Dissertation Title:

Stakeholder Viewpoints on Embedding Employability in Higher Education

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Abstract

Background. Employability is increasingly prioritised in the broader policy and regulatory climate as a key metric for evaluating performance in the Higher Education (HE) sector and in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Regulator thresholds now require that 60% full-time students taking their first degree progress into professional work (or take additional studies) within the 15-month period following graduation. A large and growing body of literature has explored varied definitions of employability, interventions to audit and embed employability in HEIs alongside more critical discussion around employability. Employability is important for a number of different stakeholders both internal stakeholders within HE (e.g., learners, teachers) and external stakeholders beyond HE (e.g., employers, Further Education practitioners). *Project Focus.* This project was designed to explore viewpoints of embedding employability, and of employability more broadly, held by a subset of internal stakeholders. Three stakeholder groups were the focus of dissertation project work: learners, teachers (i.e., academic teaching staff) and careers staff (i.e., careers and employability or work-based learning staff). There were two project research questions. A first, broad, research question (RQ1): 'How do stakeholders of employability define employability?' and a second, more focused, research question (RQ2):'How is the embedding of employability within H.E. programme designs, curricula, learning environments and other pedagogic initiatives viewed by stakeholders of employability?' *Methods.* Ethical approval was secured from the London Metropolitan University Ethics Committee. Two Research Assistants (RAs) led recruitment and data collection for the project. Prospective participants were recruited to the project via email circulars, via targeted institutional recruitment messages and via social media messaging. The project sample comprised 12 participants in total: four from each stakeholder group. Individuals participated in online semi-structured interviews lasting, on average, 43 minutes. Interview data was transcribed verbatim and subjected to an interpretivist type of Thematic Analysis (TA). *Findings.* Analyses are presented in two main sections; one concerning RQ1 (broader understandings/ definitions of employability) and one concerning RQ2 (focused on viewpoints of embedding employability in UK HEI curricula). The first section of analysis contained interview material focused on contextual issues relevant to embedding employability in HEIs. An overarching theoretical framework - Ecological Systems Theory (EST) - assisted understanding of contextual material focusing on three systems: the microsystem, the mesosystem, and the macrosystem. Four themes were presented in the first section of analysis. These were titled: Theme 1: The importance of complex, plural definitions of employability (microsystem level); Theme 2: Seeking to embed employability into an overloaded curriculum (mesosystem level); Theme 3: Navigating the neoliberal landscape and ethical concerns about embedding employability (macrosystem level); and Theme 4: The elephant in the room: social justice and employability (macrosystem level). The second section of analysis contained interview material that concerned key factors relevant to optimising the embedding of employability in HEI learning and teaching

environments. Five themes were identified linked to the second section of analysis. These were titled: Theme 1: The systemic challenge to motivate and engage; Theme 2: Arenas beyond the classroom; Theme 3: Tailored approaches are better; Theme 4: Embedding professional collaboration; and Theme 5: Learning to know and manage the self. ***Project recommendations and practical implications.*** Recommendations and implications for practice derived from project evidence are considered at various levels of action including my own teaching practice, local learning and teaching approaches, broader institutional strategies, UK related sector wide policy and debate and the broader global pedagogic community associated with Higher Education.

Declaration of original work

I confirm that this Dissertation/Project is my own work and that it has not previously been submitted for assessment on any other course.

Signed:

Date: 27th May 2023

Acknowledgements

Contents List

Key to Abbreviations

BPS = British Psychological Association

EAS = Employability Appraisal Scale

EST = Ecological Systems Theory

HE = Higher Education

HEI = Higher Education Institutions

HESA = Higher Educational Statistics Agency

OfS = Office for Students

TA = Thematic Analysis

TEF = Teaching Excellence Framework

Introduction

Topic Background

Employability is increasingly prioritised in the broader policy and regulatory climate as a key metric for evaluating performance in the Higher Education (HE) sector. For example, thresholds have been put in place applying to full-time students taking their first degree that require 60% of students to be seen to progress into professional work (or take additional studies) within the 15-month period following graduation (Office for Students (OfS), 2022). Universities who fail to secure these standards would be likely to face eventual sanctions if they cannot justify falling short of such thresholds. The OfS has also prioritised the importance of HEIs ensuring student success beyond their degrees regardless of demographic background including ethnicity and disability status (OfS, 2018).

Taking a course of studies at a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the UK typically leads, on successful completion, to acquiring an academic degree as a formal qualification. Recent figures indicate that nearly 2.7 million students were studying at an HEI most of whom were full-time undergraduate students from the UK originally (Higher Educational Statistics Agency (HESA) 2022a). Figures consistently demonstrate that students from the least privileged backgrounds are less represented in HE. For example, in 2020/21, over half undergraduate students comprised individuals born into families with parents in managerial and professional occupations (51% enrolments) while around one fifth undergraduate students comprised individuals born into families with parents in routine/ semi-routine occupations (21% enrolments) (HESA, 2022b). Discussion here illuminates that widening participation closely dovetails with employability and builds the case for addressing the two issues in tandem in HE learning initiatives.

Understanding how employability can be successfully and consistently embedded in learning and teaching environments is an increasingly important consideration within HE. There are many reasons for this, and also many stakeholders of how successfully employability is addressed at an institutional level. Increasingly, guidance and frameworks are available to support quality and initiatives relating to employability. For example, Advance HE recently published 'Essential frameworks for enhancing student success: embedding employability' which collates feedback from HEIs on how employability related content has been successfully incorporated into curricula (Tibby and Norton, 2020). Given its acknowledged importance, and the increasing availability of clear frameworks to explore the current status of employability within universities, there is clear value and scope for auditing employability at an institutional/School/Departmental level.

Defining Employability

Employability has been recognised to refer to different things. One notable shift has been away from employability as a proxy of being in employment and toward an understanding that emphasises the extent to which an individual holds the skills and experience relevant to gaining employment at a

future time. One established definition of employability is provided by Yorke (2006) who states that employability concerns a graduate's achievements but also their potential to obtain employment and particularly 'graduate employment' related in some way to their degree studies. Some authors, reviewing how employability appears in official statements, reports and position papers in a UK context, has highlighted the shift toward Higher Education institutions for taking responsibility for employability provision (Hooley et al., 2022). Elsewhere, Dalrymple et al (2021), reviewing the 2016-2021 employability literature offered varied conclusions including the need to differentiate and provide a wider range of measures of employability, and the importance of engaging a wider range of stake holders in discussion around employability (Cheng et al., 2021). These authors also point to inequalities and differential opportunities in the provision of employability within HEIs.

Discussion has also pointed to the existence of competing perspectives on employability, including 'possessive', 'positioning' and 'processual' approaches to employability (Holmes, 2013). While 'possessive' perspectives (emphasising notions of skills and attributes) is central within HEI practice, strategy and policy, Holmes argues that 'processual' approaches, which place greater attention on the notion of developing graduate identity, are superior in terms of theoretical sophistication and in terms of empirical support.

Measuring and Predicting Employability

An increasingly wide range of conceptual and operational measures of employability exist. Traditional measures of employability include initial graduate salary and a measure of elapsed time between graduation and first graduate-level employment. For example, in a UK context, these measures are used in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) and the Graduate Outcomes Survey. Increasingly, measures beyond 'macro' level measures of economic contribution/value are considered important. For example, newer measures focus on employability in terms of gauges of wellbeing, employment-related satisfaction, the extent to which graduate work aligns with personal values, as well as measures of commitment to or aspirations toward active citizenship and meaningful social contributions.

One newer model, the Bioecological Model of Employability, provides a more contextualised account of employability that focuses both on responsibility for career development and individual characteristics but also on relevant contextual factors and proximal processes to the individual (Llinares et al., 2016). These authors view employability as a meta-competence in that it involves the whole person and connects with many other individual-level processes and competencies. For example, employability links with Lazarus and Folkman's (1984) framework for considering cognitive, emotional and behavioural aspects of coping (applied to the context of pursuing and maintaining employment). Meanwhile, Spanish researchers have developed and validated a multidimensional Employability Appraisal Scale (EAS) (Llinares-Insa et al., 2018) derived from their

Bioecological Model starting point. Unsurprisingly given the holistic/contextualised emphasis of the EAS, the range of factors and individual items in the scale are wide ranging. These factors include: Employment Protective Behaviors (e.g., "I can organize my time to make the most of it"), Employment Risk (e.g., "I have a tendency to leave things until the last minute"), Job-seeking Behavior (e.g., "I can't find a job because I lack self-confidence"), Self-control (e.g., "I have a bad temper"), and Self-learning (e.g., "When I need to know something at work I usually ask or ask to be taught"). Reasonable evidence has been found in support of these differential EAS factors. For example, drawing on a diverse sample of 489 individuals (including long-term unemployed, professional/non-professional workers, university students), Spanish researchers have developed and validated a multidimensional Employability Appraisal Scale (EAS) (Llinares-Insa et al., 2018). This conceptually integrates individual indicators and personal circumstances from and is based on a Bioecological Model of Employability.

Another approach - the Graduate Capital Model (Tomlinson, 2017) - was designed explicitly for university students as a way of gauging self-assessed confidence to transition into the graduate employment market following their degree studies. The emphasis here on 'capital' feels helpful in that it acknowledges something more complex than 'skill acquisition' and something more like a transition of identity from student to graduate worker. The emphasis also builds in the process of making connections between educational experiences, social/work related experiences, career goals and personal values/identities. The authors scales items help distinguish between factors characterised by 'human capital' (the skills an individual brings to the workplace), 'social capital' (resources reflecting social relationships/networks), 'cultural capital' (resources reflecting culturally-relevant knowledge and skills), 'identity capital' (extent to which an individual is invested in their future working life) and 'psychological capital' (abilities to adapt to change and uncertainty).

Many factors might be understood to influence employability ranging from the macro/societal (e.g., changes in the labour market due to economic conditions) to social/cultural factors that might mediate an individual's ability to learn about and develop proficiencies for work in particular sectors to more obviously individual level factors (e.g., specific skills, work-seeking confidence). Prompted by the difficulties of the post covid-19 pandemic climate, longitudinal research has recently provided evidence concerning individual and organisational level factors as predictors of perceived employability and well-being among 301 Italian university students aged 18-33 years (Schettino et al., 2022). Predictors included career ambition, university reputation, university commitment, and technostress related to technology-enhanced learning. Path analysis findings supported the impression that technostress was a key impediment both for students perceived employability and for their positive well-being. Findings also demonstrated that career ambition, perceived university reputation, and perceived organizational commitment predicted enhanced employability perceptions.

There is a wide-ranging literature concerning embedding employability in HEIs. This literature includes empirical work, policy recommendations and discussion pieces. Discussion of this literature in this section is therefore illustrative rather than exhaustive and is designed to draw on key articles and records relevant to the current project focus reported in this dissertation.

One area of work relating to embedding employability in HEIs concerns exploring links between industry and universities. An example of this includes a recent analysis of employer surveys seeking to identify employability skills most valued by employers found general employer satisfaction with core skills (basic literacy, numeracy and IT), but more scepticism about more abstracted skill sets (e.g., business awareness, career self-management and problem-solving) (Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020). These authors also drew on discussion of existing pedagogic approaches to embed employability, concluding that small group teaching sessions could be a central means of aligning graduate skills with the requirements of employers. Other work tests the impact of interventions designed to embed employability within degree courses. For example, experimental research involving 64 second year undergraduates enrolled at UK HEIs recently found that, relative to a control group, students who received employability embedded within courses reported higher levels of knowledge, strengthened career planning skills and were more likely to intend to acquire relevant work experience (Bradley et al., 2021). Clearly intervention research is important as it provides an evidence base to support specific approaches to cultivating employability among learners, mechanisms of action for intervention effects (where found), and where there is evidence for intervention effects on specific learner groups (e.g., interventions that work particularly well on learners who historically have a relatively lower level of academic achievement).

Other work has focused more on the experiences of different stakeholders of embedding employability across different university departments. For example, focus group research has been conducted to examine the experiences and activities of 34 lecturers from UK, Thai and Vietnamese HE settings attending a workshop to discuss the transference of 'soft skills' (abilities to collaborate, communicate, problem solve) to bolster graduate employability. Study findings pointed in part to the challenges involved in rethinking careers services and teaching and learning settings (Tang, 2019). In a similar tradition, other work has linked embedding employability with broader issues around embedding inclusive student experiences and outcomes. For example, the literature linking equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) to graduate employability is relatively under-developed with even less research conducted that explores EDI in the context of embedding employability within HEIs. Recent discussion around where attention is needed to link EDI to employability has emphasised the importance of embedding employability directly into academic assessment explicitly as a means of developing an inclusive approach to cultivating professional literacies and therefore employability among a more diverse range of the student body (Lowe, 2023).

This section has considered empirical work concerning embedding employability in HEIs. Part of this work reflects the range of different stakeholders involved in embedding employability in HEI environments. The next section will focus on these stakeholders, and their viewpoints on embedding employability, in greater detail.

Views Of Employability Among Stakeholders

There are a wide variety of stakeholders of employability in HE as a sector. Stakeholders include students and their families whose investment in an HE education is anticipated to strengthen longer-term employment prospects and broader life goals. Stakeholders also include employers who require specific and changing graduate skills and attributes. HE providers are clear stakeholders of how successfully employability is embedded in curricula with the need to enhance and maintain institutional reputation in a competitive sector. Teaching practitioners are also stakeholders of the extent to which, and how successfully, employability is embedded in curricula. Reflecting London Met's strategic agenda, employability is also important from a social justice perspective. For example, recent longitudinal data suggests how employment and earnings outcomes for English HE graduates vary by region, by discipline and by graduate characteristics demonstrating, illustratively, that median earnings for women continue to be lower (13.4% lower) than for men five years after graduation (Department for Education, 2022).

Some studies have focused on learner stakeholder viewpoints of employability within the HE curriculum. For example, a sequential mixed methods study involving survey and interview responses was recently conducted among Australian university students beginning a project management degree gauged perceived employability (Gilbert et al., 2022). These authors found that participants had lower scores on most employability dimensions compared with students who had already started their degrees alongside some evidence that female students scored lower on perceived employability dimensions that male students. Findings support the importance of embedding a clear understanding of the importance of understanding the role of employability from the outset of university studies. Another recent study has explored views regarding self-perceived employability among 80 full-time postgraduate university students before and after they had taken a mandatory course module (Padgett and Donald, 2022). Findings demonstrated a statistically significant difference in scores such that self-perceived employability increased from 37.5% to 92.5%. Content analysis of textual data generated from this study suggested that module benefits were wide ranging and included positive impact on confidence, interactivity, knowledge of the recruitment process, how to develop CVs, increased proactivity linked to career pursuit and networking. Study findings suggested that students felt there could be more attention on gaining opportunities for real-world experience. Exploring student views of personal outcomes of a university education have been undertaken in several previous studies. For example, Glover et al (2002) surveyed 400 students at the start and end of their university course

studies finding that the strongest motivation to complete a degree course was as an economic investment rather than purely for the pursuit of knowledge.

Empirical focus on multiple stakeholder views in educational research connects with broader emerging research and practice concerns linked to the need for movement towards co-constructing features of the learning environment and teaching practices. This is reflected in different ways in recent empirical work (e.g., Barnes et al., 2022; Birnholtz et al., 2013; Ha and Pepin, 2017). For example, French-Canadian focus group research involving five nursing students and four nursing teaching practitioners suggested that activities linked to co-constructing the learning environment can be perceived as useful for future nursing student practice while nursing educators described greater appreciation of how co-construction could help teaching practitioners understand teaching and learning from new perspectives (Ha and Pepin, 2017). However, empirical work to date has not yet provided a coordinated, systematic effort to gauge multiple stakeholder views of how employability could or should be most effectively embedded within HE curriculums. As discussed above, such explorations are important partly given the variety of stakeholders involved when considering employability and careers linked to engagement in HE but also from the perspective of who should be involved in constructing initiatives to embed employability within HE settings.

Research Project Rationale and Research Questions

Dissertation project work will, in part, build on understanding from a recent internal survey of how employability is 'embedded' in the current School of Social Sciences and Professions (SSSP) curriculum (this work is reported internally at London Metropolitan University and externally also). However, the study approach is primarily 'outward looking' and intended to connect with broader academic literature in this area designed primarily to inform and shape internal policy concerns. In saying this, we also acknowledge that interview study findings will be used to contextualise and frame understanding of the recent employability survey as part of an ongoing initiative to develop the breadth and application of employability within curricula across SSSP. Data concerning of English university leavers for 2012/13 followed up three and a half years post first degree suggested that, at London Metropolitan University, 66% were in full-time paid work compared to a 74% sector average (HESA, n.d.). This discrepancy highlights that the local context is highly relevant and underscores the need to develop an evidence base for understanding how to support the employability and employment outcomes of London Met graduates.

Some authors have described studies designed to evaluate initiatives to more fully and/or more meaningfully embed employability within Schools/Departments (e.g., Bradley et al., 2021; Gao, 2019; Kornelakis & Petrakaki, 2020; Scriven & Strampel, 2020). Other authors have explored how employability is currently embedded in curricula - for example, one study has examined employability initiatives in Australia in an audit of undergraduate programmes in geospatial science

(Arrowsmith & Cartwright, 2019). The current dissertation project aim is to understand how stakeholders of employability define, view, value and implement employability within an HE context. Our stakeholders of interest are: (i) teaching practitioners in HE, (ii) HE students, and (iii) Careers and Employability staff working in HE. Distinct research questions apply to each of these stakeholder groups. However, the overarching research questions relevant to each set of stakeholders are: (1) 'How do stakeholders of employability define employability?'; (2) How is the embedding of employability within HE programme designs, curricula, learning environments and other pedagogic initiatives viewed by stakeholders of employability?' It is anticipated that the current study will support systematic understanding of different stakeholder views of how employability could or should be most effectively embedded within HE curriculums can help produce a more democratically sourced, unified understanding of how employability should be embedded. Linked to discussion in previous Sections, it is also noted that drawing on these different stakeholder perspectives may offer suggestions to practical applications in HE learning and teaching environments – for example in terms of how and where aspects of the curriculum and learning environment could be more clearly and effectively co-constructed between different stakeholder groups where possible.

Methodology and Methods

This section will outline the system of planned methods used to address the project objectives, aims and research question outlined above. Details around project resourcing, sampling, recruitment, project resourcing, ethics and study procedure are summarised. Methods of data collection and data analysis are also presented and discussed.

