Factors which impede or facilitate widening participation students' engagement with employability services

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Abstract

Young adults enter higher education in the hope of improving their future job prospects. Therefore, there exists a prevailing belief that maximizing the employability of students is an ethical objective for providers of Higher Education (Kofler, 2021). Furthermore, the incorporation of graduate outcomes into external league tables has positioned employability as a key indicator of teaching quality. As a result, universities have introduced various initiatives aimed at enhancing students' employability. However, it has been noted that students demonstrate reluctance in engaging with the employability support services offered by their institutions (Bradley et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2024). To investigate this issue, we explore student engagement with employability support in a widening participation context. Data for the project were collected via an online survey of second-year students within the School of Accounting, Finance, and Economics at a modern UK university with a focus on widening participation. In addition, student focus groups were conducted to gain deeper insights. To illuminate our findings, we draw on Simon's (1964) theory of bounded rationality, together with concepts of habitus and behavioural economics. This enables a

theoretical contribution by connecting individual cognitive heuristics with the structural constraints which can affect widening participation learners.

Keywords:

bounded rationality, employability, placement, rational choice, widening participation

Introduction

The subject of employability outcomes for graduates from institutions of higher education (HE) has become an important matter for the sector (Cheng et al., 2022). One reason for this is that employability is increasingly seen as a measure of a university's teaching quality and therefore graduate outcomes are included in external league tables. For example, in the United Kingdom (UK), employment outcomes for graduates are used in the assessment of a university's teaching provision in the Teaching Excellence Framework (Office for Students, 2022a). Further, in England, the Office for Students (2022b, 107) requires that a provider *"must deliver positive outcomes for students on its higher education courses"*. These positive outcomes include graduates moving into management or professional roles. There is also the view that maximising the employability of our students is the morally right thing to do (Kofler, 2021).

Therefore, for various reasons, universities provide a range of employability support for students. This includes reviewing the content of individual degree programmes to ensure they include the technical skills necessary to enter and succeed in a student's chosen field as well as developing the transferable skills desired by employers. However, Hooley et al. (2023) identify academic staff's historical resistance to the employability discourse in universities.

and now professional services have expanded into this space with a university's career service providing specialist extra-curricular employability support to students. In an analysis of employability activities in UK HE, Rees (2021) identified employability workshops, employer mentoring schemes and providing opportunities to take up internships and placements as examples of best practice in employability support. This type of support is usually offered through an institution's central employability service.

The aim of this project is to investigate the factors which can impede or facilitate students' engagement with employability support in the context of a modern UK university with a history of supporting widening participation (WP). WP is an important issue for global universities (Negrea and Gartland, 2025). Based on the results of household surveys from 64 countries, Salmi and D'Addio (2020) provide evidence to suggest reduced participation rates in HE for the poorest income quartiles compared to the richest. They also use surveys from 36 countries to argue that ethnic minorities globally are less likely to attend university. Whilst there may be regional differences in the ways in which WP is defined, how the target student groups are identified and the local solutions proposed, what underpins the global WP agenda is a desire and commitment to address social inequalities through making access to, and success in, HE more inclusive.

Consistent with this global perspective, at the heart of the WP agenda in the UK is the mission to provide equality of opportunity, including progression from university into graduate jobs for groups of students who were previously underrepresented in HE, including those from low socio-economic backgrounds (Office for Students, 2023). It is in this context that the study contributes to the literature through identifying where students get employability support from. Rational choice theory, specifically Simon's (1964) theory of bounded rationality, provides the theoretical framework for the study, supplemented by additional insights from Bourdieu's concept of habitus. The project has the potential to

inform the implementation of mechanisms to enhance the effectiveness of our employability provision for students and thereby support a strategy of enhancing student success and achieving more equitable employment outcomes for graduates.

The next section contains the literature review which considers student employability through the lens of rational choice theory and habitus, and develops the research questions for the project. This is followed by the context and method for the investigation which includes data collection through an online survey and focus groups. The results of the survey and focus groups are then presented and discussed. The final section concludes on the investigation, offering recommendations for practice and suggestions for future research.

Literature review

Understanding variations in student engagement with employability opportunities can be framed through rational choice theory which views individuals as rational actors who will perform an analysis of the costs and benefits of a particular action to decide if they want to proceed. Therefore, when deciding whether to engage with employability services or extra-curricular events, through the lens of rational choice theory, students would be driven by self-interest to make choices which are rational for them. As universities do not charge for the employability support, it is reasonable to assume that the main 'cost' considered by students is that of their own time spent. Jackson and Dean (2023) suggest that time is a particularly scarce resource for less privileged students who may need to use their 'spare' time to do paid work alongside their studies rather than engage in extra-curricular activities.

