

From Consultation to Co-Creation: Partnering with Students to Enhance Engagement with Employability Enrichment Activities

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Abstract

This paper captures a 'students as partners' project, in which final-year students took on the role of pedagogic consultants to co-create an employability enhancement toolkit that could increase engagement with enrichment activities to prepare for placement and graduate job applications. The project was carried out with second-year students; it adopted a focus group approach, as a qualitative method for gaining an understanding of 1) what barriers and enablers affect engagement with employability enrichment activities and 2) how the authentic lived experiences of peers may provide additional support.

Preliminary findings highlight common barriers (such as time constraints, lack of awareness and perception of the relevance of activities) and positive enablers (such as mentorship and peer influence). Understanding and addressing the barriers while at the same time focusing on enablers and harnessing the lived experiences of peers may well help institutions significantly to increase students' participation in employability enrichment activities and, as a result, improve their educational gain, acquisition of transferable skills and readiness for employment.

Keywords: students as partners, graduate readiness, peer influence, lived experience, co-curricular participation, extra-curricular participation, barriers to engagement.

Introduction

In today's competitive job market, it is difficult for graduates to stand out, having to demonstrate skills beyond their curricular achievements. With a degree no longer a guarantee of employment, higher education (HE) institutions have had to shift policy towards employability (Chapman *et al.*, 2023), with a focus on enhancing graduates' employability opportunities and the development of evidenced skills (Beckingham, 2023). Not only do HE institutions now play a crucial role in preparing students for professional success beyond academic achievements, graduate outcomes are a key metric by which universities are evaluated (Christie, 2017). The Office for Students (OfS) 'Condition B3' requires providers to deliver positive student outcomes, measured by three main indicators: continuation, completion and progression. The OfS 'Graduate Outcomes' survey captures where students have progressed to fifteen months after graduation. Positive outcomes are defined as managerial or professional employment, further study at any level or other positive

outcomes. For students undertaking a full-time first degree the numerical threshold HE institutions need to meet is sixty per cent for progression (OfS, 2023).

Employers often claim that graduates lack career readiness, particularly in resilience, self-awareness and workplace communication (CMI, 2025; Institute of Student Employers, 2024). Attending university is not a gateway or golden ticket to employability, but a pathway that requires engagement with enrichment activities that can enhance students' employability profiles and prepare them for the process of applying for placements, work experience and graduate roles (Lock and Kelly, 2022). These include co-curricular (within the course) and extra-curricular (outside the course) activities. Having relevant work experience is a significant factor in the recruitment process according to the Employer Perspectives Survey (Department for Education, 2017). The 2025 ISE survey found that seventy seven per cent of employers agreed that graduates who completed an internship or placement had better skills and attitudes than those who hadn't had this kind of opportunity (Institute of Student Employers, 2025). Competition for graduate jobs is fierce and the latest High Fliers report shows that since 2022 graduate recruitment has declined by twenty four and half per cent (High Fliers, 2026)

Despite efforts by careers teams and academics to enhance employability, student engagement with placement preparation opportunities remains inconsistent. Students aspire to obtaining high-paying jobs when they graduate, yet too few of them take part in the activities that can help them attain such roles. Lock and Kelly (2022, p.76) sum it up thus:

"If students understand employability to be a problem to be solved at or towards the end of a degree program, then they are less than likely to take on the role of an active navigator of education employment pathways that is expected of them."

To address this issue, we looked to answer the following:

- What factors enable successful engagement with enrichment activities?
- What factors inhibit successful engagement with enrichment activities?
- To what extent can peer lived experiences support engagement with enrichment activities?

This paper is in two parts:

1. A students as partners (SaP) project with final-year students who had returned from a year-long placement in industry. To make the most of their lived experiences of preparing for and undertaking a placement, we worked with them as consultant partners (Heeley *et al.*, 2014) to glean from them what enrichment activities they most valued (and why) and to create together an 'Employability Enhancement Toolkit'.
2. A qualitative inquiry using second-year student focus groups to explore the complexities of engagement in co-curricular and extra-curricular employability activities, identifying key barriers and enablers. This was followed by an activity using our co-created toolkit, to help students confidently to develop action plans and so make them feel better prepared.