Project resourcing are first outlined. Data collection for the project work was part-funded by two separate grants awarded internally in 2021 and 2022. Project recruitment and data collection was completed by two Research Assistants (RAs). Both RAs were final year psychology student; the first RA a man in his mid-20s the second RA a white woman in her mid-30s. Both RAs were carefully supervised throughout project work with weekly meetings and dedicated training sessions (e.g., covering project recruitment, using an interview schedule, setting up and conducting interviews, ethical considerations in the interview setting and linked to data protection). It should be formally acknowledged here that the research reported in this project proposal (and eventual dissertation) involved the support of two paid RAs who completed data collection activities. Given that this is a dissertation submitted for an academic award it should be underscored that Dom Conroy undertook the following roles independently: initial study conception, draft interview schedule design, interview schedule redrafting/development, data organisation and data analysis.

Study Design

This study adopts a qualitative interview study design. The study will be cross-sectional as data will only be collected at a single time point. The study data collection technique will be via one-to-one semi-structured interviews. The study data analysis approach will draw on thematic analysis as a flexible method to explore views and experience relevant to the research question.

Participants

Sampling

The study is designed to strike a balance between in-depth understanding of individual stakeholder viewpoints on employability in H.E. settings while also gathering a range of viewpoints from across potential stakeholders. Recruiting a broader range of stakeholders including relevant external stakeholder groups (i.e., student alumni, local employers, and Further Education teachers) was beyond the scope of the activities for this dissertation work. Therefore only 'internal' stakeholders (meaning internal to London Met, i.e., students, teachers and London Met careers staff) were considered for this dissertation. Participants were teaching practitioners in HE (London Met university staff) ('teachers' hereafter), London Met students ('learners' hereafter), and London Met Careers and Employability and Work-based Learning staff ('careers staff' hereafter).

Recruitment

Staff were recruited via a database of teaching colleague staff who have already indicated willingness to be contact about participation in this study from a previous audit survey in Spring 2022. Students were recruited via forum posts, email circular messages and word-of-mouth/snowballing sampling. I recruited colleagues from the London Met Careers and Employability service via communications with Vanessa Airth who leads on the University's Programme for Improving Student Outcomes for Work-Related Learning and Neelam Thapar who is Head of Careers and Employability at London Met. These colleagues are already involved in a broader School-wide employability project. Individuals willing to take part in the study were contacted via email with a formal information sheet and consent form. From this point, individuals were able to participate in the study if they wish to. All participating individuals were asked to return a signed copy of the consent form if they would be willing to take part. Participant email addresses were recorded in this study and were be stored in a password-controlled file and destroyed five years after the start of the study (i.e., in May 2027). Please see Appendix A to view the Research Ethics Form approval for this study which contains copies of the participant information page, an informed consent page, and the debrief page (please note that the Ethics Approval included in this dissertation is a January 2023 amendment from the original approval)

The sample

This dissertation project sample was derived from a broader sample pool of 19 participants (4 students, 7 staff, 8 careers staff) recruited for a School internal project. The project sample comprised 12 participants with equal numbers from each stakeholder group (i.e., 4 learners, 4 teachers, 4 careers staff). This approach permitted balanced inclusion of stakeholder perspective yet also enough individuals in each stakeholder category to permit some degree of cross-comparison within and between categories. The decision to draw on a smaller sample of nineteen participants for the empirical work reported in this dissertation is also pragmatic and will mean that data analysis can be completed in an efficient, timely manner. Participant details for the project sample are summarised in Table 1 shown on the next page. Interviews were, on average, 43 minutes long (M = 43.1, SD = 11.2, range = 32 - 67 minutes).

Table 1. Project sample

Pseudonym	Demographic details	Work/ degree studies information
Teacher stakeholders		
Chloe	White British woman, 50s	Education, 20+ years teaching experience
Peter	White British man, 50s	Social work, 20+ years teaching experience. Teaches employability specific module.
Tony	White British man, 50s	Education, 20+ years teaching experience
John	White British man, 40s	Criminology, around 10 years teaching experience
Learner stakeholders		
Ramon	White Italian man, 30s	Psychology student - third year
Camille	Black British woman, 30s	Counselling student - second year
Nevena	White Slovenian, woman, 23 years old	Psychology student - third year
Tahlia	Black woman, 40 years old	Psychology student - second year
Careers stakeholders		
James	White British man, 40s	Career service manage, responsible for the operational delivery of all employability activity at the university.
Theresa	White British woman, 40s	Careers advisor
Petra	White non-British woman, 40s	Work-based learning staff
Alina	White woman, late 30s	Careers advisor

Data Collection Method

Given the complexity of employability as a notion it was decided that one-to-one semi-structured individual interviews with individual stake holders would optimise the possibilities for gaining clear, detailed insights into stakeholder viewpoints that the project was designed to explore. All interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams. Online interviews were preferred given the sheer practical difficulties of booking rooms and scheduling interviews on days that individuals were on campus. The interview schedule was developed by Dom Conroy (as the Principal Investigator) and then refined with input from members of the School-wide 'Embedding Employability' project. An initial core set of questions was generated and then additional/alternative questions were crafted to suit the different interviewee stakeholder groups. The final versions of the three interview schedules (learners, teachers, careers staff) are included as Appendix B.

The interview schedule questions were aligned with the project research questions. Schedules were adjusted to suit each different stakeholder groups but the broad approach across schedules is similar: to consider definitions of employability and related work/employment related terms, and to locate employability within the learner's broader life project. Each interview schedule begins with a brief preamble paragraph to explain the study. Three initial questions were included to establish common understanding for the interview. An illustration from this section (the first question) is: 'What does the term 'employability' mean for you?'. A preamble to the third question presented the Advance HE definition of employability ("Employability has been defined as a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workplace, the community and the economy.", Yorke, 2006). Participants were then asked: 'What is your view of this definition of employability?'. Participants were also asked four questions on specific terms linked closely to employability; 'graduate outcomes' and 'work-based learning'. For example, interview schedule question four is: 'What does 'graduate outcomes' mean for you?'. Understanding meanings around the trajectory employability was important to establish among different stakeholders. Accordingly, for example, question ten was: 'When does an undergraduate's career start?'. Later questions were more research question focused. For example, question twelve was: 'How should university teachers approach jobs/employment and careers in learning sessions? (e.g., what works well/ less well). The interview schedule closed with the most open-ended question and is intended to emerge logically from prior discussion to that point in the interview: 'Could the university do anything else to support employability that does not currently happen?'

Data Processing

All interviews are audio recorded using a digital recorder provided by Dom Conroy. All interview audio recordings are initially transcribed using an Artificial Intelligence transcription service ('Trint')

to produce a rough standard transcription that could be downloaded as an editable Word file. These files are then checked against the audio recording to ensure transcription fidelity and to make changes to improve transcript accuracy. During this manual checking process all transcripts are fully anonymised and de-identified. This meant that any individuals or places spoken about by interviewees are either given a pseudonym to protect identification or details are omitted to prevent identification. Audio files from the recorder and Word file transcripts are stored in a password-controlled file on a secure file sharing cloud service used by London Met.

Research paradigms

Discussion in this section identifies the paradigmatic approach adopted for this project. Locating empirical work within a defined scope of paradigmatic enquiry is important, holding implications for the possibilities of how realities and knowledges are defined (i.e., ontological and epistemological concerns) within the context of this work. Traditional research paradigms adopted within social science empirical enquiry include positivist approaches (assumes possibilities of accessing objective knowledge about the social world to investigate/confirm universal accounts of social phenomena), interpretative approaches (i.e., focuses on possibilities of generating rich, detailed, accounts of lifeworld experiences), and critical approaches (i.e., emphasises the possibilities of using research to identify and challenge power imbalances apparent within empirical work) (Taylor and Medina, 2011). These research paradigms clearly differ in their assumptions for what constitutes research data and practices reflecting differences in the underpinning assumptions around the nature of knowledge and reality associated with each paradigm. Recognising and utilising the diversity of these paradigmatic approaches is important for educational research to offer breadth and depth of empirical enquiry (Scotland, 2012). Each paradigm provides a distinctive lens for understanding processes involved in understanding, illustratively, experiences within learning environments and how teaching approaches are understood and talked about by teaching practitioners.

Understandings of research paradigms have witnessed emerging interest in mixed methods research (e.g., Creswell et al., 2004; Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007) and plural approaches to research enquiry (e.g., Frost and Nolas, 2011; Miller et al., 2008). While a mixed methods approach is beyond the scope for this dissertation, a methodologically plural approach is arguably very well suited to the research focus on 'stakeholder views of employability'. Epistemological pluralism takes the starting point that for any empirical dataset there will be multiple options for framing an understanding of the emergent knowledge, characteristics and dynamics. For example, the interview dataset linked to my own research (concerning 'Accounts of light and non-drinking UK university students') was understood in plural terms and led to analyses that, separately, produced an account of interviewees lived experience of 'maturing out' from heavier drinking styles (Conroy et al., 2021a) and an account of how interviewees were rhetorically inventive in how they rebuffed challenges to their self-identification as non-drinkers or light drinkers (Conroy et al., 2021b).

The paradigmatic approach in this dissertation will be adopt a similarly plural approach. Interviews are likely to contain detailed experiential accounts (e.g., of learning or teaching experiences) and, in this way, will be considered primarily via an *interpretivist lens*. However, interview accounts are likely to include rhetorical work of the different stakeholder groups (e.g., talk suggesting where the responsibility principally lies for embedding employability). Given these anticipated more discursive characteristics of the dataset, a *critical lens* will also shed light on the research question. The ultimate emphasis and configuration of this pluralistic approach will be governed by pragmatics.

Data Analytic Method

Textual transcript data was subjected to Braun and Clarke's (2006) tradition of Thematic Analysis. Thematic Analysis (TA) is a well-established, flexible method for exploring patterns and trends in any kind of data. TA can be defined and deployed flexibly to suit specific research requirements. For example, TA might be used in a more positivist approach to research where text is examined for evidence is examined systematically for material relating to a particular construct in social science research (e.g., 'self-efficacy'). Another variant of TA in a different study context might adopt a more experiential/critical realist approach to analysis. For example, a study looking at 'experiences of engaging in a course of Higher Education studies as a person with disabilities' might fall into this epistemological category. However, beyond its flexibility as an analytic technique, Braun and Clarke also define TA as reflecting a series of defined quality considerations when approaching quality research – including research sensitivity to context, research transparency, etc. TA is flexible but also provides a rigorous way of engaging with textual data. As discussed above, data for this project was primarily explored via an interpretivist line of enquiry.

Analytic approach

For this project, TA involved a series of defined stages. Teacher, learner, and careers staff stakeholder groups were subjected to TA in turn. An initial stage involved data reading and familiarisation. For example, this involved reading through each transcript slowly, underlining key phrases and terms and making notes about sections that draw attention and curiosity (and possibly also ambiguity). Data analysis then turned to producing a set of appropriate 'codes' of the textual data. Coding is referred to in sometimes quite technical senses in qualitative methods guidance textbooks. For example, Braun and Clarke distinguish between 'selective' and 'complete' coding. Coding for this project involved identifying and labelling sections of the interview transcript to produce an organised understanding of the employability textual dataset to ensure a smooth, methodical approach for developing themes at the next stage of analysis. After this stage, data concerning optimising embedding employability and data concerning contextual factors involved in embedding employability was separated to enable focused more straight forward exploration of each distinctive set of material in turn. An initial set of themes for each set of material was produced via iterative stages of exploring relationships between

codes, producing initial theme titles, and cross-referring theme titles, codes and the raw data. A provisional theme table shown in Appendix C was produced for each set of material (optimising, contextual). Candidate extracts that provided the clearest illustrations from each participant relating to themes were collated. Throughout this process a deliberate approach to interview transcript extract editing was taken. This involved editing material to enhance clarity and concision of each of the extracts. This process involved some compromise between fidelity to the original extract text and producing a clear concise extract.

Ethical Considerations

Institutional ethical approval was secured (see Appendix A). I drew on the British Psychological Society Code of Ethics and Conduct (BPS, 2021) ethical guidelines for completing research which outlines four guiding ethical principles (Respect, Competence, Responsibility and Integrity) to guide research. Distinctive ethical issues pertinent to the research reported in this dissertation and next considered. First, it should be noted that discussions around employability might elicit, among learners particularly, distress linked to concerns about historic, current or future efforts to secure employment or to develop work related experiences. Partly for this reason, it was underscored in the study information sheet and consent form (see Appendix A) that study participation was completely voluntary, and that participants could withdraw without being disadvantaged in any way within two weeks of participating in the study. A second key ethical aspect to the study involved the university student RAs conducting the interviews with university staff and the inevitable power dynamics relevant to these interactions. As part of the consent process, it was therefore underscored to teacher/colleague participants that this was a research study rather than an internal audit and that interview discussion was ultimately separate from their working role at London Metropolitan University. Given that some interviews would be conducted with individuals from a relatively small team (e.g., Careers and Employability staff), care was taken to ensure that transcription involves the careful removal of any individual identifying information before a final transcript was produced. RAs were provided with full supervisory support from myself as the project Principal Investigator.

Findings

Study findings are presented in two sections. A first section presents contextual themes linked to the first research question (RQ1 = 'How do stakeholders of employability define employability?'. Then a second section presents those themes linked to embedding employability which were more directly aligned with the second project research question (RQ2 = 'How is the embedding of employability within Higher Education. programme designs, curricula, learning environments and other pedagogic initiatives viewed by stakeholders of employability?').

Material in the first section, presented below and addressing RQ1, concerned broader contextual issues involved with how employability can or should be viewed among stakeholders. This material offered initial depth of insight into contextual issues that frame an understanding of the second research question, RQ2 (defined above) which concerned, more focally, how employability is optimally embedded in UK HE curricula.

Analysis 1: Contextualizing Employability

An overarching theoretical framework - Ecological Systems Theory (EST) (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) - was drawn on to aid understanding of the large corpus of relevant material. Widely used in the social sciences, EST posits that individuals are nested within structures that influence individual development in some way. EST can guide understanding of discrete layers of social influence on human development. Traditionally, EST is applied to early childhood development but has been applied in eclectic spheres in health and educational fields alone including, illustratively, disparities in ethnic mortality and morbidity (Noursi et al., 2021), explanations for why teachers become Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Coordinators (Dobson & Douglas, 2020) and to frame understand of women's ability to continue breastfeeding (Jackson et al., 2022). With its focus on social and temporal influences impacting on individual development, EST is well positioned to frame an understanding of factors relevant to efforts to embed employability within HEIs. At a slightly broader level, EST is also well placed for explaining factors relevant to the cultivation of employability at an individual level. EST has been deployed in the literature at varying levels of elaboration and complexity. The classical theory articulates five separate structures ranging from the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem while a fifth structure, the chronosystem, reflects the impact of time-related changes including life transitions and historical events. The microsystem refers to immediate factors most closely related to the individual that shape development. The mesosystem refers to the range of possibilities stemming from the interactions at the level of the microsystem. The macrosystem refers to broader interactions links to and reflecting societal and cultural values and traditions.

For this project, an EST focusing on three systems; the microsystem, the mesosystem, and the macrosystem acts as a simplified explanatory framework (see Figure 1). Themes aligned with the

distinctive EST systems are presented and titled as follows: Theme 1: The importance of complex, plural definitions of employability (micro level); Theme 2: Seeking to embed employability into an overloaded curriculum (meso level); Theme 3: Navigating the neoliberal landscape and ethical concerns about embedding employability (macro level); and Theme 4: The elephant in the room: social justice and employability (macro level). Simplified versions of these theme titles appear in Figure 1.

In the narrative that follows below, data relating to each of these themes will be presented in turn alongside discussion of how the characteristics and dynamics of each data extract can be understood as a distinctive illustration of its associated theme. Each extract is presented following by participant details in the following order: pseudonym, stakeholder group, gender, ethnicity, age-related details (e.g., (Chloe, Teacher, female, white, 50s).
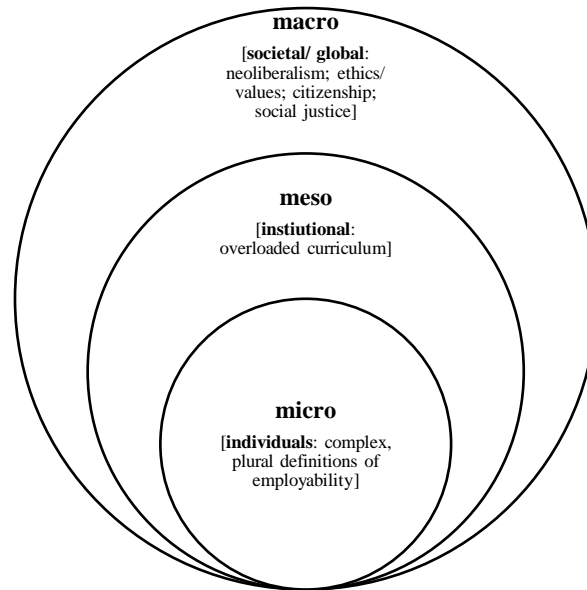
Figure 1. Contextual factors involved in embedding employability in Higher Education Institutions presented using an adapted Ecological Systems Theory framework

Theme 1: The importance of complex, plural definitions of employability

The more contextual material in the data set starts off with a theme recognised by all stakeholders concerning the importance of maintaining a complex, plural understanding of employability. Plurality of understanding was important for participants and the material here revealed commitment to no singular understanding of employability; to the importance of individually meaning definitions; and to understandings being situated both historically and culturally. This theme reflects a micro level understanding and data here centred around the importance of personal growth and life/career trajectories, both individual level considerations.

We will first consider the extracts below which all focused on the importance of employability/ graduate outcome definitions incorporating an emphasis on personal growth:

> Our students may come in at foundation level without formal qualifications as a mature student… so having graduated, having grown as a person, having enjoyed learning, having the opportunity to get deeper knowledge of a subject area… and then it helps them get a better job well, that's great and if it doesn't, they still have the learning experience, which is the most valuable part to it all… and if they don't go into careers why should they be judged as having failed? (Chloe, Teacher, female, white, 50s)

> Graduate outcomes could be measured in terms of asking are you happy with your life right now, your mental health? Whether the hours you put in your work are in line with your work level? what the trade-offs of having a first-class degree? Are you doing what (you) really want to do? So is a success measure the mark or your happiness, your wellbeing? are you doing what you want to do, what you are supposed to do? That's important. There are other metrics… success rate of the degree or that university… but it could be more stretched out to be broader and deeper (Ramon, Student (3rd year), male, white, 30s)

> The other thing is whether work is about contributing to society or something which you want to do for yourself… I mean is your existence to support the economy? My view is (work is) more about what you are contributing to your own self-development, your ideas, who you are… and that's not necessarily the view that the government would want you to have… but yeah, I don't see my role in life to support my economy (Alina, Careers, female, white, 30s)

These ideas focused on the variability of definitions around both employability and graduate outcomes as concepts relevant to gaining work- during and following degree studies. Both Chloe and the Ramon focused on the importance of the pursuit of intellectual and personal growth rather than simply measuring graduate outcomes in terms of career success and securing graduate employment. Ramon advocated the need for sustained critical reflection among graduates around whether degree-related sacrifices were, on balance, worthwhile in the context of the broader life project. Providing a careers staff viewpoint, Alina viewed employability as ultimately about self-development, self-

integrity ("your ideas") and identity ("who you are"). Alina here articulated tensions with traditional definitions of employability which may focus on the cultivation of measurable individual differences like skills and attributes.

