



Embedding Employability in Higher Education Collaborative Project

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Foreword

Stuart Norton and Gavin Bunting

Graduate outcomes remain a key component, and indeed measure, of higher education. To positively effect change there is an increasing demand for initiatives that enhance employability, enterprise and entrepreneurship. In a multifaceted employment landscape, there is need for innovative approaches to ensure graduates are well-equipped for the complexities of the modern workforce. The "Embedding Employability in Higher Education Collaborative Project" was a sector project designed to help institutions critically reflect on and enhance their employability provision. A core component of this project was the use of LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® (LSP), a facilitation methodology that fosters deep engagement, creativity, and narrative construction. LSP also enhances problem-solving, collaboration, and communication. Rooted in theories of constructivism and play, LSP enabled participants to build models representing aspects of 'employability', including barriers and enablers, to facilitate a deeper understanding of complex issues. Its application in this project has proven valuable for fostering engagement, reflective thinking, and knowledge exchange. By leveraging physical models, LSP allows participants to articulate tacit knowledge and visualise possible futures in ways that traditional discussion methods often fail to achieve.

This collection looks at four institutions that have been through the project that consisted of:

- + an employability review survey which will benchmark data from the project partners
- + a face-to-face collaborative workshop including all project leads providing the space to share and discuss challenges and opportunities
- + a bespoke workshop for each institution based on enhancing employability working with LEGO® through the LEGO SERIOUS PLAY® methodology
- + an opportunity to collaborate with project leads through an 'online cafe' drop-in session to discuss progress
- + a final face-to-face collaborative showcase, sharing good practice and solving challenges
- + an individual digital report to help shape future practice.

The project focused on a range of employability components including competencies and how these can be embedded or aligned with curricula in ways that resonate with students and educators alike. The use of LSP provided a dynamic and participatory approach to achieving this goal by facilitating reflection on employability in a structured yet creative manner to help participants:

Critically reflect on employability practices: by building models that represent the necessary components of employability, allowing participants to identify strengths, gaps, and opportunities for future enhancement.

Develop a shared vision for the future: one of the key objectives of the project was to help institutions envision what employability should look like in the future. The approach enabled participants to construct tangible representations for their provision, fostering alignment and shared understanding across diverse stakeholders.

Navigate challenges and explore solutions: employability initiatives often encounter barriers, such as curriculum constraints, resource limitations, and varying levels of staff engagement. Through LSP, participants were able to model these challenges and collaboratively explore innovative solutions, making abstract problems more concrete and actionable.

Enhance engagement and ownership: employability initiatives are most effective when all stakeholders play an active role in shaping them. By considering the models from both the academic and professional service perspective, colleagues gained valuable insights into the complexities of the roles and responsibilities colleagues had.

Common themes

Leading and facilitating the sessions across all of the institutions involved in the project allowed us to identify common challenges, opportunities and areas of focus:

Embedding in the curriculum: the challenge of engaging a student cohort where many of them work, or have commitments such as caring responsibilities, was discussed in all workshops. These commitments can often limit students' capacity to engage with developmental/employability opportunities delivered outside of the curriculum. Embedding employability into the curriculum can help tackle this inequality of opportunity and give all students the opportunity to engage with employability and develop the capabilities needed for successful future careers.

Placements/work experience: it was recognised that placements are an extremely valuable experience for students, with data indicating that students who do placements are more likely to go onto graduate level employment. Opportunities to increase the number of students who secure work experience/ placements, through developing stronger links with employers, especially local employers was discussed. Institutions also highlighted the need to look at scalable options for different types of work experience, such as virtual placements, linking to authentic assessment and helping students recognise the employability skills they are developing through their part time work.

Staff buy-in: The support from colleagues across the institution, not just those directly involved with employability, was highlighted, with it being especially important to get academic staff on-board to successfully embed employability into the curriculum. The role of academic promotion criteria in recognising and valuing employability related activity as an important motivator was discussed, along with the importance of senior leadership commitment and support.

The power of narrative in LEGO® Serious Play®

A defining feature of LSP is its emphasis on storytelling. Each model built by participants serves as a narrative artifact, encapsulating individual and collective perspectives on employability. This storytelling process is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it facilitated meaning. Constructing and explaining the LEGO® models helped participants articulate their thoughts, translating complex or unstructured ideas into coherent narratives.

Secondly, it encouraged deeper reflection: The process of storytelling compels individuals to critically engage with their own assumptions, experiences, and beliefs about employability, which lead to richer discussions and insights, further strengthening the collective understanding. As participants share their narratives, they developed a deeper appreciation of diverse viewpoints, fostering a more holistic and inclusive approach to the challenges they faced and providing opportunities to find appropriate solutions. This ultimately resulted in a shared narrative, which articulated the student journey in a powerful and meaningful way, linking knowledge, skills and attributes to typical career destinations. Many participants commented that they had never explained their student journey in this way before and will be using it in future communications with current and prospective students.

Lastly, it supported actionable outcomes: By anchoring discussions in tangible models and narratives, the LSP sessions generated concrete takeaways that can inform strategic decision-making and policy development.

The integration of LEGO® Serious Play® into the "Embedding Employability in Higher Education Collaborative Project" represents a significant step toward reimagining how employability is conceptualised and embedded within curricula. By leveraging the power of structured play, hands-on engagement, and storytelling, LSP provided a fun and engaging mechanism for institutions to critically reflect on their employability strategies, envision future possibilities, and navigate challenges collaboratively. As higher education continues to evolve it is increasingly vital that HE providers look to ensure that graduates are not only career-ready but also equipped with the lifelong skills necessary to thrive in an ever-changing world, regardless of entering the workforce, further study, setting up their own enterprise or wider positive trajectories that graduates chose to follow.

Academic and Careers services collaboration within Accounting & Finance

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Stage one: Background

This case study looks at collaboration between the Careers Service and Academic Staff in Accounting and Finance at Birmingham City University. The case study focuses on the Level 4 Professional Development in Accounting Module.

A key pillar of the University 2030 strategy is to equip and empower tomorrow's workforce. A key priority within this pillar is to develop graduates with the ability and confidence to excel wherever their ambition takes them. Employability is a key part of delivering this strategy (Birmingham City University 2025).

The importance of employability is also recognised by the Office for Students in the requirement that Higher Education institutions deliver outcomes for all students which are recognised and valued by employers or further study. Employability data published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency is used as a measure of this.

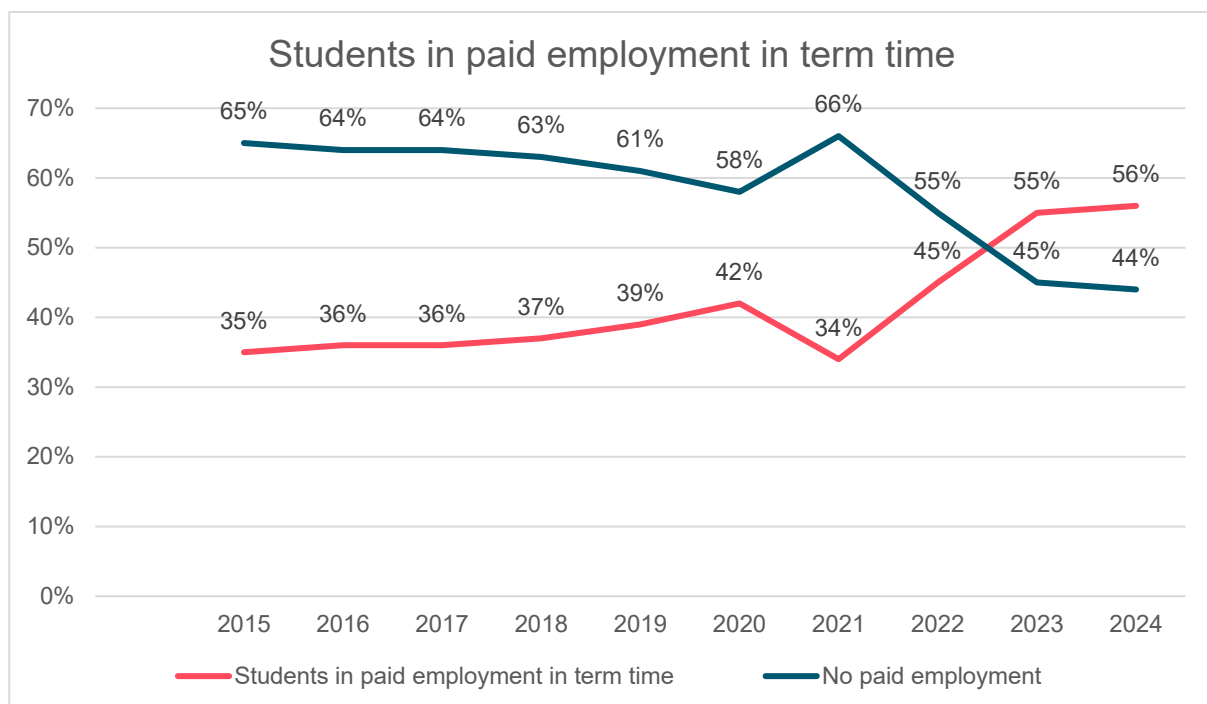
The professional development module is one of the vehicles that we are using to deliver the university strategy and meet the requirements of the Office for Students.