Literature review

Defining enrichment activities

Enrichment activities may be categorised as: curriculum-based activities (CBAs) – formally embedded into the degree programme and credit bearing; co-curricular activities (CCAs) – delivered by the university but not part of the degree programme; extra-curricular (ECAs) – beyond the degree programme and not delivered by the university (Green *et al.*, 2019; Jackson and Tomlinson, 2021). CCAs and ECAs serve as vital additional opportunities for acquiring the practical skills, graduate attributes and experiences (Muldoon, 2009; Jackson and Bridgstock, 2021) required by employers offering summer internships, placements and graduate roles.

We define these further:

Curriculum-based activities are those that contribute to formative and summative assessment. In relation to employability activities, these could include *curricula vitae* (CVs), creating LinkedIn or Handshake profiles, reflective logs relating to skills, employability portfolios, research projects and work-integrated learning.

Co-curricular activities are those embedded in or linked to the course or degree. CCAs include placement years, career-related seminars/webinars, industry mentoring, hackathons and course representative or research assistant roles. They can help students apply what they've learned in class to authentic, work-related situations and also develop a variety of transferable skills.

Extra-curricular activities include paid work, volunteering, society leadership, sporting activities, the arts, drama and music, faith and cultural activities and other social groups and personal projects. These experiences demonstrate a wide range of social and transferable skills, such as motivation, creativity, communication and leadership. ECAs take place outside studies and do not provide a grade or academic credit. However, some HE institutions have developed schemes to reward student reflective accounts that demonstrate the development of skills and attributes. Typically, students need to evidence and reflect on those skills they have developed by undertaking ECAs. Examples include:

- The 'Extra Edge Award' at Edge Hill University (2026), a four-level award (bronze to platinum), rewarding volunteering and part-time work;
- The 'Futures Award' at University of Derby Students' Union (n.d.) which rewards students for volunteering in student union activities;
- The 'Hallam Award' at Sheffield Hallam University (2025) has three levels (bronze, silver and gold), providing recognition for work experience, volunteering and skills development.

Benefits of enrichment activities

Student engagement with a broad range of enrichment activities may positively affect students' academic success and employability (Ribeiro *et al.*, 2023). Qualitative studies with employers confirmed that many of these professionals had, as a minimum requirement, a degree classification; they also revealed that, during the selection process, they relied on ECAs to filter applications (Stuart *et al.*, 2011).

From the student's perspective, ECAs may develop transferable employability skills, contribute to physical and psychological wellbeing and build social networks and personal confidence (Chapman *et al.*, 2023). Work-integrated learning, in which students partner with industry on authentic work-related activities, may also help students to acquire a wider range of skills (Jackson *et al.*, 2024).

Barriers that impede engagement with enrichment activities

Despite the evident benefits of participating in these activities for future career prospects, many students fail to engage. A study by Dickinson *et al.*, (2021) attributed this to, for example: not being aware of these activities; knowing of them but not seeing their relevance; being unable to afford to take part in them; not having the time to join in. Low involvement, or none at all, may cause students to miss out on essential skills, networks and the kinds of experience valued by employers.

Many students have various commitments and demands outside university – whether caring responsibilities, having to commute to and from campus, working part or even full time (a need exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis (Schofield, 2024)). The annual Student Academic Experience Survey published by AdvanceHE and HEPI reported that 68% of students now undertake paid work during term time, a twelve per cent increase from 2024 (Neves *et al.*, 2025, p.31). The negative effects of term-time employment on academic attainment have long been a concern (Hunt *et al.*, 2006; Callender, 2008), as it leaves students with little time to engage with ECAs and benefit from them.

