

**Title: Employability in Higher Education; Exploring Frameworks of Support for Undergraduate Business Management Students**

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**Abstract**

This thesis focuses on employability in current English Higher Education (HE). It explores where the responsibility lies for developing employability skills by considering both institutional and student roles. It also seeks to identify if differences exist in the drivers for employability between pre- and post-92 universities*.* The research concentrates on final year Business Management students at two contrasting universities. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with staff and focus groups were held with students. The research points to employability in HE as an ongoing challenge where *neoliberal* approaches dominate, the impact of which is critiqued throughout the thesis. The findings highlight that employability and employment are two different things, but that the metrics applied to measure success fail to differentiate between them. Considering how employability is embedded at pre- and post-92 universities, the thesis identifies *students as individuals* with differing needs for developing their employability skills. It questions the onus of responsibility and whether it should lie with students themselves or with course teams within the sample. The recommendations call for a review of the metrics used to measure employability within HE. Students are *heterogenic* and as such should be encouraged to drive their student journey to incorporate their individual needs for employability. It is recommended that universities look to review their current offerings and consider a loose framework where students are supported by their course team. The focus should be placed on providing a good student experience with individualised employability choices for students’ personal growth and development. This would result in a win/win, a positive student experience and a meeting of the metrics.

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**Chapter 1 - Introduction**

* 1. **Introduction**

This thesis considers how employability is perceived and presented within the English Higher Education sector (from now on HE). The research contemplates what is meant by employability in the sector, and whether current provisions in HE is effective, relevant and where the responsibility for delivering employability lies. Attention is given to objectives for employability in HE; whether supporting graduates to enter the world of work and to progress into desirable career paths or establishing the place employability holds within the wider curriculum. A detailed examination of these issues requires mapping of the historic and political landscape of education in order to track key events in the emergence of employability within HE. This research explores the last sixty years in order to demonstrate how HE has evolved both in a wider, environmental manner, and to position employability within a HE context. It analyses and critically evaluates employability within curricula as well as looking at the wider purpose of HE in England to see where employability fits in this locus. This thesis is limited to HE in England as other countries in the UK have their own educational approaches towards employability and thus would fall outside the scope of the study.

**1.2 Research Aim**

In short, this thesis deliberates the purpose and the role of employability in contemporary English HE, and whether it occupies a dominant role within the sector. It considers these points from the perspectives of two courses, one in a pre- and one in a post-1992 university. As part of the research, staff were interviewed and focus groups were held for students, to understand a range of views and perspectives on employability in HE currently. The purpose of this thesis is to focus on three key themes. The first is the developing concept of employability over the past sixty years. The second researches how two HE institutions address employability, and how employability is embedded within their undergraduate Business Management courses. Lastly, to consider where the onus of responsibility lies for employability in HE journeys, is it with staff connected to delivering employability in HEIs or students?

**1.3 Research Objectives**

Specifically, the research objectives (ROs) are:

*RO1: To consider the place of employability in English Higher Education*

*RO2: To explore who is responsible for developing employability skills in graduates*

*RO3: To identify any differences in the drivers for employability between pre- and post-92 HEI*

**1.4 Thesis Structure**

This thesis is structured into chapters which address the key research objectives. Chapter one introduces the background to the research and researcher. It highlights the importance of defining key terms such as HE, employability, and neoliberalism in greater depth. The overarching research objectives provide a clear structure for the development of the thesis. To contextualise the motivation to undertake this research, there exists a brief discussion of the researcher’s background, personal reflections and hence any potential biases at the outset in section 1.5, and in further detail in chapter 4.

Chapter two is devoted to setting the scene within English HE and also to reviewing its purpose. It examines and critically analyses the existing body of knowledge and relevant contemporary discourses within education and more specifically in relation to employability and areas of influence, such as neoliberal approaches, marketisation, metrics and the Knowledge Economy.

Chapter three builds on this and traces back the history of education, as it entwines political and economic drivers with employability in HE from the Robbins report published in 1963 to date.

Chapter four outlines the methodological approach of the research and explores the strategies to gather primary and secondary data. In this chapter the primary data collection methods are defined, along with the research population, and accessibility is also identified. A framework for the thematic analysis is presented and common research issues such as bias, validity and ethical considerations are contemplated and addressed within the methodology.

Chapter five presents and analyses the data findings gathered during this doctoral research project. The key themes of HE and employability are synthesised with the existing body of knowledge in order to address the contested areas identified in earlier chapters and to further inform the overall research objectives.

Finally, chapter six pulls together the key areas and demonstrates how a contribution to knowledge is made by addressing a number of areas which would benefit from further development, as identified within this research and existing literature. The broader implications of these findings will be discussed, and suggestions made to further inform the contemporary debates in the area of supporting employability within HE. Further research opportunities will be acknowledged, and the thesis will conclude by reflecting upon the value and possible impact this research has on not only personal learning and development but also for the wider HE community.

**1.5 Personal Reflection and Position**

“Progress, not perfection - I am proud of you mum!” My daughter Anna x

The research we undertake is often based upon a personal will or desire to discover, develop and learn, ultimately with an aspiration to enact change or improvement. This research is driven by a personal desire to succeed and progress in my career. My inspiration to complete my doctorate comes partly from the above quote opening this section, which my daughter wrote on a post-it note to motivate me when I was struggling to juggle a multitude of challenges, including my doctoral research. I want to make my family proud of me and to show them where hard work and determination can get you. This is my position, who I am!

An honest perspective cannot be unbiased or completely objective in relation to this research because it is personal to me. It is influenced in part by my background, my experiences and to some extent my own higher educational learning journey, so naturally I carry with me certain ‘baggage’. This research is predominantly about employability in English HE institutions, but I feel much of this endeavour is inspired by having spent my working life with no clear plan for my own career choices and very little institutional support to help me define my ideal career path. I recall an incident during a GCSE English class at the age of fifteen, when I was required to read a passage aloud from a book. I remember being nervous about the task in hand and my overwhelming memory is of being chastised by the teacher for my ‘bumbling’ approach to the passage, upon which I was instructed to sit down whilst a perceived favoured student was called upon to show me how it should be done. I often think of this and feel that subconsciously I went into HE teaching to prove to myself and others that I can do this and I am worthy. I can now stand up in front of a class of 300+ students and not just read the passage but help others learn and develop too.

I was the first person in my family to go to university and gain a degree as well as the subsequent postgraduate qualifications required to progress my own career path in HE teaching. Further education did not feature on my radar when I was growing up, and my plan was always to leave school at 16 and progress into the world of work. This is what I did, and it was not until I was in my mid-twenties that I seriously considered returning to education, prompted by the realisation that I had reached a glass ceiling and could not progress without a degree. I was driven by the end result rather than the experience of learning itself, which may be something that influences my view of HE and how employability fits within HE.

I can attribute much of my drive and ambition to my mother’s encouragement. She always instilled the importance of education and she wanted me to be educated and have options that she had never had. The working role models within my family were not typical for the era in which I grew up, the 1970s and 1980s. My mother worked two, or sometimes three jobs cleaning or in small local shops, whilst my father struggled with employment due to having relocated from Northern Ireland in the time of ‘the Troubles’. Some of this was due to the culture shock of adapting to a new way of living and he also had some health issues. As a result, he was often between jobs or struggling as a self-employed electrician.

In addition, in my current role as an Assistant Professor in Business I am frequently assailed by feelings of ‘imposter syndrome’ and a fear of not being good enough, as I believe that having a non-academic background places me within a minority amongst my colleagues. I feel I am perceived as less able as I have not yet secured my doctorate, unlike many of my more junior colleagues. These feelings of guilt and shame are explored by Munt (2000), who discusses working class academics as lacking a sense of belonging, feeling that they are just pretending and being fearful of exposure; this truly resonates with me.

Chapter 4 covers the methodology of this research and considers in more detail my positionality and my value stance. It is important to recognise this from the outset, who I am, my upbringing, my work and my experiences, may impact what I do and the position I take. This research is testament to this.

**1.6 Employability**

The issue of employability within HE in England is a very difficult topic to explore fully as there are few agreed definitions for a starting point. Additionally, with an ever-changing landscape within education, any definition is likely to be superseded in a short period of time.

The agreed definition of employability this research will use focuses on personal skills and competencies students develop which will make them more likely to gain graduate level jobs upon completion of their degrees, which is drawn from Knight and Yorke (2006). Whilst it is important to be aware of the metrics used in this area, it is also important to view them with a critical eye. Therefore, they are included within the scope of this research, but they are not the sole driving force for the thesis. Instead, it focuses on how two undergraduate business courses in a pre-1992 and a post-92 university have met these challenges, what lessons could be learnt, and which examples of good practice might be adopted by other institutions. The over-arching aim has been to develop an understanding of employability, its place in HE and also to share good practice identified whilst conducting this research.

**1.7 Summary**

This introduction briefly familiarises the reader with the researcher and the focus of this thesis, which is employability within HE. The next chapter deliberates current literature in the area of HE and more specifically graduate employability from the perspectives of policy, institutions and students.

**Chapter 2 – Literature Review**

**2.1 Introduction**

The purpose of this chapter is to explore current literature in the area of employability. This includes confirming definitions used for key terms and also exploring the inherent complexity associated with the area. Deliberations include university priorities, why the sector exists and how governance and politics influence HE. Establishing this knowledge is key to ensuring the research explored in subsequent chapters is located in the sector. In addition to this, the wider environment in which universities operate will be analysed, along with macro concepts such as the knowledge economy and neoliberalism in relation to employability in HE.

The chapter consists of three sections. The first section explores the wider picture of what is meant by HE and universities; in particular, it focuses on the differences between pre- and post-1992 institutions and how they have changed over time. The second section considers the purpose of university education, why the sector exists and what its focus is. This is done by exploring transactional and transformational forms of leadership in HE, focusing primarily on the work started by Burns (1978). How employability is defined in HE forms part of section three by considering the literature which helps define what we understand by employability and the conceptual models which frame contemporary HE. Also considering key areas impacting this such as a ‘student centred approach’, the ‘knowledge economy’ and ‘neoliberalism’. The final summary outlines the key findings and leads into chapter 3, where the literature review moves to focus on the entwining of government drivers and educational aims in HE is traced.

**2.2 Defining HE and Universities Pre- and Post-1992**

Defining HE has proven challenging for many writers, with numerous definitions being offered in the literature (Jameson 2018). ‘Universitas’, the Latin word for university, translates as ‘fuller’ and ‘wholeness’, which can describe a process which broadens horizons (Maisuria and Cole 2017, p.6). This acts as a useful starting point but translating to the realities of the English HE sector is more problematic. A relatively recent definition came from Mayhew *et al* (2004), who suggests HE can be defined as education that is at a higher level than A level or equivalent, often taking place in either a designated university setting, or alternatively a college that is approved to run post-A level qualifications. As with many definitions, however, this one is fundamentally flawed as it is very simplistic in its application and is parochial (it only embraces England and Wales). It also fails to provide any of the granular detail that delineates HE from other forms of education. The University of Warwick (2020) stripped the definition down to a basic form with their definition: ‘The continuation of study post the age of 18.’ (University of Warwick marketing 2020, p.1). However, this again proves an unsatisfactory definition as education post-18 might well embrace other forms, not just degree qualifications. Additional complexity is afforded to the definition by Wolf (2016) who describes HE as:

A special institution: a community of teachers and scholars. Its purpose is to generate and impart understanding, from generation to generation. The university is a glory of our civilisation. It is neither a business or a training school. *(Wolf 2016, p.2)*

This definition is convoluted in part and fails to suggest the fundamental aims of HE, however Wolf (2016) concludes by stressing it is a dangerous assumption to model HE as a homogeneous sector, since its primary purpose may differ according to the individual institution or personal perceptions. Hence, when coming up with a definition it is important to emphasise that merely conceiving of a university as a single entity is misleading, as there are a number of categorisations that can be made. An example of this is the separation between the pre-1992 universities and the post-1992 universities. Even then however, there are further sub-divisions with universities identifying with various groups, for example ‘Russell Group Universities – RGU’ and the ‘University Alliance Group – UAG’ (Fury *et al* 2014).

Exploring this separation in more detail, pre-1992 universities are long-standing universities, created before the Further and Higher Education Act (F&HEA 1992), which tend to be research intensive. This can be seen in a sub-group of pre-1992 universities known as the ‘Russell Group Universities’ (RGU) whose stated aim is:

…to help ensure that our universities have the optimum conditions in which to flourish and continue to make social, economic and cultural impacts through their world-leading research and teaching. *russellgroup.ac.uk 2021*

The creation of the RGU led to the formation of an elite body of universities which creates a hierarchy within the sector. Given the differing groups, this amplifies the importance of not defining HE in terms which stress its homogeneity.

The 1966 White Paper ‘plan for polytechnics and other colleges’ recommended a new ‘large and comprehensive’ (DfE 1966, p.1) network of organisations should be set up to provide high quality technical and vocational education. These organisations were called Polytechnics and were designed to have a direct link with industry. This idea was enshrined in law by the act that created polytechnics and marked a clear divergence of purpose of HE when compared with the existing universities.

The 1992 Further and Higher Education Act re-designated polytechnics as universities, creating the post-1992 group of universities (often referred to as ‘modern universities’). As with pre-1992 universities, it is important not to view them as one group. Examples of difference is, the post-1992 universities have additional sub-groups such as Million+ and the Alliance Universities that focus on applied research and industry connections.

Alliance Universities partner with industry and the professions to deliver the workforce of today and tomorrow through practical, skills-based learning and applied research. *unialliance.ac.uk 2021*

This discussion shows the differences in purpose within the sector and hence any definition needs to recognise this diversity. The term ‘university’ does not go far enough in distinguishing the differences. To ensure this is recognised, the definition used in this thesis is a mixture of that used by the Education Reform Act (1988) which defines the sector as education that is above the standard NCF Level 3, and my own synthesis of the various literature explored in this section. *Thus, this definition is; education post school, that aims to further educate students with knowledge and skills for graduation and beyond.*

As this section demonstrates, we cannot consider universities as a homogeneous group, as there are clear differences that exist within definitions of the term ‘university’ in England. The next section considers how the perceived purpose of university may differ depending on the institution and its position within the HE hierarchy.

**2.3 The Purpose of University**

This section examines why universities exist and how their purpose has changed since the F&EA (1992). In particular it looks at the dichotomy between the educational and economic imperatives currently existing within HE, taking into account the responses of different universities.

