



## Embedding employability in the Social Sciences curriculum: Reflections from an applied university

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### ABSTRACT

This paper reports on a collaborative reflection undertaken by the authors in their capacity as academic staff delivering employability-focused modules to undergraduate criminology students in a post-92 higher education institution (HEI) in the United Kingdom (UK). First, the broad context of higher education (HE) policy and the criminal justice sector (CJS) is explored. The setting of the reflection is outlined, including the format of the modules which form the basis of the reflection and the underpinning methodological approach taken by the authors. The modules include employer-led projects, placements, and simulation. The authors' reflection followed Schon's three stages of reflection, namely in action, on action and for action, and was thematically analysed. Three key thematic areas emerged from the reflexive process: external engagement and relationship development, student readiness, and the role of academic staff. Each theme will be analysed in the context of extant literature. Finally, the authors make recommendations for stakeholders. These include resource requirements, reciprocity, articulation of parameters, and support for students. A model for embedding employability activity will be provided, aimed at an interdisciplinary audience, which considers student readiness alongside external capacity.

**Keywords:** employability; reflection; practitioner engagement; simulation; placements

### Introduction and context

Criminology remains a popular choice for undergraduate students. According to The Complete University Guide (2023), 125 out of 164 Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in the UK offer criminology undergraduate courses and research among British Society of Criminology members identified a mean of 101 full-time equivalent students recruited each year per course (Harris, Jones, & Squires, 2019). At our institution, typically around 300 undergraduate students are recruited each year across three courses: BA Criminology, BA Criminology & Sociology, and BSc Criminology & Psychology. This is significant in the context of reduced university budgets as, due to depleting Government funds and increased reliance on tuition fees (Committee of Public Accounts, 2022), popular courses may experience increased pressure to recruit more students to bridge the funding gap.

Student fees rose from £3,225 in 2009/10 to £9,250 per annum in England from 2010/11. This has led to persistent calls for HEIs to ensure their courses offer students 'value for money.' Recent political statements have enhanced the rhetoric of so-called 'low quality' courses, which is inexorably linked to earnings potential (Adams, 2022). The regulator for higher education in England, the Office for Students, uses the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) to grade HEI success. One of the key metrics employed for this purpose is graduate outcomes (Office for Students, 2022), leading to HEIs placing an increased importance on employability for students. At the authors' HEI, the emphasis is on 'knowledge applied' which aims to help students to 'engage with the world, collaborate with others and think in new ways' (Sheffield Hallam

University, 2023). Although the definition of employability is contested, most HEIs in the UK have a strategic focus on employability as a possession, something students can develop (skills) and obtain (employment) (Clarke, 2018). Notwithstanding the critiques of this narrow focus, which are beyond the scope of this paper, and considering the purpose of this contribution is to explore existing provision, the authors' reflections will align with this strategic viewpoint.

Delivering meaningful employability experiences to large numbers of students remains challenging for several reasons including employer access, course capacity, and student readiness. As a result, academics in our HEI have developed embedded options for engaging undergraduate students with employability-focussed learning. These include opportunities to develop entrepreneurial skills, semester-long placement opportunities, simulation modules, and collaborative project work. Additionally, students have access to institutional resources, including expert advice and guidance. This paper is based on faculty experiences of developing and delivering placements, simulation, and collaborative project work as the basis for the shared reflection. In the changing context outlined above, we note that Schon (1991) advocates for professional adaptability to meet the challenges of practice. Therefore, the goal of this paper is to make sense of our experiences for the overall benefit of professional development in HE employability.

### **The Criminal Justice Sector**

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External engagement is an important part of the work of developing options for student employability. This typically involves working with the statutory criminal justice sector (CJS) and associated organisations, to support students to understand how crime and victimisation is managed within society, develop career-specific skills, and build their professional networks. Over half a million people work in the statutory CJS in the UK (e.g., police, prison, probation) (Skills for Justice, 2017). However, the so-called 'rendezvous' nature of criminal justice includes over 1,700 diverse penal voluntary and community organisations (VCS) working within and alongside statutory services to deliver services including, rehabilitation, resettlement, family ties, finances, and support for victims (Clinks, April 2022). Although this makes a demarcated CJS difficult to define, external engagement should provide students with an insight into the diversity of the CJS.