Birmingham City University has developed an employability strategy to support staff to further enhance the development of graduate skills within the curriculum and improve graduate outcomes. The strategy was developed through consultation groups with employers, students, academic staff and Careers staff. The strategy has the following pillars – which relate to attributes or achievement statements which the curriculum aims to develop in every student.

Experienced	Aspiring	Professional identity	Self-aware	Globally & culturally aware	Informed
I have gained work-related learning to significantly increase my confidence for work readiness.	I am able to navigate my career and/or future study options.	I know and can articulate the skills required for my future success.	I understand what is important to me and my personal values.	I understand how my future career operates in a global and changing society.	I know how to apply subject specific knowledge and transferable skills to achieve future success.

The majority of students registered on the Professional Development in Accounting module live in geographical areas with a high relative deprivation base on the Index of Multiple Deprivation (over 70% are classified as rank 1 which is the highest level of deprivation). In addition over 60% of Accounting & Finance students at BCU are first generation students.

The 2024 Advance HE Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves et al., 2024) identified that 56% of students in higher education were in paid employment. This is a significant increase from 35% in the 2015 survey, as illustrated below.



The 2023 survey was the first time that the findings identified that there were more students in paid employment than were not. Students in employment worked an average of 14.5

hours per week. In addition, 14% of students reported that they had caring responsibilities, which is an increase from the 11% reported in the 2023 survey. Birmingham City University carried out a survey of 1185 current students in summer 2023. This identified that 61% of students studying at the University have had a part-time job in the last 12 months. Students within the Faculty of Business, Law and Social Sciences reported the highest percentage at 69%. In addition, the survey identified that 43% of BCU students who have undertaken part-time work had worked more than 15 hours per week on average. With such a high percentage of students with significant commitments outside of university, it is important to make the most of the time that students are on campus for timetabled classes and recognise that students may have limited ability to engage with extra-curricular activities.

A key part of the employability strategy is to embed employability within the curriculum. Historically students from lower-socio-economic backgrounds have been the least likely to engage in extra-curricular activities (Montacute et al., 2021) and with the increasing pressure for students to undertake work and caring commitments, students are unwilling or unable to engage in extra-curricular activities. One of key focuses of the strategy is to make employability structurally unavoidable within the curriculum by embedding activities within modules. Consequently all students have the opportunity to gain essential employability skills as part of their timetabled classes and module assessments.

As part of the roll-out of the employability strategy, academic staff are working in collaboration with Careers staff to look at module content and map against the pillars. We decided that we would initially focus on how employability is embedded right from the start of the student journey. In addition to this, supporting with the aim of embedding the employability framework, it was hoped that this would increase the visibility of careers services to students from an early stage, and that students would be more willing to ask for careers advice later in their studies. The BSc Accounting & Finance programme includes a Professional Development in Accounting module in semester 1 of Level 4 and this was considered a good module to incorporate more input from our careers service.

The Professional Development in Accounting module aims to develop the types of competencies that organisations are looking for in their employees, set in the context of accounting. It also provides an opportunity for students to gain an awareness of the role of an accountant in business, and the key decisions that they will need to make within this role. Teaching on the module consists of seminars and workshops throughout the week. This is a core module and because the Accounting & Finance Program attracts a large number of students there are many academic staff involved in the delivery.

Stage two: Approach

Evidence shows that completing professional work experience as part of an undergraduate degree significantly boosts employability prospects (Greaves 2003). In the very competitive graduate labour market, employers often recruit students for their graduate schemes who have already completed a placement with the company. This links to Donald Super's Developmental Theory, in particular the mini-cycle of growth, exploration, establishment and maintenance (Super 1980). This also aligns to the four stages of David Kolb's Experiential Learning Spiral, which are concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation, or in simpler terms to attend, identify, evaluate and explore an experience (Kolb 1984).

Careers staff provided targeted support in two separate sessions in the first semester. The first session focused on the creation of a professional level CV. This session comprised of input from Careers staff covering the content of a CV followed by each student producing or improving their CV. Careers staff also explain as part of this session the key skills needed for careers in typical sectors that Accounting and Finance students progress into. These include analytical skills, numerical skills, IT skills and knowledge of Accounting software packages, for example Sage. In terms of the employability strategy, the main pillar that this activity would link to would be professional identity – students being able to know and articulate the skills required for their future success. One to one feedback and advice on the structure and content of their CV was provided by a member of the Careers team. The main reasoning behind this early careers intervention at the start of Level 4 is to give the students early exposure to the careers and employability support available at university and to get the students' CV's ready to enable them to start applying for professional placements in Level 5. This early intervention and exposure links to the 'DOTS' model (Law and Watts, 1977/1996). This is a four-stage model of career planning originally developed by Bill Law and Tony Watts of the National Institute for Careers Education and Counselling. The four stages are Decision Learning - being able to weigh up personal factors to make a sound plan, Opportunity Awareness - knowledge of opportunities and the ability to research these, Transition Learning - understanding of how to seek and secure opportunities and Self Awareness - the ability to identify and articulate motivations, skills and personality as they affect career plans. The creation of a professional CV links to the Decision Learning and the Self Awareness stages of the DOTS model as it allows the students to reflect upon their current skills and experience and understand which skills and type of experience they need to develop to make the transition from student to graduate level employment. This includes the development of skills specific to a career in Accounting and Finance

The second session was to allow the students to finalise their CV before making their final submission as part of their summative assessment for the module. Students were also made aware of the wider support from Careers outside of the session, including the CV resources available on the Careers+ website, the option to email their CV to the Careers+ team for review and feedback, and the option to book a CV check appointment to receive further one to one advice and guidance on their CV. They were also made aware of CV checking software CV360 available via the Careers website. Presentation slides and

resources from the sessions as well as contact details for the Careers team were also posted on the students Moodle page for them to access when needed. Students were made aware that there is a specific Careers Consultant, Careers Coach and Employability Adviser linked to their course to offer support.

Throughout both sessions students were informed of the importance of developing a professional graduate level CV that they could use to apply for a variety of opportunities, including short term work experience, internships, summer placements, year-long professional placements between the second and third year of study, and graduate level applications in their final year of study. They were also given information about the opportunities provided by the University for students to enhance their employability skills, including clubs and societies, the volunteering and mentoring scheme, the range of online and on campus employer events and the wider support available from the Careers team.

In addition to the input provided by the Careers team, the module also embedded the Graduate+ Bronze Award within the delivery and assessment. Graduate+ is an award framework developed by the university. It is designed to capture and provide evidence to help students to improve their academic and employability skills. Students complete and evidence a range of twelve activities to gain the award. Activities include many soft skills that employers require from graduates. Staff from the Graduate+ team attended classes to launch the award and provided input on key employability skills and tools such as building resilience, the use of personality indicators, developing digital literacy, communication skills and using LinkedIn.

To ensure that employability skills are embedded within the module, the completion of the Graduate+ Bronze Award and a professional CV with a reflection on the development of employability skills formed a significant part of the summative assessment for the module.

The project was a collaboration between Careers staff, Graduate+ staff, Level 4 academic tutors and the Employability lead for the college. We had initial meetings with Careers, Graduate+, the course leader, the module leader and the employability lead to discuss the project in terms of content, delivery and assessment. Once this was agreed, the Careers and Graduate+ teams designed the session content and agreed this with the Module leader. The module leader ensured that teaching staff were aware of the sessions together with any pre-session work such as drafting a CV to bring along to the session. This ran for the first time in the 2023/24 academic year.

Stage three: Outcomes

The immediate outcome of these sessions was the raise in profile and awareness of Careers service amongst Level 4 students and an increase in engagement levels with appointments and interventions. The Careers service has already seen an 85% increase in early engagement with the Placement Advisers from this cohort at the beginning of Level 5 to receive advice and support with placement opportunities and the application process.

The key messages from this intervention are:

- + Introducing career planning and the involvement of Careers and Graduate+ at an early stage is an effective way to get students thinking about employability from the start of their studies. This is important as they look at gaining the skills necessary for securing internships, placement jobs and graduate jobs. We have seen increase in engagement levels with all appointment types by this cohort, including 85% increase in Placement Appointments, 25% increase in Careers Advice and a 1500% increase in 'Ad hoc' interventions where students call in to the Careers office without an appointment and we offer on-the-spot advice and support.
- + Involving Careers+ and Graduate+ increases the visibility of these services and encourages students to access the support provided at the relevant time in the student journey. This is further enhanced by having specific staff from the Careers team linked to specific courses and departments to ensure continuity of support to both students and when collaborating with academic staff.
- + Obtaining buy-in from academic staff is key to the success of these kinds of initiative and it is key that this is driven by the course team with strong leadership from the module leader and the course leader.
- + Having a specific member of staff whose role is related to developing employability encourages these types of initiatives to be developed and can ensure that there is a joined-up approach between modules and levels.
- + Investment in the University Careers service is necessary to ensure that interventions can be developed, supported and maintained.

