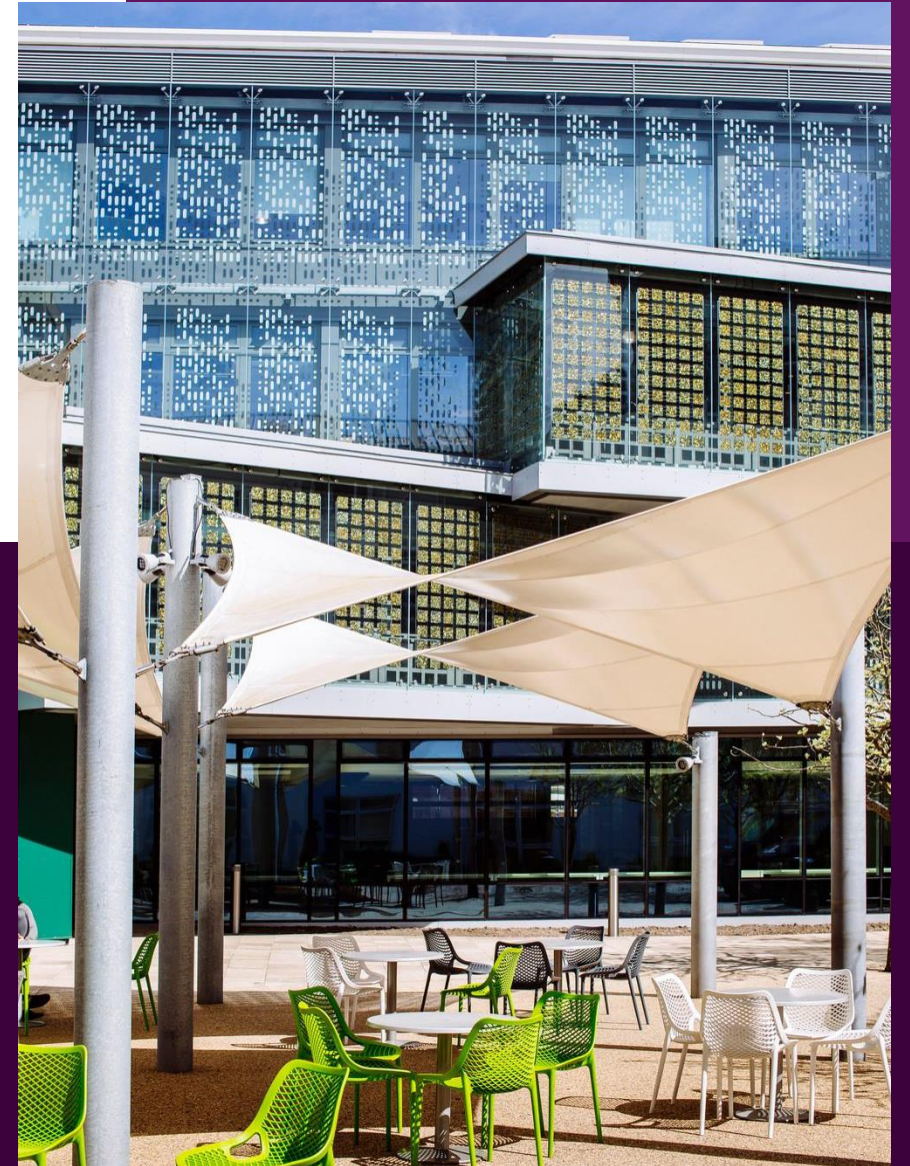# Focusing on student engagement to address graduate employability

Tom Lowe

University of Portsmouth Strategic Imperatives

Student experience:

- Pursue educational excellence, improve student experience and reduce variation in outcomes

Graduate employment:

- Rapidly improve graduate employment

2030 Vision

- **Engage every student in a life-changing experience:**
  - Through innovative and inclusive education, every student - irrespective of their background - will reach their potential, with outstanding outcomes and employability

TEF 2023 Gold — Teaching Excellence Framework

The Context of English Higher Education

- 23 years of tuition fees

- 11 years of 9K+ fees

- 7 years of "value for money"

  And students still come...and want:

- Excellent services; world leading teaching; welfare support; careers and opportunities; lifestyle; remote support; organised courses; life experiences & freedom to explore!

