

Community of Practice in a seminar setting:
an action research approach
to graduate employability and skills
in Higher Education

Sara Anne Bird

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University of the West of England

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Abstract

United Kingdom higher education institutions play a valuable role in preparing students for graduate roles through the development of employability skills and preparedness for employment. This study explores the impact of a transitional Community of Practice within a first-year, marketing communications degree module to develop pedagogic practice for the development of undergraduates' employability. The research questions critically evaluate the development of students', employers' and the academic lead's identification, prioritisation and understanding of graduate skills and perceptions of employability, and the impact of group-decision making on skills selection and pedagogic approaches. A theoretical lens of Communities of Practice is used, and the benefits and limitations of this approach, including cocreation, are evaluated. This research addresses macro-level policy priorities to reduce gaps between employers' expectations and graduates' readiness for graduate roles by considering micro-level seminar-based interventions in higher education settings, particularly in the context of widening participation.

Using an interpretivist approach, the study employed an action research methodology over three cycles of research and four data collection points throughout a two-semester module. The research participants comprised the first-year students studying the module and two employers who contributed to group discussions. Transcripts and artefacts from individual interviews and group discussions, students' reflective portfolios and the researcher's field notes were analysed using thematic analysis.

The intervention successfully engaged first-year students and fostered positive attitudes towards graduate roles and improved understandings of employability and skills. A legitimate transitional Community of Practice was established as students engaged in legitimate peripheral participation regarding both professional practice and professional and adulthood identity transitions. Employers' and the academic

lead's deepened understandings of employability and learning approaches impacted their own practice, and limitations of cocreation for pedagogic approaches were identified. This research established that ongoing employer engagement in seminar settings can provide a scalable approach to employability development in Higher Education.

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List of Abbreviations

| | |
|--------|--|
| BERA | British Educational Research Association |
| BIS | (Department for) Business, Innovation and Skills |
| CAQDAS | Computer-assisted Qualitative Data Analysis Software |
| CBI | Confederation of British Industry |
| CDT | Class Discussion Transcript |
| CVPP | Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals of the Universities of the United Kingdom |
| CoP | Community of Practice |
| DfE | Department for Education |
| DfEE | Department for Education and Employment |
| DLHE | Destinations of Leavers of Higher Education |
| HE | Higher Education |
| HEA | Higher Education Academy (now known as Advance HE) |
| HEI | Higher Education Institution |
| HEPI | Higher Education Policy Institute |
| HEQE | Higher Education: Quality and Employability Section |
| LEO | Longitudinal Educational Outcomes |
| NCIHE | National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Committee) |
| NSS | National Student Survey (UK) |
| NUS | National Union of Students |
| OfS | Office for Students |
| PI | Professional identity |
| PPI | Pre-professional identity |
| PSRB | Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body |
| SES | Socioeconomic status |
| TEF | Teaching Excellence Framework |
| UUK | Universities UK |

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction

There is no global consensus regarding the definition of graduate employability due to the complexity of the issue and the variation in policy, workplace and higher education (HE) perspectives (Römgens, Scoupe and Beusaert, 2020). The frequently cited Higher Education Academy (HEA) definition of employability is:

'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' (Yorke, 2006, p. 8).

This captures the political framing of English higher education institutions (HEIs) as primary sites of graduate skills development, and a 'magic bullet' model where HEIs deliver skills to students who secure skilled graduate roles to the benefit of the national economy (Harvey, 2001). UK HEIs' success is therefore, in part, assessed by their graduates' progression, i.e. progression rates to managerial or professional employment, or further study, with repercussions for HEIs' rankings, financial resources and, ultimately, degree awarding powers (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS), 2015).

While national economic success and progression rate targets drive macro- and meso-level conceptions of employability at policy and institutional levels respectively (Tomlinson, 2017a), this study is principally motivated by the desire to support diverse students through my personal practice. As an academic and leader for a first-year (level 4) module, I am in a position to support undergraduates' skills and knowledge development at the personal, or micro-level (Tomlinson, 2017a), so that they can achieve their aspirations and become fulfilled and successful practitioners in their future careers.

This study therefore sets out to contribute knowledge towards the development of first-year undergraduate students', employers' and academic staff's understandings of employability and employability skills in undergraduate HE courses, and how to develop these. This is intended to develop my own and other's practice, as academic

staff, in facilitating employer engagement on an ongoing basis in HE seminar settings for students who have limited opportunities or motivation to engage with employability development outside core curricula.

This study addresses gaps in the literature regarding the documented lack of impact of academic teaching of employability skills upon graduate outcomes (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009), particularly for first-year students (e.g. Lock and Kelly, 2022) and the potential of engaging employers in seminar settings as an alternative approach. The application, legitimacy and development of a Communities of Practice (CoPs) approach is explored as a theoretical lens for this practice in HE contexts (Lave and Wenger, 1991). An action research approach was adopted to inform practice over the course of the module, as an ethical approach engaging both students and employers and to explore the alignment between CoP theory and action research.

This thesis therefore presents the processes and outcomes of an action research approach for employability and skills development through a transitional CoP delivered as part of a first-year undergraduate Practical Marketing Skills module for a BA(Hons) Marketing Communications Management degree. Two marketing professionals engaged as employers in a series of group discussions and activities with students, facilitated by me as the academic lead, with intervening student-academic sessions on skills development. Three research cycles engaged all stakeholders in the hallmark stages of action research (Kemmis, McTaggart and Nixon, 2014): action and opportunities for observation through skills development workshops; reflection through group discussions personal reflective portfolios and interviews; and planning for the next cycle through cocreation in group discussions and my preparation for teaching.

This chapter provides the policy contexts of graduate employability, widening participation and the HE management, and effectiveness of dominant graduate employability development approaches. The potential contributions of engaging with employers in university settings, Communities of Practice theory and cocreation are outlined, and positioned with respect to gaps apparent in practice and the literature to justify this study. The context of my teaching and institution are introduced to

situate the study in practice, and my positionality as a teacher, researcher and ex-practitioner is explored. Proposed contributions of the study and dissemination of the findings are described. The research aim and research questions are listed and the methodological approach outlined, before summarising the proposed contributions to knowledge, and describing the overall structure of this thesis. By the close of this chapter the reader will have a clear understanding of the justification, research approach and contributions of this study, and what to expect from this thesis.

1.2. Background to the study

This section outlines the political context that justifies the wider relevance of this study, and the pedagogic contexts that locate the practice explored and developed through this study, including the theoretical lens of CoPs.

1.2.1. *United Kingdom policy context for graduate employability*

Graduates' success in securing roles that require and reward their degree-level education and their ability to sustain ongoing career progression has become a prevailing policy issue across national contexts (e.g. BIS, 2016; Committee for Economic Development of Australia, 2015). In England, this reflects the significant expected contribution of graduates to the knowledge-economy (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (Dearing Committee) (NCIHE), 1997), the consequent positioning of graduate employability development within HEIs as a 'magic bullet' for national economic prosperity (Harvey, 2001, p.101), and a promise of future earning potential for students, justifying substantial university fees (Tomlinson, 2017b). UK HEIs' success is therefore, in part, assessed by their graduates' progression rates, i.e. progression to managerial or professional employment, or further study. Through the Office for Students (OfS), HEIs' rankings, financial resources and, ultimately, degree awarding powers are then contingent upon these outcomes (BIS, 2015).

Teaching excellence is positioned as the 'key driver of a prospective student's investment' (BIS, 2016) p.43) to access graduate roles, facilitating social mobility. England's Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) is designed to enhance the effectiveness of teaching for employability, assessed through proxies of graduate progression such as salary and level of perceived professional standing of graduate

roles, though numerous other factors affect individual students' trajectories upon graduation.

These simplistic assumptions fail to reflect the massification and expansion of HE in a globally competitive graduate marketplace (Tomlinson, 2012; Brown and Hesketh, 2004). The Dearing report also precipitated the expansion of HE accessibility across low participation groups (NCIHE, 1997), with over 50% of young people attending university in England since 2017/18 (Department for Education (DfE), 2019). In the UK, approximately two-thirds of students are first-in-family to attend HEIs (Coombs, 2021), and parental HE qualifications, socioeconomic status (SES), ethnicity, disability, and participation in HE of local areas are predictors of lower progression rates than national averages for the three years of available data (OfS, 2022). The assumption that graduates' 'possessive' employability skills (Holmes, 2013, p.538), developed through HE, are the strongest predictors of graduate employability fails to account for progression data documenting the impact of positional attributes reflecting diverse students, such as being first in family to experience HE (OfS, 2022).

For the subject of Business and Management, in which this study is located, students exhibit the lowest broad subject group progression rates in 2019-20, at 63.3% (OfS, 2022). Therefore business schools at new universities such as the HEI in which this study is situated, which attract large cohorts of students from widening participation backgrounds, face multiple challenges in improving progression rates. Furthermore, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) describe a persistent 'gap between what is taught in schools, colleges and universities and what is valued by employers' (CBI, 2018, p.7). For business disciplines, reports of shortfalls of suitable graduates are frequently cited in policymaking (e.g., CBI, 2019; CBI/NUS, 2011; CBI/UUK, 2009), although other studies dispute this (e.g. Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2016).

Graduate employability is students' principal motivation to attend university (Advance HE/HEPI, 2020), and contributes to social mobility and national economies (BIS, 2015). The transformative power of HE to overcome positional disadvantage and achieve such outcomes in an increasingly competitive global market and an era of mass education is debated (e.g. Brown and Hesketh, 2004), and this study

acknowledges those debates but focuses upon the experiences of students in HE settings. Furthermore, the relative responsibilities of universities, employers and students in achieving high graduate employment rates are contested (for example, Cranmer, 2006; Holmes, 2013). However, whether for political or economic motivations, or as a founding mission of HE (Yorke and Knight, 2006), HEIs and academic staff are committed to developing students' preparedness to achieve their aspirations and become successful practitioners in their future careers. Graduate employability and the mechanisms to achieve this are therefore high on institutional agendas in HE and subject to ongoing development in the literature.

1.2.2. Extracurricular and intracurricular development of employability in HE

Yorke's (2006) definition (section 1.1) is frequently cited in policymaking and HE sector reviews, reflecting macro- and meso-level conceptions of employability (Tomlinson, 2017a). This study adopts a micro-level position, from the perspective of students and academic staff regarding 'how employability is constructed at a personal level and its relationship with a range of subjective, biographical and psycho-social dynamics' (Tomlinson, 2017a, P.11).

Employability is typically understood as the combination of subject knowledge, employability skills, career management skills (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009) and attitudes, values and beliefs collectively characterised as professional identity (Ibarra, 1999). Employability skills are also known as attributes, competencies or capabilities (Tomlinson, 2012), and the term 'employability skills' is used in the research questions below. This language was chosen because the title and related learning outcome of the Practical Marketing Skills module in which this study is located was agreed before this study was initiated, employers and students both used this language (unprompted), and this reflected my own language at the outset of the project. This also avoids confusion with HEIs' lists of less well-defined graduate attributes, explored in Chapter 2 (Literature review). The focus of this study is principally on *soft* (interpersonal) employability skills, such as communication, teamwork and leadership, although the module also focused on some hard (technical) employability skills.

This study also acknowledges the importance of graduate identity development (Holmes, 2013), and Jackson's (2016, p.925) concept of pre-professional identity (PPI) formation through membership of communities in various 'landscapes of practice' while in HE, in line with the CoP approach. This study uses Tomlinson's (2017a) graduate capitals model of human, social, cultural, psychological and identity capitals as an organising framework, capturing these accumulated and inherited characteristics and wider socially circumstantial conditions that determine graduates' success in the job market.

Work experience is a strong correlate of graduate progression (Wilton, 2012), and policy, literature and practice strongly emphasise the importance of internships and placements while at university (e.g. Pegg et al., 2012). However, these are inaccessible to students who lack the confidence, aspiration and understanding of the workplace to apply for such opportunities (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009, Bullock et al., 2009), or for whom work or commuting for financial necessity is prioritised (Parutis and Kandiko Howson, 2020). This disproportionately affects the widening participation groups described above (Reddy and Moores, 2012), who underestimate the value of extracurricular and seminar-based employability development opportunities in HE, despite policymakers' assumptions that these are valid expectations of the university experience for all students (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019).

Within the curriculum, academic teaching of employability skills has little or no impact upon graduate outcomes (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009) and Pegg et al. (2012) called for greater pedagogic engagement with 'skilful practices in context' rather than 'lists or categories of skills' (p.5). Barriers to improved academic engagement with employability include the need to embed employability and skills development across curricula, the persistent prioritisation of disciplinary knowledge over skills development and deficits in academics' understanding of skills in employment contexts (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). Students also resist engagement with employability (e.g. Rees, 2019), particularly early in their degrees which they later regret (Lock and Kelly, 2022; Tomlinson, 2008), both as a concept and for specific

activities such as group work (Diver, 2019). Consequently, many graduates claim that HEIs fail to address employability or to convey employers' expectations of employers to students (CBI/ National Union of Students (NUS), 2011), despite Knight et al.'s (2003, p.3) call to make 'the tacit explicit' in the teaching of employability.

Employer involvement in course design and delivery is positively correlated with graduate employment and types of roles secured (Cranmer, 2006; Mason et al., 2003), however is largely confined to one-off guest lectures. Employers are more likely to work directly with students in the workplace, impacting a minority of students and academic staff (Sin and Amaral, 2017), or at an HEI level developing lists of graduate attributes (Rees, 2019), limited extracurricular employer mentoring (Scholarios et al., 2008) or participation in universities' careers or networking events (e.g. Friend, 2010; Watanabe, 2004). At a module level, employers may provide specific employability content delivered largely by academic staff, such as authentic assessment (e.g. Gulikers, Bastiaens and Kirschner, 2004) but typically have little interaction with students on an ongoing basis (Pegg et al., 2012). Therefore employability skills development is largely provided through intracurricular, on campus, mass provision led by academic staff and career services, with limited evidence for impact on progression rates (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009).

1.2.3. The potential of Communities of Practice theory

Defined as "a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice" (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.98), CoPs allow 'novices', or newcomers, to observe and engage in practices with old-timers, who have developed expertise within the discipline, through legitimate peripheral participation. This situated learning prioritises group learning where all community members learn through social interaction, emphasising a constructivist approach (Rogoff et al., 1995). Therefore the implicit values, behaviours, language and understandings of the professional community are negotiated and renegotiated through practice (Wenger, 1998). Lave and Wenger (1991) originally contended that CoPs arise organically only through practice, and critiqued educational approaches that position vocational

learning as a largely individual activity delivered through teaching with a defined beginning and end. However, Wenger's later (2000) work argued for intentional CoPs and, while no substitute for workplace-based practice, CoPs in HE environments provide considerable benefits for individuals at the start of their professional journeys (Kapucu, 2012). CoP approaches have been used extensively in nursing (e.g. Andrew, Tolson and Ferguson, 2008), and teacher education (e.g. Viskovic, 2006), but little in business school contexts.

This theory supports pre-professional identity (PPI) formation for students, which Jackson (2016, p.925) relates to 'understanding of and connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of a student's intended profession', reflecting the shared repertoire characteristic of CoPs. The CoPs relevant to this study are typically envisaged as either organically arising in professional practice (and inaccessible to many students) or artificially constructed in seminars between staff and students (e.g. Barczy and Duncan, 2013) and this study suggests a transitional opportunity between the two, where employers, students and academic staff engage in seminar activities together on an ongoing basis.

1.2.4. The role of cocreation

Cocreation, or Students as Partners (SaP), occurs where students and institutions work together to improve student experience at university, programme, module or task level (Dollinger, Lodge and Coates, 2018). As shared practice, cocreation is highly compatible with CoPs and the action research methodology adopted in this study. Numerous studies list the benefits of cocreation (e.g. Cook-Sather and Abbot, 2016; Werder, Thibou, and Kaufer, 2012; Bovill et al., 2010) and Bovill et al. (2016) considered its logistical challenges. However there is little regarding the universal appropriateness of cocreation outcomes for students' long-term learning journeys.

1.3. Statement of the issue

Graduate employability is a significant challenge in HE contexts, particularly for business schools and for HEIs with diverse student cohorts (OfS, 2022), for the benefit of students seeking graduate career opportunities in a competitive global environment (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), and for HEIs' progression rates and

standing with the OfS. Many students cannot access the extracurricular work experience opportunities that contribute significantly to graduate employability (e.g. Bullock et al., 2009), or overlook the importance of intracurricular opportunities (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019). First-year students show low levels of engagement with employability curricula (Lock and Kelly, 2022; Tomlinson, 2008). The impact of academic-led skills development in curricula is limited (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009), and the engagement of employers in on campus contexts is advised (Pegg et al., 2012) but ongoing engagement of employers with students is rare (Sin and Amaral, 2017). Therefore the development of practicable, intracurricular approaches that allow, and encourage, students to engage with employers and demonstrate an impact on understandings of employability and skills is needed.

1.4. Context of the study

The current study was located within a new first-year, marketing communications, undergraduate module, delivered within a new Marketing Communications Management degree at a UK university, and taken by 20 students.

The programme was designed to enhance vocationally-focused learning opportunities for students within an academic degree programme. This reflects the typical position of a UK academic degree with a vocational orientation, reflecting the requirements of UK HE funding policies that are determined, in part, by graduate outcomes data discussed in section 1.3, above and by requirements for educational achievement determined by Quality Assurance Agency benchmarks (QAA, 2009).

The programme was led by academic staff with both practitioner and academic backgrounds and accredited by the Chartered Institute of Marketing (CIM). While this module allowed students (and employers) to prioritise their own chosen skills for development, overall the programme was mapped to CIM skills requirements and also reflected the experiences of the academics/ex-practitioners who designed and delivered the programme. The programme was also developed as a space to test alternative pedagogic approaches, compared to larger programmes, such as problem-based learning, aspects of flipped learning and other forms of practical engagement, rather than a lecture dependent format. This was intended to develop scalable

pedagogic approaches for future, larger cohorts, however the programme was withdrawn after one year of recruitment due to the small size of the programme in a Business School context, despite strongly positive feedback from students. The developments in other Business School modules and programmes, arising from this module and study, are reflected upon in Section 6.5.

The Practical Marketing Skills module was delivered over the first year of the Marketing Communications Management programme, and was designed to establish underpinning technological and soft skills required to succeed in other concurrent and future modules on the programme (see Module Specification, Appendix 1.1), and students' future careers in marketing communications or aligned professions. Concurrent modules included those establishing knowledge in other business disciplines in the context of Marketing Communications, such as human resources management in agency contexts and finance for such businesses as required by UK Quality Assurance Agency benchmarks for business degrees. Other modules focused upon marketing, such as marketing planning, strategy, tools and techniques, requiring students to produce proposals and presentations using the technical and soft skills considered in this module. Later in the degree, students produced pitch presentations and materials for employers in their second year (a module that I also led, recruiting different employers to those engaged in this study), and produced video, design content, written documentation and presentations for this and a range of other modules over the course of their degrees.

The technological skills accounted for two-thirds of the module, and included the use of Adobe packages, website design and development, and copywriting. This was largely taught by current practitioners acting as part-time tutors and me, as Module Leader.

One-third of the module was dedicated to soft skills, delivered as approximately one hour in each session and led by me as an ex-practitioner and employer. These soft skills were not specified in full in the learning outcomes of the module (Appendix 1.1), and it was this aspect of the module that this study developed through the methodology described below, and is the focus of this thesis. This skills development

was delivered in addition to the Employability and Enterprise Service support provided for all Business School degree programmes. This included careers' consultants' contribution to this module through attendance of, and engagement with, two group discussions, however they could not be included in the sample for the reasons outlined in Section 3.4.4. In addition, careers consultants provide extensive careers management skills development and support including: second year programmatic sessions regarding finding and applying for placements; final year module-based sessions regarding identifying and applying for graduate roles; extensive extracurricular one-to-one support and group workshops for topics such as identifying appealing careers, CV development and developing LinkedIn profiles. Careers development is therefore built into the degree within modules, supplemented with personalised support for students through an extensive extracurricular offering.

The module was delivered in a 'long thin' format through fortnightly three-hour sessions during the autumn and spring semesters of the 2018-19 academic year (thirteen sessions over the twenty-four weeks of two semesters (see the module schedule provided in student handbooks, Appendix 1.2).

There were three formal assessment points for students at approximately eight-week intervals over the module, for both formative and summative assessment. This included a reflective portfolio where students chose skills they wished to reflect upon, rated their self-estimated proficiency for each and wrote an account of why and how their skills and understanding had developed since the start of the module and/or the last assessment point.

The fortnightly delivery allowed time within the timetabled three-hour sessions for students to engage with employers through group discussions four times over the course of the module. I facilitated each group discussion to prompt discussion on themes arising from the previous group session, interim sessions and interviews. The group discussions incorporated group decision-making about the soft skill(s) for focus over the next cycle, and the pedagogic approaches to do this. There was time between sessions for me to adapt the soft skills content in response to students' and

employers' agreed skills priorities and methods, and facilitate this in the intervening timetabled sessions. This approach is termed 'the intervention' throughout the study. As described below, this provided a valuable opportunity for the integration of action research data gathering, planning, reflection and implementation of approaches suggested through the group discussions.

The two employers who attended the group discussions were marketing professionals, and pseudonyms are used throughout the study. Helen was the managing director of a local digital marketing agency, and John was the marketing director and lead of a marketing department in a global business-to-business organisation. Coincidentally, both employers were also alumni of the institution in which the research was conducted. Collectively, the students, the employers and I are collectively referred to as the 'stakeholders' in the study, reflecting our mutual engagement in the group discussions, cocreation and research approach over the course of the module.

I was the programme leader at the outset of the study, and then the Associate Head of Department responsible for the programme by the time that data collection started. I chose to lead this module due to my interest in scaffolding employability into programmes, and I also lead the second-year module that these students progressed to, again working with employers but in a different way. My multiple roles with respect to this module and these students are now explored.

1.5. Positionality

Chiseri-Strater (1996) called for researchers who position themselves within the qualitative research methodology to locate their potential influence on the study, and recognise their impact on participants and data. This reflexivity regarding 'who I am, who I have been, who I think I am and how I feel' (Pillow, 2010, p.176,) allows us to remain aware of the subjectivities of qualitative research and maintain a critical perspective around the experiences of the researcher and the researched. This study locates me as teacher, active researcher, manager, erstwhile employer and practitioner, and current employee within the HE sector, with a strong student focus that, at times, conflicts with policymakers' perspectives on HE.

As both a teacher and manager in HE, I bear some responsibility for generating, gathering and utilising the measures of employability that determine the institution's TEF rating. However, as also a teacher and previous employer in marketing I have a keen interest in students' and employers' subjective experiences of employment and the value it contributes towards student satisfaction and identity, beyond future income or position. My own choice of first degree (in biology) was not motivated by employability, though chosen in a very different economic environment before the introduction of fees, and my later decision to leave a lucrative advertising role for academia reflects values related to learning and fulfilment rather than economic success.

In the development of this study, my dual role as a teacher and researcher could be considered subject to 'role-contamination' (Walton and Warwick, 1978, p.242) due to the power relations between the students and I, and how these may impact upon students' experiences of recruitment and data collection. Social identity theory informs the relationship between me as the researcher and the researched (Hogg, 2010), with our identities as learner and teacher, student and marker, and influences of age and power and, possibly, class, gender and/or ethnicity affecting the dynamic of each relationship. These are discussed in depth in Chapter 3 (Methodology) and touched upon below, however, while one role may 'contaminate' the other and vice versa, it is also arguable that I am inevitably both a practitioner and a researcher, and to separate these roles is unrealistic and counterproductive (Groundwater-Smith and Mockler, 2007). Throughout the study I endeavoured to remain reflexive and sustain a "simultaneous awareness of the self and the other, and of the interplay between the two" (Rossman and Rallis, 2010, p.384). Ultimately, my own professional development through the research undertaken with students in this study, and dissemination of these learnings for the professional development of others, constitutes my own intention in undertaking a Professional Doctorate in Education.

Finally, this study took place over the first year of these students' degrees, a time of likely change and experimentation for students. Reflexivity required 'redesigning the observed' (Marcus, 1995, p. 111) and recognising that identities of those studied are

diverse and changing, but also ‘redesigning the observer’ (p. 114) and reflecting upon my own evolving perceptions and identity as a practitioner, especially through this collaborative research process, explored in Chapter 6 (Conclusion).

1.6. Methodological approach of the study

The methodology of the study is briefly introduced here because an action research approach becomes an integral part of the delivery of the module and intervention, and therefore inseparable to the context of the study and my role as ‘teacher as researcher’ (Stenhouse, 1975). The ethical considerations for such an intervention are complex, and integral to the development of the study. The methodological gaps regarding the undergraduate voice in the development of undergraduate employability are first highlighted.

1.6.1. *Methodological precedents*

Graduate employability research is dominated by employer voices (e.g. McMurray et al., 2016; Hogan, Chamorro-Premuzic and Kaiser, 2013; Bennett, 2002) and graduate views on the effectiveness of HE skills development (e.g. O’Leary, 2017; Matsouka and Mihail, 2016; Knight and Yorke, 2004; Mason et al., 2003). However, *undergraduates* remain ‘the missing perspective’ (Tymon, 2013, p. 849) and, at the outset of this study, the few examples of undergraduate-focused research included Tomlinson (2008), Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell (2008) and Tymon (2013). These largely survey-based approaches focused on second- and third-year undergraduates and their understandings of employability and skills however some recent studies explore first-year students’ perspectives and adopt exploratory approaches around skills development (e.g. Mullen et al., 2019). The low engagement of employers in on campus settings provides few opportunities to evaluate such interventions (Pereira, Vilas-Boas and Rebelo, 2020), and the examples available are largely outside business school settings (e.g. Hanna et al., 2015).

1.6.2. *Action research*

Action research was ideally suited to this study due to its explicit cyclical mechanism of action, observation, reflection and planning, implementation and evaluation (McNiff, 2013), providing opportunities for all stakeholders to engage in decision-

making on the module over three such cycles. This created a space for *praxis*, where practical evidence was invested back into practice through creative yet rational thinking and ongoing reflection, with almost immediate benefits for students' learning and my own practice (Kinsella and Pitman, 2012). This practical and systematic approach allowed me to act as a reflective practitioner to investigate and improve my own teaching and students' learning throughout the module (Nolen and Putten, 2007; Suter, 2006), with wider opportunity to 'develop and codify the knowledge base of teaching' through real world research (Hammack, 1997, p.247).

Three research cycles were implemented over the 24-week module, excluding concurrent with the assessment cycles on the module. Data was collected through the seminar-based group discussions, interviews with both employers and four students, and the entire cohort's reflective portfolios, contributing to a multi-method, longitudinal study from September 2018 until May 2019. This incorporated four data collection periods: at baseline; at the interface between the first and second cycles of action research; at the interface between the second and third cycles; and at the conclusion of the study. Full details about recruitment, data collection and analysis are given in Chapter 3 (Methodology).

1.6.3. Ethical Considerations

This study prompted a number of ethical challenges due to the nature of my dual role, the length of the study and the variety of data collection methods. The Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) were used extensively in the design and implementation of this study. The inherent challenges of action research, and the counterarguments for the ethical benefits, are discussed in Chapter 3 (Methodology) and final reflections made in Chapter 5 (Discussion). In summary, these include: ensuring the quality of students' experience of teaching within the module (Hammack, 1997); ensuring non-participation is understood to be acceptable and not subject to later disadvantage, and the impact of power relations between me, as staff, and students (BERA, 2018); the need for ongoing consent in this longitudinal study (Bournot-Trites and Belanger, 2005); and, finally, the dual use of students' portfolio submissions as both data and assessment (BERA, 2018).

The measures taken are discussed in Chapter 3 (Methodology) and weighed against the potential ethical advantages of engaging students as (in part) co-researchers, which can be considered more 'profoundly democratic' than more traditional research approaches (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.37). With potentially positive impacts upon students' learning, understandings of research and perceptions of the value of their degrees (as observed in Creasey, 2013), action research offers a number of benefits for student engagement.

1.7. Research aim and questions

The overall aim of this research is to explore the impact of a transitional Community of Practice within a first-year, marketing communications degree module upon students, employers and the academic lead (the stakeholders), in order develop my own and others' pedagogic practice for the development of undergraduates' employability.

The following research questions evolved over the course of the study, and are addressed to achieve the above aim:

Research Question 1a: What were the differences in identification, prioritisation and understanding of graduate employability skills, and perceptions of employability, related to the marketing communications industry, by employers, students and the academic lead at the start of the study?

Research Question 1b: How did these develop over the course of the study, and how did this intervention contribute to this?

Research Question 2: How effectively does each stakeholder group engage in decision-making about:

- the key employability skills to focus upon at this stage of their university degree?
- appropriate pedagogic approaches to learn / develop these graduate attributes?

Research Question 3: What are the benefits and limitations of a Community of Practice approach in the seminar, and is this a legitimate typology of CoP?

1.8. Proposed contributions and dissemination of this study

This study sets out to contribute knowledge regarding the practice of developing graduate employability in undergraduate seminars in HE, the value of CoPs as a theoretical lens in this context, and to explore the methodological appropriateness of action research in this context.

As described above, there is a lack of research developing and evaluating seminar-based interventions involving employers in HE settings, while dominant academic-led interventions show little impact on graduate employability (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009) and many students cannot or will not access extracurricular opportunities (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019). There is a notable gap in practice regarding how to engage first year students, who resist engagement with employability development curriculum content (Lock and Kelly, 2022) and with survey-based research regarding employability (Tymon, 2013). While employer engagement in curriculum delivery is demonstrated to improve employability (Cranmer, 2006; Mason et al., 2003), interventions that engage employers with students on an ongoing basis are rare, particularly in business school contexts and for first year students. Therefore this study aims to evaluate whether ongoing engagement with employers offers benefits for first-year students' engagement with, and understandings of employability and skills, and contribute suggestions for practice to engage and work with employers in this way.

Over the course of the study, further practical considerations arise, including deeper understandings of the barriers to engagement with employability curricula for first-year students. These related to identity development and transitions and perceptions of graduate careers and refute assumptions made by some authors about students' lack of engagement.

The application, legitimacy and development of a CoP approach is explored as a theoretical lens for this practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The potential role for

transitional CoPs, bridging typical university and workplace CoPs, towards graduate identity development and preparing students for professional practice is established. The impact of situated learning upon wider identity transitions than becoming a marketing professional, through university, to adulthood and into graduate employment, is discussed and suggestions for how this could positively impact employability development in HE are outlined.

Methodologically, the appropriateness of an action research approach, practically and ethically, is discussed, and its alignment with CoP theory is explored.

The early outcomes of this study have been presented at two Society for Research in Higher Education conferences, three UK Chartered Association of Business Schools Learning Teaching and Student Experience conferences, and within my own institution, with implications for practice across other HEIs. The findings will be developed for dissemination through appropriate academic and professional publications.

Perhaps the most significant outcome of this study has been upon my own professional practice: over the course of this professional doctorate my understanding of learning as a sociocultural phenomenon (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1988), and my role in creating environments conducive to this, has developed considerably. My teaching has adapted accordingly, readjusting the balance of power within my seminars to enfranchise students. My understanding of the precursors for effective learning have shifted from an emphasis on *what* to learn to a focus on *how* to learn, and the long-term value of this approach for students. This has informed my professional role in HE staff development, and will continue to impact upon the training, support and guidance I offer to staff both within my own institution and beyond.

1.9. Outline of thesis

The study is structured as follow: the current chapter, Chapter One, has provided an overview and contextual basis for the study.

Chapter 2: ‘Literature Review: multi-level perspectives on graduate employability and pedagogic approaches’ develops themes in the literature related to definitions of employability and the debates for policy (macro-level), the roles of HE and employer organisations (meso-level), and the experiences of students, academic staff and individual employers (micro-level) in engaging with employability. Pedagogic approaches for graduate employability development (including cocreation) are reviewed, before describing the key foundations of CoP theory and its role in identity development. The methods used to conduct the literature review are described at the outset of the chapter.

Chapter 3: ‘Theoretical Framework and Methodology’ describes my philosophical position of social constructionism and justifies the action research methodology adopted for the empirical research in this study. It describes the longitudinal nature of the study and how recruitment, consent and ability to withdraw were managed. Data collection methods are described in detail, and the triangulation of the resulting data and thematic analysis methods outlined. I undertake a critical review of the ethical challenges arising from this study, and explain how these challenges were addressed. The chapter concludes with the limitations of this study.

Chapter 4: ‘Findings and analysis’ reports on the key findings of the action research study and explores the key themes arising from the research relating to concepts of employment, employability of understandings of skills, and students’ responses to pedagogic approaches and particularly the impact of cocreation, and the overall impact of the module. Evidence for importance of employers as role models for professional and more immediate contexts is presented.

Chapter 5: ‘Discussion’ provides an interpretation of the ‘Findings’ chapter, and critically evaluates this in the context of the extant literature regarding employment, employability and skills, and pedagogic approaches. The legitimacy of this intervention as a CoP within an HE teaching environment is reviewed against the foundations of CoP theory, and the viability of *transitional* CoPs debated. The action research methodology is reviewed with respect to its practical and ethical

impacts and limitations upon teaching, research and the student experience, its theoretical alignments with CoP theory are discussed.

Chapter 6: ‘Conclusion and recommendations’ reviews the aim proposed at the outset of the study and the main findings with respect to each of the four research questions. It outlines the key contributions to practice, theory and methodological considerations, and recommendations for further development of each, including future research, in the context of the limitations of the study. Finally, I reflect upon my personal journey, as a researcher, ex-employer, manager and teacher, and the impact of the study upon my own professional practice in HE teaching and research.

1.10. Summary of the chapter

This chapter has provided the context and a brief overview of the study, outlining the justification for the timeliness, relevance and educational impact of the outcomes. The potential of transitional CoPs in this context has been discussed and will be expanded upon in Chapter 2. The context of the module in which this is situated, the planned intervention and my positionality have been outlined, and the proposed action research methodology justified, and ethical considerations introduced. The research aim and questions are stated, with a summary of the proposed contributions of this study. Chapter 2 will now review and critique the literature relevant to this study, and continue to justify the research aim, questions and methodology of this study.

2. Literature Review: multi-level perspectives on graduate employability and pedagogic approaches

2.1. Introduction to chapter

The aim of this chapter is to position this research study within the contexts of UK policy and other stakeholder drivers of employability, critically considering the role of HEIs in graduate employability development, and to determine appropriate pedagogic means to contribute to this at a modular level.

This review uses Tomlinson's (2017a) structure of macro-, meso- and micro-level perspectives, working at national socio-political, organisational and individual levels respectively. Macro-level, English government policy with relevance to graduate employability is summarised (section 2.4), and the meso-level role of HEIs and employers in defining and enacting policy reviewed (section 2.5). Micro-level determinants of access to, understanding of, and engagement with employability interventions are explored, contextualising these in HEIs with a widening participation agenda (section 2.6). The conceptualisation and operationalisation of employability in HE is explored, particularly in the context of the discipline of marketing and 'expected' graduate attributes on the part of employers and undergraduate students (section 2.7.1).

Section 2.7 continues to review dominant models and pedagogies of employability. The limited success of classroom-based interventions in HE is evaluated, particularly for first year students who demonstrate low engagement with employability subject matter. Dominant teaching approaches across classroom-based and work-based environments are evaluated, and the potential for the interface between the two is discussed. The application of action research in exploring previous interventions is appraised (section 2.8.2), comparing approaches used in HE teaching to those in more community-based interventions. Cocreation is then explored as a means to facilitate equitable and valuable learning between students, employers and academic staff in academic settings (section 2.8.4).

Finally, in section 2.9, the role of Communities of Practice is considered, advancing a traditional skills-based approach to provide opportunities for developing shared

understandings of professional practice with employers, and advancing individual students' professional identity development as suggested in the graduate capitals model.

2.2. Literature search strategy

The literature reflects two overarching and distinct themes arising from the preliminary development of the study, which justify the research topic and methodology. The first of these concerns how 'employability' is understood, conceptualised and operationalised by different stakeholder groups in the context of HE, while the second identifies potential pedagogic strategies for developing employability in the classroom, and a theoretical lens of Communities of Practice (CoPs) (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

The literature search strategy commenced with mapping the relevant white papers and other policy documents regarding employability and HE in the UK and particularly England. I then reviewed the grey literature from non-governmental organisations such as Advance HE (previously HEA), the CBI, UUK and the NUS, who have undertaken periodic reviews defining employability in the context of UK HE and discussing appropriate strategies for its development. Finally, a narrative literature review of the key academic papers, books and conference presentations was based upon using key search terms through the university's library database, Google Scholar and key academic journals in the field, such as *Teaching in Higher Education*, *Journal of Education Policy*, *Education+Training*, *Journal of Education and Work*, *Journal of Vocational Behaviour* and *Studies in Higher Education*, and use of relevant references cited in these articles. This chapter therefore aims to reflect the perspectives of diverse stakeholder groups engaged in employability at macro-, meso- and micro-levels.

2.3. Definitions of employability in HE: macro-, meso- and micro-level perspectives

There is no global consensus regarding definitions of employability, due to the complexity of the issue and the variation in policy, workplace and HE perspectives (Römgens, Scoupe and Beausaert, 2020). The most cited definition of graduate

employability throughout the literature in this review is ‘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’ (Yorke, 2006, p. 8, HEA series on Learning and Employability). This definition positions graduate employability as requisite for national economic success in a knowledge-based economy (Harvey, 2001, p.101). This is therefore a macro-level, policy-led perspective of employability, ‘located in wider structural, system-level shifts in capitalism and how education systems are coordinated in that framework (Tomlinson, 2017a, p. 9).

Understandings of employability have developed from early twentieth-century concerns regarding the dichotomy between individuals who were willing and capable to work versus the ‘unemployable’, through a 1950s/60s’ focus on self-image and attitudes, the 1970s’ study of knowledge and abilities, and a 1980s’ shift to career management skills (Guilbert et al., 2016). The 2000s considered unpredictable and ‘boundaryless’ careers (Fugate, Kinicki and Ashforth, 2004; Arthur and Rousseau, 1996), and UK HEIs are now positioned as the primary means to deliver skills-based training and ensure individual, and therefore national, economic success in an unpredictable global marketplace (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

The meso-level perspective explores the roles of employer organisations and HEIs, whose institutional-level processes mediate the employment, employability and work-related experiences of individuals before, during and after entering the graduate labour market (Tomlinson, 2017a). Prominent employers strongly influence policymakers’ conceptions of employability, prioritising a human capital-based, ‘possessive’, perspective of the skills pipeline from HEIs to the labour market (Holmes, 2013, p538). Therefore HEIs bridge the divide between the macro-level policy and micro-level experiences of individuals entering and navigating this labour market (Holmes, 2013). This can result in tensions between universities’ needs to comply with national policy and financing, their duty to support individual students’ long-term career development, and the role that universities occupy as critical

observers of the labour market and neoliberal imperatives (Hooley, Bennett and Knight, 2022), explored in section 5 below.

Micro-level perspectives consider 'how employability is constructed at a personal level and its relationship with a range of subjective, biographical and psycho-social dynamics' (Tomlinson, 2017a, P.11). Current graduates are likely to curate a career spanning across employers (including self-employment), roles and sectors, with a focus upon personal fulfilment as much as lifetime employment (Guilbert et al., 2016). Such dynamics determine not only understandings of employment and employability, but also how students navigate intra- and extracurricular offerings of HE to access their immediate and longer-term career goals. i.e., processual aspects of employability (Holmes, 2013). Literature regarding positional perspectives considers the impacts of social, cultural, psychological and identity capitals (Tomlinson, 2017a), acknowledging the differential distribution of individual advantage amongst a surplus of otherwise similar graduates (Brown and Hesketh, 2004).

The competence-based views of employability described above struggle to capture this multi-dimensional concept (Römgens, Scoupe and Beausaert, 2020).

Employability is a 'complex mosaic' (Forrier and Sels, 2003, p.102), and 'a fuzzy notion, often ill-defined and sometimes not defined at all' (Gazier, 1998, p. 298).

Attempts to provide greater definition risk 'hollowing out' this complex concept to a fragile skeleton of skills, attributes and 'marketability' of individuals: a common flaw of policy and much academic literature, and, consequently, how students develop understandings of employability in the HE environment (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, p.197).

2.4. Macro-level: policy implications for employers and HEIs

The 1963 Robbins' report, when just 5% of the UK population attended university, urged HEIs to prioritise skills for employment alongside a curriculum that developed 'the general powers of the mind' (Robbins, 1963, p.6). This commenced a policy era assuming a 'magic bullet model' of HEIs as key sites of graduate skills development fuelling a successful knowledge economy (Harvey, 2001, p.101) (Figure 2-1). The 1997 Dearing report informed the structural reorganisation of the English HE system to

achieve this, including the introduction of fees, widening participation, and positioning learning as the means to develop skills for employment (NCIHE, 1997, p.84). Envisioning young people as the UK's 'greatest natural resource in the global economy of tomorrow' (p.76), the report assumed a foundation of human capital theory (Becker, 1993): students now invest (through fees) in skills development for their own future success in the labour market, and (theoretically) stable and significant returns over their career(s), under increasing government oversight. The report's goal of over 50% of young people attending university in England was met in 2017/18 (DfE, 2019), and around two-thirds of students are now first-in-family to attend HE (Coombs, 2021). However, the Office for Students' (2018) condemns continuing gaps in progression to highly skilled employment for underrepresented groups.

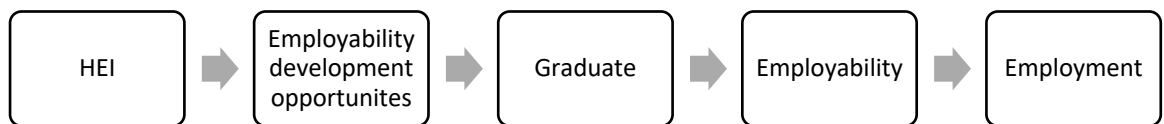


Figure 2-1 'Magic bullet' model of employability (adapted from Harvey, 2001)

Expectations that employers and HEIs work collaboratively to establish curricula and respond to changing labour market needs is central to policy (for example, NCIHE, 1997; CVPP/DfEE/HEQE, 1998). However, Leitch (2006) accused HEIs of prioritising student recruitment at the expense of employer engagement, and employers of neglecting their role in skills development. The 2012 Wilson review further called for employers to participate in such processes or risk diminishing their authority to comment on the qualities of graduates. For HEIs, the review commended skills-based learning and called for further contextualisation 'of skills realisation and self-evaluation' (p.32) indicating increasing scrutiny at meso- and micro-levels, and emphasising the role of the (then) HEA in defining and developing appropriate pedagogy.

By 2015, the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills concluded that, while universities were 'playing their part as powerful engines of social mobility' (BIS, 2015, p.8), there remained a deficit in the types and quality of skills for graduates in some

sectors, and a surplus of over-skilled graduates in others. The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) aligned Longitudinal Educational Outcomes (LEO) data for 'graduateness' and income of graduate roles with ratings of teaching quality to 'change providers' behaviour' (BIS, 2015, p.19). This consolidated expectations of HEIs as hothouses of graduate talent to satisfy employers' needs, using graduate progression rates (defined in section 1.1) as a proxy for institutional achievement.

English HE policy therefore requires meso-level, organisational interventions for employability enhancement, with consensus regarding the importance of employer engagement with universities (e.g., Norton and Tibby, 2020; Cole and Tibby, 2013; Wilson, 2012).

2.5. Meso-level: HEIs' and employer organisations' engagement in employability

Meso-level perspectives consider institutional-level processes, as employability is enacted through employer organisations and HEIs (Holmes, 2013). Both influence policy through powerful lobbying bodies, and HEIs, collaborating with employers, play a key role in bridging the divide between and macro-level shifts of policy and individual students at a micro-level. Employers are active in the labour market itself through graduate role creation, recruitment processes and professional development (Tomlinson, 2017a).

The requirements of employers for graduate skills, and therefore HEI curricula, dominate policy (e.g., NCIHE, 1997). As described in section 1.2.1, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) decries the persistent gaps between the employability skills developed through education and those required by employers (CBI, 2018).

Conversely, the UK's Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR, 2016) concluded that employers are largely satisfied, providing inconclusive evidence regarding skills gaps and development needs. However, employers' emphasis remains upon transferable, generic or 'soft' skills (Jackson, 2010), expressing satisfaction with levels of hard skills in business (Archer and Davison, 2008). Soft skills are variously defined as transferable (Bennett, 2002), or generic skills encompassing '[l]ife skills, social skills, interpersonal skills, leadership skills, transversal competences, social competences

and meta-competences...commonly used to refer to the 'emotional side' of human beings' (Succi and Canovi, 2020, p.1835). These specific skills are discussed further below. Despite the prominence of employer voices, many small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) are excluded from setting the agenda (Harvey, 2005). Large 'blue chip' employers are over-represented and SMEs, representing most UK marketing communications organisations, have little voice despite employing 24.3 million people in the UK (Minocha, Hristov and Reynolds, 2017).

As described above, HEIs' role in employability is long-established, and a HEPI (2020) press release reports that while a minority 'may rail against the 'employability agenda', [p]olicy changes in recent years have led to employability being a mainstream activity across all universities, rather than the specialism of a few'. Debate now focuses upon defining employability in the context of HE, how HEIs achieve employability for a diverse student population, and how more critical perspectives can be integrated more effectively into curricula.

Policy- and employer-led priorities result in technocratic rationalities for employability development in HE, designed to help individuals to 'identify their skills profile and to match this as closely as possible with the (presumed) needs of the labour market' (Sultana, 2018, p. 64). Such an approach can risk overlooking graduates' needs and the 'skills, knowledge, understanding and personal attributes that make a person more likely to choose and secure occupations in which they can be satisfied and successful' (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007, p.280), which assumes a more hermeneutic, or humanistic, definition of employability (Sultana, 2018). Hooley, Bennett and Knight (2022) found that technocratic and humanistic strands are well established in UK HEIs, as reflected in this study. However, these can perpetuate a deficit model of self, involving 'constant self-policing', self-development and self-promotion (Rawlinson and Rooney, 2010, p. 205), where emancipatory perspectives remain typically underserved. Emancipatory rationalities empower students to question the dogma of economic and labour market imperatives and challenge social structures 'in the hope that they are, ultimately, transformed' (Sultana, 2018, p. 65). While I acknowledge the importance of such critical perspectives, this study occupies

the space where ‘technocratic rationalities shade into more humanistic, lifelong and developmental perspectives’ (Hooley, Bennett and Knight, 2022, p.10). This study addresses the initial engagement of first-year undergraduate students with employability, given their current low levels of interest, described in section 2.7.3. ‘Embedding employability in curricula contexts provides rich potentialities... for stimulating...critical encounters’ (Rawlinson and Rooney, 2010, p. 201), therefore engaging students in conversations about employability early in their HE career creates the grounding for deeper discussion in the later in their degrees. This aligns with the introduction of critical perspectives at level 5 and beyond (QAA, 2014).

In enacting technocratic and humanistic rationalities, the following institutional discourses are common: an employability outlook e.g., development of graduate attributes (Rees, 2019); university employability services (Rees, 2019), offering centralised advice and localised provision of training in career management skills (e.g. Bridgstock, 2009); employer mentoring (Scholarios et al., 2008) and participation in universities’ careers events (e.g. Friend, 2010); professional association membership and accreditations (Mistry, 2021); extracurricular activities e.g. volunteering and international exchanges (e.g. Rothwell, 2013), networking and industry events (Watanabe, 2004), and discipline-specific work-experience, internships and placements (Rees, 2019; involvement of employers and alumni in curriculum development and delivery; and provision of specific employability curricula content (largely by academic staff (Rees, 2019). It is these latter two categories that are the focus of this study.

HEIs work collaboratively with employers in developing curricula, both nationally through QAA Benchmark Statements and Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Bodies’ (PSRB) requirements (QAA, 2009), and locally through direct engagement in universities’ advisory boards. Lowden et al. (2012) suggests that employers’ contribution to curricula are, however, routinely overlooked. Collaboration also contributes to HEIs’ lists of graduate attributes, understood as ‘the qualities, skills and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution’ (Bowden et al., 2000, p.3, cited in Wong et al.,

2021): common themes include self-awareness; lifelong learning; global citizenship and engagement; academic and research literacy; and variations on specific employability and professional development skills (Wong et al., 2021). These reflect the 'bigger picture thinking' of a Western (primarily US) liberal education, whereas job advertisements focus on specific skills such as self-management, persuasion, innovation and teamwork (explored as micro-level perspectives, below), suggesting a tension between universities' traditional curricula and employers' requirements (Rhew, Black and Keels, 2019). These issues cause 'conceptual vagueness and lack of explanatory value' of graduate attributes at a disciplinary level (Tomlinson, 2017a, p.17) and, while academic staff support such attributes, their confidence and success in incorporating them into teaching lack consistency and are stronger for staff with industry backgrounds (de la Harpe and David, 2012). This suggests that greater employer involvement at a disciplinary level would develop disciplinary clarity over universities' graduate attributes.

While employer involvement in course design and delivery is positively correlated with graduate employment and types of roles secured (Cranmer, 2006; Mason et al., 2003), employers are typically limited to one-off guest lectures. Therefore, their impact remains largely confined within workplaces, impacting a minority of students and academic staff (Sin and Amaral, 2017). Lowden et al. (2012) suggest 'there is still much to be done to foster a shared understanding across employers, HEIs and other stakeholders of graduate employability and how to promote it' (p.8), though Yorke (2006) argues that more resources are needed to fully embed employer engagement in HE. Many HEIs aspire to greater employer involvement in institutional delivery while academics face increased pressure to facilitate effective for short-term measures of employability at a local level (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). Yet, employers' commitment to ongoing collaboration with HEIs remains significantly lower than students' and academics' expectations, preferring to work with selected students in the workplace (Pereira, Vilas-Boas and Rebelo, 2020). Sin and Amaral (2016) considered 'the low participation of employers [in Portugal] in internal institutional activities [to be] noteworthy' (p.97). In the UK, good employability practice remains 'sporadic' (Lowden et al., 2012).

Employers' role in offering real-world experience, however, remains invaluable, with overwhelming evidence for the value of internships, placements and work experience (Lowden et al., 2012), especially alongside university embedded careers management skills (Taylor and Hooley, 2014). This develops job-specific and broader career skills (Jackson and Wilton, 2016), but is contingent upon access to, and relevance of, opportunities for undergraduates. 89% of employers seek students with meaningful work experience while only 22% provide placements or internships (McMurray et al, 2016, citing CMI, 2014), causing a shortfall of short-term work experience opportunities. The Wilson review (2012) acknowledged that time and peer pressures limit students' willingness to apply but overlooked the differential access to work experience for a diverse student population (e.g. Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). First-in-family students are less likely to access external work placements and internships while at university (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021), lacking the confidence and connections for successful applications (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019; Bullock et al., 2009). Disadvantaged students often underestimate the value of placements, and the importance of roles relevant to future aspirations over, say, part-time retail work and immediate financial need (Parutis and Kandiko Howson, 2020). Overall, just 6.6% of LEO respondents (DfE, 2020) had undertaken year-long placements, and many more prioritise accessible, paid and general work experience over specific, career-related opportunities (Parutis and Kandiko Howson, 2020).

Lack of access to work experience means many students fall through the net of HEIs' and employers' largely pragmatic, market-driven approach to graduate employability (Toland, 2011; Prokou, 2008), and the role of academic and careers staff, and employers, within university environments becomes ever more important.

2.6. Micro-level: Students', employers' and academic staffs' experiences of employability

Micro-level consideration of graduate employability focuses upon individual stakeholders in the labour market, principally students and graduates (Holmes, 2013), where prospective students and their families evaluate whether future earning potential constitutes an 'equitable' return on substantial university fees (Tomlinson,

2017b). Individual academic staffs' and employers' perspectives are also explored in this section.

Johnston (2003) criticised the dominance of government and employer perspectives in employability literature and argued that 'the voices of other partners in the graduate recruitment process, the graduates, are deafening in their silence' (p.19). The widely cited work of Mason et al. (2003), Knight and Yorke (2004) and others (e.g., O'Leary, 2017; Matsouka and Mihail, 2016) have rectified this, however, *undergraduates* remain 'the missing perspective' (Tymon, 2013, p. 849). At the time this study was proposed, notable exceptions included Tomlinson (2008), Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell (2008) and Tymon (2013), where largely final year undergraduate perspectives on employability were explored through a methodological mix of surveys, interviews and focus groups. Tymon's (2013) study of over 400 business, human resources management and marketing students demonstrated that first year undergraduate students tended to lower response rates and less vocality as participants, perhaps reflecting a lack of engagement with employability early in their academic careers. Rothwell et al.'s (2008) survey of second year business undergraduates faced methodological challenges of self-reporting and discriminatory power. These examples demonstrate the barriers to surfacing the student voice, and the propensity towards brief snapshots of students' experiences of employability within HE, and collectively reflect the challenges of employability research across diverse cohorts.

Students' understandings of employability are related to the type of university attended, socio-economic status (SES) and background. For example, before substantial fees, students focused on degree choice, place of study and grade achieved, but sought 'to add value and distinction to these credentials, mainly as a way of 'standing apart' from other graduates with similar profiles and achievements' (Tomlinson, 2008, p.55). In contrast, Tymon's (2013) study, based in a new university, concluded that students prioritise employment over employability, with an instrumental (extrinsic) focus on level of pay and job security, and scepticism about employability's relevance while at university. These findings reflect class and

socioeconomic differences, as Parutis and Kandiko Howson's (2020) series of in-depth interviews found that, while low-SES students considered 'employability classes' valuable for developing skills, they struggled to convert this (and other forms of capital) into meaningful economic outcomes, and considered *any* work experience to offer transferable skills (e.g., part-time work). Conversely, high-SES students sought, and had connections to access, discipline-specific placements and internships to enhance specific skills, while undertaking extracurricular activities, such as a year abroad, for the performative value to employers and to secure an 'interesting' career. High-SES students were proactive, talking to family and social connections about work, while low-SES students were more instrumental, considering it better to focus upon and conclude their studies before thinking about work.

Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp (2019) attributed such findings to students' savviness in exploiting opportunities for employability development while at university. Working class students in new universities are less likely to have access to parental advice (as first-in-family to attend HE) or additional resources, and can assume that achieving a degree ensures graduate employability. In contrast, their more 'knowing' counterparts foster social connections and extracurricular activities. The labour market is not a neutral arena and many 'students do not know the full conditions of their circumstances and [do not] weigh all options when making decisions. Within their social context students make choices that make sense' (Tholen, 2014, p.14), but perhaps not to their advantage, reflecting differential understandings of the positional considerations in the expanding graduate labour market (Holmes, 2013). It is disputed whether this is solely attributable to low-SES, as working status, low sense of belonging and other aspects of university experience may negatively impact academic performance more than low SES (Rodríguez-Hernández, Cascallar and Kyndt, 2020), and Okay-Somerville and Scholarios (2015) found social class had no direct effect on any indicators of employability. Parutis and Kandiko Howson (2020) questioned whether HEIs' employability interventions may even exacerbate inequalities, critiquing the sectors' reliance on largescale quantitative data and failing to understand how students from different socioeconomic backgrounds may engage differently. Despite the indisputable future earnings advantage of a degree (Belfield

et al., 2018), and substantial opportunity costs of non-participation (Tomlinson, 2008), current HEI approaches to employability and skills development fail to nullify the impact micro-level biographical and psycho-social dynamics. These include class, disability, race and other characteristics which persist as predictors of 'gaps' in degree grade, employment and earnings (e.g., OfS, 2022; Duta, Wielgoszewska and Iannelli, 2021; Universities UK/NUS, 2019; Zwysen and Longhi, 2018; Burke, 2015; Crawford et al., 2016).