Post COVID, many employers opted to return to in-person career fairs (High Fliers, 2023). Though these may be very beneficial, to attend such large events (and, indeed, even smaller enrichment activities) may be daunting for students; institutions must therefore put in place preparatory structured support to boost their confidence and so willingness to take part. Chapman *et al.* (2023) draw attention to the likelihood that students just arriving in HE – and focused entirely on settling in, making friends and adjusting to study at this level – are much less motivated than those nearer the end of their programmes to take up extra-curricular activities or even to see relevance in preparing for placements, let alone graduate roles. Likewise, those with caring responsibilities are less likely to bother with ECAs, whatever stage they are at (Stephenson and Clegg, 2012).

Engaging students as partners to motivate peers

Students as Partners (SaP) is defined by Cook-Sather *et al.* (2014, pp.6-7) as

“a collaborative, reciprocal process through which all participants have the opportunity to contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways, to curricular or pedagogical conceptualization, decision making, implementation, investigation, or analysis.”

Healey *et al.* (2014, 2016) present four overlapping areas of partnership activity: learning, teaching, and assessment; curriculum design and pedagogic consultancy; subject-based research and inquiry; scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL).

Involving students in a co-creating partnership (Dollinger and Lodge, 2020) provides the opportunity 1) to bring in authentic student voices, especially those from under-represented and minority groups (Cook-Sather, 2022) and 2) combine multiple perspectives with those of academics (Cook-Sather, 2014). Furthermore, students in a partnership may contribute to practical strategies to improve learning and share in decisions (Bovill, 2020), leading to better student outcomes. It is important, however, to consider power relations and to ensure that student contribution is not merely tokenism; it must be recognised and, in a context supportive of all voices, all then may freely help to “[make] *the invisible visible*” (Reddy *et al.*, 2025:38). Power and differentiation may be apparent between students in relation to language, culture, gender and work experience (Gordon and Conner, 2001) and due respect for individual experience and context (Marie, 2018), in which all “*may contribute equally, although not necessarily in the same ways*” (Cook-Sather, 2014, pp.6-7) is therefore a must. Students as partners projects must be fundamentally flexible enough to guarantee that they are inclusive and recognise diversity and equity in the contributions made (Healey, 2023; Healey 2024). Valuing the diversity and the time to build relationships should be a cultural priority (Felten and Lambert, 2020).

Research on student engagement has long shown that peer influence is a key driver of behavioural change (Bryson, 2014; Thomas and Jones, 2018), especially when peers share similar backgrounds or constraints (e.g., as commuters, carers, those in work). Thomas and Jones (2018, p.54) suggest using the ‘commuter student lens’ *with* commuter students as partners, to examine the student experience and to look for effective solutions to barriers they may commonly have faced. As many of our students commute to university, being able to talk to final-year consultants who themselves commute is likely to be constructive and supportive. Students often trust and look to their peers for validation, recommendations and support (Chilvers, 2025), so increasing involvement in academic activities, study resources and campus events. Additionally, incorporating their authentic student voice and drawing on their own lived experiences may overcome the problem of ‘speaking for others’ (Fielding, 2004). As educators, we can tell our students that enrichment activities are valuable, but, if students hear the same message from peers with personal experience of these and of *seeing* the benefits, they are likely to pay greater heed. As Cook-Sather *et al.* (2014, p.15) state:

“... students are neither disciplinary nor pedagogical experts. Rather, their experience and expertise typically is in being a student – something that many

faculty have not been for many years. They understand where they and their peers are coming from and, often, where they think they are going.”

Method

We undertook a qualitative inquiry to understand what motivated students to engage with enrichment activities and the barriers that put them off. Secondly, the research sought to establish whether sharing peer lived experiences could positively support engagement with enrichment activities.

As referred to earlier, the research consisted of two elements, which will now be discussed in turn. Part 1 gives an overview of the approach taken with our students as partners to co-create an employability enhancement toolkit, and part 2 explains how the kit was used with second-year students and what we did to gain an understanding of the barriers and enablers of engaging with employability enrichment activities. In both cases we opted for focus groups to provide 1) the students and 2) us respectively with 1) an opportunity to engage in conversation and 2) to gather from this their collective views and experiences (Morgan, 1993) and thus data on their attitudes and opinions (Cohen *et al.*, 2018). Specifically, we wanted the students to engage in what Bourne and Winstone (2021) refer to as activity-orientated focus groups: *ie.*, the students were encouraged to reflect on and share in completing the worksheets we had prepared.