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Outcomes pressure of English Higher Ed

- Office for Students: "all students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake HE and are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from, Higher Education (Office for Students, 2018, 14)

- In the Higher Education Act, success is defined simply as completing the degree programme (Higher Education Act, 2017)

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The successful engaged student

Student engagement is described to represent both the time and energy students invest in educationally purposeful activities and the effort institutions devote to using effective educational practices (Kuh, 2001)

Students who are highly engaged in education-related activities are more likely to progress through and succeed in HE (Tschibozo, 2008; Tinto, 2006; Astin, 1984)

Investing in student engagement can benefit student outcomes (Thomas and Allen, 2022; Schnitzler et al., 2021; Snijders et al 2020)

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Challenges in HE
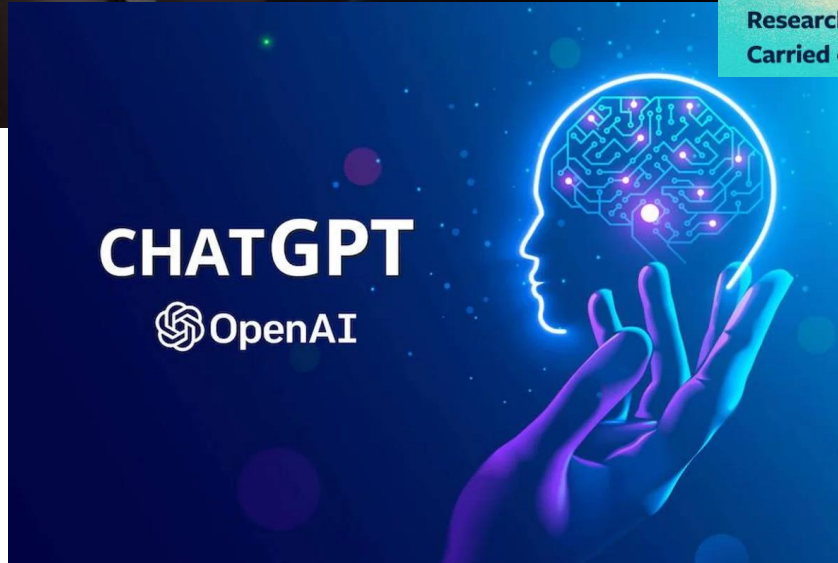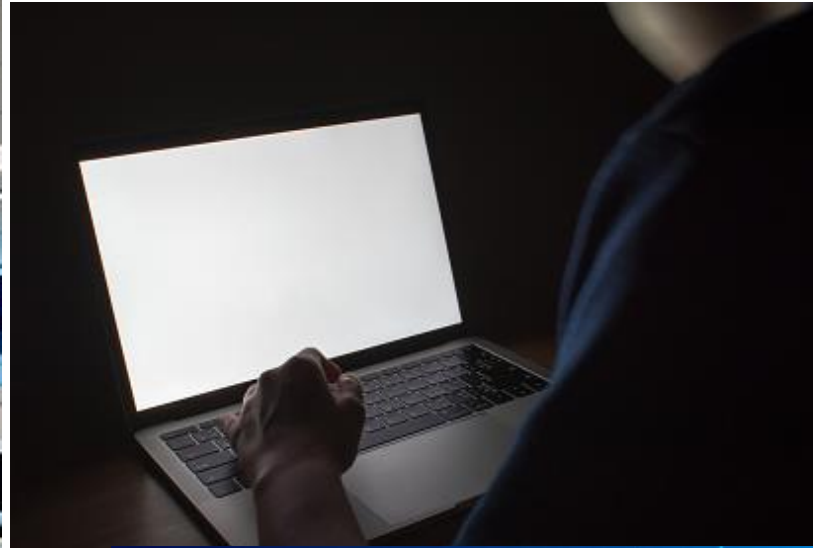
Sector studies on retention & attendance

A study of 640 university students highlights **social integration** and **academic integration** decreased significantly during the lockdown period in the beginning of 2020 (Resch et al. 2023)

Three-quarters (76 per cent) of staff have seen **lower numbers of students turning up** to lectures despite Covid-19 restrictions easing across the world" (Williams, 2022).

49% of undergraduate students who responded have **missed a lecture**, seminar or workshop since September to do paid work (Johnson, 2023).

