

Brookes Briefing: Employability Learning

This Brookes Briefing addresses one of the elements of the IDEAS inclusive curriculum model

Employability Learning is defined as, ‘a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy’ (Kempster, no date).

Embedding opportunities to gain these is crucial for the student journey. Moreover, this is also important because fee paying students expect to be equipped with the employability skills, resilience and confidence to improve their long-term career prospects. How universities approach this may impact how candidates choose their courses. In addition, employability is central to Graduate Outcome Targets and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF).

Students may not always be aware of the employability opportunities available during their programme of studies and that they have acquired certain employability skills so do not draw on them as fully as they could in the future.

Having clear career plans is associated with graduates’ positive career outcomes, so it is important for higher education (HE) institutions to find ways to support students’ career decidedness and decision-making (Shury *et al*, 2017). Students’ interest in their subject is a significant predictor of ‘career decidedness’ (which is informed by coursework, proactive career exploration, work experience, interest, feasibility, and familial contacts) (Quinlan and Renninger, 2022). Academics and career services staff may need to focus not just on employability skills, but on supporting the development of students’ interests and focusing more on using disciplinary curricula as the impetus for students’ career planning (Quinlan and Renninger, 2022).

It is important to note that the word ‘employability’ is derived from the words ‘employment’ and ‘ability’. Universities may be able to influence the ‘ability’ element which refers to the person’s skills and competencies but have no control over the ‘employment’ aspects which are dependent on a number of issues, including labour market demand (De Cuyper *et al.*, 2011).

Principles and Practices for Employability Learning

Principle 1: Identify the key employability skills in your programme/subject area

There may be employability skills specific to your subject area and programmes and there are generic ones across all. To identify the former, you could discuss with awarding bodies, alumni, and employers and use their documentation. For the latter, the **Brookes Graduate Attributes** are a good indicator. They are:

- **Academic Literacy** - disciplinary and professional knowledge and skills
- **Research Literacy** - the ability to design and undertake at least a small-scale research project in the discipline, using appropriate methodology
- **Critical Self Awareness and Personal Literacy** - the ability to assess the work of oneself, organise oneself and perform as an independent learner; to relate to other people and function collaboratively in diverse groups, including the development of appropriate interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence
- **Digital and Information Literacy** - to be able to use appropriate technology to search for high-quality information; to critically evaluate and engage with the information obtained; to reflect on and record learning, and professional and personal development, and engage productively in relevant online communities.
- **Active Citizenship** - to proactively engage with both local and global communities; knowledge of the local and global perspectives of one's discipline; critical awareness of the complexity of diverse perspectives, cultures and values and the ability to question one's own perspective and those of others; to be able to use knowledge and skills to improve society through actively engaging with issues of equity, sustainability and social justice.

Principle 2: Review/audit module content, assessment and feedback processes and (re)design these with employability in mind

It is necessary to understand where you are providing employability learning as well as where the gaps may be.

The Brookes Enterprise and Employability (BEE) tool can help you create your student employability roadmap by highlighting existing opportunities (linked to activities) to both you and students and also identify where more are needed. The process for this is:

1. **Plan activities** - Look at the four categories of activity below and decide what opportunities your students have to complete the range of activities over the course of three years
 1. *Building your professional profile activity* (green in Figure 1 on page 3)
 2. *Engaging with the professions activity* (pink in Figure 1 on page 3)
 3. *Developing professional skills activity* (blue in Figure 1 on page 3)
 4. *Exploring ideas and enterprise activity* (turquoise in Figure 1 on page 3)

- Create a roadmap** - Use the BEE Journey template (Figure 1 below) to customise and add the activities specific to your students / course.