The students involved in this research as consultants (final-year, post-placement) and research participants (second-year) were from a range of computing-related courses within the School of Computing and Digital Technologies at Sheffield Hallam University.

This research was conducted in adherence to the university research ethics committee where ethical approval was granted, and ethical guidelines were followed (BERA, 2024). Students were each given an information sheet outlining the ethical principles of the research, including that all data would be anonymised and stored securely and that they had the right to withdraw at any time. Each student signed a consent form prior to taking part in the research.

Part 1. Students as pedagogic consultants

We wanted to approach the research with students as partners acting as pedagogic consultants in a role "*not as objects of inquiry...but as co-inquirers*" (Hutchings *et al.*, 2011, p.79). In other words, through their concrete experience (Gibbs, 1998) and active involvement as collaborative partners, not just as a source of feedback.

To elicit their experiences, career-planning roadmaps were used to map their learning journeys. Firstly, a blank roadmap template recorded their immediate reflections and then an annotated roadmap charted their engagement with key enrichment activities. Participants could at the same time identify perceived barriers and enablers. Planned discussion allowed them to share their lived experiences and personal anecdotes about their own learning journeys and their engagement with CCAs and ECAs. We aimed to capture reflections about the range of activities that had been available to them: what they had felt about those activities at the time, about their

placement experience and about their preparation for graduate employment, and to what extent they could see the value of those activities. By these means, we were able to identify which enrichment activities they personally valued most. We asked all of them to reflect on their own top three activities and to say why these were valuable in helping them to attain their placement role. Through this stage of the activity the students helped to co-create the information for developing the set of enrichment cards used with the second-year students in part 2. The five stages of the activity-orientated focus group, which involved final-year students who had completed a placement year, are shown in figure 1.

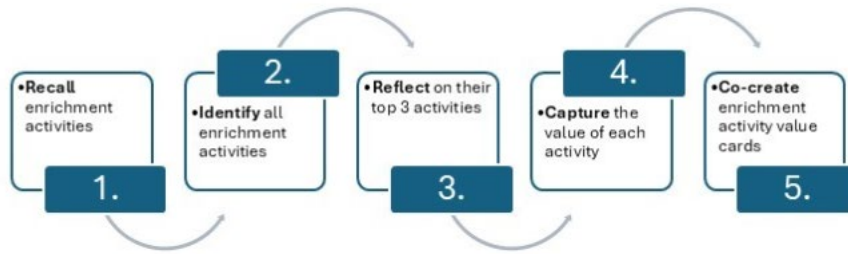


Figure 1. Final-year student consultants: Five stages of the activity-orientated focus group

Part 2. Second-year students

We held two interactive focus groups with undergraduate students in their second year at university. The first activity aimed to capture on the roadmap the enrichment activities the students had engaged in since starting university. The employability enrichment activity cards, co-created with the final-year student consultants, then served as prompts to help recall further activities. A discussion of the benefits of each activity followed. The final stage focused on reflecting on the barriers the students might have faced in relation to engaging in activities and possible solutions to these they felt might have helped. The four stages of this activity-orientated focus group, which involved second-year students, are shown in figure 2.

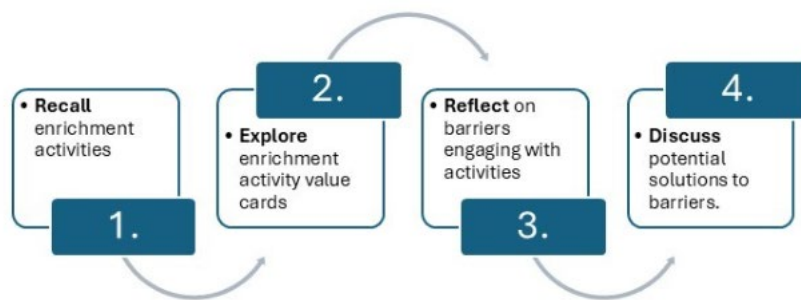


Figure 2. Second year student focus group: Four stages of the activity-orientated focus group