The foundations of this intervention should be built on throughout the student journey and should be focused on key milestones. We are continuing to develop our partnership working following on from the success of this intervention.

- + We are increasing the Careers input in this module by providing placement preparation support towards the end of Level 4. Level 5 will continue the focus on the preparation for a professional placement year and with a focus for Level 6 students on the graduate recruitment process or the progression to postgraduate study. This cycle of activity clearly links to the DOTS model of the movement through the student journey and the movement through the Careers Registration Cycle of explore (Level 4) develop (Level 5) and achieve (Level 6)

- + Graduate+ Silver and Gold activities can be embedded into Level 5 modules and plans are in place to extend this to Level 6 modules to encourage students to continue to develop their employability skills throughout their studies. We have already introduced Graduate+ activities into a Level 5 module, International Accounting and Finance Issues. The module required students to produce an academic poster and to present their work to academic staff as part of a student conference. Following the conference, students also complete a reflection. We worked with Graduate+ to produce a suite of resources to equip our students with the practical skills required in the student conference, which included key academic and employability skills including research, academic referencing, designing academic posters and communication skills. These skills contributed towards the Graduate+ Silver award. We also introduced an employability badge that students could gain if they completed some additional reflection. These interventions help students to enhance students CVs and LinkedIn profiles. In addition, it helps students to recognise the employability skills that they have developed, as students sometimes struggle to identify and communicate the skills that they have through the graduate job application process. This activity links to the Self-Awareness stage of the DOTS model.
- + We have collaborated with Careers for a semester 2 Level 6 module to build in an assessment centre style group activity, involving Careers staff and employers in the assessment process. This links to both the transition learning and self-awareness stages of the DOTS model.
- + We are looking to identify further modules where we can integrate Careers staff into the delivery and assessment of modules, together with using Careers staff expertise to build employability relevant activities into modules.

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Implementing an Employability framework using a mapping tool with six key pillars

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Background

In higher education psychology programmes, the focus is often on chartered psychological careers (e.g., forensic or health psychologist). While some students pursue these roles, many are unaware of the wide range of other career options available to them. Data indicates that a substantial amount of psychology graduates enter related professions that do not require chartered status in psychology, such as teaching, academic, or social work (Palmer et al., 2021). However, many students do not work in a psychology-related field at all. Of the top 10 professional jobs held by first-degree psychology students, nine were not in a professional chartered area (e.g., human resources; therapy professionals; youth and community workers) (HESA, 2024). Yet despite the variety of employment opportunity, psychology graduates often encounter challenges in securing graduate-level employment. Chartered professional career paths also bring their own unique challenges such as extensive (and often costly) postgraduate study and/or work experience. For example, aspiring clinical psychologists typically need to invest three or more years upon graduating in postgraduate studies and relevant work experience before they can enrol on a doctoral programme (National Collaborating Centre for Mental Health, 2019). This is but one of the many barriers faced by psychology students graduating in present times.

Statistics reveal that psychology graduates are among the least likely of social science graduates to secure graduate-level employment, with only half (48.9%) working full time and a significant proportion (12.1%) in part-time employment (HESA, 2024). The graduate outcomes data for psychology at Birmingham City University shows that 58.6% of graduates have secured a graduate level job (high skilled work) or are engaged in further study 15 months after graduation. This outcome rate is slightly below the national average of 63% for UK-domiciled, first-degree psychology graduates reported by HESA. While BCU has seen a 2.5% improvement from the previous year, it does fall below the broader national trend. Thus, it is the role of psychology educators to inform students of the range of opportunities available to them with a psychology degree. This needs to incorporate supporting the pursuit of chartered psychological professions, alongside alternative career paths (Reddy et al., 2013). Collisson and Eck (2018) further argue that psychology degree programmes, combined with student support services, should actively integrate information about the wide range of diverse career opportunities into the curriculum. It is especially important to highlight careers accessible with skills and knowledge acquired with a bachelor's degree, acknowledging the barriers students may face to accessing postgraduate study.

Psychology degrees equip students with a range of transferable skills highly valued by employers across various industries. These include key generic competencies such as

effective communication (both oral and written), teamwork, collaboration, self-reflection, and critical reasoning, as well as specific abilities such as data analysis, research skills, and specialist report writing (Appleby et al., 2019; British Psychological Society, 2021). However, it is essential that students not only recognise how they have developed these skills throughout their studies but also learn to articulate them effectively in CVs, applications, and interviews (Appleby et al., 2019). The programme team plays a crucial role in this process by intentionally linking module content to employability competencies, allowing students to identify and reflect on the transferable skills they are acquiring (Daubney, 2022). The '4As' model of employability - Acquisition, Application, Acknowledgement, and Articulation - emphasises that acquiring skills alone is insufficient. Graduates must also be able to apply, recognise, and clearly articulate their competencies to stand out in a competitive job market (Reddy et al., 2013). This highlights the importance of student's self-awareness and the ability to market one's skillset effectively to potential employers, but also the university's role in embedding this within the curriculum.

At Birmingham City University (BCU), these challenges are particularly relevant owing to the diverse student body. As one of the largest higher education institutions in the UK, the university is known for its inclusive approach, drawing students from various socioeconomic, ethnic, and educational backgrounds, many of whom are first-generation university students. A significant proportion of students at BCU come from Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) communities, mirroring the diversity of the city of Birmingham itself. In the College of Psychology, over half (58%) of our students are from a minoritised ethnic background. This diversity is a hallmark of BCU's student profile, and it reflects the university's commitment to widening participation in higher education and fostering an inclusive academic environment. This case study aims to highlight and present current strategies being employed to overcome barriers, with a focus on students studying towards a psychology degree.

BCU's inclusive approach to education fosters the development of key employability skills in psychology students while also supporting them in recognising and articulating their unique competencies in an increasingly competitive workforce. However, the societal barriers that disproportionately affect these diverse demographics can hinder equitable employment outcomes. It is important to recognise that employment is often used as a proxy for employability, but the two are not synonymous (Behle, 2020). Employability encompasses a broader set of skills and attributes that enable individuals to succeed in various roles, not simply secure any job. Therefore, it is essential to not only embed effective employability practices into the curriculum but also to implement additional support mechanisms tailored to the specific challenges faced by these students. By doing so, BCU can help ensure that all graduates, regardless of their background, have equal opportunities to succeed in their chosen career paths and overcome the disparities created by existing societal structures.

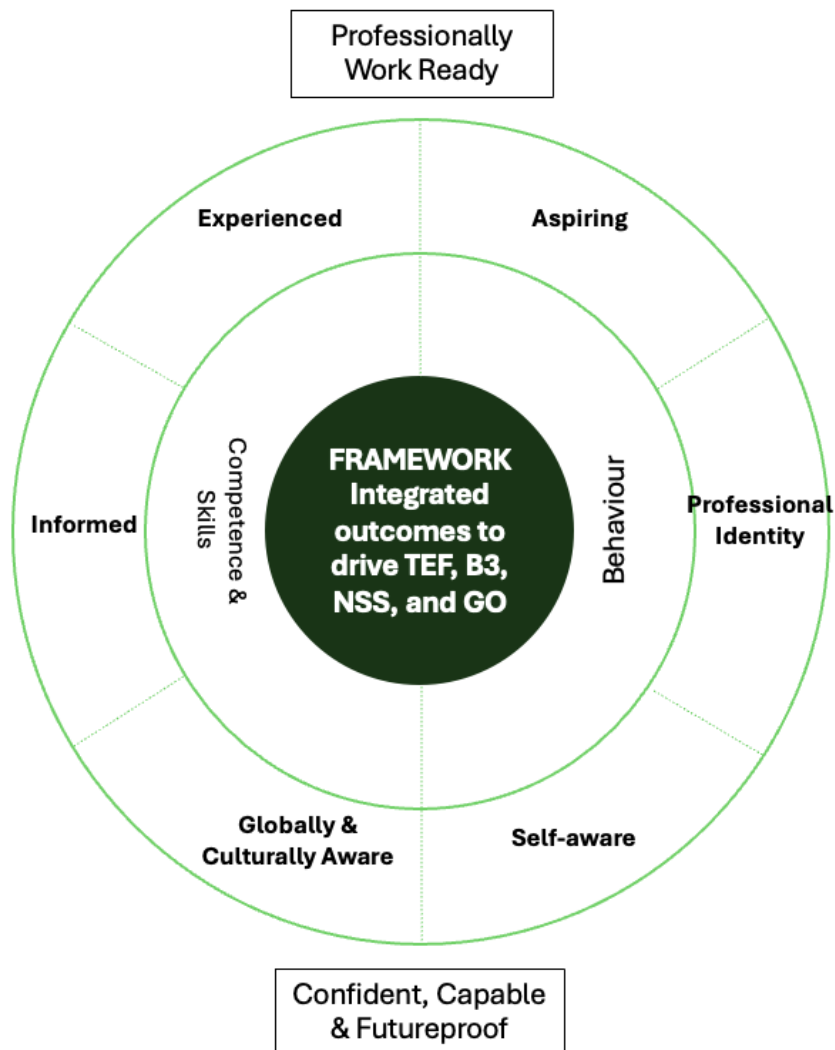
Therefore, the key aims of the project were to embed a new employability framework within undergraduate College of Psychology modules, identify current provision of embedded employability within modules and any gaps in provision, and work collaboratively with

University professional services, such as Careers+ (the universities careers service) and Graduate+ (an extra-curricular award scheme that provides students with the opportunity to develop their personal and professional skills), to develop embedded employability provision.