However, Simon (1964) suggests that students' choices are not completely rational (that is, they are not based only on an objective cost-benefit analysis) because students operate within a domain of bounded rationality This leads to sub-optimal choices because of

factors including incomplete information, a limited time in which to make decisions, emotional factors, and cognitive limitations and biases. Bounded rationality provides a useful theoretical lens for this project although it raises the question of what is considered as rational behaviour and how the standard models against which decisions are judged are identified (Grüne-Yanoff, 2007). In the setting for this project, there is the assumption that engaging with the employability service to support long term career aspirations is the rational thing for a student to do but perhaps this can be questioned in an individual student's context.

Rather than finding out as much as possible about the challenges ahead and support available, bounded rationality suggests that a student will perform limited research. It also suggests that a student may consider the minimum number of options that are necessary so will perhaps identify one source of support (for example, advice from their family) rather than consider other options (including their university's careers service). This resonates with Kahneman (2003) who discusses the role of bounded rationality in behavioural economics. He argues that heuristics, such as a student's belief that the only careers advice needed is from family and friends, can lead to irrational economic decisions. Kahneman also notes how framing something positively or negatively affects decision-making. Therefore, if students are to engage with employability services, the benefits of that support should be emphasized through positive framing to students. Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) suggest that universities ensure students understand the relevance of specific extra-curricular activities to encourage engagement. However, a problem can arise where a university careers service is delivered by a central team as students may not know about the various types of support provided despite efforts to publicize those (Bradley et al., 2021).

Whilst bounded rationality focuses on cognitive processes, social context can influence decision making. Therefore, Bourdieu's (1985) concept of habitus facilitates insight into the engagement of WP students with employability services. Bourdieu posits that

individuals are constrained by the societal structures they have encountered, that is the historical ways of doing things and thinking about themselves that they have experienced through societal structures such as those surrounding class. Therefore, habitus limits the range of possibilities perceived by an individual as being open to them, restricting action and the range of choices considered. A student who is the first in their family to enter HE, may have limited career aspirations and self-belief thereby influencing an attitude of non-engagement with some types of employability support. They may lack the cultural capital needed to know and conform to the norms of a particular profession, as well as the social networks and connections which may be needed to access and pursue a particular career path. However, Reay (2004) recognises that there is room for individual agency in Bourdieu's work and suggests that habitus can be viewed as a continuum moving from constraint to transformation through social trajectory. Therefore, as universities prepare students for the labour market, they need to support students to exercise their power as agents who are not constrained by habitus. This is particularly important in a WP context to remove the structural inequalities which can arise through a lack of cultural or social capital and thereby adversely affect employability.

Despite its importance, Cheng et al. (2022) note that there is no single definition of employability. They identify three possible strands to which a definition of employability may belong. The first strand suggests that employability has absolute dimensions meaning that it describes whether an individual student has the skills needed by employers. This includes technical, subject-based skills as well as the 'transferable' or 'soft' skills, personal attributes and attitudes which are desired by employers. Succi and Canovi's (2020) survey of employers and business school students revealed an increased emphasis on soft skills over recent years with communication skills, teamwork and commitment to work being ranked as the most important. Perez-Encinas and Berbegal-Mirabent (2023) found that interpersonal

skills were more important than cognitive skills in improving student employment, employment being measured as the time taken for graduates from masters programmes in Spanish universities to find a job. Looking at employability as an absolute concept in this way leads to the view that students' employability improves as their technical and, increasingly, transferable skills grow. The acquisition of technical skills can be built into the curriculum as can some of the necessary soft skills. However, soft skills can also be acquired through a university's extra-curricular provision provided by a central employability service.

A second strand of the definition considers that employability is a relative concept. Here it is recognized that factors affecting students' employability, such as the state of the economy, are outside of a university's control. For example, Petruzziello et al. (2023) note the impact of the COVID pandemic on the labour market. This perspective also recognizes that a student's ethnicity, gender or social class can affect their employability (McGinn and Oh, 2017). For example, Jones et al. (2017) note that students from a low socio-economic background may be the first in their family to go to university or not have a parent in a higher managerial or professional occupation. In this situation, habitus can limit students' perceptions of the options available to them regarding their careers. This can also reduce a student's social capital of professional and inter-personal networks which could be leveraged to increase their chances of securing a graduate job and progressing in their career (Römgens et al., 2020).