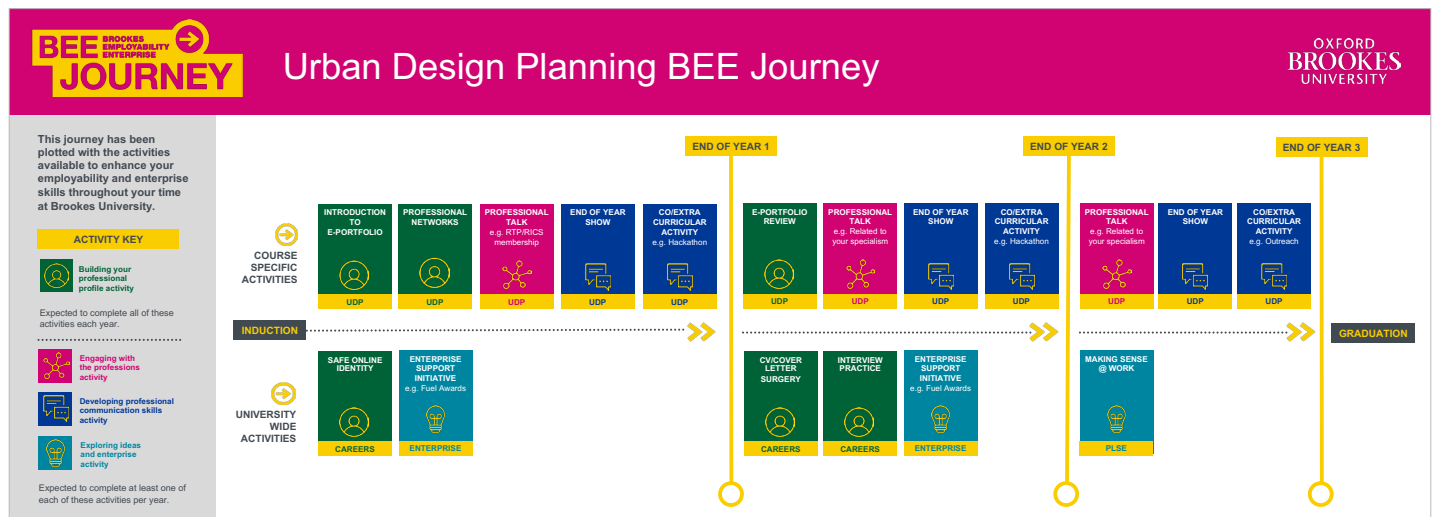


Figure 1: Brookes BEE Timeline for BA Urban Design Planning (source: Gina Dalton, Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment)

- Share the roadmap** - Once you have created your customised BEE Journey Roadmap, share the BEE Journey with your students.
- Engage and embed** - Encourage students to follow the journey tracking and be aware of their employability skills they have gained

For steps 3 and 4, you should set expectations for students to engage with the opportunities you put into the course and to come to think of them as skills they are learning to help them get into and succeed in the world of work.