Approach

In June 2024 the university introduced a new employability framework to embed graduate employability initiatives into the curriculum across all programmes. The framework offers an operational blueprint for BCU's employability strategy which commits to developing 'confident, capable, futureproofed individuals that are professionally work-ready'. The framework serves as a tool to guide academics and careers services in integrating employability practices that help students develop the necessary competences, skills and behaviours. The framework outlines six pillars of distinct focus, developed and informed by national research, sector best practice, and engagement with employers, students and professionals. The pillars form the following key sub-sets: Experienced, Informed, Globally & Culturally Aware, Aspiring, Professional Identity, and Self-Aware (see Figure 1). Accompanying the framework are a list of suggested activities and interventions for each pillar, to help identify what could be implemented at a module/programme level.

Figure 1: BCU Employability Framework



While the framework provides a blueprint for those involved with employability across the university, our task as Employability Academic Leads within the College of Psychology was to begin implementing the framework ahead of the new academic year (September 2024). To facilitate this, a mapping exercise (see Figure 2 for mapping tool) was used to initiate a curriculum review. This allowed us to i) assess the existing employability provisions embedded within UG programmes, ii) identify any gaps in provision as it relates to the pillars within the framework, and iii) support implementation of activities/interventions at modular level. Alongside the framework, we devised a set of disciplinary-specific activities and interventions for each pillar that reflected the type of activities that could be implemented within our psychology modules. It was important to foster buy-in and support from colleagues, as this was identified as critical for successful implementation (Norton & Bunting, 2024), so the framework and suggested activities were introduced and discussed at a college awayday before beginning the mapping process.

Figure 2: Mapping tool

[illegible]

Mapping was completed per level, starting at Level 4 of each programme and inviting module teams to an employability-focused meeting. To ensure a collaborative and coordinated approach, modules leaders, employability leads, and Careers+ were present at every meeting. Each meeting followed the same structure. First, we discussed module content, learning outcomes, assessment, and transferable skills developed within the module. Then, module teams were asked about involvement from Careers+ and Graduate+ to foster links, and coordinate work streams and employability provisions. Module teams were also asked about any planned or potential modifications for module content and/or assessment related to employability and how the employability team could support over the next 12 months. Module teams were also asked about employer and alumni engagement within the module and any links to assessment. The nature of employer engagement and ways of diversifying employers outside of the chartered areas of psychology to help expose students to more diverse career opportunities, were also a key part of these discussions. In a module titled Infancy on the UG programme, students design toys based on a developmental theory and gain real world insights from a toy designer as part of their assessment. By sharing these examples and exploring ways to integrate insights from various professionals, we aim to expand this approach across the programme.

Each meeting concluded with a discussion of the mapping document and instructions on how to complete it. We asked each module team to consider the content and learning delivered on each module against each pillar of the framework and provide 'evidence' of activities within the mapping document. Module teams were also required to include assessment details (type, word count, how is employability assessed) along with learning outcomes in dedicated columns of the document. This information would be used to review the alignment between assessment practices and both module specific and programme

wide learning outcomes. Additionally, the document facilitated further reviews of assessments, module outcomes (e.g. attainment gaps) and inclusive practices, complementing the annual review conducted by module teams and course leaders following academic boards. It also required module teams to document how students are made aware that they are developing employability skills, enabling a more thorough assessment of alignment. Detailed notes were taken, and all meetings were followed up with a summary email that outlined discussions, all actions set, and a date by which each module team should complete the mapping document. All completed documents were then transferred to a master file for each UG Psychology programme.

The mapping of all modules across UG psychology programmes (level 4-6) took 3 months and culminated in gap analysis to review the extent to which the module activities incorporate each pillar (as indicated by a traffic light system: met, partially met, not met). This provided insights into how aspects of provision across all levels of the programme and each module meet the employability pillars (Experienced, Informed, Globally & Culturally Aware, Aspiring, Professional Identity and Self-Aware). As part of this analysis, we produced a 'gap' percentage (areas designated as 'no' or 'partially met' in module team responses) for each module and for each pillar at a programme level. As a result of this analysis, we found that the largest gaps were for Professional Identity (41%), Aspiring (37%) followed by Self-Aware (26%). Interestingly, most 'gaps' appeared across level 5 of the programme, within optional modules as they relate to these 3 pillars but most prominently, against the Professional Identity pillar.

The findings of the mapping, gap analysis and associated action plan were presented to Course Leaders, Heads of school and the Associate Dean for employability. This information was used to further inform the design of the new programme (2025) and assessment practices.

Outcomes

Given the recent implementation of the new framework within the college of Psychology, we are still early stages of assessing its impact. As such, we provide insights into the actions taken as a result of the mapping process, along with initial anecdotal observations regarding the potential effectiveness of embedding employability within the psychology curriculum. While there has been increasing focus on employability within higher education, progress has been impacted by a lack of clarity around approaches to employability and more specifically, those related to the specific skills and experiences needed to promote graduate employability (Bennett, 2021). While psychology programmes are inherently rich in employability skills, the assumption remains that students will go onto a professional career in the field of psychology, however, as mentioned earlier, the graduate destination data shows much larger variations in career destinations for psychology graduates (Palmer et al, 2021).

Many of the skills outlined in subject benchmark statements for psychology (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2019), are those often seen in top ten employability

skills surveys (e.g. World Economic Forum, National Association of Colleges and Employers, Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and LinkedIn), and are applicable to a broad range of careers. Ensuring that colleagues emphasise this transferability for students is essential in helping them navigate the range of diverse career opportunities. This also highlights the important role authentic assessment plays in reinforcing how employability skills can be applied in different professional contexts. Aligning assessment practices with real world applications can support students in recognising and articulating their skills, further strengthening their employability beyond traditional psychological roles.

A university sanctioned employability framework that prescribes the specific skills, competences and behaviours, helps provide a direction of travel for academics. Specifically, it provides clarity around student employment needs outside of the professional psychological professions and how these can be surfaced within provision. Through the mapping exercise and implementation of the framework, our work so far highlights greater engagement with employability and increased level of ownership amongst colleagues at module level. This echoes the shift in the onus for employability, where responsibility is increasingly falling on higher education institutions (HEIs) and, by extension, teaching staff, rather than being a shared responsibility with students, employers, and the UK government (Cheng et al., 2022). This reflects a growing expectation that HEIs take a more proactive role in developing students' employability, underscoring the need for academic staff to integrate employability-focused practices directly into their teaching and curriculum design. One of the more powerful learnings to have emerged from the process, has been greater awareness of the importance of surfacing the existing skills within teaching, and how this could be better articulated to students. Discussions have focused on how module tutors can signpost these skills to students as they develop within modules, and how they can do this in a meaningful way. As a result, module teams have been able to make quick and impactful changes to their content for delivery to support the overt labelling of skills. Most significantly, this has also instigated conversations regarding how to better articulate the ways in which these skills can be used in more diverse career choices, including professions outside of the chartered areas. To evaluate the effectiveness of these changes, we will seek student feedback at in each academic term to assess how well the increased focus on skill surfacing has facilitated learning, skill awareness and career aspirations.

Notably, discussions from the mapping activity have led to several new employability-related activities within modules and new collaborations between academics, [Careers+](#) and [Graduate+](#). For example, module teams alongside Graduate+ are in the processing of developing skills audit activities within a level 5 core module to help students identify skills and areas they need to develop. Other module teams have scheduled talks and input from alumni and relevant professionals to share their insights and experiences with careers, but also as their expertise related to module assessments. This was named the 'In Conversation With...' series: A weekly talk from different professionals across a variety of psychology related sectors. The style of these conversations aimed to be informed by the BCU employability framework by making our students informed and globally aware of career pathways by inspirational people in the field. They were also linked to key tasks set to

students within their modules of study. For example, a talk provided by a domestic abuse support worker was foundational to a forensic psychology module assessment. Students were tasked with creating a support leaflet using psychological theories for the aid of victims of domestic violence. The integration of a real-world speaker aligns learning outcomes with the assessment task. The talk provided contextualisation and critical discussion within the employability initiative perfectly displays an example of ensuring employability is structurally unavoidable. As such, students were better able to understand how to apply psychological theories to practical scenarios, ensuring that the assessment is authentic. This combination of theory and practice creates a robust learning environment that prepares students for both academic success and future professional endeavours.