In a study of two UK universities, Abrahams (2017) found that middle-class students tended to have a better understanding that a degree was not necessarily enough to secure their desired job outcome. Therefore, they were more willing than their working-class peers to use their social networks to advance their employability. Similarly, in a study of two Chinese universities, Liu (2021) found that middle-class students were more aware of employment market forces and used their cultural and social capital to improve their employability

whereas underprivileged students tended to feel inferior and were often focussed on financial challenges rather than their future employability.

Jackson and Dean (2023) argue that students with lower cultural capital (defined as including an individual's language and behaviour) can find it more difficult to engage confidently with perspective employers. This view resonates with Bonnard (2020) who argues that employment outcomes are a social construct because competencies alone cannot explain the differences in employment outcomes for students from different classes, of different genders, and of different ethnicities. In an Australian context, Pham et al (2024) highlight the crucial importance of cultural and social capitals in supporting the employability of graduates. Parutis and Howson (2020) argue that universities need to help students from lower socio-economic groups to increase their cultural and social capitals, and to support students to apply these capitals to achieve improved employability outcomes to aid social mobility and reduce societal inequalities.

A third strand of the definition brings strands one and two together by recognizing that employability has both absolute and relative components. This reflects Suleman's (2021) argument that an individual's employability is contingent on their social background and labour market conditions, as well as the acquisition of the technical skills which employers require. Hence, Petruzziello et al. (2023) emphasize that it is important for universities to understand the wider context as well as the context of their students when teaching employability-related skills and helping students to build their confidence. A university's careers service is well positioned to understand the context for its students and, for example, can provide workshops and other activities to give students opportunities to develop self-awareness, confidence and soft skills. This is an important source of support because Gault et al. (2010) find that students who participate in employability programmes have a higher likelihood of securing employment after graduation.

However, some students are reluctant or unable to engage with this support and other types of extra-curricular activities that would increase their confidence and enhance their curricula vitae (CVs) (Bradley et al., 2021; Jackson et al., 2024). This is consistent with the findings of Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) in their study of Australian and UK students' engagement with extra-curricular activities. Jackson and Tomlinson (2022) further note that there is evidence that engagement with extra-curricular activities varies with student characteristics. They found that engagement is lower for students with low socio-economic backgrounds, older students, and female students because the latter group are more likely to have carer responsibilities.

Cheng et al. (2022) argue that students' understanding of employability, and their engagement with the employability and career support provided by a university, can vary with year of study. For example, in their study of psychology students at 116 UK universities, Bradley et al. (2021) found low but increasing engagement through years one to three consistently across diverse types of employability event including careers fairs, CV and application support, and practice psychometric tests. Similarly, Greenbank (2014) found low engagement with the university employability service by students, many of whom did not think about their employability until their final year. He also observed an intuitive approach to decision-making around employability which suffers from a lack of information and predisposition toward certain biases. Greenbank concludes that universities should support students in developing a more rational approach to decision-making.

Most of the employer respondents to a survey used by Bradley et al. (2021) considered that students were not well prepared for the world of work. This resonates with Andrews and Higson (2008) who recommend that universities use more work-based learning in their programmes to provide prior work experience. Relevant work experience is important for students who are looking to increase their employability (Bradley et al., 2021; Tymon,

2013). For example, Baert et al. (2021) found that students with internship experience, including voluntary, unpaid internships, were more likely to be invited to interview than students without. However, an important type of work experience is an industrial placement which is typically a year spent working in industry between the second and final years of an undergraduate programme.

The placement year can be of huge benefit to students as, inter alia, it provides the opportunity for students to develop the transferable skills that employers are looking for and can build students' confidence. Smith and Smith (2024) conclude that students can acquire cultural and social capital by going on placement as students learn the terminology used and ways of doing things in a particular sector, and they expand the network of professionals they can potentially draw on for advice and support in the future. Further, Rate My Placement (nd) report that in the UK, the best student employers offered 46% of their graduate roles to placement students and students who had completed shorter internships. However, Bonnard (2020) notes that under-privileged students are less likely to engage in a work placement. In looking at situations which may give a student a pre-disposition toward going on placement, alongside variables relating to past academic performance gender, age and secondary education, Jones et al. (2017) include a variable to denote 'class'. This is identified as having a parent in a higher managerial or professional occupation because students who are not in that position are viewed as less likely to go on placement despite the potential advantages to them of doing so. Therefore, we need to support these students through our institutions' central employability services to ensure they can access the same opportunities as their peers.

The aim of this project is to investigate students' engagement with employability support. The research questions used to meet this aim are:

RQ1: What are the influences that either impede or facilitate students' engagement with employability services?