Much of the literature argues the traditional purpose of HE is the desire to pursue knowledge for its own sake, something that may be termed the educational imperative (Abbs 1994). This stresses the view that universities are constructed for a social good. In other words, by educating more people, the population as a whole will benefit. The contrasting view, explored by Hyland and Merrill (2003) is the economic imperative. It is based on HE having a role in the application of graduate job development for wider society (Kettis *et al* 2013, Rich 2015). Whilst the educational imperative stresses the societal benefits of education, the economic imperative is more focused on the individual. It views education as an investment in the future of an individual, who may subsequently move into employment to the benefit of the wider economy. This dichotomy presents a polarised view of the debate. Zajde and Rust (2016) concede that many individuals and institutions operate somewhere between the two, viewing HE and the university experience as both a personal and public or social good.

Turning first to the educational imperative, some contemporary researchers suggest areas such as employability should be a supplementary, not a primary function of HE (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, 2017, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017). These writers assert concerns over the motives of academia being centred around student performance than the student experience (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, 2017, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017). A neoliberal approach to HE which stresses the importance of the notion that universities are moving to performative, target set institutions is regarded as negative and not a direction in which universities should be steered towards. Neoliberalism and performative approaches will be covered later in this chapter. Writers such as Readings (2002), Fearn (2008), Collini (2012), Docherty (2015), and Courtney (2017) hold HE as a means of developing individuals educationally through the pursuit of individual inquiry, expanding their critical attributes, knowledge, and providing transformative dimensions of the learning experience. It is argued that students graduated and progressed to graduate level jobs prior to the rise of employability as a metric or main driver in HE (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, 2017, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017).

Collini (2012) argues against this idea, that the priority for universities must be to contribute to economic growth. Instead, individuals should cherish the ‘inherent worth of intellectual enquiry’ as universities’ primary function; in short, the educational imperative. He raises concerns universities are losing their distinctive character. Much of his work refers to key events in political agendas throughout recent history, such as Gordon Brown’s (2010) introduction of metrics to measure the quality of teaching and student experience in relation to student satisfaction. Collini (2012) takes issue with the notion that student choice should be the central focus and questions the re-defining of students in terms of their economic value and their consumer satisfaction. He challenges the prevailing narrative of neoliberalism where students are seen as a valuable source of income for universities. Collini (2012) refutes the economic imperative view, that focusing on the employability of graduates should be seen as a positive development for HE (Lees 2002; Knight and Yorke 2006, Tomlinson 2012, Cole and Tibby 2013, Cashian *et al* 2015, Matherly and Tillman 2015, Artess *et al* 2017). Students invest time and money in going to university with an expectation that it will result in better career opportunities (Naylor *et al* 2015, Shury *et al* 2017). It can be argued that the contrasting view to the educational imperative is seeing HE as an individual investment, linked to delivering the economic imperative. Iredale *et al* (2013) refer to the resistance of change as an educational straitjacket. The economic imperative forces change onto universities in order to focus on key priorities in the macro environment. This is reinforced by the datafication of the sector that, it is claimed, has ensured the economic benefits of courses are measured (Stevenson, 2017).

Whilst it is too simplistic merely to conclude the sector was influenced solely by the two imperatives covered in this section, they have acted as a useful method of defining its purpose and the heterogeneity of the sector was again evident when analysing the two approaches. Each of the two universities in this research and its leadership staff take a differing view of the two imperatives and make judgements accordingly. The approaches differ between universities and hence, the diversity of strategies applied may be evident. This relates to the style of leadership in HE and as the next section explores differing HE leadership attitudes.

**2.3.1 Leadership in HE - Transactional Versus Transformational**

When analysing employability in a HE context, it is important to consider the purpose of education and whether it should be seen as transactional in nature. One perspective regards the purpose of HE as obtaining a qualification, possibly more aligned to the economic imperative and achieving employment outcomes (DTI 1998, Hyland and Merrill 2003, Kettis *et al* 2013, DBIS 2016). In contrast, education can be viewed more deeply, where individuals transform in a more fundamental manner, consistent with the educational imperative (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, 2017, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017). This relates to the research carried out in this thesis and how the participants perceive HE leadership within their university context.

Transformational approaches in HE may link to the educational imperative, characterised as learning for learning’s sake or the acquisition of knowledge being prioritised (Readings 1997, Collini 2012, 2017, Courtney 2015, 2017, Docherty 2015). Transformational approaches in HE exist where course teams aim to deliver a learning experience which supports a student and their overall HE journey. This perspective argues HE should be transformational in a students’ life as it aims to support individual and social transformation through a holistic path, which contributes to a public good. In contrast, the transactional view of HE is more focused on individual investment, where the costs of provision are passed to the student. Such transactions may result in students getting what they need to secure a graduate job, focusing on a tick box process of transactions, akin to a conveyor belt production line. The first lens to contemplate is a transactional approach to employability education, as successive governments have endorsed (Browne 2010, Department for Skills 2009, 2011, 2015) and more recently as espoused by Williamson (2020a), the main goal is a clearly stated purpose of helping graduates into work to fulfil the employment needs of the country. The second lens views education as a transformational experience, leading to permanent changes in student views, ideals and constructs of life (Mezirow 2000, Knight and Yorke 2006, Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Courtney 2015, Tomlinson 2017, Wolstencroft and Lloyd 2019, Cole 2020).

Burns (1978) uses the terms ‘transactional’ and ‘transformative’ in relation to both commercial and educational leadership. He claims transactional leadership trades one opportunity for another in order to achieve the desired outcomes, working on a mutually accepted psychological contract of social exchanges. Burns proposes that transformational leadership identifies motivators for change, with all stakeholders having a shared drive or desire to improve what already exists. Drucker (2006) develops Burns’ (1978) theory which focuses on transactional (the process) and the transformational (the practice) approaches in relation to leadership. While this may be regarded as a seminal text in the wider educational leadership arena, some have criticised transactional versus transformational leadership, its merits and its shortcomings (Bass 1999, Avioloi and Bass 2002, Judge and Piccolo 2004, Basham 2012, Putra *et al* 2020). When considering transformational approaches in HE, Drucker gives insight into successful leadership based on a transformational approach. He proposes leadership should acknowledge the area of knowledge and its need for constant review, challenge and development to prevent its disappearance (Drucker 2008). The continuing relevance of his work is shown by the scope of its use today (Broome and Marshall 2020). Drucker’s work examines the nature and purpose of HE, highlighting the tension between the need for the HE sector to achieve economic competitiveness, the economic imperative, and the need to support learning for personal growth, the educational imperative.

Adopting an approach similar to the transactional versus transformational framework, Wolstencroft and Lloyd (2019) focus on the role of HE leadership, proposing a process-to-practice framework which could be applied to leaders within education. They suggest practice (transformational), rather than process (transactional), should drive how academic leaders teach in education, embedding opportunities to deliver graduate employability goals within their practice. This is important for this study as the participants interviewed considered HE leadership styles they were familiar with. HEIs are focused on delivery against key metrics, which may encourage them to lean towards the transactional method of educational leadership. Although many in HE suggest transformational leadership approaches are aligned with the desire to be current, innovative, and progressive, the need to address student aspirations and motivations must also be considered. Northouse (2016) proposesa definition of transformational leadership:

The process whereby a person engages with others and creates a connection that raises the level of motivation and morality in both the leader and the follower (i.e.: the instructor and student). This type of leader is attentive to the needs and motives of followers *Northouse (2016, p.162)*

Northouse (2016) embraces transformational leadership to encourage others, whether staff or students, to excel and rise to the challenge of supporting an educational imperative of developing knowledge in HE in new and innovative ways. This moves away from the standard structured approaches seen in transactional leadership styles (Bass 1999, Avolio and Bass 2001, Wang *et al* 2020). HE and universities are changing and challenging their existence by considering not only their imperative but also how they are led or managed in contemporary HE. This research aims to investigate leadership experiences and go beyond education versus economy as the area of employability considers in the next section.

**2.4 Defining Employability in HE**

In addition to defining what a university is, it is important to explore the word ‘employability’ within HE as there are many differing views. The concept of employability in HE was first popularised in the Robbins report (1963) and the succeeding decades saw much debate about its meaning (Philpott 1999, Knight and Yorke 2004, 2006, Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Hinchcliffe and Jolly 2011, Tomlinson 2010, 2017, Cole and Hallett 2019). Due to these discussions, defining employability in HE can be problematic (Hillage and Pollard 1998). Philpott (1999) suggests employability is a ‘buzzword’ used frequently in HE but one that can be interpreted differently, a view echoed by others (Grazier 1998, Hinchcliffe and Jolly 2011, Williams *et al 2015*, Cole 2020). These differing visions can lead to problems in discussing what is meant:

Developing a shared narrative, in context, is absolutely fundamental to the employability agenda, and to date appears to have been largely ignored in practice. As an analogy, this would be like starting a journey without knowing your final destination, or the route to get there. *(Cole 2020, p.1)*

In English HE the level of interest in employability expectations is clear according to Yorke (2006) who suggests HE has a direct responsibility for contributing to, supporting and strengthening the workforce. Knight and Yorke (2006) propose a starting point for employability:

A set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that make individuals more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy *(Knight and Yorke, 2006, p.8)*

For this thesis, the definition from Knight and Yorke (2006) is used as a starting point, both authors are prolific researchers in the area of employability in HE, and the definition also reflects the heterogeneity of the student body. When considering employability skills, there is no clear consensus in academic research on what exactly the required list of skills contains (Williams *et al* 2015, Lowden *et al* 2011). However, the fixation on a set of skills can add to HE definition challenges (Holmes 2001). Some express concerns that a very narrow approach to skills development is an overly simplistic approach (Higdon 2016, Cole and Hallett 2019). Instead, students should develop a plethora of personal and professional capabilities which extends beyond simple skills (Holmes 2001, Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Higdon 2016, Cole and Hallett 2019). There appears to be a drive for clarity and structure, but it should also be acknowledged that a uniform or one-size-fits-all approach may no longer suffice. (Wolstencroft and Crossan 2018, Cole 2020). Cole (2020) went on to create a taxonomy for learning, ‘Employability redefined’, which builds on the principles of transformative learning and focuses on students’ needs for the future and not only the present (Mezirow 2000). This refocuses attention on the contrast between similarity and difference among students - homogeneity and heterogeneity. A more dynamic and fluid approach to employability is desirable in order to be successful (Cole and Hallett 2019). Within this approach, development is something that can continue with graduates throughout their life (Knight and Yorke 2006), acknowledging the heterogeneity of students and also the complexity of the global context (Jackson 2015).

Employability provision within higher education should mirror this fluidity rather than becoming transfixed by a programmatic or linear emphasis on training or interventions. *Cole and Hallett (2019)*

Knight and Yorke (2003) suggest approaches which provide learning opportunities, promote self-efficacy beliefs and acknowledge personal qualities can transform students’ overall ability to enhance themselves and their employability opportunities. However, there are ongoing debates around what constitutes ‘employability’. Research by Higdon (2016) challenges views of employability which focus solely on skills acquisition and suggests the views of students and graduates themselves on employability have not been sufficiently considered. This ties into this research which seeks to gain a better understanding of the student perspective. Clarke 2018 frames employability in HE as a ‘journey’, (Clarke 2018, p.13, Bennett 2019) whilst most recently, Rees (2021) referred to it as a complex and holistic process.

Recent research suggests a need for employability activities to be embedded within institutional strategies and course structures, as ‘bolt-on’ initiatives are not thought to sufficiently support the current developmental approaches for individual students (Knight and Yorke 2006, Barkas, 2011, Pegg *et al*, 2012, Cole and Tibby 2013, Tomlinson 2010, 2017). Cole and Tibby (2013) stress employability education is not something that can be bolted onto courses and assigned to a careers department alone; nor can it be quantified in measures such as the ‘Destination of Leavers in Higher Education’ (DLHE 2008) or the ‘Graduates Outcomes’ (GO 2017) as current processes attempt to do (Harvey 2001, Pegg *et al* 2012, Grealy and Laurie 2019, Cole 2020). The ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ (TEF), is a relatively new measure in HE and impacts current metrics attempting to measure employability success in HE.

In the introduction of the TEF in 2017; John Gill, editor of the ‘Times Higher Education’ defines the TEF as:

The Teaching Excellence Framework is a new – and controversial – government initiative that seeks to emulate the UK’s Research Excellence Framework as a means to measure and reward high-quality teaching by universities. The idea is to “audit” all universities, using a basket of metrics (broadly, these would be student satisfaction ratings; graduate completion rates; and graduate salaries after six months) plus an element of peer review. Taken together, and with a layer of benchmarking to weight scored on the basis of the student profile of each institution and how much educational “value add” a university has achieved, these would constitute a measure of teaching quality. *Gill (2020,p.1)*

The stated intention of the TEF is to assess and measure the quality of teaching (Strang *et al* 2016). Some are sceptical of its ability to deliver (O’Leary *et al* 2019). Wilkinson and Wilkinson (2020) present an argument put forward by Maisuria and Helmes (2020) that amongst HE metrics the TEF is;

devoid of real meaning for students when making choices about … which university to apply to’ and such measures are ‘widely acknowledged to be spurious indicators of excellence. *Maisuria and Helmes (2020, p.58)*

The TEF in part seeks to measure employability, which this chapter considers is difficult to measure. Employability is different to employment, which has a clear output or measure (Harvey 2001, Pegg *et al* 2012, Grealy and Laurie 2019, Cole 2020). Although the two words are linked, there is a stark difference between being employable and being employed (Harvey 2001, Pegg *et al* 2012, Grealy and Laurie 2019, Cole 2020). Employable is a subjective quality, an individual state that helps define the person and can be possessed yet not always used, whilst the state of being employed is the deployment of skills, understanding, and attributes, with the aim of benefiting the wider economy. Hence, it is possible for an individual to be highly employable yet not employed, something that the HE metrics used do not seem to recognise (Knight *et al* 2006, Scott 2016). Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) propose employment is about the present, or a fixed point in the future and therefore short-term in its focus, whilst employability is more evolutionary and long-term, enabling individuals’ progression and development. Cashian *et al* (2015) look to move the employability agenda forward by suggesting that there are two possible approaches, one being ‘likely to gain employment’, which can be output driven, or ‘be successful in their chosen occupations’ which is seen as a more open-ended and developmental process (Cashian *et al* 2015, p.4). Rich (2015) points out that the DLHE (2008) statistics, more recently renamed Graduate Outcomes - GO (2017), are often used as a measure of success for employability, but advises caution against confusing employment with employability, and proposes a new framework of employability which embraces knowledge, skills and social capital.