Other material also concerning the importance of retaining complexity and diversity in understandings of employability, concerned needing a broader 'big picture' time scale for understanding employability. Extracts from the careers and learner stakeholders below illustrate this pattern:

> If you were looking six months on, you find few graduates in graduate employment… so you need something a bit longer term because graduates quite often don't end up in a graduate job when they first finish university… compared to some universities, possibly our number gives a distorted picture. You might say, ooh, they will end up in retail, whereas in the short term that might be true, but in the longer term, they're less likely to be doing that (Theresa, Careers, female, white, 40s)

> Participant: That definition (of graduate outcomes) means if I graduated now, and they call me in a couple of months and I'm just doing voluntary work for a company that I like, who have told me that if I do well after a year I would get a job starting on £50,000 per year... they should call at least 12-24 months not straight away because it is hard and depends on which sector you want to work (Tahlia, Student (2nd year), female, black, 40s)

Both Theresa and Talia focused on graduate outcomes rather than employability, but both orientated towards a short-termism in terms of a preoccupation with gauging graduate employment as a standard sector benchmark. Theresa reflected on the slow process of graduates securing graduate level work while Tahlia suggests here that graduate outcomes gloss over potential employment successes in the longer-term period.

Other material however spoke more directly to the need for plural theoretical explanations of employability and plural underlying epistemological starting points for explaining employability, with concern around singular, narrowly defined approaches/ measures. Three extracts are presented from two of the interviews below to illustrate this part of the data set:

> As someone whose own educational trajectory happened piecemeal over 30 years it's very difficult to make assumptions about what the actual long term outcomes of education might be… lots of people, especially aged 18 years, will struggle to consider what happens three years in the future after university and might want to not to go straight into the world of work… there should be a wider ranging employability scale beyond the narrow way it's currently measured (Tony, Teacher, male, white, 50s

> Careers don't really have a starting point… a series of choices beginning when you've left compulsory education… it's a process, I suppose of making decisions and planning your life ahead… and the decision making thing is quite core, isn't it… y'know these are the different things

I'm going to do next and this is the best one for me and this is the reason why (Alina, Careers, female, white, 30s)

Most employability material (on the internet)… YouTube job interview videos is American and they approach interviews and applications differently… it's all about saying you won't get anyone better, I'm the best… there's a cultural thing about bigging yourself up but actually British people don't like boasting… if I'm interviewing someone, they say I'm absolutely fantastic, you won't find anyone else like me… they've obviously got no insight into themselves, they haven't got the insight necessary to become mature (Alina, Careers, female, white, 30s)

As a teacher, Tony problematised links between education and employability ("difficult to make assumptions") and pushed for a more holistic, kaleidoscopic measuring employability that incorporates the reality of indecision, inertia and struggles involved in pursuing graduate work careers. Alina provided different appeals for more diverse epistemological approaches to employability and careers. In Alina's first extract careers are defined as dynamic and akin to a series of choices and decision-making pathways which breaks decisively with traditional "set in stone" understandings of careers that follow a linear trajectory. The second Alina extract concerns the importance of cultural plurality in how employable qualities are understood and the risks of a 'one size fits all' understanding of what constitutes apparent, desirable qualities of employability in key scenarios (e.g., a job interview).

Theme 2: Seeking to embed employability into an overloaded curriculum

Another contextual data pattern reflected the pressure to incorporate and embed employability with an already overloaded curriculum. This theme operated at a meso level given that its focus beyond the individual level and its greater concern with institutional systems and dynamics. Here, the sector wide project to embed employability presented considerable challenges to all stakeholders. An initial selection of material concerns the experiential qualities of engaging with an overloaded curriculum spanning academic content all the way through to successful preparation for graduate level work. Illustrations are presented below:

Participant: It's difficult to say what will come after your degree… I don't know how realistic that is for everyone… I'm a parent sometimes I feel like I have fewer opportunities because I have less time

Interviewer: Yes lack of time might be a barrier to learning around employability

Participant: I'd say just having other responsibilities is a barrier, time again… you know, um, uh, because it's been quite challenging, um, you know, managing studies and work… so yeah, time (Camille, Student (2nd year), female, black, 30s)

Another problem is staff keeping up with what's required in their field… for the first couple of years when you start lecturing you're really well informed about what's going on but with the best will in the world you just stop… you know the employment field might have changed massively you've lost track of what's going on (Peter, Teacher, male, white, 50s)

There is also something around fitting into the curriculum… so it's important that employability is within the curriculum and linked to assessment but that raises logistical issues of space in the curriculum and that's a systemic thing… often students will understand how important is to do an internship, to build networks etc, but they're working a full time job, caring for a child and doing a full time degree at the same time, so they are time poor (James, Careers, male, white, 40s)

All extracts here spoke to the strain and the stretching quality of engaging with an overloaded curriculum. As a learner stakeholder, Camille found it hard to consider next steps and careers beyond her degree while studying given time demands. Noticeably, the interviewer, also an undergraduate student, spontaneously agreed that limited time was a significant obstacle to developing employability in parallel with degree studies. As a teacher, Peter also spoke to a feeling of an overloaded curriculum and the challenge for university staff to keep up with the latest innovations in the field of employability and the range of pedagogical considerations that would underpin the delivery of employability alongside and embedded with the traditional academic curriculum. An important part of the problem here was expertise and the difficulty of retaining close familiarity with and ever-changing world work. Interestingly, James, providing a careers staff viewpoint, articulates discussion linked to the overloaded curriculum in a way that spans the perspectives of learner and teacher stakeholder perspectives. James spoke to a systemic issue and referred to the disjointed approach within this. This disjointedness could involve disparity in terms of academic understanding and potentially willingness to engage in embedding employability given other demands but also spoke to recognition of the challenges faced by learners in terms of engaging with other life responsibilities wall completing degree studies.

Two additional extracts concerned the overload of information within the curriculum and within the student experience more generally that could contribute to the experience of capacity limitations to embed employability successfully alongside traditional degree studies for all stakeholders involved. Illustrative extracts from Peter and Petra are presented and discussed immediately below:

Participant: One thing to mention is that students don't always read the e-mails… you provide information, but they sometimes just delete it because they get hundreds of emails

Interviewer: Oh, yeah. We do get so many of them.

Participant: Within that white noise in the background, it's hard to get a message to say, 'would you like to take a work based learning module' or 'we've got a volunteering day' because there's all these other stuff they just switch off after a while (Peter, Teacher, male, white, 50s)

Interviewer: What barriers are there to facilitating learning around employability?

Participant: To be honest students have access to enormous amounts of resources, which sometimes might be counterproductive… just take the career portal, there is so much on it that you could spend hours looking through it… so students get overwhelmed with all the stuff that it just gets completely ignored… they go "ok, I'm not going to do it at all" (Petra, Careers, female, white, 40s)

Peter spoke about the difficulty relaying employability information given the large volume of circular e-mail information distributed to students. Cognitive load seemed important here; Peter referring to the problematic "white noise in the background". Again, interestingly, the undergraduate interviewer spontaneously agrees with this viewpoint ("we get so many (emails)") bolstering the credentials of Peters claim around information overload. Petra, providing a careers staff stakeholder perspective, spoke even more directly to the potentially counterproductive role of overabundant career related resource provision to students; the sheer volume and diversity of resources made available to learners seemed to risk inaction/ inertia. This articulated the need for a delicate balance between institutional provision that stopped short of over-provision/ saturation in relation to embedding employability.

Theme 3: Navigating the neoliberal landscape and ethical concerns about embedding employability

A third contextual theme focused on neoliberalism linked to contemporary higher education environments and ethical implications involved in the embedding of employability within higher education curriculums. Again, efforts to frame discussion within a more systemic model of understanding are fruitful. Material here is presented as operating at macro levels involving issues relevant to society, and the international/ global context.

Material was diffuse here and spanned ethical issues including mental health concerns linked to incorporating employability within the curriculum w and other concerns around citizenship. We will start by considering material illustrations from each stakeholder group that most directly concerned employability unrelated concepts in a broader near liberal context relating to political and economic structures. Four extract illustrations are presented below and then discussed:

For some people, a positive graduate outcome might be not doing anything or i volunteering whereas from a government perspective… they can't really measure it any other way some of these things are quite subtle and individual, aren't they? the difficulty in terms of government stats is that there's never any context… it's just, have you got a job or have you not (Alina, Careers, female, white, 30s)

In recent years the regulators have tightened up how universities train teachers and limit the criticality we give our teachers and simplify what we do so it's almost a checklist… but we are giving our students criticality, knowledge and skills beyond what the government expect them to

do… education has become so business focused and because we've got tuition fees now that changes the relationship (Chloe, Teacher, female, white, 50s)

Some problems come from neoliberalism, whereby the purpose of education is to give the populace skills making them more attractive to overseas investment… so the product of education becomes commodified, knowledge becomes worthless, except through its exchange value within the labour market… widespread social mobility has not existed since we moved toward a neo liberal free market model… links between education and the economy are not proven but we can say that the state of the economy determines the state of education, not vice versa (Tony, Teacher, male, white, 50s)

While jobs should contribute to the economy the economy should also go around jobs… so defining employability should be about failures as well… you know, when you don't get a job even though you have the skill sets because that allows you to understand what you're still missing (Ramon, Student (3rd year), male, white, 30s)

Providing insights from a careers staff perspective, Alina refer to attention and measuring graduate outcomes in terms of who was defining the desirability of the outcome and specifically whether this was being defined by the individual or from the starting point of government priorities. Chloe, speaking from a teaching perspective, agreed with this viewpoint that there was some incompatibility between individual and broader understandings of employability. For Chloe, the neoliberalist transformation of the education system had meant differing agendas running in parallel whereby government required professional training checklists needed to be completed on the one hand while academics and teachers sought to embed key critical skills and theoretical understanding to learners simultaneously. There is explicit reference in this extract to the role of tuition fees (introduced in 2012 in the UK) and acknowledgement of how this has fundamentally shifted the relationship in terms of how the learning and teaching environment should be configured to accommodate.

In an extract from another teacher stakeholder, Tony spoke even more explicitly about difficulties linked to the emergent neoliberal framework the higher education and articulated the viewpoint that the values of the education and the labour market are separate and cannot be easily aligned. Tony also discussed how employability works in very different ways within different disciplines and spoke to concerns about imaginary notions of social mobility in an economic context when there may be significant restraints on social mobility for many learners. Finally we have Ramon's extract providing a learner stakeholder perspective. Like Tony, Ramon was concerned with the broader economic context surrounding the pursuit of employability. While Ramon recognised the inter relationship between developing employability as an individual level and the cultivation and contribute contribution towards the economy to macro level Ramon's extract also spoke to the importance of a plural understanding of employability that incorporated a dynamic sense of the failures of the job

market to work for graduates who have acquired the requisite skill sets for graduate level jobs yet are unable to secure them given constraints in the economy.

Other material focused on how definitions of employability needed to incorporate issues around ethics and social responsibility and how these issues might underpin institution level projects to embed employability within the curriculum. The two extracts below illustrate this feature of the data:

> Definitions of employability could say something about benefits for the community and about social responsibility and ethics… you know, you could be really cynical and say that employment success is an individualistic task and that being more socially conscious, more socially responsible doesn't help in your employment field but you know… for example my brother was in finance and was interviewed for an oil company who were in the news for polluting African coastlines where lots of people got serious illnesses and my brother was saying how much money you can be offered if you're less concerned about ethics… so a purist sense of employability should include social responsibility… I would hope we tell our students about some of this, y'know; here is how to get a job, and these are ethical concerns within the sector… I wouldn't tell a student they shouldn't work in a private prison because they're understaffed… but it's good to teach about the ethics of particular sectors and we want to make them aware of ethical issues (Tony, Teacher, male, white, 50s)

> Participant: There's also the idea of community and society… and about contributing to society or whether it is about something which you feel you want to do for yourself… and questions around is your existence meant to support the economy… employability is more about yourself about what you are doing, what you are contributing to your own self-development… your ideas, and who you are… yeah, I don't see my role in life to support my economy.

> Interviewer: So, employability should not aim towards helping a community, an economy

> Participant: I think community and economy are two different things… communities in my mind are a more sort of localised idea… so the people immediately around you what they're doing… whereas the economy feels like a national income as a concept (Alina, Careers, female, white, 30s)

Focusing on the example of his brother's ethical dilemma in accepting work in an ethically controversial industry, Tony raised issues around defining and teaching employability within degree studies in a way that incorporated a coherent cover meaningful ethical and social responsibility dimension. Tony referred to a balancing act involved here; avoiding heavy-handed and politically slanted guidance to students ("shouldn't work in a private prison") yet at the same time not neglecting an ethical dimension to discussing employability in learning and teaching settings. The Alina extract above also appeals to the importance of considering a more localised context for understanding the benefits of employability and the importance of contributing in an ethically sensitive way to the greater good at a local level. Importantly discussion between interviewer and participant here reveal

some difficulty and tension in identifying what kind of broader impact beyond the person employability should be seeking to achieve.

Theme 4: The elephant in the room: social justice and employability

A fourth and final contextual theme, involving all stakeholder groups, concern material from across the interviews that focused on fairness and social justice underpinning the broader sector project to embed employability. At a systemic level, like the previous theme, the current theme was again operating at a macro level given the orientation of debate and discussion at a societal and global level of understanding. The metaphorical idiom behind the title of the theme - The elephant in the room: social justice and employability – is intended to capture the sometimes indirect, alluded to and hidden way in which a lack of parity in terms of learner access to financial/ social capital relevant to building and pursuing career plans could manifest in the interview data.

An initial selection of material concerning social justice and fairness is presented that concerned the role of relative economic disadvantage involved in students' experiences of employability. Noticeably, as students rarely appeared to speak to this issue of relative economic disadvantage directly in their interviews and therefore illustrations are presented from teachers and careers staff interviews alone. Accordingly, we will consider the Chloe, tony and Teresa extracts below followed by discussion:

Employability is like a government checklist… there's no allowance made for cultural capital that some students may have before they start university, meaning they're more likely to tick employability boxes by the end of their course… employability definitions don't take into consideration our students' social and cultural differences (Chloe, Teacher, female, white, 50s)

We let our high achieving undergraduates walk out the doors… because of their backgrounds, often they can't afford to do post-grad…. they say to me "well, I'll go and teach for a few years, then I'll do an MA"… and then they teach for a few years and are too busy to do an MA and wake up 20 years later thinking "I'm actually really not stimulated but I'm being kept busy"… a lot will get promoted into middle and senior management very quickly because they're very capable and work hard… but by the time you get there you think I'm earning too much money to change what I'm doing (Tony, Teacher, male, white, 50s)

Many of our students are not from wealthy families so the whole idea of them volunteering, even as a student, might be quite tricky for them… they need a part time job to get some income… so volunteering is only going to be for a couple of hours a week… but perhaps in the summer they'll volunteer for a couple of hours a week and have a paid job for the rest of the week… and obviously nobody wants to volunteer for long periods of time… that's another discussion with a student; "can you afford to do volunteer and is it going to be beneficial? Do you think this placement or internship will give you good experience that kind of outweighs the fact, you're not getting an income?" (Theresa, Careers, female, white, 40s)

Voicing concerns apparent by many teachers in the data set, Chloe viewed employability primarily as a checklist approach that tended to ignore the fundamental role of cultural capital underpinning learners' ability to develop their career pathways and to truly cultivate employability in competitive sectors of graduate employment. For Chloe, cultural capital was the elephant in the room; some students being greatly more advantage in their ability to identify, pursue and develop their graduate careers than other students. This viewpoint was echoed in the Tony teacher interview. Tony reflected on the trap that relative economic disadvantage created for high achieving learners, reflecting on how learners, upon graduation, become locked into non graduate work because they have to repay tuition fees and cannot progress to further studies that might it strengthen career opportunities in the longer term. Acknowledged here was a moral role of universities to financially support learners in terms of cultivating their intellectual and cultural capital to be truly competitive in the workplace and in working environments. Providing a career staff stakeholder perspective, Theresa recognised the tension between gaining work experience open brackets for example by volunteering and students needing to earn money. Teresa's example of summer work illustrated this clearly; with some students able to gain graduate job relevant voluntary work for longer periods while less financially secure students were acquired to work during these vacation periods.

While relative economic disadvantage was one aspect of how social justice and fairness underpins contextual discussion around employability, the data set also contain material relating more explicitly to considerations around prejudice limit to employability. This was apparent in the illustrations presented below:

For other student groups maybe it's trickier to commit to an internship… perhaps students with an illness or a disability may have limitations to getting work experience… I do work with a variety of disability related organisations that we can refer students to with particular disabilities like provide schemes and also similar with the care experienced students (Theresa, Careers, female, white, 40s)

Participant: Um, I guess graduate outcomes means maybe the grades that you get… I mean, I'm a mature student… so when I leave university, for some reason I don't think I'm likely to go for a graduate position

Interviewer: Why is that? If I may ask

Participant: Umm I don't know actually; I always assume graduate positions are feel sort of geared towards the younger student… I could be wrong (Camille, Student (2nd year), female, black, 30s)

Our system sets a competitive, normative standard… and the people at the bottom end of the bell curve distribution are ethnic minorities and working class people and other minorities who are already marginalised, vulnerable, disadvantaged groups… longer-term, people internalise this narrative, that they are somehow stupid or incompetent or a failure or they don't have the natural talent… a lot of people come out of the school/ compulsory education feeling that they are

intellectually subnormal because that's how they've been labelled so when they come to us a lot of my job is to explain how those labels are attached to them and to convince them to transcend those labels (Tony, Teacher, male, white, 50s)

Theresa and Camille's extracts provide concrete examples of how prejudice was involved in securing graduate level jobs for learners following their degrees. For Teresa, prejudice might stem from being disabled or suffering from a longer-term illness as creating a crucial challenge for gaining employment and for securing relevant graduate job work experience during degree studies. Providing an additional line of understanding from a teaching perspective, Tony reflected on the role of education in life more broadly and prior to HE studies and to the structural disadvantages associated with socio economic and ethnic backgrounds. Tony's extract provided an important layer of context to understanding the sector project to embed employability successfully within curriculum. Recognising the broader educational context of learners became sharply relevant here and spoke to the enormous challenge faced by teaching practitioners particularly in higher education in terms of addressing and overcoming labels of being intellectually different, subnormal, or inadequate and overcoming this in the specific sense of securing graduate level employment following their degree studies.