Results

Student consultants

The student consultants' career-planning roadmaps were rich and detailed. From this activity, we were able to see a wide variety of enrichment activities they'd collectively engaged in. As can be seen in figure 3, this was a handwritten exercise. The left-hand side of the roadmap captures the start of the student's journey at university and provides space to add personal experiences. In the example below, the student annotated all stages of the journey to capture the enrichment activities undertaken in the first and second years, during placement and then in the final year. In the first year the range of activities included placement preparation support, such as *curriculum vitae* (CV) and cover letter writing, and joining the university rugby team. In the second year, the student refers to having undertaken additional credentials (e.g., 'Azure Fundamentals', pertinent to computing-related roles), having attended careers fairs and employability workshops and having searched for a placement. This student also notes having pursued continuing professional development (CPD) activities while on placement. Then, in the final year, the student took on additional roles as a student ambassador, helped establish a new student academic society for the course and applied for the Hallam Award.

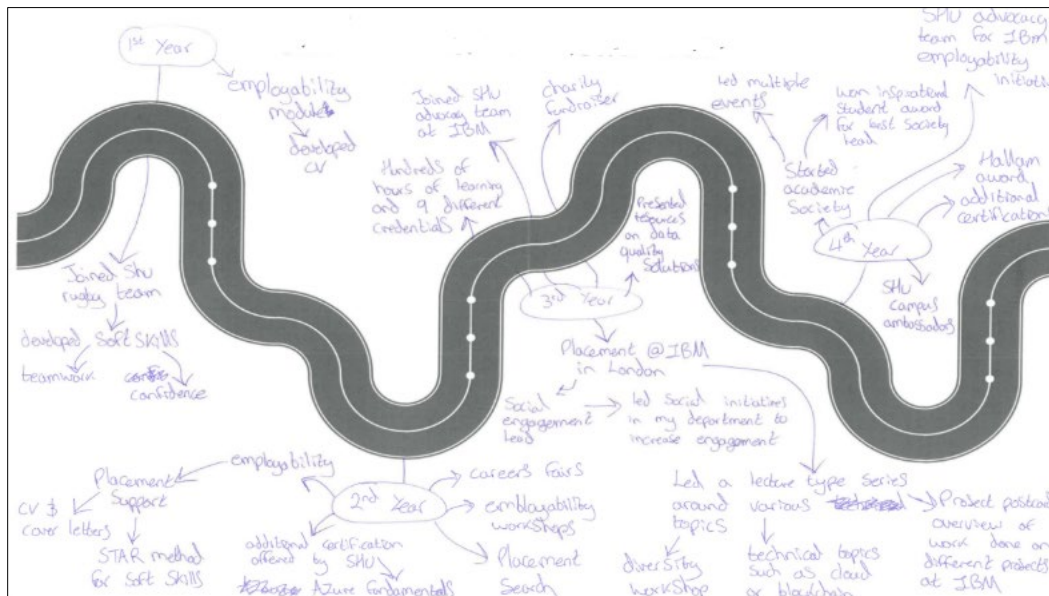


Figure 3. Student consultant career planning roadmap example

The student consultants identified thirty-six different enrichment activities they valued most, which are shown in table 1. These included attending careers fairs and course events, where visiting speakers and alumni gave talks at the university, taking part in activities led by the careers team, such as CV and cover letter writing, psychometric tests and interview practice as well as workshops on how to develop their LinkedIn and Handshake profiles.

Table 1. Enrichment activities curated by student consultants

Activities

Careers Fair/Events	Employability modules	Outside interests
Industry project	Interview Practice	Sport
Guest speakers	Academic Adviser	Mentorship programmes
Employer engagement	Peer Mentor	Read around the subject
Business research	Student mentor sessions	Study abroad programmes
CV & cover letter writing	Employability Adviser	Course Rep
LinkedIn profile	Course events	Student Ambassador
Extra certifications	Handshake	Volunteering
Psychometric tests	Part-time work	Fundraising
Extra short courses	Societies	Hallam Award
Skills assessment	Public speaking	Community Project
Attending Conferences	Technical support sessions	Learn another language

The student consultants then provided a statement for each of the activities to say why these had been useful to them when preparing for applying for a placement role. The outcome of this exercise confirmed first-hand the importance of enrichment activities. A brief description for each activity having then been captured, this information served in creation of the employment enrichment activity cards, as shown in table 2 and figure 4.