Micro-level perspectives largely focus upon students, and the role and understandings of individual academic staff and employers regarding graduate employability are neglected in the literature, particularly in the context of a changing labour market (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Therefore, assumptions of how employability is taught within HEIs need to be examined, both at a meso-level and at the micro-level of staff practice, and considered in the context of the diversity of students that our pedagogies are addressing. This review will now explore the human capital perspective, before considering wider considerations of graduate capitals, and particularly identity, as factors in employability development.

2.7. Models of graduate employability development

Many models aim to identify and map the components of graduate employability, and pathways or cycles to develop these, e.g. the USEM model (Knight and Yorke, 2002) and CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007). These function largely at the level of curriculum design, integrating traditional pedagogical models such as Kolb's (1984) Learning Cycle of Experiential Learning and Gibbs's (1988) Reflective Cycle.

To parse the different language used for similar skills categories and capture more recent developments incorporating personality and identity, Table 2-1 compares a number of models of graduate employability, related papers, and their categories of skills and other attributes. This table demonstrates the complexity that prompted Jollands (2015) to conclude that 'a framework that is useful for teachers in renewing

curriculum for employability must be coherent, systematic, detailed, comprehensive and specific. No existing employability frameworks have all these characteristics' (p.9). In order to explore this complexity, the categories of constructs that contribute to employability are now described, charting the development of understandings of employability from a principally human capital approach to the role of identity in graduate development.

| Construct | DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) | Hillage and Pollard (1998) | Harvey et al. (2002) | Fugate, Kinicki Ashforth (2004) | Knight and Yorke (2002) | Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) | Kumar (2007) | Bridgstock (2009) | Tomlinson (2017a) |
|---|-------------------------------------|--|--|--|--|---|---|--------------------------|--------------------------|
| Name of model (if used) | | | | | USEM | CareerEDGE | SOAR | | Graduate capitals |
| Subject knowledge | Knowing how | | | Human capital | Subject understanding | Degree subject knowledge/ understanding | | | |
| Job-related skills | Knowing how | Employability assets | Employability attributes | Human capital | Skills | Generic skills, Degree specific skills | Level of skills development | | Human capital |
| Career management skills | Knowing how | Deployment skills, Presentation skills | identifying, securing and managing work over one's career, Self-promotional skills | | Skills | Career development learning | | Career management skills | |
| Learning, evaluation and reflection skills | | | Reflection and learning | | | Reflection and evaluation | Reflection on self and current position | | |
| Social capital | Knowing who | | | Social capital | | | | | Social capital |
| Identity, efficacy, confidence | Knowing why | | | Career identity | Personal understandings, self-efficacy | Self-esteem, self-confidence, self-efficacy | Aspirations | | Identity capital |
| Personality | | | Willingness to develop | Personal adaptability | | Emotional intelligence | | | Personality capital |
| Metacognition / contextualisation | | | | | Metacognition | | Assessing opportunities | | |
| Expressions of capital | | | | | | | | | Cultural capital |

Table 2-1 Comparison of constructs of employability

2.7.1. *Job-related skills: prioritisations and understandings*

As discussed above, policy, employer surveys and HEIs' graduate attributes assume a human capital model of employability based on hard (technical and degree-specific) and soft skills sets (Becker, 1993). Soft skills include: 'essential attributes (basic social skills, reliability, etc.); personal competencies (diligence, motivation, confidence, etc.); basic transferable skills (including literacy and numeracy); key transferable skills (problem-solving, communication, adaptability, work-process management, team-working skills); high-level transferable skills (including self-management, commercial awareness, possession of highly transferable skills); qualifications and educational attainment; work knowledge-base (including work experience and occupational skills); and labour market attachment (current unemployment/employment duration, work history, etc.)' (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005, p.208). Demand for these attributes is largely consistent across large employers, SMEs, self-employment and disciplines (e.g. Archer and Davison, 2008). More recently, Ferreira, Robertson and Pitt (2022) compared pre- and post-COVID pandemic survey responses from digital marketing and advertising industry professionals and found an increase in the training required in basic communication etiquette, teamwork, client communication, negotiation skills, and public speaking. Significant gaps in satisfaction versus importance were found for problem-solving skills, adaptability and communication skills. The authors suggested that remote working and lack of work experience had shifted even greater expectations towards soft skills development in HE.

However, more exhaustive lists vary significantly between and within stakeholder groups (Tymon, 2013). In the field of marketing, in which this study is situated, Wellman (2010) found 52 attributes across 16 clusters, creating unwieldy 'shopping lists' for students to tick off (Barrie, 2006). Even when co-developed between employers and HEIs, stakeholders differentially prioritise and interpret core attributes (e.g., Succi and Canovi, 2020; Tymon, 2013; Archer and Davison, 2008). Additionally, graduates' and employers' estimations of graduate skill *levels* differ across attributes including emotional intelligence and leadership (Matsouka and Mihail, 2016), corroborating Jackson and Wilton's (2016) findings of students' underestimation of employer expectations. Finally, students may not value soft skills to the same extent

as employers, instead prioritising achieving a 2:1 degree or above, (Ackerman, Gross and Perner, 2003). In contrast, 82% of employers value graduate soft skills, versus 68% valuing degree-specific, hard skills (CBI/NUS, 2011). This may reflect students' instrumental understandings of employability as ensuring future employment and earning more money, rather than job satisfaction and expertise (Tymon, 2013). It is, therefore, unclear whether students undervalue the importance of soft skills, prioritise and interpret skills differently to employers and/or overestimate their skill levels, or indeed whether graduates' skills levels are actually adequate and HE curricula are appropriate (AGR, 2016). Despite these issues, these possessive aspects of employability continue to dominate understandings of employability (Holmes, 2013).

2.7.2. Career management and learning, evaluation and reflection skills

Hillage and Pollard (1998) drew distinction between 'employability assets', i.e., skills related to 'doing' work (hard and soft skills), and the deployment and presentation skills related to 'getting' work, including identifying and managing work opportunities and CV development and interviewing skills. Harvey et al. (2002) defined such skills as relating to identifying, securing and managing work over one's career, through utilising reflection and learning to do so, and Bridgstock (2009) collectively characterised these as career management skills. These are a consistent element of employability models. This cluster of understandings, across discipline knowledge, job-related skills (hard and soft) and career management skills are characterised by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) as 'knowing how'.

Harvey et al. (2002) also identified learning and reflective skills as key to ongoing skills and employability development. Fugate and Kinicki (2008) defined this as dispositional employability, encompassing optimism, propensity to learn, openness, internal locus of control and self-efficacy (Fugate et al. 2004), self-esteem and low neuroticism (Erez and Judge, 2021) and reflective thinking (Steur, Jansen and Hofman, 2012). Reflection features consistently across models of employability (see Table 2-1), with some integrating reflective cycles e.g. Kumar's (2007) SOAR model. Propensity to learn and learning style are often grouped under personality, alongside reflective skills, engagement and adaptability (Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell, 2008; Dacre

Pool and Sewell, 2007; Kumar, 2007; Harvey et al., 2002), explored as psychological identity, below.

2.7.3. Graduate capitals: social, cultural, psychological and identity capitals

As Table 2-1 shows, more recent models of graduate employability reframe graduate employability within social and cultural contexts of graduate employment.

Tomlinson's (2017a) influential graduate capital model extends beyond human capital to consider multiple capitals representing 'key resources, accumulated through graduates' education, social and initial employment experiences, and which equip them favourably when transitioning to the job market' (p.17). These additional capitals are at once consciously cultivated, subconsciously accumulated and, in large part, inherited and circumstantial dependent upon the graduate's social milieu (micro-level employability). Human capital is the first of these capitals, accounting for the possessive attributes of technical knowledge, soft skills, careers management skills, routinely employed in job advertisements and short-listing processes. Social, cultural, psychological and identity capitals are now explored in turn.

2.7.3.1. Social capital

Social capital constitutes the networks and contacts that allow graduates to leverage their human capital and access opportunities, bridging educational, social and labour market experiences (Tomlinson, 2017a). Characterised by DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) as 'knowing who', such positional attributes encompass family, school and HEI attended (Holmes, 2013). Those able to access and use such networks exhibit increased perceptions of internal employability (under their own control) and external employability (under others' control, such as economic or employer contexts) (Batistic and Tymon, 2017). Social capital therefore positively affects perceived and actual employability (Eby, Butts and Lockwood, 2003; Marmaros and Sacerdote, 2002; Brown and Konrad, 2001). The massification of HE and a crowded labour market precipitated significant variations in social capital for today's graduates (Tomlinson, 2012).

2.7.3.2. Cultural capital

Social connections convert to cultural capital in forms of knowledge, behaviour and awareness that employers value (Tomlinson, 2017a). This enables individuals to distinguish themselves in a labour market of otherwise similar graduates, offering positional advantage (Brown and Hesketh, 2004). Social and cultural capital constitute a hidden curriculum in HE, with accessibility dependent upon one's social status, social networks and the perceived prestige of one's HEI (Brown and Konrad, 2001; Harvey, 2001). Reciprocal relationships between capitals leading to cumulative advantage as, for example social and cultural capital moderate identity capital through access to work experience opportunities (Holmes, 2013).

2.7.3.3. Psychological capital

Tomlinson (2017a) concludes the graduate capitals model with psychological and identity capitals. Psychological capital captures aspects of character, such as resilience, adaptability to change, proactivity and similar attributes that equip graduates to handle setbacks and identify opportunities in job seeking and role development (Tomlinson, 2017a). Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and others use terms such as self-esteem, self-confidence and self-efficacy in the models described above, corresponding with attitudes to learning (e.g. Fugate and Kinicki, 2008; Dacre Pool and Sewell, 2007; Kumar, 2007; Harvey et al., 2002). Bleidorn et al. (2019) challenge assumptions of the 'functionally unchanging' nature of personality, and argue that, while these traits are inherently stable, interventions at appropriate times and with sustained effort can adjust traits in ways that impact behaviours in the workplace.

2.7.3.4. Identity capital

Finally, identity capital accrues through the development of professional and other identities that equip graduates for a profession, empowering them to make informed choices through their working lives (Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021, p.886). Identity is socially constructed and continually reviewed in terms of how a person construes themselves and how others perceive them in the context of a situation, through practice (Holmes, 2001). This manifests through interactions between individuals and significant others relevant to the context, in this case, current or future work (Holmes, 2013). Pre-professional identity (PPI) (Jackson, 2016), professional identity

(PI) (Ibarra, 1999) and graduate identity (Holmes, 2001), and each justifies a substantial literature and contribute to understandings of identity capital.

PI constitutes aspects of identity in professional contexts regarding acculturation to the values and moral conduct, knowledge and skills, and social and professional roles of a profession and the understanding, therefore, of who and who is not a member of that profession (Trede, Macklin and Bridges, 2012). *Pre-professional identity (PPI)* as ‘an understanding of and connection with’ PI for students and their intended profession, and a ‘less mature form of professional identity’ (Jackson, 2016, p.1). PPI, like PI, encompasses discipline-specific knowledge and hard skills; transferable soft skills; values, understanding of ethics and professional standards; self-esteem, confidence and other psychological attributes; attitudes and approaches to learning; and reflectiveness (Jackson, 2016). Jackson (2016) argues that PPI is an employability model in its own right, though it is debatable whether PPI is the umbrella for the many assets of employability, or one of those assets itself, and which perspective is most valuable to students and academic practitioners.

Holmes (2001) proposed graduate identity as an alternative to a skills-based approach, using a practice-identity model that positions skills in the context of practice and identity relative to the social setting of graduates’ desired profession and actors in that space. Students may enter HE in zone 1, indeterminate identity, with the purpose of transitioning to zone 4, agreed identity, recognising themselves and being accepted *as a graduate* by potential employers and others in their social landscape, and therefore eligible for graduate employment (Holmes, 2001). This fragile identity construction, reliant in the interface between internal and external perceptions, may change zones over a career. Skills, therefore, are of value as ‘warrants’ of employability, but performance of those skills, and other indicators of behaviour and language, are required to confirm the identity of being an employable graduate (Holmes, 2013).

2.7.3.5. *Metacognition: knowing why*

For the individual, graduate identity impacts positively upon confidence and motivation towards career goals (Jensen and Jetten, 2016), and reflects how one

applies oneself to work, to be “proactive’, ‘a self-starter’, ‘confident’, ‘enthusiastic’ and so on’ (Holmes, 2001, p. 112). DeFillippi and Arthur (1994) described this as ‘knowing why’, conveying a wider understanding of one’s own position and potential with respect to the wider working world, including aspects outside one’s control, such as employers’ perceptions (Batistic and Tymon, 2017). Therefore, understandings extend beyond one’s own role identity, to include one’s organisation’s and/or profession’s identity, and the personality traits, beliefs, norms and values associated with these (Fugate et al., 2004). Investing in a chosen identity aligns an individual’s sense of self, experiences and extracurricular choices to their wider identity profile, aligning with potential employer organisations and understanding how to demonstrate competencies in a form recognisable to such employers as a potential employee (Côté, 2005). Such relative understandings are imperative for effective career management (Hillage and Pollard, 1998), achieving metacognition that enables action in a complex and changeable labour market, as recognised in many of the models in Table 2-1 e.g. Yorke and Knight, 2006; Harvey et al., 2002; Knight and Yorke, 2002.

2.7.3.6. Mechanisms of identity development

Identity development while at university is therefore a means for students to develop intentionality and potentiality. Graduate identity prepares students for a (possible) chosen profession and unpredictable future career transitions and opportunities (Bridgstock, 2017), i.e. potentiality, and focus on desired futures (or possible selves) prompts individuals to invest in exploring and developing identities (Jensen and Jetten, 2016). Ibarra (1999) developed Markus and Nurius’ (1986) concept of possible selves to conceptualise PI formation as an experimental process where individuals observe role models to identify potential identities. They then experiment with those provisional identities and evaluating those experiments against their internal standards and external feedback. Possible selves are defined as the representations of the self in the future derived from the representations of the self in the past, and the ‘significant hopes, fears, and fantasies’ of those future selves, specific to that individual (Markus and Nurius, 1986, p.954). This potentiality is bound by students’ and graduates’ perceptions of the possible options available to them (Bourdieu,

1984), which is dependent upon the sociocultural and historical experiences of the individual, directly or through media (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Identity exploration and number of possible selves are positively correlated, and the more possible selves that are envisaged the greater the scope for identity change (Dunkel and Anthis, 2001). Such boundaries exist at both the upper and lower limits of the window of perceived legitimate careers/lifestyles (Tomlinson, 2017a), and perpetuate class-based assumptions of appropriate careers that limit social mobility aspirations for HE (Burke, 2015). For example, some ritualists may consider certain careers unopen to them, and will settle for accessible, stable options over ambitious alternatives (Tomlinson, 2007).

Identification of likely possible selves incentivises intentionality, in stimulating behaviours towards the future selves to which students aspire and providing a yardstick against which to evaluate their current selves and their progress (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Jackson (2016) proposed a similar mechanism for PPI development, using the language and theory of communities of practice (CoPs) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Students experiment through membership of multiple CoPs and the resulting 'reflection, reconciliation, imagination and visualisation will assist individuals in constructing PPI during their learning journey at university' (Jackson, 2016, p. 934). This is contingent upon professional socialisation and the internalisation of the norms and values of potential professions (Ajjawi and Higgs 2008), for example through Work Integrated Learning (WIL) and work experience. Yet, access to employers as role models or as fellow participants in CoPs while at university is limited and requires students to pro-actively engage in such opportunities (Jackson, 2016).

2.7.4. Micro-journeys: employability development at an individual level

More promising accounts are available, for example, first-year sports-science students demonstrated uncertainty and short-term intentions towards employability, but their understandings and vocabulary expanded over three years of study (Gedye and Beaumont, 2018). These students transitioned from an extrinsic focus on what employers wanted (such as lists of graduate attributes) to an intrinsic focus on roles

that suited them and their identity, and corresponding attitudinal developments of interest and enthusiasm. These stages align with Baxter Magolda's (1998) four stages of self-authorship in young adult life for professional development. At first, young people lack awareness of their own values and (professional) identity, utilising formulae based upon external cues, such as skills they are told are required. Secondly, professional socialisation and self-reflection permit increasing recognition of their own values, shifting from accepting to evaluating presented knowledge. Thirdly, self-authorship is defined by attending to, but not being bound by, others and the ability to interpret knowledge, experience and choice for oneself. Finally, internal foundations are characterised by new perspectives on, and contributions to, the profession, built upon internal beliefs and a sense-of-self (identity). Lists of graduate attributes provide a useful starting point, but Baxter Magolda (1998) recommends that HEIs offer pedagogic structures of discussion and exposure to multiple perspectives to facilitate this progression and sense-making for students. Again, this aligns with opportunities to explore possible selves (Ibarra, 1999), or experimentations in CoPs while in HE (Jackson, 2016).

Not all students will undergo the transitions described by Gedye and Beaumont (2018), and Tomlinson (2007) conceptualised an 'ideal-type model' (Figure 2-2) of how students construct and manage employability. This is framed in terms of students' orientation to the external labour market and their degree of engagement in career management activities. The above descriptions of first-year students suggest a largely retreatist orientation, pursuing other goals than graduate employment. Only two of the final year students in the study demonstrated retreatist orientation, and Tomlinson (2007, p.300) suspected 'these students looked to extend their youth and continue to enjoy the relatively loosely regulated lifestyles they had so far experienced'. Feelings of anxiety, and finding the recruitment process daunting, were also suggested, with one respondent describing 'the thought of doing a nine to five desk job doesn't really thrill me at all—it kind of scares me actually' (Tomlinson, 2007, p.301). These were affluent students with other options available to them. No students fell in the 'rebel' category of actively rejecting labour market goals. It would be hoped that graduate identity would encourage a careerist, pro-active and well-

informed orientation by graduation. Ritualists prioritised job security over ambition, and less conception of what careers could offer in terms of self-fulfilment.

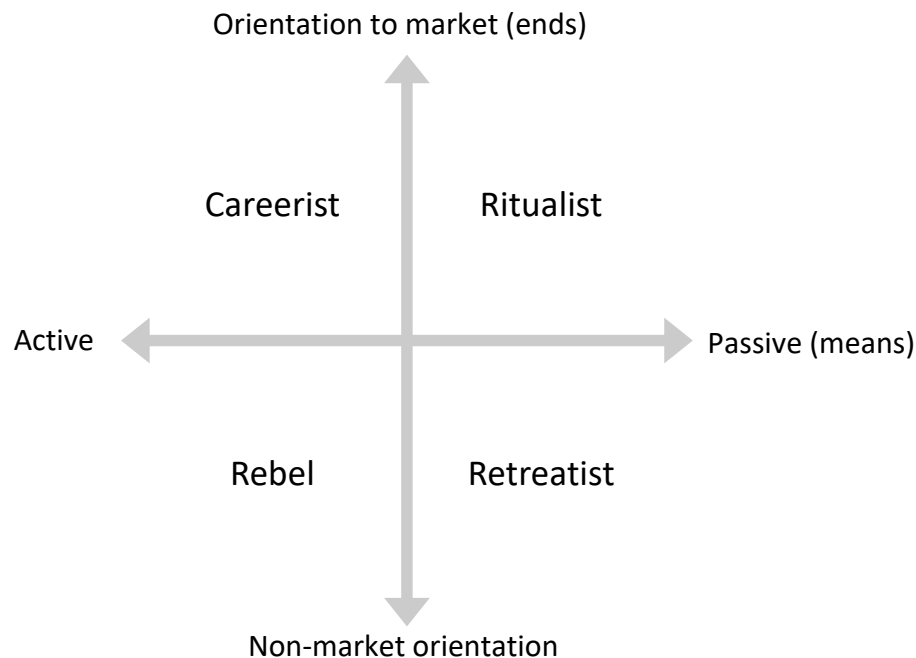


Figure 2-2 Ideal-type module of student orientations (Tomlinson, 2007)

2.7.5. Summary of employability models and approaches

In summary of models of employability, Holmes' (2001) proposal of *employability as graduate identity development* provides a persuasive alternative to skills-based approaches. While 'much contemporary educational policy makes assumptions about learning that are directly contradicted by the best research and theorising of learning...' (Hager and Hodkinson, 2009, p.619), a graduate attributes approach continues to dominate in HEIs' practice. (e.g. Rees, 2019). However, these lengthy lists of attributes are unwieldy and students struggle to contextualise their value for future careers (Holmes, 2013), and engagement with existing approaches is dependent upon possessive influences on employability such as first-in-family and socioeconomic status (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019). A capitals perspective moves beyond graduate identity and considers the mediating roles of social, cultural and psychological capitals (2017a). This imbues graduates with agency and competence to interpret their position and navigate individual trajectories through the labour market, framing possible opportunities, but also what they subconsciously exclude themselves from (Tomlinson, 2010). Moreover, Bridgstock (2017) argues that

HE has a responsibility to prepare students for the uncertain economy and labour markets of their future rather than solely the roles of today.

It should be noted that, in the early stages of this study I, as a teacher, prioritised a technocratic, human-capital based view in due to the policy, university and professional body pressures described in section 1.4 that dominated my own understandings of employability. However, over the course of developing this literature review, this perspective embraced the humanistic models of graduate employability described in section 2.7.3. Therefore, while the *content* of this first year module focused upon skills as required by the professional body accreditation and the structure of the programme, the means of *implementing* and *evaluating* the intervention drew upon humanistic, constructionist understandings of how students construct and manage employability. This journey is reflected upon in section 6.6.

2.8. Pedagogic approaches in HE

‘Employability is, at heart, about the process of learning’ (Harvey et al., 2002, p.16), and pedagogy enables the HEI employability development opportunities to be translated into employability attributes, self-promotional skills and willingness to develop for students (Harvey et al., 2002). Pedagogy is framed as principally classroom-based activities and can be the only employability development for students without access to work experience. However, pedagogic strategies also incorporate internships, placements and other forms of WIL.

Broadly these approaches divide into intracurricular, classroom-based, mass-provision led by academic staff or career services, often associated with assessment, or extracurricular, voluntary opportunities that are likely to have more impact upon employability, be more personalised, and engage more employers (Figure 2-3Figure 2-3). There remains an implicit assumption that these are equally accessible to, and therefore a valid expectation of the university experience for, all students despite evidence to the contrary (e.g. Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019; Parutis and Kandiko Howson, 2020). Therefore, if students cannot access extra- or co-curricular activities, the reflective interrelationship between intra- and extra-curricular experiences breaks down.

I use Alves' (2017) five analytical dimensions of vocational learning to characterise these different pedagogic opportunities, drawing on Illeris' (2009) strategies to bridge gaps between classroom-based and workplace-based learning before reviewing the learning approaches most common in HE. These five dimensions are learning spaces, time and temporality, types of learning, the nature of knowledge and reasons for learning.

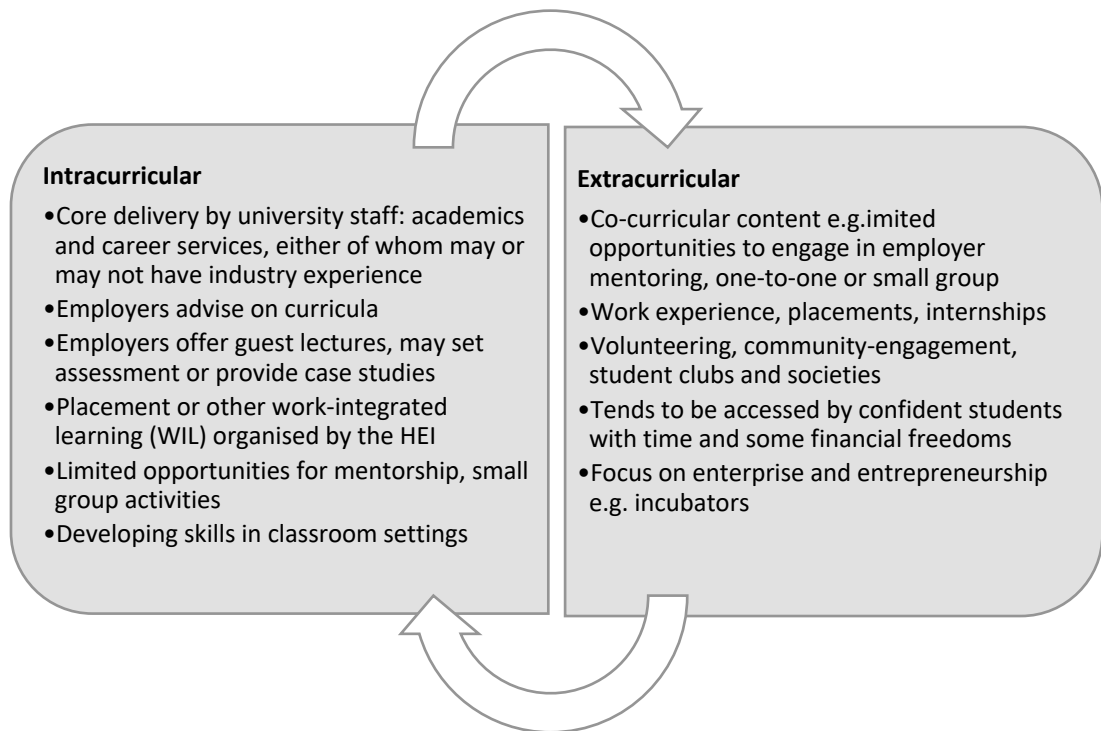


Figure 2-3 Intra- and extracurricular composition of employability development in HE and the role of employers

Illeris (2009) identified five spaces for learning: daily learning in everyday life; education-space, or intentional, learning; informal and formal (intentional) workplace learning; interest-based learning through engagement with associations or communities; and net-based learning, as required and online. Alves (2017) excluded net-based learning as ubiquitous, for example through blended learning, and Illeris (2009) and Bridgstock (2017) aimed to combine learning spaces. Knight and Yorke (2004) suggest that students who cultivate multiple loci of learning, creating cycles of reflection indicated in Figure 2-3, benefit the most. *Where* vocational learning is perceived to occur is intimately related to *what* constitutes valid vocational

knowledge: for example Alves (2017) positions all learning as situated (Lave and Wenger, 1991) and therefore contingent upon the space in which it happens.

In terms of time and temporality, learning is a lifelong endeavour (Alves, 2017), with earlier vocational learning being more instrumental and later learning more transformative (Jarvis, 2009). Multiple careers may prompt further fluctuation between these two phases (Alves, 2017). Routine work, such as part-time roles while at university, has less transformational power (see below) than discipline-specific experience (Knight and Yorke, 2004). Considering how *long* such learning experiences may last, Alves (2017) stresses that time is needed for 'forgetting what we knew and /or how we used to do things [may be needed] to accommodate the contents of new learning' (p.183), though little literature explores the time taken to fully access situated learning opportunities.

Illeris (2009) described four typologies of learning. Cumulative learning occurs primarily in early childhood when acquiring new concepts that are distinct from pre-existing understandings. Assimilative learning integrates new knowledge with existing schema, with small adjustment, and is common in vocational learning.

Accommodative learning substantially remodelled existing schema to accommodate new learning, for example as graduates start new roles and re-evaluate their pre-existing assumptions (Alves, 2017). Finally, transformative learning changes the learner's identity, impacting on personality and self-perceptions, for example when assuming a new social role or envisaging new possible selves (Illeris, 2009).

Considering the nature of knowledge, many argue that learning in professional (or vocational) contexts must be situated in the practice in the workplace (e.g. Lave and Wenger, 1991) and is inseparable from the learner (Jarvis, 2009). This conceptualisation of learning as socially constructed and interpreted through the lens of one's own prior understandings, assumptions and experiences is distinct from understanding learning as acquisition of parcels of objective knowledge, sometimes favoured by classroom-based approaches (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1988). Alves (2017) prioritised situated learning as the fourth dimension of her model, where knowledge does not 'precede action...it is permanently produced alongside action'

(Alves, 2017, p.185). Situated learning is explored in more depth in section 2.9 with consideration of CoPs.

Finally, Alves (2017) argued that much vocational learning is not intentional, and there is no reason to engage in this unplanned learning. This overlooks social costs, job security and other factors that motivate engagement or non-engagement. Lifelong learning is positioned as an individual responsibility, mediated by personal characteristics, work environment, opportunity and wider circumstances (Alves, 2017).

2.8.1. Learning approaches

The scope of HE approaches is now explored, using Alves (2017) model. The role of workplace-based learning and its value to students is explored alongside the barriers to these learning opportunities and the limitations of the classroom-based learning that many students must rely upon.

2.8.1.1. WIL, work experience and extra- and co-curricular activities

Placements while in HE are a strong correlate of progression upon graduation (DfE, 2020), recognised as the gold-standard for employability development (e.g. Little and Harvey, 2006; Knight and Yorke, 2004). However, many students choose not to disrupt their education and prioritise early graduation, or do not feel ready to access placements (Bullock, 2009), and other forms of work experience are also of value (e.g. Pegg et al., 2012). WIL is workplace-based, timebound and often transformational learning opportunities (Alves, 2017), facilitating students' reflection and integration of work experiences alongside their taught curriculum (Beattie and Riley, 2015; Jackson, 2015; Zegwaard and Coll, 2011). Just ten hours of job shadowing enhanced first-year students' understandings of employability related to academic performance (Harris-Reeves and Mahoney, 2017), however outcomes of WIL evaluations are mixed (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). Bridgstock (2015) found that WIL improved new skills development, offered work experience relevant to career aspirations, broadened networks (developing social capital, as observed by Gibson (2004)), and created employment opportunities. Sachs, Rowe and Wilson (2016) concluded that WIL fosters mutual benefit and trust between employers and

students. In contrast, Kinash et al. (2016) and Wilton (2012) found no impact for WIL. WIL opportunities at university are also limited (Jackson 2016, citing Cranmer, 2006); coordinating numerous student-employer interactions becomes unviable for large cohorts, with limited time and budget and low levels of employer engagement (McMurray et al, 2016). Equitable access for all students is essential (Sachs, Rowe and Wilson, 2016), however the numerous barriers to engagement in WIL, work experience and extracurricular activities for diverse students have already been described. While 60% of students surveyed by Jackson and Bridgstock (2021) had participated in intracurricular, 'for credit' activities (such as WIL) and almost 50% had undertaken extracurricular internships, only 14% had taken co-curricular opportunities such as volunteering, student societies and leadership programmes. Therefore the importance of integrating employability successfully into curricula is clear.

2.8.1.2. Classroom-based learning

Classroom-based learning approaches are education-based, usually short-term and assimilative (Alves, 2017). While acquisitive approaches to demonstrate delivery of graduate attributes, often through assessment, are common, constructivist approaches such as simulations, role play, field trips, observations and games are often embedded (Pegg et al., 2012). These active or experiential approaches can be a challenging transition, for staff and students, from didactic approaches better suited to theoretical and abstract knowledge (Pegg et al., 2012). More acquisitive approaches, often classified as learning by doing, include practices such as presentations and 'the (generally much-dreaded) group-working' (Diver, 2019, p.6). Degree programme-level approaches other than capstone final year projects are rare (e.g. Thomas, Wong and Li, 2014), and these are largely modular interventions. However, there is little evidence of the impact of universities' teaching such skills upon employability (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021; Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009), despite substantial resources committed to employability skills in classrooms (Cranmer, 2006).

There are several hindrances to employability skills development by academic staff (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). Firstly, staff interpret employability skills differently to employers. While they may focus on 'analysis, evaluation, problem-solving, critical thinking, communication, and teamwork skills' (Cotronei-Baird, 2020, p.6), these are applied in academic and disciplinary contexts and exclude professional practices such as business acumen or decision-making.

Secondly, while staff intuitively apply classroom-based activities appropriate to skills development, these have limited impact on long-term development of skills. Kornelakis and Petrakaki (2020) argue that groupwork, presentation skills and problem-based learning map onto professional skills such as self-management, communication, teamworking and customer awareness, however most of the literature demonstrates limited transferability of such approaches (e.g. Jackson, 2010; Mason et al., 2003). Academic staff lack understanding of pedagogies to address employability as distinct to other disciplinary content (Cranmer, 2006), and inexperienced academics lack confidence to depart from disciplinary norms (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). Skills development can be perceived to be time consuming and challenging to teach compared to a more traditional syllabus, and high student numbers exacerbate these challenges (Yan et al., 2018). Academic staff can even begrudge skills development as taking time away from content delivery (Cotronei-Baird, 2020), particularly for the recommended action learning, facilitation and coaching approaches (Pegg et al. 2012).

In practice, indirect means for skills development are often used, such as discussion and demonstration rather than practicing skills (Cotronei-Baird, 2020), and 'academics paid inconsistent and minimal attention to these skills' if facilitating them (Cotronei-Baird, 2020, p.8). Academics gave students little explicit guidance in how to develop, say, communications and teamworking skills, relying instead on implicit 'learning by doing', and assessment was also more implicit than explicit (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). Yet, Knight et al.'s (2003) HEA review of pedagogy for employability, called for HEIs to make 'the tacit explicit' (p.3), ensuring students recognise where and how employability is developed through curricula, developing their cognitive

scaffolding and metacognition. At a more granular level, Barrie (2006) suggested refined definitions of terms in disciplinary contexts for shared understandings of future professional needs between students, employers and academics, assuming a skills-based approach. Pegg et al.'s (2012) update urged HEIs to focus upon 'skilful practices in context' rather than 'lists or categories of skills' (p.5), though only briefly introduced identity. In addition, assessment may incentivise students to engage with employability, but Pegg et al. (2012) found mixed evidence for its effectiveness.

Holmes (2013, p. 543) suggested 'institutional-level curriculum development interventions were rarely, if ever, directly based on empirical research' with research often based on surveys of HE stakeholders to ascertain "*perceptions*' of the respondents: none attempt[ed] to devise some form of objective measure' (p. 546 italics in original). While individuals may demonstrate exemplary practice, there remained a 'lack of systematic and consistent use of the practices to integrate employability skills within the curriculum across different teaching spaces' (Cotronei-Baird, 2020, p.8). Therefore, there are significant gaps between what imparts real value for employability outcomes and academic practice (Kinash et al., 2016).

2.8.1.3. Reflective opportunities for employability development

Reflection features in several the models of employability shown in Table 2-1, and is implicit in models of identity development. It supports sense-making of new material, to review and reframe existing knowledge, and enhances the conditions for learning (Moon, 2004). Reflection provides intellectual space for thinking (Barnett, 1997), improves metacognition (Yorke, 2004) and is one the rare areas of learning that acknowledges an individual's emotional relationship with the experience (Moon, 2004). Processes such as personal development planning (PDP) use reflective methods (Moon, 2004), which are one of the most consistent themes of employability development. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle (Figure 2-4) and Gibbs' (1988) reflective cycle are both well used in models, though evidence for their use in practice is limited. Students can struggle with reflective skills, and Moon (2004) recommends cycles of reflection and activity to improve reflection itself. Around just

40% of HE employability stakeholder groups perceived reflective portfolios as valuable tools in employability practice (Kinash et al., 2016).

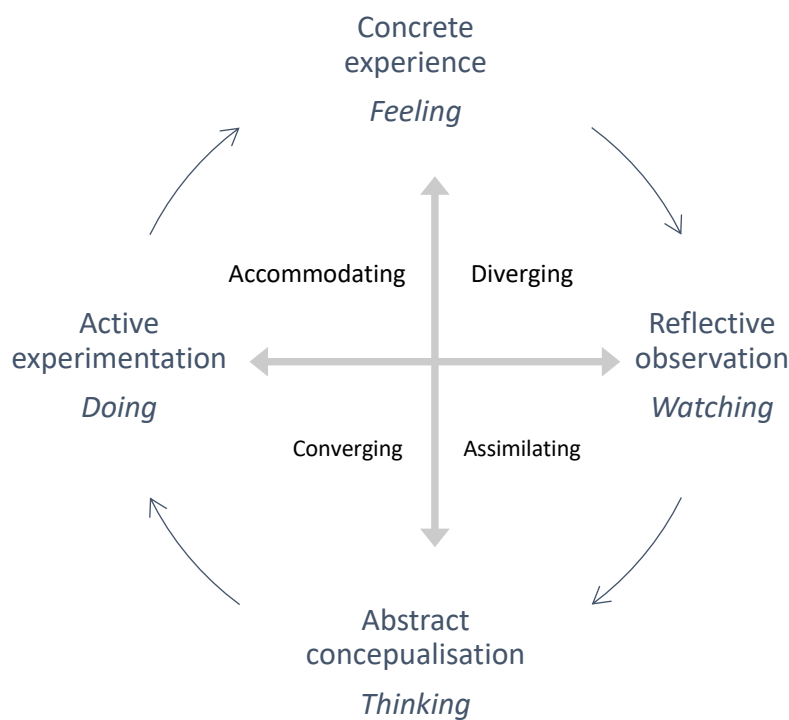


Figure 2-4 Experiential learning cycle (adapted from Kolb, 1984)

2.8.1.4. Working with employers

Norton and Dalrymple (2020, p.6) argue that ‘there is considerable value in thinking creatively about employer engagement, seeking out those partners who are best motivated to co-create learning opportunities and who perceive alignment between student outcomes and wider workforce development’. However, their compendium of case studies for Advance HE largely focused on classroom-based practices with little direct student-employer engagement, such as case studies, e-portfolios and

assessment briefs set by employers. Students favour practical components that connect them with employers, expose them to current practice and enable them to visualise and apply their theoretical learning beyond the classroom setting (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021).

Employer engagement in schools is well documented as microsystem-level links such as teaching curriculum, running soft skills workshops and offering mock interviews (Percy and Kashefpakdel, 2021). Employer engagement supports a 'life course' approach, supporting individuals' later progression through the labour market and offering long-term advantages (Stanley and Mann, 2014), though of limited value in achieving short-term outcomes (Percy and Kashefpakdel, 2021). Literature reviews regarding school-level interventions involving employers have identified quantitative and qualitative evidence of impact from employer engagement on education, economic, and social outcomes (Hughes et al., 2016; Mann, Rehill and Kashefpakdel, 2018), including longitudinal evidence of wage premia (Kashefpakdel and Percy, 2017). Some interventions are scaffolded, like this study, by causal theories of change, drawing on social, human, and cultural capitals (Jones, Mann and Morris, 2016). This interaction of capitals, particularly cultural capital, allowed young people to visualise and eliminate potential pathways (Stanley and Mann, 2014), in a manner echoing the consideration of possible selves, explored below. Young people also appreciated the authenticity of employer voices, however, as in HE, young people from more educationally advantaged backgrounds were much better at conceptualising the value of employer engagement than their less advantaged peers (Stanley and Mann, 2014).

Within HE contexts, a recent Australian study found that 40% of case studies discussed using employers to deliver employability sessions and workshops, 40% used alumni mentoring and 30% used external advisory boards (Rees, 2019), however such initiatives are rarely consistently embedded across programmes (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). It is more likely that employers, where involved, are guest speakers and judges of assessment, or mentors and advisers through extracurricular activities, but with little interaction with students on an ongoing basis within classroom environments

(Pegg et al., 2012). Suggestions to address this include 'speed dating' and networking exercises (Bennett, 2012), but little consideration is given to the role of employers in students' employability development and the mechanisms that would foster this.

Two overlapping theories for identity development is that students conceive possible selves (and negative alternatives to be rejected outright) based upon observation of role models (Ibarra, 1999) (section 2.7.3), and that role models are sources from which to learn new practices, skills and norms (e.g. Wood and Bandura, 1989). People are attracted to people that they perceive a similarity to (Gibson, 2004, citing Erikson, 1950), and therefore employers need to share some common ground with students: from a similar educational background or sharing other similar characteristics (Gibson, 2004). This may be particularly influential for underrepresented groups. The 'desire to increase perceived similarity by emulating those attributes; (Gibson, 2004, p.136), or choosing to reject those attributes (negative role models), drives engagement with identity building. For role model theory, the focus is upon learner's cognitions rather than the role model's actions, which is distinct from identity theory (Gibson, 2004). Whether for possible selves theory (Markus and Nurius, 1984) or role model theory (Gibson, 2004), when applied to employability the self being observed is as a professional, or for a particular role or industry.

Examples of offering such opportunities in classroom-based contexts include Hanna et al. (2015), who integrated ongoing involvement with employers and feedback about dress, language and behaviours in professional settings into a first-year computing module. The quantitative survey and peer-observation approach struggled to determine whether skills had improved, lacked reflective commentary, and highlighted the challenges of measuring the impact of module-based interventions.

2.8.1.5. Bridging the workplace and university spaces

This study arose, in part, from prior exploration of vocational learning and the work of Eraut (e.g. 2000, 2007), who criticised previous empirical studies for their neglect of informal (or non-formal) learning gained outside formal learning programmes encompassing "dress, discourse, behaviour, diminution of social differences, etc." (Eraut, 2000, p.114). Bathmaker (2013) also described a schism between 'non-

academic' (and largely working class) students previously funnelled to vocationalist qualifications and the neglect of codified knowledge, versus the increasing expectation of work-related degree-based vocational educational programmes in university settings which may exclude tacit, work-based knowledge. This study therefore explores an interface between the tacit and explicit, work-based and university-based and a potential theoretical lens (CoPs) and practical approaches to achieve this.

Illeris (2009) and Bridgstock (2017) both called for better integration of education-based and workplace learning. Illeris (2009) proposed alternating periods in work and education, as apprenticeship-style delivery, with the teacher providing support for skills, reflection and evaluation between work focused sessions. The substantial time in practice is not viable for most large HE cohorts, and Bridgstock (2017) suggested a more classroom-based approach of a series of problems contributing to experiential cycles of reflection (Kolb, 1984). These would, ideally, use industry briefs from employers or be co-developed with students, but again with support for skills and reflection from academic staff. Bridgstock's model proposed self-guided aspects by students, with an emphasis on new knowledge production rather than replicating well known case studies. This would constitute a CoP through regular, meaningful contact with professional experts and more experienced students, as well as peers, building from low to high-risk projects as students move from novice roles to more advanced contributions (Bridgstock, 2017). Published in the same year as data collection for this study, this is the closest example to the practice explored in this thesis.

2.8.1.6. Implications for the pedagogic approaches adopted in this study

This study adopts a dual approach to employability development. The taught sessions, between the group discussions that are the focus of this study, adopted classroom-based, teacher-led approaches typical of those described in section 2.8.1.2. These are short-term and assimilative approaches (Alves, 2017), such as simulations, role play, field trips, observations and games (Pegg et al., 2012),

groupwork and presentations (Diver, 2019). Additionally, explicit guidance on skills development, e.g. groupwork skills, was provided.

While such classroom-based interventions are of limited value when delivered in isolation (Mason, Williams and Cranmer, 2009), this study introduced an additional model of learning that bridges the classroom and workplace. It was hoped that this might engage students more deeply in the taught sessions, which are not themselves the subject of this study. This study therefore explored the impact of employers working in partnership with students through a CoP approach (Bridgstock, 2017, section 2.8.1.5). Students are then encouraged to make sense of these dual approaches through reflective practices embedded in assessment (section 2.8.1.3), bringing together three pedagogic approaches in one module.

Section 2.9 describes the theoretical justification for a CoP approach however, in conclusion to this discussion of pedagogic approaches for employability, the potential of action research in assessing and developing employability development is now explored.

2.8.2. Action research for pedagogic approaches for employability

In attempting to review pedagogic approaches, it is clear that employability development interventions are often complex. Academic leads must consider the discipline, likely future professions and the constructive alignment of skills into the curriculum (e.g. Treleaven and Voola, 2008). Appropriate pedagogic approaches for skills development and wider employability awareness and understandings are then embedded, often through learning by doing (e.g. Baker and Henson, 2010). The engagement of employers is sometimes integrated (e.g. Hanna et al., 2015), though more often consultative. Finally, these must be aligned with assessment and evaluation of the module (e.g. Treleaven and Voola, 2008). A full review is not possible within the scope of this chapter, but there is a common theme that the complexity of such approaches is often developed over cycles of activity. Action research approaches, therefore, have yielded useful models of development, as summarised in Table 2-2.

These studies frequently work with students as participants, through surveys and focus groups, and Baker and Henson (2010) used students' self-evaluations of employability skills development as quantitative data. Self-assessment contributes positively to learning (Sanchez et al., 2017), however there are mixed outcomes for its accuracy. A literature review concluded that self-assessment is not an accurate measure of performance (Tejeiro et al., 2012), and males are more likely to overestimate their skills (Tejeiro et al., 2012), as are first year students (Nulty, 2011). Self-assessment is, therefore, a useful tool for students' learning but not assessing the value of an intervention. Other quantitative approaches use survey data about employability or evaluating interventions, and qualitative analysis of focus groups and students' written reflections is also common.

Ornellas et al. (2019) and Baker and Henson (2010) each engaged *employers* as participants, through a single asynchronous, online focus group and gathering comments, respectively. Employers were also rarely involved in delivering interventions. There is, therefore, greater potential for the involvement of students and employers as co-deliverers and co-researchers, bridging the gap between the siloes of student- and employer-focused research in the development of employability and graduate attributes.

One advantage of an action research approach is the consultation processes and rounds of improvement, particularly where developing interventions with reflection from participants throughout development (e.g. Greenbank, 2011; Baker and Henson, 2010; Treleaven and Voola, 2008). However, more typical action research approaches in community settings would evaluate and improve successive cycles of intervention delivery. In academic settings, this might offer only a single development opportunity a year in an academic cycle (e.g. Greenbank, 2011), offsetting the benefits of this approach to fine tuning interventions. Overall, these studies concluded positive outcomes, where interventions engaged students, embracing the complexity of employability development.

| | Aim | Cohort | Co-researchers | Methods | Analysis | Outcome |
|----------------------------|---|---|--|---|---|--|
| Treleaven and Voola (2008) | To develop constructive alignment of graduate attributes into module learning, outcomes and assessment | Australian marketing master's programme | Leads: Academic and academic adviser Participants: Students | Cycle 1: critically reflective dialogue between lecturer and academic adviser. Literature review. Cycle 2: constructive alignment Matrix developed, student feedback on assessment tasks, Cycle 3: assessment criteria revised | Quantitative analysis of student evaluation scores. Qualitative analysis of student feedback and lecturer reflection | Example of graduate attribute-curriculum alignment matrix |
| Baker and Henson (2010) | To outline an extracurricular initiative to promote employability skills development at a UK university | UK undergraduate students interested in finance careers | Leads: Academic and careers advisor Participants: students, employers, colleagues | Cycle 1: Student focus group, discussions with colleagues, regarding understandings of employability to develop extracurricular module outline and application process Cycle 2: Student focus group evaluating module outline, comments from employers: establishing employer engagement, scaffolding presentation skills, establishing evaluation Post-implementation evaluation: skills audits, employer comments | Qualitative and quantitative analysis of skills audit ratings and reflections Qualitative analysis of employer comments, focus groups and reflections from project leads | Positive impact on self-estimated skills development, establishment of extracurricular module, application process and focus on learning by doing/ active learning |
| McMurray et al. (2011) | To examine employability skills within a psychology department's curriculum | UK undergraduate psychology students | Leads: Academic programme leads Participants: students | Cycle 1: curriculum audit, two student focus groups and survey of students' views on employability Cycle 2: embedding employability skills into the psychology curriculum, with students reflecting upon what they learned. | Qualitative analysis of focus groups Quantitative analysis of module information forms, and student survey | Information for later programme development. Note acknowledged issue of differential |

| | | | | | | |
|------------------------|---|--|---|---|---|------------------------------------|
| | | | | | | interpretation of skills language. |
| Greenbank (2011) | To encourage students to reflect and change intentions to make career decisions and prepare for the transition to employment | First year undergraduate business students | Leads: Academic module leads Participants: students | Three cycles of delivery of the same intervention using unfreezing techniques (from cycle 2), case studies and lecture delivery: Cycle 2 introduced unfreezing techniques to improve critical evaluation and lower reliance on intuitive decision-making Cycle 3: refined these unfreezing techniques | Quantitative analysis of student pre- and post-intervention questionnaire re. attitudes to career decision making. Qualitative analysis of interviews and observations of the sessions | |
| Ornellas et al. (2019) | To develop a theoretical framework, based on authentic learning approaches, for HE activities that enable students to develop employability skills. | Four European HE institutions | Leads: Academic leads Participants: staff, undergraduates, graduates, careers staff and employers' | Cycle 1: desk-based research, focused staff interviews and asynchronous online focus group across all participant groups. Cycle 2: questionnaire developed over the cycle 1, Cycles 3 and 4 in development. | Quantitative analysis of survey data Qualitative analysis of interviews | |

Table 2-2 Comparison of action research approaches for employability development

2.8.3. Reflection on employability development in HE

As described in section 2.8.1.1, extracurricular work-experience (including WIL) opportunities improve employability but are contingent upon social capital for connections and cultural capital to express one's suitability (Tomlinson, 2017a; Bullock et al., 2009), and financial flexibility to access low paid internships (Parutis and Kandiko Howson, 2020). Therefore, opportunities to observe possible professional selves (Ibarra, 1999), and participate in CoPs with professionals (Jackson, 2016), are limited for undergraduate students without compulsory placements such as those required for nursing and teaching degrees. Furthermore, opportunities for identity development related to graduate and professional futures are subject to positional influences such as class, first-in-family status and SES (Holmes, 2013).

Classroom-based, academic-led approaches therefore constitute the core curricula that can be assured in many students' degrees; however engagement is dependent upon students' understanding of the value of employability. Many students prioritise gaining a degree as a marker of employability (Burke, Scurry and Blenkinsopp, 2019; Tomlinson, 2008), and delay considering employment until late in their degrees, which may cause regret near graduation (Lock and Kelly, 2022). First-year students show lower levels of engagement with employability curricula than those later in their degrees (Lock and Kelly, 2022; Tomlinson, 2008), which may be attributable to first-year students' perceptions of employment as 'distant' (e.g. Briggs, Clark, and Hall, 2012). Stoner and Milner (2010) concluded that first-year students lacked confidence, were reluctant to make decisions, and demonstrated 'reluctance to accept relativistic stances to problems in context' (p.135) which hampered engagement in skills development. Second year curriculum-based interventions have been more successful (e.g. Rothwell, Herbert and Rothwell, 2008), however Tymon (2013) called for HEIs to increase focus on employability in first and second years through increasing awareness and making development activities more overt. However, researching reasons for lack of engagement in employability is also difficult as first-year students are less likely to engage in surveys than other undergraduate years (Tymon, 2013). Additionally, from a student perspective, skills development activities such group work is often resisted (Cotronei-Baird, 2020). For such reasons,

Eraut (2007, p.6) criticises dominant models of employability as ‘ideologically attractive but almost impossible to implement’, imposing theory on existing conditions, rather than understanding pedagogic processes in emerging contexts as this study aims to do.

Ibarra (1999) described student identity development through observation of multiple possible selves, Jackson (2016) described this in the language of CoPs, and Baxter Magolda (1998) recommended that HEIs offer pedagogic structures of discussion and exposure to multiple perspectives, heard with respect, to facilitate progression and sense-making for students. Universities have a role to facilitate such social engagements, and shift focus away from classroom-bound, academic-led discussion, demonstration and problem solving, particularly in the context of widening participation, where students may not have the social contacts to facilitate such learning themselves (Brown and Scase, 2005).

Tomlinson (2012) called for the integration of disciplinary knowledge and practice, and Illeris (2009) and Bridgstock (2017) proposed means for education and employers to work more closely to integrate the workplace and classroom settings. The engagement of employers in classroom-contexts is important for students who may not encounter them in other settings (Pegg et al., 2012), but examples of ongoing student-employer engagement are limited. Constructivist approaches are needed ‘where both the learner and employer voices carry increasing weight (Kettle, 2013, p.25). Therefore this literature review concludes by considering cocreation approaches with students and employers, and how CoP theory may inform future classroom learning.

2.8.4. Cocreation for pedagogical development

Cocreation, or ‘Students as Partners’ (SaP), occurs where students and institutions work together to improve student experience at university, programme, module or task level (Dollinger, Lodge and Coates, 2018). In defining cocreation of learning and teaching, Cook-Sather (2020, p.888) reflects how cocreation ‘brings staff and student voices together, legitimating and supporting the further development of both’ through collaborative curriculum and pedagogical development. This is a reciprocal

process, where all stakeholders have the opportunity ‘to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis’ (Cook-Sather et al., 2014, pp.6-7). Institutional or programmatic level approaches usually engage self-selected student consultants or representatives in decision-making on behalf of a wider student cohort (Bovill et al., 2016). Whole class, in-class approaches are rarer and more inclusive of all students (Bovill, 2019), and this study works with students as pedagogical co-designers, ‘sharing responsibility for designing learning, teaching and assessment’ (Bovill et al., 2016, p.198). They are, to some extent, also co-researchers, collaborating on this study in learning and teaching (Bovill et al., 2016).

Numerous studies list the benefits of cocreation, including a sense of ownership and engagement in the process of learning with benefits for learning (Bovill et al., 2010), the development of equitable classroom practices and social justice (Lubicz-Nawrocka, 2019; Cook-Sather, 2020), and development of employability skills (Jarvis et al., 2013). Barriers to successful cocreation concern resistance, norms and inclusivity (Bovill et al., 2016). Resistance from both staff and students can be based upon pre-conceptions of what good learning and power relations in learning environments should be (Hughes and Barrie, 2010) and aversion to risk (Bovill et al., 2016). Staff also cite lack of time for consultation or to implement change, and worry that students lack pedagogical understanding to make informed decisions (Bovill et al., 2016). Students also have limited time and ‘may...question why they should step out of their (often comfortable) traditional role’ (Bovill et al., 2016, p.199). Assumptions about the roles of staff and students reflect the norms of HE, which also include pre-conceptions of what HE learning approaches look like (e.g. lectures). Finally, the self-selection processes can privilege certain student voices (Bovill et al., 2016), while the barriers to engagement in extracurricular activities described in section 2.6 exclude many of the students who would benefit from alternative learning approaches from participating.

Cook-Sather and Abbot (2016) used complementary cocreation and action research approaches for joint decision-making, and concluded that ‘student consultants and

faculty translate themselves into new versions of those selves through their partnerships' (p.7). Such profound identity transitions manifested in practitioners' shifts to become student-centred teachers, and students to leaders in the learning space rather than recipients. Therefore cocreation is a promising means to enact change in the classroom, and transformation for those who engage in it.

2.9. Theoretical lens: Communities of Practice

This review describes a shift from a human capital perspective to one of identity development through constructivist approaches for employability development, both for me as a researcher and across the literature more widely. Law (2009) expanded on his earlier (1981) work to explore the value of a mid-range focus for theories of career development, between micro (needs-based) psychological and macro (incentives-based) sociological theories. Law (2009) drew focus to mid-range transactions involving the multiple interactions of parents, family, neighbourhood, peer groups and ethnic group. In one example, Law recounts an example of unemployed school leavers meeting with working people on a weekly basis for 6 months. The school leavers acquired more concrete information about what the world of work meant, and established more exploratory behaviours towards work. They become more able to trust, and act on, their own feelings, uniting 'sources of expectation, feedback, support, modelling and information which form part of the warp and weft of the [young person's] day-to-day experience' with aspects of working people's experiences proximate to their own (Law, 2009, p.23). Law (2009) found particular appeal in the potential for interventions at this level, rather than the macro-levels over which classroom-based practitioners have little influence.

As this study commenced, Bridgstock (2017) proposed that Communities of Practice (CoP) theory (Lave and Wenger, 1991) provides a lens to explore such mid-range transactions in work-related contexts. CoP theory emphasises new knowledge production through contextual interactions with employers, allowing workplace-based practices to be explored in the classroom. This provided an intriguing lens through which to explore the interaction of students and employers, with a particular emphasis on identity development and within the scope of a classroom-based

intervention. While a number of career theories exist, CoP theory is one of few to emphasise the interaction of old-timers and novices, and to provide three foundations by which to ascertain whether such a community has been established (mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared understanding, see section 2.9.4) (Lave and Wenger, 1991). This provided an opportunity to assess the intervention and its applicability in classroom contexts, while providing a model of learning congruous with the aspirations of the module.