RQ2: Among the various employability support options and other extra-curricular activities on offer, which ones are more attractive to students due to their perceived greater benefits and/or lower costs?

RQ3: What practical steps can universities implement to promote inclusivity through enhanced student engagement in employability services, ensuring that all students have equitable access?

Context and method

The context for the study is a modern UK university which has a history of widening participation (WP). To support its students, the university has a centralized employability service that provides students across all faculties with advice on placements and graduate jobs. Inter alia, the employability service facilitates employer engagement which creates opportunities for more effective use of schemes such as a career mentoring scheme, aiming to enable employers to interact with programmes of study and students more easily. The service also provides a range of workshops to build students' confidence and develop skills in areas such as CV-writing and interview technique, as well as offering one-to-one appointments with advisors.

A potential limitation of the study is that it is based within a single institution. However, the percentages of the University's students who identify as black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) (51%) or mature (36%) are higher than the sector averages (University of Greenwich, nd). This provides a suitable context in which to explore the issues which affect engagement with employability support by arguably those students who most need it. These are the students who lack their own cultural and social capital to support their desired career journey such as those from a WP background. Therefore, the project has the potential to contribute to important policy and practice debates around how universities

support the economic and social mobility of their students although other universities may recruit a lower proportion of students from working-class backgrounds.

The investigation considers student engagement with a particular employability service. However, it is acknowledged that other universities may deliver their employability support in different ways, Nevertheless, findings from this study have the potential to be applied in other contexts, and further research into the factors which impede or facilitate engagement with employability support in different contexts may generate additional understanding of wider issues.The study adopts a mixed methods design, using surveys to generate initial insights into the views of as many students as possible and focus groups to provide an in-depth exploration of the factors which impede or facilitate student engagement with employability services. Institutional ethics approval was received from the University Research Ethics Committee for the University of Greenwich (reference UREC 22.1.7.2) before the project commenced.

Data collection and analysis

Online survey. The study uses an online survey with a mix of closed and open questions to gather data from second year students on undergraduate accounting- and finance-related programmes in the School of Accounting, Finance and Economics (the School) which is part of the Faculty of Business. The investigation focuses on the views and experience of second year students because of the importance of going on a placement year in enhancing a student's CV. It is in year two that placement applications are submitted and therefore this is a time when the university's careers service promotes its services strongly to students. The online survey was designed by the project team based on their experience of students' engagement with employability support. The team included two employability specialists, a deputy head of school with recent experience of programme leadership, and an associate head

of school for student success. All team members were personal tutors with a responsibility for advising students and signposting relevant university services, including employability support. Therefore, the project team had a background knowledge of engagement with employability support based on previous conversations with students.

It is possible that any survey of closed questions can fail to capture relevant information and therefore the final questions in the survey were open. Prior to the main survey being launched, a pilot survey was undertaken where the proposed survey questions were tested by four students who provided feedback on the survey to the project team. As a result of this feedback, minor changes were made to two questions in the survey to clarify their meanings. Because of their previous experience and existing perspectives in the area of employability support for students, the project team were mindful of the risk of researcher bias in the collection and interpretation of data. Steps taken to reduce this risk included the use of open questions in the survey, making the survey anonymous, and increasing the reliability of data analysis through the use of NVivo to facilitate coding and the coding being reviewed by multiple team members.

Students were sent an email invitation to complete an online survey in the third week of Term 2. This date was chosen to give students the opportunity to engage with employability support in Term 1 of their second year before completing the survey. The survey then remained open for three weeks to allow time to run a focus group after the survey before the end of term. The email invitation to participate in the survey was followed by reminders in face-to-face lectures from each programme in the School, plus a second email. Participant information and a consent form was included at the start of the survey. In total, 76 second year undergraduate students completed the survey: 53.9% of respondents were female and 46.1% were male; 25.0% were mature students (defined as being aged 22 or over on the

1 September before the start of the second year of a student's programme); and of the 37 students who indicated their ethnicity, 75.7% identified as BAME and 24.3% as white.

Focus groups. In addition to the online survey, the study also uses student focus groups to explore the issues surrounding engagement with employability support, document students' current experience and consider suggestions for the future. The online survey asked students to state if they would be happy to participate in a focus group. In the survey responses, seventeen students indicated willingness to participate in a focus group. To maximize participation and inclusion, both online and face-to-face focus groups were used. To learn from their experiences, we also invited 'third year' students who were coming to the end of their placement year, before progressing to their fourth (final) year, to join their own focus groups. Quotes from placement returners are identified by the abbreviation PR in the Findings sub-section below. Therefore, all students included were approaching the end of the penultimate year on their programme and heading toward their final year when engaging with the employability service would be particularly beneficial to support their applications for graduate jobs. Each focus group lasted for one hour and was facilitated by a member of the project team. The focus group discussions were recorded and then transcribed. Focus group participants were provided additional participant information and a consent form specifically relating to the focus group.