Table 2. Employment enrichment card example

Enrichment activity	Description	Benefit	Skills
Careers Fair/Events	Attending career fairs and events to explore job opportunities	“An opportunity to interact with companies and find out about the career options on offer. Expand knowledge of what jobs to apply for.”	networking, commercial awareness, communication

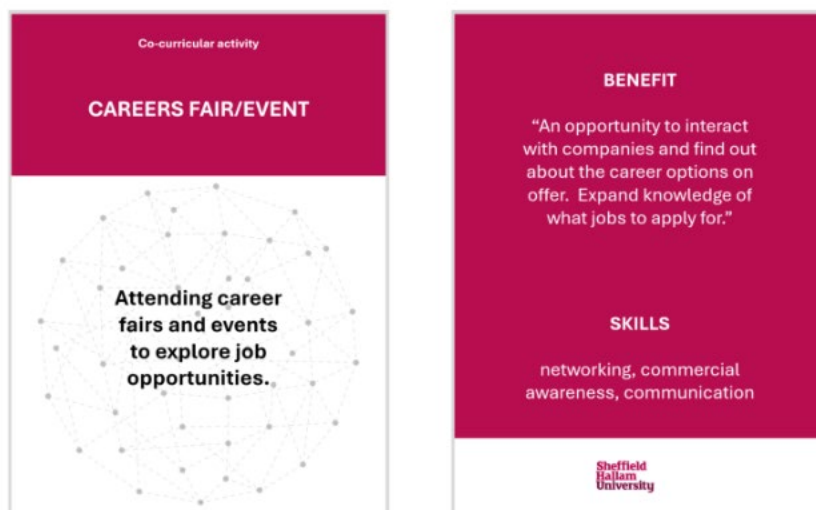


Figure 4. Employability enrichment card example (front and back)

Second-year students

During the session students engaged in a collection of activities. As an icebreaker, they identified key employability skills (including communication, leadership and teamwork, problem solving and critical thinking) but also admitted to having less confidence in 'people skills' than the technical skills they were developing as part of their degrees.

Their journey maps were visibly less populated than those of the student consultants. In figure 5, the student refers to student speakers, who would have been returning placement students in their final year sharing their experiences in a series of short talks. Having a job is also mentioned. In the second year of study, placement engagement appears in reference to such activities as attending the careers fair and participating in the interview process.