Tomczak (2017, p8) notes the penal voluntary sector to be a heterogenous group, where "[...] they do different work, have different funding sources, operate at various scales, have different and are not uniformly affected by policy changes and market reforms." One area of commonality within the penal voluntary sector is the negative impact of austerity measures. There has been a shift from grant funding towards commissioning and contracting due to a neo-liberal political climate (Corcoran et al., 2018), including increased marketisation. This has meant that localised, grassroots organisations have struggled for resources to continue to deliver services alongside larger organisations, who are diversifying from their traditional service delivery into new geographical areas.

Additionally, VCS organisations have been accused of 'penal drift' in terms of adopting language, practices, and culture of statutory organisations, in order to compete in this marketised environment, moving away from their 'value-driven' origins (Maguire, Williams, & Corcoran, 2019, p445). Although Maguire et al.'s research outlined that VCS organisations had largely resisted such a movement, they also cautioned that this came at a cost in terms of time and resources for those organisations, which may be more difficult to sustain going forward. This potentially creates tension in terms of helping students to understand the value base of such organisations, and the theory-practice nexus relating to models of criminal justice. For example, the purported aims of rehabilitation in some organisations versus the realities being more focused

on risk management. Additionally, VCS capacity to demonstrate evidence-based practice to secure funding and to improve the quality of services can be constrained by organisational resources (Brough, 2015).

CJS organisations are supporting increasing numbers of people, with more complex and urgent needs, meaning larger caseloads alongside reduced resources (Clinks, 2019). Organisations have also been impacted by Covid-19, whereby 80% of VCS respondents to a survey stated that the complexity and urgency of need had increased. Furthermore, 70% had to apply for emergency funding, with almost half seeing a reduction in the use of volunteers (Clinks, 2022). Consequently, organisations with the least capacity are the ones which may most benefit from additional workforce support from students.

In our teaching, we acknowledge the range of agencies involved with the CJS, which provide a plethora of services to people either at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice or youth justice system, or those who are survivors of criminal acts. Some also support people with broader vulnerabilities, which may increase their risk of contact with the CJS (both as perpetrators and/or victims). For example, people who are homeless or who have issues relating to substance misuse, poverty or who have been excluded from society in other ways, such as refugees and asylum seekers. This approach mirrors the theoretical scope of the discipline which explores the myriad of ways individuals may be impacted by crime and criminalisation. Students are therefore able to explore how theoretical concepts manifest in practice through external engagement.

#### External engagement in criminology

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Although Criminology is not considered one of the traditional disciplines which rely on external engagement such as, for example, allied health, and business courses, there are calls for social science disciplines to increase public engagement for the benefit of society (Murji, 2010). There is reticence within criminology towards external engagement due to the risks of voyeurism towards vulnerable populations and the ethical dilemmas of the carceral tour, which may be seen to dehumanise prisoners (see, for example, Arford, 2017). There are also concerns due to the unequal application of justice and reports of inappropriate or harmful practice (Minogue, 2009). Consequently, when considering how external engagement may manifest, criminology students and academics are urged to employ critical discourse about the direction of the CJS, rather than legitimising existing ways of working (Stout, Williams and Yates, 2008). Therefore, meaningful and effective external engagement for criminology students should involve interrogating current practice, as well as observing and participating.

Despite these contextual challenges, just over a quarter of British Society of Criminology members identified that placement activities were available for all criminology students, and over half (56%) provided placements to those who wished to undertake them (Harris et al., 2019). This survey also identified that such opportunities were often open to selection processes, which is the same in our institution. This includes formal recruitment processes, such as application forms, interviews, and, crucially within a sector that works with people with a range of vulnerabilities, disclosure and barring service (DBS) checks and organisational vetting. These processes can create barriers to participation for students for a range of reasons, necessitating alternative forms of engagement alongside placement opportunities.

### Embedding employability in our modules

This paper focuses on the experiences of the authors as module leaders responsible for three types of modules: a project module, a placement module, and a simulation module (see table 1). These modules have been selected because of the range of employability activities, the assessment strategies, the varied involvement of external agencies, and the requirement for students to engage in a reflexive learning process (Dacre-Pool & Sewell, 2007).