The data analysis began with a thorough reading of the focus group transcripts to achieve familiarization. Data were then grouped into themes that illustrated the factors which impede or facilitate engagement. NVivo software was used to aid the data organization and coding process. The classifications for the analysis were initially Impeding factors and Facilitating factors, reflecting the overall aim of the project. These overarching classifications were then divided into subcategories based on a thorough reading and re-reading of the

interview transcripts to identify and explore the themes which emerged from the data. Throughout the analysis, constant comparisons were made, contrasting data within and across themes to ensure comprehensive and consistent interpretation.

Findings

In this section a thematic analysis of the results from the online survey and focus groups is presented. In the online survey, students were asked to comment on how frequently they turn to various sources of employability support. The results are displayed in Table 1 and show that students are more likely to talk to their family and friends about their career plans rather than the University's employability experts who are there to ensure that all students have access to high quality employability support. Further, of the 76 students who completed the survey, 42.1% responded that they never ask the University's employability team for advice. Therefore, it is important that we understand the reasons for students' reluctance or willingness to engage with the services provided.

Table 1. *Responses to survey questions*

Please indicate how often you do the following:

Question	**Mean***	**Standard deviation**	**n N=76**
I discuss my future career plans with my family	3.48	1.08	76
I discuss my future career plans with my friends outside the university	3.29	1.09	75
I research possible placement opportunities (for example, by looking on the internet)	3.23	1.38	75
I research possible job opportunities for after graduation (for example, by looking on the internet)	3.16	1.33	75
I discuss my future career plans with other students	2.63	1.16	75
I discuss my future career plans with my personal tutor	2.09	1.25	75
I discuss my future career plans with a career mentor	2.05	1.23	75
I ask the University's Employability team for advice	2.04	1.14	76
I discuss my future career plans with the University's Employability team	1.79	1.02	75

* 1 Never; 2 Rarely; 3 Sometimes; 4 Fairly often; 5 Often

Factors identified as impeding engagement

Both the survey responses and focus groups shed light on factors that impede engagement with the University's employability service. The results from the survey indicate that students do not view this service as the go-to for career advice, preferring, in order of priority: family, friends, peers, personal tutors, career mentors, and, lastly, the University's employability service. To explore the reasons for this, the survey included the open question, "*What are the challenges that make it difficult for you to engage with employability support?*". 29 students answered this question, and their responses are summarized in Table 2. The themes identified in Table 2 are then integrated with the analysis of focus group data which follows.

Table 2. ***Online survey results:*** *Challenges that make it difficult for students to engage with employability support*

Theme	**Theme description**	**n N=76**
A	Students are unsure of the process for booking an appointment with the employability team, including who to contact and how to reach them	8
B	Time constraints caused by a student's workload	6
C	The availability of appointments with the employability team at optimal times for students	5
D	Issues related to anxiety and wellbeing	4
E	The appointments with the employability team do not cover the required content/appointments are too short	2
F	Student choice not to engage	2
G	Student missed opportunities to engage	1
H	Student is not sure	1
		29

Insufficient communication - not knowing who to contact (Table 2: Theme A). In the survey, the most frequent reason students gave for not engaging with the University's

employability team was that students did not know the process to book an appointment. A related challenge arose from dealing with a large employability team because students do not know who to contact and sometimes tend to prefer to contact a named individual directly rather than use a centralized booking system which is viewed as less flexible when a student wants an appointment quickly. Also, if a student feels anxious about seeking help, that anxiety may be heightened if they do not know who the appointment will be with when contacting a central team rather than an individual.