Contemporary literature discusses employers’ wants and needs for employability skills within graduates (Desai *et al* 2016, Dinning 2017, Sin and Amaral 2017, Handley 2018, Rhew *et al* 2019). According to Parutis and Howson (2020), it is a mistake to fail to ‘level the playing field’, as the title of their 2020 article suggests. However, it is important to note, students start university having differing needs and expectations for employability, as do employers. Some argue that levelling the playing field (Parutis and Howson 2020) by offering employability and skills to all students through the curriculum is the desired approach (Knight and Yorke 2006, Cashian *et al* 2013, Artess *et al* 2017). This is an area this thesis sought to investigate through the voice and words of students participating in the research. This thesis’ primary research reflects the approaches of both a pre- and post-1992 university to see if and where similarities exist in how employability is delivered for undergraduate Business Management students. Knight and Yorke (2004) suggest students need to possess certain sets of skills, attributes and knowledge to be employable. Definitions of employability have moved from demand-led skill sets, towards a more holistic approach that include transferable skills. Skills which are student-led in their positioning to employability or being a social process, incorporating personal effectiveness and citizenship (Dacre Pool *et al* 2007, Tomlinson 2010, 2017, Boden and Nedeva 2010, Schmidt and Bargel 2012, Cashian 2013, Quendler and Lamb 2016). Knight and Yorke (2002) warn of the risk of reducing employability to tokenism in the form of developing key skills only, some of which relates back to the opportunity the Dearing Report (1997) had with a wide view of employability from an educational perspective. However, the report chose to focus narrowly on the recommendations on learning how to learn and key skills predominately.

Knight and Yorke (2002) raise concerns over the introduction of institutional employment performance indicators, before the approach to metrics is rolled out. These metrics are known today as the Graduate Outcomes statistics and Knight and Yorke draw attention to the risk that ‘maximising the score will command more institutional attention than fulfilling the educational aim of enhancing employability’ (Knight and Yorke; 2002, p.264). The introduction of the TEF has highlighted the difficulty in measuring and judging this area as there are many factors that can impact outcomes, such as the current labour market, students’ wants or needs upon graduation, the students’ starting point and networking opportunities. It is acknowledged that seeing beyond current measures of salary grades and employment rates, which are current measures of success, is important for employability in HE today (Bridgstock 2009, Cole and Tibby 2013, Tomlinson 2017, Cole 2020). Contemporary thinking suggests employability is about more than just supporting students to get their initial job. It is a process of ‘becoming’, related to graduate identity (Murphy *et al* 2001, Knight and Yorke 2006, Hagar and Hodkinson 2009, Cashian *et al* 2015). Recent research contests the notion of a transferable skills set, suggesting employability is more of a process of ‘becoming’, relating to graduates self-review and identity (Hagar and Hodkinson 2009, Hinchcliffe and Jolly 2011, Tomlinson 2017). Daniels and Brooker (2014) question the value of an approach based on teaching students a set of generic skills, arguing an alternative approach would be to focus on building students’ identities. Maisuria and Cole (2017) assert there is a tension between developing employability skills and being employed as discussed earlier in this chapter. There exists anecdotal evidence of graduates being employed without having engaged in employability activities whilst at university. This may be for a variety of reasons, such as having the ability to engage in personal networking, which might be as, or more, important than developing their own employability throughout their studies. There may be graduates with a wealth of employability competencies and skills developed whilst at university who are under- or unemployed, which questions the metrics for employability within HE.

Clearly our collective understanding of ‘employability’ is pivotal to modern higher education delivery, but the underpinning concepts are not yet fully formed. The measures we use are blunt instruments, incapable of reflecting the nuanced and complex realities of transitioning from education to work *(Kellett and Clifton 2017, p.1)*

More recently, employment is positioned as a personal state (individual) graduates occupy. As highlighted previously, it is worth acknowledging that one can be employable but unemployed (Cashian *et al* 2015, Maisuria and Cole 2017). Britton *et al* (2016) suggest good employability skills do not automatically lead to a better labour market position. One major contributor to this is the government’s programme of widening participation or massification of HE, e.g., increasing access to HE, without a corresponding increase in the number of graduate jobs being created. This undoubtedly impacts metrics, as it lessens the chances of all graduates finding graduate level jobs, leading to more graduates being underemployed or worse unemployed (Mavromaras *et al* 2013, Verhaest and Van der Velden 2013). The idea of having employability skills but not being employed is an important factor for educators and curriculum leads in HE, as it can directly impact the destinations of their students, affecting the institutions’ performance against targets and metrics. Focusing on students as individuals and creating a curriculum that embraces flexibility is important in order to meet the different needs of students, but also the political drivers in HE contribute to the possible success or failure of metrics. This is discussed again in chapter 3 as well as the political drivers to open up access to HE, which may lead to these unintended consequences.

The Conservative government seemed intent on not even entertaining the notions that (1) metrics could be problematic and damage the purpose of the universities; and (2) metrics like the ones proposed in the TEF may be spurious measures of excellence. *Maisuria and Cole (2017, p.10)*

This may be true, given the current labour market changes in light of Brexit (the British exit from the European Union May (2019) and the COVID-19 pandemic (Global pandemic ongoing from 2019-22). Employability is a developing topic for HE pedagogical research and is continuing to increase, but concerns over the metrics in this area are noted. A recent review of literature on employability for the Advance HE has provided a comprehensive proposal for what is needed going forward:

Advance HE views embedding employability as providing the opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes that enable graduates to make successful transitions benefiting them, the economy and their communities…. All stakeholders, including academic and support staff, students, careers services, students’ unions and employers, have a role to play in embedding employability and should be encouraged to engage in and be involved in doing so. Employability should be integrated into the culture of the institution. *(Tibby and Norton 2020, p.5)*

Tibby and Norton (2020) note many stakeholders are involved in embedding employability to help graduates transition into their careers. The work of Knight and Yorke from the early 2000’s features in many discussions over the past 20 years, as they sum up what employability within HE is. Below is one of numerous quotes which effectively summarises the complexities around employability.

The complexity of employability and the variety that exists in curricula in UK higher education means that no single, ideal, prescription for the embedding of employability can be provided. Embedding has to be undertaken with reference to the curricular context *(Knight and Yorke 2003, p.2)*

Embedding employability may be a widely supported approach, but this can take differing forms and stakeholders may influence this. The next section focuses on one group of stakeholders, students, and the Student Voice. Views and opinions of how curriculum and the student journey to some extent could be student driven, to allow their buy-in and commitment. The Student Voice is fundamental in this research as it provides a student perspective on employability in HE.

**2.4.1 Conceptual models of Employability**

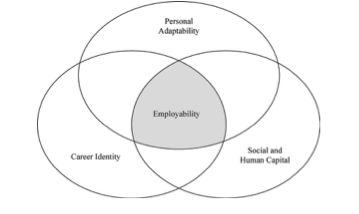
The chapter so far has presented literature on HE and what employability means in this context, we now seek to consider conceptual models and research to help frame how others work may link to this research and its findings. This is useful to understand as it allows this research to draw on elements that align to the findings within this thesis.

There have been numerous attempts to create models of employability that seek to define the relationships between variables and also act as a practical tool for those working in HE. This section selects several relevant models and explores them through the lens of a spectrum that stretches from a generic ‘one size fits all’ model through to a bespoke model for each student. The research aims to understand the individuals and their supports for employability, so more attention to models and frameworks focusing on the student will be considered in this section.

The Knight and Yorke (2004) USEM model which emphasises the Understanding, Skills, Efficacy and Meta-cognition is highly regarded throughout the HE sector and is academically valued but has not been considered in detail here as it focuses on educators and academics, at an institutional level rather than the practical application that supports students more directly. Knight and Yorke do recognise the value in focusing on the student and that employability should be a lifelong endeavour not simply a tool for initial graduate employment. The HEA Employability framework (2015) which is based on research by Tibby and Cole (2013) for the HEA was also considered, but again is pitched at an institutional level on how to embed employability in HE rather than how students would apply it more specifically. This research is looking for models, that concentrate on the student and their practical application of employability.

Both Fugate *et al* (2004) and McQuiad *et al* (2005) focus their psycho-social models of employability through emphasising employment and being employed. There are critics of this, raising concerns of this over-simplistic view of employability being about developing set skills or securing a job (Knight and Yorke 2006, Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Minten 2010, Higdon 2016, Cole and Hallett 2019). Models such as Hillage and Pollard (1998), Knight and Yorke (2004), Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) Kumar (2007) and Tomlinson (2017) are more concentrated on students and their personal/professional development with a longer-term focus on their careers and lifelong learning for personal and professional development. Although concerns have been raised for these types of models that the balance may be tipped too much towards the student or individual with suggestions these may lack the required consideration of external factors (Cole 2020) that Fugate et al (2004) and McQuiad *et al’s* (2005) work brings. There is merit in the need to consider the external influences, as chapter 3 suggests these frameworks do not necessarily align to the government’s rhetoric in the way Fugate *et al* and McQuiad *et al’s* work does. To present a variety of perspectives the following three models will be investigated further in this section: Fugate *et al* (2004), Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and Tomlinson *et al* (2017). The features of the three models will be investigated, reflecting their fit or alignment to the interpretations of employability from government, institutions and students’ perspectives.

The first model resonating when researching is the Fugate *et al* (2004) heuristic model of employability featured below, which focuses on a proactive approach to employability (Ashford and Taylor 1990), putting the onus on employees or in this case, students to secure employment. They suggest there are three key areas to be addressed in order to achieve employability as featured in the diagram below:

 M. Fugate et al. / Journal of Vocational Behavior 65 (2004)

The model is very externally focused considering industry and the need to get workers into employment and progressing. The limitations for this model are, that it is very focused on employment rather than employability and is more industry based where many models are written by academics for the HE arena, so consider students and graduates more specifically.

The DOTS model by Law and Watts (1977) which facilitates the development of planned learning experiences around four areas; Decision learning, Opportunity awareness, Transition learning and Self-awareness focuses on the student and how they can unlock their employability potential. This is an important model to highlight as many of the more recent models have used in part the DOTS model as a starting point. The SOAR model (Kumar 2007) takes a positive position encouraging students to consider themselves in positive terms and aligns in part to the DOTS (Law and Watts 1977) model, encouraging positive self-reflection. This links to the work of Goleman (1996) and the concept of self and social awareness, which is further considered in Tomlinson *et al* (2017) and their Graduate Capital Model (GCM) through the element of social capital. This model requires some further consideration as is one of the most recent models to attempt to framework employability for students.

The GCM works on students applying five areas of capital to themselves, these areas map into models considered earlier in the section. If we take the Human capital area for example it can be seen in elements of Fugate *et al* (2004), Knight and Yorke (2004) USEM model, Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) and Kumar (2007) all giving importance to students being able to recognise and articulate the knowledge, skills and competencies they possess.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

The GCM has been implemented into practice as a tool for students to use whilst studying, but it fails to feature in curriculum specifically, so it may be suggested that the practical application of the model is being left to chance (Cole 2020). Students need to be made aware and choose to engage with the model in order to successfully navigate their future employability. This is an area Cole and Tibby (2013) were keen to address in their work on employability. Many models are missing how to practically embed across institutions not just to inform HE and curriculum leaders on their overarching strategic approaches to supporting employability. One model that really focuses on the students and their practical application of employability is the final model to be critiqued, the CareerEDGE model (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007) as it is most aligned with developing students and their employability as individuals. It encompasses elements of models such as DOTS model by Law and Watts (1977), Knight and Yorke USEM (2004) model and Fugate *et al’s* (2004) heuristic model deliberated earlier in this section. The comparison and similarities are noted between the CareerEDGE model and the USEM model (Cole 2020) and many models over the last 20 years have reviewed, applied or critiqued other frameworks or models in this area as a starting point. These models have differing labels but focus similarly on elements for students or individuals to consider about themselves. Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007) used these as a starting point to develop their employability model which depicts a metaphoric key as the image below indicates.

Diagram

Description automatically generated

The emphasis of the model is on the five areas in the left-hand circle which is where students can take opportunities to development themselves and their skills and competencies, an area which curriculum leads can work into courses to open access to such opportunities, but wider than this it considers the students as individuals and their whole existence, not just their study elements. The success of this model is that by offering support in addressing the initial five areas and giving students the tools and time to reflect and evaluate their development, may lead to the three S’s self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem. It is these self-reflecting areas which will allow students to unlock the power of their personal employability (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Tomlinson 2017). Others have supported and critiqued this model, praising its ease of use for not just academics and HE leaders but students too. What is encouraging about this model is it moves on from Fugate *et al* (2004) and Mc Quaid *et al* (2005) to highlight the importance of preparing for employability not employment and more emphasis is positioned in enhancing future graduate employment, with the longer-term focus on individual careers. It is important to acknowledge that having a narrow view of learning and development for purely a work context is limiting the success of applying employability models and supports (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Kumar 2007, Tomlinson 2017, Cole 2020).

Contemporary writers have promoted the importance of preparing students for a complex world, suggesting a fluid approach is required (Jackson 2008, Barnett 2011, Scott 2016, Cole and Donald 2022). Many acknowledge the need to recognise both informal and formal experiences whilst considering the complete student not just their studies and university experiences. Elements such as work, social networks and pass times all can add valuable learning away from formal settings that can support in developing students and their employability.

From the conceptual frameworks and models presented in this section, it is clear to see there are many similarities in what students or individuals need to consider in order to support themselves to be more employable and develop their own employability path (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Kumar 2007, Tomlinson 2017, Cole 2020). The focus on the individual is key to success through supporting a self-reflective and personalised approach which are important. The focus for HEIs need to be strategically applied but consideration to a course and student level needs thought, this can be done by having flexibility to allow the practical application to be successful.

**2.4.2 Student Centred Approach to Employability**

Much of the literature explored so far has been framed by the sector as a whole and has explored wider purposes of HE. However, it is important to recognise the centrality of students in the process; this fits with some of the other contemporary terminology such as ‘Student Voice,’ ‘students as partners’ or ‘students as co-creators’. Students as collaborators or partners is a quickly developing area within HE currently (Hämäläinen *et al* 2017). Tuhkala et al (2021) suggest a definition of the Student Voice:

The aim of empowering students to make decisions about teaching and learning practices is known in academic parlance as Student Voice (Tuhkala *et al* 2021,p.1).

Contemporary research suggests student voices need to be heard, as students have lots of ideas and feedback to share (Cook-Sather 2018, Holker 2019, OfS 2020). Politics is driving this agenda, through the OfS and other HE bodies such as Advance HE (2014) and the Higher Education Academy (2015). Students are being referred to as an ‘unspent resource’ in HE (Gärdebo and Wiggberg, 2012,p.1). This is important for the overall learning experience but in such changing times, students can be seen in some universities as partners or co-creators in their learning environment. When students make contributions to curriculum reviews or are seen as co-creators then they feel part of the process of influencing change. This often refers to not only listening to students, as the term Student Voice suggests, but including them in processes of change. For example, students could take up an active role in course and curriculum design, module and assessment design and working with and supporting fellow students in buddying or mentoring approaches (Bovill 2015, Cook-Sather 2018, Holker 2019).