**Table 1 A summary of employability modules, the level of study, and assessment strategies**

Module title	Undergraduate Level/Typical cohort size and credit	Assessment	Description
Real World Project Management (project-based)	Level 5 (Year 2): approx. 150-180 students 20 credits	Group presentation and reflective account	Students work in small teams to respond to a project brief provided by an external organisation. Work is undertaken on-campus with defined engagement from external contacts.
Real World Professional Practice (placement)	Level 5 (Year 2): approx. 30 students 60 credits	Blog, poster, and portfolio	Students work four days a week for ten weeks within a host organisation following a recruitment process. Placements can be in-person, remote or blended. They attend university one day a week for academic study and peer engagement.
Criminal Justice Realities (simulation)	Level 6 (Year 3): approx. 90-120 students 20 credits	Report and portfolio	Students are taught by practitioners in the criminal justice system following a fictional case study from crime scene to sentence.

### Methodology

Each module described in this paper requires students to reflect on their learning as part of their assessment. Thus, as reflective practitioners, whose values are grounded in modelling required behaviours, (Lawrence-Wilkes & Ashmore, 2014) we have constantly reviewed our practice over the five years that these modules have been delivered. This includes reviewing student attainment, module evaluation questionnaire feedback and student consultative committees, and our own individual reflections on practice, adopting Schon's (1991) reflection in action, on action and for action processes. The findings below outline the results of the authors' reflections, with an aim to support others to consider what they may need to develop 'for action' when developing applied learning pedagogies. Ethical approval was

granted by Sheffield Hallam University Social Science and Arts College Ethics Committee in September 2021, number ER36156981.

The authors wrote individual reflections of our experiences, which were then shared and thematically analysed (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This involved reading each other's reflective accounts and identifying commonalities of experience. The practice of developing applied learning opportunities is designed to "appreciate and understand an innovation from the inside, and to convey this understanding to others" (McKernan, 2013, p80). The aim of this paper is thus to provide a description of our approach in an exploratory manner, adding depth, not breadth. Our findings are developed from a constructivist account of relating to our lived experience as academics from practice backgrounds, delivering applied modules in a large post-1992 UK university. We ascribe to Lawrence-Wilkes and Ashmore's (2014, p35) approach to applied learning, which "takes into account the moral, social, political and cultural context to enable more balanced critical reasoning and reflection for learning."

Given the multi-disciplinary nature of criminology, we also are clear that "education is not only about issues of work and economics, but also about questions of justice, social freedom, and the capacity for democratic agency, action, and change as well as the related issues of power, exclusion, and citizenship" (Giroux, 2020, p141). Thus, we have responsibilities to support students to enhance their reflective practice, adopting the principles of the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA, 2022, p8) criminology benchmark statement:

Students should be supported to express their ideas and beliefs across a range of sensitive and controversial subject areas within the discipline, in a collaborative, safe and collegiate environment, as well as being supported to reflect on how their own experiences may be shaping their views.

From the thematic analysis, three themes were identified: external engagement and relationship development, student readiness, and the role of academic staff. Each of these themes will be discussed in turn in the next section.

## Findings

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### External engagement and relationship development

Employment opportunities for graduates in the CJS have been negatively impacted by budget cuts, re-structures and, in the case of the probation service, reunification over the last decade. There are signs of this being addressed, for example, increasing recruitment opportunities for policing, with pledges to recruit twenty thousand more police officers (National Audit Office, 2022) and 2500 probation officers (Home Office, 2021). Both careers are graduate level, with many students aspiring to join either service following graduation. Regardless of whether organisations are public or voluntary sector, most are time poor with limited staffing resources. Staff members have minimal capacity and the precarity of revenue contributes to high staff turnover. Thus, it is difficult for academic staff to sustain professional working relationships. This has implications for ensuring academic rigour and relevance for the module learning outcomes and assessment practices. For placement activity, several 'mergers and acquisitions' (Corcoran et al., 2018, p192) have also taken place in recent years, which also affects capacity in that a single organisation may only take one student placement, whereas the multiple organisations which preceded it may have supported several students.