2.9.1. Nature of knowledge and situated learning

The theory of situated learning, proposed by Brown, Collins and Duguid (1988), defines learning as ‘an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice’ (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.31). Learning is situated not only in the current place and time but also within the historical and cultural contexts of communities who have produced, reproduced and developed practices over time. Situated learning occurs, therefore, within CoPs defined as ‘groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis’ (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, p.4).

The importance of language, behaviours, skills and other aspects of practice have been discussed above as indicators of identity as a graduate or professional (e.g. Tomlinson and Jackson, 2021; Jackson, 2016; Holmes, 2001). CoPs provide an *in situ* opportunity to observe and practice the behaviours of a community, and ‘pick up relevant jargon, imitate behavior, and gradually start to act in accordance with the culture's norms’ (Brown, Collins and Duguid, 1988, p.7). This has wider implications for identity development, as individuals choose to participate, or not participate, in certain CoPs, depending upon the fit with their current sense of self and aspirations for their future self (Handley et al., 2006). This two-way process also concerns the degree to which individuals are accepted or rejected by members of the community, or perceive themselves to be (Brown and Duguid, 2001). However Handley et al., (2006) critique the lack of exploration of theories of identity development in situated learning literature.

Brown, Collins and Duguid (1988) liken knowledge to a set of tools which change the way in which the user takes on the world. The user does this through participating in authentic (professional) activity, rather than simply knowing about it. Therefore, as an 'activity in and with the world' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.33), situated learning is a process of social participation, through which learning and knowledge cannot be decontextualised from the communities and practices within which they are situated. Such participation can occur at the level of task, job or profession (Brown and Duguid, 2001), and is central to the process of CoP development.

2.9.2. *Legitimate peripheral participation*

Learning through social practices in CoPs is characterised by the trajectory of newcomers to CoPs, from novice to old-timer, termed legitimate peripheral participation (Lave and Wenger, 1991). The *legitimacy* of such practice is warranted by existing practitioners (old timers), in recognising newcomers as potential, partial or full members of that community (Irving, McPadden and Caballero, 2020). These 'journeymen and masters' (Wenger, 2000, p.241) are further ahead on this journey and provide information, often tacitly through their language and behaviours, about possible futures. Herrington and Herrington (2006) described this as 'expert performances' in the context of undergraduate students observing practitioners.

Learning is characterised by the centripetal movement in knowledge over time, from the *periphery* to becoming a full community member (Lave and Wenger, 1991). More recently, other trajectories have been acknowledged, not always concluding in full participation and finding value in marginal membership of CoPs (Lave, 2004, cited in Handley et al., 2006). This is relevant to students exploring multiple CoPs, who may experience peripheral trajectories where members seek access without an intention to become a full member of a community (at that stage) (Wenger, 1998). Other students may intend more traditional inbound trajectories, to become a full member, while others will be negotiating boundary trajectories between multiple CoPs while exploring possible selves (Wenger, 1998).

Finally, *participation* requires not only engaging in the task but interacting with other community members, negotiating knowledge through practice with others (Brown and Duguid, 2001).

2.9.3. *CoPs in HE and graduate contexts*

As undergraduates, the students in this study will face a number of transitions from school or college and home, through university and on to graduate careers over a period of usually just three or four years. For most university students, this constitutes a landscape of overlapping CoPs between home, university, interests and a number of potential future professions which students may have limited access to while in HE (Jackson, 2016). These are important resources for identifying and observing possible selves (Jackson, 2016; Ibarra, 1999). However, while CoP theory bears resemblance to Vygotsky's (1978) theory of socialisation, which prioritises reproduction of knowledge, situated learning can be a process of variation and conflict (Handley et al., 2006). Such conflict may occur between members of a CoP but will also occur for an individual. For example, students must reconcile the norms of CoPs in workplace, social and familial contexts and how these complement and conflict with each other (Handley et al., 2006).

These trajectories of abandoning or distancing from the CoPs of adolescence and education, and transitioning to professional CoPs, also parallel transitions to adulthood (Goodwin, 2007). The role of work in transition to adulthood is well established, but Goodwin (2007) suggested that the role of CoPs in that process are underexplored. He cited Elias' (1961) 'lost young worker project', which examined the peripheral status of administrative, retail and apprentice workers (some as young as fifteen) within their jobs, and as unprepared to work with adults from outside their own families. Goodwin (2007) paired these largely unknown writings from Elias' project with CoP theory, concluding that observation of older workers was an important facilitator of transitions to adulthood, and that lack of work experience before graduate roles may delay transitions to adulthood for some graduates. The historical nature and young cohort of Elias' (1961) dataset provides a loose fit with today's HE students, and more recent empirical study of transitions to adulthood and

the role of CoPs are absent. The mechanisms of these transitions are also worthy of further exploration.

Within the professional marketing community, which this study frames as a potential future CoP for cohort upon graduation, local CoPs are often unstable. They are characterised by frequent job changes, mergers and acquisitions, and a substantial freelancer base (McLeod, O'Donohoe and Townley, 2011). Yet McLeod et al. (2011) found that the CoP created by 'creatives' in marketing bridged organisations and drew from the wider community, with commonalities between those from very different organisations. This study relies upon a similar commonality across the marketing management community. These flexibilities in what may be termed a community reflect a common critique of CoP theory regarding the lack of definition and specificity of what constitutes a CoP (e.g. Jewson, 2007).

2.9.4. Foundations of CoPs: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared understanding

The term 'community of practice' is too often adopted to describe any community that works together, without consideration of the central enabling elements that qualify it as such (Iverson and McPhee, 2008). Wenger (1998) defined three such elements; mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared understanding. For Iverson and McPhee (2008), analysis of these foundations permits interrogation of the nature of each CoP and defends the conceptual integrity of CoP theory.

Mutual engagement as how and what people do together as part of practice (Wenger, 1998), and is a means to assess the level of communication and interaction between community members (Iverson and McPhee, 2008). Mutual engagement between community members defines the boundaries of a community, establishing the network of actors who develop shared goals (joint enterprise) and repertoire through their practice (Iverson and McPhee, 2008). Engagement is voluntary, as participants 'vote with their feet' (Harris, 1998, p.154), to signify a true community rather than managerial control. Furthermore, engagement should be focused on and through practice, rather than social interactions, in order to advance practice with CoPs (Iverson and McPhee, 2008).

The second characteristic of CoPs, joint enterprise, refers to engagement with ‘real-life problems that people genuinely care about, [which] gives life to CoPs’ (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017, p.402). This process increases member commitment to a shared goal, and through the process of negotiation, the CoP is enacted (Iverson and McPhee, 2008). The scope of joint enterprise can extend from small acts of decision-making within a limited system to complete independence of a community in goal setting and process choice (Iverson and McPhee, 2008).

The final characteristic of CoPs is a shared repertoire; ‘a set frameworks, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents’ (Wenger et al., 2002, p.29). This repertoire of competent behaviours, language and other attributes develops as individuals journey from novice to full community member (Wenger, 1998), building upon Vygotskian (1930/1978) principles of the critical role of social interactions in development and learning, and the enabling role of others. This repertoire is not static, ‘[b]ecause the repertoire of a community is a resource for the negotiation of meaning, it is shared in a dynamic and interactive sense’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 84). A shared repertoire acts as a symbol of membership, a resource set a focus for practice, social interaction and knowledge growth, around which the community develops (Iverson and McPhee, 2008).

At an individual level, belonging is enacted through these acts of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared understanding, although experienced differently by each community member (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2016). At a CoP level, these three elements have been used by authors such as Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden (2016) and Iverson and McPhee (2008) to assess the legitimacy as CoPs, and to understand differences and similarities between CoPs as a means of analysis and understanding of the processes of learning.

2.9.5. Legitimacy of CoPs in HE and classroom contexts

The nature of communities that qualify as CoPs is debated: Lindkvist (2005, p.1189) defines CoPs as ‘tightly knit’ and practicing together over an extended period, and contends that temporary project teams are, instead, ‘collectivities of practice’ (p.1190) focused upon problem-solving. Lave and Wenger’s (1991) original

ethnographic study examined a breadth of different apprenticeship models; Yucatec midwives, Vai and Gola tailors, naval quartermasters, meat cutters and non-drinking alcoholics. Not all are workplace-based nor paid apprenticeships (non-drinking alcoholics, for example), but all are sustained communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) largely dismissed schools as sites of potential CoPs, as classroom-learning is 'discrete and decontextualised' (Handley et al., 2006, p.641), membership obligatory and there is limited scope for students' engagement with community members to facilitate legitimate peripheral participation. The adoption of legitimate peripheral participation as a pedagogical strategy is explicitly rejected, as it occurs whether intended or not and cannot be implemented or operationalised for educational purposes (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

In contrast, numerous papers discuss CoPs in classroom (and largely HE) contexts (e.g. Irving, McPadden and Caballero, 2020; Jackson, 2016; Kapucu, 2012;), though few involve industry practitioners, while others engage practitioners but are not framed as CoPs (e.g. Baker and Henson, 2010). Yet these latter examples could be conceived as CoPs should the elements of CoPs observed (Wenger, 1998). Kapucu (2012) contends that teachers can intentionally establish CoPs, with leaders to 'initiate, develop, manage, and monitor the community's activities with the purpose of aligning them with overall community goals' (p.587). Such a leader must nurture joint decision-making and adapt the community's direction to those outcomes (Kapucu, 2012), and such a leader has the potential to inhibit, unbalance or positively facilitate a CoP (Jewson, 2007). There are risks that, where there are power differentials in a CoP, as in a classroom, 'norms of deference to established authority' (the leader) may inhibit joint decision-making (Jewson, 2007, p.73)

Wenger's (2000) later work widened the potential conditions for CoPs to 'formal and informal meetings, problem-solving sessions, or guest speakers' (p.231). While these may lack the organic, spontaneous nature of the CoPs in the original case studies, even for those early iterations Lave and Wenger (1991) conceded that a community does not 'imply necessarily co-presence, a well-defined identifiable group, or socially visible boundaries. It does imply participation in an activity system about which

participants share understandings concerning what they are doing and what that means in their lives and for their communities' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.98).

Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden (2016) remained critical of artificial CoPs created as intended sites of learning processes. This study adopts their recommendation to evaluate the learning processes that occur in practice to ascertain whether a CoP has arisen, but follows the suggestion of Irving, McPadden and Caballero (2020, p.9) to 'sprinkle the seeds of growth' for CoP development.

2.10. Summary of chapter

This chapter has described the policy (macro, section 2.4) and institutional (meso, section 2.5f) pressures to develop graduate employability while in HE within widening participation contexts and for sizeable cohorts. This study has been positioned at the interface of the technocratic expectations of policy and the development humanistic understandings of employability for students in wider contexts of employability.

The dominant models of employability development have been outlined (section 2.7.1), and more recent literature explores the micro-level determinants of access to, understanding of, and engagement with employability interventions for first-year students. This review then mapped the advancement of conceptualisations of employability from the accrual of human capital to identity development (section 2.7.3). The application of these models and pedagogic approaches in classroom- and work-based settings have been explored to inform the teaching approaches planned in this study (section 2.8.1.6), and the opportunity for joint decision-making between students, employers and academic staff through cocreation established (section 2.8.4). The prior use of action research to evaluate and develop employability approaches was explored and its value for the study established in section 2.8.2).

However, the limited concepts of a skills-based approach continue to impact HEIs', employers' and individual students' and academic staffs' understandings of what employability is, and how it should be learned. For this reason, and due to lack of time and understanding to implement more successful pedagogic approaches,

classroom-based teaching for employability development is largely unsuccessful. This review therefore concluded with discussion of the role of CoP theory and legitimacy of its implementation in HEI contexts (section 2.9). It is suggested that community development and focus on shared practice with employers may be a valuable means of developing shared understandings of the behaviours, languages and skills of professional practice, and graduate identity development for students. As Hanks paraphrases in his foreword to Lave and Wenger's (1991) seminal text, *Situated Learning: Legitimate Peripheral Participation*, '[r]ather than asking what kinds of cognitive processes and conceptual structures are involved, [Lave and Wenger] ask what kinds of social engagements provide the proper context for learning to take place' (p. 14), to 'increase access for learners to participating roles in expert performances' (p.17).

3. Theoretical Framework and Methodology

3.1. Introduction to chapter

This chapter describes in detail the methodology adopted in this study used to address the research questions reached in Chapter 2. My philosophical position of social constructionism is described, introducing the methodological approach of action research and the practical, theoretical and ethical justifications for this approach. The methods are described in detail, including the sampling strategy, data collection methods, data management, data analysis, ethical considerations and the measures taken to address these over the course of the study. The challenges of the longitudinal approach and the triangulation of multiple data sources are addressed. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the methodological legitimacy and limitations of the study.

3.2. Philosophical position

Crotty (1998) calls for researchers to declare their hand regarding 'assumptions about reality that we bring to our work' (p.2), and therefore the theoretical perspective that informs their stance for the research design, data selection and interpretation, and the questions they seek to answer. My paradigmatic position is that of social constructionism, based upon an ontological assumption that 'all knowledge, and all meaningful reality as such, is contingent upon human practices, being constructed in and out of interaction between human beings and their world' (Crotty, 1998, p.42). Constructionism is distinct from purely subjective interpretations in constructing meaning from the objects and social interactions of the world, as an experienced reality, rather than creating or imposing meaning without reference to experience (Crotty, 1998). Therefore Crotty (1998, p.44) describes constructionism as a means to hold objectivism and subjectivism together 'indissolubly', accepting neither absolutely, with intentionality in the interplay between the subject and the world that they inhabit.

This world view supports Vygotskian (1930/1978) principles of the critical role of social interactions in development and learning, and the enabling role of others through interpersonal, or inter-psychological, processes. This ontological position

therefore also underpins the foundations of situated learning and CoP theory employed in this study (Lave and Wenger, 1991). Billet (2001) also interpreted learning as also *intra*-psychological between the individual and the social world and I, as the researcher, must assume a reflexive stance to my own self in research contexts. Therefore, throughout this study I locate '[myself] in the realities [I am] studying, examining how [my] interpretive frames, life histories and interests and the research context influence [my] actions throughout' (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller, 2014, p. 183, citing Charmaz, 2006). At the outset I describe my positionality (section 1.5) and in Chapter 6 I consider my changing position over the course of the study, as both practitioner and researcher.

Epistemologically, this approach favours a constructionist stance, acknowledging both respondents' emic understandings of the research topic(s) in the context of their lived experience, but also, as the researcher, my etic perspective and interpretation of those understandings and how this is coloured by my own experiences and perspectives (Creswell, 1998). Therefore, this study aims to explore and appreciate multiple, and everchanging, viewpoints rather than define an absolute truth (Easterby-Smith, Thorpe and Lowe, 1991). This contrasts to the dominant, nomothetic modes of research in employability described in Chapter 2, where seemingly objective measures are adopted to assess the impact of education and other factors upon employment and employability, for example measuring numbers of people in employment, numbers of jobs, salary and 'graduateness' of role (Steur, Jansen and Hoffman, 2012).

The research aim and objectives of this study embody these ontological and epistemological positions, and underpin the action research methodology outlined below.

3.3. Methodology of the study

The key criteria in deciding the methodology of this study were to adopt an approach that supported the constructionist philosophy outlined above, to use methods that support developing my own professional practice through research, and to engage stakeholders in a more collaborative and ethical fashion than is typical of most

empirical research. Action research is defined as ‘the study of a social situation carried out by those involved in that situation in order to improve both their practice and the quality of their understanding’ (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001, p.8).

Action research is a practical and systematic means to achieve these criteria, allowing me to act as a reflective practitioner to investigate and improve my own teaching and students’ learning in the theatre of my professional practice, i.e. the seminar (Nolen and Putten, 2007; Suter, 2006).

Action research is variously described as a methodology (e.g. McNiff and Whitehead, 2009; MacDonald, 2012), method (e.g. Avison, Lau, Myers, and Nielsen, 1999), process (Greenwood, Whyte and Harkavy, 1993) and approach (McNiff, 1993), while McTaggart, (1994, p.315) argued that ‘[a]ction research is not a 'method' or a 'procedure' but a series of commitments to observe and problematise through practice the principles for conducting social enquiry’ in a more holistic consideration of the assumptions of action research as a democratisation of research and a focus upon achieving social good. Here, I adopt action research as a methodology as this entire study abides by these commitments, which I return to after justifying the role of action research in education.

3.3.1. The development of action research in higher education and employability

Kurt Lewin formalised the concept of action research around 1934 (Adelman, 1993, citing Marrow, 1969), but the ‘actionism’ underpinning it is traceable to Moreno’s (1913) community initiative, employing group participation with prostitutes to address social issues in Vienna (Petzold, 1980). Lewin (1946), also prioritising group participation and acquainted with Moreno, focused on technical aspects of the approach through a study with employees of a factory in Harwood, Virginia. Lewin established the cyclical approach of group discussion, discussions of how to proceed, and subsequent monitoring, evaluation and reviews. These spirals of activity enable the group to recognise, and shift focus to, emerging issues.

Around the same time as Lewin’s studies, Tyler worked with teachers on education ‘service’ with a similar approach (Madaus and Stufflebeam, 1989, cited in Adelman, 1993), and Noffke (1994) traced subsequent global streams of development of action

research in education. In the US this included the work of Dewey (e.g. Dewey, 1933, 1938), Corey (e.g. 1953) and Foshay (e.g. Foshay and Wann, 1954). In Australia, the influential Deakin seminars and the work of Kemmis and McTaggart (e.g. 1982) and, in the UK, Stenhouse (e.g. 1975) and Elliott (e.g. 1991), promoted qualitative methodologies for the 'teacher as researcher' in classroom environments. McNiff (e.g. 1988) focused upon the reflective practitioner and individuals' living theory approaches to their work and continues to be highly influential. More recent resurgent interest is driven by the expansion of HE and opportunities for those focused upon teaching in a 'scholarly, yet also practice-friendly, vocation' (Bradbury Huang, 2010, p.108). McNiff (2013) attributes this to a wider, global epistemological shift towards practical knowledge. Appropriately for this study, McNiff (2013) attributed this shift to an acceptance of the social development of learning, citing Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of situated learning.

A number of action research studies focusing specifically upon graduate employability have been described in Chapter 2 and demonstrate varying degrees of student participation and uses of research cycles. Rather than evaluating and developing the same intervention over repeated deliveries, the majority developed a sequence of activities, each informed by the outcomes of the last, for example McMurray *et al.* (2011), Baker and Henson (2010) and Bazerman and Moore (2009). This approach has been adopted in this study. While the degree of stakeholder, particularly student, engagement as co-researchers varies across the studies, there is clear precedent for the use of action research in the exploration and development of practice related to the development of employability for HE students. This study engages employers to a greater degree than other identified studies, going beyond the single focus group consultation approach used by Ornellas, Falkner and Stålbrandt (2019) and employer review comments gathered by Baker and Henson (2010), exploring how students and employers interact in group discussions and engaging employers in longitudinal one-to-one interviews.

The following sections will now explore how action research fulfils the criteria identified above, of supporting a constructionist approach, developing my own

professional practice through research, and engaging stakeholders both collaboratively and ethically, while also summarising additional advantages of the methodology.

3.3.2. *Justification for the use of action research: alignment, practice and ethics*

While Holden and Lynch (2004, p.12) argue that ‘there is no right or wrong philosophical stance’, they call for appropriate matching of stance, methodology and research problem to avoid ambiguous results. The ethos of action research is fundamentally aligned with a constructivist epistemology as each recognises the social nature of knowledge creation (McNiff, 2013). The methodology of this study foregrounds relationships between stakeholder groups in graduate employability, developing intersubjective understandings that will, for each individual, be contextualised to their own experiences and position in wider contexts of employment. Together, they seek to develop practice as a means of fostering such individualised yet community-driven understandings. Therefore this alignment goes beyond my epistemological stance and an action research methodology, also encompassing the theoretical basis of this study, CoPs and situated learning (Lave and Wenger, 1991).

McTaggart positions action research ‘as different from traditional empirical-analytic and interpretative research in both its dynamism and its continuity with an emergent practice’ (McTaggart, 1994, p.315). This dynamism is advantageous to me as a teacher, seeking to adapt my ongoing practice rather than relying on retrospective evaluations. For students, the opportunity to participate in a learning community and support positive impacts on their own learning is an incentive to engage (Kuh, 2008).

McTaggart’s (1994) extended definition of action research, and the more recent criteria for action research selected by Arnold and Norton (2018) for the UK Higher Education Academy’s ‘Action Research: Practice Guide’, suggest the following as identifying characteristics of action research:

- Action research changes *practice* through problem-solving and knowledge generation

- Which is dependent upon *theoretical* development, informed by theory and generating new insights
- Requiring practitioner-researchers to be *reflexive*, questioning their own personal assumptions/understandings and professional practice and how these develop over the course of the research
- Through *collaboration* within social situations, recognising the roles, rights and development of others engaged in the practice/research
- In the context of the immediate group/practice, the institution and wider society in which the phenomenon occurs
- As a means of achieving social justice.

It is these characteristics that clearly address my second and third criteria for an appropriate methodology to develop my own professional practice and engage stakeholders both collaboratively and ethically in addressing the issue of graduate employability. The ethical benefits will also be discussed further in section 3.6.

Finally, McTaggart (1994, p.317) describes how action research improves the 'rationality, justice, coherence and satisfactoriness of (a) [the researchers'] own social practices, (b) their understanding of these practices, and (c) the institutions, programmes and ultimately the society in which these practices are carried out'. It is the innate 'satisfactoriness' of a collaborative, practice-informed approach that perhaps most appeals to me as a teacher.

3.3.3. *The practice of action research*

Action research typically adopts cycles of planning, action, observation and reflection (or evaluation) that characterise the practice of the methodology (Figure 3.1), and incrementally improve both practice and understanding through this 'practical yet systematic method' (Nolen and Putten, 2007). McTaggart (1994) warns against slavish adoption of cycles, instead focusing on the practical, theoretical and other advantages outlined above, however these cycles provide scope for the research to develop over the course of the study into a spiral of activity. This allows objectives, methods and focus to develop as more is known, as early research objectives are

achieved and new ones uncovered, or where interventions fail to produce the expected results.

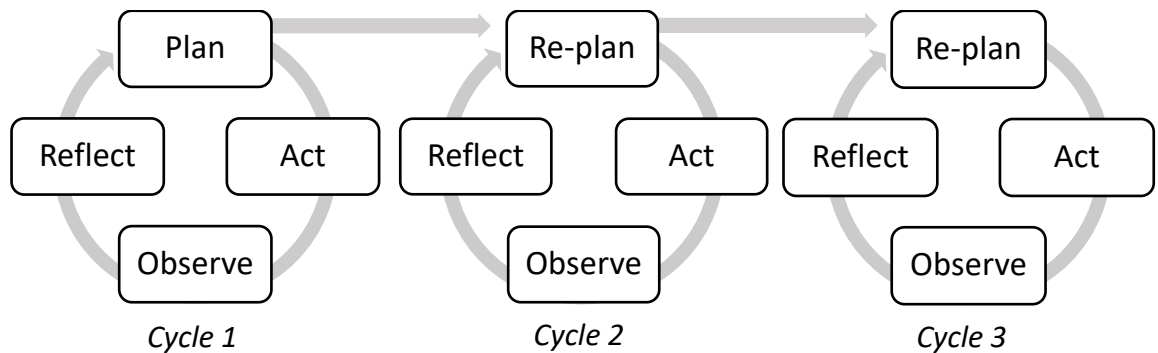


Figure 3-1 Spirals of action research (McNiff, 2013)

Cohen, Manion and Morrison's (2011) review of action research studies across health, social care, education and beyond broke these cycles down into more distinct stages upon which this study was based (Figure 3.2). This study, therefore, followed Cousin's (2009) suggestion that the best way to understand a problem is to adapt practice whilst monitoring its impact and engaging in dialogue, giving rise to further practical and theoretical understanding. How action research enables this interplay between practice and theory is now explored, with consideration of the social justice that is inherent in this process of praxis.

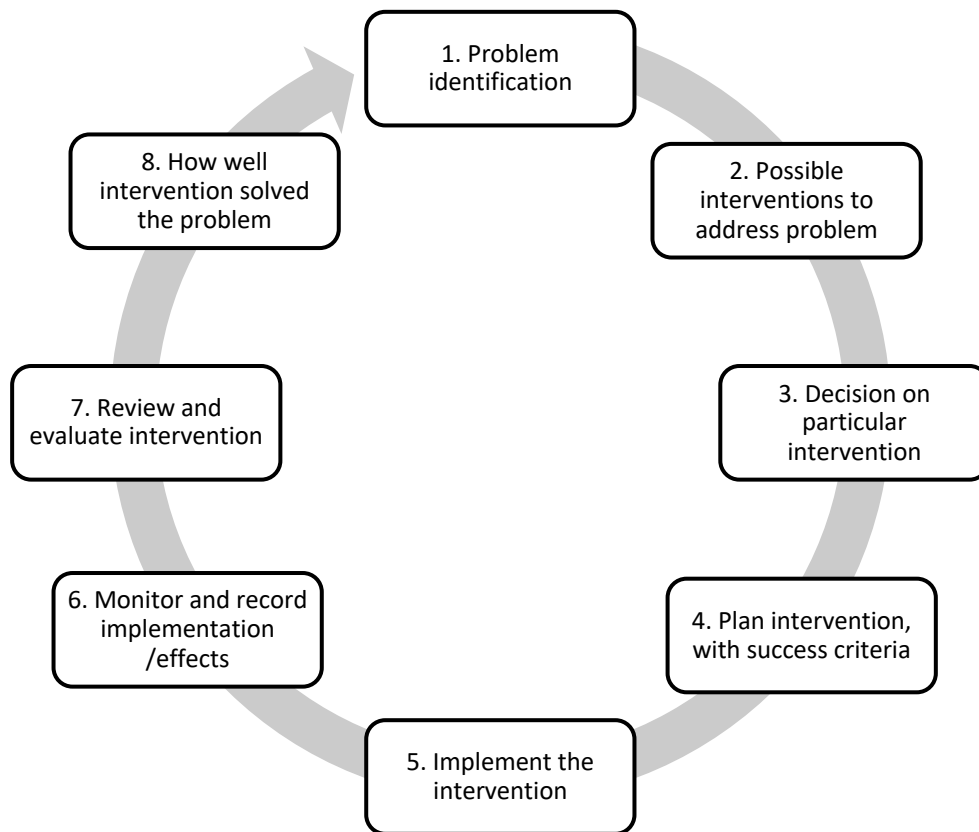


Figure 3-2 A Framework for Action Research (adapted from Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011)

3.3.4. Developing practice and theory: praxis

The role of action research in this study has, so far, been described in terms of its practical impact. Its role in the development of theory is described here as an element of praxis.

For authors such as Kemmis (2009), practice lies at the heart of action research, as it changes ‘practitioners’ practices, their understandings of their practices, and the conditions in which they practise’ (p.463). For Kemmis et al. (2014, p.31) practice is ‘comprehensible in terms of arrangements of relevant ideas in characteristic discourses (sayings), and when the people and objects involved are distributed in characteristic arrangements of relationships (relatings), and ... this complex of sayings, doings and relatings ‘hangs together’ in a distinctive human social project’. This provides a framework through which to analyse practice. The situatedness of this definition of practice in social contexts aligns with that of the situated learning, further endorsing the suitability of action research to explore the phenomenon.

Kemmis, citing the work of Hadot (1995), argues that a 'philosophical life' goes beyond theorising about doings, sayings and relatings, and *practises* these 'in ways that are wise and prudent' (Kemmis, 2009, p.465), informed by theory. Here, at the interface of practice, theory and ethics, *praxis* arises (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2010) with implications, in this case, both for how teaching is enacted and its ethical worth (Carr, 2005, Elliott, 2009, each citing Aristotle, 1955). Such focus on action and moral outcomes arises from a fundamentally different type of knowledge to the *sophian* knowledge of traditional research methodologies, based in theoretical wisdom gleaned from retrospective data analysis and meaning making. *Phronesis*, or practical wisdom, occurs where theory is derived from, and invested back through, practice through creative, yet rational, and overall 'right' (ethically speaking) judgement and action i.e. *praxis* (Kinsella and Pitman, 2012). *Praxis* does not exclude purely theoretical development, but situates theory in morally informed practice, as a defining characteristic of action research (McNiff, 2013).

Positioning myself within *praxis*, rather than purely practice or purely theory, acknowledges my role as a stakeholder and participant in the research process (Kemmis, 2012), engaging in cycles of meaning-making and exploration through action. Over time, Hammack (1997) hopes this becomes a matter of habit for practitioners, the right thing to do for their students, and as a commitment to the development of the wider discipline. Furthermore, *praxis* has deeper implications for the identity of the practitioner, as 'praxis is always as much a process of self-formation as it is a matter of achieving an external goal or satisfaction' (Kemmis, 2009, p.465), achieved, in part, through reflection.

3.3.5. *Reflective processes*

Reflection is built into models of action research, in reviewing and evaluating each cycle, however there are distinctions between reflections on practice, and reflection on oneself, one's assumptions and one's practices (McNiff, 2002). Schön (1987), when discussing reflection on practice, emphasised two reflective processes: reflection *in* action and reflection *on* action, both of which occur over the course of this study. Reflection in action accounts for the tacit processes that occur during practice,

guiding decisions made during action and realisations made at that time. An example includes realisations made during an interview and incorporated into the ongoing interview as a verbal reminder for me when transcribing. Reflection *on* action takes place retrospectively, for example through interviews about the group discussions (while simultaneously reflecting in action for the interview itself) and while writing this thesis.

However, the role of reflection for myself and other participants may be transformative. As described above, praxis encompasses the significant tradition of the reflective practitioner in action research, as a process of self-formation as a means achieving improvement in practice (Lewin, 1934, cited in Adelman, 1993; Lewin, 1946; Dewey, 1933). Dunne (1993). McNiff (2002) compared 'traditional forms of research, where researchers do research on other people... to action research [where] researchers do research on themselves... Action research is an enquiry conducted by the self into the self'. This is not confined to the researcher, and Kemmis, McTaggart and Norton (2014) widen the concept of reflectivity to include development of meaning and purpose for *participants*, structured by their lived experience through space, time and often professional functions (in this case, student and employer roles) throughout the research.

Finally, practice itself is inherently reflective, engaging participants in practical reasoning (Kemmis et al., 2014). I aim for explicit exposure to a teacher's reflective practice to prompt participants to recognise assumptions of existing practices and develop new criticality through observation of the process, with focus on the process of inquiry as much as its outcomes for all stakeholders (Reason and Bradbury, 2001).

McTaggart (1994, p.317) argues that 'action research has an individual aspect - action researchers change themselves, and a collective aspect - action researchers work with others to achieve change and to understand what it means to change'. This suggests the potential for identity development through action research for both academic researchers, and others involved in the process.

3.3.6. Collaborative and contextual approaches

As discussed above, action research is inherently collaborative through the engagement of stakeholders in ongoing practice and reflection within a communicative space (Kemmis, 2009). Ideally, this study would have adopted a *critical* action research approach, defined as a collective undertaking reliant upon joint decision making, and an exploration of the underlying social realities by the collective with a view to change that social world (Kemmis, 2009). The module design did not allow time for participants to be trained in research or engage in activities outside timetabled sessions to become fully participatory researchers: the protocol and required ethical approvals were in place before the students even joined the university. This study is, therefore, characterised as *practical* action research, characterised by collaboration rather than true collegiality with students and employers (Cornwall and Jewkes, 1995). In practical action research the voices of others involved are listened to, and some decisions reached together, and the practitioner aims to act wisely and prudently through a 'transitive, reciprocal relationship' (Kemmis, 2009, p.470). This approach has limitations in terms of truly engaging stakeholders' voices and actions, but provides a realistic approach where I can offer participants 'a sense of control of their own work' McTaggart (1994, p.325).

Notwithstanding these issues, however, action research offers ethical, philosophical, theoretical and practical advantages as a form of social enquiry in this context, through exploring the experiences of participants in this social setting and empowering students in decision making affecting them and similar others. In the context of the traditionally asymmetric power dynamic of the seminar and many other forms of research, this has positive implications in terms of inclusion and representation of the student voice.

3.3.7. Issues with action research

Despite these appealing aspects of action research, there remain concerns that this study cannot address. Ultimately, this study does not impact practice beyond this seminar, and more controversially can be accused of reinforcing the political and neoliberal norms of employability policy, discussed in Chapter 2. This echoes early

and ongoing criticism of Lewin's work with employees in factories as a means of ensuring corporate excellence (Adelman, 1993, citing Blake and Moulton, 1968). More recent thinking positions action research as a tool to harness grassroots efforts and create dialogue between stakeholder groups (Somekh and Zeichner, 2009), generating 'globalisation from below' (Appadurai, 2001, p.16) and engaging with social justice. While this study is limited in its reach, it sheds light on assumptions around employability and awakens my own, and perhaps participants' understanding: a first step to greater social change.

Historically, action research was criticised as 'only problem-solving ('easy hobby games for little engineers'); was statistically unsophisticated; did not lead to defensible generalisation; did not help to create a system of theory; and was practised (and not very well) by amateurs' (McTaggart, 1994, p.323, citing Hodgkinson, 1957). Action research was dismissed largely a common-sense approach rather than a methodology in its own right. Here I employ qualitative research approaches, such as semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis, with documented standards of practice across research traditions, described in detail below and further validated through processes of triangulation and member checking.

In terms of trustworthiness, Elliott (2009) argues that educational action research findings are 'universal rules of thumb' (p.35), to be continuously tested in each new application but as elements of an evolving theory of education. Other practitioners build upon these findings and apply their own judgement, in order to 'develop and codify the knowledge base of teaching' through real world research (Hammack, 1997, p.247). This is discussed further in section 3.7.

3.4. Research Design

The research methods employed in this study are designed to support the action research approach and to answer the research questions outlined in Chapter 2. A mixed methods approach was used gather sufficient data at appropriate timepoints, and for triangulation of methods (interviews, group discussions and portfolios) and data sources (participants) (Patton, 1999). Semi-structured interviews and group

discussions, and materials produced through them, were used to provide insights into stakeholders' perspectives related to the three research questions, including understanding stakeholders' perceptions of employability and named graduate attributes and how these developed over the course of the study; identification of key barriers and motivations to engagement with employability education for business undergraduate students, and factors in the development of these; identification and development of pedagogic approaches that support the development of employability skills in comparable HE scenarios; and understanding how cocreation between stakeholders in a CoP impacts upon the development of understandings and intentions related to employability, and its pedagogic benefits and issues. Table 3-1 summarises this action research approach, showing: reflection through data collection and analysis; the role of group discussion cocreation discussions in planning; the implementation of action and simultaneous observation through seminar sessions without employers and the next group discussion; final reflection of the action research cycles and Stage One analysis (see section 3.5.2); and retrospective Stage Two analysis (see section 3.5.3).

| Stage of analysis | Action research stage | Cycle stage | Data collection tools/ actions of intervention |
|--|--------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| <p style="text-align: center;">Stage One: in action</p> | <p>Cycles 1-3</p> | <p>Reflect (data collection)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student and employer semi-structured interviews • Student reflective portfolios (excluding cycle 1) • Group discussion: discussion of research to date, reflection on topic of that cycle's group discussion) |
| | | <p>Plan</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group discussion (cocreation) • Academic lead planning for intervening seminar sessions and upcoming group discussion |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------|---|
| | | Act/observe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervening seminar sessions without employers • Group discussions (act of student-employer interaction around defining employability skills) |
| | Final reflection | Reflect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student and employer semi-structured interviews • Student reflective portfolios (excluding cycle 1) • Group discussion (discussion of research to date, reflection on topic of that cycle's group discussion) |
| Stage Two analysis: on action | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retrospective thematic analysis of all portfolios, interviews and group discussion transcripts and artefacts |

Table 3-1 Summary of research design

Students' reflective portfolios employed both quantitative estimates of skill levels and qualitative personal reflection on these. These provided further insight into the first research question of understanding stakeholders' perceptions of employability and named graduate attributes, and how these developed over the course of the study.

The final data source was my own research diary, documenting reflections made over the course of the study across all research objectives, developed while conducting, transcribing or, for students' reflective portfolios, marking their assessments. Each of these data collection methods is described in detail below.

3.4.1. Context: the module, cohort and employers

The study was located within a first-year marketing skills module for which I was module leader. The module was required for the first year of an undergraduate marketing communications degree programme which adopted problem-based learning and other forms of practical engagement (Wood, 2003). Two-thirds of the

module focused upon 'hard' skills, such as use of graphic design packages and copywriting, and one-third was dedicated to soft skills: the soft skills component was the focus for this study. This module was delivered through fortnightly three-hour sessions during the autumn and spring semesters of the 2018-19 academic year (13 sessions in total), integrating three formative (and partially summative) assessment points. The reflective portfolio submissions included students' reflection on the soft skills element of the module and their practical work (the latter excluded from this study).

The cohort had 20 students at the outset, and two left the programme within the first semester. This was a relatively diverse cohort with students from Asia, the Middle East, Europe and the UK, and two mature students.

3.4.2. The intervention

The fortnightly delivery allowed time within the timetabled three-hour sessions for students to engage with employers through group discussions four times over the course of the module. I facilitated each group discussion to prompt discussion on themes arising from the previous group session, interim sessions and interviews. The group discussions incorporated group decision-making about the soft skill(s) for focus over the next cycle, and the pedagogic approaches to do this, through cocreation exercises. There was time between sessions for me to adapt the soft skills content as the objectives between sessions to develop content in response to students' and employers' agreed skills priorities and methods, and facilitate this in the intervening timetabled sessions. As described below, this provided a valuable opportunity for the integration of action research data gathering, planning, reflection and implementation of approaches suggested through the group discussions. The assessment points and timetabled sessions content is shown in Appendix 2.

Group discussions created a space in which all stakeholders could contribute to discussion and speak directly with each other. My facilitation sought to foster these relationships, creating smaller groups to work more closely with employers on occasion, and also allowing stakeholders to work alone, then in pairs, and then within small groups through a 'think pair share' approach. For example this technique was

used in the first group discussion for unprompted ‘first thoughts’ to identify employability skills and rank their prioritisation by employers. A variety of media and exercises were used in the sessions, both contributing to the discussion and acting as data artefacts, described in section 3.5.2 below.

3.4.3. Research and teaching schedules

As an action research study, the cycles of teaching and research dovetailed. Recruitment for the study and first interviews took place before the first group discussion. Thereafter, each research cycle concluded/started with each round of student assessment and group discussions, until the final assessment submission, group discussion and interviews.

The schedule of activity and interplay between the teaching and research is outlined in Appendix 2. Group discussions straddled a role in action (as a learning opportunity), observation (in action reflection), reflection (on action reflection) and planning (cocreation). The intervening class sessions were informed by the previous group discussion session and constituted action and observation (in action reflection). The overlaps in roles of sessions and data collection activities reflect the constraints of delivering a participatory action research approach within timetabled sessions. Interviews were moved from before group discussions to after group discussions in the final two data collection periods to avoid clashes with students’ assessment periods.

3.4.4. Sampling strategy and recruitment

In accordance with the action research approach, everyone engaged in the practice, was invited to participate, representing the key stakeholder groups: students, employers, careers staff and me, as the module leader.

All students in the module cohort were provided with a verbal introduction and printed study information sheets about the research in their first week at university (before teaching commenced), with opportunities to ask questions in person at that time, or to contact myself or the programme leader by email. The programme leader acted as an independent third party in case students wished to discuss any concerns.

Students were invited to participate in the study at one of two levels, or choose not to participate. The two levels were:

Level 1: As a research group participant:

- Participating in semi-structured student interviews at each of the four data collection points
- Agreeing to the recording of group discussions in which they participated and the use of the resulting transcripts and any written, drawn or online materials arising from these (henceforth known as artefacts).
- And allowing the use of the skills reflections, submitted in their assessment reflective portfolios three times during the module.

Level 2: As a class participant:

- Agreeing to the recording of group discussions in which they participated and the use of the resulting transcripts and artefacts arising from these.
- And allowing the use of the skills reflections, submitted in their assessment reflective portfolios three times during the module.

Of a cohort of twenty, one student left the programme before the first group discussion (and submission of consent), and a second was largely absent despite giving consent. Four students consented to participate as research group participants (level 1), and fourteen consented to participate as class participants (level 2), therefore eighteen students participated in the research over the two semesters. An additional opportunity to engage was offered at the start of the final cycle, for students who may have perceived a missed opportunity, but none changed their level of participation.

The two employers were identified through judgement sampling with the advice of academic colleagues, based upon their willingness to participate in the study, the appropriateness of their job roles as 'old timers' in the field of marketing, and their availability to participate in all group discussions and interviews. Only after

recruitment did I realise that both were also alumni of the business school in which the study was conducted. Two university careers consultants were approached as part of the team that support undergraduate modules within the faculty.

Both the employers and careers consultants were invited to participate at one of the two levels described above (excluding the reflective portfolios) and all chose to become research group participants, participating in interviews at each of the four stages, and allowing use of data from the group discussions, their transcripts and artefacts. Having two of each group allowed flexibility should there be issues with sickness or clashes with other responsibilities. However, both careers' consultants withdrew from the study due to sickness and workload.

The final participant was me, as module leader, practitioner-researcher and what Kemmis (2012) would describe as a co-habitant of the site of practice, with interdependent relationships with other stakeholders and my own identity, both mediated in and through the practice.

3.4.5. Data collection methods

This section describes the methods used to conduct the semi-structured interviews, group discussions, and reflective portfolios that formed the data collections points for this study, and the research diary that accompanied this longitudinal study.

3.4.5.1. Interviews

Semi-structured, in-depth interviews were used to gather data relevant to all three research questions. While interviews can take a number of forms, including structured, narrative or unstructured (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), semi-structured interviews were chosen to allow probing of participants' understandings and exploration of underlying feelings and emotions (Morse and Richards, 2002). Interviews were based upon moderators' guides tailored to each stakeholder group, allowing consistency of questioning to achieve stimulus equivalence (Oppenheim, 1992). Sample moderator's guides from student and employer interviews are provided in Appendices 3.1 and 3.2 respectively. Stimulus equivalence ensures that interviewees understand interview questions in much the same way, though never

perfectly in such a socially-constructed interaction. This also allows flexibility to explore unanticipated themes that arise and change the sequence of questions to reflect participants' own emerging 'structure and process' (Hays and Singh, 2012, p.239), while ensuring all topics are included. Further probing questions were frequently used to further explore or clarify interviewees' responses, allowing spontaneity and exploration, and encouraging a flow of discussion yet prioritising interviewees' perspectives.

Interviewing is further suited to this study as, itself, a site of social practice and meaning making between interviewer and interviewee, forming accounts based upon memory, interpretation and interaction between interviewee and interviewer and, to a lesser extent, a report of that individual's lived experience (Brinkmann and Kvale, 2015). As such, interviews are subject to power-relations and social distance, between student and lecturer as well as interviewee and interviewer. Interviews may also elicit different interpretations of an event, and avoidance of uncomfortable topics or other traits of socially desirable responding (Cicourel, 1964). Approaches such as developing rapport, projective techniques and assurances of the value of honest and open responses were used, moving from broad, less sensitive topics to more specific and sensitive ones over the course of each interview. Projective techniques included asking how other students might feel, rather than asking the student what *they* might feel about a situation, allowing them to project their answers onto others and avoid social discomfort. Tasks, such as rearranging attributes, written on pieces of paper, into order of perceived priority while discussing the decision-making process 'enable[ed] multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.409). These attributes were taken from Burning Glass™ database analysis of common attributes for marketing job advertisements, provided through the university careers service, and the full list is provided in Appendix 3.3. The moderator's guides were adapted in each cycle to reflect emerging themes from earlier cycles, with ethical approval confirmed for each update.

Each interview lasted between 45-75 minutes, with two (for one employer) taking place via telephone and the remainder in person. Each was audio-recorded and then transcribed. The attributes rankings exercise was captured in photographs for later analysis and coding.

3.4.5.2. Group discussions

The group discussions took place as part of the module, as described in section 3.4.2. As this was part of regular timetabled sessions, students' attendance was not mandatory. Data artefacts included: original unprompted skills identified on handwritten cards (transcribed and compiled in appendix 9.1); an online 'noticeboard' (Padlet) (appendix 9.2); sticky note votes on wall-mounted posters detailing alternative pedagogic methods (appendix 9.3); individual handwritten cards for the definition of the attributes identified on the online notice board (transcribed in appendix 10.1); and online quiz outputs capturing personal motivations for choice of teaching methods and choice of next teaching focus (appendices 10.2 and 10.3). Neither the online noticeboard nor the polling software required any personal details and remained anonymous.

Group discussions followed no defined data collection method and were not focus groups. Their function was primarily as a community space for learning between students, employers, and me, and as such the data gathered through these discussions was serendipitous rather than planned for the purposes of data collection or to convey meaning. That said, they offered a rich wealth of dialogue, personal reflection and the exploration of concepts arising within the community.

Each group discussion was recorded, using two separate recorders for when the class worked in groups with each employer. The recordings were then transcribed in preparation for analysis and coding, and outputs from the media detailed above were either transcribed or used as photographs or screenshots.

3.4.5.3. Reflective portfolios

All students consented to the inclusion of one element of their assessment as data in the study, which was a self-evaluation included in each of their three reflective e-

portfolio submissions over the course of the module. These were submitted at the end of each cycle with no baseline measure. Each submission used a customised template in which students could identify, unprompted, up to 20 soft skills and frame them in their own words. For each skill they chose, students rated their skill level out of 5 (5 being excellent and 0 being 'no skill at all'), and wrote a free text reflection. This reflection was expected to describe the skill in their own words, why they had given themselves that score, and their plans for developing those skills from that current self-evaluated level. As for the group discussions, the primary function of these portfolios was for assessment of the students' achievement of learning outcomes on the module, and in no way was the format or content designed to prioritise the needs of data collection for this study.

While the ratings appear to be quantitative, the 5-point scale and small sample size (n=18) meant that, from the outset, the ratings were used as additional qualitative data source with no planned statistical analysis. The focus was principally on the qualitative reflections.

3.4.5.4. Research diary

McNiff (2013) recommends keeping a research diary as part of the action research process to 'monitor your thinking' (p.105). Research diaries are, at heart, an ethnographic review of one's own research and practice over the course of the study (Burgess, 1981). My research diary started in an e-portfolio format, moved to a Word document, and also included a handwritten notebook which could be at hand at all times (though not during interviews or group discussions, where I chose to focus upon facilitating the task in hand). I routinely wrote in this diary in note form, including notes on transcriptions, aiming to capture thoughts as they occurred. The diary was used in writing this thesis, however, that writing process was the most significant reflective exercise undertaken as part of this study, reflecting on the totality of the journey from proposal to submission. Often overlooked as part of any methodology, this process should not be underestimated for the analysis it brings to the research and the researcher, 'the enquiry conducted by the self into the self' (McNiff, 2002).

3.4.6. Data management

As described above, the data across the research methods consisted of audio-recordings, word-processed transcripts of these, photographs of paper-based activities in the interviews and group discussions, screenshots of work on the online noticeboard and the polling software, research diary across a Word document, e-portfolio and notebook, and typed e-portfolio entries and ratings from students.

All audio-recordings, photographs and screenshots were transferred to secure, cloud-based storage via a password-protected University drive immediately after collection. The transcripts and research diary were created and kept in the same online password-protected space in accordance with the university's research ethics policy. The reflective portfolio ratings and reflections were submitted into an alternative password protected and secure space for assessments, and the reflections then downloaded as PDFs and held in the same secure, password-protected, cloud-based storage as the transcripts, ready for analysis and coding.

3.5. Data analysis

3.5.1. Outline of analysis approach

This study uses methods triangulation, drawing together interviews, group discussions and reflective portfolios, and data source triangulation, principally with the four student and two employer interviewees over the course of the study (Patton, 1999). Two stages of analysis were employed, each using all data sources, and echoing Schön's (1987) stages of reflection in their focus. The first, predominantly 'in action' stage occurred both in the moment of collecting the data, for instance while conducting an interview, and when immersed in the data collection/reflection phase for each cycle. This took place while I was teaching and gathering data, with a short time frame for action to be taken in the next timetabled session, and therefore identified only the most salient themes and issues.

The second stage 'on action' phase took place after data collection was completed. I undertook a full thematic analysis of the data, analysed each participant's interviews sequentially through the cycles to trace their journeys, and the same was done for

the group discussions. This contrasted to the approach take across each cycle at the first stage, and brought new findings to light, and both approaches are illustrated in

Figure 3-3. These phases are now described in detail.

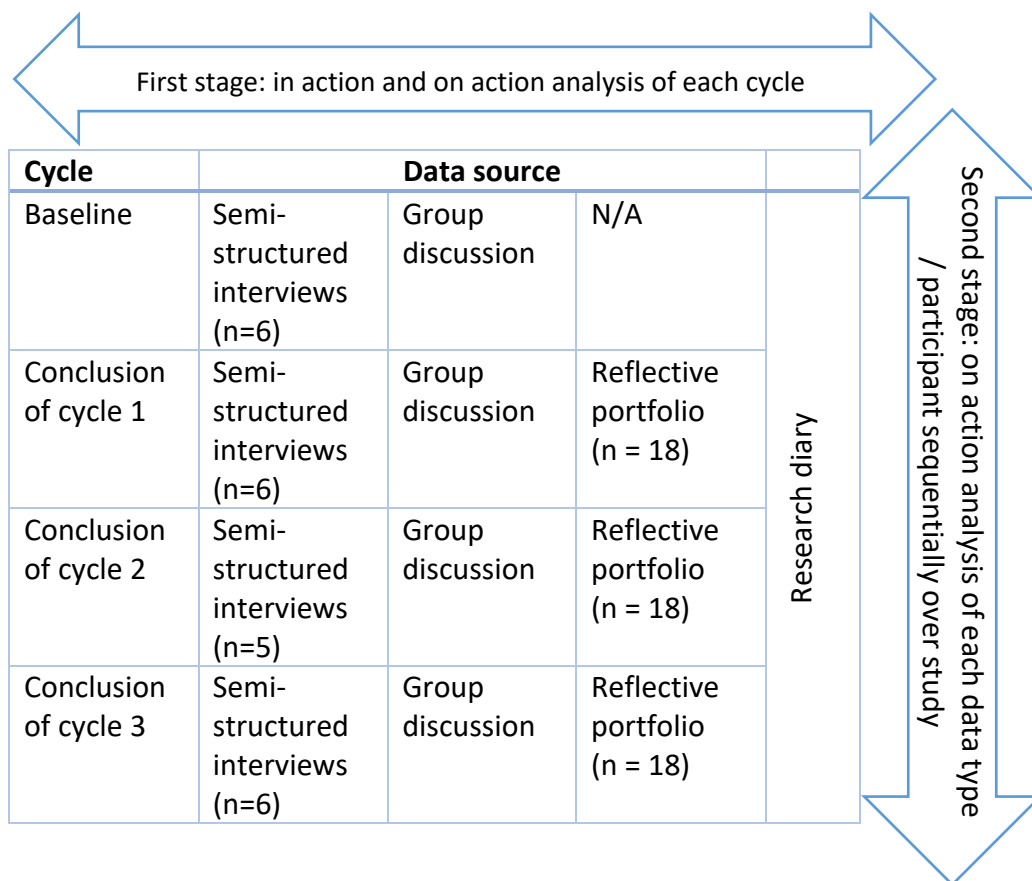


Figure 3-3 In action and on action data analysis approaches

3.5.2. Stage One analysis

Stage one analysis was an informal process, undertaken without transcription, through observation of group discussions and interviews, verbal cues for the audio recorder in group discussions and interviews (as described above), notes made in the research diary and actions taken forward into teaching. This sense-making occurred as new data corroborated ideas arising in previous sessions or new concepts emerged. The order of interviews, group discussions and portfolio submissions changed within each cycle, dependent upon individuals’ availability and assessment submission dates. The purpose of this analysis was principally to inform the next action research cycle, although notes were also used in the second stage analysis. I presented my preliminary analysis of the interviews, previous group discussion and reflective portfolios back in the next group discussion, alongside a recap on their previous decisions on topics and learning approaches. This served two purposes: firstly, this is a form of member checking, asking all participants to raise concerns where my interpretation did not fit their recollection secondly, this invited all

stakeholders to reflect on the findings so far when determining topics and learning approaches for the next cycle, while maintaining anonymity for participants. This facilitated a dialogic relationship between theory/research and practice/action, as the dyadic relationships between these supports meaning making for participants that evolves with the research McAteer (2013).

3.5.3. Stage Two analysis

Kvale (1996, p.176) posed the 'one-thousand-page question': how does the researcher make sense of a thousand pages of transcripts that they have created? The data arising from this study included twenty-three interview transcripts and artefacts, four group discussion transcripts and artefacts, forty-five reflective portfolio entries and my research diary notes: 1085 pages in total. While Kvale (1996) encouraged the researcher to consider the demands of analysis before data collection and minimise this issue, however the value of triangulation and the depth of enquiry merited the volume and variety of data. A systematic thematic analysis approach was required to analyse this data with sufficient depth and care, and this took place over the second stage of analysis.

Thematic analysis is an effective means of distilling the numerous and diverse concepts and viewpoints arising from the research into core themes that support sense-making of the study for the reader. Defined simply as a means of identifying, analysing and reporting patterns in data, the process of analysis is also one of interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998). This is also an essential step in triangulating the multiple data sources for a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena, and to enhance the credibility and validity of research findings (Patton, 1999).

Two thematic analysis frameworks were combined for this study (Figure 3-4). Creswell's (2009) Model of Qualitative Data Analysis informed the earlier stages of the process, for organising the data, and suggesting the generation of description, alongside themes, and the process of ongoing validation. This captured research diary notes and data that did not fit into the dominant themes yet had relevance to the research questions. Braun and Clarke's (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach guided most of the analysis, providing a flexible approach to working with different

data types, compatible with a social constructionist ontology. Themes are not ‘found’ but interpreted from the data by the researcher, through a largely inductive process (Patton, 2015). Therefore, this is not a process of ‘excavating’ themes waiting to be discovered but an understanding that the meaning is socially constructed at the ‘intersection of the researcher, the dataset, and the analytic and data contexts’ (Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.45). My approach is described in depth below and follows Braun and Clarke’s (2022) model: familiarisation; developing and reviewing themes; refining, defining and naming themes; and final analysis and clarification through the writing process. Each stage of Braun and Clarke’s (2022) reflexive thematic analysis approach is now used to describe the process used in this study.

3.5.3.1. (Re-)familiarisation

The COVID pandemic started shortly after data collection was completed, while the artificial intelligence (AI) transcription and familiarisation stage were in progress. This delayed analysis considerably, therefore the ‘familiarisation’ stage suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022) became essential as a process of re-familiarisation with the data. AI created transcripts with numerous errors but appropriate formatting for integration with the computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software (CAQDAS) package at the coding stage. I re-immersed myself in the data by revising and completing the transcripts while listening to each interview and group discussion recording. I added notes where emphasis or non-verbal interactions occurred.