Most recent HE thinking is moving away from the term Student Voice, as this might suggest only listening to students, towards a concept of students influencing and working to change the HE space they occupy. This can be seen in OfS’s 2020 move to place students at the centre of what HEIs do (OfS 2020). Areas of literature makes the assertion employability should be student-centred rather than curriculum-centred, i.e., something students drive rather than merely ‘go through’ (Clarke 2018, Bennett 2019). The shift away from a curriculum focus to something students experience, can be seen with Tomlinson (2010) when he viewed employability as:

A social process as much as a labour market ‘outcome’ and this process inevitably entails the active positioning of graduates within the wider labour market context within which they are located... *(Tomlinson 2010, p.80-81)*

This is relevant to this research as it shows a current perspective in HE and employability, particularly placing the onus on students, making them in some way responsible for shaping their own HE journeys and that of future students. Tomlinson’s Graduate Capital Model (GCM) (2017) reflects the moves to help students prioritise their student journey to focus on their own individual employability needs. This personalising approach is shared by other researchers (Hinchcliffe and Jolly, 2011, Stevenson and Clegg 2011, Holmes 2013, Cashian *et al* 2015). Contemporary thinking on employability is becoming more aligned with unique learning opportunities and experiences which enable students to develop their own distinctive set of skills and capabilities and making them more employable upon graduation. This allows graduates to view employability as the start of an on-going process, and something that can clearly be linked to the economic imperative and the idea of HE as an individual investment. This builds on the work of Becker (1993) who sees education as an investment which an individual makes in themselves to gain returns in the future through the labour market. Encouraging development of human capital also supports the development of a stronger knowledge economy, with the GCM 2017 aiding both hard and soft skills which are essential to building a graduate’s overall human capital and it is as much about the soft skills students build as well as the technical and subject specific skills. The focus of this model is on personal development of ourselves as individuals and focusing on our personal and social capital to align sufficiently to the right job markets upon graduation (Tomlinson *et al* 2017).

To counter Tomlinson’s model and the focus of individuals delivering their skills journey to support employment options (Hinchcliffe and Jolly 2011, Stevenson and Clegg 2011, Holmes 2013, Cashian *et al* 2015), it is argued

it is social capital that is the crucial factor which opens up work opportunities, not the acquisition of competitive skills (Higdon, 2016 p.191).

Students should have emotional intelligence and be aware of their social capital (Goleman 1996, Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Tomlinson 2017, Cole 2020). This ties into this research, where participant views of networking and connections is deliberated. This questions the place of employability in HE; if social capital is an important driver for graduates gaining successful employment to achieve the metrics for universities, why would universities invest so much time and resource into employability initiatives? However, it is important to acknowledge employers value skills highly as a report by Universities UK (2016) suggests:

There appears to be coherence among graduate and employer views: both rated skills/aptitudes and relevant work experience as the first and second most important factors in attaining employment. (*Universities UK 2016, p.30)*

To reiterate Rich (2015) from earlier in the chapter, employability measures should embrace knowledge, skills and social capital to be successful. This is pertinent to this research as the robustness of employability metrics in HE has been called into question (Bridgstock 2009, Cole and Tibby 2013, Tomlinson 2017, Cole and Willox 2021). One area of concern is how the added value is measured, and how personal development from a university experience can be measured, taking into account what exists through personal social capital which students already possess outside of their university experience. A review of TEF (2022) was undertaken and two significant areas connected to employability were added: positive progression results and changes to student outcomes. This relates to employability and student voice (Dickinson and Kernohan 2022) which is central to this research as it clearly connects HE and employability through government drivers. Considering social capital and student voice ties back into the thesis by getting accounts from students of their stories and experiences throughout their student journey. The next part of this chapter focuses on defining concepts deemed important for the scope of this thesis.

**2.4.3 Employability and the Knowledge Economy**

In the 1960’s employment moved towards a more service-based economy and as people were made redundant from secondary sector employment, the government instigated a broad shift in how HE should be framed going forward. The most notable change came in the 1970’s with the development of the post-industrial society, culminating with the Ruskin Speech which emphasised education’s contribution to the economy (Callaghan, 1976). There was a conscious change of discourse and alignment to government policy around HE and the linking to employment. This will be explored further in chapter 3, where the political aims of creating a ‘knowledge economy’ is considered. A knowledge economy can be defined as

An economy in which growth is dependent on the quantity, quality, and accessibility of the information available, rather than the means of production *(Oxford English Dictionary online 2021)*

A government paper entitled ‘Higher Ambitions – The future of the knowledge economy’ (2009) states:

In a knowledge economy, universities are the most important mechanism we have for generating and preserving, disseminating and transforming knowledge into wider social and economic benefits. *(Higher Ambitions – The future of the knowledge economy 2009, p.2)*

This rhetoric continues to prevail as more recent government literature supports the push for a UK knowledge economy too.

There are strong arguments to encourage greater competition between high quality new and existing providers in the HE sector. Graduates are central to our prosperity and success as a knowledge economy, and higher education is a key export sector. *(Success as a knowledge economy - Johnson 2016, p.8)*

More recent literature has referred to the growing prominence of the knowledge economy:

The ‘knowledge economy’, which is growing at an astonishing pace, can refer to an economy built around ideas and intellectual capital – from software to patents – and driven by technology (Waugh 2019, p.1).The notion of a knowledge economy can be traced back over 900 years with the connections between knowledge and the economy being noted (Temple 2012). The English education system and the political landscape changed significantly over this period. The increased focus on employment and the concept of a knowledge economy (Barkas, 2011, DBIS 2016, Williamson 2021) can be seen in the work of Bell (1973), when he proclaims the arrival of the post-industrial era. This was a time when industry moved to providing services rather than goods, and where universities displaced factories as the axial structure of society. The transition in education to a knowledge economy serves as a framework for the development of employability within education.Education plays a key role with greater emphasis on intellect rather than physical or natural resources within the economy (Radice 2013). This is not confined to the English HE landscape, as governments across the globe seek to address their own employment challenges through greater connection to the economic imperative for future human capital (Govender and Taylor 2015). Bell (1973) suggests the importance of a knowledge society, this was around the same time the English government began to see a shift in the economy towards knowledge-based employment.

The sources of innovation are increasingly derivative from research and development; second, the weight of the society—measured by a larger proportion of GDP and a larger share of employment—is increasingly in the knowledge field *(Bell, 1973, p.574)*

*A knowledge driven economy is one in which the generation and the exploitation of knowledge has come to play the predominant part in the creation of wealth.* *(Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), 1998)*

After the publication of the DTI White Paper (1998) there was an increased movement to see individuals as capital within the economy, referring to individuals in terms of their economic value or inputs. The government set a progression to HE target in 1999 which later increased to 50% of school leavers progressing to HE (Higher Ambitions 2009), suggesting the benefits of an economic imperative are recognised at a government level. This view continued in successive governments until the recent speech by the Secretary of State for Education who announced the 50% target was being scrapped (Adams 2020). The continued dominance can be seen in the choice of the title for the 2016 White Paper, ‘Success as a Knowledge Economy’, and by the direct link to universities and how they can aid government objectives.

Our universities have a paramount place in an economy driven by ideas and knowledge. They generate the know-how and skills that fuel our growth and provide the basis for our nation’s intellectual and cultural success *(Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (DBIS) 2016, p.7)*

The importance of the Knowledge Economy is disputed with one notable critique coming from the Wolf Report (2002) which stresses the importance of a range of jobs. Brown and Hesketh (2004) reinforce this by stating the need for highly-skilled jobs in a knowledge economy is exaggerated by the government. They suggest government insistence on this strategy serves to distract from their focus on competition in the labour market, maintaining the myth of the need to be highly qualified to succeed. Wolf (2016) suggests employers have increased requirements in job vacancies, whilst Merryfield *et al* (2013) countered that many roles do not necessarily need HE level skills to perform the job, thus inflating the skill levels in the economy. Wolf infers a degree is being used as a mark of quality in the younger generation although there is no clear evidence a degree is required to do many jobs, it is however a requirement when recruiting for such jobs. This inflation of entry grades impacts the economy and industry, and whilst the metrics suggest the demands of a knowledge-based economy and a human capital theory approach are being met, the reality is this is aided by grade inflation which is not proving necessary.

This implies several factors may have conspired making it more difficult for young people to acquire employability skills without continuing through the post-16 education system, thus working towards the government’s vision of a knowledge economy. Adopting a market-based approach supports the suggestion HE has developed into a marketised environment, as the costs for HE have been passed from the government onto students. Recent ideology has referred to this in contemporary papers such as ‘the corporate university’ (Blass 2005, Lui *et al* 2012, Webb 2018).

Finally, if students are regarded as inputs into the economy, the question remains: why are so many English undergraduate students either under or unemployed? Nearly half of graduates’ work in jobs that do not require a degree (Grassby 2014). It is proposed that the knowledge economy builds knowledge, adds value and contributes to our economic needs (DBIS 2016). This may be true, but against a backdrop of high numbers of students graduating into a much lower number of graduate level roles that are available, in 2020 the Institute of Student employers reported a 12% drop in graduate level jobs. This raises the question of why educate to UG degree level if there is a shortage of suitable graduate roles. In the English labour market, it appears there are more vacancies in low or technically skilled jobs, such as retail and construction industry roles? Is the answer either.

1. This is a myth, and the knowledge economy is not real or is not necessary, or

2. That English HEIs are not developing the right employability skills to get our graduates into jobs?

At this point it is important to reiterate the key finding of this part of this chapter. There are several different imperatives at play in the university sector, broadly the educational and economic. Balancing the different demands tends to mean each university emphasises different aspects of their offering. One area that contributes to the economic imperative is the suggestion universities are operating as businesses, by adopting some neoliberal tactics as the next section contemplates.

**2.4.4 Neoliberalism as the defining ideology**

Universities compete in their marketplace and the prevailing approach may be described as neoliberalism. There is much debate regarding the definition of neoliberalism, and it remains an ill-defined and often contested concept (Mudge 2008, Boas and Gans-Morse 2009, Peck 2010, Birch 2015, Cahill *et al* 2018). Harvey (2007) as well as Mirowski and Plehwe (2015), were reluctant to commit to a definition, suggesting it was both a political project and an intellectual movement with the flexibility to change with the times and setting. Peck (2010) concurs that neoliberalism is both elusive and perplexing. These views can be summed up by Venugopal:

An extraordinary number of different and often contradictory phenomena have come to be identified as neoliberal *(Venugopal 2015, p.169)*

Since the 1980’s universities have undergone a series of reforms designed to make them more responsive to the country’s economic needs (Knight and Yorke 2004, Clarke and Patrickson 2008, Minten 2010, Tomlinson *et al* 2017, Wright and Shore 2019). There is a view that in order to deliver a knowledge economy, neoliberal approaches to HE is necessary, however, there is scepticism of this approach (Radice 2013). Harvey (2007) raises the point, neoliberal approaches have become so ‘enmeshed’ in HE that they are almost natural or normalised.

Runs smoothest when it’s not noticed as such, this state of being taken for granted, being assumed is where ideology exists at its purest *(Blacker 2013, p.6)*

Others are not supportive of neoliberal approaches in HE and contest the necessity of neoliberalism and occupational positions that are created as unnecessary to keep academics working on pointless or ‘bullshit’ jobs (Graeber 2015, p.48). For the purpose of clarity within this thesis, the definition adopted is of neoliberalism as a process that stresses competition between providers, looks to business and industry for focus and guidance, and believes the free market can deliver benefits and should be as unrestricted as possible (Turner and Yolcu 2013). The policies of the 1997 government reinforced neoliberal approaches which were advocated by the 1992 Act. This moves adult education to a competitive situation, where HEIs compete as businesses, predominantly focusing on opening HE to market forces and making them as unrestricted as possible. Education is framed by neoliberal principles of free market, free enterprise and metrics which suggest measurements of success through statistics and league table positioning (Ball 2003, Hyland and Merrill 2003, Simmons 2008, Graeber 2015). To contextualise this in relation to the education sector, a small amount of related research exists which warns of the negative impact of neoliberalism on education, particularly in terms of its impact on students (Saunders 2017, Turner and Yolcu 2013).

Neoliberalism has become the most widespread and dangerous ideology of the 21st century *(Turner and Yolcu 2013, p.xiv)*

Turner and Yolcu (2013) proposed the neoliberal lens is unsuitable for contemporary HE, being at best counterproductive and at worst fundamentally damaging to the sector. The last 30 years have seen a change in the underlying culture within the HE sector with a prevailing shift to what might be termed a neoliberal approach where students are customers (Tomlinson 2017). This approach encourages competition between providers and creates an environment in which the economic imperative is viewed as key and competition between providers is seen as a way of improving standards. The neoliberal approach can be seen in HE with the removal of some state support and the encouragement of competition, shown in the major move to tuition fee funding and attempts to create a market in HE through metrics and league tables.

The aim of a neoliberal approach is to create a free economy but, this rarely occurs. In this instance, there are numerous examples of how the government intervenes to ensure graduates meet the employment needs of the country. This approach is underpinned by a reliance on metrics (Ball, 2003) that guides universities with what to focus upon. This shows HE is often driven by policy changes that are reinforced by successive governments through the introduction of successive Education Acts. Arguably, most notable amongst them is the ‘Further and Higher Education Act (1992) (DfE 1992) which is described as a turning point in the culture of education (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2018) showing a neoliberal approach is not fully applied as only parts of HEIs truly incorporate a business focus. Chapter 3 is devoted to looking at both the history of government policies in relation to the employability agenda in HE and the implementation of metrics with the paths of education and economics entwining, market forces resulting in the dominance of the economic imperative.