Reciprocity is important for organisations engaging with universities. For example, supporting students on placement also enhances the skills of those supervising the students in the work setting (Bramford & Eason,

2020). Following a recruitment process, students are allocated to organisations based on our knowledge of the organisation, the nature of the work being undertaken, the expectations and competences of staff supervising the students, and pragmatic factors, such as location. Reciprocal benefits include reducing recruitment pressures on the host organisation, addressing student learning needs, and reducing the potential for a negative experience, which could have reputational impact for both university and placement organisation. However, this does mean that the responsibility is with academic staff to ensure that they have knowledge of the host organisation, student competence and confidence, and sufficient time and resources to complete the recruitment process. There are also tensions in terms of the role of student placements, their interface with volunteering roles within organisations, and that of paid staff. However, Berbegal-Mirabent et al. (2020), acknowledge that utilising the labour of students to develop projects benefits organisations with limited resources. Bramford and Eason (2020, p318) also recognised the 'fresh thinking' and dynamism students offered to an organisation. Additional benefits include the development of recruitment pipelines of individuals with relevant sector experience (Pycroft & Gough, 2019).

Sourcing placements for large numbers of students requires constant engagement and relationship development within the sector. There are also organisational factors to consider in terms of the relationships that different departments within the university may have with local employers. For example, social work and psychology students are often seeking placements with similar client groups, whereas students from management courses may be seeking placements in the same organisation, but in different functions/departments e.g., HR, IT, finance, and marketing. Covid-19 has exacerbated these issues, with some organisations quickly adapting to remote models of service delivery, but others more vulnerable to funding pressures and lack of access to clients. For placement students this meant that some placements either could not go ahead or were delivered remotely. While remote working is likely to remain a feature of the post-pandemic workplace, arguably, one of the purposes of a placement is exposure to a professional working environment alongside opportunities to see how organisational culture shapes service delivery, and to be able to critique criminological theory versus practice (Bramford & Eason, 2020).

The size and the diversity of the penal voluntary sector can be difficult for students to navigate, particularly in terms of future career planning. Additionally, there are potential barriers and challenges for students to access statutory organisations, such as vetting, risk assessment processes and security concerns. Thus, by providing opportunities for students to learn more about organisations across the sector, students may consider their own values, and how that will manifest in a future career.

#### Student readiness

Clarke's (2018) work outlines how institutional definitions of employability focus on skill acquisition and frequently obscure the impact of individual attributes, behaviours, and social capital on career development. This section considers the impact of individual preparedness for engaging with employability activities at university, what we have termed 'student readiness'. The size of our cohort, whereby there are over 300 students per undergraduate year, means that, despite their synonymy with student employability, placements for all is a challenging prospect. A large cohort of undergraduate students means greater diversity within the student body, with caring responsibilities, paid work commitments, and in some cases, a criminal record being a barrier to placement and work in specific sectors. The course team recognised a potential lack of capacity for external organisations to host placements for such large and diverse cohorts, which led to the development of on-campus simulation and applied project modules within the programme.

The simulation module is a final-year undergraduate module primarily taught by practitioners in the CJS. Students are taken week-by-week through a realistic simulation of two criminal incidents and are taught how the practitioners would progress the case using policy, legislation, and theory. Students are expected to adopt a reflective approach throughout, culminating in a reflective portfolio. According to Usherwood (2015, p4), simulations are "a recreation of a real-world situation, designed to explore key elements of that situation". Offering simulations can recreate important themes within different contexts, such as policing, courts, and probation, thus enabling students to consider real-life scenarios and issues within a certain subject (Hagan, 1997). Theoretically, providing a simulation as a low-risk, on-campus activity enables content to be accessed by a significant number of students. Realistically, the module size is constrained by practitioner capacity and the maximum number of students taking the module each year is 120, less than half of the cohort.

To address these capacity issues, project-based modules provide a way for external organisations to engage with students at defined points. One example explored in this paper is a second-year undergraduate module, offered as an option to students who do not or cannot undertake placement. Students are provided with a project brief from an external organisation which they must explore within a small team of their peers. Students create a poster outlining their response to the project brief incorporating policy, legislation, and theory. For this module, it is not unusual to have a cohort of between 150-180 students, and up to 60 students assigned to each organisation. Therefore, group work is an essential component of delivery for operational reasons (Mutch, 1998).