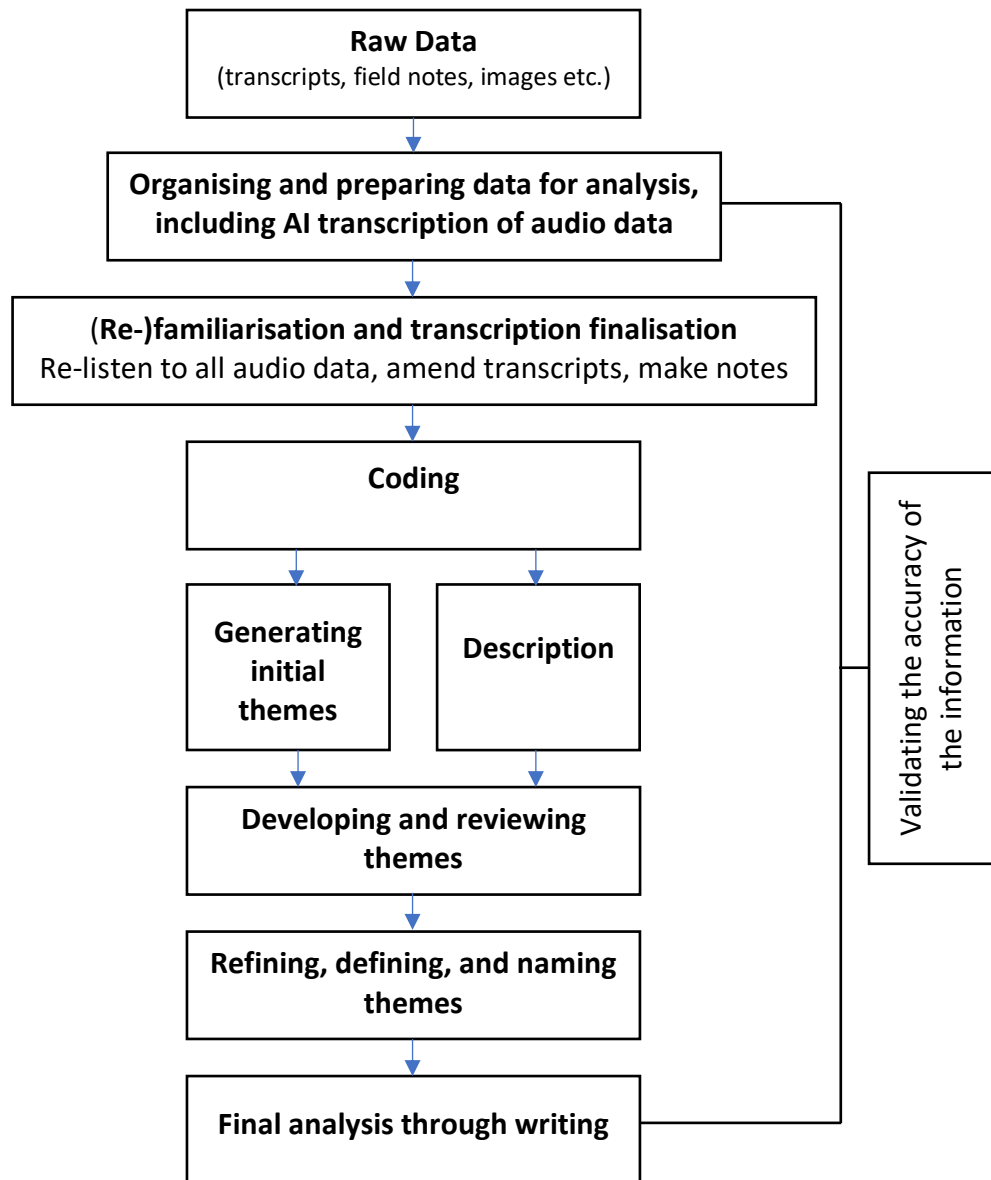


Figure 3-4 Stepwise analysis process, adapted from Creswell (2009) and Braun and Clarke (2022)

Interviews with one participant at a time were transcribed, reviewing their journey over the four interviews (three interviews for John) and the three cycles of action research. The group discussions were also analysed sequentially, and the artefacts analysed alongside as they arose in the transcript. I supplemented the research diary entries made after each interview/discussion, ‘critically engag[ing] with the information as *data*, rather than simply as information’ as suggested by Braun and Clarke, 2022, p.42. These notes suggested potential patterns (codes and themes) across the dataset as well as descriptively charting individuals’ journeys, making

sense, and posing questions. I used the questions suggested by Braun and Clarke (2022, p.44) to facilitate this critical engagement, including (paraphrased):

1. How does the person make sense of whatever it is they are discussing?
2. Why might they make sense of things this way?
3. How 'common sense' or socially normative is this depiction?
4. How would I feel if I was in that situation? (Is this different to how the person feels and why might that be?)
5. What assumptions so they make in depicting the world?
6. What kind of world is 'revealed' through their account?

For example, question 4 prompted consideration about how the employers and I felt when we were new students or graduates. Additionally, Braun and Clarke' (2022, p.45) reflexive questions drew attention to my own experience through the analysis, and its impact upon the findings.

1. Why might I be reacting to the data in this way?
2. What does my interpretation rely on?
3. What different ways could I make sense of the data?

3.5.3.2. Coding

I undertook a systematic process of coding, reading through each transcript, and manually tagging all segments of text that suggested meaning relevant to the research questions. These segments were allocated to code labels, suggesting more complex codes for later thematic analysis. Text could be tagged to multiple codes if multiple meanings were evident, parsing out focused codes with single meanings. NVivo CAQDAS was chosen for the flexibility it offered in coding and revising codes as more data was encountered, and for the ability to retrospectively review all the text tagged under each code label for further refinement. These codes evolved over the course of this phase, being revised, aggregated, divided or developed into hierarchies as more data was processed and meanings became more defined.

This study is largely inductive, as described above, but a deductive approach was used for themes related to CoP theory in this study (Patton, 2015). I purposefully searched

for data related to the foundations of CoPs, such as mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire (Wenger, 1998), to ascertain the legitimacy of the potential CoP under study. Codes included both semantic meaning i.e. explicit ideas made clear by participants, and latent meaning, i.e. implicit or conceptual levels of meaning interpreted from the data by the researcher (Boyatzis, 1998).

3.5.3.3. Generating initial themes

Initial themes were developed through a visual mapping exercise using pen and paper, drawing thematic maps from the codes identified in phase 2. I then used sticky notes to map them relative to each other, identifying themes and subthemes, aligning to each of the research questions. Some codes became themes themselves, for instance dread of employment, when merited by the weight of its meaning for the research question.

This phase balanced generating themes and interpreting patterned meaning, while relating this to the research questions (Braun and Clarke, 2022). Some codes were put aside, at least for the time being, if less relevant to the research questions, while considering whether they *should* be relevant and whether the research questions were appropriate, or if in fact these codes were not within the scope of this study. The descriptive research notes were developed in parallel over this stage, capturing observations that did not constitute themes.

3.5.3.4. Developing and reviewing themes

The data to be used in drafting Chapter 4 (Findings) was identified in this phase, reviewing all the coded data extracts. I returned frequently to the original dataset, through text searches and memories of specific interactions, to refine patterns of meaning and develop previously unrecognised nuance. The ongoing descriptive process of research notes informed this. This provided an opportunity to check the validity of the themes, cross-checking with the original quotes and other data, and further developed the richness of the themes into storied explanations and illustrations for the reader. Drawing out coded text to illustrate each theme in the Findings was a valuable process in reviewing the meaning ascribed during coding and initial theme generation. This ensured there was adequate data to evidence these

developing themes, and reviewed the merit of each theme for inclusion in the final analysis.

3.5.3.5. Refining, defining and naming themes

Determining a name and definition for each theme and subtheme occurred through the final clustering of data under each theme. This developed an overall structure and flow for Chapter 4, by refining themes to convey them convincingly and with clarity to the reader, and to prioritise themes that aligned with the research questions. This 'pinning down' of the data into structured themes finalised the thematic analysis, forcing precision and prompting final refinement of themes and subthemes.

3.5.3.6. Final analysis through writing

Analysis continued through re-writing Chapter 4, and the development of the Chapter 5 (Discussion), interspersing quotes and other data with interpretation, links to the literature, and consideration of the methodology of action research. Some quotes and other data were paraphrased or reduced to key phrases, to better illustrate key themes and demonstrate how they interconnected. This process of interpretation with respect to the research questions, and the wider scholarly field, advances the analytic narrative beyond simply illustrating the rationale for the thematic development, into a deeper understanding of the study and its implications for the reader.

3.6. Ethical considerations

3.6.1. Ethical issues in educational research and the context of this study

Educational research raises ethical issues due to the relationship between teachers and students. While, in HE, most students are over eighteen years of age and do not require parental consent, they are vulnerable to perceived pressures to participate or behave in certain ways given the control that researchers, if they are also teaching staff, may hold over grades and student experience. My key motivation for this study is to develop myself as a reflective practitioner, which necessarily utilises my own practice, seminars, and therefore students, to the benefit of these and future students but with potential ethical implications (Suter, 2006). This 'dual-relationship' with students, as both teacher and researcher (Hammack, 1997), is one of the

considerations of action research which means it provides 'an inelegant fit' with traditional ethical guidelines (Nolen and Putten, 2007, p.402). Therefore, the Ethical Guidelines of the British Educational Research Association (BERA) (2018) were used extensively to inform this study, as these were updated keep pace with advances in action research (BERA, 2018).

The dual relationship with students presents potential ethical issues for students' experience of recruitment, the validity of data collection and, most importantly, the quality of students' experience at the university both within the module and beyond (Hammack, 1997), a situation which Walton and Warwick (1973) termed 'role contamination'. Measures to address this are listed below, however, while my roles as researcher and teacher may 'contaminate' each other and vice versa, I am, inevitably, both. Groundwater-Smith and Mockler (2007) suggest that separating these roles is unrealistic and detrimental to the development of wider professional practice. Social identity theory informs the relationship between me as researcher and the researched (Hogg, 2010), and identities as learner and teacher, student and marker, and influences of age and power and, possibly, class, gender and/or ethnicity will have affected the dynamic of each relationship. The same would have been true for employers, therefore it was important to remain reflexive and maintain a 'simultaneous awareness of the self and the other, and of the interplay between the two' throughout the study (Rossman and Rallis, 2010, p.384), no matter which relationship was in play at the time.

The engagement of students and employers as decision-makers in action research presents both ethical advantages and challenges in comparison with other research methods. For example, poor joint decision-making regarding topics and learning approaches may impact negatively upon the quality of students' learning experience (BERA, 2018). This may arise if stakeholder groups hold conflicting objectives, or where there is an unequal balance of power between stakeholder groups. Finally, trialling novel interventions suggested by stakeholders may be risky. I play a key role as the facilitator of the group discussions and research lead to ensure all voices are heard and full discussion is undertaken, understanding risks and benefits of a

decision, before that decision is finalised. However, the ethical benefits may overshadow those of more traditional research approaches. Rowan (2000) terms this 'human inquiry', such as a qualitative research approach that focuses on communication, empathy and trust, but which positions the researcher as the lone decision-maker and 'stage manager' of the research process (Coghlan and Shani, 2005).

In contrast, action research is positioned in Rowan's (2000) 'third circle' of ethics, engaging participants in conducting and/or processing the research. In this study, key findings were shared on an ongoing basis with participants (member checks), to determine the next stage of the learning and teaching approach. While fully participatory action research, engaging students as co-researchers, would have been more 'profoundly democratic' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.37), the time and training required to enact this precluded such an inclusive approach. However the collaborative approach undertaken in the study maintains some of the democratic benefits and shift of power towards participants, and away from the researcher, than more traditional approaches (Nolen and Putten, 2007). Furthermore, engagement in action research enhances the research competencies of participants, whether students or employers, including understandings of the ethical issues associated with research and decision-making (Hult and Lennung, 1980, and provides a 'bigger picture' of university education, with positive impacts upon students' learning and perceptions of the value of their degrees (as observed in Creasey, 2013).

Other ethical considerations were related to the multiple modes of data collection in this longitudinal study, and the cyclical and evolving nature of the study over that time (Nolen and Putten, 2007; Suter, 2006). Students may forget that they have given consent, or not be fully informed at the time of data collection (Bournot-Trites and Belanger, 2005). Perceived exclusion or disempowerment may also be felt by students who did not choose to participate as interviewees early in the study (Gelling and Munn-Giddings, 2011). The use of students' assessment submissions as both data and a means to evaluate their understanding of the module content also needed clarification (BERA, 2018).

3.6.2. Ethical approval and steps taken over the study

Institutional ethical approval was sought and granted in advance of the commencement of the study, in July 2018, pending minor updates to the application which were confirmed and accepted in August 2018. This process reviewed: the research proposal, including recruitment and data collection methods; the documentation and processes supporting informed voluntary consent and ability to withdraw from the study; and the documentation to be used for data collection, namely interview guides. Additional approval for updated moderators' guides in later cycles, to approve changes made in response to findings in the first cycle, was granted in January 2019.

3.6.2.1. Recruitment, study information and consent

At the outset of the study, the students were approached during a short group induction session in their first week at university. In person, I outlined the purpose, value and processes of the research, emphasised the voluntary nature of a decision to participate and the ability to withdraw at any time, and made assurances of anonymity and confidentiality in future dissemination and protection of their data over the course of the study and beyond. A printed Participant Information Leaflet (PIL) was provided for each student (Appendix 4.1) reiterating these points, and emailed after as not all students were present at induction. The outline of the study repeated again in session 2 and attention drawn to the PIL. Signed consent forms (Appendices 4.3 for interviewees and 4.4 for class participants) were returned in session two, with the first group discussion in session 3 (see Appendix 2 for timeline of study). Students were encouraged to contact a third party, the programme leader, if they had any concerns. For the employers, telephone conversations were held over the summer about what to expect from the research, and PILs (Appendix 4.2) shared via email, with signed consent forms (Appendix 4.4) received before the first interview.

3.6.2.2. Ongoing consent

Consent from all participants was verbally reconfirmed before each group discussion and interview, after reiterating the key points of the study, assurances of anonymity and confidentiality, and ability to withdraw at any time. Reminders were given before

each assessment submission regarding the reflective portfolios, to allow opt out for individuals from submitting these as data sources. This ongoing consent ensured students were fully aware of all data collection points over this longitudinal study.

3.6.2.3. Anonymity and confidentiality

All data were anonymised, and pseudonyms used, before sharing with participants, supervisors and at conference presentations. Any details that may reveal the identity of a participant have been redacted or changed.

3.6.2.4. Personal Tutees

The only additional ethical issue that arose during the study was that some members of the research group and class group became my Personal Tutees. This occurred after I recruited students to the study so created no duress to participate. Those students had the potential to feel less comfortable about withdrawing from the study or feel a greater obligation to attend tutoring meetings. By this stage the first interview and group discussion had taken place, and I contacted students individually to ensure they were aware of the content of the PIL and how to raise any new concerns since consent was first given.

3.7. Trustworthiness

As a qualitative study, albeit through an action research methodology, Lincoln and Guba's (1985) concept of trustworthiness, characterised by criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability - and reflexivity about the self and method – was adopted. Each criterion is reviewed in the context of this study, using the list of techniques appropriate for each (Table 3-2). Description of the multitude of small ways in which the research methods have been designed to increase trustworthiness of the study have already been described, so this section reviews the strength of the overall research design approach and potential areas of concern.

3.7.1.1. Credibility

The credibility of the study, or internal validity, is reflected in the longitudinal nature of the study, methods and source triangulation, and volume of data described in section 3.5.3. These demonstrate commitment to accessing the participants'

understandings of the phenomena in hand. Like many of the criteria listed, prolonged engagement, persistent observation and triangulation were embedded in the study design from the outset. Member checks are also built into the study as the preliminary results each data collection phase were shared in group discussions, in preparation for decision-making for the next cycle of action, described in section 3.5.2.

| Criteria | Techniques |
|---|---|
| Credibility | Prolonged engagement Persistent observation Triangulation Peer debriefing Negative case analysis Referential adequacy Member checks |
| Transferability | Thick description |
| Dependability | Overlap methods Dependability audit |
| Confirmability | Confirmability audit |
| Reflexivity: In relation to all four criteria | Reflexive journal |

Table 3-2 Trustworthiness in qualitative research (Lincoln and Guba, 1985, p.301-327)

In analysis, negative case analysis is included in Chapter 4, in the case of Elena, to explore how her experience differed from the other three student interviewees. Peer debriefing is part of the supervision process for a doctorate, and a valuable means to sense-check findings as they arose, and interrogate and explore themes. This analysis helps to surface the most valuable insights from the wealth of data and the many possible themes.

Referential adequacy was the only element not used, as all the data was used in developing the themes and no part of the data reserved in this process.

3.7.1.2. Transferability

As action research is introduced in section 3.3, its value is positioned as situated in the particular social situation, with those involved in that situation, to develop practice and theory to change that situation (Winter and Munn-Giddings, 2001).

However, this does not preclude others finding resonance in this study with their own

situation and being able to adapt understandings from this study into potential practice elsewhere (Tracy, 2010). This measure of external validity can be assessed through thick description that captures the depth of meaning, complexity of context and journey of participants (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000). Extensive use of quotes in Chapter 4 (Findings) aims to convey this richness, so that the reader can develop confidence in the themes and theory I infer from the accumulated data.

3.7.1.3. Dependability

Triangulation has been discussed above, and the overlap of data collection methods provides a measure of reliability where different modes confirm common themes. As this chapter demonstrates, considerable care has been taken to ensure alignment between the philosophical approach, methodology and each aspect of research design to ensure a logical, traceable and clearly documented account of this study's methods.

3.7.1.4. Confirmability

As an insider-researcher, it is impossible to undertake this research without some implicit assumptions and unconscious biases, particularly in an area about which I am passionate (both teaching and employability) (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010). Therefore, reflexivity is an important component of these criteria and, amongst other factors, justifies the choice of reflexive thematic analysis as an analysis process. Consistent reference back to the data, a logical and methodical approach and clarity of that process for the reader can help build confidence in these Findings. However, as an insider researcher, and as a teacher, I also had 'easy access to people and information that can further enhance the knowledge' and 'have in-depth knowledge of the many complex issues' associated with pedagogy, employability and the marketing profession (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010, p.3), which an external researcher would likely lack. Action research provides an 'inelegant fit' not only with ethical guidelines but also trustworthiness criteria that seek objectivity in a process where all participants, including the researcher, are those enacting the situation under study.

3.7.1.5. Reflexivity

As discussed just above, reflexivity is built into the processes of action research and reflexive thematic analysis, and process of writing this thesis. Tracy (2010) characterises this as sincerity, capturing ‘the researcher’s biases, goals, and foibles’ (p.841), with honesty about the mistakes made in the research, and the joys. Chapters 6 aims to do this in providing an account of my personal journey, reviewing my strengths and shortcomings, however I hope this voice is apparent through much of this thesis.

Lincoln and Guba’s (1985) criteria have substantially influenced many later authors, and the work of Tracy (2010) has also been invaluable in informing this section. While, many measures were taken to improve the legitimacy of this research, the study remained susceptible to socially desirable responding. Defined as the tendency of respondents to reply in a manner that will be viewed favourably by others (Paulhus, 2001), socially desirable responding may be likely in this study due to students’ potential desire to please me, as their lecturer, or employers, as potential employers. Phillips and Clancy (1972) and Hays, Hayashi and Stewart (1989) identified two contributing factors, which are individual personality traits that seek approval of others and the demands of situation. Holtgraves, Eck, Laskey (1997) also considered the behaviour under investigation to be a factor, for instance socially desirable knowledge, socially undesirable behaviour, and socially desirable behaviour. In the case of potential employment opportunities, the latter may be pertinent. Measures will be taken to minimise socially desirable responding, such as elements of anonymity in group discussions, or projective techniques in interviews, however socially desirable responding will never be eliminated.

3.8. Summary of the chapter

In summary, this chapter has described my philosophical position, reasons for choosing action research and the measures taken as each step to improve the trustworthiness of the research. Consistent themes have been the ‘inelegant’ fit of action research with core tenets of qualitative research, such as many ethical guidelines (with the exception of BERA (2018)) and trustworthiness criteria. However

this chapter has also demonstrated the high degree of alignment between a position of social constructionism, an action research methodology and CoP theory, for their constructionist commonalities and basis in situated learning.

4. Findings and analysis

4.1. Introduction to chapter

This chapter presents the research findings of this longitudinal action research study. The study aims to explore the impact of a transitional Community of Practice within a first-year, marketing communications degree module upon students, employers and me, as the academic lead (the stakeholders), in order develop my own and others' pedagogic practice for the development of undergraduates' employability. The data collected included transcripts and artefacts from interviews and group discussions, students' reflective portfolios and my own research diary. Stage One analysis summarises the findings and actions during each action research cycle, and Stage Two uses reflexive thematic analysis to retrospectively explore the full dataset.

Participants' direct quotes and reflective portfolio commentaries are used to illustrate the reasoning underpinning the actions reviewed in Stage One, and the themes that were emergent in Stage Two, prioritising stakeholders' voices. Stage Two analysis is presented in two parts, as Themes 1 and 2 address students' perceptions of employment and barriers to engagement with employability, and Themes 3 and 4 explore the impact of employers over the module. The chapter commences with a review of participants' engagement with the study and the module.

4.2. The study

This section describes the characteristics of those who took part (the sample) and the level of engagement of students and employers with the group discussions. It then introduces the timeline of the study and how the action research developed over three cycles through the chosen soft skills, learning approaches and observations of prior cycles. The research questions focus explicitly on *soft skills*, defined in Chapter 2 as transferable, generic (and often interpersonal) graduate skills (Jackson, 2010).

Data collection points are referred to numerically, for example group discussion 1 is the first, baseline, discussion, and interview 4 is an interview from the fourth, and final, round of data collection. Quotes from group discussions are not identified to specific students (referred to as 'student') as it is not consistently possible to attribute quotes to specific speakers in noisy seminars. Employers' quotes in group discussions

are identified as they are recognisable. Portfolios are labelled alphabetically (not related to students' names).

4.2.1. Sample

The four students who opted to become interviewees included one international, two European students and a mature UK student. One European student was seventeen at the outset of the study and her first interview was delayed by a week until she turned eighteen and could give informed consent. The genders, ages (where known) and nationality of all participants, including employers, are shown in Table 4-1. In the remainder of the cohort, 8 were female and 6 male, all aged 18 at the start of the study except one 22-year-old male, 13 were British and one an international student.

Both employers had attended the institution in which the study was situated when it was a polytechnic, adding an unexpected but useful dimension to the study, discussed below. Of the interviewees, all students showed strong attendance except Elena, who missed the last two group discussions but attended most timetabled sessions (Table 4-2). For this reason, Elena's data is often used as a negative case analysis (section 3.1). Mia missed one group discussion due to sickness. Each employer missed a group discussion, but every group discussion had at least one employer present. A full schedule of participants' engagement with each data collection opportunity is shown in Appendix 5.

| Interview participant / role | Pseudo-nym | Age | Gender | Nationality | Job title (employers) |
|-------------------------------------|-------------------|------------|---------------|--------------------|--|
| Student Male 1 | Jack | 22 | Male | UK | |
| Student Male 2 | Azim | 19 | Male | International | |
| Student Female 1 | Mia | 18 | Female | EU | |
| Student Female 2 | Elena | 18 | Female | EU | |
| Employer 1 | Helen | | Female | UK | Managing Director, digital marketing agency |
| Employer 2 | John | | Male | UK | Marketing Director, international business-to-business company |

Table 4-1 Characteristics of sample

| | Group discussion attendance | | | |
|-------|-----------------------------|---|---|---|
| | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 |
| Jack | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Azim | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ |
| Mia | ✓ | ✓ | X | ✓ |
| Elena | ✓ | ✓ | X | X |
| Helen | ✓ | ✓ | ✓ | X |
| John | ✓ | ✓ | X | ✓ |

Table 4-2 Attendance of Interviewees in group discussions

As described in Section 3.5, this action research study had two stages of analysis. Stage One was performed in the short time frame of the data collection/reflection phase for each cycle, and Stage Two was performed retrospectively using reflexive thematic analysis on the full dataset. The results from Stage One are presented first.

4.3. Stage One analysis: in action analysis and action research summary

Stage One analysis used the data collected up to the time of each group discussion to inform my plan for the impending discussion, and the group's decision-making in that group discussion regarding the soft skills and learning approaches for focus in the next cycle. This then informed my preparation for the next skills-focused class sessions. Therefore each round of Stage One analysis used the data from the previous group discussion(s), latest interviews and portfolios (cycles 2, 3 and final reflection). In action analysis consisted of observations noted during interviews, discussions and while marking portfolios, and on action notes were made after these events. These identified topics consistently raised by students and employers, their degree of interest in the topic (or notable lack of interest), areas of disagreement or consensus, and my own estimation of what was important at that stage. Therefore, this stage is largely reported descriptively with some quotes that illustrate the rationale of the decision-making.

A written summary of the skills choices, learning approaches choices and the role of cocreation, engagement of participants with activities and the developing community, and a review of Stage One are now provided; Appendix 6 provides a

summary of each action research cycle and the activities in each stage of reflection, planning, action and observation, and the outcomes that determined the next cycle's activity.

4.3.1. Soft skills understandings and prioritisations

In cycle 1, students often prioritised the degree and hard skills over soft skills as employability assets. Students prioritised leadership and confidence more highly than employers, employers prioritised listening more highly than students, and all groups prioritised communication, teamwork and other interpersonal skills (Appendix 9). Employers had a high degree of agreement with each other. Over cycles 2 and 3, students significantly changed their prioritisations. Employers' storytelling about their own and others' experiences prompted students to recalibrate their understandings, and the employers consistently provided feedback to students (see section 4.5). This was reflected in students' choice of skills to reflect upon in their first portfolio submission, which was different to what had been identified in group discussion 1. By group discussion 4, students' prioritisations closely reflected the employers' original list in a concluding poll (Appendix 19).

I observed that students and employers were talking about skills differently in group discussion 1. In group discussion 2, participants wrote down their definitions of communication, confidence and leadership (as much discussed skills from group discussion 1) (Appendix 10). Students' definitions reflected less flexible and negotiated definitions than employers', for instance defining communications as telling people things correctly, but not including listening, or leadership as telling people what to do (Appendix 10). These differences were discussed and students' changing understandings were reflected in their language in later discussions and portfolios (section 4.4.3.1). The employers also explained how people across their teams expressed skills in different ways, and the importance of skillsets across teams, which helped students to reduce pressures on themselves to do things in a certain way.

The final part of each group discussion moved each cycle from the reflection stage to the action stage to choose the soft skills and learning approaches for the intervening

class sessions. Students' choice of skills for focus included communication (all three cycles), confidence (two cycles), teamwork (one cycle) and resilience (one cycle). Confidence was not an anticipated skill, and I had considered it a trait until this point, and this is discussed in Chapter 5. Students chose skills that were high on their lists of what employers wanted (after group discussion 1) but where students felt their personal skill levels were low in comparison. For example, Azim chose what would "benefit me the most" (interview 4), but Mia appreciated the process of sharing concerns with the cohort, creating a shared sense of commitment:

"as a group we decided what we...felt that we needed to do... It just makes you feel like, okay, I'm not alone" (Mia, interview 4)

Therefore, cocreation approaches worked well for skills selection, but this was not the case for choice of learning approaches.

4.3.2. Choice of learning approaches

From group discussion 1, students rejected the learning approaches that the employers endorsed. These included role play, video and review of activities (prompting Helen's recommendation on her sticky note vote (Figure 4-1), one-to-one discussions and options such as Helen's recommendation of speaking circles. In speaking circles, people sit in a circle, and each speak for a short time while others actively listen. Helen had found it valuable in her own development, but students were horrified by the suggestion. Instead, students chose challenges and real-life examples, which they could approach as groups. See Appendix 9 for full votes and definitions of learning approaches.

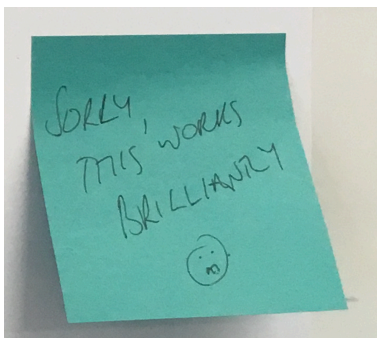


Figure 4-1 Helen's post-it note on 'video and review' in group discussion 1 learning approaches voting

In group discussion 2, students ranked the learning approaches by effectiveness and how anxiety-provoking they would find them (Appendix 10). This suggested that they avoided selecting approaches they considered most anxiety-provoking (with the exception of 'challenges'), favouring the least anxiety-provoking approaches. Many denied that they thought role play and video were effective, despite employers' recommendations, possibly to avoid being asked to do them.

In the spirit of action research, these choices were largely honoured for cycles 1 and 2 (excepting the forest walk and some role play), however we continued to explore anxiety in interviews, group discussions and class sessions. Students wanted to choose *"the least hardest one"* avoiding *"cringe"* (group discussion 2). Some acknowledged that safe choices might hamper their learning, and two interviewees and another student believed teaching staff should impose such decisions and *"keep us on our toes"* (Student group discussion 2), *"you've got to make everyone do it. You can't go off what we say!"* (Jack, interview 2). Therefore, in group discussion 3, we did not vote for learning approaches for the final cycle. In the seminars I instigated Pecha Kucha and a speaking circle.

This speaking circle was the biggest boost to students' confidence on the module. However, as the students and I had agreed that I would impose learning approaches it was implemented in the final seminar. One student refused to participate, but most students who did participate commented on the confidence it gave them. Mia described it as *"terrifying! But once I did it, I was like, I would do it again"* (Mia interview 4). Similarly, I used an element of role play in an early challenge (session 5), and this task also was received positively.

Students' choice of confidence as a topic was unexpected, and it was challenging to find a way to teach it, but I had committed to responding to the groups' topic choices. As long-term confidence building was already scaffolded into the first-year programme, I sought more immediate approaches, for use before presentations or interviews, choosing breathing and physical posture exercises. We went to a nearby forest to avoid the embarrassment of doing this on campus and students responded positively:

“Confidence was something that a lot of people in my class struggled with, so we did an exercise in which we went into the woods and did some confidence building exercises. It helped me to clear my head and really think about what I could do to give myself that boost of encouragement.” (Portfolio S)

“I usually suffer from stress and anxiety and going out to the woods with the module leader to do confidence building exercises helped me discover a place I can go to clear my mind and stay calm before an exam or a presentation due” (Portfolio R)

It was also challenging to identify and prepare ways to teach skills effectively in seminar contexts in the short times between group discussions and the next teaching sessions, in response to students’ cocreation decisions about learning approaches.

Additionally, all such interventions needed to be seminar-based (or feasible in the timetabled slot), but Helen reflected on the artificial context of university learning:

“[is it] a real learning experience if there's not some jeopardy behind it?... [in the workplace] if you screw up and you get sacked, you're going to really try and get the most out of that learning opportunity, or you're going to get promoted... but... as an academic exercise, you don't have the same” (Helen, interview 2)

This reflects the challenges for HE for students to develop skills without access to real-world opportunity for all, and the need to build students confidence and motivations to engage. Students’ decisions regarding learning approaches were compromised by anxiety and understandable avoidance of risk, and students were aware of this avoidance, and academic staff play a key role in managing jeopardy and risk in the classroom.

For me, the challenges were engaging students in methods that they found uncomfortable, finding ways to teach some skills (e.g. confidence), and achieving this in the short time span between decision-making and the next class. Furthermore, based on this small but longitudinal sample, where cocreation is facilitated, students may not be willing to make appropriate choices for learning approaches, prioritising short-term social concerns over long-term learning gains.

4.3.3. Levels of student and employer engagement, my role as facilitator

At the outset, students seemed to assume ongoing employer engagement was a normal feature of first year teaching and many students were not strongly engaged in the sessions. I planned activities for the first two sessions to prompt discussion to prompt discussion and provide structure. These included 'think/pair/share' activities in group discussion 1 about identifying and prioritising skills, and the same in group discussion 2 about defining activities (i.e. work alone, then in pairs to compare ideas, then in groups to share those ideas). The outcomes of these activities prompted interesting discussions (as described above) and the dynamic between the students and employers changed with each session. Students became less passive in their learning approaches and asked more questions (section 4.5.2), and employers understood students' positions better and tailored their examples and stories to appeal to students. Employers recalled stories from their own early career histories or examples from graduates they had employed. Students came to respect employers' expertise, be interested in their stories (section 4.5) and engaged more with employability and skills development. I reduced the pre-planned activities and my role as facilitator, only prompting where employers assumed students knew things they did not, keeping sessions to time, and to include quieter students.

The employers were strongly engaged throughout: they only missed group discussions when unavoidable work conflicts arose (one each) and reflected that they would have liked longer sessions with students.

4.3.4. Summary of Stage One action research cycles, key outcomes and activities

The challenges and rewards of the action research approach are discussed in Chapter 5; and this summary of the activities undertaken in the 'in action' phase demonstrates the challenges of embedding action research in a live module. If delivered on a weekly basis, completing analysis in and after each reflection stage, and designing appropriate teaching sessions quickly enough to start in a week's time, may not have been possible. The fortnightly delivery pattern was therefore essential to the success of this action research approach.

Table 4-3 shows the key outcomes from each reflection stage (including over first stage of each group discussion), the decisions taken at the planning stage (the cocreation element of group discussions) and the actions taken in the ensuing seminars and first stage of the next group discussion. Appendix 6 details the specific activities undertaken in each group discussion, and Appendices 9-11 show the group discussion artefacts from sessions 1,2 and 4 (group discussion 3 had no artefacts). This demonstrates what I consider as messy but practical research: to make this happen in the time available, action and observation were largely simultaneous (in action reflection), and group discussions had multiple functions of action, reflection and planning as I could not logistically organise with employers, students and in the timetabled session in another way.

| Cycle no. | Cycle stage | Data collection tools/ actions of intervention |
|-----------|--|--|
| Cycle 1 | Reflect (data collection and in action analysis) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections - students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - employability was largely extrinsically motivated for students, to secure a job and salary, not high priority - degree and hard skills prioritised over soft skills - prioritisations of soft skills different between students and employers at outset • Reflections - employers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - deeply passionate about their own and others' development, surprised how young students were. - high congruity between the two employers' skills prioritisations • Reflections – my position: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Concerns arising that students and employers were using same language but different interpretations - Students not highly engaged, often distracted and not quite cheeky to employers e.g. talking over them |

| | | |
|--|-------------------------|--|
| | Plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group discussion (cocreation): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - communication and confidence chosen as skills - challenges and real-world examples chosen as learning approaches |
| | Act/ observe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervening seminar sessions without employers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - trip to forest for posture and breathing exercises, and discussion, for confidence - agency/client interaction role play based on a real-world example to develop communications skills/negotiation/persuasion |

| | | |
|----------------|---|---|
| Cycle 2 | Reflect (data collection and in action analysis) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections - students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - think/pair/share activity confirmed that students' and employers' definitions of skills were different, though the employers' similar to each other's - employers used storytelling to explain how soft skills manifested in workplace, and how they had learned them - students see their role as passive learners, with no impact on others' learning i.e. not a community - students do not choose individual active learning approaches in front of class for fear of judgment by peers • Reflections - employers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - adapting discussion style to more story-based, less descriptive, attuned to students' needs • Reflections – my position: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - concerned about students' avoidance of the learning approaches that they feel socially uncomfortable about but would benefit from - my perceptions of skills shifted slightly, away from broad university graduate attributes to more applied skills |
| | Plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group discussion (cocreation): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - communication and teamwork chosen as skills - challenges and real-world examples chosen as learning approaches |

| | | |
|----------------|---|---|
| | Act/ observe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervening seminar sessions without employers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - negotiation card game (communication) - reflective writing and copywriting comparison (communication and reflective skills development) - teamwork guidelines, establishment of teams and teams' ground rules for coursework |
| Cycle 3 | Reflect (data collection and in action analysis) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections - students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - focus moving to mechanics of recruitment: CVs, cover letters and interviews - students' priorities and understandings of skills have shifted - discussion of fear frequent: about interviews, work in general, and whether they are grown up enough to do this • Reflections - employers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - focus moves away from priorities and broad understandings towards refining and contextualising understandings to workplace • Reflections – my position: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - facilitator role is diminishing, students and employers engage more directly - now imposing some learning approaches that students explicitly rejected, with their consent - aligning skills with coursework tasks |
| | Plan | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group discussion (cocreation): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - communication, confidence and resilience chosen as skills - no vote on learning approaches |

| | | |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|--|
| | Act/ observe | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervening seminar sessions without employers <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - guest session re. print media, challenged students to talk with new guest employer (communication, confidence and resilience) - mini-Pecha Kucha / speaking circle (communication, confidence and resilience) |
| Final reflection | Reflect | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflections - students: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - after visit to a marketing communication agency, students reflect on increased confidence to ask questions and excitement about work - many actively considering summer internships and placements, updating LinkedIn, preparing CVs - students' priorities and understandings of skills have shifted - students repeating points employers made in earlier sessions - students report greater confidence after challenging learning approaches • Reflections - employers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - as before, now refining and contextualising understandings to workplace, and correcting misperceptions, use of storytelling - employers would like to spend more time with student • Reflections – my position: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - facilitator role diminishes, students and employers engage directly |

Table 4-3 Summary of intervention development

These findings are reflected upon in more depth in Stage Two analysis, however the activities over the group discussions were characterised by the close collaboration and agreement of the two employers regarding priorities and definitions of soft skills.

The employers were adept at contextualising the topics through description and storytelling about their workplaces and employees, and reflecting on their own journeys, mistakes and vulnerabilities. Additionally, smaller group work (with up to 8 students working with each employer), gave students confidence to speak directly with employers, proposing topics and asking questions as their confidence with the employers and the format increased. As John reflected:

“[W]hat impressed me...was that it was very participative... in a very short space of time... the groups that we split people into were coming back with some very relevant points... they had thought about what we'd asked them to do... even though they're...so young and...new into studying for their qualification. To me, they demonstrate at an early stage that these are things that they could learn... I certainly came away from there thinking, you know, this very early stage, these guys are definitely thinking along the right lines” (John interview 2)

Over both the portfolios and group discussions, the employers and I shared concerns that students might be *‘telling [us] more about what they think [we] I want to hear rather than what needs to be said. But we can work on that over time’* (John interview 2), with concerns regarding socially desirable responding. Over the course of the study this diminished and students began to engage more authentically with employers.

The learning approaches used in the intervening seminars are not evaluated in this study, due to restrictions on time and scope of the study, and the focus is instead upon the value of cocreation approaches, discussed in section 5.4.2.

In summary, Stage One analysis was a highly pragmatic approach to in-module action research, requiring rapid analysis to implement change in a timely fashion, a flexible approach to teaching and ongoing monitoring of these activities against the learning outcomes for the module. Stage Two analysis explores the barriers and motivations to students’ engagement with employability and skills in more depth, and how the involvement of employers contributed to students learning in seminar contexts.

4.4. Stage Two analysis: Early understandings of employment, employability and skills

This section address the themes and subthemes concerning Research Question 1 (parts a and b), regarding participants' identification, prioritisation and understanding of graduate employability skills related to the marketing communications industry at the start of the study. Reflexive thematic analysis identified many of the issues introduced in Stage One analysis however, thematically, the valuable insights concerned barriers and motivations to engagement with employability. Examples of the data used at this stages are provided in Appendix 7 (interviews), Appendix 8 (soft skills sections of reflective portfolios), and Appendices 9-11 (artefacts from group discussions 1, 2 and 4 respectively). No example of a group discussion is included for reasons of anonymity and confidentiality, as students' small group discussions and employers' stories gave many personal, identifiable details.

4.4.1. Emergent themes related to perceptions of employment, employability and skills

Two key themes related to Research Questions 1a and 1b were emergent from Stage Two analysis: Theme 1, dread of employment and Theme 2, delay in engaging with employability. Theme 1 related to barriers to engagement with employability, both concerning employment and fears related to how one would be perceived by employers while in employment, and peers while preparing for employment. In combination with misunderstandings and underestimations of the complexity of soft skills and related concepts, these fears about work and the identity transitions culminated in a delay in engaging with employability (Theme 2). These themes, their subthemes and the relationships between them are discussed in turn below, and illustrated in Figure 4-2.

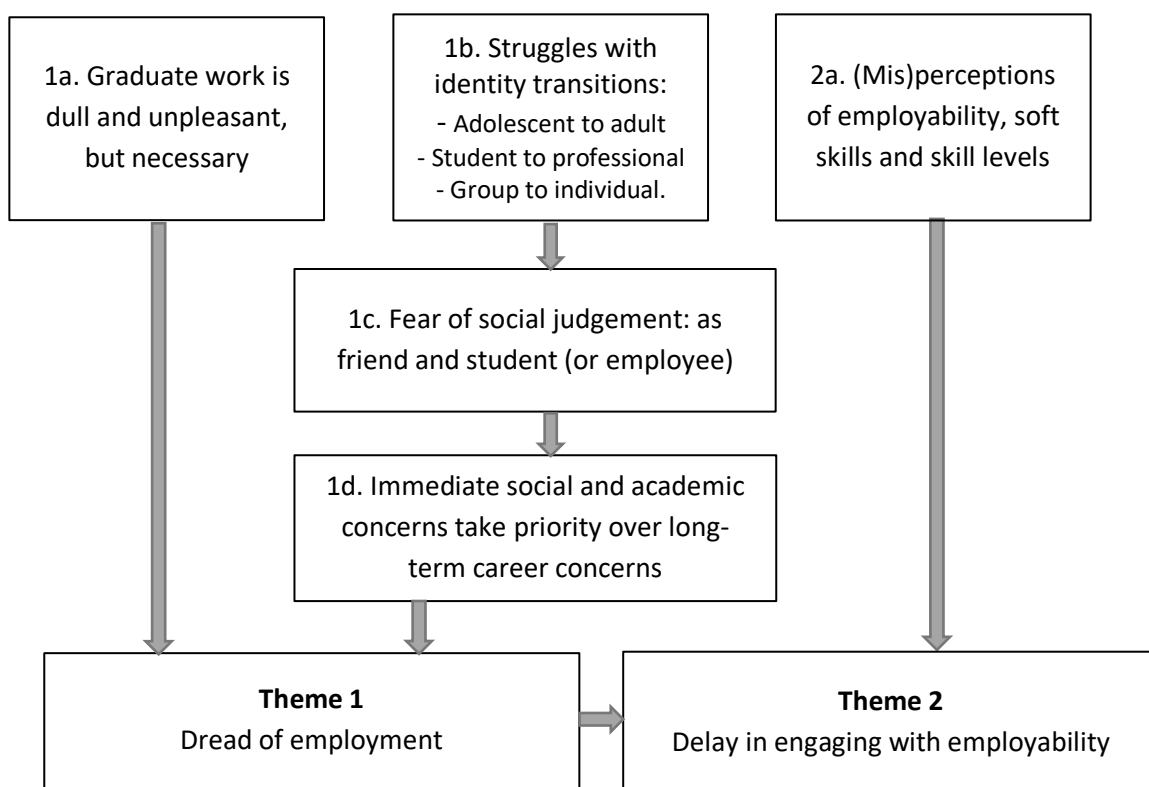


Figure 4-2 Emergent themes and subthemes for barriers to employability development

4.4.2. Theme 1: dread of employment

The dread of employment was a consistent theme over the early interviews and group discussions, and related to students' fears about graduate work (subtheme 1a), and what they would experience after graduation.

In addition, students struggled with identity transitions into university, employment and adulthood (subtheme 1b), with particular concerns about being judged by others in these spaces (subtheme 1c). Fitting in as a student, meeting new people, and succeeding academically were more urgent concerns than long-term employability (subtheme 1d). While not explicitly stated as a concept in itself, this wider theme of dread of employment and the processes to achieve and sustain it were returned to many times by student interviewees and in group discussions, and reflected on as students began to positively anticipate future careers. Each of these contributing subthemes are explored below.

At the outset students held negative perceptions about employment and transitions, for example the prospect of the application and interview process was *“daunting... horrifying”* (Jack, interview 4), *“something that I was dreading”* (Azim, interview 4) (full quote in section 4.4.3.1). However, over the course of the module, students came to appreciate the role of soft skills, such as confidence and communication, for supporting successful applications, and providing choice and agency in career development, and more immediate academic success. The opportunity to ask questions and hear employers’ perspectives helped students imagine how they could manage the experience, and helped it become achievable (Theme 3).

A final unplanned, but valuable, opportunity for students also positively impacted attitudes to work. Another module offered a field trip to a local marketing communications agency the week before group discussion 4, touring the agency and hearing about the agency structure and recruitment processes. Students commented that the group discussions had built confidence to ask questions at the agency, and the visit prompted questions in group discussion 4. John reflected on how work clothing had evolved over his marketing career:

“more casual...rather than like full on suits, they're wearing shirts, jeans... you think they” can go to a proper client... that they're going to wear, like proper dressed up but, it's not, it's the complete opposite...

The last time I saw somebody with a tie on the underground I can't remember.. So, it is changing... That doesn't mean to say that the deadlines aren't any longer there, they still are, but the culture bit I think is becoming more informal.” (John, group discussion 4)

Similar discussions about working hours, how staff really knew each other, team building exercises and a *“really chilled”* workplace. John and I responded with our own recruitment and agency experiences, explaining how such perks compensate for long hours and pressurised roles. Finally, the visit reinforced the messages from this module, such as needing *“good communication and interpersonal [skills], because they have so many different clients”* (Student, group discussion 4). This further

developed students' perceptions that work could be appealing and not something to be dreaded.

The subthemes that combine to precipitate dread of employment (Theme 1) at the outset of the study are now explored in turn.

4.4.2.1. Subtheme 1a: Graduate work is dull and unpleasant, but necessary

In baseline interviews, two students' defined employability as getting a job, which was a necessity for a salary. No interviewees were excited about graduate careers or had specific roles in mind, though Azim aspired to be self-employed and Mia and Elena were interested in creative aspects of marketing. Two of the four student interviewees prioritised a degree certificate, three mentioned hard skills and only Jack mentioned soft skills. All used the language of 'work' rather than a career:

"[employability is] just work opportunity after I finish my degree"
(Mia, interview 1)

"employability is... like you need to be employed to... make a living" (Azim, interview 1)

Jack recalled his employability education while in further education, as *"necessary to have a lot of skills... hard and soft skills"* (Jack, interview 1), and Elena could not think of a definition.

In contrast, the employers' definitions of employability embraced language, behaviours and attitude, beyond skills or qualifications, and changed little over the course of the study. John explicitly discussed the limitations of a degree as evidence of employability, and Helen's comments reflect the disagreement even amongst employers about how to define employability:

"I think it's really easy for employers to get the wrong end of the stick about it... employability is how ready a new graduate is to be employed...and how ready they are in so many different ways, knowing that actually they're not going to know the content of the job. But, you know, turning up on time, what to wear and how to present themselves and how to communicate. That to me is employability... that's when they arrive at an interview. That's what defines one graduate from another." (Helen, interview 1)

“[W]hen a student graduates...and they come out of university and maybe they've got a first... that tells you they have a certain level of ability... What it doesn't tell me is, okay, how about the ability or the capability from an employability point of view to just sort of come in and perhaps hit the ground running? So... that piece of paper alone doesn't tell me necessarily that they could be productive quite quickly in a particular area of a business.” (John, interview 1)

Over the course of the study, the students' understandings of employability evolved to include soft skills and reflect employers' needs. By interview 4, Jack removed the degree from his priority list, *“qualifications, that's gone... I still think it's going to be impressive if someone has a first... [but the employers] took... a lot of focus away from... qualifications”*. Similarly, hard skills were deprioritised over the course of the module for most interviewees, except Elena, and soft skills took priority.

More pertinently, students became *optimistic* about graduate careers. In retrospect, Mia and Azim's first definitions hinted at this, and Jack had also worried about a career *“sat in like a cube in an office...”* (interview 4). Azim reflected on *“the doubts that I had before”* (interview 4) and how the employers had changed these perceptions. Subtheme 1a captures these initial perceptions of graduate work as dull and unpleasant, yet necessary to earn a living as Mia's comments illustrate:

Mia (Interview 4): *“[Employability is] working in something that you enjoy, and you feel like you can contribute something to the company where you're in....”*

Interviewer: *“And has changed for you over the course of this year?”*

Mia: *“Yeah... I just felt, like before, working was just going to an office, working on the computer, da da da [typing noise/action] and then leaving... I just didn't feel like it was like a positive thing and like a nice thing. And...now I just see it...as...I want to work and do things...”*

By the end of the study, Mia valued employability skills as a means to access interesting careers, and have more agency in those roles. In group discussions, some saw work as a space where individuals had little control, unless they were managers, and later leadership roles would constitute controlling others. This may explain in

part why work was perceived as unpleasant (subtheme 1a), and as a place of fear of judgment as an employee (subtheme 1c) and not being prepared for that space.

4.4.2.2. *Subtheme 1b. Struggles with identity transitions: student to professional, adolescence to adult, group to individual*

This second subtheme explores the tensions between being an adolescent, a student, growing up and becoming a professional. The need to grow up or feeling “*still like a kid*” (Azim, interview 4) was mentioned by three of the student interviewees (not the mature student, Jack). For example, Elena described her “*anxiety moment*” upon seeing her boyfriend’s potential workplace. She conflated employment and adulthood, as did Azim and Mia, feeling a need to grow up before being eligible to work in such a place:

“I saw...the people wearing like suits and stuff...I felt like if I want to fit in a place like that, ... even ... from the outfits, like the whole look. When I saw those people, how they look, how they acted, like it was a moment for me... to realise that we actually had to grow and start acting more professional because we did look like kids. We were in the wrong place... It was like, awful. And I was with this pink jacket. It just, I feel like I wasn't in my place, so I felt like I had to change everything.

... I have to stop acting like a child sometimes, I have to get more serious... I just felt there's a hole, I feel like a child, and I can't anymore” (Elena, interview 3)

This conception of employment as requiring a new identity echo Helen’s words, above, about knowing “*what to wear and how to present themselves*”.

Identity as a student was also important, and interviews and group discussions suggested tensions between becoming a student and thinking about future careers. For example, a student distracted a group discussion 1 exercise with Helen, with a lengthy, and funny, description of a student’s day of sleeping late, watching Netflix, popping to a lecture, and then going out, contrasting with future (dull) working expectations (subtheme 1a). Both employers commented on this and other moments of students distracting from employability discussions:

“there’s no sense of urgency. It felt like it’s all in the future. ‘At some point I will have to engage with this but not yet’... there is a sense of disengagement, I don’t know if it’s because they’re first-years and it’s still a bit like school, but it felt to me like, ‘oh, I’ll worry about that later. I’m here, I don’t really know why I’m here, and I’ll worry about it another time’” (Helen, interview 3)

As when Elena realised the realities of the workplace, for Mia this tension between being seen as children, being a student and thinking about future careers provoked anxiety:

“everyone seeing me, like, as a small girl, like I’m just like too young to think about that. But it’s like actually around the corner, like in two years I have to be like working... I’ve worried about getting a job. I probably will. But not yet... I feel like I’m only just starting to be a student, and it’s going so fast” (Mia, interview 3)

Jack was the only interviewee with long-term work experience: Azim and Elena had some unpaid work experience with family and Mia had none. While Jack came to university for graduate career prospects, he too prioritised becoming a student after being out of education for some time (subtheme 1d). Across the cohort, students described employment as a distant concern or too anxiety provoking to think about. However, working with employers helped students manage these transitions and bring focus to employability:

“...just talking about [Helen] interviewing people and I’m thinking ‘that could be me soon’ and having to show what I can do and me thinking ‘I’m nowhere with that, I’m going so slowly but uni’s going so fast’” (Mia, interview 3)

“[after group discussion 2] I need to start focussing, but you’re not a kid anymore. You’re at university now, you know, you need to pay attention” (Azim, interview 3)

Work appeared to be perceived as dull (subtheme 1a) and demanding of a wider identity change for which students felt ill prepared (subtheme 1b), and too distant to think about at this time. In combination there is little motivation for students to engage with employability curricula. As described in subthemes 1c and 1d, such struggles with identity transition are, as Elena described, often related to fear of judgement by others who have successfully achieved those transitions.

4.4.2.3. *Subtheme 1c. Fear of social judgement: as friend, student or employee*

All four student interviewees resisted presenting, asking questions or otherwise being singled out in class, as did many of their classmates. When he finally asked an employer questions in group discussion 4, Azim explained that he had more confidence in this final sessions, when fewer *students* attended. Section 4.5.2.1 describes how students avoided learning approaches requiring them to present in front of the class, when in group discussion 3 (when a careers advisor was present) explained:

Student: *"Yeah, I think the biggest problem is when you, when you're up there, and you know you've got to present you're scared...what everyone else is thinking"*

Students: *"Yeah!" (much agreement from the student group).*

Careers adviser: *"Thankful it's not them?"*

Student: *"Yeah. Literally!" (laughter from group) ...*

Student: *"But like, In front of If it's just in front of like... Helen and John, that's fine. But if it's in front of loads of people"*

Student: *"It's when It's the class, isn't it?"*

Students: *"Yeah"*

Jack also feared standing out to other students, rather than lecturers or employers, and described how this lack of confidence affected choice of learning approaches:

"I think it's confidence.... No one wants to talk in front of anyone. It's what the main thing is. Like. Even if people know the answer sometimes. They don't say it. Including myself...I think I'm always slightly wrong. Yeah. I think, I think these ones [video review / role play] ...would probably help us the most. But no one obviously [chooses these]...." (Jack, interview 2)

Subtheme 1a suggested some students saw work as a site of some control, and many students used the word 'wrong', as Jack does above, describing their fears of being in the wrong place because of identity, doing the wrong things at work, or saying the wrong thing in class. This suggests fears of social judgement not only at university but beyond.

This was also related to academic skills, as Elena felt that *“right now I feel like I know less than everybody”* (interview 1) and wanted skills videos to watch at home to learn alone and develop confidence to perform in class. Subtheme 1c therefore draws together these perceptions from across the cohort of judgement by others, as an immediate concern at university and a concern for the future workplace.

This passivity in the seminar reflected students’ understandings of learning in interview 2. Two laughed when asked what their role was in the module, and thought they had little to contributing to others’ learning. They saw students’ role as to *“just listen”* (Mia), or *“listen and to really do what they’re asked to.. to learn on their own”* (Elena), *“take in as much... information as I can”* (Azim) and *“learn, maybe? I don’t know, I have no idea”* (Jack). These assumptions of passive learning changed over the module, as Jack contested *“people prefer getting talked at. But we shouldn’t, we shouldn’t get talked at”* (interview 3), acknowledging confidence as key to taking an active role. By interview 4 Elena commented the importance of her contribution of herself and others to class, and another student recalled group discussion 4 *“was more inclusive as you were working with different people from the class and finding out their opinions”* (Portfolio H, final submission).

These reflections capture the importance of repeated interaction not only with employers, but with fellow students, as discussed in section 4.5.2, to overcome fear of social judgement and take a more active role in class. Alongside the perception of work as dull and distant (subtheme 1a), at a time where students are not yet comfortable in their student identity (let alone being a professional) (subtheme 1b), concerns about being judged (subtheme 1c) take priority over long-term career concerns (subtheme 1d).

4.4.2.4. Subtheme 1d: Immediate social and academic concerns take priority over long-term career concerns

Across the reflective portfolios and group discussions, students consistently prioritised skills which would support their immediate social and academic needs, rather for career motivations (subtheme 1d). Academically, this focused upon group work and the need to communicate effectively with teammates and work with teams.

The portfolios related meeting deadlines, motivation, resilience and organisational skills to assessment submission, while patience, confidence and communication were important for working with others. Socially, all interviewees valued confidence when meeting new peers in and out of the seminar. Therefore these first-year students prioritised skills that relieved immediate discomfort concerning transitions to university, while careers seemed too remote to consider.

No students explicitly said that this was why they were choosing these skills, however in the portfolios and group interviews students applied them to their immediate situations rather than employment, for example:

“communication, it's got better but I again it comes down to the amount of people we met and stuff. I try to get involved as much as I can, in classes as well, which has obviously helped, ... the one I am worrying about is just teamwork, I just don't think, I think maybe I thought I was better than what I was, and talking about it. And what about what it really is and I'm not actually good at that? Um, I thought I was better...I have a lot to learn. But I have learnt a lot when it comes to writing stuff, I thought I was better than what I was at writing as well. But I'm not” (Jack, interview 2)

Teamwork was only chosen once as a class priority, but described in over half the portfolios as students consciously applied the skill to working in groups on academic assessments. Some extended this to relationships with housemates and new friends. All student interviewees discussed the challenges of teamwork, and all felt they improved. For example, in interview 2 Azim teamwork as *“so bad and someone always doesn't do enough work or someone is just too stressful”* and by interview 4 reflected on being *“a really a bad teamworker before... now I'm better at that”*.