Almost **one in five** students said that they had considered dropping out of university because of cost of living increases (Office for Students, 2023).

Students part time work average per week has **increased from 13.5 to 23 hours** (Wright, Lowe & Wilding, 2024).

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Barriers to in-person attendance

- **Illness/Health issues** (both physical and mental – e.g., feeling ill, migraine, mental health, depression)

- **Other course demands** (e.g., busy with coursework, revision, focusing on assignments, deadlines, timetable clashes)

- **Convenience/Online availability** (e.g., online easier, classes accessible online, watching recordings)

- **Personal circumstances** (e.g., family issues, relocation, finances, childcare, bereavement)

- **Lack of motivation/Interest** (e.g., no interest, lack of passion, dissatisfaction with course)

- **Course-related issues** (e.g., lecture quality, relevance to assessments, poor teaching)

- **Travel/Commuting** (e.g., distance, train strikes, weather, expense)

- **Anxiety/Stress** (e.g., nervousness in seminars, social anxiety, stress from workload)

- **External commitments** (e.g., work, meetings, personal appointments)

- **Timetabling** (e.g., early morning classes, back-to-back classes)

(1,600 students, Dickinson, 2023)

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Academic Development

- Senior Lecturer in Higher Education

- CPD lead for Student Engagement & Embedding Employability into the Curriculum

- Former Head of Student Engagement & Employability, UoWinchester

Graduate Employability

- Graduate Outcomes Survey (15 months post graduation).

- B3 Regulation with 60% target for UG courses

- High vacancies in job market.

- The main reason students study in HE (Curnock-Cook, 2021; UCAS, 2021).

- "All students, from all backgrounds, and with the ability and desire to undertake HE and are supported to access, succeed in, and progress from HE" (Office for Students, 2018, 14).

Job vacancies hit record high as post-pandemic labour market continues recovery

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When does the Graduate Outcomes Survey take place?

Each academic year is split up according to course end date into four cohorts: A, B, C and D.

Cohorts	Course end date	Surveying Begins	Census week
A	1st August-31st October	1st December-28/29th February	First week in December
B	1st November-31st January	1st March-31st May	First week in March
C	1st February-30th April	1st June-31st August	First week in June
D	1st May-31st July	1st September-30th November	First week in September

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Graduate Outcomes Timelines

Graduates	Graduates	Graduates	Current Final Years	Current year 2/3
2019/20	2020/21	2021/22	2022/23	2023/24

Academic years

Jun/Jul 2020 graduation

Jun/Jul 2021 graduation

Jun/Jul 2022 graduation

Jun/Jul 2023 graduation

Jun/Jul 2024 graduation

Calendar years

* 2022	2023	2024	2025

Spring – Graduate Outcomes results

September – League tables

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An urgent time to act

- The responsibility for employability has been transferred by the UK government to higher education institutions – as absolute responsibility – a view shared by students.

- A gap between employers' expectation for employability and the government's employability agenda.

(Cheng, Adekola, Albia, and Cai, 2022)

- Work experience no longer mandatory from 2014, with 90-91% of schools still offering (Department of Education, 2017), but anecdotal evidence that a minority are engaging.

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Improving Graduate Outcomes - Interventions

Awards

Sport/Societies

Careers Advice

Placements

Employability Modules

Enterprise

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Higher Education post COVID-19

What have we achieved / **done**?!

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Change at pace and timely intervention

National Student Survey - rule of four:

- 4 days to create press releases, celebrate and commiserate

- 4 weeks to decide what to do, share best practice and identify issues

- 4 months to prove it   (Lowe, 2022)

Graduate Outcomes?

- …still working on it

- Make a enhancement with 3rd years in spring 2024, no league table impact until September 2026!

- How do we make time for such delayed data?

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Literature - Employability

- Employability often referred to as an unclear and subjective term (Tymon, 2013).

- Employability is the term that both drives and causes debate within the skills discourse, with the literature united through a collective inability to define the term (Tymon, 2013). :

Broad definitions;

- Oliver states that employability is about enabled graduates who are equipped for the working world (Oliver, 2015).

- The values, attributes and behaviour, which may all change as a result of the student award experience (Wright, Jeffries-Watts, 2017:152).