Group work has experienced what Hall and Buzwell (2013) refer to as an "increase in popularity" in higher education. This might be attributed to the corresponding increase in focus on employability and graduate outcomes (Dickinson, Griffiths, & Bredice, 2021) with group working widely considered to be a key employability skill (Elmassah, Bacheer, & James, 2020). However, Mutch (1998) urges caution in assuming that group work provides such straightforward outcomes. They advocate for clear messages to students about the purpose of any group working activity. The project-based module includes activities which highlight the benefits of group working for the purposes of providing additional perspectives and achieving creative solutions, as well as promoting the importance of teamwork as a graduate skill. However, given that students can struggle to make connections between different activities, an explicit articulation of these benefits is paramount for students.

Student objections to group work typically centre around the issue of "social loafers", so-called due to their reluctance to share the workload equally and negative approaches towards working with others (Myers, 2012). Elmassah et al. (2020) highlight how previous research has focussed on student experiences of group work to be centred on personality traits, and students' previous experiences of group working, while their study found that the latter was the most influential for respondents' perceptions of group work.

The second-year project-based module cohort have experienced at least one other group work assignment, in their first year. Thus, their perceptions of the task may be impacted by this experience, particularly as that assignment also involves working with an external partner. The project module typically assigns students to teams rather than permitting self-selection. However, Myers (2012) found that groups which were self-selected reported higher levels of positive group working attributes, such as organisation and trust, than those who were assigned to a group. This is another example of where best practice may be inhibited by necessity, as timetable configuration for such a large cohort means that students are not guaranteed to be assigned to a class where they have existing relationships with peers. Taken together, we

can posit that, where possible, self-selection may increase the likelihood of positive group working experiences, which can subsequently influence perceptions of future group work tasks.

The module encourages a specific approach to group work by providing students with tools and techniques to model compassionate group working concepts (Gilbert, 2016). There is a regular occurrence of avoidance behaviours within each cohort, including failure to communicate with group members and address group conflict, and non-attendance to timetabled classes. Upon reflection, we had assumed that this was due to the high number of students, with the inevitability of a percentage of non-engaged learners. However, Russell and Topham (2012) identified that there may be other factors not previously considered, including the prevalence of social anxiety within the population. They found that students who reported social anxiety cited presentations as the learning activity which had the most significant impact on their symptoms. Group work was also cited as a factor which spiked social anxiety. As the module includes both activities, more proactive support could be considered necessary. This includes addressing potential triggers for anxiety at appropriate points in the module and signposting to student support resources.

Compassionate approaches in pedagogy often run counter to the culture of higher education, which is focussed on individualism and outcomes. Musselin (2018) argues that competition, rather than marketisation, has shaped the culture of contemporary higher education. Universities compete to secure research funding, recruit students, and to demonstrate the quality of their provision for reputational benefit (Musselin, 2018). This cultural shift is not only felt at the institutional level, but also by the individuals within it. In the drive to attract students, UK HEIs may refer to the results of the Graduate Outcomes survey as one of the key measures of the quality of their provision. Graduates are advised to complete the survey to “help your university or college to evaluate and promote their offerings” (HESA, n.d.). With this focus on outcomes, it is not erroneous to assume that the teaching environment might be shaped by a competitive mindset between students as a result. The assessment for the applied projects module is a presentation based on work produced within a team. Due to institutional regulations, students are individually graded, despite the activity involving a group work project. This may compound the issue of grade competition. Tomlinson (2018) demonstrated that students place great importance on their degree classification as an indicator of their job market prospects. Furthermore, it is their attainment when compared with their peers which high performing students may view as offering a “positional advantage” in the labour market (Tomlinson, 2018 p56.). This can make meaningful team working a challenge, as students are reluctant to share their ideas and generally prefer to work individually. In this competitive and outcome-focussed mindset, the role of academic staff is vital in supporting both students and external partners to engage with a meaningful experience.