The reflective portfolios also recounted students' personal challenges, including moving away from supportive family environments, applying for summer jobs, or even considering dropping out, as Azim did after moving alone to a new country. These challenges had greater priority than employability, and successfully tackling these challenges helped build students' confidence. As discussed in Chapter 5, such prioritisation is an opportunity, as students invested time in developing these skills,

re-framing what we presented as an employability curriculum into something with much more immediate resonance for their immediate academic and social needs.

In conclusion to Theme 1, these combined factors of subthemes 1a to 1d build to create significant barriers to student engagement with employability and this stage of students' degrees. In combination with theme 2a, these generate little incentive to engage with employability development, resulting in delay in engaging with employability (Theme 2).

4.4.3. Theme 2: delay in engaging with employability

Theme 1, above, and theme 2a, introduced below, combine to explain Theme 2 of this study, accounting for students' delay in engagement with employability. This theme was not unanticipated (see Chapter 2 (Literature review)); however, the subthemes clarify the causes of this delay in engagement, and therefore possible pedagogic approaches to overcome these barriers to engagement. Subtheme 2a describes students' underestimations or misperceptions of their own skill levels versus employers' perceptions.

Theme 2 was evident through students' behaviours and absence of interest as much as from data in transcripts: at the outset of the module, students did not engage strongly with the employers and were easily distracted from employability discussions. Interviewees described more immediate pressures and the desire to enjoy being a student (subtheme 1d), with no evidence of engagement with employability outside the curriculum. Some student interviewees described the dread of the drudgery of future working life (subtheme 1a) and recruitment processes (section 4.4.3.1). These negative feelings and immediate priorities combined to deprioritise employability, however talking with employers, anticipating the potential of fulfilling and even fun roles and knowing how to take steps to apply for these (section 4.4.3.1) motivated students to engage with skills development as a means to secure such roles (section 4.4.2.1).

However, subtheme 2a accounts for why students did not feel they *needed* to invest in skills development in the first instance. Students overestimated their own

proficiency in soft skills, did not understand employers' priorities and differential understandings of these skills, and as a result did not think there was a significant gap between their current and desired skills levels. This subtheme is now described, charting students' initial understandings and how these developed over the intervention, with a positive impact on both Themes 1 and 2.

4.4.3.1. Subtheme 2a. (Mis)perceptions of employability, soft skills and skill levels

The differences between students' and employers' identification and prioritisation, of soft skills were clear from group discussion 1. While skills such as teamwork and communication were identified by most participants, only one student identified listening as important compared to both employers, while leadership was high on students' lists but not important to employers (appendices 9.1 and 9.2). More concerningly, students and employers were using the same skills language in different ways in group discussion 1 and baseline interviews, therefore this became the key theme for group discussion 2. The reflective portfolios also charted deepening understandings of the complexity of skills that students assumed they had understood at the outset of the module, but later reflected that they had not. Students assigned numerical scores for their self-perceived skill levels, to prompt reflection (not for marking purposes), and in the second cycle a number of students reduced their competency scores. Student interviews and portfolio commentaries showed that many students perceived their skill levels as lower as they came to comprehend the complexity of skills through discussion with employers. For example, these two students gave themselves lower skills marks in portfolio submissions 2 than 1 and their commentaries can be linked to specific themes that the employers discussed in group discussions:

"In my last evaluation, I rated myself higher than I do now. This is because, while learning about communication and what it means to be a good communicator, I found it was just as important to be good at listening as it is to be an engaging presenter... I hope to improve my listening skills and become more patient with people I work with in the future, so that communication will become effective and create a more positive work environment."
(Portfolio L, submission 2)

“I think maybe I thought I was better than what I was, and talking about it, about what it really is and I'm not actually good at that?... I have a lot to learn... it's not like I've lost any ability but it's more like 'oh god there's so much more to it that I didn't know'. So now I've got further to go. But it's not like I've lost [skills]” (Jack, interview 2).

By the end of the module, most of the cohort commented that their skills were improving due to the skills sessions, group discussions and wider programme. However many commented that this was in relation to their adjusted understandings of soft skills attributable to the discussions with employers.

To illustrate this subtheme further, three soft skills (communication, confidence and leadership) and career management skills (e.g. job applications and interviews) have been selected as short case studies and are described below. They show how students differentially interpret, underprioritise or overprioritise skills compared to employers, or, in the case of careers management skills, have limited awareness of these as a skillset. The early overreliance on simply gaining a degree was additional evidence of this (section 4.4.2.1).

4.4.3.1.1. Soft skill case study: Communication

Communication was a chosen focus for all three cycles: all student and employer baseline interviews and group discussion 1 exercises listed communication in the top three skills and both employers named communication skills as a common challenge for graduates from interview 1.

The employers defined communication differently to each other at the outset. In group discussion 1 Helen focused on being *“able to listen and respond and have eye contact and things like that... interpersonal stuff...”*, while John discussed attention to detail. In discussion between them, in front of students, John recalled prioritising listening in his baseline interview, and communication as a two-way process became a recurring theme for group discussions. After group discussion 1, two student interviewees included listening and attributed this to the employers' discussion, while Jack ruefully reviewed his skills prioritisation list, demonstrating that students may not identify the key skills that employers prioritise :

“I think we need to focus on the ones we don't think we needed, because we probably don't have them, if we don't think we needed them. Yeah, I think listening skills is probably... is really important, as its own thing if it's not included in communication”
(Jack, interview 2)

This calibration of communication as two-way continued throughout the remaining group discussions (section 4.5.2.1) as students continued to discuss communication as *“more about listening, and understanding people properly before like taking action, and stuff like that...”* (student, group discussion 4), or *“ you can listen to someone and hear what they're saying, but they might not mean the same thing, that you might like mean, they use the different words or something like that”* (student, group discussion 4).

Listening as an aspect of communication appeared in around half the final portfolio submissions, with a clear relationship to students' attendance of the group discussions. The understanding of communication as a two-way process is a useful exemplar of the development of understandings of a core soft skill over the course of the module, thanks to the group discussions with employers and students choosing to study skills in class sessions.

4.4.3.1.2. Soft skill case study: Confidence

Confidence was chosen by the group for cycles 1 and 3, which was unanticipated as this was not listed by student interviewees in baseline prioritisation exercises or frequently listed in job advertisements, and I had previously considered confidence a trait rather than a skill. Yet, in group discussion 1, seven out of fifteen students and both employers listed confidence in the independent skills identification exercise (Appendix 9), and both groups chose confidence as a priority skill for focus.

Students and employers both saw confidence as bedrock upon which other skills were built. For example, Azim (interview 1) described being *“too nervous...I'll choke on my words”* when presenting but dedicated *“to tackle that problem...to get rid of my ...fear”* and Mia participated in the study *“to break the barrier of the confidence that I have now”* (interview 1). Students' written definitions of confidence in group discussion 2 (Appendix 10) and student interviews reflected internal concerns of

shyness, discomfort and anxiety about what others thought (subtheme 1d). In contrast, both Helen and John considered the wider positive impact of confidence, as the *“ability to believe in yourself ...to make a positive contribution to others”* (Helen, group discussion 2), that *“inspires or builds confidence in your colleagues. Reassures those you might be trying to convince”* (John, group discussion 2). These are examples of calibrating students’ understandings (section 4.5.2.1).

This shift in perceptions progressed over group discussion 3 as students moved towards planning how to build confidence and demonstrate skills to employers, by becoming a student ambassador or joining a society. In group discussion 4, John reassured students that *“it gets easier... you're always meeting new people and in different situations...And some are easier to deal with than others, and so it's an everchanging world and it gets easier over time”*.

4.4.3.1.3. Soft skill case study: Leadership

Leadership is chosen as an example of skill prioritised by many students at start of the module but demoted, and redefined, in response to employer feedback. Azim was the only student interviewee who mentioned leadership unprompted, as his top priority, though Elena put it first on her prompted list. Males in the cohort were more likely to suggest leadership as a priority attribute in group discussion 1. However, John and Helen ranked leadership low on their priority lists in the interviews and group discussion, as a skill for development and use in later, not graduation, roles:

“There's nothing wrong with aspiring to be a great leader...But ... you're not going to go into industry being a leader. It takes time to develop those sorts of skills. ... I think if you start coming in, acting as a leader, you're going to run into problems because there's people who worked in that business in that industry for many, many, many years who rightly own that sort of ground... So, you just need to be careful with that one” (John, group discussion 1)

Three of the student interviewees demoted leadership in interview 2 versus interview 1 (Mia had never prioritised leadership), though this was the only discussion regarding leadership. Jack now commented, *“leadership...I would have said 'how is*

that not important'? Obviously, it isn't until you move, cos you don't want to go in and look like uh, arrogant guy, you know, that is annoying" (interview 2).

Group discussion 2 explored definitions of leadership (Appendix 10), and Helen reflected on her role as a managing director, corroborating John's position:

Helen: "I thought there were some interesting differences [between students and employers] when you looked at the wording. So, leadership of a team was what you [the students] talked about and we talked about leadership more generally...I sort of mentioned about leading without authority... which comes back to this whole thing about people you think that leadership is 'aaah' [sound like a choir, with expansive hand gesture] big leaders do - and actually leadership can mean you're the person who goes into the kitchen to make sure it's tidy every day. You know, it's not necessarily big things"

John: "Yeah. Yeah. I sensed an idea of leadership with senior leaders operating in isolation and everybody is like...a long way down there...Actually a good leader also brings people along with them and becomes part of an effective team. And I was like, you know, nobody works for me, people work with me."

After group discussion 2, me, the employers and careers, Helen discussed 'heroic leadership' and how universities and the media perpetuate such characterisations, suggesting that group discussions create an alternative view:

"...you know, things haven't changed when I was when I did business studies here, you know, we studied Richard Branson, Anita Roddick and all of the kind of the heroic leaders without any sense of 'well leadership can mean lots of different things'... I think it's pervasive, that idea of heroic leaders" (Helen, after group discussion 2)

Again, the employers' role in calibrating students' expectations and preparing them for the future workplace is seen through these interactions in these and later group discussions (section 4.5.2.1). Students' definitions of leadership shifted over the module, from portrayals of control in group discussion 2 to *"not someone who like takes complete control, more like someone who values everyone's input and then comes to like a decision"* (Student, group discussion 4). By the final interview,

leadership was at the bottom of Elena's list: a significant change for this student who had prioritised leadership at the outset.

4.4.3.1.4. Career management skills case study: seeing the employer perspective

Students found application processes intimidating, and were unfamiliar with cover letter and curriculum vitae (CV) writing, interview formats, and how to express their skills. Students underestimated the need to articulate skills, which Mia thought would be conveyed *"just by speaking and the way people just transmit"* (interview 1) and overlooked the experiences they could use to illustrate their skills. For example Azim described becoming the captain of the football team, and learning leadership from his coach, but would not mention this in an interview (interview 1).

The final two group sessions focused upon application processes and how employers recognise skills. With only one employer in each session, students led the questioning and employers provided very specific detail compared to previous sessions. For example Helen described how every job advertisement attracts over one hundred applications and the frustrations of applications that do not refer to job criteria or why applicants want to work for her company, or underestimate the role requirements:

"It's not because it 'looks fun to work' or 'looks like you don't work very hard', which I've had on one covering letter... All you have to do... is go to the about us page on whichever company... and find one thing that's nice about the culture, 'because I really like this about your company'... We're very easily impressed, but something that... isn't a standard email" (Helen, group discussion 3)

This, captures how an employer, speaking from personal experience, highlights the competitiveness yet humanity of the application process, and simple steps for successful applications. The students were really engaged in this session and John's later session (section 4.4.2), as demonstrated by their reaction to descriptions of Helen's description of her company's interview process:

Helen (group discussion 3) "...we're quite low key about [interviews]. [They] are probably an hour and a half...with at least two of us, possibly four of us. It's normally a presentation."

Student: *“Against one person?!” (sounding shocked)*

Helen: *“...the last set of interviews we did, you had to have an interview with two of us, then a presentation to two different people. So, you were asked prep, and do a ten-minute presentation to two others who then asked you quite difficult questions and their job was to ask difficult questions. And then there was a written exercise as well.”*

Student: *“oh.” (entire class is stunned)*

The session was structured to support students with practical advice, which many in the cohort found empowering despite being early in their career journeys, as reflected in portfolios and some interviews:

“That was scary, talking about assessment centres – but when Helen talked about interviews I was like, yeah, I can imagine doing that. Though I’m thinking ‘what can I add to my CV?’, I haven’t even got a job yet. But then not many other people did either. I guess all I can do is keeping adding these little things.”
(Mia, interview 3)

“I loved [the third] session.... because you don't know what employers want to know and now when they were telling us about how people applied and how they want things, like that's really great...if I hadn't attended this session, I wouldn't have known and where would I have known, on YouTube?”
(Azim, interview 3)

In group discussion 4 John covered similar points (e.g., cover letters), and followed students’ questioning to add depth, for instance describing using LinkedIn to recruit. Several portfolios reported that students developed professional social media profiles following the session. Overall, this practical advice built students’ confidence and alleviated some fears related to recruitment, for example:

“It made it easy. Like, I thought it would be really hard, like something that I was dreading, the interviews and all that, but then I really thought about it...That's when I saw it, when I saw when we attended because like when they talked and everything, I was like it's not so bad after all” (Azim interview 4)

4.4.4. Summary of Themes 1 and 2: barriers to engagement with employability

In summary, the first two themes illustrate the different identification, prioritisation and understandings of soft skills by students and employers (subtheme 2a) that cause

students not to value employability development, and aspects of work and identity transitions that cause such development to be an unpleasant experience for students (Theme 1). In combination these account for students' delay in engagement with employability in the first year of their degrees, while they manage more immediate concerns (subtheme 1d) and until graduate recruitment is approaching. These characterised students' position at the outset of the study, and while simply settling into university helped to alleviate those immediate concerns, this intervention demonstrated how the involvement of employers positively impacted upon subthemes 1a-1d (see Theme 3) and subtheme 2a (see Theme 4) and therefore alleviating the desire to delay engagement in employability development (Theme 2).

4.5. Stage Two analysis: learning approaches

This section explores how the involvement of employers addressed students' doubts and helped to build confidence and understanding regarding the two themes and five emergent subthemes above. It also considers the learning approaches used in the intervening skills sessions, at first chosen by students through cocreation and later chosen by me to develop students' confidence by offering greater challenges than they would choose. These continue to be explored through reflexive thematic analysis as Stage Two analysis of the entire data set.

The study's aim, 'to explore the impact of a transitional Community of Practice...' and whether this qualified as a CoP, are explored in the Chapter 5 (Discussion). However, CoPs are, by definition, sites of situated learning, therefore exploring the nature of knowledge and mechanisms of learning in this study lays the groundwork for theoretical discussion.

4.5.1. *Emergent themes for pedagogy and community development*

The reflexive thematic analysis focuses upon the research aim and the impact of working with employers through a CoP. Theme 3 describes how employers acted as credible role models, and this was largely unrelated to their marketing roles but regarding succeeding in any graduate career (subtheme 3a), managing emotional challenges and developing resilience (subtheme 3b), and therefore successfully negotiating transitions to early adulthood and beyond (subtheme 3c). Theme 3 aligns

research question 1b regarding learning approaches. Theme 4 explores employers' role in students' development skills and behaviours in professional contexts, aligning with research question 3 regarding CoPs. These themes are discussed in turn, alongside a discussion of cocreation and Figure 4-3 illustrates the relationships between these themes.

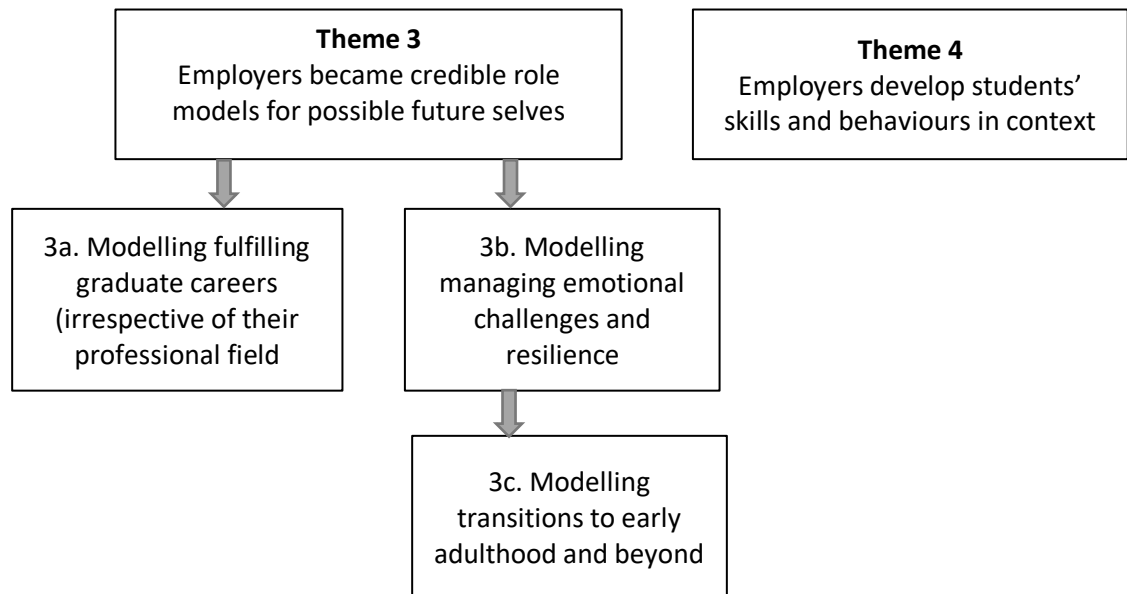


Figure 4-3 Emergent themes and subthemes for learning approaches

4.5.2. Theme 3: Employers became credible role models for possible future selves

This section describes how the students perceived employers as more than employers, through the relationships developed over the course of the intervention and employers' role as credible role models. The influences of this are broken into three subthemes that relate to the subthemes in Theme 1, and account for the developments seen for those subthemes 1a-d, such as optimism towards graduate careers.

All four student interviewees discussed the employers' importance as real-world marketing practitioners (Theme 4), however valued employers as *"the people across the table from you, they're just normal people..."* (Jack interview 4). The term 'normal people' was used by two interviewees and captures how students viewed them not only as employers but as people that they could relate to beyond the sphere of work.

The employers shared their vulnerabilities, shortcomings, and moments of doubt, which created relevance, trust and connection with students, which were essential building blocks for the three subthemes in this section. Rather than intimidating recruiters, students saw employers as approachable, offsetting the fears described in Theme 1:

“Well, [the employers] did seem very friendly, so I wasn't like intimidated in any way or nervous. But I guess for most of the people, it's like a reminder that it's going to get too real soon... Yeah, [recruitment] is like scary, but I think it's helpful. So, we can know what's it going to be like, and see that those people are normal people” (Elena, interview 3)

“Because when before I saw them in class, I didn't think employers would be that friendly. Like I thought they'd be more critical... try to criticise you. But they looked like people that if I went on an interview with, I would be comfortable, like I would be calm. I'd be able to talk without being nervous... talking without choking” (Azim interview 2)

The employers anticipated such fears and intentionally implemented measures to be approachable, such as actively listening and responding to students (e.g., John, interview 4). They acknowledged a parental role in supporting this younger generation, though also expected professional standards. Recalling the student distractions in class, Helen asked *“am I a parent and should I be kind of 'oh!' [telling off gesture], or actually is it 'well, you know, learn what you want to learn. It's your career, not my career'”* (interview 2).

The distinction between this study's approach and typical university-employer interactions (e.g. guest lectures, employer-led assessment briefs) was the repeated, ongoing nature of interaction. In a learning environment that prompted anxiety for most of the cohort, a total time of around seven hours with employers across the module helped build this confidence, trust and connection with employers:

“... even as somebody from outside who has an external expert knowledge...you're still not trusted, [students] don't appreciate what you have to say to start with. So, I think coming back a few times really made a difference and actually I would have quite

happily spent more time with the students in those sessions”
(Helen, interview 4)

Students were reluctant, at the outset, to speak in large groups or ask direct questions, and the student interviewees were bemused when asked what role they might play in the learning community:

“What? Me personally?!... I don’t have a role, do I?” (laughing)
(Jack, interview 2)

“just being in class? (laughter)” (Mia, interview 2)

Students assumed a passive role and Mia didn’t *“like to speak out...I just I like to listen”* (interview 3) while Elena saw learning as a solo endeavour, as students are *“there always to listen and to really do what they’re asked... to learn on their own”* (interview 2). This reflected a traditional view of learning as content-led rather than contextual, explored further in Chapter 5 through situated learning. Azim describes aiming *“to learn, to just use this opportunity to take as much knowledge and guidance as I can”* (interview 4), and laughed when asked what he brought to others’ learning.

Jack was one of few students to reconsider his role, asking more questions in group discussion 3 and 4, which he attributed to being a mature student. He also reflected on the importance of developing relationships with the employers:

“we shouldn’t get talked at...because it just encourages us to not get engaged... So it’s a good balance, I think we need a balance. Like having [the employers] talk at us is good because we get so much from them and we wouldn’t otherwise, but then, talking to them... if we don’t talk to them, we’re not going to get everything” (Jack, interview 4)

As these relationships developed, students and employers began to have more fun together, suggesting genuine personal interaction rather than mandated activity, and, by group discussion 3, students held longer conversations with each other, debating topics before asking employers for their opinion, shifting towards student-led discussion. This helped students to perceive the employers as accessible role models, rather than remote presenters. Furthermore, employers’ efforts to portray themselves as relatable and fallible reduced power differences between them and students.

Storytelling was a particularly important mechanism in helping employers to connect with students in group discussions. In early discussions, employers realised that students struggled to make sense of topics in work contexts. Storytelling brought scenarios to life and were often amusing, gently recalibrating students' expectations, realigning misconceptions, and increasing depth of understanding. For example, when John wished to allay students' fears about the precariousness of marketing roles, he described his own redundancy and subsequent success. When students underestimated the values of their extracurricular and educational experiences as relevant examples of skills, Helen told a story about an applicant who had travelled in Tibet and framed this experience in ways relevant to the role. The more idiosyncratic these stories, the more they were recalled by students. For example Mia recalled 'the frying pan' story, where John described running a focus group about Le Creuset pans with his mother's friends before attending an interview with the company, as an example of self-motivation.

Employers' stories about their own career histories, fears and mistakes, and those of their employees, widened those represented in the community: employers introduced their younger selves and other graduates with experiences that students could relate to. Students engaged well and laughed often (as the employers intended) reducing students' anxieties about speaking with the employers and future challenges.

Azim describes how stories stood out for him, compared to description, and their role as cautionary tales:

"[stories] are the best things because they kind of take you into the experience, because if you just tell people facts, facts, they're not going to quite understand... if you tell them a story, they will remember it... the story kind of engages many things and you kind of understand the world...Helen always says stories, but her stories are nice because like they it makes you think, OK, like you remember it properly she tells you a story, like someone did something wrong, you remember like 'fuck it, I'm never going to do that, like ever!'" (Azim, interview 3)

Both John and Helen struggled between painting a confidence-building, aspirational view of work, and describing the harsher realities of the workplace, such as the precariousness of agency roles:

“...they're so optimistic and they have such faith in their own abilities and the fairness of the system, but it's hard not to want to squash that... because actually the reality is, it's quite difficult growing into a role and learning the skills you need. But failing is part of the learning” (Helen interview 2)

Using stories of less successful graduates to highlight poor practice was a gentle and memorable way to suggest how to succeed, as Azim’s quote supports. For example Helen compared two graduates, one of whom proactively arranged the agency’s recycling, making a greater impression and being promoted sooner, while the other did the basics of the role. This is an example of how employers chose relatable stories, rather than complex business scenarios, consciously pitching their language and context to be comprehensible for students yet relating to soft skills. Considering the value of stories, Helen observed *“...otherwise you're just preaching at them”* (interview 1), *“the story thing is what I always feel...gives me credibility is to be able to say, ‘this is what I think and here's an example’”* (Helen, interview 3).

These stories of their own, and others’, experiences allowed students to think ‘that could be me’, and this was the most valuable aspect of the intervention. Students rarely commented on the marketing aspects of their roles, but instead reflected on the employers’ attitudes to careers (subtheme 3a), approaches to challenging situations (subtheme 3b), and their wider roles as adults (subtheme 3c).

4.5.2.1. Subtheme 3a. Modelling fulfilling graduate careers (irrespective of their professional field)

Subtheme 1a described students’ anticipation of work as dull and obligatory, however employers’ enthusiasm and their role as alumni suggested to students that they too could find fulfilment in careers:

“[T]hey seem like they really enjoy their jobs...They seem like they loved them? ... And that's what I want too, I just want to... enjoy what I do. So, yeah, it was nice to see that people, you know, done similar... courses...” (Jack, interview 4)

As Mia described section 4.4.2.1, perceptions about graduates' roles moved from boring to fulfilling, and offering potential, whether in marketing or other careers:

"So working with employers will...make me get more information about my future, they bring more ideas about me. Like maybe marketing isn't really my thing... so that would kind of give me an idea of the future, kind of give me like an insight which would be cool. So I think I think it's pretty nice" (Azim, interview 2)

By the end of the study, working with the employers and visiting the agency had discouraged Azim from working in marketing agencies as *"it's just it's too friendly"* (interview 4) and he wanted a more competitive environment. However working with employers had allowed him the insight to make that decision and dismissing doubts as he considered alternative options:

"I mean, [the employers] gave me more of an insight of what I'm getting myself into. And it... gave me an idea, like a lot of a lot of doubts that I had before, I didn't even really know that there were doubts I have... they're just questions that I always wondered. And then in those sessions, they were answered without me asking" (Azim, interview 4)

Such reflections address Subtheme 1a, perceptions of work as dull or unpleasant. However, while employers' evident interest in their own careers was observed, their role as normal people rather than intimidating recruiters also positively impacted students' ideas of the workplace.

4.5.2.2. Subtheme 3b. Modelling managing emotional challenges and resilience

These apparently very confident employers shared their vulnerabilities and weaknesses frequently over the group discussions. For example, in response to students' concerns about 'cringe' (section 4.3.1.2) Helen recalled her own experiences and positive outcomes:

"I've done quite a lot of things which have been horribly cringeworthy: role play, chucked in the deep end, having to do presentations to senior people and sitting back down and thinking that was the worst thing I've ever done, and people go 'actually that was alright, wasn't it?'. And that's how I built my confidence over the years is just being thrown into really difficult

situations and finding that I didn't die, pretty much!" (laughter)
(Helen, group discussion 2)

Other examples included John's description of early guest lecturing as "*daunting*" (group discussion 2) and Helen's experiences of being weak at teamwork. As Mia (interview 3) observed "*it's good to know it's not just me*". As described above, students appreciated employers as normal people, and employers' use of storytelling to describe their setbacks and successes modelled that lacking confidence and making mistakes were normal and even valuable:

"The thing with stories... you think, wow yeah...people do go through the same things... you get anxious, you get worried. I think having that level of common ground with someone that is as successful as they are, it's just reassuring because, you know, we're right at the beginning of all that. We know we have to go through so much, probably wrong stuff that we do, all our mistakes and stuff. And I just think, that even if you do make a mistake, you know, they help, that's what I think stories do, even if you do mess up, it's not the... end of the world: you made a mistake, everyone does. I think just having that reassurance that everyone does that. That's what makes the stories so useful"
(Jack, interview 3)

Whether recalling redundancy, time at university or weakness in their skillsets, this was an important thread of relatability for students which anticipated the bigger concern of managing transitions to adulthood and professional roles (subtheme 1b).

4.5.2.3. Subtheme 3c. Modelling transitions to early adulthood and beyond

Helen saw her role as providing a different perspective to students' family and teachers, and representing students' future selves beyond the field of marketing:

"...my role has been... an objective experienced voice that isn't a parent, and isn't a teacher, isn't a lecturer, but is something else. And I recognise that I am an employer, but I would like to think that my role was something [else]... I'm giving an employer's view, but it's also a grown-up's view. This is what work is like... I run a business, but I'm also somebody who's worked all of my life. So, that's about wisdom, isn't it really? It's trying to be a wise guide as much as being an employer" (Helen, interview 4)

This role as more than employers was an unexpected aspect of the intervention for me, though mentioned by three of the interviewees. Elena did not engage with

employers in this way, missing the final two sessions. For others, however, the employers illustrated that these transitions could be achieved:

“...they literally have been through it, what we're going through right now but, like they've already done this. They've lived their life and now they're there. Like probably a lot of people in our course aspire to be there. So, it's like to see them... it's great. Because when you see them, do I want to be that in the future or do I not want that future?” (Azim, interview 4)

The employers' position as alumni was positively commented upon by many students, also reflecting positively on the university, as the experience *“just builds confidence in you, doesn't it? That you chose the right place”* (Jack, interview 4), and *“... I just think it's very interesting that they were students. It just gives you more kind of confidence that, yeah, this university has been right,”* (Azim, interview 4). The potential impacts for student satisfaction help justify similar future approaches.

4.5.3. Theme 4: Employers develop students' soft skills and behaviours in context

This final theme captures the impact of employers on the soft skills and other behaviours and knowledge that are the overall learning aim of this study and module, and relates to Theme 2 about students' misperceptions of skills. As Helen's definition of employability (section 4.4.1) describes, this is not just about skills but also *“turning up on time, what to wear and how to present themselves and how to communicate”* (Helen, interview 1). As Elena described in section 4.4.2.2, these are often students' key concerns.

In terms of skills, section 4.4.3.1 describes how students (mis)perceptions of skills (subtheme 2a) evolved over the module. The employers were key to this:

Mia, interview 2: *“[meeting employers] was the first time I thought about it.... I was never thinking of, like, the soft skills that it's very important. I was always thinking, like, my grades, and what school did I go to? What classes did I take, what grades did I get? And now it's more like what skills as a person do I have?”*

Interviewer: *“What's made you change your thinking on that?”*

Mia: *“Just class, having the guest speakers come and hearing what they think, what they're looking for.”*

The employers brought credibility that an academic alone (despite my own industry experience) could not, as “when an employer comes and tells you it’s, like okay, it’s real” (Mia, interview 4) and they “know that little bit extra” (Jack interview 4). Fifteen of the eighteen portfolios reflected positively on employer discussions (three did not mention them). These showed how the employers provided a glimpse into workplace contexts and recruitment practices:

“I found the employers session interesting, discovering what employers are really looking for which was different to our own ideas. Some key skills, such as leadership, that we thought were important, were valued less by the employers. This session allowed me to realise where to prioritise key soft skills” (Portfolio L, final submission)

“I have enjoyed the lessons in which we speak to actual employers as I think it really helps me to understand this course and its real-life applications” (Portfolio S, submission 3)

“to see first-hand what marketing employers look for was invaluable. I particularly enjoyed learning about personal branding and how to make yourself stand out against the competition when applying for jobs.” (Portfolio N, final submission)

These quotes include contributions from students who were relatively quiet in the group discussions, suggesting that asking questions or speaking in class are not the only means of meaningful engagement. Students felt they had improved communication and teamwork skills the most, and were now prioritising presentation skills and motivation, according to a final poll in group discussion 4, though with only eight students (Appendix 11).

Despite the learning being situated almost entirely in the seminar, students gained a sense of what real-world work would be like, and developed confidence about approaching that real world, culminating in the agency fieldtrip, and building towards placements over the next year, which three of the four interviewees planned to do.

4.6. Summary of the chapter

The two-stage analysis process allowed the rapid, in action analysis within each cycle (Stage One) and systematic reflexive thematic analysis (on action) across the entire

data set (Stage Two) to both impact immediate practice and reflect upon the study as a whole. This study identified four core themes. Theme 1 explored students' dread of employment and, therefore, Theme 2, delay in engagement with employability. This was caused both by students' perceptions of employment as dull and obligatory (subtheme 1a), with little scope for agency, and their anticipation that becoming a professional required identity transitions for which they were not prepared (subtheme 1b). These transitions were perceived as not only about becoming a professional, but also about becoming an adult, and this daunting prospect caused retreat into socially safe practices (subtheme 1c) and a desire to enjoy this 'student phase' of their lives and prioritise immediate academic and social concerns (subtheme 1d). Students (mis)perceptions of skills and their own skill levels (subtheme 2a) meant that they underestimated the extent to which employers prioritised soft skills, and their own abilities.

Theme 3 concerned the role of employers as models for each of the above sub-themes, exhibiting fulfilling professional lives (subtheme 3a), and life journeys that had encountered social risks and vulnerabilities (subtheme 3b), yet where these 'normal people' had navigated successful adulthood as much as professional roles (subtheme 3c). Therefore, the interactions in the group discussions reached beyond the immediate goals of developing understandings of employability and the development of employability skills, and supported students through the identity transitions inherent in these early days of their university career. Additionally, the students valued the employers' perspectives on soft skills in work contexts (Theme 4). The repeated interaction through the group discussions facilitated an environment of trust that fostered these transitions. Student engagement in decision-making (cocreation) supported commitment to the goals agreed through the group discussions concerning skills to be developed. However, there was a limit to students' willingness to volunteer for socially risky pedagogic approaches through cocreation, and an expectation that I, as the teacher, would impose such approaches and use my expertise to manage their learning journeys.

In conclusion, the opportunity to interact in a scaffolded but increasing student- and employer-led community created positive outcomes for students' understandings and development of employability and skills, and, perhaps more importantly, helped to address the fear and low confidence with which students considered these at the outset of the module. The role of this module in supporting students' identity transitions, and the role of the study in understanding this process, helps to highlight the wider importance of students' transitions towards future careers, even from the start of their degrees.

5. Discussion

5.1. Introduction to chapter

The aims of this chapter are to discuss and interpret the themes proposed in the Findings, then synthesise these with the existing literature and consider methodological and personal reflections and implications for future research and practice. The chapter will open with an organising network mapping the four research themes and their related subthemes to the Research Questions. These largely practical considerations will then be considered through the lens of CoPs, and the legitimacy of the conceptual framework debated. Consistencies and incongruities of the study with CoP theory, and its value in seminar environments when engaging with employers, will be discussed. The chapter will conclude with a consideration of the value of action research in the context of this study and CoP theory, and the methodological and ethical issues arising over the course of the study.

5.2. Summary of main findings

Four key themes were emergent from the analysis of the interview, group discussion and reflective portfolios data. Theme One concerned students' dread of employment and Theme Two the delay in engagement with employability, Theme 3 explored employers' roles as models beyond professional practice, and Theme 4 employers' more direct role in skills development. Themes Three and Four were facilitated by the repeated interactions between students and employers, and the development of trust between students and employers.

Themes 1 and 2 relate to Research Question 1a and barriers to engagement with understandings of employability and skills. Theme 3 addresses Research Question 1b and how students' understandings of employability develop over the course of the module. The subject of cocreation (considered in section 5.4.4) addresses Research Question 2. Theme 4, describing how employers develop students' skills and behaviours in context, relates to Research Question 3 and CoP theory. The relationships all themes are shown in Figure 5-1, describing the impact of employers in overcoming barriers to engagement with employability development.

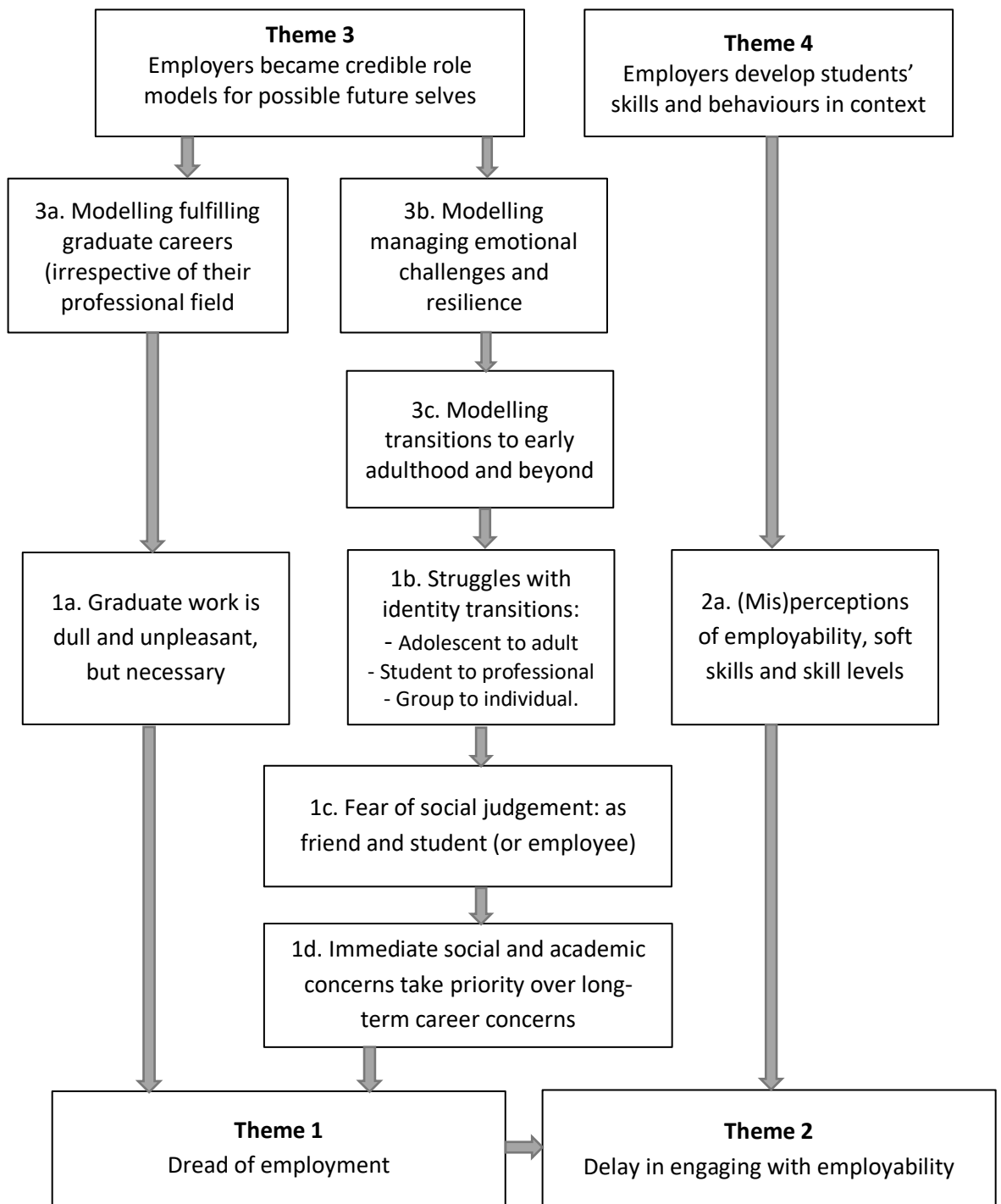


Figure 5-1 Emergent themes: how employers impact barriers to employability development

Student engagement in decision-making (co-creation) supported commitment to the goals agreed through the group discussions concerning *skills* to be developed. However, there remained an expectation that I, as the academic lead, would impose learning approaches that students otherwise resisted, and use my expertise to

manage their learning journeys. Overall, the intervention had a positive impact on students' engagement with employability and understandings of skills, and this discussion will review the mechanisms of that impact.

5.3. Themes 1 and 2: Employment, employability and skills

Theme 1 of this study detailed students' dread of employment, supporting prior literature regarding students' largely instrumental attitudes towards employability as requisite to securing a job and substantial salary (e.g., Tymon, 2013; Tomlinson, 2017b).

Theme 2, delay in engagement with employment, also supports existing literature that first-year students perceive employment as distant (e.g. Briggs, Clark, and Hall, 2012) and defer intention to study employability until later in their degrees (Lock and Kelly, 2022).

This study contributes new understandings regarding the causes of such dread and delay in engagement. Previous studies largely attribute delay in engagement to 'the lack of appreciation by students of employability skills development' (Tymon, 2013, p.849). Tomlinson (2007) identified a minority of 'retreatist' final-year students who found discussions about employability 'daunting' as the burden of entering the job market would compromise their current freedoms, causing them to 'abandon the task' (p.300) of engaging with employability. This characterises subtheme 1a, of perceptions of graduate work as dull and unpleasant, but necessary, however more nuanced interpretation of the causes of such retreat are explored across subthemes 1a-d.

Interviews and group discussion introduced two further interrelated concerns that deprioritised discussions around employability. Subtheme 1b described struggles with identity transitions, and not being 'grown-up' or adequately confident enough to enter this rapidly approaching external, professional world. Subtheme 1c described how students feared judgement from other students and in future workplaces, anticipating appearing out of place and getting things 'wrong'. These concerns, regarding immediate concerns about their social positions and academic success in

their first year at university, were prioritised ahead of employability discussions (subtheme 1d). These subthemes are discussed in turn below in the context of the literature and to more fully explore Theme 1, before returning to Subtheme 2a and Theme 2.

5.3.1. Subtheme 1a: Graduate work is dull and unpleasant, but necessary

Marketing is perceived as a more 'interesting' future career than other disciplines chosen by business school students (Kim, Markham and Cangelosi, 2002), however choosing a business school-based degree is largely driven by the extrinsic motivations such as future job opportunities and a high salary (e.g. Kim et al., 2002). There is little literature exploring the current generation of students' perceptions of business and marketing careers, however I did not anticipate that some students anticipated boring, routine careers characterised by a lack of agency. I returned to the literature, and Berg et al.'s (2017) use of rich pictures showed that UK and Canadian students held no positive expectations of work itself. They were concerned about being tied to a routine role 'within a restrictive work environment filled with cubicles' (p.1348) (echoing Jack's words about sitting in a cube), without the freedoms of student life, suggesting these negative perceptions are not uncommon.

Attitudes to work became more positive over the course of this module, as explored below, however course leaders cannot assume that students have chosen a degree because they are excited to work in that field: students may consider marketing as the 'best of a bad bunch' of potential business careers. Furthermore, as Mia suggested, development of employability skills can provide students with greater choice and agency in selecting and entering future careers. This is an understanding that Parutis and Kandiko Howson (2020) reported for high socioeconomic status students, and suggests that this intervention supported such transitions for students lacking this savviness upon entering university.

5.3.2. Subtheme 1b. Struggles with identity transitions: student to professional, adolescence to adult, group to individual

The second subtheme related to wider issues around identity transition. This study strongly supported the influential work of Holmes (2001) in considering employability

as graduate identity development, and the required changes of outlook, behaviour, language, dress and more before students would be eligible to even seek work. However, while I anticipated that students may resist consideration of themselves as marketing professionals this early in their university careers, students' interviews and portfolios, and employers' interviews, drew attention to identity transitions to *adulthood* as a more pressing prospect that eclipsed consideration of longer-term transitions to graduate employment and professional identity. Student interviews and portfolios repeated themes of growing up before being able to enter the world of graduate work, and the short time at university in which to achieve this.

Arnett (2000) defines the age of 18-29 as emerging adulthood, as marriage and parenthood occur later than in the 1960s and delay full adulthood compared to earlier generations. This is a time of identity exploration, to 'try on possible occupational futures' (Arnett, 2000, p.474), when young people prioritise accepting responsibility for oneself and independent decision-making over establishing a career (Arnett, 2000). This aligns with observations that students were prioritising more immediate academic and social concerns (subtheme 1d), and the role of employers as possible selves is reflected upon in section 5.4.

These reflections on identity suggest potential to reconsider the work of Holmes' (e.g. 2001) and Tomlinson's (e.g. 2017a) to incorporate other identity priorities that may compete with, or accompany, graduate identity development. For example, students wanted to enjoy being students for some time: an identity to which they had probably aspired for several years. As described above, students' immediate goals were centred on academic success and becoming a member of the student community which increases self-esteem and psychological wellbeing, while avoiding 'feared selves' that might be useless, unemployed or have a job they hate (Cameron, 1999). The allure of enjoying studenthood for as long as possible, and the daunting nature of adulthood, may combine to further distance consideration of becoming a professional, whether in marketing or any other graduate role. The majority of literature about students' professional identity development assumes a starting point of a student identity or overlooks it entirely, but for first-year students it is important

to consider how student identity, to which they most immediately aspire, may eclipse the PI to which HEIs and policy hope they are most aligned upon graduation.

Super (1980) explored the relative role identities of child, pupil or student, leisurite, citizen, worker, spouse, homemaker, parent and pensioner over a lifetime, though overlooked the distinct identity of adulthood. Super reflected upon the interactive nature of the variety of roles constituting a career, and concluded that self-actualization is achievable through interactions of these roles and mini-cycles of role salience for each. This life-span, life-space theory is less utilised in HE settings, considering constellations of self-concepts across identities rather than the technocratic focus upon employment outcomes and employee identity (Hartung, 2021; Sultana, 2018). This suggests that universities can do more to reflect the multiple identities of student, worker, young adult (or even child) and adult, and those beyond the realm of work and study. While this study considers only the first year of a degree, the salience of studenthood is clearly dominant at this time. Therefore, employability outcomes that aligned with Super's (1980) cycle of activity of anticipation, planning, action, and adaptation towards *student* identity facilitates employability transitions rather than embedding this solely in the, at this stage, less relevant *worker* identity.

Overall, the group discussions with employers appeared to facilitate a shift towards engagement with employability and skills, through what Tomlinson (2010, p.74) describes for graduates as 'making active and meaningful choices, reflexively constructed and linked to agency and self-identity'.

Lave and Wenger (1991) described professional identity development as integral to CoPs. Identity is constructed through situated practice and legitimate peripheral participation within a CoP that involves 'becoming' and 'changing who we are' (Wenger, 1998, p. 5). Bridgstock's (2019) work saw opportunity in the overlapping CoPs that students experience at university (e.g. being a student, becoming a professional) and this study also suggests that this may be in part due to conflict as students struggle in renegotiation of multiple identities in the relatively short time they are at university.

Struggles with identity transitions was therefore a consistent subtheme (1b) contributing to the overarching theme of delay in engagement with employability (theme 2), and this study supports the growing assertions that identity is a more valuable lens for graduate employability than a skills-led approach (e.g. Tomlinson 2010; Hager and Hodkinson, 2009; Holmes, 2013; Jackson, 2016). While, in this study, I chose to cultivate a community around skills development, it is CoPs' role in identity development that is likely to have contributed most significantly to students' development and psychological wellbeing.

5.3.3. Subtheme 1c. Fear of social judgement: as friend, student or employee

Fear of judgement by others is a barrier engagement with such a community, whether in academic settings or the workplace. As quotes from all interviewees illustrated, they and others were concerned about making themselves vulnerable in front of their peers.

Elena (interview 3) described how she felt like she was "*in the wrong place*" in work environments, and felt that the required identity transition to fit into such environments were inaccessible at this time. Other students, who engaged more consistently with the employers, found the employers' normalness reassuring, whether as people that they might be interviewed by (e.g. Azim), or as future colleagues (e.g. Jack). This reduced their fear of judgement from these and other employers.

Of more immediate concern, however, were students' fears about the social risk of learning approaches such as role play. While I had encountered this in classrooms before, in the case of cocreation this could rule out the choice of valuable learning approaches. Further exploration of the literature suggests that students may make choices that are 'more ego-protective than growth-oriented' (Harris, Brown and Dargusch, 2018, p.125), choosing to deliberately underperform or avoiding opportunities for personal feedback in order not to attract negative peer or academic staff reactions (e.g., Harris, Brown and Dargusch, 2018). In times of stress, such as struggling with identity transitions (subtheme 1b) and prioritising building friendships students may prioritise perceived well-being over opportunities for growth

(Boekaerts and Corno, 2005). In contrast, where students' personal interest, values, expected satisfaction and rewards align with the subject matter, they are prepared to take greater risks (Boekaerts and Corno, 2005). Therefore, as Theme 2 identifies that students delay engagement with employability, potentially risky learning approaches to employability are likely to attract low student engagement. Subtheme 1c (fear of social judgement), therefore, has implications for engagement in many forms of learning but particularly those related to employability.

5.3.4. Subtheme 1d. Immediate social and academic concerns take priority over long-term career concerns

A further subtheme resulting in the dread of employment and delay in engaging with employability was first-year students' prioritisation of personal, emotional and social journeys over employability and skills development, despite the latter being their long-term goal in investing in a university education. Eden (2014) is one of few authors who discusses students' prioritisation of coping with new experiences (in that case, work experience) over skills development, and the need for 'a more developmental, emotionally conscious approach' (p.275) towards employability development than the mechanistic, skills-based approach typical in HE. Clues to first-year students' disengagement are apparent in prior literature, for example Tymon (2013) discusses first-year students' lack of confidence to engage in discussions about employability and lack of interest, and suggests raising awareness of employability and more overt activities to render goals clearer. However, students' broader emotional, social and academic journeys in HE, particularly over their first year, are neglected. At this stage, when students have yet to find their feet at university, it is possible that 'making the tacit explicit', as Knight and Yorke (2003, p. 3) recommend, about an intimidating future may prompt students to resist engaging with employability through fear rather than disinterest.

While other authors suggest that the first year is too soon to teach about employability due to this apparent lack of engagement (e.g., Bradley, Priego-Hernández and Quigley, 2021), in this study, students shift from a 'retreatist', passive, internal focus to a more outward looking, actively engaged 'careerist' position (Tomlinson, 2007) in later interviews, discussions and portfolios, indicating that

working with employers on an ongoing basis was successful in supporting students' development even at this early stage.

The interviews and class discussions suggested that students considered immediate social and academic concerns as requiring distinctly different actions to employability skills, but later described starting to apply their learning from the module into their academic practice. For example, working with peers to achieve early academic success through groupwork across many modules was a significant source of stress, yet 'soft', employability skills such as listening, negotiation and working as teams helped to alleviate this stress. Chamorro-Premuzic et al. (2010) found that 'soft' skills were seen as inferior to academic skills by some students, and the literature largely positions soft skills as necessary for success *after* graduation, rather than a factor in successful academic study. Academic skills are frequently framed as individual skills, such as information searching, critical writing, presentation skills and referencing, as demonstrated through a review of this university's own academic skills webpages and texts (e.g. Turner et al. 2011).

Therefore, aligning soft/employability/interpersonal skill development with first-year students' more immediate goals of improving academic performance would not only benefit long-term employability but also shorter-term academic success (e.g. Harris-Reeves and Mahoney, 2017), and provide greater incentive to engage (supporting social cohesion). This process therefore situates learning not only in context of the profession and relevant organisations, but also in terms of students' own long-term academic journey, and their immediate emotional goals.

5.3.5. Subtheme 2a. (Mis)perceptions of employability, soft skills and skill levels

At its outset, the study confirmed the commonly reported disparities in students' identification and prioritisation of skills compared to employers (e.g., Succi and Canovi, 2020; Tymon, 2013; Archer and Davison, 2008) and students' understandings and estimations of skills levels compared to employers' (e.g. Matsouka and Mihail, 2016) (subtheme 2a). Furthermore, these students largely believed that a degree and basic work experience (e.g. in retail) would be sufficient evidence to secure the employment they desired, which suggested they lacked the savviness of students

with greater cultural and social capital, confirming the findings of other studies (e.g. Tymon, 2013).

However, the action research approach also meant that students suggested skills that the employers and I had not considered, i.e. confidence. I had not considered confidence as a teachable skill before this study, and it is not discussed as such in the literature. This suggestion led me to identify confidence both in job ads and as a subject of discussion in psychology literature. I do not think that the module had significant impact on students' confidence in itself, but as described in subtheme 3b, students became more comfortable with feeling uncomfortable, in part due to the employers' assurances. However, Bleidorn et al. (2019) suggested that interventions at appropriate times can adjust traits in ways that impact behaviours in the workplace. The students who participated in the speaking circle reported increased confidence, and highlight the impact of challenging, yet manageable learning environments.

Therefore, while students may hold misperceptions about prioritisations and definitions of many soft skills, understanding students' prioritisations helped me to understand their immediate social and academic concerns (subtheme 1d). This collaborative approach therefore suggests approaches to address both students' and employers' priorities, often towards similar goals (see Conclusion).

5.3.6. Summary of reflections on employability

While the Findings chapter focused upon the observed increase in students' confidence in discussing employability, soft skills and careers management skills, this discussion has focused upon the barriers to such development. Other authors have largely concluded that first year students are not ready to engage with employability, however this study has suggested reasons for this in the subthemes described above. These were: students' negative perceptions of work; competing priorities for immediate academic and social stability over longer-term professional futures; and more urgent identity transitions in terms of becoming a student and adult, rather than a professional. While these may defer consideration of professional futures for students, addressing students' concerns can be aligned with professional identity and

skills development. I now consider in greater depth the pedagogic approaches in this module, and the choices made by students.

5.4. Themes 3 and 4: Learning approaches

Baxter Magolda's (1998) four stages of self-authorship is a potential theoretical lens for assessing stages of development through this study. The students moved from stage one, reliant on external cues such as being told to develop skills, to stage two, shifting from accepting to evaluating presented knowledge with awareness gained through a degree of professional socialisation. The mechanisms through which this was achieved are explored in this section. I examine how employers became credible role models for students' possible future selves professionally and emotionally (Theme 3), and the largely tacit nature of these learning opportunities. For Theme 4, I discuss the employers' role in developing students' professional skills and behaviours in the context of the marketing profession (Theme 4).

5.4.1. Theme 3: Employers as role models

Herrington and Herrington (2006) lamented a lack of observable 'expert performances' for first-year students in employability skills development, however this study showed that this extended to observable *emotional and identity* performances. Students reported the influence of the employers as people with fulfilling graduate careers (subtheme 3a), for managing emotional challenges (subtheme 3b) and for successfully negotiating transitions to adulthood (subtheme 3c). This was enhanced by the employers' role as alumni, supporting evidence that people are attracted to role models that they perceive a similarity to (Gibson, 2004, citing Erikson, 1950). We cannot assume that a similar influence would be exerted by employers who were not alumni, in a similar intervention, but this is worthy of exploration.

These employers became both models of behaviour and possible selves for students. Role modelling provides examples of behaviours to be integrated into one's own behavioural repertoire (e.g. Wood and Bandura, 1989), while possible selves provide a constellation of identity goals (or identities to be avoided) (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Students' exploration of both professional and adult identities supports

Ibarra's translation of possible selves theory into work contexts, bridging between life stage transitions and potential graduate careers. There is precedent of both professional and adult identities being developed through work-related CoPs, though the only study identified is Goodwin's (2007) re-analysis of Elias' (1961) 'lost young worker project' through a CoP lens. Goodwin proposed that entry to professional CoPs was a prompt to transition to adulthood: this study suggests that identity transitions to adulthood are pre-requisite to identity transitions to being a professional, suggesting a mutuality between adulthood and professional status transitions.

For both Themes 3 and 4, the development of trust, and students' perceptions of employers as 'normal people' facilitated this process. Close engagement with employers would not have been accessible outside the seminar for most students, without social capital to access employers as acquaintances and too early in their careers to apply for long-term graduate roles. Yet no students asked employers about recruitment opportunities with their organisations, suggesting that social capital was not enhanced through this study. However, there is evidence of development of human, psychological, cultural and identity capitals (Tomlinson, 2017a).

Practitioners' expert performances created opportunity for students to develop cultural capital in terms of understandings of the workplace, skills and professional behaviours (Theme 4). While the exercises and group discussions on this module aligned with Knight et al.'s (2003, p.3) call to make 'the tacit explicit' when teaching employability, the role of employers as role models and co-participating in shared practices enhanced these explicit approaches. Such situated learning opportunities are discussed in the context of CoPs in section 5.5.1.