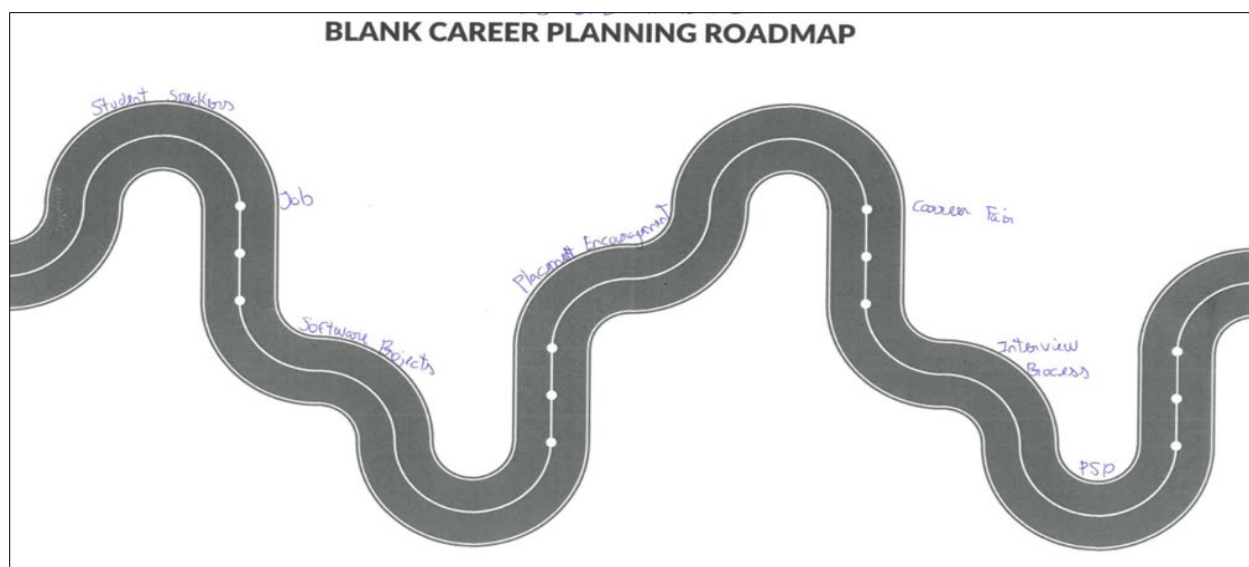


Figure 5. Second-year career planning roadmap example

During the discussion of the employability enrichment activity cards, the students acknowledged they had come across some, but not all, of these activities.

They appreciated the benefit statements and could recognise the value of the enrichment activities; however, this also revealed barriers to engaging with them. For example:

- Timing of events: family commitments, paid work with evening shifts;
- Notice of event: insufficient time to plan attendance; unable to alter work or other commitments;
- Benefit of event: unclear understanding of why the event was important;
- Event venue: when the space was unfamiliar or busy, students felt overwhelmed and uncomfortable;
- Cost: commuting to university at peak times on public transport; travelling in for one event on days with no classes; having to miss a work shift to be able to attend.

Evaluation and discussion

Working with our student consultants helped to identify authentic examples of enrichment activities and their benefits. Through the reflective activities, they were able to articulate for example:

- how engagement with curriculum-based employability activities helped with job application and interview preparation;
- how networking helped explore potential career opportunities;

- the value of engaging in real world applied experiences and in development of transferable skills.

Through the process, students were reminded of the range of enrichment opportunities. Since most were applying for graduate jobs, they found this timely and useful, highlighting the importance of reiterating available support and associated skills development (Beckingham, 2023).

Recognising the gap between what students *choose* to engage with and what they *need* to engage with to prepare them for placements and graduate roles, we could clearly see that second-year students lacked the experience to recognise the tangible benefits of co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. As Lock and Kelly (2022) say, though students may become more engaged at the end of their degree, they may consequently be disadvantaged at this stage. More needs to be done to help them realise the benefits of attending enrichment activities early on (O'Shea *et al.*, 2021). Through the lived experiences of the student consultants, we were able to share authentic first-hand benefits of enrichment activities. This shifts the message from 'the university says you should' to 'someone like me benefited from this'. Their first-hand stories of how enrichment activities connected directly to their own placement job offers, attainment and increased confidence as work-ready graduates further consolidated this more pertinent message (Callender, 2008).

The research highlights clear barriers to engagement owing to commitments, timing and cost. To support students who commute or have caring and/or work responsibilities, universities could integrate CCAs and ECAs that promote professional development and employability into daytime hours when students are already on campus (Thomas and Jones, 2018). Embedding some of these activities within the curriculum could raise levels of participation and address challenges related to events being held in unfamiliar university locations. However, consideration for staff development is also needed (Clegg *et al.*, 2010), preferably co-created with student consultants to ensure collaborative cohesion (McIntosh and May, 2025).