#### The role of academic staff

This next section considers the role of the educator in employability modules. However, this needs to be placed within the context of resourcing constraints and work-planning methods which do not necessarily account for the significant additional work undertaken by academics to fully develop authentic employability modules (Bates, 2011). Despite institutional rhetoric around graduate outcomes and applied learning, work-planning tools are based on traditional lecture/seminar didactic delivery. However, interactive workshops based on experiential learning are more appropriate pedagogical tools to enable students to make meaningful connections between their academic knowledge, policy and practice, and their personal values, which will shape their futures.

Concerns are not limited to practicalities. A fundamental question educators must consider is the extent they wish teaching to focus on industry needs. Given that aligning the curriculum with industry



requirements is one of the purported benefits of this kind of collaboration (Berbegal-Mirabent et al., 2020), a critical consideration of the function and scope of university education is necessary, and this may be simultaneously influenced by a combination of individual, professional, and discipline-specific values. The authors' institution is focussed on an applied curriculum and subsequently employs many lecturers (including the authors) who previously worked, or still work, in industry; so-called 'pracademics' (Posner, 2009). Previous research highlights how this distinct group of lecturers are motivated by their strongly held values and opportunities to nurture innovation in future professionals (Dickinson, Fowler & Griffiths, 2022). Similarly, as mentioned above, the discipline of Criminology cultivates a critical analysis of criminal justice institutions and notions of unequal access to justice in contemporary society. This can present tensions between the external organisation's concerns and students' conceptual understanding of the function of the criminal justice sector. These tensions must be pragmatically balanced, alongside management of students' potential for deference when engaging with external partners to ensure a culture of change can be developed. Berbegal-Mirabent et al., (2020) posit that one of the benefits of industry engagement with teaching is the development of new ideas for organisations, and students must feel confident in their abilities to put forward such ideas. In the applied project, students are encouraged to discuss their organisation critically in the relative 'safe space' of their seminar group. Reflecting on approaches to communicating critique in a productive way is emphasised as a crucial part of the learning experience of the module, to enable the organisations to benefit from student ideas.

For the simulation and applied project modules, perhaps due to their delivery remaining on-campus, a proportion of students have expectations that the content will be delivered in a traditional university lecture-seminar format. The impetus for both modules is for students to apply their learning to the context of the workplace and to focus on problem-solving approaches, which has been found to enhance in-classroom practical learning experiences (Martin et al., 2008). Additionally, in the project-based modules, students can struggle to see the relevance to their wider employability when they are working on-campus, detached from the daily experience of their project workplace. Therefore, client visits and communication are important to enable students to develop a link with their project organisation.

Student readiness to engage with practitioners can be challenging. Encouraging a professional approach within an on-campus learning space where students may feel more congruent with their student identity can impact classroom management. Students undertaking a placement receive induction activities relating to professional practice before they begin working within their organisation; and they also participate in a mid-placement review, with their placement supervisor and university tutor, designed to replicate workplace appraisal processes. Additionally, for students taking the simulation module, external professionals will vary in their experience as educators and their styles of delivery. As an example, some sessions are inevitably highly interactive (e.g., taking fingerprints) whereas other sessions involve close reading of sentencing guidelines, requiring close attention to detail and engagement with complex legal language. Thus, the role of the lecturer in these situations is to set clear expectations at the start of the module, model professional behaviour, and encourage independence and the problem-solving approaches which would be required in the workplace.

Reflection is a vital component of teaching within all the modules outlined in this paper, both as an output of the learning experience and in terms of the reflexivity required in the careers students tend to progress into when working with individuals e.g., policing, probation, prisons, drug and alcohol services, and working with young people (Moon, 2004). Practitioners teaching on the modules are also encouraged to consider the 'anecdotal' role of reflection, often akin to 'reflection in action' (Schon, 1991) which supports students

to make links between theory and practice. However, supporting students to identify their learning and skill development in the modules proves to be an ongoing challenge, where an environment of consumerism and student 'enjoyment' vs learning, negative impressions about the value of reflection can pervade these activities (Musselin, 2018). In the context of delivering effective employability experiences, the ability of students to articulate skill acquisition is fundamental to employability (Rust & Froud, 2016; Dacre-Pool & Sewell, 2007). Thus, the role of the lecturer is to support students to understand and apply models of reflection. Reflections also form part of the assessment strategy for the modules, which means that students also have an instrumental interest in developing these skills, even if at that point, they do not fully appreciate the merits of the task.