A final selection of material involved advocations to take action in the context of unfairness and social justice issues around the broader context of embedding employability in higher education institutions. Again, the material was diffuse across the overall data set. Two extracts are included below as illustrations of this material:

There's not a formula for everything… it's very case specific, but it should be what the job entails, what the person can contribute to… we need to be as inclusive as possible catering for everything within equity and inclusion… and so then everyone can apply for (Ramon, Student (3rd year), male, white, 30s)

Having a sound employability strategy means actually coming good on our social justice and our social mobility pledges and ways to elevate students… part of that needs to be really looking specifically at barriers faced by the characteristics of our university's student groups and also opportunities we can present… that's really important and any discussions about employability here should be rooted within that (James, Careers, male, white, 40s)

In his extract, Ramon spoke about recognising the need for an inclusive climate in which graduates can apply for jobs. Concerns raised here unsettled a model but discussing embedding employability that operates purely at an individual or institutional level and firmly places on the agenda the importance of having a transparent process in which individual characteristics and differences are accounted for within the process of recruiting graduates to graduate level employment. In his extract, James, a career staff stakeholder, spoke explicitly to the importance of recognising a joined up strategic approach to both considering employability and social justice within university

environments. But acknowledging and confronting unfairness and recognising the relevance of social justice to efforts to embed employability were, from this perspective, critical to ensuring any success in embedding employability in a way that was inclusive to all university learners, regardless of background and regardless of starting points in learners' pursuit of graduate level careers.

Section summary

Taken together, material speaks to the broader contextual factor involved in embedding employability in Higher Education learning and teaching environments as found in interview accounts from a range of stakeholders of embedding employability (learners, teachers, HEI careers staff). At an individual level, material demonstrated a tension between traditional skill/ aptitude understandings of employability and individual/ subjective/ personal understandings of employability and adjacent concepts linked to careers and graduate outcomes. At a broader, institutional level, contextual material demonstrated the considerable challenge, experienced by all stakeholders, to meaningfully and credibly embed employability within already very full curriculums. A final two selections of contextual material concerned the broader societal and global context involving neoliberalism, themes around citizenship and a concern with social justice in that some learners found it much easier to secure employment/ career related goals due to advantages in terms of financial, social and cultural capital.

Analysis 2: Views on Embedding Employability

We can now turn to material in the current section, which addresses RQ2 ('How is the embedding of employability within Higher Education. programme designs, curricula, learning environments and other pedagogic initiatives viewed by stakeholders of employability?'). This material built on the contextual analysis presented in the previous section. Material in the current section concerned the more focal research concern on stakeholder viewpoints around how employability can/ should be most optimally embedded in HE curricula.

Five themes are presented and are titled: Theme 1: The systemic challenge to motivate and engage; Theme 2: Arenas beyond the classroom; Theme 3: Tailored approaches are better; Theme 4: Embedding professional collaboration; and Theme 5: Learning to know and manage the self. Data relating to each of these themes will be presented in turn alongside discussion of how the characteristics and dynamics of each data extract can be understood as a distinctive illustration of its associated theme.

Theme 1: The systemic challenge to motivate and engage

One feature of the data concerning how the embedding of employability could be optimised concerned the challenge to motivate learners and to embed employability in creatively ways within the learning experience. This was evident in different ways across the stakeholder groups evident in the Tahlia and Chloe extracts included below:

Interviewer: what have lecturers done in learning sessions that have been useful for employability?

Tahlia: One module focused on employability, but it wasn't very specific… was just very basic… even when I was asking questions about forensic psychology, which I'm interested in, the answer from the lecturer was a bit confusing, not very clear (Tahlia, Student (2nd year), female, black, 40s)

I would like to run a portfolio that they start in their first year and add to every year which could include good work from practice, maybe a poster presentation on something learnt from a placement, you know, a collection of different tasks… that'd give more motivation to do it… got to build the motivations (Chloe, Teacher, female, white, 50s)

Interview extract discussion here from Talia showcases the dynamics linked to learning sessions or entire modules focusing on employability. Talia's experience of these courses was that they could be basic, unclear, confusing and potentially vague and data here spoke to the challenges for learners to remain sufficiently motivated with employability related content in the curriculum. Echoing Tahlia's emphasis, the importance of having clearly defined, judiciously positioned focus on employability in the learning sessions was emphasised by teaching stakeholders as well. Chloe, a teacher stakeholder, also spoke to challenges involved in embedding employability. Chloe advocated the need for innovative and fresh ways in which employability could be successfully included in the curriculum -

for example the possibility of more creative and flexible ways of linking employability activities and also the importance of including this at an earlier point in the degree to develop an appreciation of employability from the outset of degree studies.

A range of material from across the different stakeholder groups spoke to the importance of taking a big picture view when embedding employability to ensure a strategic approach for successfully including employability related content in a way that would work well for learners. Both teacher and careers and employability staff stakeholder groups spoke to the importance of flexible and creative embedding of employability in the curriculum. Examples of this type of discussion are apparent in material from James and Petra (career advisors) and from Peter (teacher) as shown below:

> In terms of careers stuff launching it at like the first day of level four doesn't really work… there's so much information that takes place in that first year at university and students will feel really far away from it and it doesn't really help them… as a career service we talk about part time jobs at the start because that's something that's often more immediately important in their minds… then when they start semester two after a grounding in the subject the explicit employability stuff starts to happen… but employability is this collection of skills, experiences and reflecting upon them, so you need them baked into your curriculum right from the start (James, Careers, male, white, 40s)

> Work based learning is about identifying and meeting a series of learning goals through practical work experiences… this might happen through project work… so students who want to be I.T. consultants will not be physically in a workplace they will pitch for projects online to a brief, perhaps knocking around some ideas then going away and complete the project and say here are the deliverables… so depending on your academic discipline, might be art and design… it might work better more sort of project based… you are delivering a service to employers in the way it would normally be delivered… you're communicating perhaps online to them rather than necessarily being sat in their office. (Petra, Careers, female, white, 40s)

As careers and employability staff, both James and Petra articulated concerns about the risks for approaching employability in an arbitrary and formulaic fashion within learning environments. For James, the initial occurrence and staggering of employability within the curriculum was vital and he recognised the pitfalls of prematurely including employability related content in the curriculum during learners' degree studies. In her interview, Petra focused partly on the role of an inventive and well calibrated approach to embedding employability including the project focused computer science example she provides that would sidestep requiring needing to be in a physical work space or working in a strict, linear way while still building key experience of collaboration with employers. These possibilities for acquiring work experience in contemporary and alternative ways might help motivate learners while working within the pragmatics of providing experience for large numbers of students.

Teacher interviews focused on the need to motivate learners via sessions that involved deep rather than superficial learning approaches. Finding ways to motivate students to engage in embedded employability drew on practitioners' skills in terms of developing learning environments that were rich, engaging unsuccessful in prompting sophisticated levels of reflection amongst learners. The Peter and John interview extract below showcased this:

> Peter: You can hit the employability and subject stuff at the same time in sessions but you have to think about it… I've got a housing module where each, each seminar is about a topic, and starts with a specific interview question so then we work our way… work backwards from the interview question to the topic.

> Interviewer: Oh, that feels an interesting, creative way (Peter, Teacher, male, white, 50s)

> Learners could discuss their experience in employment… or you can put on talks like 'what does forensic psychologist do?' or create activities in the classroom which very specifically relates to future careers… you need to avoid having them too contrived… and then assessments… my students do a risk assessment on their flat at home and link it to criminological theory but, you know, it was very tick boxey and I'm not sure it really helped them to do risk assessments professionally later on… I'm struggling to think of good practises, too (John, Teacher, male, white, 40s)

Speaking from a teaching perspective Peter was also concerned about an overly superficial and simply planned approach to employability. In his extract, Peter advocates the need to move towards a more genuine integration of employability within subject areas and within learning sessions apparent in his vineyards about structuring a seminar around a set of interview questions. John's extract focuses on different opportunities involved in embedding employability in learning environments and in assessments. Notably, John ends his extract revealing the difficulty of reflecting on and articulating good practises linked to embedding employability; this was not something where teaching practitioners necessarily had a large stock of gold standard practise to draw on when discussing these in the interviews.

Theme 2: Arenas beyond the classroom

Other material focused on the need to scaffold pathways away from the academic focus of course and toward the world of employment and careers. Different emphases appeared across stakeholder groups but all concerned some emphasis on the importance of managing and enhancing learner expectations of employability within their degree studies and the importance of framing academic studies within a broader context. Illustrative interview extracts are presented below:

> Teaching learners about umm what constitutes effective learning wouldn't have the same impact if they weren't getting an opportunity to go into a real-life context and see whether it works or not.

And the other trade off for that is that they also get to see the theory breaks down. You know, there's a there's always a kid in the corner that theory will not apply to. And I think that's very important, too. I mean, the other thing that we do is on what we teach. There are courses where they are taught about things they'll need if they go into teaching like this assignment is where they're asked to create a curriculum resource and then justify it using a theory. I think those things are all positive too. In terms of what doesn't work, I'm not entirely sure. And I think maybe the students might be a better source of information on that. (Tony, Teacher, male, white, 50s)

Some students still graduate and are like oh I didn't know how to get experienced, just thought I'd get a marvellous job with this degree… and then you kind of say, well, you probably won't straight away… have you thought of volunteering, and they're horrified (Theresa, Careers, female, white, 40s)

(It is important to) get the practical experience and be on the frontline, in the thick of it, to really get to know if this is what you want to do… because practical is different to the theory… two years back I wanted to become a stenographer and got myself a job in a hospital as a radiology assistant… and it wasn't for me… there was a lot of standing and household duties like cleaning… and all these stenographers and radiologists sitting in darkness looking at scans… and it dawned on me that I didn't want to spend my whole career sitting in a dark room… I want to see the light…. you know what I mean? (Camille, Student (2nd year), female, black, 30s)

For Tony, parts of the issue was around inclusivity, under concern for applying more theoretical content in initial teacher training education two real world contacts. While this would address an employability agenda it would also support understanding for a broader range of students in the cohort, engaging students with a wider range of aptitude towards purely theoretical discussion. Notably, Tony points to the role of learners themselves as an unimportant group to engage with on this issue. Providing a perspective from careers and employability staff, Theresa's extract also focused on the importance of students understanding the need for a planned, slower trajectory into graduate work than they might have anticipated. Learners themselves were an agreement with other stakeholders around the importance of embedding employability in a way that coherently, systematically, and meaningfully bridged beyond the curriculum itself. The ways in which this could work with diverse and the points of emphasis within this material were multifaceted in some cases. Camille, a learner, discussed the role of gaining access to relevant experience as part of developing employability. Discussing her work experience as a radiology assistant, Camille found placement experience as part of her studies valuable as a way of eliminating contemplated career pathways and the value of work-related experience for honing understanding of what types of work and what types of careers might be desirable and appropriate.

Theme 3: Tailored approaches are better

Another issue involved in successfully embedding employability concerned the importance of customising employability related activities and initiatives. Customisation could mean different things including adjusting the approach by student cohort, by levels of prior employability related experience and by the approach taken. Illustrations are first considered from careers stakeholders:

> Students are not always receptive (to employability sessions)… if you talked to first year students they'd think why is this person coming in this early I don't graduate for another two years… we try and suit the session to their career journey… for final year students you might run a session on the job searching and graduate schemes… for first years you might run a session on getting CVs ready for a part time job or introducing the careers service and emphasising that employers don't just want a degree, they want skills and how to develop these at university (Theresa, Careers, female, white, 40s)

> Interviewer: when does the undergraduates career start would you say?

> Participant: I guess the first step would be to assess where a student is at… because unless you know where you're at, it's pretty difficult to imagine what would be the journey towards their chosen goal (Petra, Careers, female, white, 40s)

> Here, we do a really specific type of work based learning which can be all different employment levels… we do quite specific work based learning modules in the classroom and yearlong sandwich placements but also companies coming in and setting challenges and things like that or getting students to work on organization focused problems… it all counts as work based learning (James, Careers, male, white, 40s)

Theresa focused on the importance of ensuring a staggered approach to delivering employability related content in a way that was carefully calibrated to the typical requirements of undergraduate students. A key danger here was losing student engagement ("not being receptive") when presented with sessions on employability. Anticipating this and ensuring that the approach ranges from initial considerations (e.g., introducing the careers service) and leads toward final stages of preparation before learners' graduate (e.g., sessions on job searching). Meanwhile, Petra emphasised the need for clarity on the starting position ("knowing where you're at") as critical to this process, and the analogy of a "journey" was used here to underscore the importance of planning and anticipating a clear sequence of steps to maximise the chances of success for working towards securing graduate employment linked to a specific career. With a different emphasis, James spoke to the importance of providing different types of work-based learning suited to different courses and different levels of study (e.g., undergraduate vs postgraduate). Having bolder, more direct involvement from employers was another way of avoiding overly generic approaches to employability in the curriculum.

Other material relating to this theme appeared from teaching and learner stakeholders and again concerned the value of customising employability related initiatives to suit specific requirements of the learning experiences. Illustrations are provided from the Chloe and Ramon interviews:

> In terms of barriers to developing employability skills across different student groups… you might have very mixed age groups, students in their 40s, 50s, already in careers as well as 18-year-olds who haven't really worked at all… you might have students from certain ethnic backgrounds or religions who don't really want to get careers… who are at university for different reasons… there's lots of different levels… we don't know what our students' starting positions are we don't survey them at the beginning, find out what work they already do… so it's hard to pitch to be suitable for all our different student groups (Chloe, Teacher, female, white, 50s)

> There is a lack of guidance and mentoring… sometimes just having an objective person saying this should be a good career for you and actually not this one for X, Y and Z reasons… to guide us through… there's a sea of opportunities out there and sometimes you can't see straight or don't know where to look or how to field the information… sometimes you are absolutely In the clouds and need to be put on Earth and be like, look this is what you could do… and having someone go ok this was my path, I'm going to tell you what I've done (Ramon, Student (3rd year), male, white, 30s)

Providing insights from a teaching perspective, Chloe articulated the challenges involved in addressing employability in student cohorts of widely differing experience or in terms of widely differing work and career plan ambitions. Missing from current approaches in Chloe's view were more systematic efforts to identify and build from learners' established life experiences relevant to employability and to use this as a springboard for more individually tailored approaches to developing employability related skills via curriculum activities. Interestingly, Chloe also referred to some ambivalence about careers among students from different demographic backgrounds ("don't really want careers"); a point which dove tailed with a broader issue around diverse reasons for wanting to undertake degree studies in the first place. From a learner perspective, tailored approaches could also mean closer proximity and more exposure to teachers. The Ramon extract relays the bewildering experience of developing a career pathway would be easier with more exposure to a mentor and a modeller to navigate the way through the options.

Theme 4: Embedding professional collaboration

Other material, particularly represented by careers and employability staff stakeholders, concern the importance of higher education employees working in partnership to successfully embed employability. There were many challenges to working in partnership some more historical and others more pragmatic. Across the selection of data, however, there was a shared understanding among the stakeholder groups, that the project of embedding employability successfully within the curriculum

would be unlikely to succeed without a sophisticated and sustainable plan for working in partnership across different areas of the university. We will consider illustrations from careers staff first:

It's important that academic and career staff working closely together so students know about different activities going on across the uni, across the student union, there's all sorts of different people involved to help students develop skills… so I think it's the cooperation between these different (professional groups) (Petra, Careers, female, white, 40s)

It's rare, but academics might not want career service to come in as they might not feel it's their job to talk about employability… most academics have worked in industry so they can see the value… the careers team can deliver sessions but it's tricky we are a small team, so we can train academics and help them to deliver sessions… I did a really good session with a digital media lecturer where we looked on a jobs board for opportunities for final year students… the academics are valuable because they know their field from a practitioner viewpoint that I may not know… but it depends how clued up they are on the labour market because obviously employability is not so much their job… you don't want an academic giving students the wrong information about the job market (Theresa, Careers, female, white, 40s)

I think there's a perception… as a careers advisor and from students and academics that career advice is checking CVs, showing (a student) that they're really suited for this job and type some things into a computer and it says you should be a librarian or things like that… and it's not understanding the service… (students should engage in) a series of career related reflections that bring that self-awareness, so that (misperception) can be a barrier (James, Careers, male, white, 40s)

Petra articulated the importance of teachers and career staff working in cooperative partnership to deliver employability goals. For Petra, part of the challenge was resistance from academics around employability and work-based learning in initiatives. Speaks to an improved situation and an appeal for open mindedness around how the curriculum could be configured to deliver employability related goals. Extracts from the Teresa and James interviews, both careers staff, similarly spoke to the importance of teachers and career staff particularly working in partnership to successfully embed employability. The selection of material presented below focused more on barriers to working in partnership between different stakeholder groups. These extracts are presented below:

For Theresa there was significant barriers linked to time and rigidity around designated roles working in higher education. Her extract spoke to the resource limitations in terms of not having enough time to deliver employability but also to the professional concerns around not feeling professionally competent to deliver employability related materials on the part of the teacher. Theresa's second extract, more hopefully, recognised the value of closer academic involvement and cooperation in employability delivery. However, also built into this extract, is a sense of the risks involved too and the delicate balance struck between academics delivering employability related content while only

working within the boundaries of their expertise about a given labour market and the risks of stepping outside that expertise. The James extract presented above spoke to other risks. Specifically, this extract from the James interview spoke to misconceptions about the career service as primarily instrumental in focus and existing to find the right jobs for students rather than playing a more holistic role to foster reflection about career opportunities among both students and academics.

Another less obvious part of embedding professional collaboration involved teaching practices that worked in a communicative and collaborative way to clearly and consistently embed employability within courses in a way that made sense from a learning perspective. This was apparent in the Chloe extract presented below:

> We have really good course learning outcomes related to employability which we're not reminding our students about, you know? we need to revisit specifications and the overall course everything happens at module level that's the problem… academics need to refer the students back to the overall course aims more often (Chloe, Teacher, female, white, 50s)

Chloe spoke to the importance of teachers 'weaving the golden thread' between learning sessions to ensure that employability related content was consistently linked back to relevant module and course outcomes so that students understood the fuller picture and the relationship between discrete skill sessions and activities on the one hand and broader employability related learning outcomes on the other hand.