If we are to encourage students to use our employability support services, it is important that we communicate the benefits to them, and that the systems and information on how to access support are clearly explained. We may think that we have adequately communicated to students. However, this view is not necessarily shared by students as illustrated by the following focus group quote:

> *I found in my first and second year, it wasn't really communicated to me, the employability office. … I don't think it was explained in the fullest of what it really offers. They said they can help with the CV and personal statement, but I had all that covered so I didn't really see a use for it. And then I was just speaking to my lecturer one time saying I'm applying for internships, and that there was a specific company I wanted to go work for. And then he said the employability office would be able to help me make a connection with that company. I didn't know that and if I knew that sooner, it would have saved me a lot of time. So, I think if they could kind of explain how they help us get our foot in the door of internships that would save a lot of students a lot of time.* [Student 1, PR]

Time constraints (Table 2: Themes B and E). Time constraints can also stop students from engaging with employability support. All students need to spend adequate time studying and the necessary time commitment is perceived by students as increasing as they move between the stages of their programme. Further, if a student has a part-time job, this also demands their time. For students from a low socio-economic background who are more likely to need to work during their degree programme, or to work longer hours than some of the other students, this time commitment can be considerable.

> *I think in year one, I still got to a lot of help, meetings and that was like all my days off. But I in my year two actually have a part time job now. So I've been caught up with that and then just more busy because the workload from year one to year two has increased.* [Student 2]

Therefore, when a student is deciding whether to engage with a particular form of employability support the potential benefit (that is, the relevance to an individual student in their context) must be clear in order to incentivise students.

Inconvenient appointment times (Table 2: Theme C). In addition, the scheduling of support should be as flexible as possible to meet student needs, particularly in a WP context where students may have significant commitments outside their programme which mean they might not always be free to access the support they would benefit from.

> *I think ... it will probably be more of the scheduling that would hinder me. So if some of them would probably fall where maybe I'm at school but I'm doing part time work so it's just probably that personal conflict in schedule. But if I usually make time to do these employability [events] like career workshops because I know that at the end of it, I would be benefiting from it.* [Student 3]

Wellbeing: resilience and confidence. The students who participated in the study had not yet started applying for graduate roles, but some had applied for placement opportunities. This has given them experience of the competitive recruitment environment and, for some, experience of unsuccessful applications. This situation can knock students' confidence but they need to be resilient enough to keep applying which some students manage to do on their own.

> *I had loads of rejections. I did so many interviews. ... So I had to kind of adapt my mindset and think that I've got myself in this, now I can get myself out of it. I don't need to rely on someone else. And in the end, I managed to make something happen.* [Student 4, PR]

However, other students need support to build their confidence. In a WP context where students can lack the social capital required to find that support among their friends or family, the employability service has an important part to play in building a student's confidence in their employability journey.

> *When I first searched for the placement, my confidence was very low. That was when the employability advisors motivated me. I thought that I don't have the right skills or my skills are not compared to other applicants are not like so attractive. But the advisors told me that no, you have the right qualities... So, yeah, I received lots of motivation from them. And day by day, my confidence went higher.* [Student 5]

None of the participants in the focus groups said that anxiety had stopped them engaging with the employability service. Perhaps it is not surprising that students chose not to discuss this type of sensitive issue in a group setting. However, in the integration of results

from the survey and focus groups, Theme D has been retained in Table 2 as an identified sub-theme to reflect the voice of the survey participants. It was acknowledged in the focus groups that some students just do not engage and the reason for that may not be clear. It is possible that the reasons behind Themes F to H overlap with the issues already discussed in this section.

Factors identified as facilitating engagement

The focus groups also identified factors that facilitate engagement with the employability service.

CV writing and interview preparation. Students who consider themselves to be time-poor, including where that is by reason of part-time work, caring responsibilities or other family commitments, will engage with the employability service if there is a particular source of support that they want to benefit from. At the institution that provides the context for this study, the employability service offers students assistance with CV and cover letter writing, and interview preparation. This service was cited as the primary service used by students.

> *I received huge support from the [employability service] last year where they were helping me with my CV and my cover letters.* [Student 6]

> *I wasn't really sure about like the sort of examples that I could use for competency based questions for interviews ... so it was really good to be able to just sit down and talk to someone for a little bit about the examples that I had ... and how to gear my answers more towards what like a either a sifter or an interviewer would be looking for.* [Student 7, PR]

Desire to gain access to a mentor. Networking is increasingly deemed to be an essential part of the job search process (Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021). Therefore, by attending career fairs, employer events, and other networking events organized by the careers service, students increase their chances of finding employment after graduation, Participants in the focus group recognized the importance of networking opportunities, citing it as a reason to engage with employability service. Specifically, the employability service runs a mentoring scheme where students can be paired with mentors from the world of practice, including alumni. Students find this type of mentoring relationship extremely beneficial, especially in a WP context where students lack their own networks with the professionals who have the careers they aspire to pursue after graduation.

