support. While there is much to commend in relation to support that is available for all, some students will face challenges and need additional help. Engaging students in a conversation about the barriers they face, their interests, and how they would prefer to receive support is vital. This helps to ensure students feel a sense of ownership over the process, actively engage in activities and achieve maximum benefits.

Do we have a good understanding of the local and national labour market?

The employment and labour market landscape is constantly evolving and changing. Keeping abreast of emerging opportunities, growth industries and the skills employers require is needed to ensure students receive good advice and are well equipped to meet employer demands. Broadening students' horizons is an important function of HE, and London has a great diversity of employment opportunities. Many students will want or need to remain in the area after graduation, so understanding local opportunities is particularly important.

How can we help employers?

Consider the issue from the employer's perspective. HEIs have been successful in engaging employers when they have taken the time to build a relationship, understand their needs and tailor an offer accordingly. Talk to employers about the best ways to communicate with them about what you have to offer. For example, a breakfast meeting might be more accessible for some employers.

Do we have a good understanding of our current employability offer?

Even HEIs with central employability teams are aware that lots more is happening independently within departments and faculties. Academic staff will have valuable insights

and contacts and central teams can provide additional resource and expertise. Mapping what is available may be useful in uncovering innovative practice that can be extended or standalone activities that might be enhanced by being incorporated into a wider programme. Developing a co-ordinated approach can also help to reduce duplication and the risk of an employer being contacted on multiple occasions by staff working in different parts of an institution

How can employability support be embedded and complement the wider curriculum?

We have shown in this report that building employability into the curriculum and embedding activities within courses improves take-up and helps students join the dots between what they are studying and how they can apply their knowledge and skills in the workplace on graduation.

Who else can we work with?

Employability support teams often sit within careers or wider student services departments. Engaging with those involved in the delivery of the institution's access and participation plan could help to further strengthen the employability offer by ensuring interventions are informed by a more nuanced understanding of the needs of under-represented groups and complements wider support designed to maximise retention and attainment of these students.

How can we evidence the impact of our offer?

HEI staff involved in developing employability support are enthusiastic and creative. Understanding which activities are having the desired impact and for which groups of students is a crucial part of developing an effective programme, particularly where resource is scarce. Improving the data on student participation in employability activities and linking this to outcomes data is a necessary foundation for understanding impact. HEIs are homes to experts in research and evaluation; engaging academic staff may be a way to improve the evidence of impact and help build useful relationships for employability teams.

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