Over a hundred years ago, Pantaleoni (1898) argued for the need to promote a ‘hedonistic world’, where the focus was on absolute free competition. This prevailing approach is evident in much of modern education, with universities managing and performing as businesses, competing for customers (Tomlinson 2017) and attempting to gain a competitive edge by offering more than their competitors. An example of this is the unprecedented number of unconditional offers *made* to potential students, with UCAS suggesting a 2175% rise between 2017 and 2018 (Morgan 2018) to entice student commitment to attending a particular university. Focusing on England specifically, drivers such as higher student fees and the marketisation of HE have brought more scrutiny (Pemberton *et al* 2013, Blackmore *et al* 2016) which has led to a myriad of different approaches (Knight and Yorke 2004). This is central to this thesis as it signals a shift in how students are perceived. The university league tables and metrics such as the GO survey link directly to employability for students, showing that results serve as a marketing tool as much as an educational imperative. This may be a deliberate aim of government in their marketisation of HE by moving the costs of HE onto students with the introduction of increased fees and competition. The majority of HE institutions all applied to charge the top limit of £9,250, which to some extent undermines the neoliberal principle of competition based on price and value for money. Cost is thought to be one of the key drivers in creating a market for HE. Whilst in some ways, this has a positive impact on the sector, with record numbers attending university and a significant increase in the number who achieve ‘good’ degree grades (defined as a 2(i) or above) (HESA, 2019), this has come at a significant financial cost. The cost to students has been substantial, with the average student now leaving university with a debt of over £50,000 (HESA, 2019). In addition to this, the numbers who attend university have not risen as expected since 2005, when student fees tripled, amid concerns over widening access expressed in the Augar (2019) report. As chapter 3 will suggest, the journey of employability in HE is strongly linked to, and restricted by, government regulations and initiatives focusing on connecting to the economic rather than the educational imperative.

Neoliberalism, which stresses the 3Es of economy, efficiency and effectiveness (Metcalfe and Richards 1990) seeks to correct HE problems, although its success could best be described as ‘mixed’ (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2018). There were clear inefficiencies in education prior to the adoption of this approach (Simmons 2008) with non-viable class sizes, high student dropouts, excessive teaching loads and weak financial management being features identified prior to the 1992 Further and Higher Education Act.

It is important to present a neoliberal approach not just in purely negative terms. Neoliberalism has a profound impact on HE with its creation of competition, markets and metrics. There are some highly contested notions of the knowledge economy and concerns around neoliberal approaches making HE a consumer-centred environment through commodification and marketisation of courses and study. Individual views of neoliberalism in HE are varied, with some suggestion that HE should be protected from wider political trends (Readings 1997, Collini 2012, 2015, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017). Readings (1997) posits, the true culture of HE is being lost in the pursuit of excellence for a consumerist ideology. There is an argument that the pressure put on universities to compete in a marketised way is damaging institutions, and knowledge exchange with learning gain is being sacrificed for fads such as embedding employability or student choice approaches (Readings 1997, Fearn 2008, Collini 2012, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017). The fear is meeting metrics to satisfy the political agenda becomes a priority over the educational imperative.

One such example is ‘performativity’, a term coined by Ball (2003), concerning the embedding of metrics such as the GO in 2018. The GO metrics are implemented with the aim of measuring the percentage of graduates gaining graduate level employment up to fifteen months after leaving university. This measure, however, could be seen as a flawed approach as it is dependent on a number of outside factors. When the economy is negatively impacted, this may manifest itself through labour shortages, job availability or job security issues (Clarke and Patrickson 2008), which in-turn impact at a public policy level through government but directly linking to HE and graduate outcomes too. This is an area to be mindful of in the current economic climate; Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic will continue to have an impact on the national and global economies. In particular the labour market will be affected, when graduates are seen as assets or capital, but reduced employment opportunities are available. Other factors include the aspirations of individual students, existing social capital and the industries students choose to move into. Ball (2003) stressed concerns for institutions focusing efforts on their performativity within the sector, suggesting tasks are often completed as a box-ticking exercise rather than for any tangible benefit. This may be linked to political governance through insidious targets on HEIs, with employability being one such measure. There is also reference to educational establishments having acquired the ‘ability to speak fluently the language of performativity’ (Orr and Bennett2012, p.5), implying they engage with focusing on employment based metrics to make their institution look good in terms of metrics such as those now used in the TEF, which focuses on employment as one of its measures (Higley 2017). The concern in education is metrics appear to be the focus for universities rather than the prioritisation of the development of students. This approach relates to value being linked to the adoption by HEI leaders of transactional rather than transformational approaches, which might truly add value to a student’s experience. Tomlinson (2018, p.11) refers to this as the ‘measured market’. An example would be the TEF, along with employment metrics, which are seen to contribute to the ‘authoritarian neoliberalism’ (Dalrymple *et al* 2021) deriving from a political economy (Tansel 2017, Bruff and Tansel 2018). Contemporary research highlights employment is a prominent component in the development of the TEF (Rich 2015, Scott 2016). It is important to note areas within the TEF such as employability will need fuller deliberation as the framework is embedded further, since at time of writing, only a pilot and one iteration of the metric had been implemented. Initial reports indicates there may be a division on the TEF’s approaches and measurements, particularly in relation to employment and employability (Ashwin 2016, Murphy 2017). The TEF is going through review, change and development at the time of this thesis completion so this research recognises that there is an evolving and ongoing debate around the topic of employment metrics and the TEF (Dickinson 2022).

Neoliberalism may be seen as the dominant paradigm within English politics, and this is being reinforced by the focus from universities and government on developing highly skilled graduates ready to enter the job market (Zajda 2020). Neoliberalism continues to be an important but contested part of HE as it potentially changes the aims of universities to focus predominantly on the economic imperative. Increasingly, neoliberal approaches are seen through quality assurance, which focuses on metrics rather than capturing rich and meaningful learning journeys (Graeber 2015).

**2.5 Summary**

To conclude, the educational imperative that existed historically for the holistic learning purpose of university does still exist for some, but there are drivers in contemporary HE for the economic imperative to play a more prominent role, as this section highlights. This has been during a time when the drivers to increase the number of people progressing to, HE was the objective, during a time when graduate level opportunities have been declining for a variety of reasons, not least technological and economic changes as well as the impacts of both Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic on recruitment and jobs. This also leads to a tension between HE aims and under or un-employed graduates, resulting in a negative impact on the employment metrics applied.

The next chapter is dedicated to tracing back the history of HE and its connections with employability. History plays a major part in shaping our futures so an understanding of how the two areas became so entwined is central. The role the government plays in HE is an important relationship to understand in this thesis.

**Chapter 3 - Higher Education and Employability; A brief history**

**3.1 The origins and history of the University**

This chapter is a review of the history of the university as an institution in the UK. It is valuable as it allows the tracking of government policy along with the related funding and regulation changes made in HE. It links with industry and the changing focus of priorities towards developing employability within HE throughout the last sixty years. Throughout history, education has been viewed as key to the development of society. Initially, for religious reasons, some churches supported and developed scholars so that more people could access the Bible’s teachings. Later, for social reasons, universities were founded with the intention of educating the emerging middle classes. During the Industrial Revolution, the focus moved to mechanical reasoning, originating from George Birkbeck and his creation of the Mechanics Institutes (1823). This approach changed not just education but also society, allowing both the working class and women (1830) the opportunity to access post-school education (Kelly 1952). This can be seen as the forerunner of today’s employability agenda, producing and preparing graduates for the world of work.

During the 1990s, the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) pushed for a further expansion of HE and suggested a target of 50% of 18–30-year-olds entering HE by 2010 (this was subsequently adopted by the new Labour government). A pivotal speech from Tony Blair cemented this goal and confirmed education as paramount to the vision of a knowledge economy. The political leaders of the time stressed the same message; from Tony Blair (1995) ‘Education is the best economic policy there is’, to Gordon Brown (2007) ‘it is people—their education and skills—that are necessarily the most important determinants of economic growth’. Even more recently the message is broadly the same: ‘the government’s reforms are equipping our young people with the skills to win the global race for success and compete in the modern, knowledge economy’ (Alan Mak MP, 2016). Knowledge is seen as power by governments.

The orthodoxy of encouraging greater numbers of school leavers to attend university has been challenged in recent years by the previous Secretary of State for Education (Williamson, 2020b). In a speech in July 2020, he referred to the 50% target as ‘an absurd mantra’ which he did not accept, but he goes on to say, ‘we must never forget that the purpose of education is to give people the skills they need to get a good and meaningful job’ (Williamson 2020b). This appears to be a clear indication confirming the government has a clear and continuing commitment to encouraging universities to provide graduates for the future of industry, and thus a clear commitment to the knowledge economy.

Historically education has been regarded as a set of values which encourages commitment to and support of employability, but contemporary ideology leads us to question education and be critical of all that is presented in order to progress education (Allen, 2012). Education is often seen as transforming (Thompson 1963). Pioneers such as Robert Raikes and Hannah More (1880) were seen as revolutionary, as they brought education to groups who had previously been ignored, notably women and the working class. This development of accessibility was not universally popular, and this thesis looks to examine these contrasting positions in more depth.

To fully understand the role of employability within the wider context of HE it is necessary first to adopt a historical perspective, to consider the commonalities as well as the changing landscape that contemporary HE operates within. This next section focuses on tracing the journey of HE and how employability is incorporated.

**3.2 Tracing the journey of employability within education**

**3.21 Robbins Report (1963)**

It is acknowledged in the UK since at least the publication of the Robbins Report (Committee on Higher Education, 1963) that there was a need to make clearer connections between the national economy and undergraduate education. Since the publication of the Robbins report there have been more noticeable links between the national HE system and the English economy (Harvey 2002, Yorke 2006). Over the years this relationship has become more apparent, particularly at points where public investment has increased. The Robbins report focused on skills and workplace readiness, factors which Cole and Hallett (2019) most recently claimed presented too narrow a perspective. Sumanasiri *et al* (2015) echoed the assertion of Robbins (1963) that there is a connection between employability skills of graduates and the course curriculum within HE. There is particular emphasis on integration of both curriculum and employability skills to support students in readiness for graduation.

In the early 1960’s there was a view that HE and universities had evolved from their historic purpose as places of study where individuals could develop intellectually. Students were primarily at university to enhance their human understanding through enquiry and discovery (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017). This was predominantly seen as a social good, aligning to the educational imperative. A subtle, but important, change came from the implementation of the Robbins Report in 1963 which made recommendations for the immediate expansion of universities. It also saw the introduction of the ‘Robbins principle’ that education ‘should be available to all who were qualified by ability and attainment’ (Robbins, 1963). This saw the establishment of polytechnics, which were largely created to teach transferrable technical and vocational skills to students to prepare them for working in industry and the public sector.

To summarise, Robbins was one of the first key political figures to focus clearly on the need for employability and education to be more aligned to promote economic prosperity, initiating the economic imperative approach. This was not significantly developed further until Callaghan came to power in 1976.

**3.22 Callaghan – The Ruskin Speech (1976)**

In 1976, the presiding prime minister of the UK, James Callaghan, gave a pivotal speech, called the ‘Ruskin College Speech’ soon after his appointment to post in October 1976. In it he called for a ‘Great Debate’ about the nature and purpose of education. Callaghan spoke of the complexity of modern life and the need to aim for something better, where education was for life. The government’s goal was to provide education from nursery through to adult education. They were working to equip children to learn to the best of their ability, with a sense of value in society and to prepare learners to make a positive contribution to the economy as members of the labour market. This was expressed by both Robbins (1963) and Callaghan (1976), In his speech, Callaghan openly called for a public debate on education which would call on employers, trades unions, administrators as well as teachers and parents to get involved and present their views and opinions.

The overarching essence of this speech was that the education system was out of step with vital political and economic needs of the UK to compete efficiently in industry and this needed to be addressed. This was a significant speech as it called on all stakeholders to play a part and get involved in linking employment and education more, as this would ensure that the country had the right skills coming through the education system to keep the economy functioning. This reinforced the drive to embed employability within the HE curriculum, although the word ‘employability’ was not at this point commonly used. Instead, the focus was on transferable skills or key skills for industry. Callaghan also called for education to be a lifelong process; an aspiration that has been echoed subsequently, most notably by Kennedy (1997) whose desire for ‘lifelong learning’ is still used twenty-four years after the publication of ‘Learning Works’.

Callaghan made further inroads into linking HE and employability. Brant and Vincent (2017) refers to his Ruskin speech as a turning point in educational policy for employability. Callaghan raised concerns this subject was ‘shrouded in secrecy’ and pledged that the government would take a proactive role. This led to the introduction of a national curriculum with greater diversity in the types of schools and what they offered. Callaghan started to introduce greater choice for parents in which schools their children attended. It has also been suggested that New Labour’s clear reliance on clear and measurable metrics, holding schools and staff accountable for the tracking of student progress (Maisuria 2005), can be traced back to this initiative. This impacted HE, as going forward the Conservative government looked to dilute the perceived power of universities.

With the Ruskin Speech, Labour aimed to align education and employment and create control, accountability, standards and metrics to achieve these aims and goals which were perceived as being linked to the needs of the economy (Maisuria 2005, Chitty 2013). These may have subtly paved the way for the introduction of the massification of education and later an unintentional alignment of a neoliberal approach to education, where HEIs were tasked with performing in-line with business tactics.

The Labour party lost to the Conservatives when Margaret Thatcher came to power in 1979, which resulted in a change in focus and priorities in the education agenda. However, what is interesting is the role employability played in the agendas of both Labour and Conservatives at this time. The Ruskin speech made it clear the government expected universities to act upon employment. The subsequent suggested era of neoliberalism also saw a focus on employment but this time the push was from market forces rather than the government. There is potentially a disconnect of strategic aims between the educational and economic imperatives, but they are united in seeking the same outcome, which is improving employability in HE.

**3.23 Thatcher/Major - Conservatives Reign (1979-1997)**

Other British Government leaders from the late 1970’s through to the 1990’s made attempts to support employment to make England more competitive in the global market but often the attempts lacked conviction. An example of this is the disconnect between the commitment to employment expressed by the 1979 Conservative government and the subsequent inadequate HE budget (Grove 2013). Margaret Thatcher’s priority when coming to power was not centered specifically around education and employment. She recruited Keith Joseph in 1981 to lead the education department and make changes. Her major educational legacy was the Education Reform Act (1988) which saw the establishment of City Technical Colleges (CTC) to introduce vocational education. The introduction of courses such as BTECs as part of the ‘enterprise in HE “initiative” prompted a wider debate about employability. This was a pivotal development as the CTCs opened the delivery of education to market forces. ‘The reforms tie together in an attempt to create a market/consumer driven provision of state education’ (PSI). The introduction of CTC’s, along with parental and student choice, was not welcomed by all. It was accused of limiting the attainment of some young people in society. ‘With the development of these initiatives, there seemed little cause for optimism that the term 'comprehensive education' would come to mean anything significant beyond the age of 14’ (Chitty 1989, p.163). This may have been seen as an attempt to improve employability as such vocational qualifications also taught transferable skills, which were embedded within courses, these were decided upon predominately by industry and commercial managers. This gave staff working on supporting employability for students hope.