> *My mentor helped to build confidence... I told him I've been declined. I was in contact with him a lot and he said to keep going, keep pushing, keep applying. Eventually, you'll get something.* [Student 8, PR]

> *I think the career mentorship programme helped me with my confidence quite a bit because we did practice interviews and all that sort of stuff. And my mentor was from X, and at the end of the programme they asked me to do a speech for them, and I did. And at the start of the programme again they asked me to go to the office and do it for them. I was nervous but I said yes for the experience. There were probably about 50 people there.* [Student 9, PR]

Desire to gain work experience. Students recognized that the job market is competitive and that they need to stand out from other candidates. They believed relevant

work experience to be a key factor that employers consider when hiring graduates. As such, advice from the employability service to gain work experience through internships, work placements, and volunteering is very helpful.

> *I remember her taking a look at my CV and cover letter, which was really useful. She told me what to include like some volunteering is usually really good because in my CV, I didn't include that at all. And I actually did some volunteering and then she said to include it.* [Student 10]

Desire to enhance employability skills. A reason cited by students who engage with employability services is to improve their employability skills. They recognized that employability skills like communication, teamwork, problem-solving, time management, and leadership are crucial to securing employment.

> *In terms of applying for placements, definitely it was more on how to make yourself more competitive in terms of having the appropriate skill set. I know that the employability office has been emphasizing commercial awareness and I do believe that students sometimes overlook it.* [Student 3]

Intra-curricular employability support. The students' programme includes two core modules that focus purely on employability. In year one, students study a '*Personal and Professional Development*' (PPD) module which starts to build students' employability skills alongside their academic skills. In year two, students study a short '*Future Paths'* module with a focus on developing employability skills further and career planning. *Future Paths* also includes content on entrepreneurship and postgraduate study, recognising that not all students want to take up a graduate position with an employer when they graduate. The

benefit of this type of intra-curricular module is that it involves all students and therefore reflects an inclusive approach to providing employability support.

> *I didn't originally want to do a placement so I was on a three year course. And then I ended up switching once I got the placement. Honestly, ... the Future Paths module, that made me consider a placement because they spoke about our future and then I attended some workshops that would explain the benefits of a placement.* [Student 11, PR]

Suggestions from students

The survey included the open question, "What could we do differently to make it easier for you to access employability support?". 26 students answered this question and their responses are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. *Online survey results: What we can do differently to make it easier for students to access employability support*

Theme	**n N=76**
Additional information on the type of support available and how to access it/ How-to-access support guide/ More announcements (for example in lectures)/ More awareness of employability sessions	7
Nothing, everything is fine/ Students need to focus on employability as support is easy to access	6
Provide additional online workshops	5
Identify someone as the face of the employability service so students know who to contact	3
More information on placements/ Additional support for placement applications	3
Don't know	2
Make employability sessions compulsory	1
	26

Table 3 shows that the most common answer to this question was a request for more information on the employability services which the University provides and how to access those services. Anecdotally we know that students receive a lot of emails and can struggle to find the time to read them all. In their focus groups, students suggested that a lecture announcement to flag an important email provided a helpful solution to the need for information but would take into account the challenges they faced of reading every email received to look for the relevant information. Students also suggested that providing additional online employability workshops would encourage more engagement with employability support. Three students wanted to know details for a named contact and another three students wanted more support with placement applications.

The focus of the employability support provided for students is short-term and with the aim of helping students to secure managerial or professional roles after graduation. However, one student commented that more information on medium-term career paths would be useful.

> *... if you were to start a graduate role and the employability service sets you up wonderfully to get to that graduate role... but then after that ... What happens next? Maybe part of that's down to the employer to tell you ... I know you can't tell me exactly because that is very much down to a company and company policies and where they're based and things like that. But I think it would be useful to just sort of know the ladder ... I understand it's two or three years and maybe that's why I can progress if I keep doing well at my job.* [Student 12]

Discussion

The research investigates the factors which impede or facilitate students' engagement with the employability support offered by a university employability service. Thematic findings have been presented in the previous section, and the theoretical and practical implications of these findings will now be discussed. The project adopts a theoretical framework rooted in rational choice, which views students as rational actors driven by self-interest when making decisions regarding their engagement with specific forms of employability support. Our analysis takes into consideration the constraints and decision-making processes highlighted by Simon (1964) in his theory of bounded rationality. This is because students are sometimes making this type of choice with limited information about the time or other commitment that a particular activity would involve, and its benefits. Recognising that students can be influenced by social ties and their own cognitive limitations, this theoretical perspective is enhanced through the integration of habitus and behavioural economics to enhance understanding.