In terms of psychological capital development (Tomlinson, 2017a), students were surprised that these successful employers demonstrated vulnerability, on their weaknesses and failures (subtheme 3b). The employers also offered observable developmental performances with examples from their student careers and current practice. Both employers recounted engaging in challenging learning opportunities

and ongoing active reflection, modelling dispositional employability (Fugate and Kinicki, 2008).

Few studies address students' dread of employment (subtheme 1a, section 5.3.1) (e.g. Berg et al., 2017), however lack of professional goals weakens graduate identity development, which is a key driver to students' engagement with employability development (Holmes, 2001). No studies have been identified that build more positive perceptions of graduate *roles*. Such interventions would build students' intrinsic engagement with potential careers (Kim et al., 2002), and support graduate identity development and therefore commitment to career goals (Jensen and Jetten, 2016). The employers' enjoyment of their roles and their stories of their own and others' work experiences positively impacted students' perceptions of future graduate roles (subtheme 3a), suggesting a valuable approach to support graduate identity development. Once aspirations are established, or at least possible selves identified, the actionable practicalities of soft skills and careers management skills allowed students to develop a sense of agency in their employability development. Understanding that skills development would allow greater choice of careers and roles, and that effective career management skills would communicate these skills to that end, enhanced student's appreciation of the intervention and the wider importance of employability.

Theme 3, therefore, captures learning approaches based upon access to possible selves, the opportunity to model more specific behaviours, and how these contribute to cultural, psychological and identity capital development. Theme 4 considers more direct impact of employers upon students' human capital development, in terms of skills, and the further development of cultural and identity capital related to graduate professions, including marketing.

5.4.2. Theme 4: Employers develop students' skills and behaviours in context

Theme 4 describes how students observed, and interacted with, employers in negotiating and renegotiating their understandings of work, skills, and identity over the course of the module. Working with employers appears to have had more success than comparable studies that did not involve employers interacting with first-year

students (e.g. in comparison to Stoner and Milner, 2010). The interview and portfolio data suggest that this is attributable to the repeated engagement between students and employers, and opportunities for students to observe employers in practice. The development of a CoP of students, employers and me as an academic is discussed in section 5.5.

As the case studies in the Findings (section 4.4.3.1) show, students commenced the study with different prioritisation and/or understandings of skills such as communication and leadership compared to employers. While the group discussion exercises surfaced these disparities (see Appendices 9 and 10 for examples), the discussions between students and employers explored and explained these differences. The employers directly impacted students' understandings through multiple means: through description and storytelling regarding the workplace, recruitment processes and career journeys that students cannot yet access; by gently providing feedback on students' misconceptions; as well as through their behaviours as models in the classroom (Theme 3).

Lave and Wenger (1991) describe storytelling as a key tool of legitimate peripheral participation, explored in the next section. However this literature had not prepared me for the degree to which this was true in this seminar setting. Storytelling in HE teaching makes learning more personal, helps students to think more critically, and introduces factual content (Abrahamson, 1998). In business school contexts, storytelling increased enjoyment of learning and learner engagement, reduced students' resistance to learning and led to improved student performance (Bryant and Harris, 2011). The employers discussed how they used storytelling to legitimise their claims and make them more memorable. Students took many of these stories as either cautionary tales or relatable possible models of behaviour. I interpreted many of these stories as widening the cast of professionals represented in the group discussions, introducing not only the employers as their younger selves, but also their past employees and teams. Stories fleshed out these images of the employers and their staff, contributing further possible selves to students' imaginations.

5.4.3. Reflection

This study confirmed the substantial literature and numerous models that cite reflection as one of the most important processes in developing employability understandings and skills, as summarised in Table 2-1 of the Literature Review. While a small number of students may have written what they thought the markers wanted to read or committed little time to the process, others used the guidance for effective reflection and evidenced ongoing engagement with the process. As described above, both employers had (unprompted) discussed the role of ongoing reflection in developing their own professional practice, corroborating its importance. All of the student interviewees commented on the benefits of reflection, sometimes to their own surprise. For my own teaching practice, the most valuable personal reflection was that many modules use reflection as a final assessment point, however this module's three portfolio points, and the repeated process of reflection interspersed with opportunities for action (as part of the action research approach), conferred significant benefit for students (as endorsed by Kolb, 1984).

5.4.4. Cocreation

Cocreation was the subject of research question 2, and was used in this study as both a pedagogic and research method, contributing to the decision-making in each action research cycle. This approach was successful for choosing topics for focus in future learning cycles, as students chose topics that the employers and I agreed were good priorities. However, when offered a choice of pedagogic approaches, students shied away from those that the employers had recommended, such as role play and video presentation, and chose approaches that did not make them 'cringe'.

While the literature review had identified that some students are 'uncomfortable' with learning approaches such as role play (Elwyn, Greenhalgh and Macfarlane, 2001), little literature explores why. In this study, 'cringe' related to learning experiences where students felt they would work alone, rather than as a group, and be judged by peers. Students did not fear judgement by me, as a teacher, or the employers, but did not want to perform role play, video or individual presentations in front of peers. However, when students were directed to participate in a speaking

circle (after most had resisted preparing short Pecha Kucha presentations), all but one agreed to participate, and participants reported a boost in confidence after the session. This supported the employers' predictions that the most challenging learning experiences are often the most rewarding, and suggested that students had either truly underestimated the learning potential of the task or, perhaps unconsciously, reported low anticipated potential in the hope of avoiding uncomfortable activities.

There is some literature addressing the challenges of cocreation between staff and students. Bovill (2020) reviewed earlier studies concerning whole class cocreation strategies, as used in this study, challenges related to logistics such as time and class size were common. However, 'sticky' classes, resistant to change, were also a common issue. Staff did not enjoy teaching these classes, where community was difficult to establish, unlike this class who were very engaged in terms of topic and community development. This study suggests that *what* students will learn may be more amenable to cocreation than *how* students learn due to students' protective stance against the social risks of some learning approaches. Bovill (2020) also discussed staff who claim to facilitate cocreation but do not enact students' suggestion as disempowering for students, yet this is what the employers and I chose to do in terms of pedagogic approaches. However, two interviewees in this study suggested that we needed to, in Jack's (interview 4) words, "*make everyone do it*", because students would not choose what they knew to be the most valuable learning approach. This inferred that students valued the expertise of the teaching staff and conceded that students may not make appropriate choices. This was confirmed after using the speaking circle, and students' comments in their portfolios about the confidence this challenge had given them, despite their resistance to the approach. More recently, Godbold, Hung and Matthews (2022) have explored conflict during cocreation, and concluded that 'modelling partnership practices in the classroom, including how lecturers frame and respond to conflict' (p.1114) in response to debates during cocreation prepares students for democratic decision-making in civic life, and therefore also professional life.

I am further reassured about the decision to impose learning approaches in the latter stages of the study as we had the ‘strong relationships, trust and shared-decision making at the heart of co-creating [which] require a focus on teacher and student attitudes, language, and behaviour to one another’ Bovill (2020, p.1032) established through the ongoing group discussions. I therefore suggest that, where trust is established and a strong case made, the expertise of stakeholders such as employers and teaching staff may take precedence where students are resistant to approaches that may cause manageable, and short-term, discomfort, despite evidence of their efficacy, where full discussions about the reasoning take place. The implications of this for the action research methodology, which adopted the cocreation decisions as part of the planning stages, are considered later in this discussion. The implications of this for the rising trend in cocreation (or students as partners (SaP)) approaches in HE would be worthy of further investigation.

Additionally, cocreation was demonstrated to impact employers in terms of their estimation of students’ understandings of employability skills and the importance of real-world contexts for development. Employers’ perceptions of skills did not change over the course of the study, while students’ changed significantly, but employers re-evaluated the starting point of new graduates in employment and employers’ role in their continued development. This reinforces the argument for cocreation (and the action research that utilised this process) as a means of establishing social justice between stakeholders, as students impact employers’ understandings through more equitable classroom interactions.

5.4.5. Summary of pedagogic reflections

In summary, as a pedagogic approach, working with employers on an ongoing basis in this way appears to be a sustainable and effective means to increase students’ social and cultural capital, and confidence in their ability to work in future graduate roles. While this approach required considerably more work on my part to organise the employers in the first instance, less organisation was required for later sessions as employers were familiar with what was expected. Also, while a small amount of preparation was required to develop an overall theme, structure and some content

for each session, much of the session relied on discussion driven by the students and employers, which reduced my overall workload. This approach is also scalable, with more employers working in small groups with larger cohorts. The most satisfying moments of this teaching approach were in the last two group sessions, when the students and employers were speaking directly for longer periods, requiring little input on my part yet with greater impact towards employability skills and understandings than I would have achieved without the employers. In the context of continuing wider participation, approaches to connect students and employers from early in the degree appear to offer significant advantages for students' emotional, academic and professional journeys, if facilitated appropriately.

5.5. Community of Practice

Having discussed the topic of employability and skills development and the pedagogic processes of the study from the perspective of the thematic analysis, I now consider these through the underpinning conceptual lens of communities of practice (CoP). While this could not be conceived as a CoP of *marketing communications* practice, being based in a seminar rather than in industry, I propose this as a transitional CoP for students aspiring to the profession. I consider whether this intervention can be regarded as a CoP, echoing the work of Iverson and McPhee (2008)), by establishing whether the hallmarks of CoPs are present. These constitute mutual engagement, a negotiated joint enterprise and a shared repertoire, where “[e]ven low levels or limited aspects of each element indicate a certain level or measure of CoP dynamics, even if only as a marginal case” Iverson and McPhee (2008, p.179). Firstly, however, I consider how the activities undertaken through this study align with understandings of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation.

5.5.1. *Situated learning*

As both employers and students acknowledged, the processes of learning occurring in these sessions was distinctly different to the those elsewhere in this module and the programme. While other modules relied on lectures, textbooks, academic papers and ‘manuals’ of technical skills, learning in the group sessions occurred through discussion, student-led questions and storytelling, and topics agreed through group

decision-making. Students' interpretations of the subjects of discussion evolved over the course of the group discussions, in line with what Wenger (1998) envisioned as a longitudinal journey, not only in terms of 'hard knowledge' but also regarding students' identities, goals and aspirations, which typifies situated learning.

Marketing degrees typically promise gains of human capital, i.e. the skills and knowledge of the discipline, and "receiving" a body of factual knowledge about the world' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.33). However, in this study, students demonstrated developments in relativistic knowledge, moving from 'black and white' definitions of communication or leadership to nuanced, flexible understandings situated in the circumstances of the profession and role. These were negotiated with practitioners over the course of the module. This contrasts with the findings of Stoner and Milner (2010), who concluded that first-year students demonstrated 'reluctance to accept relativistic stances to problems in context' (p.135). The students and I each concluded the module with different interpretations of the same language, though negotiated to be more like each other's than before the intervention and subject to future change. Students' interpretations became more alike those of the old-timers than vice versa, given the experience of the employers. Employers' changes in understanding were less pronounced and appeared more impacted by each other than by the students or I, however their understandings of the positions of graduates and the role of HE changed somewhat, to acknowledge the significant transitions of students in HE and considerations for new graduate recruits. My own understandings shifted away from standardised definitions of soft skills (e.g. universities' graduate attributes lists) to more nuanced understandings in the context of a situations.

As discussed in section 5.4.2, Lave and Wenger (1991) suggested storytelling as an important tool of situated learning, describing circumstances that students might not themselves observe until, and if, they enter the profession. Crafting such imagery enabled students to envisage situations particular to, and situated in, the discipline, and the historical and contextual aspects that define situated learning (Elmholdt, 2004). These stories illustrated more than professional language and behaviours, revealing emotional models of the employers and their career journeys. This is not an

aspect of situated learning explored in any depth by Lave and Wenger (1991), not even in the context of the apprenticeship of Yucatec midwives, where one imagines there is deep situated learning related to coping with the emotions of childbirth and loss. Lave and Wenger reflect upon the personal stories shared in Alcoholics Anonymous as a means for newcomers to recognise that they are alcoholics, in order to transition in identity to non-drinking alcoholics. While this bears some resemblance to how personal stories, vulnerabilities and discomfort experienced in learning were shared with students in this study, the role of old-timers as emotional role models, and learning related to mental health, jeopardy and failure is neglected in CoP theory and is worthy of further investigation.

In what may be a debatable parallel, the Alcoholics Anonymous case study may be the most relevant of Lave and Wenger's original case studies for this study. Chosen for their text as a 'more detailed view of the fashioning of identity' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.79) than the examples of midwives, tailors and quartermasters, the case study detailed the process of identity transition to a new life stage, that of a nondrinking alcoholic. Through the company of 'near-peers and adepts, those whose practices and identities are the community of A.A.' (p.79), alcoholics attended sessions intentionally convened for learning. 'Old-timers give testimony about their drinking past and the course of the process of becoming sober' (p.79-80) through extensive storytelling and 'discussion meetings' focusing upon a single aspect of transition. These processes facilitated identity construction and transformation through the medium of talk, through the purposeful interpretation and reinterpretation of alcoholism, and themselves as alcoholics, particularly for newcomers. As with other case studies, the A.A. case demonstrates that there is often no pre-determined curriculum, but instead one that unfolds as required by the community, as in this study. With elements of this CoP convened with the express purpose of identity transition, the roles of old-timers in sharing experience through storytelling and near-peers in discussion, and focused discussion on specific topics, the parallels to a seminar environment with the intentional involvement of old-timers are clear, and will be returned to later.

This learning did not take place in the workplace, and therefore was not fully immersive in the sociocultural practices of the profession. It did bear the hallmarks of guided workplace learning (Billett, 2007), including modelling, coaching and questioning, that are recognised practices in situated learning and the apprenticeships described by Lave and Wenger (1991). Furthermore, Orsmond, Merry and Reiling (2022) argue that the process of negotiation and renegotiation of meaning, and associated development of social identities, i.e. the processes of situated learning, are themselves invaluable professional skills. These ease future transitions into graduate employment through learning *how* to talk in the workplace, in what Goldie (p.e641, 2012) termed ‘ways of being and relating in professional contexts’, while Hager and Hodkinson (2009) concluded that developing such social and cultural capital while at university accounted for greater chances of successful acquisition of graduate roles upon graduation.

5.5.2. Legitimate peripheral participation

As Elena described, the transition to a future profession is more than gaining knowledge of how to do (in this case) marketing, but also how ‘*how [practitioners] look, how they acted*’, and the language, behaviours and other implicit understandings that allow newcomers to become full participants in that sociocultural practice. For first-year students, accessing the agencies and offices of the marketing workplace is often not possible, limiting opportunities to observe and interact with old-timers, and many students lack the confidence when encouraged to apply for placements a year later (Bullock et al., 2009). Therefore, while a seminar cannot replace the workplace, engaging in conversations and activities with practitioners has the potential to start this journey, building confidence, shifting aspirations (i.e. identity) and developing cultural capital markers of language and behaviour to access the career pathway through processes of legitimate peripheral participation.

A conclusion that legitimate peripheral participation occurred, characterising this more decisively as a CoP, depends upon: whether these two groups could be characterised as newcomers and old-timers; the extent to which relationships existed

between individuals in the two groups; and whether these interactions were instrumental in the development of 'activities, identities, artefacts, and communities of knowledge and practice' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.29). In terms of roles, the students are newcomers not to the career of marketing but stand at the threshold of the possibility of marketing as a future career, and the employers are seasoned old-timers not only of the profession but also of the university and as working adults in graduate roles. No specific 'master-apprentice' relationships existed in this context, which was also true the non-drinking alcoholics, quartermasters and Yucatec midwives case studies. Both students and employers reported perceptions of direct relationships, enacted through conversations, decision-making and the shared activities of 'guided workplace learning' including question and answer sessions described above. Students and employers described the development of trust between the group's members, and therefore confidence to ask direct questions and express vulnerabilities within the shared space. In terms of the development of activities, identities and artefacts, these are explored elsewhere in this chapter under cocreation, identity development and shared repertoire.

In terms of the *legitimacy* of the participants, the students, are considered as future potential marketing professionals by the employers, academic staff and themselves: even those who choose to pursue an alternative profession will position this as a change of direction from marketing. In terms of the legitimacy of participation, students were granted an:

'uneven sketch of the enterprise [of marketing, graduate roles and adulthood, including]...who is involved; what they do; what everyday life is like; how masters talk, walk, work, and generally conduct their lives; how people who are not part of the community of practice interact with it; what other learners are doing; and what learners need to learn to become full practitioners'. (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.95)

Though incomplete, this picture is more complete than first-year students would otherwise encounter.

In terms of i.e. *peripheral* participation, the students demonstrated transitions from being school/college-leavers to becoming future professionals, through the process of

jointly engaging in practices akin to those of the workplace. Students' understanding of ideas of communication, confidence and other skills and traits shifted towards those of the employers over time, increasing in 'eligibility' to become future practitioners. Students were also becoming students and adults, moving from the 'periphery' of each identity towards fuller participation. This participation and community development, as Lave and Wenger (1991) take pains to explain, is not a pedagogical strategy, but a way of understanding the transitions in identity and learning taking place for these students as a fuller understanding of learning that traditional, curriculum-led approaches. This whole-person view of the student experience again captures the momentary and longer-term fears related to such transitions, offering a model of understanding that helps construct higher education around this emotional journey and beyond learning outcomes.

Finally, it can be argued that all stakeholder engaged in *participation* in this potential CoP, not only in terms of discussing the practices of the profession, but, perhaps more importantly, participating in a community of practitioners, where 'acceptance by and interaction with acknowledged adept practitioners make learning legitimate and of value from the point of view of the apprentice' (Lave and Wenger, p.110, 1991). While such participation is remote from the workplace, storytelling and interaction with practitioners allows these nervous newcomers to take early steps into the CoP in a manageable, safe way appropriate for their highly peripheral status, preparing them for the 'greater commitment of time, intensified effort, more and broader responsibilities within the community and more difficult and risky tasks' (Lave and Wenger, 1991, p.111) required of their next steps into practice. Therefore, as characteristics of legitimate peripheral participation are confirmed, the characterisation of this intervention as developing learning through the social practices of a CoP is supported.

5.5.3. Mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire

Iverson and McPhee (2008) looked beyond Lave and Wenger's (1991) earlier characterisations of situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation as the principle characteristics of CoPs, and argued that Wenger's (1998) triad of 'founding

elements' represented the 'core of CoP theory' (p.179). These consist of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and a shared repertoire. I therefore now consider the activities of the group discussions from these perspectives.

Mutual engagement represents the means and level of communication and interaction between participants in a CoP and is a prerequisite of joint enterprise and share repertoire (Wenger, 1998). The level of mutual engagement affects the degree to which participants access and negotiate understandings (Iverson and McPhee, 2008), and Harris (1998) emphasised the voluntary nature of this, as participants should be able to 'vote with their feet' (p.154), as students can, and did, for these group discussions. This again suggests parallels with Lave and Wenger's (1991) case study of non-drinking alcoholics, due to the voluntary nature of engagement of this CoP: while Lave and Wenger's career-orientated examples documented transitions for apprentices who were paid (in some form) to engage and where non-engagement would result in the withdrawal of that opportunity, non-drinking alcoholics attended voluntarily and at personal, emotional expense. Neither the employers nor these fee-paying students were obliged to attend the group discussions, and students' engagement with the socially risky learning described above is optional, as demonstrated by Elena's lack of engagement over the final two group discussions. However, most students did choose to engage, as did the employers, and over time my role as facilitator diminished as students and employers adopted more self-directing roles in the final sessions. This recalls Dewey's early propositions of learning as a social process, where the 'quality is realised in the degree in which individuals form a community group ... when education is based upon experience and educative experience is seen to be a social process... The teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of leader of group activities' (Dewey 1938, p. 58-59).

Students across the cohort also demonstrated differential levels of engagement within the sessions, as some actively engaged in discussion with employers while others chose not to. Mia suggested lack of confidence as the cause of shyness with employers, however others will have perceived engagement as of little value to their

learning and chosen not to attend. These tensions, around attendance, participation and engagement, are of rising concern in HE but are also consistent with mutual engagement as something to be nurtured and cultivated, and not enforced or managed (Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002). However, both employers commented upon the high degree of engagement of those students who chose to attend, not only in terms of listening and asking questions but ‘coming back with some very relevant points’ (John, interview 2), and while ‘[t]hey are probably telling me more about what they think I want to hear rather than what needs to be said. But we can work on that over time” (John, interview 2), this demonstrates that engagement is perceived by employers as a prerequisite to a shared repertoire.

The second characteristic of CoPs, joint enterprise, refers to local ownership of issues and engagement with a set of problems and topics that concern CoP members (Wenger, 1998), which, when people think together about ‘real-life problems that people genuinely care about, gives life to CoPs’ (Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden, 2017, p.402). Stakeholders’ motivations to engage varied, as Helen sought to support future generations while John hoped to protect the discipline, and students were more focused upon allaying their own fears and developing understandings to smooth their own future careers, however their goals (and repertoire) were the same i.e. a shared understanding of key factors in recruitment and career-development in marketing. Helen commented upon the importance of fostering trust in the community in order to facilitate these discussions, while Iverson and McPhee (2008) suggest that ‘[n]egotiation also potentially increases member commitment’ (p.179), implying an iterative, positive process between trust and commitment. In this case stakeholders negotiated priority skills and pedagogic approaches for the next round of teaching. At this stage of their degree, there were weak relationships between students, however this did not appear to affect the process of working together in the CoP, confirming Pyrko, Dörfler and Eden’s (2017) conclusion that the sense of joint enterprise helps overcome these barriers, as ‘not necessarily because of liking each other, they organise themselves around negotiating a practice that they all share and identify with’ (p.392), which may help build cohort identity for these first year students.

The final characteristic of CoPs is a shared repertoire, 'a set of frameworks, tools, information, styles, language, stories, and documents' (Wenger et al., 2002, p.29). This is described, capturing refinement of terminology and shared understandings of language around soft skills and activities of the workplace. Elena expressed her concerns that she lacked this repertoire, and Helen defined employability as much by language and clothing as skills. While students were keen to adopt the language and behaviours of the employers, John described *'really enjoy[ing] taking a step out and thinking about what's important for people'* (interview 2) and a therefore a process of mutual engagement in developing that shared repertoire. The development of this repertoire was apparent as students' behaviour with employers shifted over time, in contributing to the group in a semi-professional environment which was of marked contrast to student-staff sessions. The tools and general activities of the group discussions were largely negotiated between me and employers, after the first session, as the result of our post-group discussion conversations, however each session developed in line with student-led enquiry and discussions. This shared repertoire was visited and revisited, as understandings of skills and other behaviours were developed and clarified into a resource to both define the community and be subject to its future further engagement in practice (Wenger, 1998).

5.5.4. *Legitimacy of the CoP*

Using the same approach as Iverson and McPhee (2008), the community established in this module qualifies as a CoP with characteristics of mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. Furthermore it the processes arising constituted situated learning and legitimate peripheral participation. While Lave and Wenger (1991) resisted strategies to establish CoPs for the purpose of learning, and suggested that they should always arise organically, Wenger's later work (e.g. Wenger et al., 2002) focused on establishing CoPs more intentionally within workplace settings. Kapucu (2013) characterised university learning settings as CoPs in their own right, when they are the setting for course design and activities that can enhance learning. Lave and Wenger (1991) also conceded that, were legitimate peripheral participation was considered for cultivation in schools, it would require "varied forms of membership" (p.41) as took place here, rather than students and staff alone.

Therefore, this CoP sits somewhere between a university seminar CoP, and a professional, workplace-based CoP, and I characterise it as a transitional CoP. Recently, Orsmond et al. (2022) suggest that university CoPs involving employers develop know *who* and know *how* knowledge, rather than the know what and know why knowledge prioritised in more traditional university pedagogies. This CoP is also only one of many CoPs in which each student sits, with learning both transferred between them and situated firmly within the practices of that CoP, for example as students, within casual workplaces, within clubs and societies.

One distinction of this CoP, again more akin to the example of Alcoholics Anonymous, was my role as facilitator, bringing together newcomers and old-timers through somewhat stage-managed practices, rather than those practices arising totally organically or through an approach specified by the employers. A further distinction was the short lifespan of this CoP: while the students and I continued to work together over the next year it was without these particular employers and around a different set of practices. A further limitation on this CoP was that the students acted as a group, with little opportunity for individual interactions with employers over time. In contrast to the case studies of Lave and Wenger (1991) this neglects individuals' life histories, dispositions and agency and limits the potential of the CoP (Billett, 2001; Hodkinson and Hodkinson, 2004). However, in terms of the value to the old-timers, the employers, this CoP achieved at least some of what they had hoped and which the 'masters of practice' described in Lave and Wenger's (1991) text, of safeguarding the profession and future professionals, and the role of inducting newcomers into industry.

5.5.5. Summary of CoP approach

A CoP perspective broadens understandings of employability for students, academic staff and employer stakeholders beyond a human capital perspective. While the subject of this transitional CoP was soft skills, its practice extended into the languages behaviours and other tools in the repertoire shared by this temporary community. This had positive impacts upon students' graduate identity development, as well as human, cultural and psychological capitals. While the CoP was hoped to embed

knowledge in the practice of a particular profession, the students in this study reported wider benefits for their understandings of graduate work, transitions to adulthood and ways of learning. This suggests that CoP theory may define the scope of learning too closely and neglect the roles of old-timers beyond their profession, and that CoPs can offer more than professional socialisation and knowledge.

This approach allowed employers whose voices are largely absent from ongoing HE engagement, i.e. those from SMEs, to work closely with students and prepare students for the marketing industry. It also allowed students who otherwise had limited access to employers from their potential future profession to observe employers as role models (Theme 3), gather conceptions of future professional selves and develop their understandings of a shared repertoire of language, behaviours and understandings of the marketing profession (Theme 4).

5.6. Methodological reflections

5.6.1. The value of action research in the context of CoPs, cocreation and pedagogy

This study used action research cycles over the course of the module, where different topics and pedagogic approaches were able to be chosen in each cycle through cocreation. Though this was not designed to be a full participatory action research project, it incorporated shared decision-making around the planned actions for the group. This follows the same approach to action research as the studies listed in section 2.8.2, though other action research approaches also consider successive cycles of the same intervention, rather than stages of a single intervention. However, the breadth of definitions of action research qualifies this study as such, though some academics would debate whether any action research is truly research or is simply problem-solving (e.g., Hodginson, 1957, cited in McNiff and Whitehead, 2006). In this case, action research provided the best fit to exploring the social interactions occurring in this context, providing voice for stakeholders alongside the development of practice, and developing immediately relevant, inclusive practice. In addition, retrospective reflexive thematic analysis allowed in depth exploration of a proposed theoretical perspective (CoP theory) and to identify emergent themes in the full body of data.

Action research offered benefits in terms of *my* praxis, driving the concurrent development of theory, practice and an ethical approach to inquiry (Campbell and Groundwater-Smith, 2010), as reflected on in section 6.6. This approach aligned elegantly with CoP theory in uniting the students, employers and me around the practice of research as much as the practice of soft skills development. The methodology and theory neatly parallel each other in terms of developing a shared repertoire and mutual engagement around development of this part of the module. A further review of the literature yield few examples of research to explore the commonalities of action research and CoP theory. Altrichter (2005), investigating the teaching profession, and Yamori (2009), exploring training young people in reducing harm in natural disasters, each suggest that these commonalities would suggest a role for action research to develop identity in a similar manner to engagement in CoPs.

Nolen and Putten (2007, p.402) questioned ‘[a]t what point does teaching become research?’: a consideration that underlies the praxis that action research fosters. However there remains little consideration of ‘when does research become teaching?’. It became evident, particularly in the interviews, engagement in interviews was likely to be enhancing students’ experience of the module for those participants, increasing the time and guidance for reflection on soft skills, and creating a stronger relationship with me as a teacher. I noted that this group were more likely to ask for help both with the module and aspects covered by tutoring. Hammersley (2002) explored the ‘inherently unstable’ nature of balancing practice and enquiry within action research and furthermore, ethically, enquiry should be subordinated to practice in an educational setting. However, in this case, enquiry is often also teaching, offering value beyond ‘normal teaching’ to those who chose to engage more deeply in the research. It was for this reason that recruitment was reopened towards the end of the second cycle, for equality of opportunity for student class participants, and this possibility explained.

Finally, while research methods were not explicitly taught, students engaged in processes of informed consent, data collection, member checking and discussion of

findings, and observation of the outputs of research being put into practice. Whether in academia or professional practice, such skills would confer benefits in any future career.

5.6.2. Trustworthiness and authenticity

Chapter 3 (Table 3-2) summarised the criteria and techniques proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) for the evaluation of qualitative research. Each of these approaches was adopted through the cycles of action research, with the exception of referential adequacy, as Braun and Clarke's (2022) thematic analysis method was followed, and external audits, as requiring an additional researcher would be inappropriate for this doctorate, and assumes an 'objective truth' to be audited against.

An example of negative case analysis would be Elena's journey, as she chose not to attend the final two group discussions, and her experience differed from the other three student interviewees from that point.

My social constructionist position prompted an interpretivist approach where I as researcher must be 'prepared to accept the meanings that the actors attribute to social phenomena at face value' (Crotty, 1998, p.75) and where 'the sociological observer must exercise sufficient discipline on himself to ensure that it is indeed the actors' meanings that are recorded in his notebook and not merely his own' (Mitchell 1977, pp.115-16. While, ultimately, my interpretation will dominate these findings, the use of multiple data sources and the longitudinal nature of this study is intended to triangulate between individual participants' own contributions. This longitudinal approach also supported ongoing member checking, not only discussing findings in group discussions but also in interviews, to corroborated and refine my interpretations.

in the context of a two-semester module with three cycles of action research, the rapid research and decision-making process on each cycle was challenging. This rate of Stage One analysis meant that some subthemes, later identified through reflexive data analysis, were overlooked during Stage One analysis. Others could not be concluded until the full data set was available, for example the delay in engaging with

employability. However, a number of subthemes were identified over Stage One, allowing for member checking and further exploration in later interviews and group discussions, as discussed above.

Furthermore, the ideal cycles of action research were subject to timetabling constraints and absent participants (such as students leaving before the last session for cheaper international flights). Therefore cycles were stretched or reduced, some elements (e.g. interviews and group discussions) conducted out of the ideal order, and all had to fit in the maximum 1.5-hour timeslots to allow the rest of the module to also be delivered. Overall, however, I was surprised at how feasible this was, and am considering a similar approach future study.

5.6.3. Ethical issues

Throughout the study, the ethical management of the project complied with the university ethics' approval process, and when the moderator's guide was updated to reflect the developing understanding arising from the cycles of action research, ethics approval was sought for the changes and granted (see additional Appendix). A persistent ethical questions for educational research is whether the research process has impacted in any negative way upon students' achieving of learning outcomes from the module. In this case, the Findings chapter has documented the positive impact of the employers' involvement upon students' learning outcomes related to employability, and this chapter has further explored the positive impacts upon cultural and identity capitals for students. As described above, it is likely that the student interviewees benefited from slightly more support regarding the module than those who only participated in the group discussions, and the opportunity to become an interviewee was extended again to the cohort (none took this opportunity). A further ethical concern was of my dual role, as research and teacher, and whether this may have impacted upon students to answer or engage in certain way. As described above, the trust developed between this learning community over the course of this module is likely to have mitigated this threat, and the degree to which students disclosed personal circumstances, or chose not to attend class, would support this.

Yet, this trust was tested around my decision to implement, to a small degree pedagogic decisions that were *not* taken by the class. This is an ethical concern both in terms of whether students' contributions in joint decisions were overlooked, but also in terms of an educator's responsibility to use their expertise (especially when supported by other stakeholders, in this case the employers) support students to tackle challenging learning opportunities that they might otherwise reject but which offer long-term benefits for their learning and confidence.

Overall, as discussed in Chapter 3, the benefits for the whole cohort's engagement in decision-making, their progression in understandings and skills related to employability and their understandings of the research process, are likely to have offered substantial benefits over a module without such as process of action research. Furthermore, action research itself is an inherently more ethical research process than many alternatives, as the processes of joint decision-making and power sharing mean that ethical considerations are intrinsic to the approach (Holian and Coghlan, 2013).

In conclusion to this reflection on the methodology, action research is messy, unpredictable and challenging to complete while also delivering a module. However, it was also elegantly aligned with the subject of CoPs, and engagement in this process was a valuable experience for students.

5.7. Summary of the chapter

A legitimate transitional Community of Practice was established as students engaged in legitimate peripheral participation regarding both professional practice and professional and adulthood identity transitions. For all students, this process helped to draw back the curtain on an industry that they otherwise only know through media portrayals, and it helped them to transition, in terms of language and understanding, from outsiders to legitimate peripheral participants, and a step closer to becoming novices in the industry should they wish to do so. Alternatively, the opportunity to observe possible selves can support students to decide that this is not their chosen professional route. One key impact of ongoing opportunities to work with employers to achieve the common goals of the CoP was that it helped provide students with a

blueprint of employers' own personal journeys, as illustrated through stories and examples, that supported students' own transitions from student to industry novice. Therefore, the impact of the CoP reached beyond the immediate goal of understanding and developing skills, towards identity development and confidence building.

6. Conclusion

6.1. Introduction to chapter

The previous chapter critically examined and discussed the current study's research findings within the context of the literature and considered the approach of repeated seminar engagement with employers through the lens of Communities of Practice. In this chapter I review the aim and research questions for this study, and how the findings address these. Contributions to theory, practice and methodological understandings are summarised. Recommendations for practice and future research are proposed regarding employability and skills development, pedagogic approaches and methodological development. Finally, I reflect upon my personal journey over this study its impact upon my own positionality and practice, and how undertaking this doctorate has developed these.

6.2. Research aim and questions

The overall aim of this research is to explore the impact of a transitional Community of Practice within a first-year, marketing communications degree module upon students, employers and the academic lead, in order develop my own and others' pedagogic practice for the development of undergraduates' employability. To achieve this aim, the research questions explored stakeholders' developing conceptions of these skills, the pedagogic processes in this development, and the value and legitimacy of a theoretical lens of Communities of Practice in conceptualising this approach. The outcomes for each research question are summarised below, and Table 6-1 shows the key themes and subthemes arising from the analysis.

| Theme | Subtheme |
|------------------------|--|
| 1. Dread of employment | 1a. Graduate work is dull and unpleasant, but necessary. 1b. Struggles with identity transitions: student to professional, adolescent to adult, group to individual 1c. Fear of social judgement: as friend, student or employee 1d. Immediate social and academic concerns take priority over long-term career goals |

| | |
|---|---|
| 2. Delay in engaging with employability | 2a. (Mis)perceptions of employability, soft skills and skill levels (plus subthemes contributing to Theme 1) |
| 3. Employers became credible role models for possible future selves | 3a. Modelling fulfilling graduate careers (irrespective of their professional field) 3b. Modelling managing emotional challenges and resilience 3c. Modelling transitions to early adulthood and beyond |
| 4. Employers develop students' skills and behaviours in context | N/A |

Table 6-1 Summary of themes and sub-themes

6.2.1. *Research Question 1*

a) What were the differences in identification, prioritisation and understanding of graduate employability skills, and perceptions of employability, related to the marketing communications industry, by employers, students and the academic lead at the start of the study?

At its outset, this study confirmed the extensive literature documenting the disparities between employer and student definitions and prioritisation of employability skills, and relative estimations of individuals' skills levels and preparedness for employment.

b) How did these develop over the course of the study, and how did this intervention contribute to this?

Over the course of the study, students demonstrated significant shifts in definitions and prioritisations and skills, and increased confidence and intentions towards employability. Most students commented positively about employer involvement.

The first theme that was emergent from the research, Theme 1, addressed research question 1, capturing students' dread of graduate careers and how more immediate priorities delay engagement with employability. Students perceived future work as dull, yet obligatory to sustain an income, and as a space of control and lack of agency (subtheme 1.1). Students anticipated that work would curtail their current freedoms and conflated this with transitions to, and the responsibilities of, adulthood (subtheme 1b), for which they felt ill-equipped to succeed in terms of appearance, behaviours and confidence. These concerns manifested as a fear of standing out or being judged by others, at university and in future employment (subtheme 1c). Therefore, the distant concern about graduate roles is overshadowed by social and academic priorities as new students (subtheme 1d), intensified by prioritising a good degree as the most important contributor to future employability. Students also prioritised technical skills or skills for later promotion, and undervalued (or overestimated their own) skills for early graduate careers, reflecting extant literature (subtheme 2a). All the subthemes relating to students' perceptions of employment and current and future identity transitions are negative, even fearful, and understandings this place of vulnerability in large part explains the pedagogic implications considered in the second research question.

The employers' priorities reflected those represented in the literature, and the time spent in group discussion allowed a nuanced interpretation for students, which also re-calibrated my interpretations away from more simplistic 'graduate attributes' as an academic.

6.2.2. Research Question 2

How effectively does each stakeholder group engage in decision-making about:

- the key employability skills to focus upon at this stage of their university degree?**
- appropriate pedagogic approaches to learn / develop these graduate attributes?**

When using a cocreation approach to select employability skills, students identified options that addressed their immediate social and academic concerns (subthemes 1b and 1d), satisfying both students and employers and creating strong student engagement in class activities and reflective assessment. In contrast, for pedagogic

approaches, students rejected socially risky activities such as role play (subtheme 1c) which the employers and I favoured. This offered a valuable opportunity for discussion between students, employers and I about learning processes, and some students suggested that academic staff should impose challenging but valuable approaches when students resist making this choice for themselves and others. When such activities were trialled, all students who engaged reported positive experiences, and the limitations of cocreation for practice are considered below.

Pedagogically, employers provided credible role models for possible future selves and identity exploration for students (Theme 3). Communities of practice theory anticipated this impact upon students' understandings of the language, behaviours, skills and contexts of their realm of professional practice and recruitment processes (Theme 4). In addition, students valued the employers as models for: developing fulfilling graduate careers (irrespective of their professional field) (subtheme 3a); managing emotional challenges and developing resilience in personal and professional learning journeys (subtheme 3b); and transitions to early adulthood and beyond (subtheme 3c). Students perceived the employers' contributions as credible, relevant, and accessible to themselves, both as alumni and as 'normal people', whom they trusted through repeated opportunities for informal engagement in class discussions. Over the module, these opportunities for abstract conceptualisation enhanced the active experimentation of class exercises and reflective processes of assessment (Kolb, 1984) as students reflected on their work-related experiences in class and beyond.

6.2.3. Research Question 3

What are the benefits and limitations of a Community of Practice approach in the seminar, and is this a legitimate typology of CoP?

This study concluded that the founding elements of CoPs were present in this learning environment, as stakeholders voluntarily engaged in attending and contributing to the activities of the group discussions (mutual engagement), developed shared objectives around real-life problems (joint enterprise), and developed language, stories and negotiated understandings regarding the profession of marketing (a

shared repertoire). Therefore, a legitimate CoP emerged, and this intervention fostered an appropriate environment for that to occur.

The professional practice contexts by employers enhanced students' perceptions of the relevance of employability and skills education and their confidence for their own future success. Opportunities for ongoing engagement developed trust within the community and allowed students to engage in increasingly more complex discussions with employers to negotiate and renegotiate their understandings. Such understandings extended beyond skills and employability into more positive perceptions of graduate work, transitions to adulthood and ways of learning, with potential impacts upon identity development across these contexts.

The limitations of such an approach are accessing employers who can engage on an ongoing basis and reflect effectively on their own practice through discussion, as these employers did. This is essential to providing ongoing opportunities for large cohorts of students to develop relationships with employers. Students may also choose not to engage, and the role of the academic in facilitating such an approach and managing other stakeholders can be challenging. However, this approach provides an ongoing opportunity to engage with employers for students who may lack the social capital and confidence to access workplace settings for possible careers while at university.

CoP theory provides a valuable, alternative lens to the human capital perspective adopted by English HE policy and HEIs' employability strategies, and this theoretical perspective is now explored in the review of this study's contributions to knowledge.

6.3. Contributions to knowledge and recommendations

6.3.1. Practical/pedagogic contributions

At a micro-level perspective of employability (Tomlinson, 2017b), this study demonstrated that first-year students will engage with employability and skills development where they develop an interest in graduate careers and see immediate value in applying employability skills. This contrasts with previous studies which where students deferred engaging with employability development until late in their

degrees (Lock and Kelly, 2022), which would delay opportunities for critical engagement with the subject later in their degrees.

This study suggests that the dominant definitions of employability (for example, the HEA's definition listed in section 1.1), macro-level policy prioritisation of skills-based approaches and meso-level simplification of complex graduate skills into university level graduate attributes prompt issues across the HE sector. These include: pressure upon students to develop skills without the accompanying transitions in identity, confidence and aspirations that support engagement; failure to contextualise skills in a manner with immediate relevance to students' social and academic success; and restricted opportunities and resources for students, employers and academic staff to work closely with respect to specific professions or disciplines and develop shared language and understandings of employability.

This study supported extant literature that students' choice of degree, and potential future career, is driven by largely extrinsic factors and they can lack intrinsic interest in the profession (e.g. Kim et al., 2002), which deterred students in this study from engaging in employability development. Engaging with employers who demonstrated positive career experiences facilitated by their own ongoing skills development, shifted this perception and increased student engagement with employability. Such perceptual shifts are not described in the literature, and this study identifies both the powerful role of poor perceptions of graduate careers in limiting students' engagement with employability, and the role of successful graduate role models in overcoming this. Universities and academic staff may overestimate students' interest in graduate careers, and underestimate the barriers to engagement with employability development.

A further motivation for students to engage arose where employability skills satisfied students' most immediate priorities of social and academic success. Extant literature and university practices largely position soft skills as useful after graduation and they are perceived by students as inferior to academic skills (e.g. Chamorro-Premuzic et al., 2010). Therefore students may not appreciate the value of soft skills for academic success, and individualistic academic skills may fail to prepare students for future

collaborative workplaces. In this study, as predicted for situated learning, students adapted their learning about skills in professional practice (from employers) and applied this to their social and academic priorities, such as groupwork. The ability, through cocreation, to choose the skills students were most interested in/most needed developed engagement and additional opportunities for reflection upon their success in applying these skills and contextualisation with employer discussions. This student-led approach is not novel but demonstrates that the persistent separation of 'employability' and 'academic' skills in policy and HE fails to address students' needs, and integration of soft skills into curricula would benefit students and employers alike.

However, the limitations of cocreation were demonstrated where students resisted socially risky learning approaches. The literature adopts a largely uncritical acceptance of the pedagogic value of working with students as partners and its value in improving the learning experience for underrepresented students (e.g. Cook-Sather, 2020), however this study suggests that students lacking confidence may choose safe but less effective approaches through cocreation. This observation echoes the literature regarding students' choices about engaging in assessment, and forms of resistance and ego-protection (e.g., Harris, Brown and Dargusch, 2018). Therefore cocreation requires critical consideration regarding students' motivations and barriers to decision-making, the importance of discussion about decision-making, and the role of pedagogic expertise in managing and alleviating short-term student anxieties over long-term learning journeys.

These contributions are consistently dependent upon the relationships and trust established between employers and students, which are unlikely to be experienced by most students through the most common methods of employer engagement in HE, such as guest lectures or extracurricular mentoring. Therefore this transitional CoP is a scalable and useful means of bridging the gap between seminar-based, academic-led skills development and workplace experience. In widening participation contexts, this supports students' social, cultural and identity capitals (confidence)

development, fostering skills and intentions to access placements and other work experience.

The benefits described above largely focus on student employability and skills development, however there were also benefits in the relationship between me, as an academic, and employers, as described in section 5.5.5. These two-way relationships are underexplored in the literature. This model also offered employers a rare opportunity to induct future graduates into the SME business-models typical of the marketing profession, and to nurture the future of the marketing profession itself. These direct connections between students, employers and academic staff provide a micro-level counterpoint to the macro-level employability narratives dominated by government, corporations, industry bodies and HEI executives, which are shown as darker connections in Figure 6-1. Similarly, the macro-level assumptions of a human capital, acquisitive model of skills development appear simplistic compared to a participatory, situated learning approach between employers and future employees of a professional community that also fosters identity development, as considered through the theoretical lens of CoPs, below.

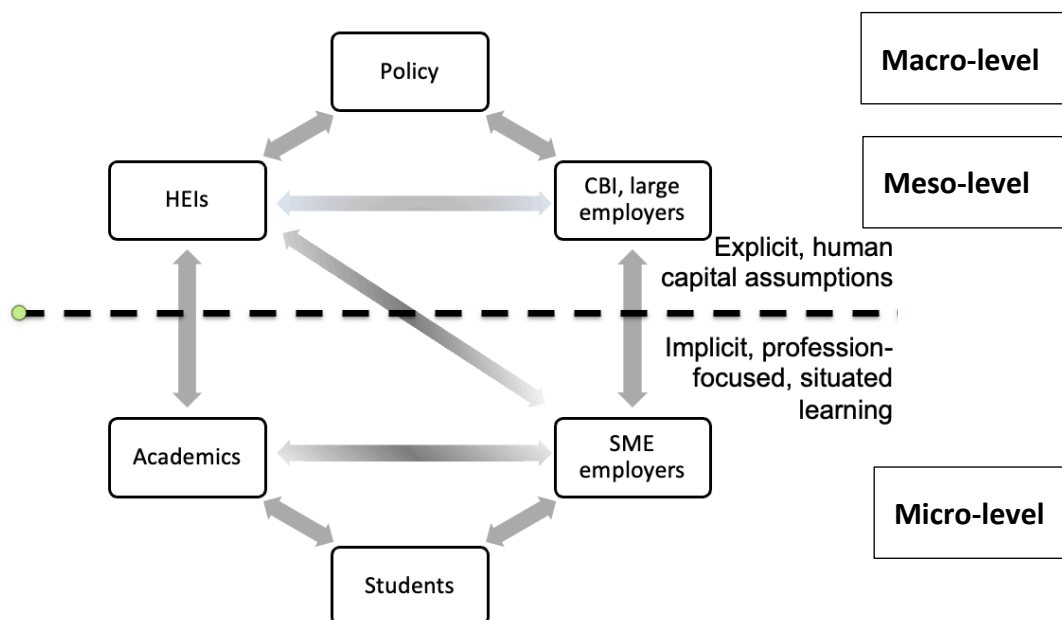


Figure 6-1 Relationships between macro-, meso- and micro-level approaches to developing graduate employability

6.3.2. *Recommendations for practice*

The following recommendations for practice arise from this study:

- 1) Engage first-year students with employability and skills development, but work with graduates and employers to credibly position graduate careers as sites of agency, fulfilment and ongoing development. Plan for greater critical discussion regarding employability, later in the degree, given this stronger grounding.
- 2) Align employability skills with students' immediate social and academic concerns, with relevance for their current practices as much as for future professional practice. Reposition 'employability' skills as essential for academic success and avoid artificial barriers between academic and employability skills.
- 3) Explore the boundaries and barriers to the success of cocreation, and continue to value, though critically evaluate, academic expertise and experience. Use conflict through cocreation as an opportunity for discussion between students, staff and other stakeholders.
- 4) Develop academic expertise in employability through greater integration of careers development theories and practice in post graduate certification and recognition.
- 5) Work with employers to foster a model of a transitional CoP providing opportunities for situated learning through storytelling and discussion and repeated interaction to foster trust. This requires considerable administrative support and universities should invest in both facilitating such engagement with employers and training employers to engage ethically and professionally with students.
- 6) Reframe dominant expectations of how employers are engaged in university-settings, break down the barriers between university settings and workplaces, connect not only students and employers, but academic staff and employers. Ensure this is facilitated not only at an executive level between universities and large business with high graduate recruitment, but with smaller

employers and academics with responsibility for employability development (the majority of staff).

- 7) Position employability as more than skills development, using concepts of identity development and opportunities to observe possible selves as design criteria for undergraduate degrees. Consider the cycles of role salience that occur over the course of a degree (Super, 1980) and align skills development to these cycles.

6.3.3. *Theoretical contributions*

The role of legitimate peripheral participation for professional practice in university settings has been neglected, but the theoretical lens of CoP theory offers a transformative pedagogic approach that addresses more than the development of professional practice.

Lave and Wenger's original 1991 work confined the exploration of CoPs to the languages, behaviours, skills and other forms of knowledge related to the practice of each case study profession, and professional identity development in these contexts. This study suggests that situated learning within CoPs can extend beyond the professional realm, with benefits for all stakeholders. The shared repertoire drew not only from professional practice, but also from old-timers' experiences of life-stage transitions, career management strategies, learning approaches and emotional resilience in personal and professional contexts. The scope of that repertoire therefore flexed not only around old-timers' intentions for newcomers' professional learning, but to accommodate newcomers' emotional and other needs which facilitated their engagement with professional practice. This latter pull-through mechanism of CoPs contributes not just to the negotiation and renegotiation of meaning within CoPs, but also of subject matter relevant to students' identity development.

Through this process, students explored both professional *and personal* identities (or possible selves (Markus and Nurius, 1986)) at a time of significant identity transitions and uncertainty. This was signified by students' perceptions of employers as normal people and role models for adulthood, which again is not an outcome of CoPs

explored in the literature. Repeated opportunities to engage in storytelling and discussion within this seminar-based community enabled students to look beyond the employers' identities as professionals and recruiters and perceive them as possible future selves as adults, learners and emotional role models. The role of storytelling in widening the cast of possible selves that students encounter, engaging students and making learning memorable are some of the advantages of this learning approach. Furthermore, storytelling contextualises learning in environments beyond the seminar room walls, bridging to CoPs in entirely professional spaces.

Overall, this study demonstrated that situated learning engages students in developing professional skills with relevance to their own future careers, but also the ability to contextualise this learning in more immediate social and academic contexts. The role of employers was invaluable in this, and as dominant means of engaging employers in HE contexts are exclusionary for many students, developing conditions for legitimate peripheral participation offers wider benefits than professional practice alone.

6.3.4. Recommendations for future research

The following recommendations for future research arise from this study:

- 1) Exploration of the scope of professions-based CoPs beyond professional practice, and the roles of old-timers as personal as well as professional role models and guides
- 2) The value of adopting an assumption of situated learning, and fostering opportunities for sustainable transitional CoPs across business school programmes and over longer time periods, and their differential impact upon students based upon the defining characteristics of widening participation
- 3) The role of transitional CoPs in offering opportunities to observe possible selves, and aspire to or reject career paths and approaches to employability development
- 4) The role of storytelling, both within CoPs and in teaching, and pedagogical models of storytelling practice

- 5) Mapping student identity journeys throughout students' university careers, and exploring how HE priorities may conflict with or support this development and be more appropriately aligned for mutually beneficial outcomes. Tomlinson's (2021) self-assessment scale based on the graduate capitals model may be a useful tool for this approach.

6.3.5. Methodological contributions

Action research was an appropriate research approach for this study, contributing to both the theory and practice of teaching within the delivery of a module and developing relationships between the stakeholders of students, employers and academic staff. Ethically, the values of action research helped to establish a learning community that prioritised the student voice, engaged in discussion about the mechanisms and objectives of learning and reduced the power differentials between the teacher and learners in the development of praxis. Concerns about role contamination (Walton and Warwick, 1973) and the impact of the research upon student experience or socially desirable responding (Hammack, 1997) did not impact this study negatively, as interviewees reported an enhanced student experience through involvement with the study. Concerns that students who were not interviewees were excluded from these benefits were offset by repeated, but declined, invitations for other students to become interviewees. Therefore the neglected concern is that the time and attention devoted to research in similar studies will often be compromised as teaching professionals prioritise learning opportunities over research.

In terms of practice, conveying that I was a learner myself, reflecting upon my practice and learning by doing (and sometimes failing) is likely to have been a valuable model for students that can be overlooked when focusing on student-employer relationships, and is worthy of further exploration as a pedagogic mechanism.

The commonalities of action research and CoP theory (section 3.3.2) created a mutually beneficial association between the research approach and research subject that facilitated this study and engaged students and employers in positive exemplars

of practice. Furthermore, action research, and the processes of cocreation embedded in the research cycles in this study, precipitates CoP-like practices, becoming as much the subject of the study as the methodology. However, the potential impact of action research upon identity development for participants, other than the research lead, is underexplored (exceptions include Altrichter (2005) and Yamori (2009)).

6.3.6. *Recommendations for methodological development*

The following recommendations methodological consideration arise from this study:

1. Explore the impact of participatory, education-based action research upon students' identity development
2. Continue to debate the ethical pros and cons of action research, not only for practice but for research, and against the wider ethical benefits of collaborative research, and update ethics guidelines appropriately

6.4. Limitations

A limitation of this study is that it was confined to a single small class of 18 students, and its success may be, in part, attributable to the specific individuals who took part in this study. While I believe scalability of this intervention is feasible with administrative support to work with employers, this would need to be trialled in practice and require adept academic facilitators. Such facilitation may be limited in many HE settings by the current minimal integration of in-depth employability training into postgraduate certification for higher education educators, and individuals' confidence and time to develop such interventions while developing and delivering multiple modules.

The study was also successful due to the engagement and contribution of two employers with extensive reflective skills and confidence to engage with students. Not all employers would have the skills or desire to engage in this way.

Additionally, some students chose not to engage as fully as others, for example no young UK-domiciled students participated as interviewees though some were vocal in the group discussions, and are quoted in the Findings chapter.

The limited length of this study, while offering some longitudinal observations, provided a relatively short time span for skills and identity development and no follow up to assess longer term impact. This time-span is typical of the literature regarding similar interventions; however it is challenging to gather and analyse data, prepare sessions and deliver teaching over the course of a module. Larger teaching and research teams would better support future projects for more in depth Stage One analysis.

The interventions developed and delivered in the intervening sessions between the group discussions, in response to the topics that were chosen by the group, were developed at short notice, and may have missed more appropriate means of developing the specific skills under focus. While the literature was briefly consulted, limitations in planning time and resources limited the choice of possible approaches. If repeated, a portfolio of sessions and resources could be developed to provide pre-prepared sessions for the most commonly requested skills development topics. Further research would be needed to establish the benefits of ad hoc development in response to joint decision-making and its benefits for student engagement versus integrated, planned and properly resourced development without cocreation processes and their potentially lower impact upon student engagement.

The measures taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the study are explained in Chapter 5, and this study makes no claims to generalisability as this study is small in scale and reflects a very specific module, cohort and influence of myself and those particular employers. However, action research's 'information-rich sample and design' (Patton, 2015, p.713) warrants extrapolation to similar situations, i.e. transferability (Lincoln and Guba, 1995).

6.5. Developments since the study

In the year following this study, the programme was withdrawn due to its specialist nature and small cohorts, which are no longer sustainable in a modern business school environment. Furthermore, due to promotion, I am no longer a module leader and cannot, therefore, continue to work with employers in my own classrooms in this way despite the benefits.

The students continued to work with a new group of employers over the next academic year through another module, which I led, where they worked on marketing pitches for the employers' real-world challenges. In the National Student Survey, these students commented positively about the opportunity to work with employers throughout their degree.

The learning from this study has, however, been disseminated beyond this programme. The outcomes have been presented to the Careers and Library services, at both the university where the study was conducted and another UK university, supporting their work to remove the divide between academic skills and employability skills. Each are considering how students can work with employers who may not be responsible for recruitment, but provide possible future as both professionals and working adults.

6.6. Personal reflection

Over the course of this part-time study, how I think and feel about the topic of employability development, my role as a researcher, the roles of students in education and the role that university can play in students' personal development, has changed considerably. At the outset, I assumed the language and skills-based narrative of 'graduate attributes' derived from my own institution, policy and the dominant academic literature, as described in section 2.7.5. Early proposals positioned CoPs as a useful pedagogic tool to develop soft skills, using CoP as an instrumental approach with little acknowledgement of the underpinning theory. These assumptions reflected the mechanistic goals imposed upon HEIs and the focus, in my role as a manager, on improving Long-term Educational Outcomes data for graduates and other performance measures of employability.