For a brief moment it looked as if at last a British government was going to catapult the country into a position where it could compete with other industrialised countries which had already made all these changes through comprehensive education reform and an integration of vocational and academic education. (Benn and Chitty 1996, p.17).

The wording echoed that of the later Wolf Report (2011) and showed the lack of action in the subsequent years. This would not happen as John Major and his administration were not in favour of the vocational, skills focused approach. When John Major became Prime Minister in November 1990, he inherited an education system that had lacked investment and needed attention (Benn and Chitty 1996). However, both the incoming and outgoing administrations shared similar views over selection, elitism and a negative view of the local authorities and teachers. To further his agenda, Major was responsible for the ‘Further and Higher Education Act 1992’ (F&HEA 1992) which transferred control away from the local authorities to central government, with the aim of returning control to individual schools or organisations. The Act also introduced the idea that schools and the private sector should be more closely aligned, which supported the configuration of government policies and HE is connecting on the need to support employability skills in future graduates. One of the objectives of the Act was to use ‘the good practice from industry, within education’ (DfE 1992). This was partly focused on allowing industry to tell the education sector what they needed from graduating students. It also saw the start of the commercialisation and marketisation of the sector, which had the stated aim of using best practice from the private sector to help ensure the smooth running of Britain’s FE and HE sectors. To facilitate this, the former polytechnics were granted university status and the term ‘post-92’ universities was coined. Universities, particularly the post-92s, were expected to prepare students for life beyond academia and to groom students for the world of work (Crossan 2017).

The F&HEA 1992 was a key piece of legislation that impacted the compulsory education sector and one that inspired corporatism and a managerialist approach (Courtney 2015). Schools, colleges and universities were increasingly asked to justify decisions to stakeholders and to ensure that the demands of students were kept central to their decision making. The primacy of key performance indicators such as league tables, quality marks and inspections was reinforced by comparisons made between providers. In theory, this was designed to ensure that new students have multiple sources of information to hand when they decide which institution to attend. Some argued, however, that this focus on quantitative data encouraged HEIs to concentrate on data rather than considering the wider concept of education, as observed by Coffield and Williamson (2011). Turner and Yolcu (2013) raise concerns over neoliberal approaches that rely heavily on metrics, which could be counterproductive.

The marketisation of education extends beyond HE and is noted in several different sectors. Courtney (2017) discusses the corporatisation of compulsory education in the post-16 sector. Ball (2003) notes the switch to a performance-based system using key performance indicators (KPIs) to measure performance. These examples have their roots in industry. The rise of a predominately neoliberal approach to the sector also sustains the push towards ensuring students are ‘industry ready’ with the subsequent introduction of tuition fees in 1998. Universities are seen by many as having a primary purpose of ensuring that students who pay fees have employability skills embedded within their courses.

The 1980’s was the time when neoliberalism began to dominate in the education sector (Holmwood 2014). Neoliberalism, as chapter 2 explores, is a manifestation of a closer alignment with the introduction of CTCs, which were partly funded by the private sector with a mandate that they should ensure the future employability of students. This is important when considering the claims of a neoliberal approach to education. Cadbury’s in Birmingham is one such example of this approach, where the local community were prepared for not the world of work generally but the world of work more specifically at Cadbury’s.

Calls for a large-scale review of education led to the Dearing review of the National Curriculum in 1994, and a further review of Qualifications for 16-19-year old’s, published in 1996, just before the 1997 Education Act in which vocational qualifications were modified. ‘The national committee of inquiry into HE report 1997’ was a pivotal point in HE. The Conservatives addressed education and employment as they focused on escalating unemployment figures. They did this by concentrating on the employment options of school leavers. This makes a clear link to the economic imperative through the development of education focused on aligning employability and developing key skills in the nation’s young people. The subsequent report recommended the introduction of tuition fees and the expansion of industry-based vocational courses should be a key part of the education strategy. This recommendation, despite regular criticisms (Wolf, 2011), has been at the heart of successive education policies, most recently with a significant increase in the number of apprenticeships being government funded. Despite the recent upheaval in UK politics with Brexit, it seems unlikely this would change soon, even if there was a change in government. This was also a key policy area for the Labour party seen in their 2016 general election pledge:

…Lifelong learning, cradle to grave. You never stop being a student. Raynor (2017).

The thread linking education and politics throughout this period is a drive to improve employment, which connects to the outcome of a neoliberal tactic to education. The main difference being their approaches, governments were adjusting the out of sync approach from education to employability and the neoliberal approach contested government involvement stating employability should be in step with industry and market demands.

**3.24 Blair, The Dearing Report (1997) – The Moser Report (1999)**

Publication of the Dearing Report (1997) made the link between industry and HE, suggesting that it should grow holistically. His report focused on supplying this through developing students’ ‘learning skills’ which related employability to the achievement of skills for life. This tied into the work undertaken with the expansion of HE and the creation of the post-92 universities. The Dearing report further proposed the HE sector should focus on basic skills such as communication, numeracy, personal development planning, team-working, problem solving and IT/digital literacy skills. Dearing referred to these as.

Key to the future success of graduates whatever they intended to do in later life (Dearing Report 1997, p.133).

Referring back to chapter 2, many academic writers have been and continue to be hesitant to commit to a list of specific skills. Based on the Dearing Report (1997), the government made recommendations that every student should have the opportunity to take a work placement, resulting in additional funding being allocated to the apprenticeship and HE budget. The succeeding Education Act (1997) also made the connection between education and employability by modifying vocational qualifications. In addition, both Dearing (1997), ‘The national committee of inquiry into HE Report 1997’ and the Kennedy Report (1997) sought to promote widening participation in HE for various underrepresented groups, for example, ethnic minorities, women, and students registered with disabilities. This was a time when HE institutions were forging links with employers (Gilliard 2016). Employability became an area of policy for government with publicly funded initiatives. This extra funding meant there was a need for more accountability in HE, particularly in the area of graduate employability, as well as a requirement to evidence the value for money of the additional investment. This funding for the embedding of skills was given further impetus by the election of Tony Blair in 1997, when he gave his now famous political speech in which he advocated ‘education, education, education.’ In this speech he set out his priorities, one of which was to put education and classrooms at the top of the political agenda. This focused predominantly on raising standards of teaching, with the slogan ‘standards not structures’ but also facilities. There was more funding for buildings and also more accountability for schools and staff. Blair wanted to get the foundations right before tackling the concerns within HE. This was when ‘new Labour’ put the employment discussions high on the political agenda and framed it clearly in terms of the needs of a knowledge economy (Coughlan 2007). This would come at a cost, as Blair introduced tuition fees for HE whilst attempting to widen participation, justifying this move by introducing funding and loans for all and specifically encouraging students from lower income families to progress into HE.

This focus on helping all sectors of society to gain the skills they needed was managed by the newly created ‘Office for Fair Access’ (OFFA). Blair’s time in office saw the introduction of tuition fees in 1998 to fund the HE promises, at a time when David Blunkett was Education Secretary. Loans started at a capped rate of £1000 per year and were means tested. At the same time there were attempts to support widening participation to encourage students from lower income families to progress to HE. This was not the only aim of widening participation. The initiative also sought to ensure that England had a skilled workforce to meet the challenges of the twenty-first century. This shows the path of education crossing and linking with the government’s plans for employment and the needs of Britain in relation to addressing or mapping to the workforce needs.

The Moser Report (1999) highlighted the need to build on widening participation, emphasising the requirement to get the basics right first. Raising standards in literacy and numeracy was considered to be integral to the success of instilling in children the ambition to progress, either vocationally or academically, into HE. Moser’s Report (1999) agreed that there was a need to raise standards in literacy and numeracy, as these basic skills would support future employability and were often identified by employers as being vital. A main objective of the government was to improve educational standards, enabling more students to have the choice of entering HE (Gilliard 2016). This push for the marketisation of education whilst focusing on employability set the scene for much of the landscape of modern day HE. It marked a shift in the relationship between the student and the university towards one that stressed the outcome and links to usable skills at the end of the degree (Thompson and Wolstencroft 2018). The era of neoliberal approaches (Courtney 2015) as highlighted in chapter 2 had a significant impact on the direction of university curricula. This needed to be addressed before education could tackle a fundamental area such as supporting employability within the curriculum. In 2004 the Labour government passed a further bill to increase annual fees for students to £3000 per year with effect from 2006, rising to £3250 for the 2010 student intake to take account of inflation. In 2005 however, UCAS applications fell and data from UCAS 2006 showed 15,000 fewer students starting university, which was a concern for the government (Education for England 2011). This linked to the Kennedy Report (1997) in ‘widening participation’ which focused on getting people from across the societal spectrum into education. Whilst on the face of it the push for inclusivity was done to help people who may have otherwise been neglected by education, it also widened the skills pool for UK industry. This raises the question of whether its implementation was entirely philanthropic in nature, or whether it was linked to a hidden employability agenda (Ecclestone and Hayes 2019).

**3.25 The Coalition (2010) and Wolf Report (2011)**

The Browne Review Report of 2010 centered around the idea, the choice of going into HE was one of individual human investment for personal benefits and also adding to economic growth. This focus was seen as blinkered and narrow but keenly supported by the new coalition (Holmwood 2014). This report brought the focus firmly back to HE in 2010 when the coalition came to power because many Liberal Democrats had pledged to abolish university fees if they got into power but instead many of them ended up voting to nearly triple HE course fees to £9,000+ per year in most places, which David Cameron and the Conservative party pioneered and drove through. The rise in fees largely in response to the Browne report resulted in mass student protests and riots. Wilkins (2010) concluded HE could be regarded as an end in itself or the gateway to industry, but it would be students who would have to pay for this. The onus and cost of HE is central to the thesis, should it be students or HEIs that responsibility lies with? With a change in fee responsibility from HEIs and governments to students, would this also mean a change in student attitudes to their student experience and journey? Alongside the introduction of the higher tuition fees, the Wolf Report (2011) suggested a major redesign of vocational courses was needed. One of the major elements for concern in the Wolf Report was students being advised into dead-end courses and the figures showing a third of all students in vocational education did not seek to progress to HE. Since this report, the government has demonstrated an increased focus on employment, working with employers and supporting a focus on student experience for future employability. DBIS (2011) produced a report ‘Higher Education: Students at the heart of the system’ which devotes chapter three to ‘a better student experience and better qualified graduates’ (DBIS 2011, p.33-45), and confirmed a commitment to actively seeking to support employability within the HE Student body.

Embedding employability into the core of HE will continue to be a key priority of Government, universities and colleges, and employers. This will bring a significant private and public benefit, demonstrating HE’s broader role in contributing to economic growth as well as its vital role in social and cultural development. (Higher Education Funding Council for England- HEFCE 2011, p.5)

The quote above showed governments ‘intention to influence and policy choices to entwine education and employability into the curriculum for the benefit of the workforce and wider society. With these commitments however, came increased fees of £9000+, which came into effect in 2012 committing to producing business ready graduates and the rise of apprenticeships. Michael Gove as Education Minister made reforms and changes mainly in the primary and secondary education area as too did his successor Nicky Morgan (Gillard 2016). This was done with the aim of raising standards early to give more young people the educational choices for their futures, but some would suggest the reality was it turned schools into exam factories (Coffield and Williamson 2011).

The Government, amongst other HE stakeholders such as HEFCE, Office of Students (OfS) and the Nation Union of Students (NUS) (2011), have emphasised the need for there to be a strong connection between HE and the prosperity of the economy (DBIS 2016). In the tracking of government influences in HE and more specifically employability, the next key indicator came with the introduction of the ‘Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF 2017)’ as the next section contemplates.

**3.26 Introduction of REF/TEF (2012 – 2021)**

A main focus from 2012 to 2021 in HE has continued to be around employability but also more institutionally focused on improving standards, with the introduction of the ‘Research Excellence Framework’ (REF) and the more recently introduced ‘Teaching Excellence Framework’ (TEF 2017). Aimed at improving standards, this brought to the forefront the concern over how best to effectively measure employability activities within HE. Both the REF and TEF are target driven initiatives that have a clear steer from government, which also impacts the UK HE league table positioning (Barkas et al 2017). This may show the government’s commitment to mapping HE and the needs of the economy through the labour market and employment rates, but this time through an approach that stresses setting targets and measures. This links back to chapter 2 with the consideration of performativity, metrics and the suggestion of neoliberal approaches within HE.

Looking more recently at the political and economic links between education and employability in 2017 the then Universities’ Minister, Jo Johnson, discussed how ‘HE has long been one of the most powerful sources of opportunity, broadening students’ minds and expanding graduates’ career options’ (Johnson 2017). A prominent component of TEF, is employability which places a metric for the development of employment in undergraduate courses for graduating students (Rich 2015, Scott 2016).

The government, amongst other HE stakeholders, emphasised the need for there to be a strong connection between HE and the prosperity of the economy (DBIS 2016). Government has stipulated through the creation of the TEF (2017), the importance of having employability as a central requirement of all HEIs, by ranking universities on key elements of employment. In its introduction it lists four key objectives of the TEF, with one being ‘better meeting the needs of employers, business, industry and the professions’ (TEF 2017), which may highlight government intention to integrate their focus of education and employment specifically within the area of undergraduate employment in England. The TEF “assesses excellence in teaching at universities and colleges, and how well they ensure excellent outcomes for their students in terms of graduate-level employment or further study” (OfS 2019, p.5). Using metrics such as the DLHE introduced in 2008 (Scott 2016, Rich 2015) and more recently in 2018 replaced by the GO survey, forming part of the TEF also making attempts to measure universities success in employability of students. This links back to section 2.4 in chapter 2 where the debate of employability not necessarily equaling employment was discussed, and will be focused on further in this research, through the findings.

Contemporary research of employability and the employment of graduates led to the replacement of the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) to GO as the new Graduate Outcomes survey gave students a longer timeframe to secure their career roles and consider what a successful graduate might look like (Oosman-Watts 2017). This contemporary approach created by the introduction of the TEF has not been positively received by some in academia particularly many Russell Group universities failing to secure the highest gold award. Some claim the TEF is not fit for purpose (O’Leary et al 2019). The TEF has undergone a review in 2021 which was not considered in the scope of this research as it was emerging after the dates this research was concluded.

The TEF’s launch and awards did not go down well in some HEIs, as discussed earlier in this chapter and so the government instructed an independent review of the TEF, which was conducted by Dame Shirley Pearce and published in August 2019. This review highlighted the key principles required of transparency, relevancy, robustness and proportionality. The government published an interim response in January 2021. This response paper clearly shows commitment to the employment agenda in the opening statement made in the report.