As a result of this collaboration between psychology and Careers+, we have increased Careers+ involvement across all levels of the programme, offering input and delivery of both general and module-specific content. This has helped to facilitate a more thematic approach to employability provision, avoiding duplication at any one level/year. Moreover, this has helped to foster greater connections between academics and careers teams, in addition to ensuring input is more meaningful to module aims and content. For example, on the module Psychology of Individual Differences and Personality, a core level 4 module, the careers team now deliver a session on assessment centres and use of psychometrics and presentations in recruitment. This links directly to module learning outcomes (application of psychometrics), but also highlights how subject-specific knowledge applies in real world contexts. Through this work, students can better understand how knowledge applies outside of the module, and skills can be used for future employment/interview processes.

Additionally, careers service and alumni teams are now aware of the longer-term aims for provision and are better equipped to support us over the next year in helping to progress activity further. This has facilitated ways we can work together to coordinate, prioritise and progress employability opportunities within the curriculum. This has included support for academics in increasing their understanding of the range of career options open to students, and more specifically, those that align with their subject areas. To this end, Careers+ colleagues have developed information leaflets in requested areas of work (e.g. careers within rehabilitation, careers in alternative education, and roles that involve working with children and young people) for academics to embed within modules. These resources help staff and students to have a broader understanding of the different career pathways available. Helping students to explore options is important given research indicated that students' career interests change during university (Quinlan & Corbin, 2023).

The gap analysis helped to assess where we need to target provision and support at a module/programme level, and what specific provision is needed. For example, we are collaborating with Careers+ and employer engagement teams to enhance our provision of employer engagement within modules. One way we plan to embed this is through employer-set dissertation briefs, where dissertation projects will be based on a topic or question posed by an employer. This will enable us to provide more opportunities within the programme where students can gain exposure to professionals (via mentoring and/or in an advisory

capacity) and develop real world skills that foster their professional identities. Involving employers in guiding and assessing students throughout this process offers valuable hands-on experience, helping bridge the gap between higher education and the workplace.

To further develop our students' awareness and ability to articulate transferable skills gained during the course, we will develop an interactive 'toolkit', which aims to provide students with an opportunity to reflect on and evidence transferable skills developed at each level of the programme, with practical guidance for using these examples in job/further study applications. This links to the 'Self Aware' pillar and aims to provide students with the opportunity to understand themselves in relation to their learning and reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, developing a LinkedIn profile as one of the suggested activities within the toolkit. It is through the above planned activities, along with greater embedding of the popular 'In Conversation With..' series, that we hope to address gaps against the Aspiring pillar and ensure that students develop greater understanding of the different career options and pathways open to them. Exposing students to alumni and other successful professionals as part of this series ensures that our students see themselves as aspiring professionals.

Overall, implementing an employability framework using a mapping tool with six key pillars has allowed for identification of activities, resources and events to improve employability provision across undergraduate programmes, and strategic collaboration with academic staff and Careers services. This can be applied to other levels and programmes of study.

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Enhancing Employability by enabling agile responsiveness from higher education to skills needs of individuals and employers

Bridie Killoran, Careers and Learning Pathways Manager, Atlantic Technological University, Ireland
Implementation Period: 2021 - 2024

Context and Rationale

In today's dynamic and fast-paced world of work, continuous learning and skills development have become increasingly critical to meet the demands of a rapidly changing labour market. Enterprise in Ireland's Western region face mounting challenges in addressing talent shortages while ensuring sustained organisational growth. In response to these needs, Atlantic Technological University (ATU) has launched the [MyCareerPath](#) project as part of the broader *Higher Ed 4.0* initiative. Funded by the Human Capital Initiative (HCI) which is delivering an investment targeted towards increasing capacity in higher education in skills-focused programmes designed to meet priority skills needs. This case study examines the impact of the employability collaborative project with ATU and Advance HE, focusing on employability in the context of bridging skill gaps among employees, aligning educational pathways with workforce demands, and promoting lifelong learning.

The ATU Higher Ed 4.0 [MyCareerPath](#), Careers and Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) project is a transformative initiative funded by the Irish Human Capital Initiative which leverages technology, collaboration, and innovation to support lifelong learning, workforce upskilling, and career development. By aligning with regional and national priorities, the project enhances access to higher education, promotes RPL, and strengthens enterprise-education partnerships.

The online MyCareerPath platform involves engagement with employers and potential students to Atlantic Technological University. The service advises candidates on learning pathways available and appropriate to them, and how to achieve their career objectives or improve their employability. The project was designed with a strong emphasis on collaboration with enterprises, ensuring that outcomes are not only relevant but also

Relevant national strategy and policy documents in Ireland.

[National Skills Strategy 2025](#)

[Industry 4.0, 2020 – 2025](#)

[Government of Ireland, Future of Jobs Report 2019.](#)

[OECD Skills Strategy project for Ireland](#)

Lifelong Learning

National Access Plan 2022-2028

[National Skills Strategy 2025](#) (DFHERIS, 2021)

[European skills agenda for sustainable competitiveness, social fairness and resilience](#) (European Commission, 2020)

Regional Enterprise Plans (West and Northwest)

[Enterprise Ireland Strategy 2022 – 2024](#) (Enterprise Ireland, 2022)

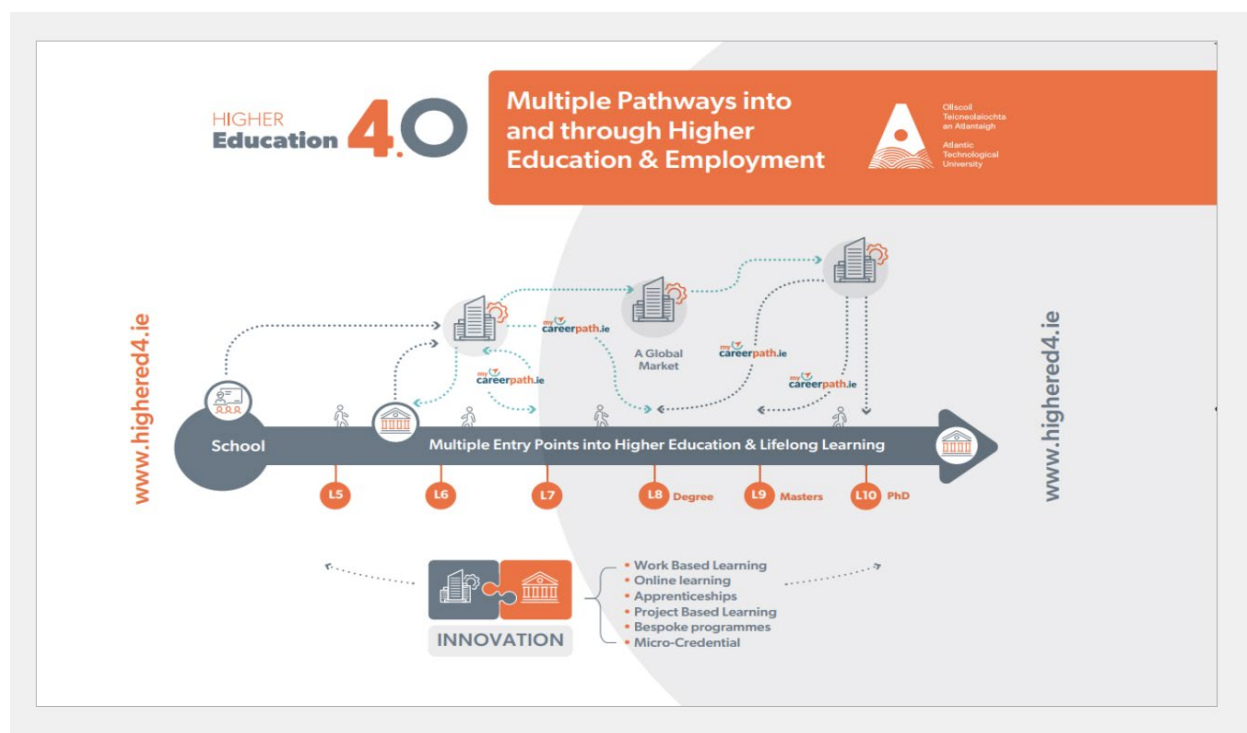
embedded within organisational practices. The initiative aligns with the Irish government national policies which prioritise job creation, digital transformation, sustainability, and innovation. Additionally, the project supports the National Skills Strategy 2025 objective of leveraging technology to enhance talent and skills development.

In April 2022, ATU was formed following the merger of three Institutes of Technology and therefore it has been an ideal time to design new strategies, processes and policies for engaging students with careers and employability. The Advance HE collaboration was a good opportunity to frame a discussion about embedding employability at a pilot level in one academic department.

Advance HE & ATU MyCareerPath Collaboration

The MyCareerPath initiative was scoped in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders, including industry partners, professional bodies, and public sector representatives. The project aimed to address the needs of learners, employers, and employees, with a particular focus on the West and Northwest regions of Ireland where ATU operates. Figure 1 shows the multiple pathways targeted by MyCareerPath.