Through both engaging with the critical literature and working closely with the student interviewees, this research process has grounded me back into the realities of university and graduate employment for many students. I have recalled my experiences as an employer of graduates, and as a student myself, without the social and cultural capitals of my private school peers and as the only member of my family to attend university. I remembered when, (unsuccessfully) applying for graduate roles

at major marketing agencies, a peer secured a role in a top agency thanks to his father's connections, despite no prior interest in the industry. It is tempting, in an era of sizeable business school cohorts, tight budgets and close OfS scrutiny, to develop approaches that offer opportunities for skills development as neatly wrapped packages of knowledge embedded in modules. Students need to be able to open those packages, and nestle them into a wider array of skills, capitals and understandings that empower them to envisage and access possible futures. Our role, therefore, is to develop that array as much as those skills, and provide the space and connections to observe, consider and rearrange what they already possess into new possibilities. This was not the HE environment I had been trained to cultivate.

I return to Pillow's (2010, p.176) call to consider 'who I am, who I have been, who I think I am and how I feel': this study has led me to appreciate the potential breadth of academics' roles as teachers, researchers, active participants and often past professionals in our own classrooms. It has also caused me to re-evaluate the role students in decision-making and in research. Yet, it has also reminded me of the value of expertise and the importance of theory and ongoing evaluation to ensure we support students through the challenges of their HE journeys and prepare them for graduate futures. While I have reflected upon the identity development for the students in this cohort, recalling Kemmis' (2009) quote in section 3.3.4 about the impact of praxis on self-formation, I must also reflect upon my own identity journey. Much prior writing considers the *tensions* between the role of teacher and researcher, but this process of praxis embraces the complementarity of multiple identities, and the expertise these combine to develop. The inquiry-led mindset that being a researcher brought to my teaching allowed me to understand students' needs and wants, and respond through flexible teaching approaches. It was challenging managing these two roles, in the same space and time period with the rapid sequencing of data collection, analysis and intervention development and delivering that into the classroom. Yet it was also exciting, inspiring and appreciated by students, as two years later some commented positively on engagement with employers in this module in their NSS comments. I felt that this module made a difference.

Conversely, my role as a researcher was enlivened by my experiences as a teacher and ex-practitioner of marketing: I held a bigger picture of where students started at university and where they entered graduate roles and the speed and distance of that journey. However, I had failed to understand how the language of HE and policy had operationalised my understanding of graduate employability into a list of skills, decontextualised understandings of those skills into teachable packages and standardised the expectations of the typical student journey.

This critical viewpoint continues to impact my role as a manager, and often contribute to frustrations of the realities of HE. The role as insider researcher allows access to the people, places and processes of HE, and understanding of the complexity of HE (Costley, Elliott and Gibbs, 2010), as a site of morally-informed praxis (McNiff, 2013). Therefore my praxis aspires to positive change, but those complexities of HE can stymie such change.

However challenging it has been to prompt wider change, more personally my attitudes towards the role of research have developed away from researcher-controlled projects to recognising the ethical and practical benefits of participatory research approaches. The immediate opportunities for reflection and development of my practice, and the empowerment of students with its repercussions for their learning and identity-development, were the most rewarding outcomes of this study.

The most significant journey has been contextualising HE, and universities, as sites of emerging adulthood, social uncertainty, and significant challenge for students: we as practitioners have greater scope for positive impact than economic success, for example on the personal and emotional trajectories of our students. It is too easy to forget our own past persona, as a first-year student facing the pressures to grow up, get a good salary, and seek the graduate roles that HE policy and society endorses in a competitive market, with little room for doubt and exploration. The role of communities that reach beyond the walls of HEIs, to alumni and professionals can bring emotional and practical benefits to us as academic staff as much as to students.

6.7. In summary

The most significant outcome is that providing conditions for a transitional CoP is a scalable and useful means of bridging the gap between seminar-based, academic-led skills development (which has been shown to have limited impact upon skills development) and workplace experience. The intervention successfully engaged first-year students and fostered positive attitudes towards graduate roles and improved understandings of employability and skills. It also demonstrated positive impacts on students' human, cultural, psychological and identity capitals. Employers' and the academic lead's deepened understandings of employability and learning approaches impacted their own practice, and limitations of cocreation regarding pedagogic approaches were identified. It also demonstrated positive impacts on human, cultural, psychological and identity capitals.

This research established that ongoing employer engagement in seminar settings can provide a scalable approach to employability development in Higher Education, given appropriate administrative and employer support.

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Appendix 1: Outline of the module

Appendix 1.1: Module specification

| Part 1: Basic Data | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|--|---------------------------|-----------------|-------------|----|
| Module Title | Practical Marketing Skills 1 | | | | |
| Module Code | UMKDJY-15-1 | Level | 1 | | |
| UWE Credit Rating | 15 | ECTS Credit Rating | 7.5 | WBL module? | No |
| Owning Faculty | FBL | Field | Marketing | | |
| Department | BBS: Business and Management | Module Type | Standard | | |
| Contributes towards | BA (Hons) Marketing Communication Management | | | | |
| Pre-requisites | None | Co- requisites | None | | |
| Excluded Combinations | None | Module Entry requirements | n/a | | |
| First CAP Approval Date | 1 June 2016 | Valid from | September 2017. | | |
| Revision CAP Approval Date | | Revised with effect from | | | |

| Part 2: Learning and Teaching | |
|--------------------------------------|--|
| Learning Outcomes | <p>On successful completion of this module students will:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Understand the range of print media and be able to specify print to a professional level 2. Be able to use key presentation tools 3. Be familiar with a range of social media and be able to set up and manage accounts proficiently 4. Understand the purpose of coding and be able to undertake rudimentary HTML coding for digital media and be able to build basic websites 5. Have awareness of key soft skills for marketing communications, and be able to reflect on their development 6. Have the ability to reflect on the use of technical and soft marketing skills in their other modules |

| | |
|------------------|---|
| Syllabus Outline | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Print and print media <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Types of print media - Specifying print • Setting up presentations whether in Powerpoint or Prezi • Using Adobe <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Understanding the Adobe suite - Creating visuals with Photoshop and Illustrator - Creating videos with Adobe Premiere - Websites and web design with Adobe Muse and Dreamweaver • Designing a website <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Building a basic website - Website functionality |
|------------------|---|

| | |
|---------------|---|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HTML and coding • Key soft skills in marketing e.g. teamwork, communications, interpersonal skills |
| Contact Hours | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In line with the tenets of 'flipped' classroom delivery, initial briefings, threshold concepts and supporting material will accessed online. • Face to face contact time will total 36 hours and comprise of an average of 1.5 hours per week across a 24 week period. Wherever possible, the majority of contact will take the form of workshops and small group teaching. • In addition to face to face contact, ongoing contact will be maintained with students through 'office hours' discussion boards on the University's virtual learning environment (VLEs) and other technology-aided means. <p>QAA guidance is available here http://www.qaa.ac.uk/Publications/InformationAndGuidance/Pages/contact-hours.aspx</p> |

Teaching and Learning Methods

- In line with tenets of the 'flipped classroom' students will be expected to engage with independent learning both before and after attendance at any face-to-face taught session. Students will be guided to a range of online materials on the Blackboard VLE to prepare in advance of scheduled sessions as well as materials to consolidate learning in a post session environment.
- Scheduled learning will take place largely in an interactive environment where students will be encouraged to build upon their understanding of basic concepts by engaging in the development of more complex aspects of theory and practice using a range of online and offline resources.
- Using a task-focused, problem-based approach, the delivery of the syllabus will be based around the development of extended projects or case studies on topics of interest or relevance to organisations within the sector. Within the context of a wider projects students might engage in a range of activities which include (but is not limited to) the production of shorter case study examples, group research activities and presentations.
- The syllabus content will reflect the academic and management skills required for successful completion of modules and assessment across the students' programme of study.
- Scheduled teaching activity on this module will account for an average of 1.5 hours a week.
- Online logs or e-portfolios or other forms of recording will be used to record engagement and progress on the projects.
- In between scheduled sessions, students will be expected to work independently and in groups that will support their work toward their final assessment. This will account of the remainder of the hours allocated to this module.


Scheduled learning includes interactive learning sessions, seminars, demonstration, practical classes and workshops; lectures; work based learning; supervised time in studio/workshop.

Independent learning includes hours engaged with materials provided on the VLE, Library and internet searches, essential reading, case study preparation, assignment preparation and completion. These sessions constitute an average time per level as indicated in the table below.

Key Information Sets Information

Key Information Set - Module data

Number of credits for this module 15

| Hours to be allocated | Scheduled learning and teaching study hours | Independent study hours | Placement study hours | Allocated Hours | |
|-----------------------|---|-------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------|---|
| 150 | 36 | 114 | 0 | 150 |  |

The table below indicates as a percentage the total assessment of the module which constitutes a: -

Coursework: Portfolio

Please note that this is the total of various types of assessment and will not necessarily reflect the component and module weightings in the Assessment sections of the module description:

| | |
|--------------------------------------|------|
| Total assessment of the module: | |
| Written exam assessment percentage | 0% |
| Coursework assessment percentage | 100% |
| Practical exam assessment percentage | 0% |
| | 100% |

Reading Strategy

Students will be encouraged to engage with a wide range of academic and practitioner literature. They will be encouraged to make full use of the print and electronic resources available to them through membership of the University which include (but are not limited to) a range of electronic journals and a wide variety of resources available through websites and information gateways. The University Library web pages provide access to subject relevant resources and services and to the library catalogue. Many of these resources can be accessed remotely. Students will be presented with opportunities within the curriculum to develop their information retrieval and evaluation skills in order to identify such resources effectively.

In line with the 'flipped' philosophy, students will be directed to specific resources and expected to undertake essential reading prior to each session.

Essential reading

Students are expected to purchase or have open access to following text as it is considered core to the module:-

Smith, J. (2013) Adobe Creative Cloud Design Tools All-in-One For Dummies

| | |
|--|--|
| | European Journal of Marketing, International Journal of Advertising Journal of Marketing, Communications Journal of Advertising Research, Journal of Interactive Advertising, Journal of Communications Management, Journal of Marketing, Journal of Consumer Behaviour Management, Marketing and Management Marketing Management Science Review, Harvard Business Review The Economist, Any/all broadsheet newspapers |
|--|--|

| Part 3: Assessment | |
|-------------------------------|--|
| Assessment Strategy | <p>Students are required, over the course of the module, to compile a portfolio of evidence that demonstrates their proficiency in a range of practical marketing skills outlined by the module's Learning Outcomes. Within scheduled sessions, students will have the opportunity to practice and improve their skill level but evidence of proficiency can also be drawn from any of the modules studied and also from extracurricular activities.</p> <p>Students will be encouraged to identify their personal areas of development and to set their own goals. They will then use formative assessment within this module and from modules across the programme as a tool to track their progress and reflect upon what actions have yet to be taken.</p> |

| | |
|--|---|
| Identify final assessment component and element | Com pone nt A |
| % weighting between components A and B (Standard modules only) | A: |
| | 100 |
| First Sit | |
| Component A (controlled conditions) Description of each element | Element weighting (as % of component) |
| 1. Reflective Professional Skills Portfolio | 100% |
| Component B Description of each element | Element weighting (as % of component) |
| N/A | |

| | |
|--|---|
| Resit (further attendance at taught classes is not required) | |
| | |
| Component A (controlled conditions) Description of each element | Element weighting (as % of component) |
| 1. Reflective Professional Skills Portfolio | 100% |
| Component B Description of each element | Element weighting (as % of component) |
| N/A | N/A |

If a student is permitted a retake of the module under the University Regulations and Procedures, the assessment will be that indicated by the Module Description at the time that retake commences.

Appendix 1.2: Module schedule

| Week | Date (w/c) | Topics | |
|-------------------|---------------|--|--|
| | | Hard skills | Soft skills |
| 1 | 17/9/18 | Introducing module, the staff and assessment | Personality types and what they mean in the workplace |
| 2 | 24/9/18 | Introducing Adobe Creative Cloud: Design Process and Photoshop | Review skills required by industry |
| 3 | 8/10/18 | Adobe Illustrator | Class discussion with employers |
| 4 | 22/10/18 | Social media management: branding yourself | To be decided in 3 rd session |
| 5 | 5/11/18 | Copy writing for communication Leaflet design | To be decided in 3 rd session |
| | 12/11/18 | Portfolio #1 2pm 13/11/18 | |
| 6 | 19/11/18 | Adobe In Design | Class discussion with employers Mid-module feedback |
| 7 | 3/12/18 | Personal support session for leaflet | To be decided in 6 th session |
| | 17-24/12/18 | Vacation | |
| | 7-14/1/19 | Assessment period | |
| 8 | 21/1/19 | Website design and intro to Wix | To be decided in 6 th session |
| 9 | 4/2/19 | Start drafting agency designs | To be decided in 6 th session |
| | 11/2/19 | Portfolio #2 - 2pm 12/2/19 | |
| 10 | 18/2/19 | Start agency branding work: design and Illustrator | Class discussion with employers |
| 11 | 4/3/19 | Video editing to create creds video | Guide to print with [different employer] |
| 12 | 18/3/19 | Website and social media | To be decided in 10 th session |
| 13 | 1/4/19 | Final workshop on agency materials | Class discussion with employers |
| Assessment period | 8/4/19 | Portfolio #3 2pm 9/4/19 | |

Appendix 2: Timeline of study

Sessions last three hours each, at fortnightly intervals

| Key | |
|-----|---|
| | Recruitment |
| | Interviews |
| | Group Discussions |
| | Class sessions: informed by previous group discussion |
| | Reflective portfolio submissions |

| Cycle | Stage | Date | Research Activity | Learning activity related to study |
|------------------|-------------|-------------|---|------------------------------------|
| | Recruitment | August 2018 | Employers recruited/ consent forms signed | |
| | | 18/09/18 | Student briefing | |
| | | 24/09/18 | Students sign consent forms | |
| Cycle 1 | Reflect | 02-08/10/18 | Baseline interviews | |
| | | | Group discussion 1 | |
| | Plan | 08/10/18 | Cocreation in group discussion 1 | |
| | Act/Observe | 22/10/18 | | Class session |
| 05/11/18 | | | Class session | |
| Cycle 2 | Reflect | 13/11/18 | Portfolio submission 1 | |
| | | 14-16/11/18 | Interviews | |
| | | | Group discussion 2 | |
| | Plan | 19/11/18 | Cocreation in group discussion 2 | |
| | Act/Observe | 03/12/18 | | Class session |
| | | 21/01/19 | | Class session |
| 04/02/19 | | | Class session | |
| Cycle 3 | Reflect | 13/02/19 | Portfolio submission 2 | |
| | | 18/02/19 | Group discussion 2 | |
| | | | | Cocreation in group discussion 2 |
| | Reflect | 19-28/02/19 | Interviews | |
| | Act/Observe | 04/03/19 | | Class session |
| 18/03/19 | | | Class session | |
| Extra session | | 25/03/19 | | Trip to local agency |
| Final Reflection | Reflect | 29/03/19 | Elena Interview | |
| | | 01/04/19 | Session 13: group discussion 4 | |
| | | 03-12/04/19 | Final interviews | |

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| | | 09/04/19 | Portfolio submission 3 | |
|--|--|----------|------------------------|--|

Appendix 3: Moderator’s Guides

Appendix 3.1: Moderator’s Guide – Baseline: Students

Note wording/questions varied according to previous answers

| Purpose | Content | Time |
|--|---|----------|
| Introduction, consent | <p>As you know, my name is Sara Bird and this interview is the first one with you in a study contributing to my doctorate at [the university]. The project focuses on how universities like [the university] ‘teach’ employability to students and equip them for graduate roles. So, your viewpoint as a student is very valuable to me. There are no right or wrong answers and it’s okay to give open and honest answers.</p> <p>I will be audio recording the interview (can’t take notes and focus on our discussion at the same time) and taking a photo of something we will work on to use for later analysis. I am likely to use quotes from these interviews in the dissertation and any other materials published as a result of the study – but anything I use from this from these interviews will be anonymised, and confidentiality assured.</p> <p>You have already signed a consent form, however I do want to remind you that you can withdraw from this study at any stage (even right now), without penalty, and it wouldn’t in any way affect your performance on the module or programme, and you don’t need to give a reason. And you can do this up to two weeks after this interview and I would remove this interview from my data set.</p> <p>Check that they are happy with all this: verbal consent repeated on audio recording.</p> | 5 min |
| General aim of attending university, how important is employability? | <p>Let’s start with thinking about why you chose to go to university – and why you chose this particular degree?</p> <p>(If employability / getting a job not mentioned, probe on this)</p> <p>We often use the term ‘employability’ at university – what do interpret ‘employability’ as?</p> | 8-10 min |

| | | |
|--|---|------------------|
| <p>Key graduate attributes and skills</p> | <p>Unprompted: What attributes and skills do you think are most important for the career you are looking for?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did you identify these? <p>What attributes and skills do you think <i>employers think</i> are most important for graduates for the career you are looking for?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why? Why? What evidence? <p>Prompted (see Appendix 2.3 for words list):</p> <p>These are some of the skills and attributes that I have found in job ads and other sources (cards with skills – highlight ones they have already mentioned)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are any of these a surprise to you? - Are there others that you missed in the previous 2 questions? <p>How would you rank these in terms of importance?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Add in cards with any skills they identified earlier <p>And which ones should we be focusing on as a university?</p> <p>Thank for usefulness of this section</p> | <p>10-15 min</p> |
| <p>Learning graduate attributes and skills</p> | <p>So, the next question is <i>how</i> students like you should be developing these attributes and learning these skills (still on cards ranked in front of us) and how universities should teach or guide this learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think are the best ways to learn such attributes/skills? - Are there different ways to learn different attributes/skills? | <p>10-15 min</p> |

| | | |
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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are there 'types/groups' of skills to be learned in different ways? <p>Where else would students like you be developing these kinds of skills?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If needed, prompt on volunteering, internships, placements, university societies – what are the roles of each of these in terms of developing employability? <p>Is there a skill or attribute that you have learned in the past? Can you describe how you learned that skill – what support did you need to learn that skill?</p> | |
| 'Measuring' graduate attributes and skills | <p>And how do you, or employers, know how 'good' anyone is at a skill or attribute? How do you – or employers – estimate this? (Is there a difference between how employers might look at this and how students look at this? Do students recognise this?)</p> <p>How do you rate your own skill levels against the list we have in front of us now?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How are you reaching these estimates? What kind of processes are happening for you? <p>(Looking for how they apply their internal measures)</p> | 10 mins |
| The module | <p>So, this module is designed to be one of the many ways by which you learn these attributes and skills while at [the university]. And we're in the early stages of working as a group of students, employers and academic staff together to decide how these attributes should be taught/learned – and how to assess the cohort's progress. So, students are involved in the decision-making.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you hope to get out of this module? - What are your early impressions of the process? - How does it feel to be part of this process? | 10-15 min |

| | | |
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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are any aspects particularly exciting or enjoyable? - Are there any aspects that are perhaps worrying or you're not sure about? - Is there anything else you'd like to say about the module at this stage? | |
| Conclude and close | <p>I really appreciate the time you have taken to share your thoughts with me, it has been very interesting.</p> <p>Is there anything else you wanted to add before we finish? Anything you think I've missed: Thank you.</p> | 5 mins |
| <p>Outline plans for contacting them for the next interview in about 8 weeks' time. Reminder that, should university work build up or if for any reason they do not want to continue to be part of the study, they can contact me at any time on my [university] email address to withdraw from the study, with no impact on the module or anything else.)</p> | | |

Appendix 3.2: Moderator’s Guide – Baseline: Employers

Interviewer’s Guide – Baseline: Employers

Note wording will vary according to previous answers

| Purpose | Content | Time |
|--|--|----------|
| Introduction, consent | <p>As you know, my name is Sara Bird and this interview is the first one with you in a study contributes to my doctorate at [the university]. The project focuses on how universities like [the university] ‘teach’ employability to students and equip them for graduate roles. So, your viewpoint as an employer is very valuable to me. There are no right or wrong answers and it’s okay to give open and honest answers.</p> <p>I will be audio recording the interview (can’t take notes and focus on our discussion at the same time) and taking a photo of something we will work on to use for later analysis. I am likely to use quotes from these interviews in the dissertation and any other materials published as a result of the study – but anything I use from this from these interviews will be anonymised, and confidentiality assured</p> <p>You have already signed a consent form, however I do want to remind you that you can withdraw from this study at any stage (even right now), without penalty, and you don’t need to give a reason. And you can do this up to two weeks after this interview and I would remove this interview from my data set.</p> <p>(Check that they are happy with all this: verbal consent repeated on audio recording.)</p> | 5 min |
| General aim of attending university, how important is employability? | <p>Let’s start with thinking about what you consider to be the current role of a university such as [the university] for students?</p> <p>6) How well prepared do you think most graduates are for their careers upon graduating?</p> <p>- Is there any difference to which university they attended, or what degree they studied?</p> | 8-10 min |

| | | |
|------------------------------------|---|-----------|
| | We often use the term 'employability' – what do you interpret 'employability' as? | |
| Key graduate attributes and skills | <p>Unprompted: We're both working on this module as part of the marketing communication management degree - what attributes and skills do you think are most important when recruiting graduates to your field?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How did you identify these? <p>What attributes and skills do you think <i>graduates think</i> are most important for the careers in this field?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Why? Why? What evidence? <p>(Explore any gap noted between the first and second answers here)</p> <p>7) How well do you think most graduates perform against these attributes and skills?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Is there any difference to which university they attended, or what degree they studied? <p>(Explore issues that arise that are not related to the identified attributes/skills)</p> <p>Prompted (see Appendix 2.3 for words list):</p> <p>These are some of the skills and attributes that I have found in job ads and other sources (prop: cards with skills – highlight ones they have already mentioned)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Are any of these a surprise to you? - Are there other ones were overlooked in the first question in this section? <p>How would you rank these in terms of importance?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Add in cards with any skills they identified earlier | 10-15 min |

| | | |
|--|---|-----------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Which ones should we be focusing upon? <p>(Take photo of final list after the interview is over)</p> <p>Thank for taking part in this useful process</p> | |
| Learning graduate attributes and skills | <p>So, the next question is <i>how</i> students should be developing these attributes and learning these skills (still on cards ranked in front of us) and how universities should teach or guide this learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you think are the best ways to learn such attributes/skills? - Are there different ways to learn different attributes/skills - Are there 'types/groups' of skills to be learned in different ways? <p>Where else would students be developing these kinds of skills?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - If needed, prompt on volunteering, internships, placements, university societies – what are the roles of each of these in terms of developing employability? <p>Is there a skill or attribute that you have learned in the past? Can you describe how you learned that skill – what support did you need to learn that skill?</p> | 10-15 min |
| 'Measuring' graduate attributes and skills | <p>And how do you, or employers, know how 'good' anyone is at a skill or attribute? How do you – or employers – estimate this?</p> <p>(Is there a difference between how employers might look at this and how students look at this? Do students recognise this?)</p> <p>How do you rate your own skill levels against the list we have in front of us now?</p> | 10 mins |

| | | |
|--------------------|--|-----------|
| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - How are you reaching these estimates? What kind of processes are happening for you? <p>(Looking for how they apply their internal measures)</p> | |
| The module | <p>So, this module is designed to be one of the many ways by which you learn these attributes and skills while at [the university]. And we're in the early stages of working as a group of students, employers and academic staff together to decide how these attributes should be taught/learned – and how to assess the cohort's progress. So, students are involved in the decision-making.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - What do you hope to get out of this module? - What are your early impressions of the process? - How does it feel to be part of this process? - Are any aspects that are particularly exciting or enjoyable? - Are there any aspects that are perhaps worrying or you're not sure about? - How do you feel about working with students on these attributes and skills? - Is there anything else you'd like to say about the module at this stage? | 10-15 min |
| Conclude and close | <p>I really appreciate the time you have taken to share your thoughts with me, it has been very interesting.</p> <p>Is there anything else you wanted to add before we finish? Anything you think I've missed?</p> <p>Thank you.</p> <p>(Outline plans for contacting them for the next interview in about 8 weeks' time. Reminder that, should university work build up or if for any reason they do not want to continue to be part of the study, they can contact me at any time on my [university] email</p> | 5 mins |

| | | |
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| | address to withdraw from the study, with no impact on the module or anything else. | |
|--|--|--|

Appendix 3.3: Prompted attributes/skills list

Taken from Burning Glass's database of real-time job data (provided by university careers service) for marketing careers:

- Teamwork/collaboration
- Customer service
- Stakeholder management
- Negotiation skills
- Detail orientated
- Presentation skills
- Problem solving
- Meeting deadlines
- Multi-tasking
- Building effective relationships
- Written communication
- Oral communication
- Self-starter

Appendix 4: Participant Information Leaflet and Consent Forms

Appendix 4.1: Participant Information Leaflet: Students

Information Sheet for Students

This project aims to improve higher education approaches to helping undergraduates like yourself develop your employability skills, particularly in marketing communications. It will involve students, employers and [the university] staff working together to explore:

- What the current key graduate attributes/skills expected of marketing communications graduates by employers are
- How these should be taught and assessed in your modules and across your programme while at [the university]
- The 'gap' between what students and employers think these attributes/skills should be and what they look like

My name is Sara Bird, and I am both the researcher and your module leader for Practical Marketing Skills. This research will contribute to my Professional Doctorate in Education, and to my developing professional skills as both an educator and researcher in higher education. This project will be overseen by my doctoral supervisor, [name of supervisor], at [the university].

You have three choices about how you would like to engage with this study, alongside the expected usual engagement with the module itself:

- 1) To allow me to use selected materials that you will be generating as part of the module. These are:
 - a. Evaluations that you will make of your own attributes/ skill levels as part of the assessment of the module
 - b. Your reflections on your thoughts and feelings about these and your progress over the module
 - c. Your contributions to the four class discussions that will choose which attributes to focus upon and how these will be taught
- All of these will be anonymised and presented as from the class as a whole.

2) To allow me to use the materials detailed above

AND

for you to participate in four personal, one-to-one interviews with me about your experiences and thoughts of employability, your future roles, and your experience of the module, over the course of the module.

3) To not participate at all in the research, and not make any of your personal data available for the purposes of this study. Your contributions to class discussions will not be included in the study, nor will any other aspect of your class work or coursework.

The benefits of participation will include your contribution to improving learning and teaching of the module and future modules, and an insight into research methods that may help you later in your course and career.

Risks of participation include concerns that you may feel pressured into taking part or contributing in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable because of my role as module leader.

Choosing to participate is entirely voluntary and is in no way related to your performance, participation or support for this module.

You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time during the course of the study, and up to 6 months after the last interview or class discussion (whichever is last). There will no penalty to this, and you simply email me at [\[email address\]](#) to do this. You do not need to give a reason for withdrawing. You can then specify whether you:

- still wish me to use any data you have provided up to that time as part of the study,
- or
- would like me to withdraw all the data you have provided to the study, and ensure that no quotes, imagery or other information you have provided is used in the final thesis.

You can also talk with your programme leader if you have any concerns at any stage of this study [programme leader's email address].

I will ensure that all audio recordings of interviews and/or class discussion (and any transcriptions), and photographs of any drawn or written materials are stored securely and confidentially on a password-protected drive. It will not be shared with anyone besides my supervisor.

Quotations from the interviews or class discussions, and any drawings or other artefacts, will only be published in an anonymised way, so that no individual can be identified. Any quantitative data from the assignment will be presented for the cohort as a whole (excluding those who choose not to participate). Any unique characteristics that could identify you, your families, friends or professional associations will be changed or removed where necessary to further support this.

All data will be handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2018 and the British Educational Research Association 2018 Code of Practice and destroyed twelve months after the end of the project. The consent form will be stored on the same basis.

If you have any questions about this project or if you wish to withdraw your consent, please contact me at [email and phone number]

Appendix 4.2: Participant Information Leaflet: Employers and University Staff

Information Sheet for Employers and University Staff

This project aims to improve higher education approaches to teaching employability skills to undergraduates, particularly in marketing communications. It will involve students, employers and [the university] staff working together to explore:

- What the current key graduate attributes/skills expected of marketing communications graduates by employers are
- How these should be taught and assessed in your modules and across your programme while at [the university]
- The 'gap' between what students and employers think these attributes/skills should be and what they look like

This research is being led by Sara Bird, the module leader for Practical Marketing Skills. It will contribute to her professional doctorate in education, and to her developing professional skills as both an educator and researcher in higher education. This project will be overseen by her doctoral supervisor, [name of supervisor], at [the university].

You have three choices about how you would like to engage with this study:

- 4) To allow Sara Bird to use your contributions to the four class discussions that will choose which attributes to focus upon and how these will be taught.

- 5) To allow Sara Bird access to the materials detailed above
AND
To participate in four personal, one-to-one interviews with Sara about your experiences and thoughts of employability, graduate roles, and your experience of the module, over the course of the module.

- 6) To not participate at all in the research, and not make any of your personal data available for the purposes of this study. Your contributions to class discussions will be recorded, but would not be transcribed or used in any other form for the study, nor will any other aspect of your class work or

coursework.

- 7) To not participate at all in the research, and not make any of your personal data available for the purposes of this study including being audio-recorded in class discussion (no audio recording at all would be made in this case). No notes would be made about your contributions to class discussions nor will any other aspect of your class work or coursework be included in this study.

The benefits of participation will include your contribution to improving learning and teaching of the module and future modules, and an insight into students' perceptions of employability.

Risks of participation

- For employers, risks may include concerns that details about your organisation or professional role may be revealed during class discussions
- For careers staff, risks include concerns that you may feel pressured into taking part or contributing in a way that makes you feel uncomfortable because of Sara Bird's role within the Faculty or University.

Choosing to participate is entirely voluntary. You can choose to withdraw from the study at any time during the course of the study, and up to two weeks after the last interview or class discussion (whichever is last). There will no penalty to this, and you simply email Sara Bird at [email address] to do this. You do not need to give a reason for withdrawing. Any data you have provided within the last two weeks before withdrawing will be removed from the study. You can also talk with your programme leader [email address supplied] if you have any concerns at any stage of this study.

The audio recordings of interviews and/or class discussion (and any transcriptions), and photographs of any drawn or written materials, will be stored confidentially by the research team on a password-protected drive. It will not be shared with anyone outside the research team.

Quotations from the interviews or class discussions, and any drawings or other artefacts, will only be published in an anonymised way, so that no individual or employer company can be identified. Any unique characteristics that could identify you, your families, friends or professional associations will be changed or removed where necessary to further support this.

All data will be handled in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2018 and the British Educational Research Association 2011 Code of Practice and destroyed twelve months after the end of the project. The consent form will be stored on the same basis.

If you have any questions about this project or if you wish to withdraw your consent, please contact Sara Bird at [email and phone number]. Further information on [the university] Research Ethics is also available at [\[web address\]](#) and this study has been approved by a [the university] ethics committee.

Appendix 4.3: Consent Form: Students – Interview Participants

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM: STUDENT RESEARCH GROUP

| |
|---|
| Name of Researcher |
| Sara Bird |
| Title of study (to be completed by the researcher) |
| Developing Learning and Teaching Approaches for Employability in Higher Education |

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, ring the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask.

- I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and / or written form by the researcher. **YES / NO**
- I understand that the research will involve use of:
 - materials that I will submit as part of my assessment, including:
 - 1) valuations measuring my own perceived attributes/ skill levels
 - 2) my reflections on these and my progress over the module
 - my contributions to the four class discussions, both verbal and through digital, written or drawn materials developed during the discussion. These will be audio-recorded and transcribed, screenshot or photographed as appropriate.
 - 4 one-to-one interviews over the course of the module, each lasting up to 1.5 hours and which will be audio recorded and transcribed. **YES / NO**
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time up to six months after my last interview without having to give an explanation. This will not affect my education at [the university] or performance on this module. **YES / NO**
- I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study. **YES / NO**
- I understand that any audio-recorded, transcribed or other materials featuring my contributions will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed 12 months after completion of your research. **YES / NO**

- I understand that you will be discussing the progress of your research with others at [the university] i.e. your doctoral supervisor

**YES /
NO**

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my own information.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 4.4: Consent Form: Students – Class Group Participants

RESEARCH CONSENT FORM: STUDENTS CLASS GROUP

| |
|---|
| Name of Researcher |
| Sara Bird |
| Title of study (to be completed by the researcher) |
| Developing Learning and Teaching Approaches for Employability in Higher Education |

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, ring the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask.

- I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and / or written form by the researcher. **YES / NO**
- I understand that the research will involve use of:
 - materials that I will submit as part of my assessment, including:
 - 1) valuations measuring my own perceived attributes/ skill levels
 - 2) my reflections on these and my progress over the module
 - my contributions to the four class discussions, both verbal and through digital, written or drawn materials developed during the discussion. These will be audio-recorded, screenshot or photographed as appropriate. **YES / NO**
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time without having to give an explanation and with immediate effect. This will not affect my education at [the university] or performance on this module. **YES / NO**
- I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study. **YES / NO**
- I understand that any audio-recorded, transcribed or other materials featuring my contributions will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed 12 months after completion of your research. **YES / NO**
- I understand that you will be discussing the progress of your research with others at [the university] i.e. your doctoral supervisor **YES / NO**

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my own information.

Name:

Signature:

Date:

Appendix 4.5: Consent Form: Employers and University Staff – Interview Participants

**RESEARCH CONSENT FORM:
EMPLOYERS AND CAREERS STAFF RESEARCH GROUP**

| |
|---|
| Name of Researcher |
| Sara Bird |
| Title of study (to be completed by the researcher) |
| Developing Learning and Teaching Approaches for Employability in Higher Education |

Please read and complete this form carefully. If you are willing to participate in this study, ring the appropriate responses and sign and date the declaration at the end. If you do not understand anything and would like more information, please ask.

- I have had the research satisfactorily explained to me in verbal and / or written form by the researcher. **YES / NO**
 - I understand that the research will involve:
 - use of 4 one-to-one interviews over the course of the module, each lasting up to 1.5 hours and which will be audio recorded and transcribed
 - my contributions to the four class discussions, both verbal and through digital, written or drawn materials developed during the discussion. These will be audio-recorded and transcribed, screenshot or photographed as appropriate. **YES / NO**
- I understand that I may withdraw from this study at any time up to six months after my last interview without having to give an explanation. **YES / NO**
- I understand that all information about me will be treated in strict confidence and that I will not be named in any written work arising from this study. **YES / NO**
- I understand that any audio-recorded, transcribed or other materials featuring my contributions will be used solely for research purposes and will be destroyed 12s months after completion of your research. **YES / NO**
- I understand that you will be discussing the progress of your research with others at [the university] i.e. your doctoral supervisor **YES / NO**

I freely give my consent to participate in this research study and have been given a copy of this form for my own information.

Name:

Signature:

Appendix 5: Schedule of participant engagement with group discussions, interviews and reflective portfolios

| Data source | Numbers of participants | | |
|---|--|-----------|---|
| | Student interviewees | Employers | Students: class participants (excluding interviewees) |
| Research diary | Ongoing | | |
| September 2018: Cycle 1 | | | |
| Semi-structured interview | 5 | 2 | N/A |
| Group discussion Artefacts | 4 | 2 | 15 |
| | Group Discussion Transcripts (GDTs), Padlet, cocreation votes | | |
| Conclusion of cycle 2: November 2018 | | | |
| Semi-structured interview | 5 | 2 | |
| Group discussion Artefacts | 4 | 2 | 10 |
| | GDTs, Mentimeter screenshots, descriptor cards, votes for pedagogies | | |
| Reflective portfolio | 4 | | 14 |
| Conclusion of cycle 3: February 2019 | | | |
| Semi-structured interviews | 4 | 1 | N/A |
| Group discussion Artefacts | 2 | 1 | 9 |
| | CDT, votes for pedagogies | | |
| Reflective portfolio | 4 | | 14 |
| Final reflection: April 2019 | | | |
| Semi-structured interview | 4 | 2 | N/A |
| Group discussion Artefacts | 2 | 0 | 11 |
| | CDTs, final polls for soft skills | | |
| Reflective portfolio | 4 | | 14 |

Appendix 6: Summary of action research cycles and intervention development

| | | | |
|--|---------|------------------------------------|---|
| | | | |
| | | Recruitment | |
| | | Interviews | |
| | | Group Discussions | |
| | | Class sessions | |
| | | Reflective portfolio submissions | |
| Action research cycle no. | | back for intervention | ons |
| Cycle 1 | Reflect | Thesis proposal, literature review | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First year students expected not to engage deeply. • Expect differences in identification, prioritisation and understandings of skills between students/employers • Learning approaches need to contain reflection, real-world basis, and anything that engages students • Cocreation expected to be unproblematic |
| Timetabled sessions 1 and 2: student briefings, consent and unrelated module content N.B. This intervention is 1/3 of module | | | |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--------------------------------|--|--|
| | | Interview 1 | <p>Aims of (attending) university: understandings of employability; identification and prioritisation of skills; what employers are looking for; how to learn/develop skills in class and outside; how to demonstrate skills; hopes and expectations of module/intervention.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students came to university for employability though undecided on graduate futures, prioritised skills differently to employers with focus on leadership and own weaknesses • All chose marketing as an interesting subject (on reflection, this may mean just more interesting than other business options) • Students prioritised degree and hard skills as employability assets over soft skills • Students perhaps did not realise that this proposed intervention was unusual for a degree • Employers prioritised skills in line with literature: deeply passionate about what employees bring to workplace and roles in teams. Excited to be working closely with students. High congruity between the two employers' skills prioritisations. |
| | | Group discussion 1 (Session 3) | <p>Identification and prioritisation of skills through think/pair/share activity; class split into two, one group with each employer, to discuss which skills to prioritise and why (preparation for cocreation)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prioritisations were different between students and employers, prompting valuable discussion (reflection) |

| | | | | |
|--|--|--|--|---|
| | | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Concerns for me that students and employers were using same language but different interpretations (included in cycle 2 reflection)• Students not engaged as much as hoped, often distracted and not particular respectful of employers, even quite cheeky |
|--|--|--|--|---|

| | | | | |
|-----------------|-------|--------------------|---|--|
| Cycle 1 (cont.) | Plan | Group discussion 1 | <p>Cocreation: Skills choice for next cycle through group discussion and agreement of skills. Learning approaches for next cycle voted for from shortlist (see Appendix 5 for vote and definitions)</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group chose communication and confidence as skills • High consensus on skills choice • Challenges in translating learning approaches into students' language – see Appendix 5 • Votes: role play x3, video and review x3, case studies x3, challenges x14, information gathering x0, employer sessions x8, one-to-one with me x6, students' finding real world examples x11 N.B. only employers and I voted for role play and video and review • Concerns for me and employers that students avoided the learning approaches we most strongly supported (included in cycle 2 reflection) • However 'challenges' allows a lot of scope for translation on my part, and simply implies problem-based learning |
| | serve | Session 4 | <p>Confidence: took students to nearby forest for breathing and posture activities, discussion about what triggers nervousness (might</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence was a challenging skill (or trait) to teach, so I researched approaches, and focused on breathing and posture to |

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| | | | be embarrassing for students on campus so visited forest) | <p>manage how students were seeming to see confidence, as ‘not panicking’</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students enjoyed this activity, teambuilding aspects off campus, and mentioned in many portfolios |
| | | Session 5 | Communication: agency/client interaction role play based on a real-world example of challenging but interesting interaction from my career | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students rejected role play in cocreation, but this was the only way I could see to enact a challenge about communication in a real-world simulation about pitching an unexpected answer, listening, persuasion and negotiating the outcome. All joined in. • Used storytelling extensively in guiding this activity, recalling my experience and client’s reaction, and final outcome • Students rose to the challenge, ensuing discussion was valuable |
| Outcomes of cycle 1 for reflection in Cycle 2 | | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Most students came to university for employability though undecided on graduate futures: marketing is an interesting subject (on reflection, this may mean just more interesting than other business options) • Students often prioritised degree and hard skills as employability assets over soft skills, prioritised leadership more highly than employers, and prioritised communication, teamwork and other interpersonal skills lower. Employers had high degree of agreement with each other. |

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| | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group discussion 1 already affected students' prioritisation (in interviews and later classes), shifting towards employer priorities. • Employers and students may have different interpretations of the language for soft skills • Group chose communication and confidence as skills to focus on: confidence was a surprise to me and appears on few skills listings, and often considered a trait. I find it challenging to teach, and address how to manage anxiety as this seems to be students' most urgent concern – with some success (breathing and posture activities and discussion) • Students seem to be avoiding the learning approaches that employers and I think most valuable and choose real world 'challenges': I use role play as a way to teach communication skills (despite no students voting for role play) and students still engage as they are focused on real-world problem solving • Students not really engaged in group discussion at this stage, and may think working with employers is normal for first year teaching (this is not followed up on) |
| Cycle 2 | Reflect | Portfolio 1 | <p>Students identify own skills list and rate their proficiency at each skill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many answers formulaic, tend to pick up on part-time work or school extracurricular activities as examples |
| | | Interview 2 | <p>Added definitions of key skills and role in class, otherwise reviewing same content as interview 1 and reflecting on changes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students saw themselves as passive learners, with no impact on others' learning and no reason to stand out i.e. not a community |

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| | | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students were worried about what other students would think if they were seen to do something wrong in class • Therefore students will not choose more individual active learning approaches and prefer to do active learning in groups (even if they don't like to be in groups) |
| | | Group discussion 2 (Session 6) | <p>Definitions of key skills through think/pair/share activity, and discussion about outcomes</p> <p>Discussion about learning approaches and why they did.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A think/pair/share activity confirmed that students' and employers' definitions of skills were different, though the employers' very similar to each other's • This prompted useful CoP-like discussion about what they are, with the rise of storytelling from employers, a consistent theme for all future sessions • Students partially confirmed what interviews suggested, that students would not choose individual active learning approaches in front of class |

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| | Plan | Group discussion 2 | Cocreation: through online vote for skills and learning approaches | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group chose communication and teamwork • Challenges and real-world examples chosen as learning approaches |
| | | Act/Observe | Session 7 | Oral and interpersonal communication skills activity (negotiation game) and discussion |
| | Session 8 | | Written communications skills: copywriting activity vs. reflective writing. Reflective thinking skills theory and discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reflection was introduced in response to the reflective quality of the first portfolio submissions, as it was clear students needed more guidance • Useful to compare different types of writing – versus ‘marketing writing’ and reflect on how communication changes according to need |
| | Session 9 | | Teamwork: guidelines, team allocation for final assessment, team building activity and ground rules development | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teamwork was required for the final assessment on the other 2/3 of the module, so this was good timing to weave this skill in as |

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| | | | | <p>groups were set (I chose the groups, so people had to work with others they knew less well)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students engaged well; reflective portfolios comment on the usefulness of this session as most students do not like group work |
| <p>Outcomes of cycle 2 for reflection in Cycle 2</p> | | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Student and employer interviews and student comments are reflecting positively on the employer sessions, and prompting discussion in class sessions • Employers and students have very different interpretations of the same language for soft skills, addressed somewhat in group discussion 2 and developed in class sessions • Group discussion 2 I ask the direct question about whether students are rejecting certain learning methods (role play, video and individual tasks) because they make them anxious: students agree with this but also deny that the learning methods they are rejecting are significantly better than those they are choosing, despite employers endorsing this methods across two sessions. I'm concerned that they are consciously or subconsciously still trying to avoid those methods. • Students becoming more engaged: their most immediate concern is becoming the mechanics of applications and interviews |

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| | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Many portfolios show listings of chosen skills that reflect employers' recommendations from group discussion 1, though students have limited examples to illustrate skills level and experience • I still have a strong role as facilitator at this stage, as students lose focus and I keep group discussion 2 moving with activities to prompt student engagement • Employers starting to change how they engage compared to first session: they work well as a double act, comparing experiences, telling stories. I sometimes join in, as an ex-practitioner, but aware of students' limited time with employers. Session is humorous and supportive of students. • Group chose communication and teamwork as skills, and challenges as real-life examples as learning approaches • Class sessions using these methods are challenging to develop in the short time frame |
| Cycle 3 | Reflect | Portfolio 2 | <p>Students identify own skills list and rate their proficiency at each skill</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students really took opportunity to reflect and used examples from course, others repeated earlier answers • These students often marked themselves down on some skills, as understanding of depth of skills had increased, not because they thought they had deteriorated |

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| | | Group discussion 3 (Session 10) | Discussion about recruitment processes: CVs, cover letters (briefly), and interviews | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Helen was the only employer in this session, which had little pre-planned facilitation, allowing participants to direct the session While we started with CVs, and cover letters, interviews were students' main worry |
| | | Interview 3 | Same structure as interview 2 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interviews scheduled after group discussion due to assessment timings on other modules. Therefore, they contributed to my and interviewees' reflection, not to cohort |
| | Plan | Group discussion 3 | Cocreation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Group chose communication, confidence and resilience |
| | Act/Observe | Session 11 | Guest session re. print media, student quiz and Q&As with guest, discussion | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication: this session was not closely aligned to the action research so students were instead briefed to work with this new employer (an expert in print) using appropriate communication and reflect on this with new person |
| | | Session 12 | Communication: Pecha Kucha, speaking circle | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communication, confidence, resilience: Students were asked to prepare mini-Pecha Kucha presentations, only 2 did, so I asked |

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| | | | | <p>them all to speak in a speaking circle (as suggested by Helen) for 2 minutes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All except one did this, all found it intimidating, and afterwards all said how useful they found it and felt a sense of achievement • These students would never have chosen to do this via cocreation, but it was probably the most valuable learning experience on the module (besides speaking with employers |
| | | Extra session | Field trip to marketing communications agency | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organised as part of another module, this was incorporated into the study as a 'real practice' interaction |
| Outcomes of cycle 3 for final reflection | | | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students had started to focus specifics of how to get a job/work experience, and were most concerned about interviews so this was a key focus of group discussion 3. They found the prospect of interviews intimidating, and were surprised how formal they would be, the number of interviewers, the number of stages, for even a small agency. • Both employers' ways of working with students had developed: students now leading more of the discussion and actively engaged, employers consciously adjusting students' misperceptions, extensive use of storytelling, and working far more directly with students |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students led more of group discussion 3 and actively engaged, employer (Helen) consciously adjusting students' misperceptions, extensive use of storytelling, and working far more directly with students • Students were developing confidence to ask questions and my role as facilitator became less prominent, only prompting where employers assumed students knew things they did not, keeping session to time, and trying to include quieter students • Imposing a learning approach that students <i>did not choose</i>, and that they found intimidating but achievable, gave the most positive feedback of any session on the module (except the employers' sessions and maybe the forest session) • Confidence and resilience are two-sides of the same coin and can be taught together • Learning approaches were not voted on: we discussed barriers to students more anxiety provoking methods in group discussion and interviews, and some students asked me to choose methods | | |
| Reflection | Group discussion 4 (session 13) | Discussion about recent agency visit, CVs, LinkedIn and standing out from other applicants | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussion about recent agency visit and what surprised students: • Discussion about CVs, cover letters, LinkedIn and other aspects of recruitment process (standing out from the crowd) |

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| | Interview 4 | <p>Reviewing answers from earlier interviews; review of the module and intervention; plans for how the experience on this module will carry forward into their practice. Reflection on agency field trip for students only.</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students and employers very positive about the group discussions (and students about whole module) • Students reflected on how their skills had developed, increased understandings of employability and recruitment • Most students planned to apply skills to applications soon and three of four students planned to take a placement |
| | Portfolio 3 | <p>Students identify own skills list and rate their proficiency at each skill</p> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some students really took opportunity to reflect and used examples from course, others repeated earlier answers • Interviews suggested some students increased rating to show they had achieved something, rather than really reflecting |
| 5 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students had recently visited a marketing communications agency on another module: they were surprised how lax the rules for work appeared (e.g. no set working hours), number of team building trips, sweets in office - the agency had painted a very rosy picture • Employer (John) and I had both worked with/in agency environment, so some time spent in group discussion on readjusting that rosy view: this would offset long hours, short deadlines, high expectations, need to generate income and potentially high turnover of staff | | |

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| | <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Students' skills understandings developed considerably since first group discussion; many students repeating points employers made in earlier sessions. Student skills prioritisation activity now almost mirrors what employers suggested in first discussion• Students' focus had moved on to specifics of how to get a job/work experience: many students mentioned in portfolios the actions that John suggested in the discussion e.g. preparing LinkedIn profiles, planning summer internships• Both employers' ways of working with students had developed in similar ways: students now led more of the discussion and actively engaged, employers consciously adjusting students' misperceptions, extensive use of storytelling, and working far more directly with students• My role as facilitator continued to be less prominent, as after round 2 |
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Appendix 7: Example interview

Azim INTERVIEW 4

Interviewer [00:00:01] OK, so just to remind you that this interview was a fun one in my series of four. Thank you very much for being with me all the way through the process for a study that contributes to my doctorate here at UWE Bristol, focusing on how universities teach employability to students and what we can practically do to ensure that you're more employable upon graduation, that there's no right or wrong answers. I'm really interested in your opinion and you've already consented to the recording. And just to remind you that if you say anything, that you then think, I really don't want Sara writing that in a thesis somewhere, then please let me know I can withdraw any specific part of the data. Or I can withdraw if you feel afterwards I could withdraw a whole interview or something like that, the everything you've done. But when I report it, I will ensure because you're from quite a small cohort only show there's nothing in there that can identify individuals,

Azim [00:01:29] even if there's some

Interviewer [00:01:30] you never know.

Azim [00:01:32] No publicity is bad publicity

Interviewer [00:01:34] you could be in your 50s. And that could be something you said. Somebody finds it and you're running for the president of [home country].

Azim [00:01:41] I feel like that's the thing. I don't I think like a person should be proud of who they are from the start. I mean, like, it's, you know, what you say is you. So, like, yeah, I'm always confident when I say sort of like

Interviewer [00:01:55] well, it's good research practise not to. So, yeah. You're drawing to the end of your first year at uni. How's it going. How's it been

Azim [00:02:05] It was it was really rough at the start, it was extremely rough. And then December like after December, January, I sort of like got my head straight and started putting more work, more time focused more, attended every class I could possibly be at. And I'm just like people barely attend I'm always like one of three or one, of four . Well, yeah, it's been, it's not been so bad, it's been a great learning experience for this year.

Interviewer [00:02:42] I did notice, this isn't within the research. But I noticed the relationships you've built with people in the class. (Yeah). Seems so much better. (Yeah). I felt like it feels like quite a happy class.

Azim [00:03:00] There's harmony. Yeah.

Interviewer [00:03:00] Yeah, yeah. Um and so yeah we talk about employability and how would you define employability at this stage. So if you were saying we had to do that, the ability a student. What is that

Azim [00:03:15] employability is it is your, they say to develop your skills that you need to be employed. It's just like because everyone needs certain skills to work. And if you're inexperienced. But when they teach that employability means, I think just teach you what you need for the job, for the job that you want, basically.

Interviewer [00:03:42] And do you think your idea of that has changed at all over the course of the year?

Azim [00:03:47] I mean, for me, it's different because, like, I'm still very, very confused of what I want to do because of this whole idea that I had how I'm going to build my future. And it kind of got disrupted by one business that's really on right now. And they're doing exactly the thoughts I was going to do exactly the same thought, like the exact same kind of pattern or plan. I was in the exact same thing. But now this

(discussion about his business idea)

Interviewer [00:06:11] Yeah. There's been a lot of people in the industry. Well, good luck. So, um, at the start of the year, we talked about various attributes. So those skills you talk about employability and I want you to have another go. So remember this exercise? (skills arrangement exercise0

Azim [00:06:31] So, um, so what do you want me to do?

Interviewer [00:06:34] Yeah. Put them in order. So at the top, (what's the most important) things you think are most important? And as you say, you haven't decided your career. Do you think these change enormously according to career again. So do you think the order is what's most important or what skills, especially soft skills, do you think they change according to career? Definitely. Okay. So do you want to maybe think about the marketing, communications and marketing

Azim [00:06:59] as a marketing agency? Of what I would need?

Interviewer [00:07:01] Is that because you've been [agency] recently and you're kind of like, I've got a vision?

Azim [00:07:04] Yeah, I no, but like even marketing is just like like I see myself working in an environment like that marketing agency. But I don't know in a way, because it's just it's too friendly. I need competition. I like I need fuel. I need something to drive me like like it's just for me it's not just about passion because I don't know what I'm passionate about yet. And for me it's about competition. Like I want to be the best, so I want to be in a field where it's competitive. But at the same time, I still don't know. I'm still like a kid.

Interviewer [00:07:37] Like, that's what's quite nice about University, is you get the chance to so you could do an internship so you can do placement. And I've had people who actually thought they were going to do public relations and then went on placement and they hated it. And that was their entire career plan. And, but at least you find out before you graduate.

Azim [00:07:54] So that's what I want to do. I want to get an internship. But I'm really confused of the process because like a lot of people here are saying, oh, internships, but a lot of people are saying, I'm not getting internships. I don't have any experience, but the experience I have I have I do have experience. But experience I have is not documented because I worked for [employer]. I worked for [employer] as well. But like,

Interviewer [00:08:16] And I think that's what they're expecting at the internship stage. They're not expecting a large CV and they are aware that, you know, you just had to try it out.

Azim [00:08:42] Yeah. But at the same time, I don't want to feel like I'm just trying out there. I want to be able to like, you know, because they're helping me. I want to help them as well. And so it should be like that.

Interviewer [00:08:52] well they will definitely have an idea of a project said as an intern.

Azim [00:08:55] Yeah, yeah. Because I was thinking about the summer and.

Interviewer [00:08:57] Yeah. And it's sort of two ways. It's either finding internships that were already being offered, which means [university resource] is the best place or sending your CV direct to organisations you're interested in.

Azim [00:09:11] Yeah, I was thinking that, but uh, yeah, I'm just I'm still like I don't know what I'm going to do in summer and because I don't really have a home. Yeah. Like, I can't go back to [home country].

Interviewer [00:09:30] Yeah. [city] a pretty good place to experience and thinking not only about marketing agencies but about companies that require marketing we're a centre for Airbus. And we've got so many organisations here that have marketing and I think it's best to get an internship, even if you're not thinking this is the kind of company I would work for. Yeah, yeah. And you don't know really how many companies have you been in? So it's really important to get out and see different ones, I'd say, to send out loads of CVs, apply for everything and see what happens, but I don't think you'd be too choosy at this stage.

Azim [00:10:05] And it's like one thing I really struggle with is is like judging myself on what I'm good at and what I'm not good at. I like I like I'm still, like, really lost just generally throughout many things like I don't know, like what I'm good at, what I want to be, what exactly is like is the way for me or the path.

Interviewer [00:10:28] And so you talking about what. So rather than what you're good at, you're not talking about these kind of skills, you're talking about what kind of fields or you talking about skills.

Azim [00:10:40] I'm talking about me like as my skills, like what I'm going to do, because sometimes I could be like, oh, I'm a very good speaker. But at the same time I get very nervous in front of people. I tend to choke when I speak to people. It's a serious thing whenever I lose my thoughts quickly. I can't keep eye contact with people when I talk most of the time. So it's like I always have to look away because I get really distracted for some reason. And so it's just like I still don't know.

Interviewer [00:11:08] Well, you're in your first year at university and says about the gradual development of these skills and the more places you put yourself in. I would say that. So I'm forty-four next month. And I would say, you know, I think I'm a pretty good communicator, but I know there are bits that I still working on. You're never you'll never be finished.

Azim [00:11:31] There's always room to improve. (Yes), I think I think presentation skills are very important. And deadlines even more important. Also to be a self-starter, you need to be proactive. Um, I think you need to build effective relationships with the clients and with your with your team, of course. And to be good at oral communication. So you can, I mean it depends on what you work as. oral communication, confidence is needed because if it comes to conference, you don't have the confidence to think your ideas are good enough to present them or really do anything with them. Teamwork and collaboration, I think is way more important. We need to build relationships so we can work effectively and I think multitasking. Not everyone is good at multitasking. So, like, I'm really bad at multitasking. I can't even write now, I don't never write notes in class because I can't pay attention, listen and

understand and write. It's just that's why I always just listen in class and just observing this. Uh, stakeholder management could be...every stakeholder?