The government is firmly committed to ensuring that our HE sector is better aligned to the needs of the labour market and economy… Sir Williamson 2021a

This is a crucial statement when considering the focus for this thesis, as chapter 2 investigated, HE and the positioning of employability and employment is a contested area. This response document rejects the recommendation of proportionality and student satisfaction should sit within the TEF aspects of quality. A clear and firm commitment however to employability in HE by the government is the concluding of this review, it lists stakeholders who need to see credibility in the TEF as students, parents, employers and providers. Listing employers here in the TEF gives another clear commitment to their opening statement above and aligning HE to the needs of the labour market and economy. During the rolling out of the TEF and the Pearce review by the government, consideration needs to be given to the Augar report (2019) for HE and its implications or impacts as the next section deliberates.

**3.27 Augar Report (2019)**

The Augar Report (2019) reinforces the link between education and employability very clearly its first principle:

Principle 1. Post-18 education benefits society, the economy, and individuals. The potential benefits of an increasingly educated adult population have guided our work. But increasing the sheer volume of tertiary education does not necessarily translate into social, economic and personal good. That depends on the quality, accessibility and direction of study. Augar (2019, p.12).

This first principle sets the agenda for the rest of the report to focus on the economic imperative, with links between industry and the HE sector, and reinforces the controversial introduction of the TEF, where the last section highlighted the prominence of employment and employability (Rich 2015, Scott 2016). Whilst there has been significant criticism of both the methodology and the purpose of the TEF (O’Leary et al 2019), there is currently no suggestion that it will be modified in any significant way, as concluded by the Pearce Review and the subsequent government response. Hence, the TEF in its current form helps to cement the link between industry and education (McVitty 2019). As noted earlier in this chapter, the TEF has since undergone a further review and changes. The advent of T Levels and the continuing development of apprenticeships suggests that government is still highly focused on ensuring that students are ready for the world of work and on building a knowledge economy.

The recent Augar review (2019) shows how funding implications, changing priorities and even the change of political leadership can impact on governmental priorities. It may also be fair to say that since the Augar Report (2019) there has not been substantial progress, which may be because it was published fairly recently with little time to have an impact, and it was difficult to predict the future, particularly in such a fluid landscape as the contemporary education sector. Since its publication, two major phenomena have affected not just the English HE system, but the global HE context: Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. Both continue to have a major impact in the UK since early 2020.

As Education secretary, Sir Williamson published the government’s interim report on Augar’s review in January 2021 citing the ongoing pandemic as a justification for the delays in response and the continuing delay in finalising the conclusion of this review. However, in a clear and consistent discourse, Sir Williamson echoes his earlier response to the Pearce review’s interim report, emphasising the economic imperative in his opening statement:

In 2018, the government launched a review of post-18 education and funding, with the aim of ensuring that post-18 education gives everyone a genuine choice between high quality technical and academic routes, that students and taxpayers are getting value for money, and that employers can access the skilled workforce they need. Sir Williamson 2021b

Williamson (2021b) summarises three key areas for significant change now and over the next 10 years as:

1. The impact of a global pandemic

2. Delivering on new opportunities outside the EU (Brexit)

3: Adapting to changes that big data and other technological advancements bring

In doing so he put HE at the forefront of the necessary responses. According to Sir Williamson, one approach to this is the government’s new ‘International Education Strategy’ to attract and retain the best international students who can contribute positively to our economy. He also set a clear commitment to the current Prime Minister, Boris Johnson’s speech from September 2020, promising a more flexible system that allows everyone to access and benefit from education throughout their lives, whilst also benefitting the economy and labour market. This came from the funding recommendations made in the Augar report which proposed a ‘Lifetime Skills Guarantee’ from 2025, under which everyone would be able to apply for a ‘Lifelong Loan Entitlement’. This would have major ramifications for education and HE in particular. It would impact not just who chooses to study but also what, when and how they study. This thesis will not focus on this, as it is too recent and remains a developing area, with the timelines beyond the scope for coverage in this research. It is, however, a very important development to be aware of for future contemplation and links back to chapter 2 section 2.4.2, the knowledge economy. This thesis focuses particularly on the three areas Williamson focuses on above, to trace the connections and impacts on HE

**3.28 Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and technological advancements (2019-2021)**

This chapter set out to trace the history of education and its links to employability through economic policy. This mapping has shown that a constant state of flux is the norm, and that employability is not the only factor that has driven education policy, but it is without doubt a key one. Since Boris Johnson - assumed office in 2019, both the education sector and the economy have been influenced by significant changes in the global environment. The advent of Brexit gave rise to concerns over de-internationalisation and trade agreements, as well as the changes to the free movement of people in the short and longer term. These were key factors for the UK economy and HE, with the risk that there might be an impact on the large numbers of international students being able to travel to the UK for study.

The issue of how funding might be impacted for students, particularly fees for EU students and the issue of their student status, was outlined by the Universities minister (Donelan 2020). There have already been changes to costs for EU students which may impact student choice going forward as the costs are set to rise. However, the picture is not one of complete doom and gloom, as since October 2020 the best and brightest international students (Including EU students) have been granted a new route to extend their stay in England via a new points-based immigration system. This supports further the interim announcement towards the end of 2019 which permits a 2-year post study work visa, with the aim of giving opportunities for talented international students to be retained in the UK job market. Both these government initiatives were positioned around attracting and retaining talent to drive the UK economy forward, and contribute to the push for a knowledge economy as Foster (2019) highlights:

We also want to ensure we retain the brightest and the best students to continue to contribute to the UK post-study, which is why we (the government) are launching the Graduate route in the summer of 2021. This additional new route will allow those who have completed a degree at a UK Higher Education provider with a track record of compliance to stay in the UK for two years and work at any skill level, and to switch into work routes if they find a suitable job. (Foster 2019, p.2)

This was further supported by the Education secretary in a speech in September 2020 when he outlined the aims for HE, (Williamson, 2020a). Another government press release states that the post-study work visa for international students would:

...allow eligible students to work, or look for work, in any career or position of their choice, for two years after completing their studies. (Gov.uk 2019 p.1)

This prompts a question regarding the wording ‘any skill level’, or ‘look for work’: how does this contribute positively to the knowledge economy and drive for a highly skilled workforce if there is no requirement to have undergraduate degree level employment? This may not adequately address the concerns of voters with regards to immigration, and it may negatively impact the unemployment figures that the UK is currently experiencing as a result of the three areas Williamson highlighted, the COVID-19 pandemic, Brexit and technological advancements. These topics are ongoing and wider than this research focus and so may be an area for further investigation as the realities evolve. With the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit, would transnational education be impacted? Are research and funding avenues currently available reducing or will they dry up all together? How will English institutions be impacted with employees and non-UK staff which currently plays a key role in all HEIs across England (Herridge and James 2019, Lay 2019)? There are lots of questions posed but at the time of writing this thesis there were no clear answers or guidance on how these conundrums might play out. In their book on Brexit and HE, Herridge and James (2019) note many students are already choosing to study in other European countries as a result of the uncertainty that Brexit presents. With the potential reduction in the market for international students in HE (Scott 2018) as a result of the confirmation of the Brexit vote (BBC Politics-Johnson 2019), the projected figure for students graduating from English universities appeared negatively impacted by the Brexit confirmation. In a short space of time there has then been the added issue of the COVID-19 pandemic. Not only was HE severely impacted by successive lockdowns and global restrictions on travel, every sector and person has been affected in some way. Campuses in England and further afield were closed and staff and students had the challenge of moving learning, assessment and teaching online. The effect of the pandemic on international recruitment, with its financial and practical implications, are yet to be seen fully.

**3.3 Summing up connections between education and employability**

An area for possible concern in the future is the UK HE sector’s ability to compete globally. There are currently several ongoing concerns, as discussed throughout this chapter in Brexit, the COVID-19 pandemic and technological advancements and changes in HE particularly within the home nations, as each of the four countries have adopted their own approaches and regulations for supporting HE through these areas, leading to a lack of consistency. More significantly the uncertain political landscape in the aftermath of Brexit is likely to impact and influence HE not just in teaching but also research, funding, student body and student numbers going forward (Frostrick 2017).

This historical review shows the relationship between government policies and the economic imperative, as well as linking funding and regulation changes to the development of HE. It shows links with employers and the changing focus of priorities towards developing employability in HE over the last sixty years. What is evident from an analysis of the historical context is the economic imperative has been paramount since Robbins’ Report (1963), employment has been central to the government’s vision of education. What has not been consistent has been the execution of the vision, with numerous approaches used, most lasting only until a new government or leader takes power. A short-termism approach to addressing the current government’s agenda or strategy for HE and in driving a knowledge economy. The HEA report compiled by Artess et al (2017) relates to the movement within HE on the embedding of employability rather than what was once less engrained.

One interesting approach has been to move away from the discussion of employability as a list of skills and attributes towards a subtle discussion of ‘identity’. In such an analysis, the question becomes not simply about encouraging the acquisition of skills, but rather in helping students to transition from the identity of a student towards that of a graduate worker and citizen. (Artess et al 2017, p7).

This is an area of continuing development in relation to research on embedding employability in HE and may be a valuable area for further consideration. Another area of debate is the tension between metrics which focus on graduate employment statistics misalignment of how students are supported to develop their skills and attributes for future employability, as discussed in the previous chapter of this thesis. This rigid measurement is likely to increase, given metrics such as the GO form part of the TEF awarding approach. The most recent Augar report again reinforces the political agenda in wedding education, particularly at HE level, to employability and the needs of the economy now and in the future. The government faces many challenges impacting the possible success of education policy, with not only Brexit and the Covid-19 pandemic, but also the accelerating speed of technological advancements. 2020 may well have been the year of forced changes and restructuring within HE and that was predominantly for some HEIs to survive but it is clear events continued to push further changes. Changes have or will impact all stakeholders in HE not least students, employers and industry more generally.

To conclude, education and employability have become increasingly aligned over the past sixty years. This alignment is relevant as the background for this thesis. Neoliberals argue the role of the government is purely to maintain a free market at all times. This means the needs of industry, as a key stakeholder for graduates, has come to the forefront as neoliberalism has thrived. Callaghan (1976) called for a ‘Great Debate’ around the purpose of education and called for schools, colleges and universities to meet the needs of industry and for government to help facilitate this. Whilst the mechanisms to achieve the end goal differ, the objective of both the educational and economic imperative are the same, resulting in the entwining of education and employability.

The literature provides a link to this research; it shows the centrality of government in contemporary HE, particularly in the area of employability as this chapter has emphasised. This work allows the exploration of the research objective’s which focus on the place of employability in HE, howemployability is integrated into a students’ HE experience, whoseresponsibility it is and what differences may exist in the drivers to support employability in a students’ HE journey. The research in this chapter highlights differing perspectives to employability depending on individual viewpoints and as such will be reviewed and interpreted. This leads on to chapter 4 which covers the methodology and the methods used in the thesis for research and data collection. It tracks the approaches taken and attempts to highlight any bias or influences within this research. Chapter 4 also picks up personal considerations and the possible impacts these might have on the research and its findings.

**Chapter 4 – Methodology**

**4.1 Introduction**

This chapter explores the methodological approaches used in this thesis and the research methods employed. The chapter focuses on personal positioning, including an examination of the implications of being an insider researcher, as well as the biases this perspective may bring to the research (Greene 2014). This is important as the background of any researcher influences the approaches taken or methods used, so this should be acknowledged. The philosophical position adopted within this research is one of interpretivism. This signifies the belief that multiple lenses may be used to view a topic, as well as reflecting the complexity of the idea of employability. In order to reinforce this position, the research adopted a qualitative approach to the design of the research tools, with primary data being collected from two HEIs. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, looking at employability and student experience as well as small-size focus groups of a sample of final year undergraduate business management students.

To help the understanding of the reader, please refer to diagram 1 which summarises the broad approach taken, as well as providing brief details of the research methods used.

**Summary of the Methodology**

*Table 1: Summary of Methodological Approach (adapted from Cantrell, 2001)*

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Feature** | **Application** |
| Purpose of the research | * To critically evaluate how employability can be embedded in the curriculum and the challenges that this can lead to. * To address the research objectives. |
| Ontology – Constructivist/Relativist | * There are multiple interpretations of what employability means and all should be viewed as ‘correct’ since everyone sees things differently and has their personal interpretations * Reality is socially constructed and is fluid in nature. It is the shared cultures we inhabit. It is both individual and collective. This means that it can be shared both within and outside an organisation but it will not always be the same. * People make sense of their worlds by means of conversations with others. |
| Epistemology – Interpretivist  Positionality | * Events are understood through the process of interpretation, and reality has been understood through human interactions.   Insider researcher   * My relationship with the sector means I am likely to be viewed as an insider researcher. This helps me to construct knowledge but also leads to potential biases that need to be recognised. |
| Methodology | * Qualitative collection has been used. This has been gathered as an insider researcher using an inductive approach |
| Methods used | Two English universities were chosen:   * Eight semi-structured interviews with staff and four student focus groups were conducted. |

**4.2 Philosophical underpinning**

Ontological and epistemological areas are concerned with my ‘world view’, which has had an influence on the perception of this research and its reality. When contemplating the ontological approach, my research aligns to that of an interpretivist, which is rooted in understanding human behaviour (Hammersley 2012). It accepts that there are different beliefs and views. They do not need to be the same as the researchers, but it is important that they are heard, noted and presented. This appears in direct opposition to its alternative, positivism, which is based in certainty from findings which can be generalised (Remanyi et al 1998, Saunders et al 2015, Ryan 2018). With an interpretivist perspective, the focus is on gaining a deeper understanding in a unique context. There is no attempt to generalise the findings (Creswell 2011). As an interpretivist, my job is to listen to what the participants said, to try to understand their views or context and to consider how they came to their views. For example, staff included in the interview do not need to believe that including employability in the HE curriculum is beneficial. Instead, it was important to present the differing views and analyse them equitably in order to be better informed with the research findings and recommendations.

Despite the criticisms that paradigms can limit a researcher’s approaches, some believe that research should have a philosophical grounding (Atkinson 2013) otherwise it has no foundations, is rootless and often therefore inconsistent. This was why a commitment has been made within this chapter to the interpretivist approach. Scholars have discussed how the fear of failing to commit to a particular approach can impact on the perceived success of research (Oakley 1999, Howe 2004, Gokturk 2005, Creswell 2011)

**4.2.1 Interpretivism**

Interpretivism considers the meanings and understandings of individuals and their perceptions, (Denzil and Lincoln 2008, Guba 1994). It allows for knowledge production in the area of embedding employability in HE to be added to and enables meaning around the employability processes researched to be established. This approach was adopted due to my belief that reality should be seen as a social construct, rather than something always shared by all participants. Views or perspectives differed between individuals and institutions, which is accepted. It embraces the notion that everyone will see things differently, as we all have our own perceptions sculpted from our unique experiences and backgrounds. The aim and role of the researcher is to attempt to uncover and understand others’ perceptions or understandings of employability (Denzil and Lincoln 2008, Guba 1994).