Figure 1: ATU Higher Education 4 pathways into and through Higher Education



The primary goals included developing MyCareerPath as a career platform with advanced assessment tools and integrating AI to support upskilling and employability. The project also aims to promote lifelong learning by enhancing access to higher education through multiple routes (see Figure 1) and creating tailored career pathways, including integrating a framework to promote the concept of sustainable employability throughout a learner's lifespan.

One of the key aspects of this project and a focus for this case study was the collaboration with the academic leads within the university. In 2023, ATU MyCareerpath collaborated with Advance HE to benefit from their specialist knowledge in embedding employability specifically at the discipline and programme level. We wanted to get an understanding of the current levels of embedded employability within the curriculum and support colleagues in engaging with employability. We aimed to leverage these insights to shape the design of the MyCareerPath learning pathways for individuals returning to Higher Education from the workplace.

Implementation stages

As part of the collaborative project, an academic workgroup was formed to specifically look at how ATU was embedding employability across the three of the main university campuses, spanning across the West and North-West of Ireland. It was decided to focus on the faculty of business and specifically the Bachelor of Business studies programme to see how the knowledge and good practice exchange operated between both heads of departments and lecturing staff in relation to embedding employability.

The Advance HE Embedding Employability programme involved completion of an employability review survey, an interactive collaborative workshop for the relevant faculty participants, online drop in sessions to discuss progress and a comprehensive report outlining the key findings from the project. This provided a valuable tool for the university staff to reflect on the challenges and opportunities in embedding employability into the curriculum.

The survey provided insights into how employability is integrated into the learning and teaching practices of the Business Studies programme. It specifically explored staff perspectives on employability and its implementation within the curriculum.

ATU received 31 responses to the survey, in which staff were asked to assess the Business Studies programme across five key areas:

- + Knowledge and soft skills
- + Wider context
- + Linking and reflection
- + Networks
- + Career preparation

The survey findings highlighted areas of good practice and opportunities for further exploration. In terms of good practice, the survey identified that ATU provides a diverse range of opportunities for students to engage with external stakeholders and collaborate with industry partners. These opportunities enable students to align their learning with employer expectations, expand their knowledge beyond their discipline, and further develop the foundations for shaping the curriculum. The report highlighted the fact that with increasingly

fluid boundaries, this approach fosters a dynamic learning environment for students and creates authentic learning experiences within the curriculum. Additionally, this presents a valuable opportunity to enhance network development. The survey report recommended that ATU should explore ways to integrate these strengths more strategically to further enhance networking opportunities for students.

The report also highlighted three key areas for exploration and reflection in mapping out its employability approach. These included evaluating provision across the business studies programme, determining how and when employability is introduced to learners, how it is developed and assessed. Having this structured process will allow programme boards to document employability provision and initiate the monitoring of relevant activities, ultimately aiming for an assessment of their impact.

As a relatively new university with new structures and policies, there is ample scope for ATU to consider how implementing a holistic support system throughout the university can empower students to reach their full potential throughout their studies and the importance of aligning the offering with the future direction and strategic priorities of the university. For example, strengthening collaboration between careers teams and academics can create a more cohesive approach, enhancing student outcomes. A strong partnership will drive greater impact than isolated efforts, reinforcing the principle that "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts."

The next stage of the project was the collaborative workshop within the university. Attendees included heads of school and departments from the faculty of business across all three campuses, lecturers aligned specially to the Bachelor of Business programme and various representatives from support services that impact on students' employability, for example, careers and placement.

The workshop comprised of two stages, beginning with facilitated discussions on the various challenges faced in embedding employability within the university. A key takeaway from these discussions included the importance of staff buy-in and support, particularly from academic staff, for successfully integrating employability into the curriculum. Embedding employability into relevant quality assurance processes is also essential, with the recognition of employability-related activities in academic promotion criteria serving as a strong motivator and demonstrating institutional commitment. Senior leadership support was also identified as a critical factor for success. Although placements are highly valued, not all students can participate in the 'gold standard' year-in-industry due to personal circumstances such as caring responsibilities or health issues, highlighting the need for flexible placement options to ensure all students gain work experience. Employer engagement was acknowledged as crucial in developing impactful employability initiatives, as employers contribute significantly to enhancing the curriculum through industry-focused seminars, authentic assessments, and experiential opportunities. Additionally, attendees emphasised the importance of helping students understand the skills they are developing, the reasons behind specific assessments, and how these contribute to their employability. Lastly, the delay in measuring impact through Graduate Outcomes was noted, prompting

the need for alternative methods to assess impact at earlier stages of the student or graduate journey.

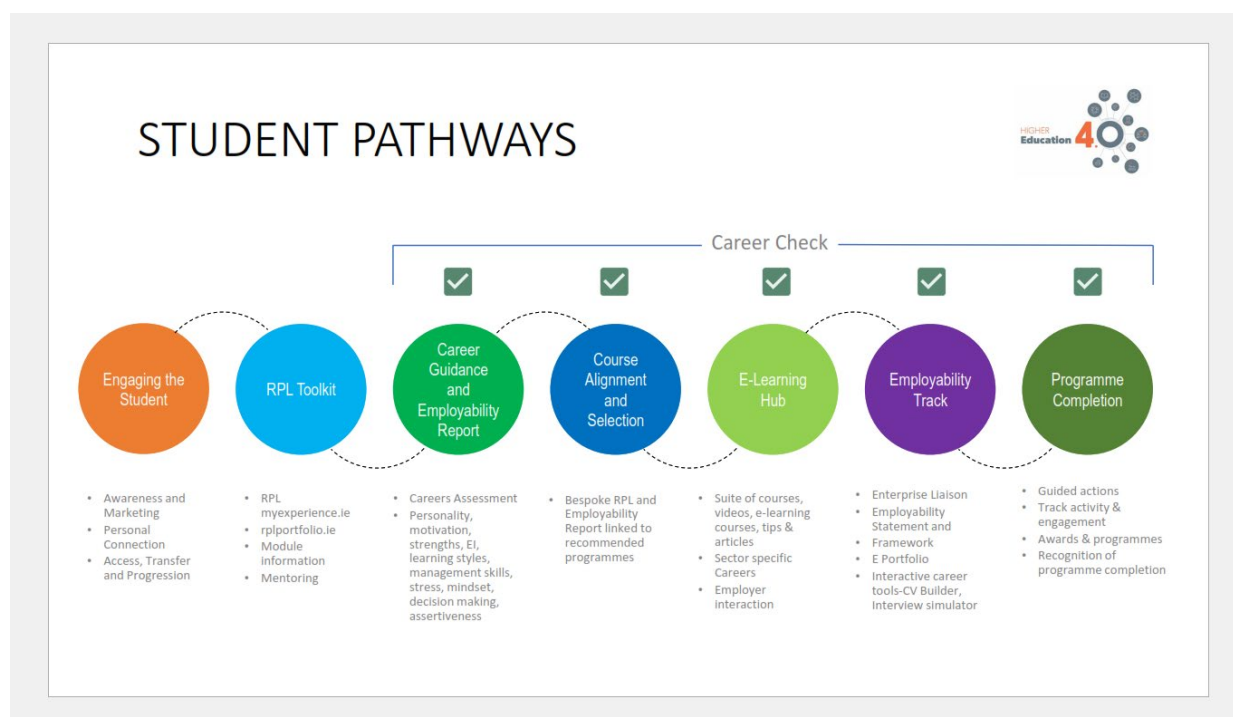
The second stage included an activity centred around using LEGO® SERIOUS PLAY® to describe the attributes that students develop during their ATU journey. This process led to the development of narrative, outlining the skills and attributes students develop, how these are built on each year and importantly, how these are related to future careers.

- + Overall, the key takeaways included:
- + The requirement for a cross-university provision centralising all existing employability activity as part of a more holistic approach.
- + A centralised point of access to relevant employability resources, information and knowledge assisting in mapping out different pathways for students and support experience exchange between staff.
- + It was highlighted that programme level/ cross module assessment would facilitate deeper understanding and also help staff better coordinate programme level learning and teaching experience.
- + It was emphasised that many staff from ATU have come from industry, with their teaching utilising this experience to provide industry relevant case studies, that help students appreciate how theory is applied in a business context and help prepare them for the world of work.
- + It was highlighted that programmes could do with further developing placement opportunities for students. This could be facilitated by greater engagement with employers, especially alumni, and working with them to develop and enhance course content.

Design concepts of MyCareerPath informed by the Advance HE Collaborative Project

The Advance HE design workshops, helped to inform the process flow for the MyCareerPath learner journey as shown in Figure 2. The design incorporates all the key elements of the programme from first contact through to successful completion.

Figure 2: Process Flow for MyCareerPath (MCP)



The Student Pathways framework provides a structured, student-centred approach that supports learners from initial engagement to career readiness. By integrating career assessments, personalised learning, digital tools, and employer interactions, this pathway ensures students are well-prepared for academic and professional success.