Student readiness influences the approaches of the academics teaching the applied project module. In previous years, some students have not made an active choice to take part. The alternative elective modules available in the same semester are both capped. This inevitably means that the module is some students' second, even third, choice. Additionally, some students may have either been rejected or been rejected by the placement application process and may have lost confidence following being precluded from those opportunities. This is one of the key drivers for including compassionate working approaches, which may help to challenge some of the competitive and status-seeking behaviours of the neoliberal society (Rashedi et al., 2015).

### Conclusions and Recommendations

We have demonstrated the multiple complexities inherent with educators engaging with external organisations, not least where the space within which the interaction takes place may differ e.g., engagement in a classroom environment or a workplace setting. University-industry (U-I) collaborations are established approaches for educators across a range of disciplines who wish to support their students with skill development (Aizpun et al., 2015). Scholarship on U-I collaboration has historically focussed on research activity. However, we support calls for expansion to include "any kind of formal or informal cooperative interaction between universities and businesses for mutual benefit" (Berbegal-Mirabent et al., 2020 p264), due to the central role of employability within university delivery. This includes reviewing resource requirements, reciprocity, articulation of parameters and support for students.

Institutions should explicitly acknowledge the additional resources required to deliver meaningful employability experiences. We have outlined some of the associated risks for not doing so, in terms of student readiness and external engagement. Additionally, although our courses provide myriad opportunities for students to engage with employability, we adopt a modular approach rather than full course integration. This means that there can be a tendency for module leaders to work in isolation. Thus, specific 'employability' modules emerge, rather than all modules considering their role within the employability strategy. Educators must therefore be flexible, and fully articulate the parameters of what is achievable within tight timescales to stakeholders.

Active consideration of reciprocity requires careful consideration as to what institutions can offer organisations. We have facilitated access to job recruitment platforms, promoted volunteering opportunities, ran networking events between organisations and academic staff to support research projects and find additional methods of creating partnerships. This means that engagement with employers moves beyond the traditional notions of placement, a high stakes activity, to provide a broader range of opportunities for employers, students and staff.

For academics grappling with how to maximise their precious resources, the model below outlines the trade-off between student readiness and external organisational capacity. The model shown in Figure 1 is based on our experiences of working with students and stakeholders, and maps student readiness and external organisational capacity along a continuum according to the degree of difficulty for each stakeholder group. The model maps onto the Advance HE framework for embedding employability (Tibby & Norton, 2020) by auditing and mapping capacity alongside prioritising actions, which require pragmatic decision making based on capacity. For example, the ‘guest lecture’ requires a low level of student readiness (due to familiarity with the lecture format) and a low level of external organisational capacity (one member of staff preparing for and attending a one-off event). We have also highlighted three activities in red, which did not form part of this paper but do form an important part of our course offer. In this model below, academics need to consider their own capacity and resourcing, which will differ depending on the competences of the student cohort, their existing external networks, and the resourcing provided by their institution. The examples which require high student readiness and high organisational capacity also tend to map onto ‘high-impact’ practices, which are activities/experiences where learning often takes place outside formal classroom settings and encourage collaboration between students and stakeholders. Research has shown that such experiences support students to transfer learning to real-world settings, and support increased metacognition of values and beliefs (Goulette & Denney, 2018; Johnson & Snyder, 2020). Notwithstanding the success of high impact practices, they also require greater internal staffing resources.



**Figure 1** Organisational capacity and student readiness

Finally, the process of completing this reflection, and writing this article has re-orientated us to the importance of reflective practice in academia (Lawrence-Wilkes & Ashmore, 2014). Practising what we preach should not be viewed as naval-gazing privilege, but an inherent part of the role of the educator, and in maximising learning for ourselves, our students, external organisations, and for other individuals striving to strike a balance between the false dichotomy of teaching vs scholarship. Teaching is scholarship, a perspective which should be actively encouraged in every department in every university.

## Biographies

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