Theme 5: Learning to know and manage the self

A diffuse cluster of data concerned what felt like triad of skills concerning reflection, self-awareness/ self-management and articulation. These data involved the importance of reflecting on employability skills (and skill gaps), having opportunities to articulate these and developing sophisticated levels of self-management skills in the process. We will start with reflection – much of this material was present primarily among career staff who, with their unique perspective and stakeholder position on the cultivation of employability among students, focused on this as critical to the successful embedding of employability in HEIs:

> Around January level four, they had to search for graduate jobs that they wanted to do, pull out the skills required for those jobs and, and explain what skills they've got at the moment and how they're going to further develop those skills for it to be realistic to apply for that job… so taking something external from the real world and getting a student to reflect on where they're at and then plot a real path from where they are now to getting that job… so some reflection that brings some self-awareness and then some planning (James, Careers, male, white, 40s)

> A personal opinion of it… it's about having that kind of knowing, knowing yourself, having an awareness of your strengths and weaknesses and developing and nurturing those skills… during

career planning, career development, you've got that crystallising stage when they're actually starting to think about strengths, skills, what they enjoy doing, what they don't enjoy doing and I don't think it's too early to start (Theresa, Careers, female, white, 40s)

James discussed different qualities including drawing on real world work experience, a process of reflection, engagement on the concrete requirements for securing a particular type of job, further reflection, the accumulation of greater self-awareness and further planning. Self-awareness cut through this extract; for example having identified relevant graduate jobs to apply for James implicitly refers to the role of self-awareness in "pulling out the skills" needed to optimise the success of a given job application. Theresa's interview also illustrated the importance of developing self-awareness to employability within degree studies. For Theresa, this self-awareness was about recognising specific limitations and strengths using this as a platform to develop and hone existing skills and to be aware of blind spots that might act as obstacles to securing progress along specific career pathways. Both extracts underscore the importance of early planning in the course to achieve these goals and the importance of some formal process of reflection in this case involving the crystallising of employability related plans.

Self-awareness was one way in which participants talked about the importance of reflection as an ingredient of successfully embedding employability in higher education environments. But reflection alone and in the abstract was not enough and careers staff also spoke to the importance of using specific approaches and techniques and platforms to produce a higher standard of reflective activities linked to employability. We can see examples of how this was apparent in the following three careers staff interview extracts which gave a clear sense of the importance of embedding employability in terms of needing to articulate learning, understanding, and life experience is relevant to work by settings to career plans. Material from the careers staff interviews particularly focused on the importance of developing skills with articulating skills and experiences relating to employability:

Employability requires reflection… so maybe feedback from a lecturer to a student on how communication skills or team working skills have developed… or keeping a personal development portfolio… start off saying I don't feel very good at this and then you put in place actions for what am I going to do… and then that's a record for you to reflect on over time of your part of your progress… but then it's also about articulating those skills and attributes through the process of applying for jobs or further courses and then being able to use that when you get there… and people might have preferences with how they communicate maybe they are a bit more visual, more auditory, etc.. maybe they are using certain terminology which might not be very clear to a person who is listening to them… that might create misunderstandings and their intended message might be misinterpreted or received differently (Petra, Careers, female, white, 40s)

These extracts from the Petra interview illustrates the importance of reflecting on, identifying, logging but then also learning to articulate employability related skills as one key part of successfully embedding employability within higher education learning environments. Importantly, within this, reflective activities might involve some component of dialogue to be successful; For example, here Petra refers to the role of tutor feedback on reflection activities on the learner's part. The importance of recording and instantiating evidence of acquired and of growing employability was key in this extract. The implications of this are varied, but, for example, Petra's suggestion that a learner being aware of their ability to articulate in visual terms might translate into a decision to develop a PowerPoint presentation for a job interview following a particular visual approach.

A final selection of material involved a more relational application of the self-awareness discussed above within real world work settings. The ability to articulate relevant skills transferred into abilities to connect and 'fit in' with people in work settings. Examples of how this was apparent are provided by the following interview extract illustrations from Camille and Tahlia:

> (definitions of employability) may miss something… because you may have the skills, but you also need to be able to fit in interpersonal attributes I suppose (Camille, Student (2nd year), female, black, 30s)

> Interviewer: Do you think there are kind of general skills that you need to be employable?

> Participant: I think it depends on where you go, but the basic level of customer service, and being a people's person, I think is key… yeah because every job really now you need to have basic core communication skills… yeah to be good with people being able to communicate (Tahlia, Student (2nd year), female, black, 40s)

Any understanding of how to develop a successful approach to embedding employability woods, in light of Camille's extract here, clearly being complete without a refined and methodical understanding of how to fit in socially within work settings and engage in a successful way into personally with individuals in a working environment. Tahlia's extract similarly appeals to the importance of developing, at the very least, an ability to provide an appropriately polite, respectful style of communication as something fundamental to gaining successful access to graduate employment.

There were other ways in which managing and bolstering a sense of self were apparent from learner stakeholder group data. Relevant data is presented below followed by discussion of how the extracts illustrate the theme.

> With the interview skills, how to present yourself even your appearance… I'm quite a nervous person anyway, I get really anxious and interview terribly, so finding ways to manage anxiety and stress before interviews which are not a natural setting, and you may not be your best self… it's good to be genuine and be honest with your answers… sometimes you go in sounding a bit robotic

listing things off not actually showing your personality… 9/ 10 times I walk out thinking that I didn't get the job and I have got the job… so people do look past the nerves um, I guess people expect it (Camille, Student (2ⁿᵈ year), female, black, 30s)

A barrier for employability, maybe one thing… our class was huge like 100+ students and maybe doesn't allow everyone to speak because people get nervous in front of so many people… probably impossible as limited amount of spaces, but if it was a smaller class, maybe it would make the individual like interaction a bit easier… and this is like the major skill you need to get for employability (Nevena, Student (3ʳᵈ year), female, white, 20s)

I think (developing career plans) will be just looking at what the role entails... and how much to contribute to it without exploiting them, obviously… because sometimes being passionate of our job means we're going to exploit you… you're going to give more and more and more… and because you're passionate, you're going to do more and that's a slippery slope and happens sometimes (Ramon, Student (3ʳᵈ year), male, white, 30s)

These extracts gave insights into the critical importance of managing the self in relation to cultivating sophisticated employability skills with a clear real world application. Camille referred to the importance of managing anxiety and stress but also being able to manage yourself in a way that facilitated delivering an authentic and honest account of your qualities in relation to a specific job. Notably, within this account Camille draws attention to the fact that managing myself is critical given that nerves may not necessarily make the negative impact on a particular job application or interview in the way that candidate may imagine. Managing self-confidence and anxiety and identifying this as a major skill relevant to employability were apparent in other ways in the data for example, the Nevena extract highlighted the importance of learning how to develop confidence to speak to a potentially very large group of students and recognising the potential advantages learning how to acquire great presentation skills in smaller settings first. Material here highlights the importance of embedding employability related activities linked to group interactions and specifically speaking to groups but also illustrates the potential pitfalls involved in providing learners with opportunities to present to groups of students which may backfire if the student group is too large and therefore the group presentation task feels too daunting for at least some learners. Ramon's extract concerned wariness of how to manage enthusiasm for particular career pathway decisions and the need for some care in the approach in relation to managing levels of enthusiasm and passion demonstrable to others so that learners pursuing graduate jobs are not exploited by employers, potential employers, all those providing opportunities for work placement experience.

Section summary

Taken together, material gave a rich, varied sense of key factors relevant to both optimising and inhibiting the embedding of employability within HEI learning environments. The range of factors

involved, found present in the five themes presented in this section, were overwhelmingly endorsed by all stakeholders (one noticeable exception here was Theme 5: Learning to know and manage the self which did not contain extracts from teacher interviews). A central challenge for all stakeholders concerned dealing with employability in a way that would motivate and engage learners. Making links beyond the classroom and immediate learning environments was also identified as critical, as was adjusting and calibrating (or 'tailoring') approaches to individual learners where possible. Many stakeholders endorsed the importance of strengthened professional collaborative bonds in the project to embed employability. Finally, both careers staff and learners testified to the key role of learning self-management and self-knowledge skills in relation to cultivating employability in a way that transferred to successes in career development and securing initial jobs.

Discussion

Employability is a priority area for Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). This is partly because of the understood relationship between cultivating greater levels of learner employability and developing an HEI's performance in terms of 'progression', i.e., the proportion of graduates from an institution who progress to highly skilled work up to 15 months after leaving university (Office for Students, 2023). This performance is critical to an HEI's ranking and reputation within a fiercely competitive sector; progression is a key metric of HEI success relating to student outcomes and partly determines performance in major evaluations such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

However, beyond sector and institutional concerns, employability is of concern to wide ranging stakeholders including learners and all those invested in learner progression into and beyond their Higher Education studies. There is burgeoning interesting in employability both conceptually and from a learning and teaching practitioner perspective. This project was designed to build on a recent internal survey of how employability is 'embedded' in the current School of Social Sciences and Professions (SSSP) curriculum. I sought to conduct interviews with three key Higher Education stakeholders of employability; learners, teachers and careers staff and to use textual data from these interviews as an evidence base for understanding viewpoints of how employability can and should be successfully embedded within HE learning experiences and environments.

The current study aim was to understand how stakeholders of employability define, view, value and implement employability within an H.E. context. The study research questions were: (1) 'How do stakeholders of employability define employability?' (RQ1); (2) How is the embedding of employability within H.E. programme designs, curricula, learning environments and other pedagogic initiatives viewed by stakeholders of employability?' (RQ2).

The corpus of interview transcript material generated from individual interview discussions with twelve stakeholders (four learners, four teachers, four careers and employability staff) was substantial and diffuse. However, interview data clustered around a first set of material that concerned broader contextual issues involved in understanding the role and relevance of employability of employability in HEI settings that roughly aligned with RQ1; and a second set of material concerning how employability might be optimally embedded in HEIs (aligned with RQ2). Given the contextual focus of the first set of material, Ecological Systems Theory (EST), was drawn on to frame and present this material as distinctive microsystem, mesosystem and macrosystem layers pertinent to the strategic/ cultural project in HEIs to embed employability.

Project data pointed to a valuable array of contextual issues and concerns underpinning the contemporary emphasis on embedding employability in HEIs. Different stakeholder groups sometimes provided different points of emphasis to some material but it was striking how much alignment there was in project themes among the stakeholders. At a more personal level, Stakeholders

were concerned with maintaining complex, dynamic and situated definitions of employability that steered away from locating the notion of employability at a purely intra-individual level of understanding (Theme 1: The importance of complex, plural definitions of employability). At an institutional/ cultural level, stakeholders were concerned with the challenge to embed employability within an already very full curriculum and the implications that 'overloading' the curriculum could have for student attention and motivated 'buy in' to employability related content in their curriculum (Theme 2: Seeking to embed employability into an overloaded curriculum). Pulling back to a 'big picture' societal view of embedding employability in HEIs, stakeholders voiced a range of concerns linking to issues around citizenship, social responsibility and the broader neoliberal landscape to which employability was closely tied as a concept in many stakeholder interviews (Theme 3: Navigating the neoliberal landscape and ethical concerns about embedding employability). Bigger picture issues also involved differentiated opportunities to develop employability focusing to a great extent on unequal financial and cultural/ social capital between different learners. Social justice tied in closely to this material reflecting that learners who were relatively disadvantaged in terms of their resources and/ or circumstances (e.g. learners with less money, with known disabilities, with dependents) faced many more obstacles to developing their career plans and 'building employability' during their degree studies than individuals studying degree courses under relatively advantaged circumstances (Theme 4: The elephant in the room: social justice and employability).

Project data also pointed to key factors relevant to embedding employability in HEIs and to cultivating qualities in learners relevant to fostering employability or skills/ sensibilities/ mindsets of adjacent relevance to becoming (directly or indirectly) more employable. This material concentrated on a fundamental challenge to motivate and engage learners with employability related content in the learning environment (Theme 1: The systemic challenge to motivate and engage) and the importance of delivering such content in a way that made credible links to specific careers, defined professions etc (Theme 2: Arenas beyond the classroom). Material in this second 'optimising the embedding of employability' section also testified to the importance of calibrating employability related content to individual circumstances and requirements as much as possible (Theme 3: Tailored approaches are better). A fourth theme in this section focused on the importance of all university stakeholders (i.e., teachers and careers and employability staff) working in close partnership in the interests of a more seamless, successful delivery of employability to learners (Theme 4: Embedding professional collaboration). A final thematic strand, primarily from careers and learner stakeholder groups, concerned the central importance of developing skills concerning reflection, self-awareness/ self-management and articulation (Theme 5: Learning to know and manage the self).

Re-engagement with Empirical Work

In this subsection, I will connect project findings with surrounding relevant literature. The project produced a wide range of findings across two separate analytic sections and key areas of connection will be explored in the context of the available research literature.

Several studies closely linked to the findings presented in Analysis 1 (Contextualizing Employability). Illustrative examples of these studies are now considered. Project findings provided evidence that various stakeholders, in different ways, valued the idea of a more plural, diverse definition and account of employability (Theme 1: The importance of complex, plural definitions of employability). There appears to be limited scholarly work engaging in critical, plural definitions of employability and a general convergence toward more traditional definitions that locate employability as a dispositional or skill-based quality operating at the level of the individual learner. Some empirical work has focused on producing an organised understanding of the different ways in which employability might be understood. For example, a conference abstract reports an ongoing Erasmus+ funded project involving strategic involvement from six HEIs across three European countries to produce a taxonomy of skills for boosting new graduate employability in HEIs organised into cognitive, methodological, social and subject-specific clusters (Omellas, 2018).

Project findings partly concerned difficulties embedding employability alongside the traditional academic curriculum (Analysis 1, Theme 2: Seeking to embed employability into an overloaded curriculum). Notably, the focus of this theme was endorsed by all stakeholders including learners who could feel strain in terms of the range of different and sometimes extracurricular commitments required of them during their degree studies. These findings chime with recent case study research that has examined perceptions of engagement in extracurricular activities by 38 students across six focus groups (Dickinson et al., 2021). Thematic analyses from this study reflected showcased learner awareness of varied barriers to participate in these activities and the perception that pressure to participate in extracurricular activities held the potential for harm. The final Section 1 Analysis theme, Theme 4: The elephant in the room: social justice and employability, focused on social justice and fairness in the context of embedding employability. Relatively few studies have explicitly explored inequity of provision around building employability in HEI environments. Unpublished mixed methods research exploring perceptions among 245 undergraduate minority ethnic law student of barriers and opportunities towards labour market participation demonstrated anticipations of prejudice among some prospective employers based on ethnic background when applying for jobs (Davies, 2014).

At a macrosystem level, the third theme ('Navigating the neoliberal landscape and ethical concerns about embedding employability') contained material from all stakeholders that articulated a variety of ethical issues underlying the broader HEI project to embed employability within HE curricula.

Previous work has discussed the close relationship and shared meanings between ethics and employability, particularly when considering ethical issues linked to questions of virtue, dialogue and responsibility (Robinson, 2005). One example of how this might apply in real world examples of 'embedded employability' might be developing learner employability in a way that cultivates skills to challenge evidence of working practices that appear unethical in some respect in a way that is respectful and appropriate. One recent study has explored the possibilities for cultivating an ethically informed employability among Malaysian undergraduates by exposing them to culturally resonant cinema/ film extracts and photography as part of in-session learning activities (Hassan and Chin, 2019). This initiative involved discussion around how the benchmarks for graduate competencies for future employability could usefully involve, from an ethical perspective, the cultivation of appropriate cultural awareness and a 'glocalised' mindset that incorporates a sense of civic capacity and universal prerequisites for work in different national settings. This concludes discussion of Analysis 1 (Contextualizing Employability) findings in relation to relevant surrounding literature.

Several studies closely linked to the findings presented in Analysis 2 (Views on Embedding Employability) are now considered. One relevant study presented 30 interviews across nine Australian universities examined cross-disciplinary collaboration between careers practitioners, academics and teaching staff (Bridgstock et al., 2019). The article findings underscored the importance of a carefully managed approach to calibrating the embedding of employability in a discrete way depending on learner year of study (supporting Theme 3: Tailored approaches are better) with findings also highlighting the challenged to manage employability within an already dense curriculum to deliver (supporting Theme 4: Embedding professional collaboration). A mixed methods study involving six universities in three countries (UK, Finland, South Africa) explored both the quality of teaching environments in terms of successfully embedding employability into curricula and also the relationship between university-industry collaboration activities and learner work readiness and employability (Ezeuduji et al., 2022). Findings suggested wide variation in terms of both the quality of employability in learning and teaching provision and also considerable variation in terms of correlations between greater learner opportunities to access such collaborations and enhanced employability scores in different institutional settings. These study findings imply that many other factors including the quality of the collaboration and the way in which learners are involved in activities bear heavily on whether industry collaborations are inevitably conducive to developing employability and career pathways. Finally, an illustrative study connected with findings presented in both Analysis 1 (Contextualizing Employability) and Analysis 2 (Views on Embedding Employability) is considered. Other research connects with findings from across Analyses 1 and 2 presented in this dissertation. For example, a recent survey of 417 Turkish undergraduates has investigated interactions between students' study motivation, perceived employability and demographic factors including gender and socioeconomic status (Bozgeyikli et al., 2022). Findings

suggested a pattern that reflected that, among participants from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the relationship between study motivation and employability was weaker among women than among men. These factors feed into project findings (specifically, to Section 1, Theme 4: The elephant in the room: social justice and employability and to Section 2, Theme 1: The systemic challenge to motivate and engage) concerning social justice in that they provide empirical evidence that efforts to embed and enhance employability may be closely tied to surrounding pedagogic considerations (e.g. academic motivation) but also to social identifying factors including relative poverty and gender identity. This concludes discussion of literature that connects with findings presented in Analysis 1 (Contextualizing Employability) and/ or Analysis 2 (Views on Embedding Employability). Project limitations and strengths are considered in the next section.