The learning pathways consist of seven key stages:

1 Engaging the Student

This initial stage focuses on creating awareness and marketing educational opportunities. It includes establishing a personal connection with students and learners in the workplace. It includes introduction to the concept of RPL, ensuring access, transfer, and progression into Higher education.

2 RPL Toolkit (Recognition of Prior Learning)

This stage provides tools and resources for students to assess their prior learning and experience. It includes access to platforms like *rplportfolio.ie*. Module information and mentoring to guide students through the recognition process.

3 Career Guidance and Employability Report

Students are asked to complete a brief AI-powered questionnaire based on the proven CareerEDGE employability framework, developed by Dacre, Pool and Sewell (2007). Upon completion of the questionnaire, an individual report is generated which identifies the five key areas of employability that must be developed for students to achieve fulfilling and successful careers. (please see table 1 below).

Table 1: Measuring 5 key elements of Employability Using AI

Career	Career Learning	Understanding career progression, planning, and decision-making.
E	Experience of Work & Life	Practical experience, applying skills in real-world settings, and professional growth.
D	Degree Subject	Leveraging academic knowledge and subject-specific expertise.
G	Generic Skills	Critical thinking, creativity, IT literacy, and problem-solving capabilities.
E	Emotional & Cultural Intelligence	Managing emotions effectively and understanding cultural diversity.

We measure the student's employability both at the beginning and at the end of their learning pathway. Figure 3 shows a sample report which a student receives.

The self-assessment and its learning programme have been designed for learners to help them identify the areas they need to develop in order to make themselves as employable as they can be.

Figure 3: Employability Report



4 Course Alignment and Selection

At this stage, students receive personalised recommendations based on their Employability Report and RPL assessment. This helps them select the most suitable academic programme. Students can also gain access to digital learning resources, which include Online courses, videos, tips, and articles.

5 E-Learning Hub

Students gain access to digital learning resources, which include:

- + Online courses, videos, tips, and articles.
- + Career-specific resources and interaction with employers.

6 Employability Track

This stage equips students with tools and resources to enhance employability, including enterprise liaison and employability framework. Digital career tools like CV Builder and Interview Simulator. An E-Portfolio to showcase achievements and skills.

7 Programme Completion

The final stage ensures that students successfully complete their educational and career pathways. It includes guided actions to track engagement. Awards and programme recognition for achievements.

Matching learning pathways with participants using personas

Following some scoping and findings from the initial research and Advance HE workshops, MyCareerPath created and developed five distinct career and learning pathways, each tailored to represent the five key personas. During the design phase, the team conducted in-depth research on each persona, exploring who they are, what they contribute, what they require, and the specific supports MyCareerPath can provide to meet their needs. Figures 3 and 4 show how each of the personas were characterised based on a set of research questions.

Figure 3: An example of research questions for Personas, in this case New Beginnings (Youth)

The screenshot displays the 'mycareerpath.ie' website interface. At the top, the logos for 'mycareerpath.ie' and 'ATU' (Atlantic Technological University) are visible. The main heading is 'Pathway 1: New beginnings (Youth)'. Below this, there is a profile picture of a young man. To the right of the photo, there are four sections: 'Who am I?' (Beginner/career starter/first job/first course/returning to education/workplace.), 'What I bring:' (Excitement, enthusiasm, energy. Also, confusion and insecurity.), 'What I need:' (Support in understanding myself and my career needs. Confidence and assurance in my career decisions.), and 'MyCareerPath.ie Supports:' (Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), CVs, applications, work-based learning.). Below the photo is a circular diagram with four segments labeled 1, 2, 3, and 4, with the word 'Bootcamp' in the center. At the bottom right, there is a navigation bar with numbers 1 through 5, and a small grid of icons representing different career paths.

Figure 4: Development of the Five Personas

	Who I am?	What I bring?	What I need?	Mycareerpath.ie supports
New Beginnings	Beginner/career starter/first job/first course/returning to education/workplace	Excitement, enthusiasm, energy. Also, confusion and insecurity	Support in understanding myself and my career needs. Confidence and assurance in my career decisions	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Cvs, applications, work-based learning
Career Accelerator	Graduate (recent or completed degree some time ago), employee with significant experience (needs qualification to progress).	Experience, knowledge and skills. Sense of fulfilment and achievement. Confident, energised and engaged in career activities.	Support in gaining employment or promotion, exploring career directions, finding a postgraduate course.	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Cvs, applications, work-based learning.
Career Mastery	Seeking promotion or career advancement, job changer, looking for a new challenge	Substantial experience, knowledge and skills. Looking forward to a new challenge.	Specialised training and development, support in gaining promotion or changing job, redefine career direction. Consolidate experience, knowledge and skills.	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Cvs, applications, work-based learning.
Dream Builder	Considerable achievements in my life and/or career. Now looking to pursue my passions.	Significant experience, knowledge and skills. Self-understanding and self-efficacy, passion for subject knowledge.	Acknowledge achievements, strengths and passions. Redefine personal and career needs. Change of scene. Consolidate experience, knowledge and skills.	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Cvs, applications, work-based learning.
Entrepreneur	An ideas person, innovator, dynamic, creative, interested in business, problem-solver.	Passionate, energetic, visionary, risk-taker, creative and innovative.	Understand self-employment and business needs. Access to information on training and development requirements, relevant networks and supports	Personalised career advice. Self-exploration tools. Information and advice on courses, Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), Cvs, applications, work-based learning.

Four-step process

Having selected the most appropriate persona, all learners are brought through a 4-stage developmental programme with the help of the most up-to-date e-learning tools and assessments as well as one to one mentored support from Careers and Learning Pathways Advisers (Figure 5). Each Learning Pathway incorporates a process of self-discovery leading to the development of successful career plans as learners reflect and focus on their career goals as they proceed through the programmes. Though the steps are similar in each case, the content of the pathway will vary depending on the persona and the individual.

Step 1 – “Starting Blocks” Self-discovery

Map your values, strengths and achievements with access to online resources. Understand your unique skillset and how to develop your potential.

Step 2 – “On Your Marks” Self-development

Reflect and explore your career direction and consider your next steps. Identify learning gaps and suitable courses in a career pathway of interest to you.

Step 3 – “Get Set” Career Toolkit

Develop the resources you require to support your career. Refine course choices to suit your career goals. Consider advice on course applications including available supports and funding.

Step 4 – “Go” Career Plan

Finalise a career and learning development plan to support your career journey.

Learners gain access to an innovative platform with customised e-learning content, psychometric assessment tools, and a relevant career development programme.

Figure 5: Personas and Four Stage Developmental Programme



Figure 6: Personas and Blended Approach



Impact and outputs

The collaborative project with Advance HE provided insights into the extent to which employability is currently integrated into the curriculum and identified the supports needed to enhance staff engagement in this area. These findings also informed the systematic development of MyCareerPath service designed to support individuals in the workplace seeking to upskill and transition back into Higher Education.

The project is an excellent example of how universities can develop career and employability pathways and leverage advantages for all learners. It assisted in identifying employability skills and embedding employability into the curriculum to ensure the development of essential skills, values, attributes, and behaviours to help students achieve success and remain the most employable versions of themselves throughout their lifetime.

The workshops provided invaluable insights into embedding employability and recognising its value to the journey of the learners and its significance in helping students achieve success. The key learnings included:

- + The scope and nature of current activities and best practices within the organisation.
- + The necessity for centralised coordination.
- + Essential skills and attributes for student development.
- + Leveraging staff expertise from industry.
- + Expanding placement opportunities.
- + Integration of curricular and extracurricular activities.
- + Resource allocation and management

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Bridging the gap between academic learning and career development: A pilot study on Embedding Employability

Laura Walshe and Siobhán Mockler, National College of Ireland, Dublin

Background and Context

The National College of Ireland's (NCI) Master of Science programme in Artificial Intelligence (AI) has a strong focus on developing technical proficiency in Machine Learning, Data Analytics, Programming and Process Automation. Since participating in this collaborative project with Advance HE, we have identified that our Master programme in AI (see Figure 1) oversees the integration of specific soft skills; decision making, presentation and teamwork, into the curriculum. These soft skills are highly sought after by employers, particularly the skill of teamwork, which employers refer to during the interview process by calling on students to give examples of their previous group experience. Reflecting on our new learning and insight, the aim of the project is to develop specific interventions to address the deficit skills through different career development workshops and employer engagement events alongside technical education.

Research shows that employability skills have been identified as being crucial for graduate success in the job market. Many Higher Education Institutions (HEI) adopt diverse approaches to enhancing graduate employability, with many integrating employability skills as a mandatory part of the curriculum (Foskett & Johnston, 2006; Stanbury, 2005; Knight & Yorke, 2004). This strategy aims for a broader and more consistent impact on student employability compared to models that depend on students proactively engaging with a central careers service. In contrast, NCI's current approach relies on offering career support through supplementary services, delivered as optional workshops outside of the standard timetabled curriculum.