Interviewer [00:12:45] I think is think about who is involved in a project and how do you manage their expectations. So there's multiple people in a team.

Azim [00:12:54] Yeah. You need to be detail oriented as well, um, because you're literally building the identity of a brand. So you need to be very, very, very detail oriented. You need to be very into, catching small mistakes, you need to be organised and everything. Um, negotiation skills. Maybe you need them because you could a client could not know exactly what's good for them. And if you negotiate good enough, you could convince them that this will sink you. But my idea might raise you up. And leadership, I mean, it's needed if you if you want to aim if you want to aim higher than your actual position that you need to learn leadership. Otherwise you just got to work under people. Problem solving is definitely customer service. Problem-Solving. Creativity is creativity. (Yeah) creativity is

Interviewer [00:14:05] how do you define creativity?

Azim [00:14:07] I think creativity is. Like just your head gathering many thoughts and then just creating a new pattern for your idea. Yeah, like a fresh version of (inaudible) from you,

Interviewer [00:14:22] the other word on there is lateral thinking,

Azim [00:14:24] lateral thinking. So it doesn't necessarily have to be, like, artsy.

Interviewer [00:14:28] Yeah, I was interested how you were defining because people define it in different ways.

Azim [00:14:32] No, I don't think creativity has to do with art. And you could be creative, you can be creative anything really like creativity is very important.

Interviewer [00:14:40] I think we're working on it a lot in my module next year.

Azim [00:14:42] That's great because I feel like I work easier when it's when I just let go of my creativity. And that's what I did, like I say, with like logos, leaflets, stuff like to design like I would. I tend just close my mind and think of a crazy idea. I look at many different things and I sort of create a new pattern in my mind. Like I get ideas from here, here, here. I'll be like, OK, this will look good together.

Interviewer [00:15:08] It's the most common definition or idea about how you develop creativity is that you have to be aware, open to seeing lots of different things

and knowing lots of different things and putting them together in different ways. So that's very much what you're saying. That's nudging towards the top.

Azim [00:15:24] That creativity is very, very important. Problem solving is important but the (inaudible?). What do they deal with? A lot of problem solving?

Interviewer [00:15:33] I think problem solving happens every day. So I you know, I might have a problem that's like the blackboard went down just before one of my assessment deadlines. And that's like a really obvious problem. But there might be more endemic things, like I have a member of staff who never responds to me when I'm asking for things and how do I solve that problem in the long term. And I think much of my job is we are identifying a problem about something that's happening in the faculty teaching wise. And my job is to solve it. I always think that's kind of what we do, our client needs something and that support, that sort of that issue and then we solve the issue. I always think that's like, really what we do

Azim [00:16:15] I see. Yeah, exactly. Exactly. The problem solving is important because it didn't have if nothing like if it's not broken it won't be fixed. So there has to be an issue. Yeah. Um, I don't really understand the meaning of resilience,

Interviewer [00:16:29] so that's been a matter of discussion over the course of the year. So is it interesting that some people in the class see resilience as the ability to just keep on going no matter what. Others see resilience as if you've had a knock back, as kind of like you did around December, January, if you feel you got sort of had a knock back and things haven't worked out, how do you come back? And the career staff define it as bounceback ability. So it's saying that you're not always going to succeed. you know, it's not always like that. You have bits where you get negative criticism or a project doesn't succeed or something really something difficult happens in your personal life. And then it's not so much carry on on regardless as saying, OK, yeah, you will be brought down a little bit because that's what happens. And it's how equipped are you to pick yourself off, pick yourself up, which you did this year?

Interviewer [00:17:38] Yeah, I think I think this is stop dropping things on the table I'll need to leave them in reception later,

Azim [00:17:46] you know. Yeah. I just love those investors. I'm realising how when I came back and I left and I literally saw them on the table, oh my God, there's

Interviewer [00:17:57] [inaudible]

Azim [00:17:59] Oh, look, she's going to come back. She's going to come back I waited to five minutes. Well, I think this is appropriate.

Interviewer [00:18:09] OK, I'm going to take a photo of it.

Azim [00:18:16] I don't think written communication, is, like it's important, but it's not as important as the others.

Interviewer [00:18:21] Yeah, all of these are important. I suppose.

Azim [00:18:23] All of them are important, but some are just up the level.

Interviewer [00:18:29] What I'll show you is what you said at the beginning of the year?

Azim [00:18:31] It's probably different.

Interviewer [00:18:33] Well, first of all, you set out an interesting way. So when you did in the beginning of the year, you separates it into getting the interview, getting the job, getting promotion. So you kind of had a thought process, which was quite interesting.

Azim [00:18:50] I like to evolve. I like to change. I like that's what I notice about myself. I'm never the same. I always there's always parts of me that keep changing, changing, changing.

Interviewer [00:19:00] So at the beginning of the year, I think you had...this was getting the job. So the ability to receive a CV. And be in the interview and yes, that's very much about kind of the interview. Then you go into kind of probation. So then self-starter, problem-solving, multitasking, teamwork organised was one you added, detail orientated and customer service. And then in terms of long-term development, you had leadership. So these were your ideas, spotting potential, optimism um, open minded, embracing diversity, debating, negotiation and building effective relationships. And you also had loyalty.

Azim [00:19:50] I, I really agree that one.

Interviewer [00:19:52] the loyalty one?

Azim [00:19:54] I just really agree with the whole thing. OK. It makes like it makes a lot of sense in my mind because there I see like, OK, applying for a job there I see a person just starting a job, working as a normal desk job and then after that is a person finally getting to the top and then being like those skills would be very important. Need to be open minded. They need to opti, to like the optimism is part of it seems to be a positive thing to always think the best. Yes, you need to build effective relationships amongst the client and your workers. And everyone.

Interviewer [00:20:29] It's interesting as something like written communication was relatively high up and that is quite low down. So you've promoted things like creativity wasn't one we talked about before, but that's something that's become more apparent. Self-starter is still pretty high. Time management is the same as meeting deadlines, really. And so that was still pretty high. Building effective relationships is not really down the bottom, but it's something that I think and teamwork has kind of come up the list. Yeah. Whereas multitasking went down the list quite a long way off.

Azim [00:21:06] Multitasking?

Interviewer [00:21:07] So that was kind of high up in your middle of it. But that's near the bottom of your list.

Azim [00:21:12] Yeah, because I think like when someone hires you, they wouldn't want you to multitask. I would want to give you work and you just focus on that. They wouldn't want you to juggle many things which won't be as effective.

Interviewer [00:21:22] So here's my list. I'm working on at the moment. So that's the list of all the things I'm working on the moment. What I do is I allocate time. So I'm working one thing in great depth at any one time. That's how many things in a job usually typically tend to balance at one time, how many things I've got to get done.

Azim [00:21:47] But but does that count as my multitasking?

Interviewer [00:21:50] So I got these tasks going. Well, I do one at a time. So that's that's not most. So that's not much.

Azim [00:21:56] That's time management.

Interviewer [00:21:59] Yes. And [employer] brought up that she doesn't think multitasking is a good thing. She would rather someone does a job. Does it well, does it for half an hour. Instead of doing it for an hour. But also twenty is a lot of stuff

Azim [00:22:10] because you do it more effectively. If all the energy is directed in one place, that's how it's going to.

Interviewer [00:22:17] Step away from the social media. Um, yeah. Optimistic was an interesting one. Positive outlook.

Azim [00:22:25] positive? Yeah, it's just to always be optimistic, to always, like, think because I really believe in a law of attraction and I really believe the way that you think the your thought process is when defines your life, basically, how you see life,

because your thoughts decide your perspective and your perspective decides how you see things is bad or good. So like every, your whole life, if it's bad, is because of your thought process and everything, it's like. So I think if you're positive and you think, OK, this will happen I want this and you set your mind to your subconscious will just make, your actions will just be, will work towards that goal. and I think that's very important.

Interviewer [00:23:05] I think it's a make your own luck thing. I think that what we do is things don't happen by accident. They happen because we kind of create the right environment.

Azim [00:23:16] Exactly. Things don't happen by accident. I, I just truly believe in a law of attraction. I truly believe that people are completely in control of their lives

Interviewer [00:23:23] Yeah. Oh I don't know, completely in control?

Azim [00:23:25] No, it's like I realise a lot of things. It's just because the way my life was going to really like sort of (inaudible) because my father because because of me basically it wasn't because of anything wrong. I always blame everything I like. The university is hard. The people around me are just I don't like them. The food is bad. My parents are not talking to me. I don't have anyone around me. This is I would blame it on everybody else but myself, you know? And then I realised, like, it's just like it's just I came to conclusion that it's just if you believe and if you if you're positive things will come to you

Interviewer [00:24:03] So you've gone through kind of what led to these suggestions so as you know, that we focused on confidence, well, communication, confidence, resilience and teamwork have been some of our key things this year. What would you say over the course of your time at university? What should the university be focussing on from these things as in what should we be helping you develop most specifically?

Azim [00:24:44] Everything. I think I think the most important thing to teach the students to sort of not it's like it's not a way to teach and sorry to, it's like, you know, how a dog follows sheep and tries to guide them in a certain way. I feel like university can guide at student in a certain way if they use like, if they just do things differently, they can motivate a student. They can. And if a student is motivated and if it's if the students even if the student doesn't have the skills, the student would go. And if he's motivated enough, he would go and learn everything, you know. So I think motivation is very important. And I think problem solving skills for important because as students we face problems all the time and to be able to solve them effectively is going to make your life way easier, is going to decrease the stress. You're just your workload is

even going to sort of it's not going to look as as difficult. And I think written communication and oral communication, presentation skills, meeting, meeting deadlines, very, very, very that's one thing I'm really bad at. Like I usually finish assignment like an hour, like minutes before like the deadline. I'm like, but I don't know, like. Like I work really well pressure, I just well, I have to just nothing but work. I know

Interviewer [00:26:08] it's interesting. Like, Yeah. You so you're saying like the university is like a sheep dog is like we're kind of around the edges just sort of nudging you in the right direction and not really up close. But it's more like, come on everyone, just try that. And have a go at it,

Azim [00:26:24] that's all I know. But I think it's like university could like do that sort of, I'd assume. But students can do whatever they want anyways, you know, regardless of what this university is, sort of what the university can do is and like depending on different courses, there are a lot of motivation. How do you say motivation resources or motivation sources? Like you can motivate a different person, different courses differently? Yeah, I think it's completely possible. Yeah.

Interviewer [00:26:52] Yeah, it's quite tricky when people have such different sources of motivation to some people are really focused on their future career. Some people are focused on next week. Some people are really focused on how they look to the group. Some people are really focused on their own sort of self-belief and say, yeah, you have to kind of work....

Azim [00:27:11] It's different. But at the same time, it's like if I hold a course, most of them would be kind of like-minded, like even if everyone's completely different. But at the same time, a whole group would have something in common and people could be motivated in many different ways, not just not not every single person has a different way. It's just like there is still one way they can motivate everyone else.

Interviewer [00:27:35] It's quite interesting because obviously you've had the visit to Saint Nicks. Did you enjoy the Saint Nicks?

Azim [00:27:39] I did. It was it was good. It's just like, um, they just they just seemed like they seemed very friendly, like if I had a company, but if I had a company and I would go to them, it would be good. But then if I was a big boss, there's no way I would hire them. They're just too friendly like you need like if I'm going to do business, real business, I need like robots. I need extremely professional people. You know, I need, like, people who will do like those people sort of would feel like they would try, I don't know. But I kind of like judge people when I see them. I feel like

those people would kind of like, try to force their own ideas on top of yours instead of like letting you be the guide and then helping you build your own vision

Interviewer [00:28:29] sorry people like Saint Nicks would force their ideas?

Azim [00:28:31] like not force, but like the type of people they are, they don't feel like they would listen to you and then do your work. Yeah. Look like that. People don't kind of, they would give you extra things, but I

Interviewer [00:28:43] think that is what characterises communications agencies, is that they should do that because they are experts in communication. so a marketer might come and say, I want this. And they say, well, actually, if you thought about the fact that Instagram has this new feature and you might be wanting to look at that to.

Azim [00:28:59] Yeah, yeah, that's what I'm thinking. Like, help is always like that's where you can hire them. But at the same time, what I'm saying is like they just like me, like if I'm a big-time company, like they say they have big time companies. They even just they just seem like that's the thing, we live in a very materialistic age and they just seem very underfunded. OK, they don't seem like they can handle big business.

Interviewer [00:29:27] Yes. They don't seem as professional as you want.

Azim [00:29:30] it's like the standard of them because, you know, like other marketing agencies might be huge, they have huge places. And in a very visible location, there's was sort

Interviewer [00:29:39] of London soho

Azim [00:29:40] You can barely get into it. And it's very difficult. And it's like I liked it, but it was a nice environment. I would love to work there. Like, the environment was nice.

Interviewer [00:29:48] I think if I get to explore all the different. So that is kind of one extreme of this. I've worked in agencies like that where it's fun and you go to the pub and you're kind of all friends and then you see in our clients. There are some places where it's more there's a massive headquarters and everybody and then they have rounds of redundancies and if you don't achieve your bonuses, your targets, you're not going to get your bonus and then you goes all you're going to be out the door. So, yeah, it's quite interesting to start exploring these really different environments and identify something you never knew about. If you were hiring people, you kind of you have the idea and you want them to do the idea? Is that kind of what you were saying?

Azim [00:30:30] And what I was saying is just basically like I'm. I can't explain it properly, but, yeah, like they looked like to people that they looked creative. That is like a good team, but they just looked like, you know, like different agencies with different CEOs or different people, different companies. Like I just feel like I don't know some like pharmaceuticals. I say pharmaceuticals wouldn't hire a company like that because they're very innovative. They're very, like I say, young and very, they're in touch with this. But like, yeah, I can't explain it because my way, the field I want to sort of enter to it is completely different and games and, this. I Want to be like. Doing things bigger than me.

Interviewer [00:31:21] Yeah, OK, um, so, um, Saint Nicks were talking about, um, so first of all, um, if you had been able to go to Saint Nicks at the beginning of the year. Would that be better to get a view of that kind of agency and marketing comms, would it be better at the beginning of the year?

Azim [00:31:45] It's it would have been it would have been good if I would have helped anyways. But I think. I like the fact that it was at the end is always very good, like if it was at the end and the start it would have been good, but if it was only at the start. I think at the end would be better because you're taught, you're taught, you're taught, you taught of things that will help you get this sort of job. And you still don't know what it is to learn to learn and learn. But then at the end, you go and you see it and you're like, oh, OK, now I get it. It sort of sort of like that. So yeah, I think it was very good at the end, but it could have been good at the start as well if there were two times.

Interviewer [00:32:23] Yeah. And what impact do you think it have on your learning next year?

Azim [00:32:31] I mean, that place, like it's sort of made me want to work in places like that less because like but by that I mean in the future, again, in the far future, like in six, seven years, because that's when I envision myself to be successful. So like. And so I feel like year after university, I would definitely work for them. But later on when I'm taking my life seriously, seriously.

Interviewer [00:32:58] I was thinking more about what you're learning stuff in the second year. Will you be now thinking? Oh yeah, I can see how it applies there. Is it is it kind of put things in context more. (Yes.) Of understanding what it would look like in business. Yeah. So for instance, doing my module next year will be about creating campaigns and media plans

Azim [00:33:18] we should be involved in things like that, because that's if you don't do it, like once you do it, you sort of you develop those specific skills for doing things

like that, because I feel like, yeah, it's the diversity of this of this programme. Of course I like it's not it's not what I thought it would be but like not

Interviewer [00:33:41] going back to the skills which are the skills you think that you've improved the most this year?

Azim [00:33:48] I would say creativity. I think resilience, um. Oral communication, my oral communication improved because I learnt more things and I'm trying to speak in a more, uh, how do you say? What's the word, sophisticated, sophisticated, yeah. I think I improved teamwork as well. Teamwork and collaboration improved because I was really a bad teamworker before. like I just couldn't collaborate with people. But now I'm better at that. My presentation skills are better as well because I'm like, the more you present, the more confidence you get. confidence definitely increased. I improved that. for.... Yeah. And problem-solving skills. I've sort of developed a little bit of it because small issues that I used to have before I would get really stressed, like I have stress issues. I stress for no reason. I find myself sitting in the bar like just so stressed for no reason and I'm just like why are you stressed. Like relax and. Yeah. So I now I take my problems easier, like, you know, like I just have a clear head, I have issues so. Yeah I think so.

Interviewer [00:35:19] What is it across the programme that, the degree, that has helped you improve those skills.

Azim [00:35:29] Assignments.

Interviewer [00:35:30] OK, yeah,

Azim [00:35:31] assignments and not only assignments, but it's just the work in class, I think is the most important, like because sometimes in classes like, you know, Carolyn's classes, you know, the ones where she was teaching us the videos and all that, there are just like, classes like that are like, I, I can't keep up. I'm not as fast. So like I always just she's doing this and she's like already ahead of me. And like, if I stop or delay the whole class or just like I'm always like behind my behind and so, like, I sort of don't understand it and.

Interviewer [00:36:08] How does that help you develop the skills?

Azim [00:36:10] It's it's helped me develop the skills. I mean, I think just teaching in classes and, um, the way you do your assignments and the way I think it's not just the course itself, I think is just the course and university life. Hand in hand developing your skills, because when you get assignments or you get a bad grade or let's say I mean, I failed one sort of subject. you having the might, gave me the extra push that,

OK, you can fail, you know, you have to do this, you have to do that. I'm like, the only way you can do this is by learning to be specific skills, like improving yourself. And that's what I did, I think. And I think it's just the course and interest like.

Interviewer [00:36:58] So looking at my particular module and employers coming in, how has that affected your learning that this year?

Azim [00:37:06] I mean, it gave me more of an insight of what I'm getting myself into. And it gave me. It's just gave me an idea, like a lot of a lot of doubts that I had before, I didn't even really know that there were doubts I have. So, like, they're just questions that I always wondered. And then in those sessions, they were answered without me asking

Interviewer [00:37:29] do you know what any of those questions where?

Azim [00:37:31] I can't recall. But it was just a lot of work aspects of like, OK, what employers are really like. And I noticed just how different employers are really, really different. Like, it's all up to the person. Like it's all of, I think jobs are all about your luck. If you're if you're at the right time, in the right place at the right time, you could be lucky. But, yeah, I just think because you could be very, very qualified for a job, but like your type of personality could remind your employer of their ex or something, and they'll just kick you out or just reject it, like you never know what's going to happen.

Interviewer [00:38:03] And are there any particular moments with the employers that you can recall as being useful or something that made you think in a different way

Azim [00:38:12] like it's as when they were saying we were talking about people, what's important for you to apply? And like the process of applying and how they picked some people. like When they talked about different people applying to them and that kind of kind of give me an idea of what to avoid and what to sort of go for. (Yeah), because now when I'm applying for a job, I wouldn't just tell them, hey, I want to work for you. Like, I just want to get experience. Like I'm interested in your business. I like what you're doing. And I would love I would love to be part of that. And I would want to contribute. You know, you need to show that you're interested in their brand, not just interested in helping yourself, but also helping them. Yeah. So they kind of give me and like give you like it. It made it easy. Like, I thought it would be really hard news, like something that I was dreading, the interviews and all that. But then I really thought about it, I was like. That's when I saw it, when I saw when we attended because like when they talked and everything, I was like it's not so bad after all.

Interviewer [00:39:13] Can you remember any particular stories they told that you thought were interesting or anything?

Azim [00:39:18] Yeah, I remember when I don't remember their names, but, um, when [employer] I think, and she was talking about people applying for coming to her business, I don't like you know, I remember like her talking, but I don't remember exact details when you get the idea.

Interviewer [00:39:39] Yeah. Which were the most useful bits when you were interacting with the employees would have been the most useful bits for you.

Azim [00:39:45] I mean, when questions were asked and I would answer. And then it would be right. That would kind of give me the confidence and give me like, OK, like I, like my thoughts, are right, like so it makes me doubt myself less and be more confident to ask more questions and interact more in classes. And yeah, just like like right now, if I see myself, like I would like if I'm in a place where I don't know anyone, I'm very awkward. I would still have the confidence to like raise my hand to ask a question, do this do that. Before I would never, I would just sit at it. And this is my whole life in classes like I used to be noisy and everything like really, I've never really contributed in classes like, I'd be at the end of the class in the corner, sitting by myself, like unless I had my friends, you know, but yeah. Sort of like that. But now it's different.

Interviewer [00:40:37] Does it make any difference that they were both people who'd been here as students. They both did their undergraduate degrees here,

Azim [00:40:45] but you know what makes me wonder, it makes me wonder, like if you're if you're already successful, what are you doing in the university? (like why they are coming here?) But that also gives me thinking, like, well, they're sharing, like, yeah, that's what I like about what I like. When I thought about that, I was like, that's very selfish of me to think because I was thinking like like, you know, a successful person wouldn't have time to do all this. But I was thinking at the same time I was like, but if you're successful and you're generous enough, you would want to show people what to do and how to do it and help people. And I, I just think it's very interesting that they were students. It just gives you more kind of confidence that, yeah, this university has been right, because I had a whole different concept of the University before I came. I thought I was going to be way, way worse. But it's actually very, very, like it exceeded my expectations, massively. So, yeah, so I really like this university. But from what I've heard, I like it because I was friends last year with a lot,

I used to come to Bristol, I was friends of everyone was from Bristol University and they all talked so much

[short discussion about reputation of university]

Interviewer [00:42:01] And in terms of you know when you would like it, there's a group you chose whether to focus and you chose communication every time as a group. Sometimes the group choose confidence. Sometimes they chose resilience. Sometimes they choose teamwork. How do you feel being able to choose the skills you're going to focus on for the next...?

Azim [00:42:21] I mean, it's just it's I think it's just like evaluating yourself. It's just like you have to test yourself. You have to like, see your data and how could you have done what you like, what you're good at, what you've done. And like, I feel like every person kind of knows what they're really, really like suffering or they're they're low on. So I feel like - can you ask me the question again?

Interviewer [00:42:48] So, you know, as a group where we had the group discussion, I'd ask you to choose what we were going to focus on for next eight weeks.

Azim [00:42:56] Oh, OK. So basically, yeah. So I think choosing what I'm going to focus on is basically what's going to benefit me the most. So I would look at what I'm which skill would really help me like like a much better grade. So see like writing better essays. Or like um presenting better or something. So I'd focus on those skills, or say if I didn't have confidence. And I knew that having confidence which is. Get me to interact with our closest friends and also just getting more information,

Interviewer [00:43:24] and so there are certain skills that kind of unlock the other skills. (Exactly.) And so the class chose communication every time. They choose, chose confidence the first time, teamwork the second time, and confidence and resilience the third time.

Azim [00:43:41] I think confidence always first. (Yeah) I think confidence always..., a confidence unlocks your, your every skill you have because confidence is what gets you thinking it like I'm really good at this, I'm really good at that. You have no confidence. You're just going to be weak like a weak person and you're working like we're just it's just that we like. Yeah. I think confidence is always top

Interviewer [00:44:03] What did you think you have? I made I made people stand up and talk, do you remember about three weeks ago, two and 1/2 weeks ago, we you there two and a half weeks go. Yeah, you were, everyone and everyone had to stand

up and talk for two minutes. Were you not there? So I asked everyone to prepare a Pecha Kucha

Azim [00:44:23] Oh no, I wasn't there. I think I emailed you, but I wasn't there.

Interviewer [00:44:27] I won't ask about that then. So which skills are you now focused on as the next things of what you want to improve?

Azim [00:44:34] What do I want to focus on? Yeah, our focus on my written communication, 100 percent written

Interviewer [00:44:40] written communication?

Azim [00:44:41] written communication. I want to focus on my mmmm. I would say building effective relationships because. Like, whether you're like whether I need the relationship or not, it is going to help me when they have the time. Oh, I think self-starter. I need to be a self-starter because like, like if I do my work early, I'll be fine. I just can't. It's just like I go and sit and then just my brain constantly 'leave leave leave' or just like, so I leave. So like I usually just like wait till I'm like sort of like screwed.

Interviewer [00:45:24] I saw a great cartoon. I went to a training thing on Tuesday about academic writing because I'm got to write an entire thesis and it's, you know, the Calvin and Hobbes cartoons. There's a little boy in a toy tiger and call Calvin and Hobbes cartoons. And Calvin, the little boy is playing in the sandpit and the tiger's saying 'oh, How's your writing going? And he's like, oh, I'm waiting for I wait for the right mood. And then the tiger says, Oh, what moods that? and he says last minute panic. the whole class laughed.

Azim [00:46:07] but that's what I think. That's what it's like. How can I explain it's like if there is. Something that's like attacking you from the back and you're just like you have to run. It's like you have to do work. Yeah, I think last minute panic is my main motivator

Interviewer [00:46:25] I think what you were talking about a bit earlier was how you've been reflecting through the soft skills template on your skills and evaluating your skills at each stage. Has that been a useful process?

Azim [00:46:38] Yeah, but yeah, I think it's useful. But I think now, like now that I have to submit my third one, I just don't have anything to say. So I really like, like I feel like I want to say I improved but I don't want to lie. Like I want to write something that isn't true because like I haven't improved as much. I improved some things that helped me. But I still have, I might have finished this bit, But I still have this much.

Interviewer [00:47:10] what you can do. So your assessment is say I had done this, but I realise I need to do this and I think so.

Azim [00:47:18] OK, so it's like, oh, what I need to do to improve. OK, that's

Interviewer [00:47:23] And so overall, how do you feel that particularly this module, practical marketing skills went for you

Azim [00:47:32] that I like, I like it because you're the teacher on the module. Actually, if it was a different teacher, I would have just been less comfortable and I would have not wanted to come to the class because I think a teacher really affects like the course because like if the teacher is just like, you know, what I'm saying and some teachers are just not as great as others and that that sort of demotivates or motivates the students.

Interviewer [00:48:01] Yeah, I it's funny how different people have different ideas of who's good as well. Have the same teacher and two students.

Azim [00:48:06] Exactly. That's what that's what I do understand. Some people think that like some people, I would say something and I think everyone believes the exact same thing, but then people think completely different ideas. But.

Interviewer [00:48:18] It happens in the workplace, which you think is terrible as well, because And what do you think your role was in this module?

Azim [00:48:29] My role (yeah). To learn to just use this opportunity to take as much knowledge and guidance as I can.

Interviewer [00:48:42] So what do you bring to other people's learning?

Azim [00:48:47] Laughter! - (laughter) I bring I bring to other people's learning. Depth maybe (inaudible) on detail,

Interviewer [00:48:56] but it's quite interesting. I put because I thought you in groups is a very different personality types. How has that been for you?

Azim [00:49:02] difficult, In a way, because I work for like this group that we're doing for our assignment for the video. We were just working. I came from the library. Um, well, basically ...didn't do anything and literally not a single thing. Nothing, did nothing

Interviewer [00:49:18] you can choose, not share the work, with her

Azim [00:49:21] but like, like I'm just like I don't want to be just cruel. Like, I don't care. So end of the year, there's no reason to create any you know, I didn't even say anything about it. It's just I didn't do any work at , but I like ... and ..., like they're very good people. They work. I actually like doing their bit. And I was with them the whole time. Yeah. I was working with them and with the other group. It's just I mean, I think ... was just a problem because like she said, in a different group with ... and you know, them and they were telling me like she's crazy, like she just she just thinks she's like she left she already left. And she's going to sit there till she should come back one day before the exam. And I was just like like she's in our group as well. And she keeps pushing us like, hey, do this, do that. Like you're not like because she's leaving. She was pressuring us to do such thing.

Interviewer [00:50:16] So it's interesting. So that's like where the behaviour of one person is a learning experience because you'll have the same with colleagues. You never choose your colleagues,.

Azim [00:50:27] You never choose your colleagues. It's just yeah. You just have to like it. It's a lot I think of it as a learning experience because you can. Because I've dealt with it. Well, yeah, I dealt with it very well.

Interviewer [00:50:37] And then you can talk about in an interview or something. Exactly. So my next question is how does it feel to be part of this process of doing the research of this module with employers coming in?

Azim [00:50:46] I really like it because I it just gives me like a moment to just talk freely, like, you know, just share my honest thoughts about real questions, not because I don't necessarily talk about serious things the whole, but because I

Interviewer [00:51:03] do you think about research to not as a career, but just because obviously you're basing all you're a lot of what you see is an academic environment. You should be doing research as it made you think that research at all.

Azim [00:51:15] It just makes you think that research is so difficult.

Interviewer [00:51:19] I guess I haven't looked, but I think you've got to research module next year so you'll be doing this.

Azim [00:51:23] This is something that's what I think. I'm very one of my weak skills, just research. Like I like getting the data and getting picking the right data is something that I really struggle with because I don't know what's right. What's like

when I see data, I don't know what what would be best. So, like, I really I just really struggle with research and I think

Interviewer [00:51:46] hopefully will help you with that. You get your degree. That's what we need. And there was that many aspects of the module, practical marketing skills that were worrying or that you were not so sure about or.

Azim [00:51:58] the scores, I genuinely thought I was going to fail Yeah, I generally thought I was going to fail

Interviewer [00:52:00] was that on the first

Azim [00:52:01] those. That was in January. Yes. But I was like I was like, yeah, I was like, I'm going to fail because I was really sick. And I had the presentation coming up and I wasn't feeling I wasn't ready for.

Interviewer [00:52:13] how about on this module.

Azim [00:52:14] On this module. Yeah.

Interviewer [00:52:16] So we've had three rounds of submissions. Your submission next week, you've had to say the first mission was in November and that was 20 percent then. The second submission was in February. And with that sense and it's always been my portfolio and the leaflets and the website

Azim [00:52:34] so what's the question

Interviewer [00:52:36] So is there anything on the whole module in so practical marketing skills, whether it's teaching hard skills or soft skills with employers or the soft skills in between with me? Is there anything that's been not so good or something you've worried about?

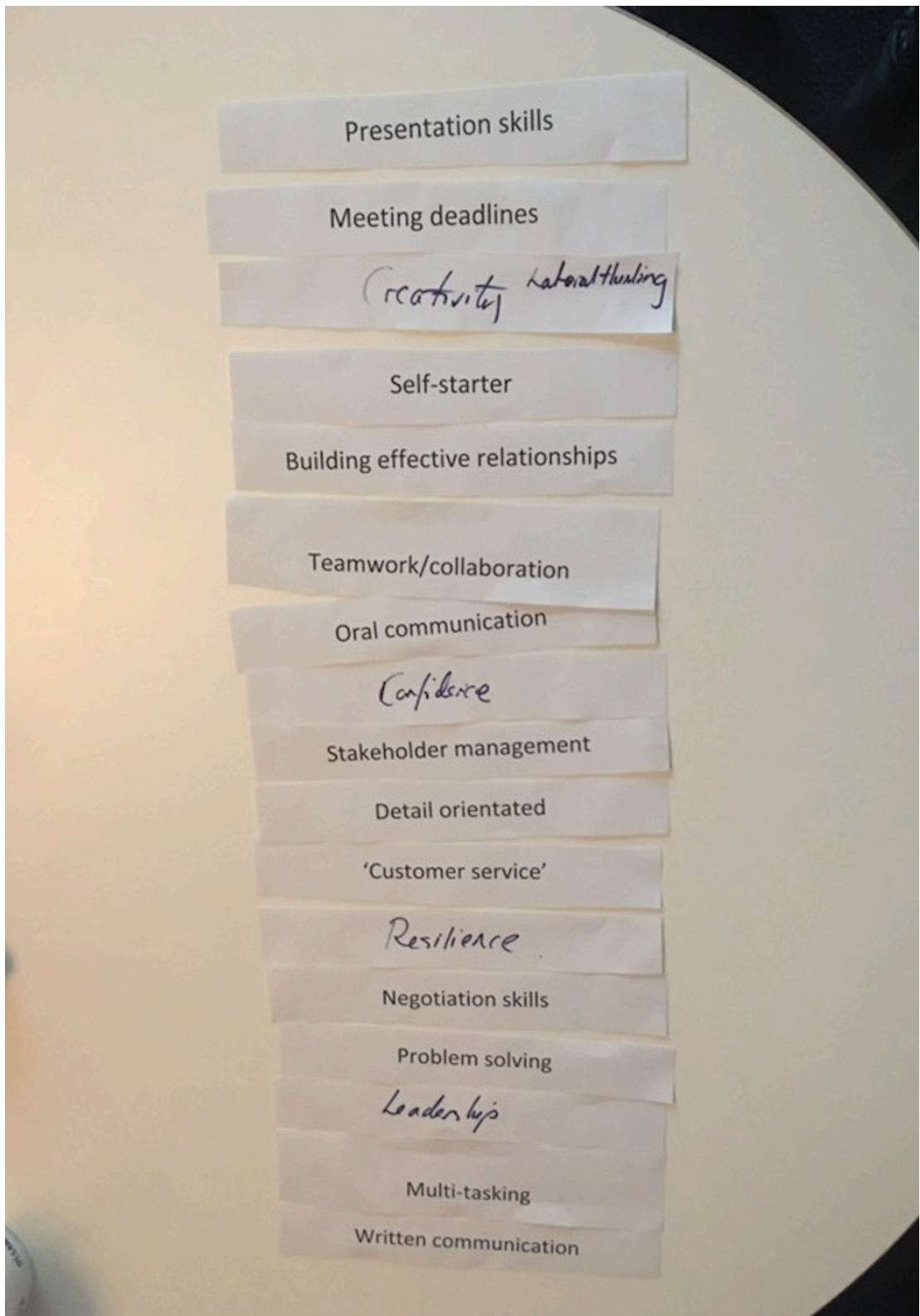
Azim [00:52:49] I mean, yeah, I mean, I think I really worried about it and I really worried about me editing a video because it was just like it was pushed at us in a very short period of time. And and I'm like, I'm not so fast like with new things. So I need my time to actually understand it properly. And I feel like it went too fast. And I missed some skills that I should have learnt because of the login, because because of the login with the leaflet and but with the video, it was just like I just couldn't keep I couldn't keep this profile.

Interviewer [00:53:28] So is there anything else you like to say, really?

(discussion about personal issues related to personal tutoring)

Azim [00:57:09] Right. That's it. Thank you very much for four whole sessions. Um.

Final skills list:



Appendix 8: Excerpt from reflective portfolio

This data has been selected as a sample of reflective commentary and skills self-evaluation for one student (not an interviewee): this samples has been edited to remove identifying information and other elements of the portfolio not relevant to this study. The full cycle 1 data is included to illustrate the assessment, but only communication, teamwork and confidence in cycles 2 and 3 included to demonstrate the core skills chosen by the cohort.

Instructions:

Soft Skills Assessment

This template is for use throughout your BA(Hons) Marketing Communication Management degree. Use it to choose which skills to focus upon, and to estimate your current skill level in each, and provide evidence of your level of achievement in this skill.

There is space for up to 20 skills here, and this should be more than you need. If you would like to add more, consider creating a new portfolio page with a second, or even third, list. Then refer back to this when preparing your CV, LinkedIn profile and job applications.

To complete this skills assessment:

1. Save as a name that will ensure you can find this page to add to your portfolio
2. Add today's date below - you will be able to compare your progress over the course of your degree
3. Where it says 'Skill no.1', add the name of the skill you are focusing upon
4. Score your current skill level from 1 (unsatisfactory) to 5 (excellent) - and you'll be prompted to explain why you chose that level, showing what you understand that skill to be
5. In the evidence box, provide your best examples of your ability in that skill as written examples, or attach images, videos, presentations, or anything else you think you may want to show an employer, or use to remind yourself, to demonstrate your skills in that area
6. Continue to do this for a new skills (Skill 2:....., Skill 3:) for as many boxes as you wish to use.

Student L's responses:

Date of skills assessment

09-Nov-2018

Skill no.1

Communication

Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

Excellent

I find it easy to concisely word what I mean and how I feel to other parties. I am comfortable talking in groups and on a one to one basis. I do however find it difficult to present in an engaging and captivating way.

While working as a waitress in a very busy café, it was important to use effective communication to work as a team in the kitchen. Without good communication skills, customer satisfaction would've been decreased and would've made the workplace more stressful and unmotivated. However, my communication skills enabled me to be a good waitress and have good relationships with both customers and co-workers. I am constantly working to improve this skill.

Skill no.2

Organisation Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

I am very organised in day to day life, for example, arriving to workshops on time and handing in assessments early. My time management could still be improved.

I show my organisational skills most in general life. Getting organised for university every day, getting the prep work done and leaving early to get a bus in on time as I know they can be unpredictable. As well as showing organisation in the two assessments that I have completed so far, doing them in sections and allowing time for questions. I haven't been working on this skill much as my organisation so far has worked for me.

Skill no.3

Patience Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

I try to be understanding and patient when other parties are acting in a frustrating way. However, sometimes I do not manage to stay patient, especially in stressful situations or situations with a long waiting period.

I have shown patience in the various babysitting jobs I have done in the past. Children require a lot of patience and I can remain calm and kind even when that patience is being tested by their behaviour. I am trying hard to improve in this skill.

Skill no.4

Working in teams Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

I like working collaboratively with people who are putting in equal effort to me but I often assume a leadership role and find it difficult working with people who put in minimum effort.

My experience at all jobs I've had required to work as a team. Whether I was a waitress or assistant manager. To work efficiently with co-workers and my boss and customers is required for a good service. Doing these roles I learnt to work with many different personality types and people effectively. I am always working on this skill, especially now that I have to work well with my housemates.

Skill no.5

Leadership Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

I naturally assume a leadership role in group situations, however do find it uncomfortable to act the leader to friends.

During my role as assistant manager, I had to take lead and instruct the other employees on what needs to be done around the shop. All members of staff were older than me and had been working there for longer, which made me uncomfortable but I still took the lead and did my job effectively. I am not particularly working on this skill as I have had no opportunities to act a leader and work on this skill.

Skill no.6

Proactivity Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

Although I always get my work done on time and to the best of my ability, I find it difficult to be proactive and often procrastinate or get side tracked.

When writing assignments and coursework, I had to be proactive about researching and writing. Although I find this difficult, I have never entered a late submission for any coursework or assignments in the past which shows some evidence of proactive behaviour. I am trying to work on this skill, however this is one that I struggle to improve on.

Skill no.7

Positive thinking Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

Even in disappointing or stressful situations I mostly still maintain a positive attitude. Able to maintain perspective and clarity.

I have found myself in many situations which required positive thinking. Whether it was, a delayed flight, disappointing grades or a upsetting social situation. I find perspective, take away a positive from the situation and do the best I can to move forward with motivation. I am constantly working on this skill, reminding myself to be positive on a daily basis.

Skill no.8

Creativity Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

Creativity in the way of thinking outside the box, only comes naturally to me when I am passionate or interested in the subject, I find it hard to think of solutions for a situation I don't care about. I also find it difficult to be creative under pressure.

Exams are an example of how I don't function creatively under pressure, my exam grades have always been much worse than the grades I get through coursework. Under the time pressure I find it difficult to find creative solutions. However, when I was doing my subsidiary BTEC, I was given a brief and then free rein and I produced a piece of work in the form of a music video that got me the highest grade possible. With this course I feel I am constantly given the opportunity to be creative and improve on this skill.

Skill no.9

Confidence Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

I am confident speaking in front of people and contributing to discussions. I am also a confident person in who I am, I am not shy about what I stand for or believe in. Situations that I am not well versed in do make me nervous which make me less confident and more reserved.

I speak often in class and often forefront presentations that we had to do regularly in A level Classical Civilisation.

Reflection on the first 8 weeks of 'Practical Marketing Skills' module:

In the first 8 weeks of the practical marketing skills module, we have discovered how our personality types effect the way we interact and conduct ourselves in life. In the employer's session we identified what key soft skills employers look for, Confidence, communication and teamwork. Since then have spent the soft skills portion of the sessions working on these. In the hard skills portion of the five sessions we have had, we have begun to learn how to use adobe software photoshop and illustrator as well as using these skills to work on our assignment brief.

Discovering my personality type was interesting as it was so accurate. I felt this was relevant to becoming self-aware of what skills I have and the skills I lack. I found the employers session interesting, discovering what employers are really looking for which was different to our own ideas. Some keys skills, such as leadership, that we thought were important, were valued less by the employers. This session allowed me to realise where to prioritise key soft skills. The subsequent sessions where we then worked on those key skills identified in the employer session has also been very relevant to how we should conduct ourselves effectively in future when looking for placements or jobs.

Cycle 2:

Date of skills assessment

10-Feb-2019

Skill no.1

Communication Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

In my last evaluation, I rated myself higher than I do now. This is because, while learning about communication and what it means to be a good communicator, I found it was just as important to be good at listening as it is to be an engaging presenter. I feel that I am an effective and concise presenter however, I lack listening skills and patience which hinder my skills as a communicator. Lack of efficient communication has effected past challenges, especially those that include teamwork. I hope to improve my listening skills and become more patient with people I work with in the future, so that communication will become effective and create a more postive work environment.

Skill no.4

Teamwork Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

I do not believe that my teamwork skills have improved from the last reflection. Working collaboratively with people in a team can be enjoyable when everyone in the team puts in an equal amount of effort, however I feel that it can be an extremely stressful process when there are members of the team who are not willing to put in the same amount of work. I find this especially true when that work is a supposed reflection of you, for example if it is graded. It seems unfair that an individual's grade should stem from the work of several people who may not put in as much effort as that individual. That fact often causes me to become stressed in team situations. I also tend to assume the role of leader in a team, mainly because I like to have control over a situation and become anxious when i'm confused or do not know what is going on. I am learning this term to work in teams and hope that the experience will allow me to discover hwo to work effectively with different personality types without becoming overly stressed or anxious about the end result.

Skill no.9

Confidence Unsatisfactory Excellent

I do feel as though my confidence has improved since last reflection, although I do not think it is at a level 5. I think it has improved because, the insecurities that held me back in the 1st semester, do not hold me back now. I started university insecure about meeting and interacting with new people but now that I know the people in my course to a deeper level, I feel that I feel assured around them, leading me to become more confident with my presence and ideas. I was also uncomfortable using certain software and technology at university, however these past months we have learnt how to use and work with a variety of software and have become increasingly confident using and creating. Confidence to do my work at a high level has impacted my overall confidence as a person.

Cycle 3:

Date of skills assessment

08-Apr-2019

Skill no.1

Communication Unsatisfactory Excellent

In this final and third evaluation, I believe that I have improved in my communication skills even more. While working within groups for two modules this semester, I feel that I have become much better at listening to people's ideas and incorporating them in our work. As well as organising a group and working with everyone's strengths and weaknesses so that group work is completed to the best standard and on time. I hope to continue to improve my communication more, by actively listening to those who do not necessarily hold the same opinion as me, being more open and understanding to opposition.

Skill no.4

Teamwork Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

While still having it's hard moments, the group work this semester made teamwork much easier. Mainly, my group were more motivated and more willing to meet up than before and in general put in more effort. Although, everyone was very different and learning to work with different personalities was something that was much more prevalent this semester. I actually really enjoyed getting to know everyone in my team and learning to work with them, i think this made me realise how teamwork doesn't have to be stressful.

Skill no.9

Confidence Unsatisfactory

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

 Excellent

While i feel i was pretty confident in the last assessments, i feel that this semester i have really stepped outside of my comfort zone and pushed myself to be more active at university. I became part of the ball committee as well as became the president of the marketing society for next year. This took alot of confidence for me and has made me more confident in myself in the process, the fatc that i was chosen to be president really took me by surprise. I hope to continue to grow confident in myself the more i venture in to next year and take up my role on the committee.

Appendix 9: Group discussion 1 artefacts

Appendix 9.1: Activity 1: Frequencies skills suggested by students and employers in independent 'brain storm' of key skills required for marketing careers ('think' phase of think/pair/share activity)

| Totals | | | Totals (cont.) | | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|----------------------------------|----------|-----------|
| Skill | Students (n=15) | Employers (n=2) | Skill | Students | Employers |
| Communication skills | 13 | 2 | Charisma | 1 | 0 |
| Teamwork | 12 | 2 | Concentration | 1 | 0 |
| Initiative | 8 | 2 | Empathy | 1 | 0 |
| Confidence | 7 | 2 | Genuine interest | 1 | 0 |
| Leadership | 7 | 0 | High standards | 1 | 0 |
| Work to deadlines/ time management | 6 | 1 | Intuition | 1 | 0 |
| Flexibility/ adaptability | 6 | 0 | Management skills | 1 | 0 |
| Motivation | 5 | 0 | Negotiation skills | 1 | 0 |
| Problem solving | 4 | 2 | Politeness | 1 | 0 |
| Organised | 4 | 0 | Presentable | 1 | 0 |
| Patience | 4 | 0 | Professional | 1 | 0 |
| Willingness to learn | 3 | 2 | Strategic thinker | 1 | 0 |
| Attention to detail | 3 | 1 | Vigour | 1 | 0 |
| Creativity | 3 | 1 | Work well under pressure | 1 | 0 |
| Work ethic | 3 | 0 | Ability to ask for help | 0 | 1 |
| Interpersonal skills | 3 | 0 | Ability to prioritise | 0 | 1 |
| Open minded/open to opportunity | 3 | 0 | Commercial acumen | 0 | 1 |
| Punctuality | 2 | 1 | Commitment | 0 | 1 |
| Fast pace | 2 | 0 | Curiosity | 0 | 1 |
| Positive mindset | 2 | 0 | Focus | 0 | 1 |
| Listening skills | 1 | 2 | Goes the extra mile | 0 | 1 |
| Resilience | 1 | 2 | Inspires confidence in others | 0 | 1 |
| Ability to work with others | 1 | 1 | Passion | 0 | 1 |
| Analytical | 1 | 1 | Respond to feedback | 0 | 1 |
| Presentation skills | 1 | 1 | Self-awareness | 0 | 1 |
| Ambitious | 1 | 0 | Sense of urgency | 0 | 1 |
| Autonomy | 1 | 0 | Work cross functionally | 0 | 1 |

Appendix 9.2: Activities 2 and 3: output (after pair/share activity)

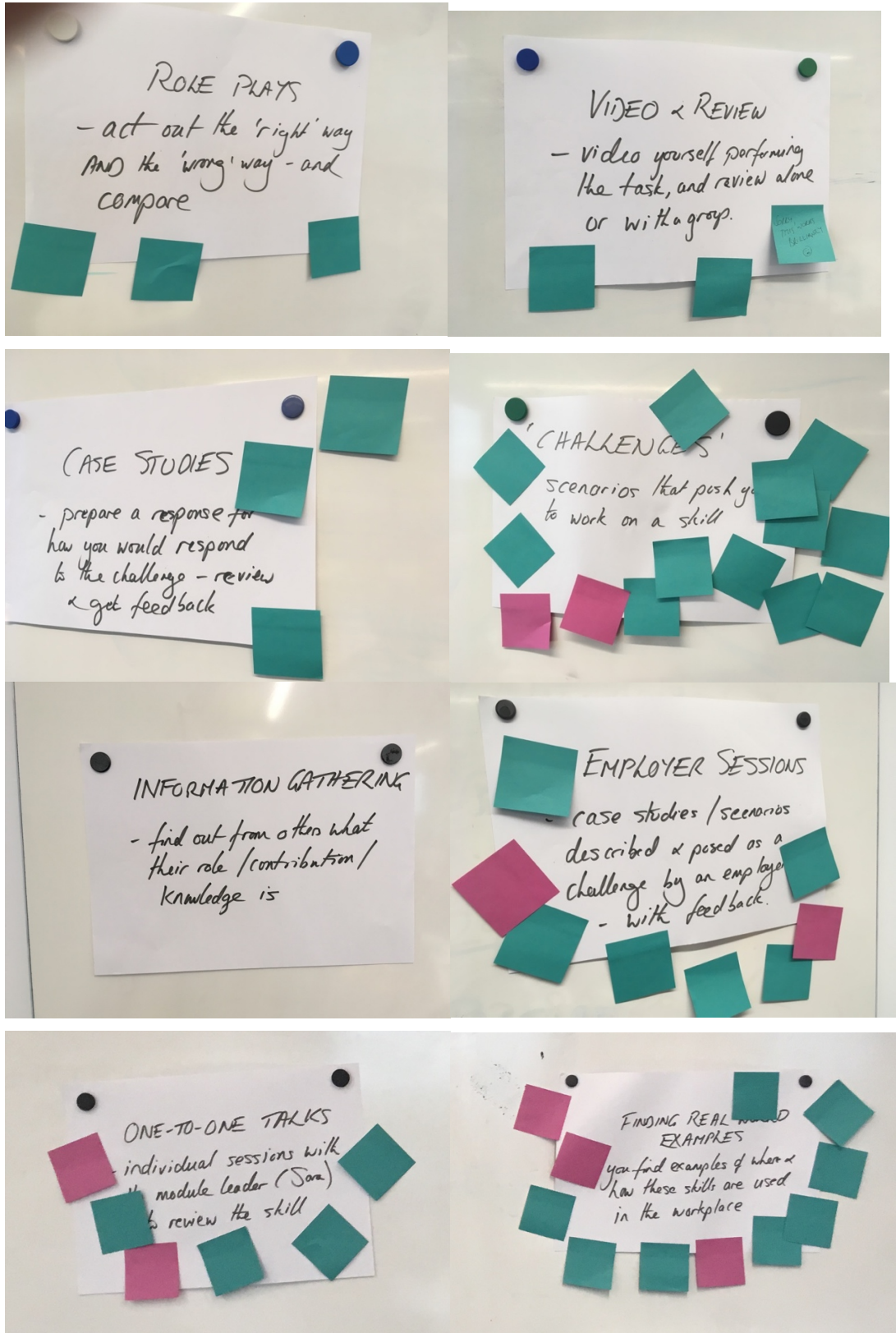
Sara Bird +3 + 1m
MCM group session 1
Soft skills to work on for the next 6 weeks

| Ben, Lydia and grace | Student group 2 | Student group 3 |
|----------------------|-----------------------------|------------------------|
| Teamwork | Teamwork | Communication |
| Communication | Dedication to project | Team work |
| Organisation | Leadership | Driven |
| Motivation | Strong communication skills | Organized |
| Flexibility | Hardworking | Punctual |
| Problem solving | Patience | Intuitive |
| Leadership | Initiative | Confidence |
| Charisma | Social skills | Working under pressure |
| Time management | Autonomy | Being positive |
| Work ethic | Resilience | |
| Empathy | Innovative | |
| Presentable | Management | |
| Professional | Organisation | |
| Confidence | Time management | |
| Vigour | Proactive | |
| | Fast pace | |
| | People skills | |
| | Strategic | |
| | Adaption | |
| | Team player | |

Appendix 9.3: Cocreation: votes for learning approaches, round 1

N.B. Choice of soft skills was conducted through discussion

Votes for learning approaches (group discussion 1) N.B. there is no colour coding in this community so different colours do not represent different groups.



Appendix 10: Group discussion 2 artefacts

Appendix 10.1: Activity: Participant's definitions of key skills – written individually

Communication

Students

- Get the point across.
- Ability to transmit a message clearly
- Confident within yourself to put your ideas forward
- To be able to communicate clearly and effectively to different types of people
- Having the ability to speak to others and present a message either directly or non-directly
- Oral and written being clear and patient.
- Ability to speak with other employees in a clear and effective way
- Being able to voice your feelings and ideas to others
- Ability to express ideas and opinions clearly so that others understand what you are saying
- The ability to speak and write in the correct style, as well as being compelling and amusing
- To be able to find a way to communicate effectively with different personalities and to be able to explain yourself
- Being able to interact with others on many different levels/platforms in the correct way
- The process of exchanging information
- Sharing ideas and making sure everyone is on the same page and knows what is going on.
- Ability to take on everyone's ideas in the group and talk to each other effectively about the task

John: The ability to work and contribute as part of not just the marketing team, but other key stakeholder in the business e.g. finance, operations, sales, product development etc. Cross-functional teamworking is key.

Helen: Draw others in. Encourage. Motivate. Working with others. Offering ideas. Accepting of others' ideas. A willingness not always 'be right' i.e. give and take. The ability to keep focused on the big aim.

Sara: Ability to both listen and convey ideas through a variety of media, with others for effective working relationships

Confidence

Students

- Believing you can accomplish something and not being nervous about it
- The ability to feel comfortable and calm in any given situation and deal with the circumstances presented
- A self-assurance to be able to ask for help and take initiative without always second guessing
- When someone is able to speak their mind without being affected by other people's opinion
- Having the ability to carry out a task or speaking to others with less worry and shyness
- Putting yourself forward for tasks and being able to do things out of your comfort zone
- Being able to assure yourself and deliver item [can't read handwriting]
- Self-assurance of one's abilities
- Believing in what you are doing. Not second-guessing yourself.
- Having the ability to present or complete a task with little worry, and have done it well.
- Ability to believe in yourself and your abilities and being able to show others this
- To be sure in the things you do and be sure in yourself
- To not have difficulties with communication skills because you have trust in your own knowledge

John: The ability to talk knowledgeably about a specific areas/subject which inspires or builds confidence in your colleagues. Reassures those you might be trying to convince. N.B. Confidence not arrogance

Helen: The ability to believe in yourself, your worth, your ability to make a positive contribution to others. Confidence is most beautiful when it is a 'quiet' confidence i.e. self-assured not 'shouty'

Sara: Willingness to speak up, put forward ideas and not to have to ask lots of questions all the time

Leadership

Students

- Being able to motivate and help peers while leading them
- The ability to manage, maintain, guide and to be fair to any given number of people
- Being able to organise a group and lead them to complete the task
- To effectively instruct and support other people
- Being able to control and organise a group, but also helping when needed
- Being able to direct and encourage others whilst also monitoring and taking responsibilities
- Being able to lead a team by dealing with conflicts and setting tasks as well as moderating progress
- How well you organise people to achieve the goal
- Being able to take control in a group situation and lead people
- Being able to lead a team and hand out tasks to others
- Able to guide and lead a team in a certain direction in a supportive open-minded way
- The ability to be compelling, innovative to be able to lead a group of people
To have the ability to lead people and make them work better

Helen: To steer others to a common goal Cast your vision and persuade people. Give clear direction and communicate with whole team. Be upbeat and positive. Ever hopeful. It's different than management.

Sara: Ability to work as a team, get things done, get along with others, in a productive manner

(John did not complete this one)

Appendix 10.2: Cocreation: votes for soft skills, round 2

What are the top three skills you would like to focus on next?



Appendix 10.3: Cocreation: votes for learning approaches, round 2

You have 100 points to allocate between your preferred learning methods:



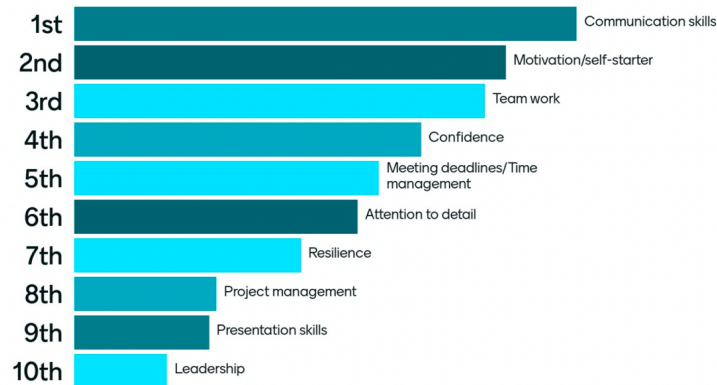
Appendix 10.4: Final activity: exploring students' perceptions of the level of effectiveness if, and how anxiety provoking, each teaching approach



Appendix 11: Group discussion 4 artefacts

Activity: Final polls regarding soft skills

Which are the most important soft skills?



Which skills do you think you have improved MOST this year?



Which skills do you feel you need to improve the most going forward?



What are the skills we HAVEN'T covered that you are starting to consider or see in job ads?