Limitations and Strengths

This section will discuss, in tandem, the range of strengths and limitations of the work described in this dissertation. Where appropriate, future research directions are also considered in this section (and more fully in a dedicated section immediately below). First, this study provided insights into embedding employability from multiple stakeholders including HEI staff who spanned both teaching and careers and employability professional backgrounds. Clearly, the range of stakeholders could have been much broader still (e.g., to include 'external stakeholders' including employers, alumni and Further Education teaching and careers and employability staff). Pursing this broader range of stakeholders is an important area of focus for future research and will provide a clearer evidence base for when, how, and by whom, particularly employability related activities might be undertaken across HEI and beyond. Second, the study offered some parity in terms of participants from each stake holder group (four from each of the three groups); this was important as it diminished the likelihood of the over-representation of one particular stakeholder within the analysis. However, it is noted here that interviewees were included from a single HEI in one national/ cultural context and the sample size of just twelve individuals would clearly mark this as initial, exploratory research rather than confirmatory, generalisable research. Third, the final sample, while it contained some diversity in terms of demographic background, the sample was overall skewed as a mainly white sample, mainly middle-aged group of individuals with, particularly, younger adult students arguably underrepresented in the sample. A future expanded version of this study could adopt a stratified sampling approach in which, illustratively, quotas of younger and older stakeholders, quotas of white and Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) stakeholders and quotas of women, men and non-binary stakeholders were included as part of the sampling approach. The focus now turns to consider a future research agenda to build on project findings.

Future Research Suggestions

Project findings pointed to different points of emphasis for employability related interventions that could be included as part of 'embedded employability' provision in HEIs. Crucially, project findings highlight the need for such interventions to follow a targeted approach to bolster employability potential among individual learners from relatively marginalised, underprivileged backgrounds. To date, relatively few peer reviewed articles have been published that report employability related interventions based in university settings and fewer still that report interventions that adopt a social justice slant. One study involved a sample of 271 Spanish university students found that a group subjected to an employability-focused intervention programme reported higher levels of self-efficacy related to gaining employment and higher levels of skills relating to employability (e.g., teamworking skills) at the post intervention time point (Hernández-Fernaud et al., 2017). Findings from another intervention, designed to raise student awareness of employability skills gained during their degree studies and involving eight final year UK university students, suggested a positive impact of short conversations about discipline specific skills on students understanding around employability and students' abilities to highlight graduate skills including communication and organisational skills (Lowe, 2020). Therefore, as a first future research suggestion, current study findings suggest that part of the emphasis of future employability related interventions should target students from marginalised backgrounds and those learners who typically face significant financial and social obstacles to developing career pathways following degree studies. It is recommended that a carefully planned employability related intervention could target, illustratively, BAME university students. Such an intervention could be designed to scaffold career related opportunities, to have opportunities to articulate these experiences in a non-threatening environment (a peer led intervention would therefore be ideal), and to provide a consistent plan for recording ongoing employability related activities and reflections and a consistent package of follow-up support.

A surprising volume of interview material concerned challenges to orthodox definitions of employability as an individual level quality, skill or aptitude and this material dove-tailed with broader concerns about employability in relation to ethics and socially responsible working lives. Relatedly, findings flagged concerns with potential missed opportunities to address a social justice agenda in employability related initiatives in HEIs. Therefore, a second future research suggestion is to conduct a content analysis of text and multimedia materials relating to employability (and employability related content) as they appear on UK HEI websites, and in strategic documentation. This could help consolidate current project findings around appeals for diverse, plural definitions of employability by exploring the breadth and focus of how employability is represented in such materials and the extent to which social justice is embedded within these materials. A third future research suggestion is to complete a systematic review that collates and explores the extant embedding employability literature. This could, usefully, highlight the concentration of empirical

work completed within specific disciplines and could help chart temporal aspects of the literature in terms of how initiatives and debates to embed employability have changed (or remained stable) over time.

Current project findings pointed to potential interactions between initiatives to embed employability and mental health; for example, the mesosystem theme - Theme 2: Seeking to embed employability into an overloaded curriculum - suggested the potentially deleterious impact on learners of a very full curriculum. Given this finding, a fourth future research suggestion is to conduct correlational research exploring links between university student well-being and employability indices. Previous correlational research found no links between employability and measures of job insecurity or wellbeing in a sample of 4,104 Finnish employees (De Cuyper et al., 2010). However current study data points to the close relationship between well-being and employability and the pursuit of careers among learners; gauging putative links between employability and relevant mental health indices (e.g., well-being, anxiety, resilience) among UK based university students might highlight specific groups who might be targeted for specific employability support based on their mental health status. Future research suggestions having been considered, discussion now turns to articulating recommendations and implications for practice emerging from project work.

Implications For Practice and Recommendations

This project has been conducted during a period of immense transition in the national and global workforce. A current National Foundation for Education Research (NFER) report (2023) has concluded that transferable skills that cannot be readily automated (e.g., via artificial intelligence or other technological advances) including collaboration, communication, problem-solving and decision-making skills will be increasingly become the focal specialist skills demanded by employers and the wider economy. These changes occur in an even broader context of considerable economic, political and technological change. Much of this change holds implications for workforce demands and, therefore, demands on HEIs in terms of the kind of skills and aptitudes and therefore the definitions around what is meant by 'employability', its conceptual breadth and remit, and how its embedding in HEI environments should be successfully approached and engaged with by relevant stakeholders.

Given this broad context and arguably revolutionary period of workforce change, study recommendations and implications for practice are considered different levels of enquiry and action. Material in this section presents key implications considered at the following levels of action: (1) my own professional teaching practice (My practice); (2) local learning and teaching approaches (e.g., Subject or School level) (Subject/ School); (3) broader institutional strategies at London Metropolitan University (Institutional); (4) UK related sector wide policy and debate (UK HE sector); and (5) the broader global pedagogic community associated with Higher Education (Global HE Community). Recommendations and implications for practice derived from current project findings, are presented

in Tables 2 and 3 below. These recommendations and implications for practice are considered systematically in related to the different themes from across the stakeholder interview data generated from this project. Project recommendations and implications for practice (alongside the levels of action described above) are shown in the left most column and these are mapped against project themes contained in the righter most columns. Following the Practice Implications and Recommendations tables on the next two pages, attention focuses on strategies for disseminating project findings.

Table 2. Practice Implications Mapped Against Project Findings

	1	2	3	4	A	B	C	D	E
My practice: Revisit my learning and teaching materials to explore where/ how existing material can be reconfigured to address employability in a motivational, individually tailored way that addresses a social justice agenda.		✓		✓	✓		✓		
My practice: For my dissertation/ project students, encourage brief (2-3 sentence) write up of research project approach and findings for prospective employers to be used in job applications and/or in job interview settings.						✓	✓		✓
My practice: For MSc Addiction Psychology students, incorporate employability into the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) via a Journal space to document employment/ career related skills, plans and actions over the academic year of studies. Include a clear, plural definition of employability on relevant VLE spaces.	✓				✓	✓	✓		
Subject/ School practices: Develop an intervention that provides scaffolded support to students from relatively socially marginalized communities (e.g., BAME, known disability) students designed to build relevant cultural capital by developing initial links with workplaces/ relevant professionals. Experiences to be converted into podcasts created with peers and prompts by intervention team for learners to revisit plans during degree studies.				✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	
Subject/ School practices: Establish community of practice, involving multiple stakeholders, to rethink and reconfigure how employability is presented, understood and deployed within specific learning sessions and within module assessment.	✓	✓			✓			✓	
Subject/ School practices: Project findings underscored the importance of collaborative partnership across the institution to deliver employability related goals. To address this, it will be important to recruit dedicated course liaisons to explore, with careers and employability colleagues, how careers and employability sessions and initiatives could be optimized given the focus/emphasis of that specific course and the characteristics of the student cohort.		✓			✓			✓	

Key. [numbers related to Analysis 1 themes and letters relate to Analysis 2 themes]
1 = Theme 1: The importance of complex, plural definitions of employability (micro level)
2 = Theme 2: Seeking to embed employability into an overloaded curriculum (meso level)
3 = Theme 3: Navigating the neoliberal landscape and ethical concerns about embedding employability (macro level)
4 = Theme 4: The elephant in the room: social justice and employability (macro level)

A = Theme 1: The systemic challenge to motivate and engage
B = Theme 2: Arenas beyond the classroom
C = Theme 3: Tailored approaches are better
D = Theme 4: Embedding professional collaboration
E = Theme 5: Learning to know and manage the self

Table 3. Recommendations Mapped Against Project Findings

	1	2	3	4	A	B	C	D	E
Institutional: Promote activities relevant to employability (e.g., encouraging students to attend the autumn Inclusivity Fair). Distribute explicit, consistent messages about the importance of building career related networks to student on VLE spaces, in emails/communications and in learning sessions.				✓			✓		
Institutional: Liaise with Centre for Professional and Educational Development (CPED) colleagues to include, in accessibility related sessions, a slide on embedding employability in minimalist/ low burden ways that add minimal additional 'content' to the curriculum and help bolster uniformity of delivery around employability across Subject/ School areas.		✓			✓			✓	
Institutional: Develop strategic/ policy approach that requires Subject areas and course teams to prompt learners to record *existing* employment related skills and experience, to record/ crystalize these reflections in a clearly defined space (e.g., the VLE) and to prompt learners to return to these spaces to update and develop content.					✓		✓		✓
UK HE Sector: Promote ongoing transparency and debate around plural employability meanings, definitions and framings with learners and all stakeholders. Debate also needed to shift sector focus to nurture broader notions of citizenship and sensibilities around socially responsible working lives and career plans. Debate could manifest in a dedicated 'Employability, citizenship and social justice' half day event involving a range of stakeholders (e.g., learners, teachers, university leaders).	✓		✓	✓		✓		✓	
Global HE Community: Develop a broader community of practice and scholarship dedicated to exploring plural definitions around employability, appealing for a blurring of employability with collective notions including citizenship and social responsibility, and developing the critical evidence based linked to employability.	✓		✓	✓				✓	

Key. [numbers related to Analysis 1 themes and letters relate to Analysis 2 themes]
1 = Theme 1: The importance of complex, plural definitions of employability (micro level)
2 = Theme 2: Seeking to embed employability into an overloaded curriculum (meso level)
3 = Theme 3: Navigating the neoliberal landscape and ethical concerns about embedding employability (macro level)
4 = Theme 4: The elephant in the room: social justice and employability (macro level)

A = Theme 1: The systemic challenge to motivate and engage
B = Theme 2: Arenas beyond the classroom
C = Theme 3: Tailored approaches are better
D = Theme 4: Embedding professional collaboration
E = Theme 5: Learning to know and manage the self

Strategies For Disseminating Project Findings

Project findings will be presented in a suitable format to both internal and external audiences. This dissertation represents the initial product to emerge from project work and will be made available on a suitable London Metropolitan University repository. An initial report of project findings has been made at an April 2023 Higher Education Research Group meeting at London Metropolitan University. In addition, a School-focused report will be prepared as a 500-word summary of findings to circulate to teaching practitioners in Social Science and Professions colleagues. Dissemination in the broader pedagogic field will involve conference session delivery and article preparation activities. Specifically, an abstract presenting project findings and titled 'Stakeholder Views on Embedding Employability in Higher Education' has been accepted for presentation at the 2023 British Educational Research Association conference in Birmingham. In addition, 1-2 articles reporting project findings will be submitted to suitable peer reviewed journal outlets (e.g., *Studies in Higher Education*) to be considered for publication.

Conclusion

Evidence presented in this dissertation contributes to contemporary empirical enquiry concerning the embedding of employability in the context of UK Higher Education Institution (HEI) environments. Drawing on interviews with twelve stakeholders, two analyses were presented that provided, first, an Ecological Systems Theory (EST) contextual account of viewpoints of employability that framed a second analysis concerning factors which optimise and impede the embedding of employability in HEI learning settings. The work and discussion presented in this dissertation provides a starting point for an expanded study of stakeholder viewpoints about embedding employability and a basis for considering appropriate institutional and practice changes to optimise the embedding of employability. Perhaps most significantly, findings presented in this dissertation help to emphasise the need for a contextualised, situated understanding of employability and the sector project to successfully embed employability within the traditional academic curriculum. Moreover, findings underscore the importance of understanding ethical dimensions involved in embedding employability. Relatedly, findings emphasise the importance of recognising how social justice feeds into discussion of and initiatives to address employability in a way that bolsters opportunities for all learners including learners from marginalised communities with relatively little financial and social capital to draw on while pursuing careers. It is hoped that this dissertation has helped to consolidate the wealth of discussion and work ongoing in this dynamic field of work.

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Appendices

Appendix A: London Met Ethical Approval (including invitation letter and consent form)

London Met Research Ethics Review Form

For Research Students and Staff

Postgraduate research students (MPhil, PhD and Professional Doctorate):
This form should be completed by all research students in full consultation with their supervisor. All research students must complete a research ethics review form before commencing the research or collecting any data and no later than six months after enrolment.

Staff:
This form should be completed by the member of staff responsible for the research project (i.e. Principal Investigator and/or grant-holder) in full consultation with any co-investigators, research students and research staff before commencing the research or collecting any data.

Timeline:
The aim is to assess applications within two weeks. The reviewers may ask for a re-submission that addresses concerns they have. In this case, a further two weeks apply from receipt of the re-submitted form. The length of the process depends on the applicant addressing the reviewers' requests explicitly and quickly. To be on the safe side, applicants should allow six weeks for the process.

Definition of Research
Research 'is defined as a process of investigation leading to new insights, effectively shared. […] It includes work of direct relevance to the needs of commerce, industry, culture, society, and to the public and voluntary sectors; scholarship [1]; the invention and generation of ideas, images, performances, artefacts including design, where these lead to new or substantially improved insights; and the use of existing knowledge in experimental development to produce new or substantially improved materials, devices, products and processes, including design and construction. It excludes routine testing and routine analysis of materials, components and processes such as for the maintenance of

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[1] 'Scholarship for the REF is defined as the creation, development and maintenance of the intellectual infrastructure of subjects and disciplines, in forms such as dictionaries, scholarly editions, catalogues and contributions to major research databases.'

national standards, as distinct from the development of new analytical techniques. It also excludes the development of teaching materials that do not embody original research.'[2]

London Met's Research Ethics Policy and Procedures and Code of Good Research Practice, along with links to research ethics online courses and guidance materials, can be found on the Research & Postgraduate Office Research Ethics webpage:

London Met's Research Framework

Researcher development sessions are listed on Student Zone and Eventbrite.

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[2] REF 2021, Guidance on Submissions (2019/01), p. 90

This form requires the completion of the following three sections:

- **Section A: Applicant Details**
- **Section B: The Project – Ethical Issues**
- **Section C: The Project – Risks and Benefits**

	Section A: Applicant Details	
A1	**Background information**	
	Research project title: Embedding Employability in Higher Education	
	School: Social Sciences and Professions	
	Date of submission for ethics approval: 17th May 2022	
	Proposed start date for project: 1st June 2022	
	Proposed end date for project: 1st June 2023	
	Ethics ID # (to be completed by RERP chair):	
A2	**Applicant details, if for a research student project**	
	Name:	
	Degree (MPhil, MPhil/PhD, PhD, DLitt, DSc, ProfDoc in ….):	
	London Met Email address:	
A3	**Principal Researcher/Lead Supervisor**	
	Member of staff at London Metropolitan University who is responsible for the proposed research project either as Principal Investigator/grant-holder or, in the case of postgraduate research student projects, as Lead Supervisor	
	Name: Dom Conroy	
	Job title: Principal Lecturer	
	London Met Email address: d.conroy@londonmet.ac.uk	

Section B: The Project – Ethical Issues	

B1	**The Research Proposal**
	Please attach a brief summary **(max. 1,000 words)** of the research project including:
	Background/rationale and conceptual framework of study. Employability has been recognised to refer to different things. One established definition of employability is provided by Yorke (2006) who states that employability concerns a graduate's achievements but also their potential to obtain employment and particularly 'graduate employment' related in some way to their degree studies [1]. Some authors, reviewing how employability appears in official statements, reports and position papers in a UK context, has highlighted the shift toward Higher Education institutions for taking responsibility for employability provision [2]. Elsewhere, Dalrymple et al (2021), reviewing the 2016-2021 employability literature has offered varied conclusions including the need to differentiate and provide a wider range of measures of employability, and the importance of engaging a wider range of stake holders in discussion around employability [3]. These authors also point to inequalities and differential opportunities in the provision of employability within H.E. settings.
	Some authors have described studies designed to evaluate initiatives to more fully and/or more meaningfully embed employability within Schools/Departments (e.g., [4-7]). Other authors have explored how employability is currently embedded in curricula - for example, one study has examined employability initiatives in Australia in an audit of undergraduate programmes in geospatial science [8]. We plan a similar exploratory approach, to understand where and how employability is currently embedded (or not) in our School curriculum. Doing so would be of immediate practical value to all stakeholders of employability whether current students, institutional careers services, teaching practitioners, and external stakeholders in the local community and in local business settings. A recent AdvanceHE essential framework offers a strategic and practical process for identifying successes and deficits in terms of employability provision within an H.E. institution across any subject area [9]. Drawing on this framework in part, our planned research, will gauge definitions and views of employability among relevant stakeholders via a series of interviews.
	Research questions/aims/objectives. The current study aim is to understand how stakeholders of employability define, view, value and implement employability within an H.E. context. Our stakeholders of interest are: (i) teaching practitioners in H.E., (ii) H.E. students, (iii) Careers and Employability staff working in H.E., and (iv) 'external' community stakeholders in business/industry. In addition, we will interview a further relevant group: (v) alumni London Met students. Distinct research questions apply to

each of these stakeholder groups. However, the overarching research questions relevant to each set of stakeholders are: (1) 'How do stakeholders of employability define employability?'; (2) How is the embedding of employability within H.E. programme designs, curricula, learning environments and other pedagogic initiatives viewed by stakeholders of employability?'

Reflection on project orientation. We would like to be clear that the study will, in part, build on understanding from a recent internal survey of how employability is 'embedded' in the current School of Social Sciences and Professions (SSSP) curriculum. However, the study approach is primarily 'outward looking' and intended to connect with broader academic literature in this area rather designed primarily to inform and shape internal policy concerns. In saying this, we also acknowledge that interview study findings will be used to contextualise and frame understanding of the recent employability survey as part of an ongoing initiative to develop the breadth and application of employability within curricula across SSSP.

Recruitment details. Participants will be teaching practitioners in H.E. (London Met university staff) ('staff' hereafter), London Met students ('students' hereafter), London Met Careers and Employability staff ('careers staff' hereafter), and 'external' community stakeholders in business/industry identified by colleagues in London Met Careers and Employability ('external stakeholders' hereafter). We will aim to interview 10 of each type of stakeholder producing a sample of around 40 individuals in total.

We will recruit staff via a database of staff who have already indicated willingness to be contact about participation in this study from a previous audit survey.