The plethora of academic, personal and extra-curricular activities which our students must deal with can be overwhelming for them, leaving little cognitive capacity for students to consider how and when they will use a university's employability services. According to Simon, limited cognitive resources mean that students might prioritize immediate or more familiar tasks over exploring new services. He posits that individuals make decisions based on the information available to them and a lack of comprehensive information can lead to sub-optimal decisions. Viewed through a lens of Bourdieu's (1985) habitus, these issues can affect working-class students more than their middle-class peers because disparities in social and cultural capital, thereby perpetuating the class structures that exist in society and denying WP students the support they need to exercise their individual agency.

It was found that rather than consulting the employability service, students are more often influenced by family members, friends, and their peers who also may not value or

engage with employability services. Reliance on this type of support reinforces habitus. Bounded rationality acknowledges the role of this type of external influence, including societal norms and peer opinions, in decision-making. However, it is of concern if this means some of our students miss out on valuable support and guidance from employability experts.

Behavioural economics can be used to explain a barrier such as the view that there is no incentive to engage with the employability service as students can put a greater importance on immediate needs such as working in a part-time job or completing university assessments rather than investing in their long-term employability. Further, the view that it is not worth engaging with the employability service because of a lack of personalization may be explained as a framing effect. Drawing on Kahneman (2003), positive framing of the benefits to students of engaging with employability support can encourage them to make the choice to engage.

A student's choice whether to engage with employability support is not just constrained through a lack of information but also through embedded cognitive and social structures which serve to perpetuate inequalities. Therefore, institutional and policy implications follow from our analysis and discussion. To ensure equitable access to employability support, its inclusion should be required within curricula. Extra-curricular employability support should be personalized and framed more positively to students in our communications to emphasise its benefits. Employability services should review how they deliver their services and how to make that as convenient as possible for WP students, including through using technology for remote access both synchronously and asynchronously. In addition, financial incentives could be provided by government to employers who provide placement and internship opportunities to WP students to encourage an equitable distribution of these opportunities and move toward a more level playing field.

Conclusion

This study identifies the influential factors that either impede or facilitate students' engagement with employability services. Among the various employability support options and other extra-curricular activities on offer, students tend to prefer those that are clearly tailored to their immediate needs and will benefit them in the short term. The provision of an employability service should facilitate an inclusive approach to supporting the employability of all students consistent with the hopes and aspirations of young adults who enter higher education to improve their career prospects. Particularly in a WP context, this is important as students may lack connections to people in the sectors they want to join after graduation. In addition, they may not have friends or family with the necessary knowledge or expertise in employability matters to support them to secure their first job after graduation to achieve their career goals.

However, our findings are that students prefer to turn to family and friends for careers advice. This means that they are not always taking advantage of the professional expertise which is provided by the University including knowledge of career pathways and how to develop the soft skills needed to succeed in a challenging graduate recruitment market. Consequently, students may lack confidence that they can achieve their desired career goals and may lack the resilience to persevere in a challenging graduate recruitment market. However, this study finds that there are several factors which can impede engagement with employability services. Therefore, it is important that we identify the main impediments in our own institution to provide workable solutions to support our students.

The following recommendations include practical steps that we can implement to promote inclusivity through enhanced student engagement in employability services to ensure that all students have equitable access.

1. Personalized support can help to address the diverse needs and challenges that students face when preparing for their future careers. Universities can provide individualized career counselling, mentoring, and coaching to students to help them navigate the job market successfully.
2. University careers services should review their communications not only with students but also with staff so that everyone knows the services on offer and can signpost those to students more effectively.
3. Technology (including Artificial Intelligence) can be used to provide online resources and tools to support students in developing their employability skills. For example, universities can provide online career assessments, job search tools, and virtual career fairs to help students connect with employers. The University that provides the context for this study has recently introduced a platform to bring together employability resources, job boards, appointment bookings and online resources.
4. If HE is to be a means of social mobility, it is important that universities consider how to make their employability services as accessible as possible to all students to reduce the inequalities that exist in society. Therefore, alongside the support provided by the employability service, it is important to bring employability support into the curriculum in significant and meaningful ways so that all students can access it. This will then include students from low socio-economic backgrounds who may have significant pressures on their time coming from outside their programme of study and which impede their engagement with the extra-curricular.

A limitation of this study is that it was carried out in one university for a particular year-group. Also, the study has been set in a UK context but WP practices and policies in HE are important globally and therefore not limited to UK universities. Future research could

look at the factors that impede or facilitate engagement with career services in other institutions, including universities outside the UK, and across year stages. A longitudinal study may also yield interesting insights into students' engagement as they move through the stages of their programmes.

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