- Hunter *et al.* refer to "*student success"* rather than employability, stating that the key to student success is complicated and includes a differing combination of factors beyond ability and motivation (Hunter, Tobolowsky, Gardoner, 2010:30).

- Employability is a set of achievements improving the probability of employment, (York, 2006).

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The repetitive conclusion - Embedding Employability into the Curriculum

- In 2021, AdvanceHE commissioned a literature review: "Employability: a review of the literature 2016-2021". A key finding and recommendation was that further work was needed to embed employability into the curriculum (AdvanceHE, 2021a).

- Later that year, AdvanceHE also commissioned Sheffield Hallam to conduct a further literature review: "Access, Retention, Attainment and Progression: a review of the literature 2016-2021". Findings highlighted the distinct lack of evidence of embedded employability into the curriculum in HE (AdvanceHE, 2021b).

- Both of these sector studies highlight the need for this project with a subsequent blog from the authors concluding that their "review now asks for an exploration of why this is a continued gap in the evidence base" (AdvanceHE, 2021c).

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Academic Staff as Champions

- Manager of expectations.

- Ownership over the timetable.

- Shared urgency.

- Trust of students.

- Power to make changes to the curriculum and assessment.

- Keen for support, training and collaboration.

- Time poor.

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Developing the course as the core of the student experience

- 100% student engagement (in theory)
- Extra-curricular activities are not accessible just because anyone can apply
- Now the norm to develop outcomes (access, succeed and progress)
- Spreading core information across the year
- Core skills development assessed as part of mandatory summative assessment (e.g. employability & academic skills)

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Alumni Engagement

- First year post graduation as the 4th year

- Alumni Panels

- Mentoring schemes

- Summer and graduation support

- Linking efforts with Alumni Teams

- Graduate service equal to student-service

- Alumni as mentors, employers and speakers

FEATURE   15/03/2021

Jack Dingley: BA (Hons) Business Management with Enterprise and Innovation 2010-2013; Business Development Manager, Tech Data

"Winchester allowed me to open my eyes to the rest of the world. I made friends with a lot of exchange students and that's where my love of


FEATURE   15/06/2021

Sahar Zafar: BA (Hons) Accounting and Finance 2016-2019; Trainee Expatriate Tax Consultant and Owner of Sahar's Cakery

"My lecturers still show me so much support. They know you by name and as a person rather than just a number. My lecturers even keep track

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Our programmes

- Identifying the difference between vocation focused and traditional discipline in relation to graduate outcomes

- Research where your graduates go and what do your students want

- Emphasis on best jobs, life decisions and broad choice

- Alumni networks and using Graduate Outcomes data
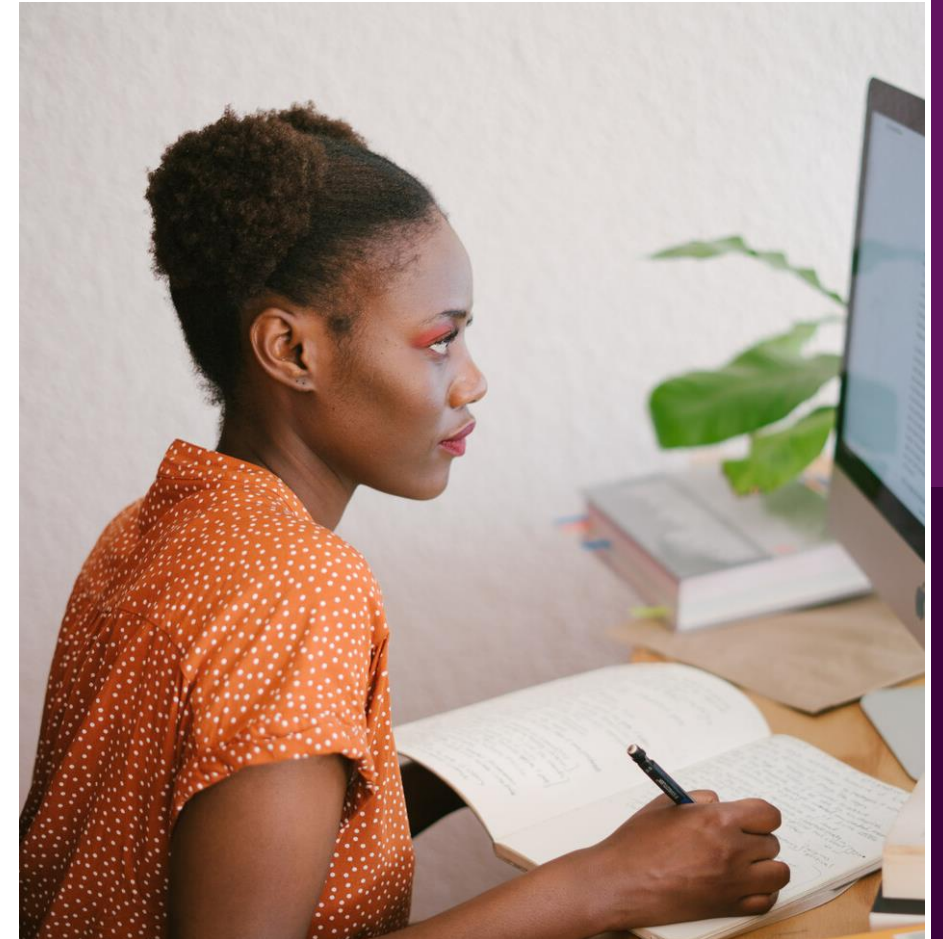
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Scenarios of Employability Interventions:

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

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Scenarios of Employability Interventions:

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

Scenarios of Employability Interventions: Outside Curriculum

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

Careers Advice

Employability Awards

Employability Module

Enterprise Programme

Societies & Sport

Volunteering

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Scenarios of Employability Interventions: 'Extra Session' Outside Timetable

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

Week 5
Careers Workshop

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Scenarios of Employability Interventions: In class session unrelated to module

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Careers Workshop	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

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Scenarios of Employability Interventions: Optional Employability Module

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Exam

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Discussion	Lecture / Discussion	Employer Speaker	Lecture / Discussion	Workshop	Workshop	Employer Speaker	Workshop	Graduate CV

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Scenarios of Employability Interventions: Optional Employability Module

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Exam

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Essay

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Discussion	Lecture / Discussion	Employer Speaker	Lecture / Discussion	Workshop	Workshop	Employer Speaker	Workshop	Graduate CV

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Scenarios of Employability Interventions: Summative assessment

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Employability Assessment

Week 1	Week 2	Week 3	Week 4	Week 5	Week 6	Week 7	Week 8	Assessment
Lecture / Seminar	Guest Speaker	Lecture / Seminar	Careers Workshop	Lecture / Seminar	Careers Workshop	Lecture / Seminar	Lecture / Seminar	Employability Assessment

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Ending the blame on disciplines

- There is a strong correlation between the skills of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS) graduates and key skills valued by employers.

- Eight of the 10 fastest growing sectors employ more AHSS graduates than graduates of other disciplines. A Humanities training may not pay back most quickly in the workforce, but it is likely to give good resilience and longevity for longer term prospects.

- Only 14% of employers say specific degree subjects are a selection criterion; for most employers, it is the level of education that is important, not the particular discipline.

(HEPI, 2023)

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Authentic Assessment

"Authentic assessment involves students in challenging tasks that closely resemble those of the workplace settings" (Sokhanvar et al 2021, 1)

Benefits in:

- Enhancing communication skills

- Promoting collaboration

- Improving critical thinking and problem-solving skills

- Applying knowledge to practice

- Increasing students' confidence

- Opportunities for self-assessment and developing self-awareness and reflectiveness

(Sokhanvar et al 2021)

Assessments Developing Employability

- Authentic assessments;

- Group work;

- Portfolio development;

- Live briefs / consultancy;

- Industry / discipline related assessments ;

- Placement reflections.

Assessments Developing Employment Practices

- Applying for a live job;

- Tailored graduate CV;

- Job application / Personal Statement;

- Job interview practice;

- Pitch presentation;

- Portfolios combining the above.

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Generative AI and the end of the essay

Now is our opportunity

- Emphasis on moving to authentic assessments

- Increase in in-person live assessments, including group work, presentations and vivas post written assessments

- Real-world projects relating to live briefs, knowledge exchange and placements

- Replacing dissertations with final year projects (portfolios, websites, reflective practice & artefacts)

- What did the essay teach us anyway?