We will recruit students via forum posts, email circular messages and word-of-mouth/snowballing sampling. We will recruit careers staff via colleagues already involved in a broader School-wide employability project. We will recruit external stakeholders and alumni London Met students via contacts held by our colleagues in the London Met Careers and Employability service. All recruitment/interviews will be conducted by a Research Assistant (RA) (Nils Perez Codesal, a final year psychology student). Dom (the Principal Investigator) and Nils have a strong working relationship, and have worked together on qualitative research since December 2021 with Nils supporting Dom's project on 'Dry January participation' as a Research Assistant funded through an internal grant. Dom has provided supervision, training and pastoral support to Nils throughout managing his RA activities on the Dry January Project. Recruitment will be incentivized by all participants (recruited from December 2022 onwards) being entered for a chance to win one of four £25 Amazon voucher prizes to reward participation.

Individuals willing to take part in the study will be contact via email with a formal information sheet and consent form. From this point, individuals will be able to

participate in the study if they wish to. All participating individuals will be asked to return a signed copy of the consent form if they are willing to take part. Participant email addresses will be recorded in this study and will be stored in a password-controlled file and destroyed five years after the start of the study (i.e., in May 2027). Please see Appendix A to view the participant information page, an informed consent page, and the debrief page.

Research methodology. Interviews will be contacted either face-to-face on the London Met Holloway university campus or via Microsoft Teams. The current study interview schedules are included as Appendix B. Interviews will be audio recorded. Transcripts will be made of interviews in anonymised/de-identified form. Textual transcript data will be subjected to Braun and Clarke's tradition of thematic analysis [10].

Research ethics statement Having the RA as the sole data collector will be an important way of minimising the risk of pressure felt by colleagues to take part in interviews. As part of the consent process, it will be underscored to colleague participants that this is a research study rather than an internal audit and that interview discussion is ultimately separate from their working role at London Met. Given that some interviews would be conducted with individuals from a relatively small team (e.g. Careers and Employability staff), care will be taken to ensure that transcription involves the careful removal of any individual identifying information before a final transcript is produced. Before analysis is conducted, participants will be sent a copy of the transcript for them to check and make any changes they wish prior to its inclusion in the final study.

We also acknowledge that there are ethical implications linked to involving a relatively young student as the RA on a study that involves interviewing staff members and other individuals for this study. It is important to note here that all field work and study related communications will take place between the PI (Dom Conroy) and the RA (Nils Perez Codesal) without direct involvement from the broader team of co-investigators (who, as the reviewer notes, include senior management). As noted above, Dom and Nils have a strong working relationship, and have worked together on qualitative research since December 2021 with Nils supporting Dom's project on 'Dry January participation' as an RA. Aligned with the reviewer's feedback, Dom will incorporate discussion concerning power dynamics as part of Nils' broader interview training before the RA conducts any interviews.

Key references

[1] Yorke, M. (2006) Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not. York: Higher Education Academy. Retrieved:

http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/tla/employability/id116_employability_in_higher_education_336.pdf

[2] Cheng, M., Adekola, O., Albia, J., & Cai, S. (2021). Employability in higher education: a review of key stakeholders' perspectives. Higher Education Evaluation and Development.

[3] Dalrymple, R., Macrae, A., Pal, M. and Shipman, S. (2021). Employability: a review of the literature 2016-2021. Retrieved: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/employability-review-literature-2016-2021

[4] Bradley, A., Priego-Hernández, J., & Quigley, M. (2021). Evaluating the efficacy of embedding employability into a second-year undergraduate module. Studies in Higher Education, 1-13.

[5] Gao, X. (2019). Embedding employability in course design: an international experience.

[6] Kornelakis, A., & Petrakaki, D. (2020). Embedding employability skills in UK higher education: Between digitalization and marketization. Industry and Higher Education, 34(5), 290-297.

[7] Scriven, R., & Strampel, K. (2020). Collaboration in curriculum design: Embedding employability for future graduate success. ETH Learning and Teaching Journal, 2(2), 497-501.

[8] Arrowsmith, C., & Cartwright, W. (2019). Embedding employability skills in the curriculum and extending into postgraduate programs. In Handbook for Teaching and Learning in Geography. Edward Elgar Publishing.

[9] Tibby, M. and Norton, S. (2020). Essential frameworks for enhancing student success: embedding employability. A guide to the Advance HE Framework. Retrieved: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/essential-frameworks-enhancing-student-success-embedding-employability

[10] Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative research in psychology, 3(2), 77-101.

B2	**Research Ethics**
	Please outline any ethical issues that might arise from this study and how they are to be addressed.
	NB All research projects have ethical considerations. Please complete this section as fully as possible using the following pointers for guidance. Please include any additional information that you think would be helpful.

	• Does the project involve potentially deceiving participants? ~~Yes~~/No • Will you be requiring the disclosure of confidential or private information? ~~Yes~~/No • Is the project likely to lead to the disclosure of illegal activity or incriminating information about participants? ~~Yes~~ /No • Does the project require a <u>Disclosure and Barring Service (DBS)</u> check for the researcher? ~~Yes~~ /No • Is the project likely to expose participants to distress of any nature? ~~Yes~~ /No • Will participants be rewarded for their involvement? Yes /~~No~~ • Are there any potential conflicts of interest in this project? ~~Yes~~ /No • Are there any other potential concerns? ~~Yes~~/ No **If you answered yes to any of the points above, please explain.** Recruitment will be incentivized by all participants (recruited from December 2022 onwards) being entered for a chance to win one of four £25 Amazon voucher prizes to reward participation. The issue of 'participant payment/incentivisation' raises ethical questions. Traditionally arguments have suggested that being offered financial incentives (in the form of a prize draw) constitutes a form of coercive practice in research. Contemporary arguments increasing press the case for *the absence* rather than the presence of offering financial incentives constitutes a greater ethical problem for a study in that, without some form of material incentive, research participation can be meaningfully viewed as exploitative and lacking fair compensation. Accordingly, entry into a prize draw (with odds stacked against winning), while ethically not straight forward, is arguably a fair and modern practice to adopt for the current research study. Prize drawer winners will be selected at random from all participants joining the study from December 2022 onwards. To ensure anonymity, only participant email addresses will be collected and these will be securely stored in a password protected Word document.
B3	Does the proposed research project involve: • The analysis of existing data, artefacts or performances that are not already in the public domain (i.e. that are published, freely available or available by subscription)? ~~Yes~~/No • The production and/or analysis of physical data (including computer code, physical entities and/or chemical materials) that might involve potential risks to humans, the researcher(s) or the University? ~~Yes~~ /No • The direct or indirect collection of new data from humans (e.g. interviews, observations, photos, surveys)? Yes/~~No~~ • The direct or indirect collection of new data from animals? ~~Yes~~ /No • Sharing of data with other organisations? ~~Yes~~ /No • Export of data outside the EU*? ~~Yes~~ /No* **If you answered yes to any of the points above, please explain.**

	Interview data will be collected from humans as part of this study (please see full details in methodology section above).
B4	Will the proposed research be conducted in any country outside the UK? No. If so, are there independent research ethics regulations and procedures that either: ● Do not recognise research ethics review approval from UK-based research ethics services? *Yes/No* and/or ● Require more detailed applications for research ethics review than would ordinarily be conducted by the University's Research Ethics Review Panels and/or other UK-based research ethics services? *Yes/No* **If you answered yes to any of the points above, please explain.**
B5	Does the proposed research involve: ● The collection and/or analysis of body tissues or fluids from humans or animals? ~~*Yes*~~*/No* ● The administration of any drug, food substance, placebo or invasive procedure to humans or animals? ~~*Yes*~~ */No* ● Any participants lacking capacity (as defined by the UK Mental Capacity Act 2005)? ~~*Yes*~~ */No* ● Relationships with any external statutory-, voluntary-, or commercial-sector organisation(s) that require(s) research ethics approval to be obtained from an external research ethics committee or the UK National Research Ethics Service (this includes research involving staff, clients, premises, facilities and data from the UK National Health Service (NHS), Social Care organisations and some other statutory public bodies within the UK)? ~~*Yes*~~ */No* **If you answered yes to any of the points above, please contact your school's RERP chair for further guidance.**
B6	Does the proposed research involve: ● Accessing / storing information (including information on the web) which promotes extremism or terrorism? ~~*Yes*~~ */No*

	● Accessing / storing information which is security sensitive (e.g. for which a security clearance is required)? ~~Yes~~ /*No*

If you answered yes to any of the points above, please explain. To comply with the law, researchers seeking to use information in these categories must have appropriate protocols in place for the secure access and storage of material. For further guidance, see the Universities UK publication <u>Oversight of Security Sensitive Research Material in UK Universities</u> (2012). |

Section C – The Project – Risks and Benefits	
C1	**Risk Assessment**
	Please outline: ● the risks posed by this project to both researcher and research participants ● if applicable, the risk involved in research abroad ● the ways in which you intend to mitigate these risks ● the benefits of this project to the applicant, participants and any others No risks are posed to the research by facilitating this study. Meaningful reflection of how employability is currently embedded in curricula and learning environments may provide the opportunity to reflect on success of current design and, as such, may be a rewarding experience for participants. In this sense, there are anticipated benefits from taking part in this study.

Please ensure that you have completed Sections A, B, and C and attached a Research Proposal before submitting to your School Research Ethics Review Panel (RERP)

Please sign this form and submit it as an email attachment to the Chair of your school's Research Ethics Review Panel (RERP) and cc <u>all</u> of the staff and students who will be involved in the proposed research.

You can find more information on <u>Research Ethics</u> on Student Zone.

Research ethics approval can be granted for a maximum of 4 years or for the duration of the proposed research, whichever is shorter, on the condition that:

- The researcher must inform their school's Research Ethics Review Panel (RERP) of any changes to the proposed research that may alter the answers given to the questions in this form or any related research ethics applications

- The researcher must apply for an extension to their ethics approval if the research project continues beyond 4 years.

Declaration

I confirm that I have read London Met's *Research Ethics Policy and Procedures* and *Code of Good Research Practice* and have consulted relevant guidance on ethics in research.

I confirm that I will carry out risk assessment before embarking on my research and if any risks are identified I will submit a report to Health and Safety.

I confirm that, before doing research abroad, I will carry out risk assessment incl. observing <u>UK Government travel advice</u>. I will discuss any concerns with my supervisor and will submit any documentation that may be required.

Researcher signature:……… …………..

Date:………………………12th-May-2022…………….……

Feedback from Ethics Review Panel

	Approved	*Feedback where further work required*
Section A		
Section B **Reviewer A**		This is an interesting proposal with great potential impact in shaping internal policy and practice within the University – but interestingly, this does not quite come out fully in the proposal. My concerns with this proposal refer to a few things: 1) Identified stakeholders are, for instance Careers and Employability staff working in HE and London Met. Given that one or two of the Proposers are quite senior members of staff in the Careers and Employability team at London Met, how does the team ensure that subordinates do not feel pressured into taking part in the research, and how would they ensure that those members of staff feel free to discuss the topics of the interviews? My assumption here is that we are working with small number of people in this team, who might be easily identifiable, even in the context of ensuring anonymity of the interview transcript. 2) My other concerns is about contacting the London Met alumni – (the proposal states that the research will contact "alumni London Met students via contacts held by our colleagues in the London Met Careers and Employability service") – do we have assurances that this process is GDPR compliant? 3) The research proposal also states that the interviews will be conducted by a Research Assistant who is not named on this form. We know this is a white man in his 20s. If this is the Principal investigator, fine, if not, should he be named as co-investigator and be covered by this research ethics form? 4) My last comment is that despite the potential to influence policy and practice internally, this aspect is severely underplayed in the proposal, despite most of the research team being in high levels of management. If this research aims to inform and shape internal

		policy directly, I think this should come out clearer and more upfront both in the research proposal and in the information sheet for participants. It would be useful to know how this project links with the other project the researcher mentioned around careers and employability: what is the link between the two?
Reviewer B		This is an interesting proposal, but it does risk coming across as a rather internal looking, LondonMet review/ evaluation. If it is a research project, would it be worth considering drawing in participants from other universities too? I am thinking ahead here to ensuring high quality publications in good journals.
		Also, if other participants from other universities were included it might also dilute some of the confidentiality challenges as London Met staff participating in this project may be easily identifiable to other colleagues.
		Given the current design of this study as a very London Met endeavour, I power dynamics need to be addressed more explicitly in the proposal. These are ethical issues. What are the likely power dynamics been a young research assistant and some rather senior managers?
		Is the research team able to be openly critical of London Met policies?
		Furthermore, would this critique appear in publications/ journal articles? Is there a risk here of exposing LondonMet issues to a wider audience? Difficult to conceal identity of the 'University' if all the journal article authors are all LondonMet affiliated.
		I would like to see more reflection on these issues in the proposal.
Section C		
Applicant response to reviewer feedback		

Thank you to both reviewers for their time with the application. There was valuable ethics-related feedback which has been addressed in our response. My responses to points raised are included below. All relevant responses are highlighted in yellow on the attached document.

REVIEWER 1

My concerns with this proposal refer to a few things:

1)   Identified stakeholders are, for instance Careers and Employability staff working in HE and London Met. Given that one or two of the Proposers are quite senior members of staff in the Careers and Employability team at London Met, how does the team ensure that subordinates do not feel pressured into taking part in the research, and how would they ensure that those members of staff feel free to discuss the topics of the interviews? My assumption here is that we are working with small number of people in this team, who might be easily identifiable, even in the context of ensuring anonymity of the interview transcript.

- This was a valuable and fair point of feedback. We have revised the proposal so that it now includes an additional Research ethics statement. This statement clarifies that data will only be collected by a study RA and not viewed in original form by the co-investigators (who, as the reviewer notes, are senior members of the C&E team). In addition, we have added in that all participants will see a copy of the provisional anonymised/de-identified transcript and be able to request any further changes to ensure sufficient anonymity. We have reflected this add-in in the information sheet. We have also added a clarifying note to the 'Do I have to take part?' section of the information sheet clarifying that this is a research study, not an internal audit. This note states: "We want to underscore to colleagues that this is a research study rather than an internal audit and that interview discussion is entirely separate from your working role at London Met.".

2)   My other concerns is about contacting the London Met alumni – (the proposal states that the research will contact "alumni London Met students via contacts held by our colleagues in the London Met Careers and Employability service") – do we have assurances that this process is GDPR compliant?

Thank you for this and we appreciated the point here. We would draw on a database of alumni email addresses provided by previous students who were willing to permit for their contact details to remain on record with us for alumni communications. All records are kept in accordance with institutional GDPR requirements.

3)   The research proposal also states that the interviews will be conducted by a Research Assistant who is not named on this form. We know this is a white man in his 20s. If this is the Principal investigator, fine, if not, should he be named as co-investigator and be covered by this research ethics form?

- The research assistant - Nils Perez Codesal - is now named in the form explicitly and added as a co-investigator.

4)   My last comment is that despite the potential to influence policy and practice internally, this aspect is severely underplayed in the proposal, despite most of the research team being in high levels of management. If this research aims to inform and shape internal policy directly, I think this should come out clearer and more upfront both in the research proposal and in the information sheet for participants. It would be useful to know how this project links with the other project the researcher mentioned around careers and employability: what is the link between the two?

- This was another fair, reasonable point of feedback, thank you. And we agree that application of project findings needs to be clearer stated both in the proposal and in study materials for participants to view clearly. Accordingly, we have added a 'Reflection on project orientation' subsection to section B1 of the proposal form, and have also added this to the participant information sheet.

REVIEWER 2

This is an interesting proposal, but it does risk coming across as a rather internal looking, LondonMet review/ evaluation. If it is a research project, would it be worth considering drawing in participants from other universities too? I am thinking ahead here to ensuring high quality publications in good journals. Also, if other participants from other universities were included it might also dilute some of the confidentiality challenges as London Met staff participating in this project may be easily identifiable to other colleagues.

- Thank you for this interesting feedback point. We agree that a cross-institution project would at some point be a very useful extension to the proposed study. And we take the point that working alongside another university might serve to adjust the focus of this project away from something internal to something broader. However, we did wonder here whether this might actually create additional ethical issues for the project in terms of pooling data (albeit anonymised and de-identified) between institutions. In addition, we felt that, from a pragmatic perspective, the study, which is designed to draw on the perspectives of four separate groups of stakeholders, is probably sufficiently complex without adding a further recruitment dimension. For this reason, our feeling here was that this may not be possible for this particular study but we are grateful for the suggestion.

Given the current design of this study as a very London Met endeavour, I power dynamics need to be addressed more explicitly in the proposal. These are ethical issues. What are the likely power dynamics been a young research assistant and some rather senior managers?

- This was an important point of feedback to reflect on. We have amended the form to clarify that all field work and study related communications will take place between the PI (Dom Conroy) and the RA (Nils Perez Codesal) without direct involvement from the broader team of co-investigators (who, as the reviewer notes, include senior management). Dom and Nils have a strong working relationship, and have worked together on qualitative research since December

2021 with Nils supporting Dom's project on 'Dry January participation' as a Research Assistant funded through an internal grant. Dom has provided supervision, training and pastoral support to Nils throughout managing his RA activities on the Dry January Project. Aligned with the reviewer's feedback, Dom will incorporate discussion concerning power dynamics as part of Nils' broader interview training before he conducts any interviews. These details have been added to the 'Research ethics statement' in section B1 of the proposal.

Is the research team able to be openly critical of London Met policies?

- This is another fair and reasonable point raised here in response to the proposed research. We have discussed this, and all other feedback here as a team and given these issues careful consideration. The project is primarily designed to address an empirical question concerning how views of employability between different stakeholders may compliment or contrast each other in the context of a range of issues relevant to employability. On a practical level, these empirical findings might be useful to London Met but also to other stakeholders (e.g. other universities/ educational settings) in terms of providing a more comprehensive, clear and rounded way of addressing employability within curricula. As discussed above, our focus here really is in addressing a broader empirical question recently raised in review work. As such, there will be a critical dimension to the study, but this really applies to how employability is understood and applied in a more general sense. Finally we note here that, as an empirical piece of work, we anticipate wide-ranging responses from London Met staff/students and broader stakeholders (e.g. local businesses, alumni). While some of these may be critical in character/focus, we also anticipate that interview data will be likely to endorse/support current institutional appraoches to employability at strategic and operational levels as well.

Furthermore, would this critique appear in publications/ journal articles?

- The findings from the study would appear in anonymised/de-identified form in journal articles, yes. We emphasis here that the research focus is not to produce a 'critique' as such but to explore, empirically, the viewpoints of a range of stakeholders relevant to employability. As noted in the proposal itself, this area for research has been explicitly raised as a priority in recent work: "There is a need to extend this (secondary data analysis) by conducting empirical research on stakeholders' views and experiences of employability." (Cheng et al., 2021, p. 11). The study, as outlined in this proposal, will contribute to fieldwork in this area to help address this empirical question.