The employability programme at the National College of Ireland, includes CV clinics, LinkedIn reviews, career planning, interview preparation, job application support. While these services are beneficial, Tinto's Student Integration Model (1997) and Kahu's Student Engagement Framework (2013) further highlight that students are more likely to engage with initiatives that are seamlessly integrated into their academic journey rather than those positioned as additional and optional classes.

NCI also faces additional challenges that highlight the need for a more integrated approach. As a Higher Education Institution (HEI) with charitable status, only 30% of our funding comes from governmental sources. This is in comparison to other Irish HEI's who receive 100% of government funding, as they are recognised as a public body. Consequentially, we are restricted in the number of full-time undergraduate students that we can recruit per academic year, which affects our capacity as an institution to grow our undergraduate population. It is worth noting that the Higher Education sector in Ireland is under financial

pressure, with Higher Education Institutes receiving 52 % less funding for undergraduate students in 2023 compared to 2008 (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2024). The consequence of the financial pressures facing the sector and the funding model we use means that we rely heavily on international students to generate revenue.

Bourdieu's Theory of Social and Cultural Capital (1986) helps frame our understanding of international student employability. Many international students may lack access to the professional networks and industry connections that domestic students benefit from, making structured employer engagement events and career development interventions even more critical for their success.

To address the challenges, the career services developed the Career Launch programme. This aligns with the institutional goal of maintaining its attractiveness to international students by helping to improve the graduate outcomes and helping graduates achieve a faster transition from college into working life.

The Global Citizens 2030 International Talent and Innovation Strategy (Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, 2024) found that 92% of international students cited employability skills as being very important.

While the employment rate for graduates has risen by 7% six months post-graduation, these gains are likely the result of several factors, including the AI programme being more established, the development of stronger industry connections, and improvements to optional career development offerings, such as employer-student engagement events held each semester.

Employer feedback reinforces the importance of soft skills, including teamwork, communication, and problem-solving, which are crucial complements to technical expertise in behavioural interviews. The typical interview process for AI graduates involves both a technical component and behavioral competency questions. Many previous graduates performed well at the technical interview but experienced challenges with the competency interview, particularly in giving appropriate examples to demonstrate their soft skills. This feedback aligns with the Employability Framework (Knight & Yorke, 2004), which advocates for the need to develop not only academic knowledge but also broader graduate attributes, including soft skills such as teamwork, communication, and problem-solving. Tomlinson (2012) also references that HEI's prioritise academic knowledge over the development of soft skills, widening the employability gap.

Sector trends, including the Higher Education Authority's Employability Strategy, highlight the need for an integrated approach, where employability skills are embedded across all modules rather than being offered as optional extracurricular activities. This is particularly relevant given the challenges we face in engaging students with non-mandatory career development workshops. The biggest challenge we experience as a Careers Service, is trying to get buy in from both academics and students to value our career development programme. The standalone career development programme, timetabled outside scheduled

lectures can minimise the importance and value to students. Furthermore, financial pressures, high rents, visa restrictions and stress due to the volatile labour market conditions further compound the challenges faced by international students, particularly when competing in a “crowded graduate labour market” (Tomlinson, 2012:2) and without an established network.

As we continue to develop our employability strategy, these theoretical frameworks and employer insights will inform our approach to embedding soft skills into the MSc in AI curriculum. Colleagues in the School of Computing provided figure 1 below which maps programme modules to key skills i.e. Research, Analysis, Problem Solving, Teamwork, Presentation, Communication, and Decision-Making. Gray cells indicate which skills are developed in each module. It highlights how different modules contribute to building specific competencies. With this information, we were able to identify gaps in competencies which we aimed to address through careers support and specifically the Career Launch programme.

Figure 1: Soft Skills Integration in Course Modules

Modules/ Skills	Research	Analysis	Problem Solving	Team Work	Presentat ion	Communi cation	Decision- Making
FAI							
DG&E							
PAI							
DAAI							
EEAIS							
IAPA							
AIDDM							
ML							
EAITS							

Our Approach

The primary intervention involved the implementation of the "Career Launch" programme for international master's students at the National College of Ireland. This non-credit bearing career module was designed to bridge the gap left by the absence of an embedded Career Management Skills module in master's programmes. The programme, delivered by NCI Career Advisors, is aimed at enhancing students' employability by focusing on practical skills such as CV writing, job search strategies, developing LinkedIn profiles, and interview techniques to compete in the labour market.

The project was structured as a short-term, intensive, and practical intervention to prepare international students for the Irish labour market. The "Career Launch" programme was selected based on its ability to address immediate employability challenges and align with the labour market needs of highly skilled graduates in fields such as cybersecurity, data analytics, and cloud computing (Gordon, 2023). The four-week format was chosen to provide concentrated support during the critical first semester, ensuring students had the skills to begin their job search early in their studies.

The Career Launch programme was designed as a proactive response to these challenges, equipping students with the skills and confidence needed to navigate a competitive and uncertain job market. Additionally, the programme aligns with the Careers Service's commitment to promoting inclusivity and diversity, fostering a more equitable labour market (Offer, 2001) of declining employment rates among graduates in the technology sector, as highlighted in NCI's Graduate Outcomes Survey for 2022.

The intervention involved NCI Career Advisors, who were responsible for the design and delivery of the Career Launch programme. Their role included conducting workshops, providing guidance, and tailoring the curriculum to address the specific needs of international students. The students engaged in interactive sessions, developed personalised career plans, and received practical training to enhance their employability skills. Additionally, institutional leadership played a role by supporting the initiative, aligning it with NCI's broader growth and employability strategies.

The intervention was implemented during the first semester of the master's programme, spanning a total of four weeks. This time frame was chosen to ensure timely delivery of employability skills at the start of the academic journey, allowing students to apply their learning throughout the course and in subsequent job searches.

Other initiatives include actively engaging with industry to ensure our curriculum remains aligned with employer expectations. This includes:

- + **Employer Feedback & Course Reviews** – We gather insights from industry partners, including employers involved in the Cinnte (Institutional Quality Review) Panel, to refine our programme and ensure it meets labor market demands. Additionally, we survey work placement host organisations to evaluate students' skills and performance.

- + Direct Employer Engagement – When we receive job roles, we reach out to employers via email/ Teams to clarify the specific soft skills they value in candidates.
- + Industry Events & Festivals – We use sector events and employability festivals to engage with employers, gathering insights on evolving skill requirements and industry trends.
- + Workshops & Employer-Led Sessions – We have expanded our employer engagement initiatives by organizing industry-led skills sessions, helping students better understand workplace expectations.

Outcomes

The Career Launch programme is an important step in bridging the gap on the employability challenges facing the international students in the MSc in AI programme. As a pilot project, the programme delivered valuable outcomes and insights while highlighting further development.

- + Student engagement: The first semester saw significant engagement with 50% of the students completing all four sessions successfully. Students also completed a CV and LinkedIn profile which was manually approved by a Careers Advisor to ensure quality and alignment with labour market expectations. This marked an improvement from the initial programme launch.
- + Networking: Structured employer engagement sessions provided students with real-world insights into the expectations of recruiters and helped build professional networks, addressing a common barrier for international students.
- + Employers feedback in terms of the festivals etc, employers said they liked the round table networking event because they got to understand the technical experience of students and it allowed them to bounce ideas off them in terms of what the future for data and ai might hold, as they will be the next generation.
- + Employer feedback also reinforced the value of integrating employability skills within technical programmes like the MSc in AI.

In order to reach the maximum number of students at an institutional level, we have come up with a number of strategies.

- + Adopting an integrated model (Bridgstock and Hearn, 2012), embedding employability and career development learning across all years of undergraduate degrees and master programs, as a mandatory career management skills module.
- + Developing a comprehensive career development learning framework that integrates employability skills; communication, teamwork, leadership, emotional intelligence, self-awareness; into all academic modules (Bennett et al., 2017).

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- + Using course reaccreditation periods with industry panels to modify existing curricula, making programmes more industry specific.
- + Interdepartmental collaboration between academia and careers staff needs to be improved, with formal collaborations to be established and maintained (Jackson and Wilton, 2016). This will ensure that career development learning is aligned with module descriptors and learning outcomes.

We are aware that our proposals pose a number of constraints which we have identified below:

- + Pressure on Career Advisors in terms of time and workload in delivering a career development module to every undergraduate and master level programme within the institution.
- + Seeking academic recognition for a careers module to incentivise participation and ensure alignment with institutional priorities.
- + Institutional buy-in and commitment to re-evaluate the Careers Advisor role, to include lecturing and assessment responsibilities.

Key message

Tomlinson (2012) posits that universities have failed to prepare graduates for the labour market due to the focus on academic education and not enough on practical learning and skills development. This non mandatory curriculum can make it challenging to encourage student engagement and widen student participation (Tinto, 1997; Kahu 2013).

This project has enabled us to reflect on the future direction of the career services on our MSc programmes. Firstly, the service should ideally be delivered as an integral part of the curriculum in order to ensure 'buy in' and engagement from students. Secondly, although the accredited module will have several benefits, many challenges and constraints will have to be addressed.

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