CPD from Academic Development

Central rolling sessions:

1. Introduction to Graduate Employability & Outcomes
2. Approaches to Embed Employability into the Curriculum
3. Approaches to Embed Skills Development into the Curriculum

- One to one support in developing course plans
- Bespoke trainings for course teams and departments
- Embedding Employability Mini Fest (Online Conference) Oct 2022

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Resources and case studies

Resources:

- Thematic resources on "where to start" with Careers, Placements and Graduate Outcomes data.

- Module & Programme Case Studies on Embedding Employability into the Curriculum (All written by academics with an emphasis on sharing best practice)

- Sector literature

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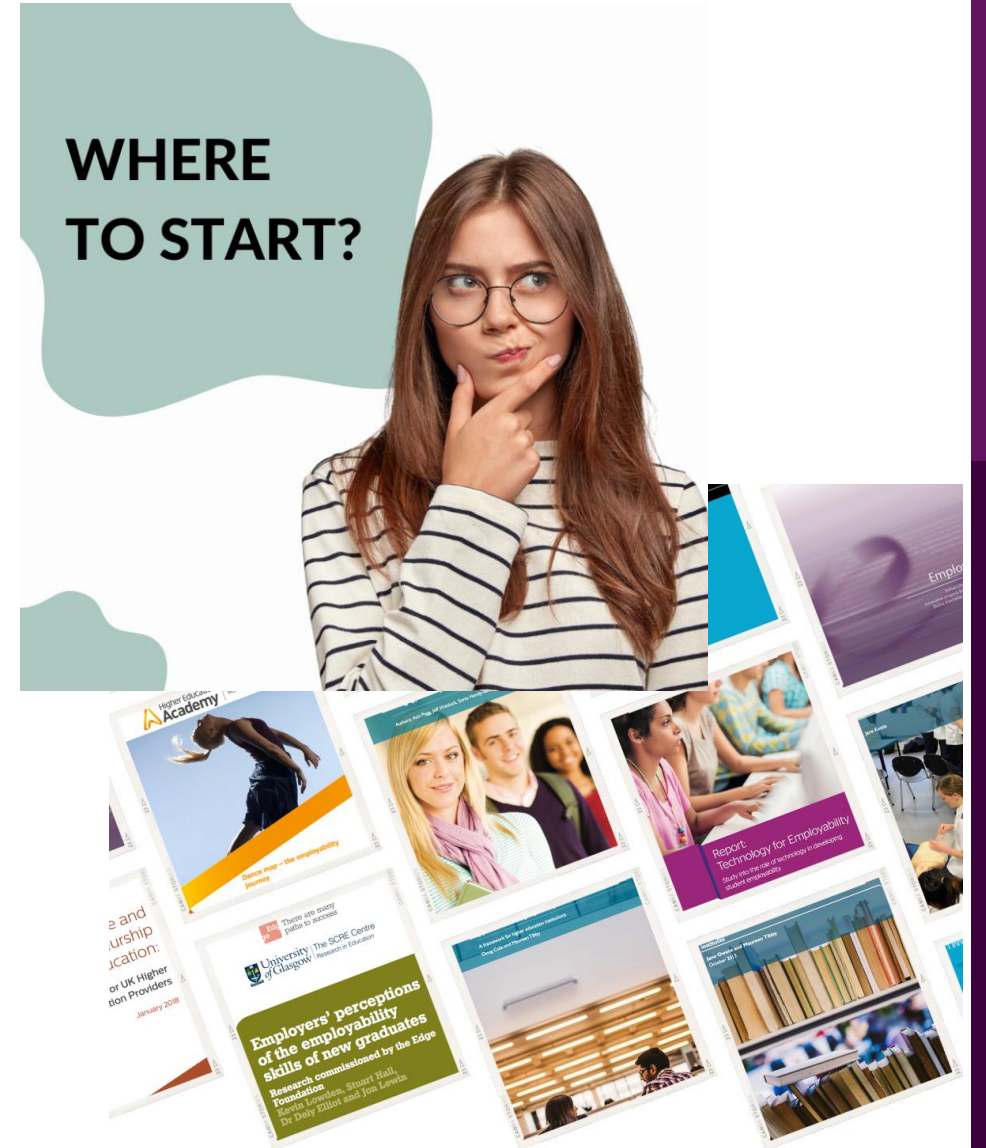
Employability Conference