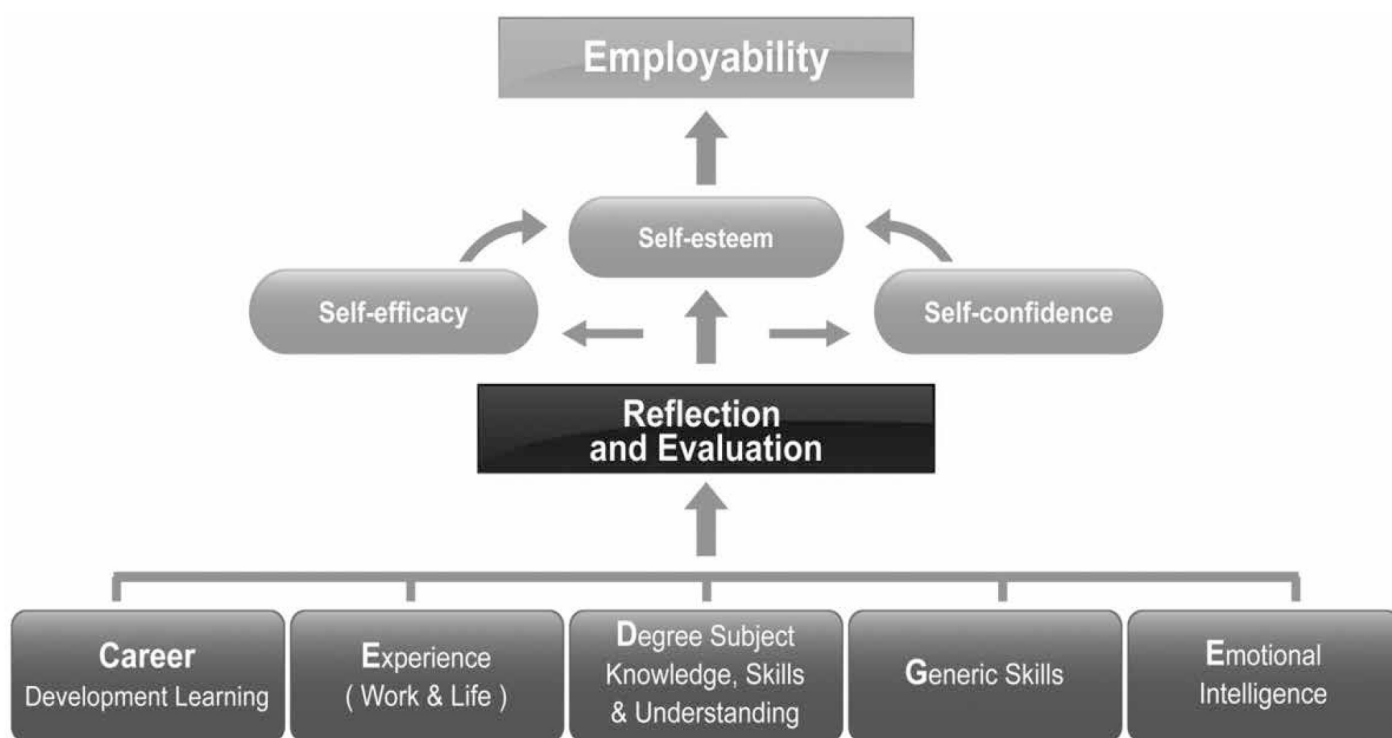
Using others to support you

Also, it is important to remember you do not need to design alone. You can seek support and guidance from central careers and educational and academic development teams. Many universities have curriculum development frameworks, such as IDEAS, that help guide your work. Work with your careers service, who generally have a named link person for your area. This could be to review current/proposed content to see where it already contains elements of employability. Alternatively, you can collaborate on embedding employability in module content and assessment/feedback processes, for example programme or module design could include involving employers in live projects and observing assessed presentations from students. Finding ways to incorporate employability within programme development will complement further resources, advice and support which students can access outside of what is arranged within the curriculum.

Other reviewing tools

Advance HE has published a **Framework for embedding employability. The Enterprise Educators UK toolkit** has published a toolkit with examples of work-related activities which are relevant for individual programme areas.

The CareerEDGE model (Dacre-Pool and Sewell, 2007), which has been described as ‘the most comprehensive’ model of graduate employability (Small, Shacklock and Marchant, 2018), is the model underpinning many universities’ employability offer. This shows the multiple features which constitute the achievement of employability of students and the interface of skills and experiences with reflection and evaluation (which in turn elicits self-efficacy, self-esteem and self-confidence). The message for your audit/review is to review the occurrence of features on the bottom row and sufficiently incorporate reflection and evaluation into your programme (for example by making them prominent in learning outcomes).



Dacre Pool & Sewell (2007)

Figure 2: The CareerEDGE Model of Graduate Employability

Examples of good practice

ICE Qube (Dr. Samia Kamal, School of Engineering, Computing and Mathematics. Faculty of Technology, Design and Environment, Oxford Brookes University) provides an integrated approach to employability and enterprise within the curriculum, or as part of students’ broader development.

Principle 3: Meet student expectations and enhance the student experience by developing your answers to likely questions about employability

The IDEAS framework suggests eight threshold themes reflected in the questions below. These were developed from a review of inclusive curriculum frameworks in use in HE, a body of literature on inclusive practice and work with the Brookes Careers team. Please see these **examples of answers** to these questions.

1. **Networking** - Where in my programme can I meet, hear from and network with prospective employers, alumni and stakeholders?
2. **Relevance of curriculum to employability** - Where in the programme am I enabled to recognise the link between my academic experience and my employability?
3. **Diversity/inclusion** - In what ways is my experience of the programme reflective of a diverse range of career role models, promoting awareness of equality of rights and opportunities within the workplace?
4. **Authentic assessment** - How far are the assessments I'll undertake reflective of authentic tasks I'll carry out in the workplace?
5. **Professionalism** - What opportunities are there for me to build confidence and strategies to develop my networks of career contacts, including employers, alumni and other stakeholders, and to present myself in person and online?
6. **Employability attributes** - How does the teaching team support me to take ownership of the latest graduate competencies and Brookes Attributes to inform my career development?
7. **The world of work** - What is the scope for undertaking placements, internships and local, regional and global mobility on my programme?
8. **Expectations on the programme** - Do the expectations set for me from the beginning of my programme match the professional expectations for behaviour, self-management and etiquette expected of a graduate?

Threshold Plus: What distinctive/additional dimensions employability learning and development is the programme known for?

References, resources and further reading

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Available at: <https://www.brookes.ac.uk/staff/working-at-brookes/learning-and-career-development/academic-enhancement-and-development/teaching-and-learning/brookes-briefings>

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