Engaging students in discussions to identify barriers also allowed them to propose solutions they believed would be beneficial, building self-efficacy (Griffiths *et al.*, 2021) while working together to enhance educational practice (Dickerson *et al.*, 2016) and to scaffold soft skills development (Beckingham, 2023). As students clearly have anxieties about attending events, liaising with them to understand what these are could well lead to co-created solutions to address such fears. A pre-event walkthrough/orientation for careers fairs or other large university events (particularly those in places strange to them) would mentally prepare students to overcome fear of the unknown (Vincent, 2019), thus at once reducing their anxiety and increasing their confidence and readiness to face what previously seemed daunting. They may also benefit from hearing the experiences of their final-year peers at similar events. Since peer-to-peer engagement is a key mechanism for widening participation in enrichment activities (Chilvers, 2025), a buddy programme – offering reassurance, social connection and peer support – would encourage more confident attendance at events (Naidoo *et al.*, 2022). Peer mentoring and peer learning within HE have been associated with confidence-building in university students (Pointon-Haas *et al.*, 2023) and greater motivation

(Motzo, 2016). However, we must acknowledge the needs of students with learning contracts by refining our support for them.

Finally, though it was a small-scale project, the student consultants were able to contribute, with measurable effect, to the academic community by means of co-creation and sharing of knowledge and experience (Cook-Sather *et al.*, 2014; Dickerson *et al.*, 2016). They evidenced their participation in a SaP project on both their CVs and LinkedIn profiles, so improving graduate employability and supporting preparation for applying for graduate roles (Lewis, 2017). Transience may be seen as a barrier in staff-student partnerships, given that the student consultants involved have now graduated. (Little *et al.*, 2011). However, there are opportunities to build upon this work with future students as partners. Using what we have learned from this initial project to inform the next phase, we are better equipped, in terms of social justice, to give greater consideration to equity for and representation from different identity groups (Healey, 2024), to the benefit both of staff and students (Curran, 2017).

Recommendations

Through this research we propose that the following points should be considered:

- **Timing of events:** schedule aligned to other on-site timetabled activities on the day; avoid peak travel times to limit cost; gain an understanding of local part-time work shift patterns; be aware of students who are carers and only able to attend during university core hours.
- **Prepare students for events:** in addition to giving an overview of the activity, provide guidance on what the students need to do in advance of attending the event. For, say, a careers fair: review the companies who will be there, create a list of whom to visit and do some background research. Consider updating personal LinkedIn profile and making connections with companies of interest and new contacts so made.
- **Timely promotion of events:** allow time for students to change external commitments if needed; send reminders for the event using a variety of communication channels, such as in-class, email, and social media used by the cohort (as this can vary).
- **Highlight the skills development:** give examples of the benefits and how engaging in activities will help them develop; for example, communication skills and industry awareness.
- **Recorded events:** where appropriate, offer hybrid options to join and record the session; for example, in order to hear guest speakers.

Conclusion and next steps

This research presents the employability enhancement toolkit with actionable insights and strategies for optimising student engagement with curriculum based, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. Our findings highlight the value of dialogue with students for gaining first-hand

knowledge of the barriers and enablers they are experiencing. An opportunity now presents itself for co-creating solutions to those barriers, for enhancing the toolkit and for planning future enrichment activities. Our paper also contributes to the continuing discourse on enhancing employability in HE environments.

The aim of the research was to gain a clearer understanding of the perceptions and expectations of students in determining whether or not they do take up those activities which can support 1) the development of their employability and 2) their preparation to apply for placement and graduate roles. By means of the co-created resource of enrichment activity cards – as developed by our student consultants with first-hand experience of placement – the second-year students valued and were able to benefit from what their predecessors had to reveal. In hindsight, we feel that the second-year focus groups might have been even more effective had they been led by the final-year student consultants, providing a validation of the activities with their own appreciation of experiencing what had been on offer.

Final-year students, returning from industry, clearly serve as relatable role models, demystifying employability and fostering a culture where participation feels normal and achievable. Their contribution to this research helped our understanding; it also allowed the second-year students to hear from them directly that the experience of taking part in the activity-orientated focus groups and contributing to the enrichment activity cards had helped them to reflect on the importance of the activities as they prepared to apply for graduate roles.

Next steps include adding QR codes that link to short, student consultants' video vignettes emphasising the benefits of enrichment activities and sharing practical advice. Hearing authentic student voices and lived experiences can be more persuasive and relatable than staff messaging.

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