Is there a risk here of exposing LondonMet issues to a wider audience? Difficult to conceal identity of the 'University' if all the journal article authors are all LondonMet affiliated.

- We note the reviewer's concern here and the valid point that they raise concerning institutional exposure. However, we draw attention to points raised above here, and suggest that project data will almost inevitably be varied, nuanced and will provide an opportunity to broadcast the successes and innovations of London Met. While difficulties with embedding employability will clearly also be a part of the study dataset we note here that such difficulties/challenges would be faced by any institution in the sector. To publish an article in a respected, peer reviewed journal

outlet, we provide a valuable opportunity to show that London Met is leading the field in striving to understand the varied perspectives involved in successfully embedding employability in H.E. curricula.

Date of approval	6th June 2022 Amendment – addition of prize draw incentive – approved 22 Dec 2022. Louise Ryan
NB: The Researcher should be notified of the review outcome within <u>two</u> weeks of the submission of the application. If the outcome is re-submission of the application because of requests for further information or suggested adjustments of the project, a <u>further two</u> weeks from receipt of the re-submitted application applies, and so on. A copy should be sent to research@londonmet.ac.uk.	
Signature of RERP chair	Louise Ryan

Appendix A: Embedding Employability in Higher Education Study Materials

Embedding Employability in Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Dom Conroy

Co-Investigators: Vanessa Airth; Nils Perez Codesal; Kelly Cooper; Neelam Thapar; Brian Tutt

Information Sheet

What is the purpose of the interview?

Thank you very much in advance for considering completing this 'embedding employability' questionnaire for the School of Social Sciences and Professions. Employability involves many stakeholders within Higher Education (H.E.) and beyond. In this study we seek to explore definitions, views and understandings of 'employability in H.E. curricula' among stakeholders who are students, who are teachers and other stakeholders. This research plan has been reviewed by an ethics committee at London Metropolitan University. Your participation in the study would be entirely voluntary.

What will I be asked to do if I take part?

Taking part will involve being interviewed by the study Research Assistant (Nils Perez Codesal, a white man in his 20s) for about 30 minutes. This would ideally take place on the Holloway London Met campus but could take place via Microsoft Teams also. As an illustrative example of the kind of interview question you would complete: 'How do you think issues around being prepared for working effectively in working roles should be addressed in university courses?'. This interview would be audio recorded and an transcript (that does not include your real name or details that could identify you) of this interview would be created.

Do I have to take part?

No. Even though we would really appreciate your help and participation, your participation is completely voluntary, and you can withdraw without being disadvantaged in any way within two weeks of participating in the study. We want to underscore to colleagues that this is a research study rather than an internal audit and that interview discussion is entirely separate from your working role at London Met.

What are the possible risks of taking part?

No anticipated risks are anticipated from taking part in this study.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

We hope that reflecting on employability within course/module curricula can be develop our curricula to bolster the employability of our students in a way that also supports our local community. As recognition of your time involved in participating in this study, you will be entered into a prize draw to win one of four £25 Amazon vouchers. To be able to notify if you, should you win one of the prizes, note that participant email addresses will be recorded in this study. Email addresses will be stored in a password-controlled file and destroyed five years after the start of the study (i.e., in May 2027).

Will my details be kept confidential?

All information obtained during this study will be treated as strictly confidential and in accordance with the Data Protection Act (1998). Other than your email address, no personally identifying details will be recorded and your response will be entirely anonymous. Only the research team will have access to interview responses. You are under no obligation to take part in this study and are free to withdraw any time up to two weeks following your response by contacting Dom Conroy (email: d.conroy@londonmet.ac.uk) who will remove your interview recording. We recognise that given the nature of this study, colleagues may be concerned about their anonymity/identifiability from their interview response. Because of this, we will email a copy of the anonymised/de-identified transcript to colleagues individually and will make any requested changes to these to ensure that colleagues have been actively involved with defining the final interview used in the research study.

What will you do with the findings of the research?

Interview findings will be analysed for patterns/themes and this will be written up in an academic manuscript. We would submit this manuscript to an academic journal for publication. We would also dissemination project findings to students and teaching colleagues at London Met for feedback and to inform practice in learning and teaching environments. Similarly, we would draw on study findings potentially in teaching settings and at relevant academic and non-academic conferences to engage with a broader research and relevant stakeholder community. You will not be personally identified in any publication or in any materials produced from this study.

Reflection on project orientation

We would like to be clear that the study will, in part, build on understanding from a recent internal survey of how employability is 'embedded' in the current School of Social Sciences and Professions (SSSP) curriculum. However, the study approach is primarily 'outward looking' and intended to connect with broader academic literature in this area rather designed primarily to inform and shape internal policy concerns. In saying this, we also acknowledge that interview study findings will be used to contextualise and frame understanding of the recent employability survey as part of an ongoing initiative to develop the breadth and application of employability within curricula across SSSP.

What if I want to contact the study team to ask for further information, complain or for any other reason?

Please contact us via email Dr Dom Conroy – d.conroy@londonmet.ac.uk.

Embedding Employability in Higher Education

Principal Investigator: Dom Conroy

Co-Investigators: Vanessa Airth; Nils Perez Codesal; Neelam Thapar; Kelly Cooper; Brian Tutt

Consent form

- I have read and understood the information sheet.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary, that I can choose not to participate in part or all of the project, and that I can withdraw up to two weeks after being interviewed without being disadvantaged in any way.
- I consent to the processing of the submitted information and data for the purposes of this research study. I understand that such information will be treated as strictly confidential (subject to legal limitations) and handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) 2018.
- I understand that all collected responses used for research purposes would be kept anonymised, de-identified form where your name would not appear anywhere in relation to the study.
- I understand that the data will be stored on a secure cloud-based system provided by the London Metropolitan University in an anonymised form.
- I understand that any data collected may be published in anonymous form in academic books, reports or journals.
- I understand that by selecting the corresponding option below, I agree to take part in research conducted by the London Metropolitan University as described above.
- I have read the illustrative questions in the information sheet and therefore I am aware what kind of questions will appear in the interview itself.
- I understand that I will be contacted with a copy of an anonymised/de-identified transcript of the interview and that I will be able to request any additional changes to ensure anonymity and to ensure that information is sufficiently de-identified from my perspective as a study participant.
- I consent to having my email address recorded and securely stored and to be contacted via email if I win one of the four £25 Amazon voucher prizes.

I have read and agree with the statements above, and consent to participating in this study   ☐

I do NOT consent to participating in this study   ☐

Debrief

Thank you for taking part in this interview study!

This research project was designed to understand definitions and views of employability within Higher Education (H.E.) settings. Understanding how to enhance graduate employment by including effective, diverse ways of including activities which are designed to enhance knowledge, beliefs, feelings, skills and motivations linked to employability are of interest to a wide variety of stakeholders. These stakeholders include graduates themselves, current students and Higher Education (H.E.) teaching practitioners but also the broader community including business local to H.E. institutions. We are hopeful that the study that you have taken time to participate in will help

If you need further information or have any questions or concerns raised from taking part in this study please contact – Dr Dom Conroy (Principal Investigator, d.conroy@londonmet.ac.uk) or contact the Psychology ethics committee at London Met via psychethics@londonmet.ac.uk).

Appendix B: Final interview schedules

Note. blue typeface below denotes unique to teachers interview schedule

Note2. Only Learner, Teacher and Careers Staff schedules are relevant to the empirical work conducted for this dissertation.

<u>Learners in H.E.</u>

Preamble. This study concerns developing an understanding of employability, employment, graduate careers, and how universities can address all these things. This study comprises of interviews with various 'stake holders' of employability including teachers, learners and people from beyond the university. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers here, and we are very much interested in hearing about employability from a wide range of perspectives. The following interview questions are designed to prompt relevant conversation around employability. Where you can, please provide detailed answers including illustrations as this will produce a richer, clearer final dataset. Do not worry about providing the names of people/institutions/places etc as these will all be altered and de-identified when these interviews are transcribed. Thank you for your time with this interview, and we will now move to the first question.

1. What does the term 'employability' mean for you?
2. How would you define 'employability'?
3. Employability has been <u>defined</u> as: "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy." What is your view of this definition of employability?
4. What does 'graduate outcomes' mean for you?
5. How would you define 'graduate outcomes'?
6. What does 'work-based learning' mean for you?
7. How would you define 'work-based learning'?
8. How do you think 'employability' should be measured?
9. How do you think 'graduate outcomes' should be measured?

10. "When does an undergraduate's career start?"
11. "How does an undergraduate's career start?"

12. How should university teachers approach jobs/employment and careers in learning sessions? (e.g., what works well/ less well)
    a. What barriers are there to facilitating learning around employability?
    b. What barriers are there to developing employability skills across different student groups?
13. Could the university do anything else to support employability that does not currently happen?

<u>Teacher colleagues in H.E.</u>

Preamble. This study concerns developing an understanding of employability, employment, graduate careers, and how universities can address all these things. This study comprises of interviews with various 'stake holders' of employability including teachers, learners and people from beyond the university. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers here, and we are very much interested in hearing about employability from a wide range of perspectives. The following interview questions are designed to prompt relevant conversation around employability. Where you can, please provide detailed answers including illustrations as this will produce a richer, clearer final dataset. Do not worry about providing the names of people/institutions/places etc as these will all be altered and de-identified when these interviews are transcribed. Thank you for your time with this interview, and we will now move to the first question.

1. What does the term 'employability' mean for you?
2. How would you define 'employability'?
3. Employability has been <u>defined</u> as: "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy." What is your view of this definition of employability?
4. What does 'graduate outcomes' mean for you?
5. How would you define 'graduate outcomes'?
6. What does 'work-based learning' mean for you?
7. How would you define 'work-based learning'?
8. How do you think 'employability' should be measured?
9. How do you think 'graduate outcomes' should be measured?

10. "When does an undergraduate's career start?"
11. "How does an undergraduate's career start?"

12. How should university teachers approach jobs/employment and careers in learning sessions? (e.g., what works well/ less well)
    a. What barriers are there to facilitating learning around employability?
    b. What barriers are there to developing employability skills across different student groups?
13. Could the university do anything else to support employability that does not currently happen?
14. Learning outcomes are statements that describe the knowledge or skills students should acquire by the end of a particular assignment, class, course, or program, and help students understand why that knowledge and those skills will be useful to them. Here is an example of a learning outcome: 'O*n successful completion of this module students will be able to design and conduct psychological research using different methods'.*
    • How would you approach writing a learning outcome linked to employability?
    • What would the exact phrasing of an appropriate employability-related learning outcome be?

<u>Careers and Employability and work-based learning staff</u>

Preamble. This study concerns developing an understanding of employability, employment, graduate careers, and how universities can address all these things. This study comprises of interviews with various 'stake holders' of employability including teachers, learners and people from beyond the university. There are no 'right' or 'wrong' answers here, and we are very much interested in hearing about employability from a wide range of perspectives. The following interview questions are designed to prompt relevant conversation around employability. Where you can, please provide detailed answers including illustrations as this will produce a richer, clearer final dataset. Do not worry about providing the names of people/institutions/places etc as these will all be altered and de-identified when these interviews are transcribed. Thank you for your time with this interview, and we will now move to the first question.

1. What does the term 'employability' mean for you?
2. How would you define 'employability'?
3. Employability has been [defined] as: "a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy." What is your view of this definition of employability?
4. What does 'graduate outcomes' mean for you?
5. How would you define 'graduate outcomes'?
6. What does 'work-based learning' mean for you?
7. How would you define 'work-based learning'?
8. How do you think 'employability' should be measured?
9. How do you think 'graduate outcomes' should be measured?

10. "When does an undergraduate's career start?"
11. "How does an undergraduate's career start?"

12. How should university teachers approach jobs/employment and careers in learning sessions? (e.g., what works well/ less well)
    a. What barriers are there to facilitating learning around employability?
    b. What barriers are there to developing employability skills across different student groups?
13. Could the university do anything else to support employability that does not currently happen?

Appendix C. Initial set of themes

Theme+	Theme	# P	#
Analysis 1: Optimising/ embedding			
Optimising teaching to embed employability	Sophisticated vs superficial (&need for flexibility)	4	9
	Pivotal role of educator in forging connections	*2*	*5*
Analysis 2: Contextualising employability			
Overloaded curriculum	Overloaded curriculum, overloaded learners	3	12
Keep things complex/ plural	A Longview on employability	3	11
	Needing plural employability/ G.O. measures	4	9
Navigating neoliberalism	Orientations to neoliberalism– understanding; working with; challenging; succumbing to	4	20
Ethics around employability	Ethics around employability	3	8
	Acquiring (?imposed) professional identity (+ / -)	*2*	*4*
Fairness	Social justice: prejudice; hegemony; disadvantage	3	5
	Limited resources for getting experience £	3	6
Spares	*Choice/ responsibility*	*3*	*4*
	Role of self-esteem	*2*	*3*

Theme+	Theme	# P	#
Analysis 1: Optimising/ embedding			
Optimising employability growth	What optimises/ impedes employability experience?	4	15
	Imp of other people	3	5
	Need to be flexible with career route (degree incongruence)	3	8
	Managing and protecting the self	*3*	*5*
Analysis 2: Contextualising employability			
Overloaded curriculum	*Limited resources/ time*	*1*	*2*
	Overarching imp of degree mark	*2*	*3*
Keep things complex/ plural	Ambivalence to HE + >u/s of life project and life options	3	4
	Role of time, dynamics & reflection in developing career	4	13
Navigating neoliberalism	Need for plural measures of employability (& resist purely Neoliberal frames)	4	9
Fairness	Fairness & prejudice	4	7
Spares	*Role of confidence*	*2*	*2*
	Responsibility	*1*	*3*

Theme+	theme	# P	#
Analysis 1: Optimising/ embedding			
Embedding- optimisers, challenges	What optimises	4	19
	Need for self-awareness, reflectiveness but also to represent/ record/ articulate work exp	4	10
	Need for/ challenge to get buy-in from other stakeholders (academics)	4	6
	Challenge to get general vs. individual approach	4	8
	Calibrating learner u/s and expectations	*2*	*2*
Analysis 2: Contextualising employability			
Overloaded curriculum	Limited space/ time resources	4	5
Keep things complex/ plural	Need for longview	3	4
	Need for plural meanings/ definitions	4	16
Neoliberalism, ethics	Neoliberalism & changing times	3	7
	Ethics	2	2
Fairness	Social justice, fairness	2	5
Spares	*Responsibility*	*1*	*1*
	Confidence	*1*	*1*

P = number of participants with extracts relevant to the theme

= number of extracts relevant for the theme

Italics denote material of more peripheral relevance to the theme or unclear connections to core material at time of initial analysis

Appendix D: Personal (reflective) graduation statement

A personal (reflective) graduation statement now summarises the relationship between module learning outcomes and experience, knowledge and skills gained from completing the Masters in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education (MALTHE) course and dissertation/project research. This statement also articulates future aspirations.

The dissertation/project outlined clear project aims and two research questions [addressing LO1, LO6]. These could, in retrospect, have been more clearly defined. For example, the final analyses focusing on 'contextual' and 'optimising' aspects of the data suggested that different research questions might have provided a more suitable breadth of framing this exploratory empirical work. However, it is also noted that the original research question focus on 'definitions' and on embedding employability offered lines of enquiry that emerged coherently from the extant literature in this area. A wide range of higher education literature was drawn on to contextualise and illuminate the objectives of the dissertation or project [addressing LO2, LO3]. On reflection, the literature in this area was much larger than originally anticipated and this posed some difficulties in terms of knowing where to place the emphasis in terms of engaging with relevant parts of the literature while also providing depth of coverage. An adjacent issue here concerned whether to purely focus on the employability focused literature or whether to also include coverage of literature on related terms (e.g., graduate outcomes). Ultimately, a more narrow/ focused approach was taken but it is acknowledged that this was to some extent at the expense of a broader, more inclusive approach to drawing on available, relevant literature.

The methodological section of this dissertation involved careful consideration of the methodology and methods involved, including the research/evaluation approach, research paradigms, the range of analytic and data collection options available and questions around epistemological approach. To a large extent, there was good coverage of questions around the purposes, validity and limitations of chosen methods and any ethical issues built into the methodological section of this project [addressing LO2]. A strength of this dissertation was the systematic presentation and analysis of research/evaluation data [addressing LO4]. Particularly strong within this was covering a range of stakeholder perspectives, acknowledging stakeholder roles and background where possible to contextualise the data and picking out the nuance and detail of individual perspectives adopted on an extract-by-extract basis. However, there was also scope for a more systematic comparison and for a more sophisticated approach to drawing out divergence and convergence between stakeholder perspectives. In an extension of the empirical work conducted for this dissertation, involving a wider range of stakeholders (e.g., alumni, employers, further education colleagues), this more systematic comparison will be undertaken.

I was glad to summarise relevant findings, and to draw out a series of clear, focused links to some of the core literature relevant to these findings. Discussion in this section was difficult to organise in terms of ensuring parity of coverage across the range of different findings. For example, discussion of findings relating to 'ethics and employability' alone could have produced a single, standalone literature review. When preparing articles based on this dissertation it will be important to conduct additional, more focused literature reviews to refine discussion around discrete issues linked to employability in Higher Education environments. As with links to the literature, project conclusions, recommendations and implications for practice were presented in a well-organised and clear discussion though with more time and word count clearly these implications could have been developed and refined further still [addressing LO5, LO6]. Finally, it feels that the dissertation was a success in terms of the production of clear connections within and across the different sections [addressing LO5]. One possibility for reconfiguring this approach might have been to explore the embedding of some literature in the Findings section. However, restricting the focus of the Findings section to

presentation and discussion of the data arguably permitted a useful dedicated focus to the empirical content in the dissertation and, in this way, evaded the risk of diluting focus on the project data.

Completing MALTHE postgraduate studies including completion of three modules (TPLT, WBLT, NSM) plus the current dissertation/project research module have been pivotal experiences to rethinking and reimagining my career plans and my future aspirations. The possibilities of linking research training alongside practitioner experiences together with newer training in theoretical perspectives in the realm of Education and learning and teaching have been inspirational for me. At the time of writing I am particularly keen to learn more about academic development pathways and plan to develop a series of academic development training workshops for my international partner institutions (in my role of leading collaborative partnerships in the School of Social Science and Professions). I plan to draw on my MALTHE studies in the immediate, medium and longer term to cultivate communities of practice, to develop myself and others in terms of our professional skills and identities and to bolster and support the aspirations of the diverse learners that I am fortunate enough to be able to engage with on a regular basis as a teaching practitioner in Higher Education.