- September 2023

- Keynote from Jisc's labour market lead

- 17 presentations from academics embedding employability into the curriculum

- Faculty focused workshops on sharing best practice

- 130+ registrations with 90+ attendees

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Thank you for listening

Tom Lowe

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RAISE Network

https://www.raise-network.com/
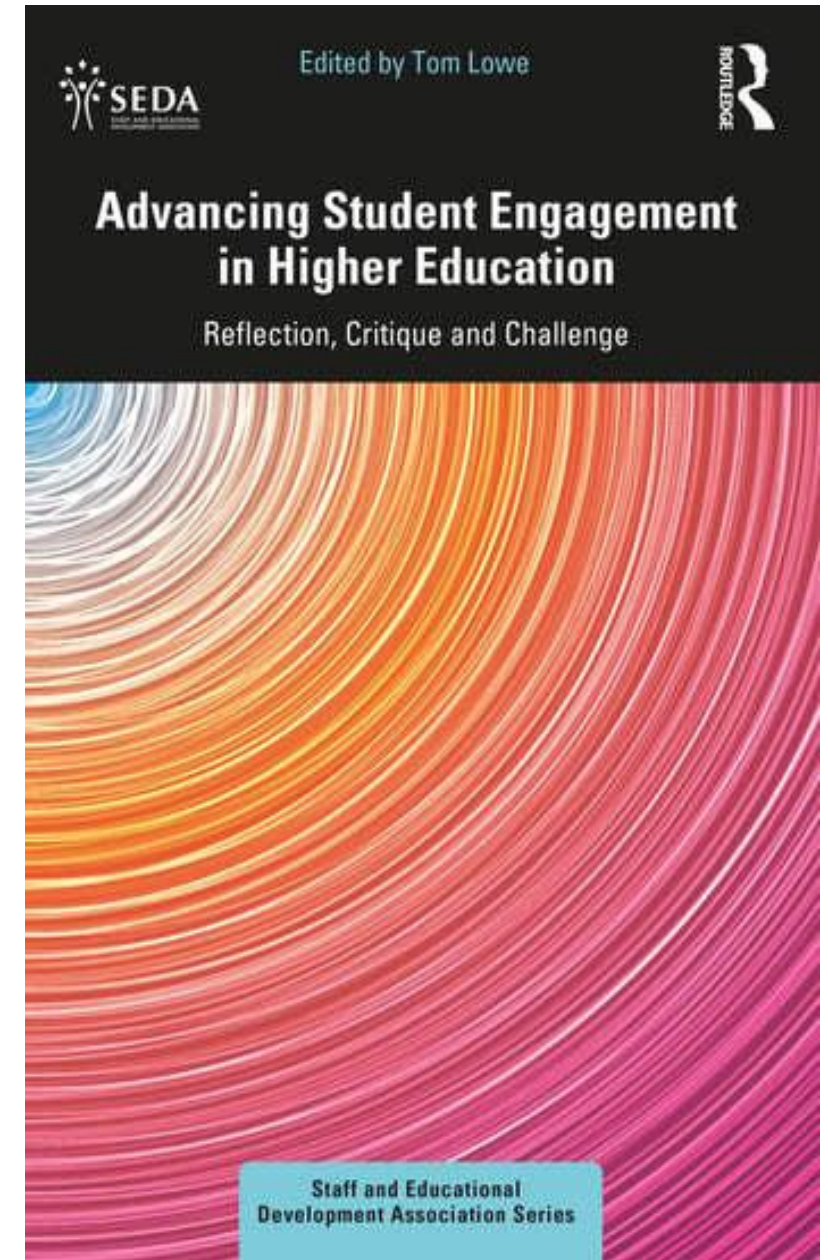
Key links

Case Studies of practices from Portsmouth:

https://sites.google.com/port.ac.uk/learningandteachinginnovation/cpd/student-employability

Case Studies of practices from Portsmouth:

https://sites.google.com/port.ac.uk/learningandteachinginnovation/cpd/student-employability/student-employability-cpd

Link to slides from the Employability Conference: https://sites.google.com/port.ac.uk/landtfestivals/forthcoming-events/employability-day-sept-2023

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