We have seen from the literature review that employability, and in particular employability skills, may mean different things to different individuals and industries in which they are interpreted (Allman and Wallis 1995, Myers 2010) as the models in 2.4.1 highlight. This maps well to this thesis, as its focus is predicated on the contention that employability can, and does, mean different things to different people. An interpretivist approach to this thesis allows for an exploration of the meanings attached to an individual’s response. It allows attempts to see this research and its findings through the eyes of the sample and to explore multiple understandings of employability in HE, thus making generalisations impossible (Williams 2000, Thanh and Thanh 2015, O’Donoghue 2019) but the data may indicate some patterns or trends which may be useful in the overall research.

Interpretivism highlights the need to put analysis into context, and to understand the world as it is experienced by individuals. It concerns itself with the meanings of findings as opposed to their measurement (Denzil and Lincoln 2008, Guba 1994). The recommendations from this research seek to achieve a deeper understanding of how staff and students perceive the embedding of employability in English HEIs. There is no intention to draw generalisations from the findings, as they are a snapshot in time. The same research conducted at a different point in time, or with different participants, would deliver different results. As a researcher it is important to acknowledge this from the outset (Williams 2000, Thanh and Thanh 2015, O’Donoghue 2019).

**4.2.2 Research approach**

Qualitative research methods have been used and an inductive approach was adopted. This inductive approach has allowed specific points which were identified in the semi-structured interviews and focus groups to be considered (Prince and Felder 2006). This enabled the emergence of themes from the findings to be identified. In contrast, a deductive approach would have indicated the existence of a clear theory at the outset, which was not the case for this research. The abductive research approach was also discounted as it is better suited to a mixed methods approach which again, did not form part of this research, whose focus is purely inductive.

**4.3 Positionality**

Stenhouse (1975) suggests subjectivity is crucial to informing practice, positing that value positions exist, and these two points should not diminish educational research. Given this, it is important to acknowledge the backgrounds and value positions informing this research (Williams 2000, Burgess et al 2006). Before looking in detail at the methodology adopted in this study, it is prudent to understand my own positionality when it comes to employability in HE.

I am an Assistant Professor in a post-92 university and have been supporting and teaching undergraduate students for the past sixteen years. As an educational researcher and academic, I have engaged with both colleagues and students in research which focuses on the student journey and their HE experience. During this time, I have been responsible for the design and delivery of employability-focused modules within undergraduate business degree courses. Therefore, I would be classed as an insider researcher (see section 4.3.1 on page 54 below) and this should be acknowledged in my methodology when considering my position and possible biases.

A secondary motivation for this research comes from my experiences as a mature student. As the first in my family to attend university, I have felt isolated at times and unprepared at graduation to enter the graduate labour market. I had not really considered my own work readiness in terms of career progression, partly as I was already in full time employment, and was studying part-time. I had not been encouraged to consider my career options and how I might advance after graduating. I have also had more recent experience of this, as my eldest child graduated in 2018 from a post-1992 university and in 2019 my eldest daughter began her HE journey at a pre-1992 university. I was interested to learn about their knowledge and understanding of employability and the support available to them throughout their student journey through to graduation. It was essential to consider my position as an insider in relation to this research, approaching it from the joint perspectives of a student, parent and academic with responsibilities for embedding employability in the curriculum.

It is difficult to approach any research without preconceived ideas, but by detailing my approaches in this chapter, I aim to show my attempts to acknowledge, but more importantly to limit, the extent to which my personal views might impact the presentation of the findings (Williams 2000, Burgess et al 2006, Denzin and Lincoln 2008, Mullane and Williams 2013). This approach has implications for policy and practice. This research should support personal development and understanding of some of the political and ethical considerations for projects going forward.

Nothing is value-free in research as we are all influenced by our own perspectives, personal and innate values, no matter how balanced we try to be in our research and writing (Rokeach 1973, Pugh 1977, Denzin and Lincoln 2008, Mullane and Williams 2013). It was important to acknowledge and address any vested interest in this thesis as an insider researcher from the outset. I approached my research on this thesis with a clear initial belief, namely that employability education and support make an overwhelmingly positive contribution to students’ graduate outcomes. However, while conducting this research it has become clear that this is not an unanimously held position.

The second value stance that needed to be addressed was the expectation that students will welcome the support provided by embedding employability education within course structures and academic modules. As chapters 2 and 3 discussed, employability is seen as ‘a good thing’ by government, but amongst other stakeholders such as students this might not necessarily be the case. Students often express uncertainty about the value of some parts of the curriculum that focus on skills and employability, as they do not perceive its relevance to their chosen course of study.

The final value position relates to the perceived distinction between ‘The Russell Group of pre-1992’ Universities and post-1992 Universities. This concerns the perception that the status of a university makes a clear and obvious difference when considering a graduate’s employability. The Russell Group universities profess to ‘…have a shared focus on research and a reputation for academic achievement’, whereas the post-1992 – University Alliance seeks to ‘…excel in preparing students for a career in industry and the professions. However, embarking upon the research without challenging such preconceptions might lead to an unconscious bias, so this needs to be explored further.

Having an insider researcher status is key to understanding how this research was grounded. Mullane and Williams (2013) suggest the values we exhibit through educational and social indoctrination, learnt behaviour or personal traits, are what set us apart and make us individual. This was a key part of the research; my previous experience will shape my interpretation of the findings and the results of this research. As an interpretivist researcher it must be acknowledged that bias will exist and by using participants’ exact words in the findings, the readers are able to form their own views of the veracity of the interpretations in this research. The use of the participants’ own voices in quotes when feasible, and the practice of inviting participants to review how they are represented in the findings before the final draft was submitted, both constitute attempts to reduce any bias.

Focusing on employability within HE means the work was likely to be influenced by my background and current academic role, which entails a curriculum-based project that supports students to develop themselves to be more employable on graduation. I work largely with undergraduate students and I lead modules that support students to consider their own employability and develop their skills throughout their time in HE. This impacts my positionality and raises the possibility of confirmation bias affecting this research. Confirmation bias occurs when a researcher is looking for pieces of evidence that confirm their presuppositions (Kappes et al 2020). As an example, my belief that employability should be at the heart of curriculum design in HE could mean that, when conducting focus groups, I might tend to select quotes and interpret them in a way that reflects my viewpoint. It is also prudent to be mindful of cognitive dissonance (Festinger 1957) that might occur when views contrary to my own are expressed. Being aware of this from the outset might help to mitigate this. An example of this is the partial use of transcripts for the primary research, where appropriate, to present the findings by quoting participants’ actual spoken words in the analysis stages (Corden and Sainsbury 2006).

The initial exploration of the literature suggests that embedding employability is regarded as a positive act (Lees 2002, Knight and Yorke 2006, Tomlinson 2012, Tibby and Cole 2013, Cashian *et al* 2015). However, it is acknowledged this is not a view held by all HE stakeholders, as discussed in chapter 2 by academics (Reading 2002, Collini 2012, Courtney 2017, Docherty 2015). This was a key area for further enquiry and was an important area for the thesis. There is continued debate surrounding these opposing perceptions. As an educational researcher, it is important to acknowledge that learning is a continuous process and that individual bodies of knowledge are constantly being added to. Heron (1996) suggests it is human nature to be shaped by our experiences and prior learning. This comes from personal experiences, both good and bad. Reflexivity on how events are therefore perceived warrants further consideration

**4.3.1 Insider Researcher**

Insider research is widely discussed in the literature and is described as research which is conducted from within an organisation or sample group to which the researcher belongs (Brannick and Coghlan 2007, Hellawell, 2006, Hockey 1993, Mercer 2007, Trowler 2011). It may be argued that primary research may be more fruitfully undertaken from inside organisations, as participants might be more open and honest with someone perceived to be ‘one of their own’. This, however, could work in reverse as participants might be more guarded in their responses. This was a genuine concern for this research, which attempts to be limited by stating at the outset of the interviews and focus groups that its purpose was to capture participants’ personal views and opinions and there were no expected responses or hypotheses to test. Insider research may entail perceived issues of validity regarding the impartiality of insider researchers when collecting and, more importantly, interpreting findings. HE research such as this may need further consideration when colleagues and students are participants in a research project, as was the case with this research. To be successful with insider research one must consider that ‘how the insider researchers hold their dual roles and survive and thrive politically are challenges that need constant renegotiation’ (Coghlan and Brydon-Miller 2014, p.4). The need for the insider researcher to be self-aware and self-regulating underpins the conduct of this research.

It has been said that ‘one need not be Caesar in order to understand Caesar’ (Merton 1972, p.31). Hellawell (2006) notes, as Merton’s quote suggested, that it is possible to have knowledge of a community without being a member. Although I am not an undergraduate (UG) student, I understand this group, through teaching and supporting such cohorts, and I have been an UG student myself, albeit it twenty years ago.

Increasingly academics and educators have been engaged in research within their own areas of education, often referred to as ‘practitioner enquiry’ (Greene 2014, Hellawell 2006). As Loxley and Seery (2008) assert, many educational research papers, including this thesis, in the field of HE are written by academics for an academic audience, in order to share best practice and experiences for learning at a practitioner level. The intention for this thesis is to add to the existing body of knowledge around embedding employability within the curriculum in HE and this may develop the debate further.

Sikes and Potts (2008) raise concerns which merit consideration: ‘Insider positioning is primarily important because it allows access to the particular people and/or phenomena that are being investigated. However, at times, aspects of a researcher’s own ‘insidership’ will come under scrutiny’ (Sikes and Potts 2008). This also impacts ethics and biases as I cannot ‘unknow’ something I find out in my primary research. This has been explored in this methodology section when considering interpretation and bias. People who know each other when research is being conducted (even if participants are presented as anonymous) may find it difficult to remain unidentified, especially in small groups, as other information may give indications to those inside the research about the identity of the contributor. When conducting this research, care was taken to limit the number of references to earlier interviews or professional relationships in case this inadvertently identified a participant.

A key theme of insider research is the concept of reflexivity. The idea of reflexivity is thought to date back to Thomas (1923) when he developed the Thomas Theorem. This is the theory that situations people experience as true, then do become true for them. It was prudent to be aware in-case this was a potential issue for this research. This concept was further developed by Merton (1949) who proposed that reflexivity was a self-fulfilling prophecy, and that once a prediction is made, researchers might accommodate their behaviour and actions so that the prediction is confirmed (Rosenthal and Jacobsen 1968). The suggestion is a reflexive approach may have the effect of skewing the results from what otherwise may have been the outcome. There are clear links here with an interpretivist paradigm whereby individuals interpret phenomena according to the personal lens through which they are viewed. Whilst this in itself this should not be seen as a negative, there are risks that attempts to judge information could be subject to a self-fulfilling prophecy rather than a reasoned judgement (Rosenthal and Jacobson 1968).

There has been an attempt in this chapter to address reflexivity in the research by stating my background and acknowledging my positionality, factors which might knowingly or unwittingly influence both the research processes and the results. This acknowledgement seeks to ensure that mindfulness could be maintained when this research was conducted, during interactions with participants and when trying to preserve the context of interactions (Johnson and Duberley 2000). Giddens and Pierson (1998) consider whether we, in contemporary society, are developing the ability to be more self-aware, reflective and self-regulating, and as a result more reflexive. Verdonk and Abma (2013) identify reflexivity as being important for social change. Ultimately, reflexivity is not a neutral process. Every researcher has a different lens born from their past experiences, history and social conditioning (Coghlan and Brannick 2010) but being aware of this helps to reduce the chances of influence affecting the research.

Recognition of reflexivity as a factor within ‘insiderness’ requires further consideration of ethics and their impact. For example, when securing informed consent from participants, there were researcher concerns that information may be learned within the course of my job role, which could impact my research or vice versa. There would be ethical implications as to whether this could or should be acted upon within the research. For example, I have specific frames of reference that are shared by colleagues, making it difficult for me to be truly objective in my approach. There could also be political implications if this knowledge could change how, as a researcher, I perform my job role. Lastly, as discussed earlier, there was a risk that, despite anonymising the responses of participants, they might be identifiable due to their links to the researcher, potentially putting the participants at risk if their contributions could be construed by the university as contentious. This was felt to be unlikely due to the nature of the topic. However, when presenting the findings and analysis, the potential impacts of reflexivity and insiderness needed careful consideration to avoid the identification of any participants.

In summing up the first section of the methodology chapter, I have stated my position and acknowledged the need for considering positionality and being self-critical in order to reduce the chance of bias impacting the findings and analysis of this research. The next section focuses on the data collection methods.

**Data Collection**

**4.4 Research Methodology**

Given the interpretivist paradigm adopted for this research, the logical approach was to use qualitative primary research data collection to understand the participants’ perceptions, thoughts and views on employability in HE. This was the approach taken for this research as the next section maps out.

**4.4.1 Qualitative primary data collection.**

The qualitative data came from semi-structured interviews (see Appendix A for questions) with four staff from both a pre- and a post-92 university, making a total of eight interviews. The qualifying criteria for students to be included in the sample selection was that they needed to be final year UG business management students at either institution. The reason final year students were chosen was because they were thought to be the most aware and informed of the employability supports in their university having studied for the longest period of time as undergraduate students. Some of the participant information came from general demographic data collected as part of an initial online survey to understand the participants backgrounds and profiles, (part of these are presented in a table below and in appendix C) and to start them thinking about the area of employability in HE. The sample completed consent forms and the online initial survey; they were also given participant information sheets before taking part in this research.

**Table 2. Focus group demographics**

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| Focus group Number | TOTAL number of students | Year Placement taken | International / Home mix | M/F Split |
| Uni A 1/FG1 | 8 | 8 | ALL HOME | 4M/4F |
| Uni A 1/FG2 | 2 | 0 | 1 H & 1 INT | 1M/1F |
| Uni B 2/FG3 | 7 | 0 | 2 H & 5 INT | 3M/4F |
| Uni B 2/FG4 | 6 | 0 | 2 H & 4 INT | 4M/2F |
| TOTALS | 23 Students | 8 with full year placements, 15 without | 13 Home & 10 International | 12 Male & 11 Female |

The focus of the interviews and focus groups were to gather qualitative data which reflects staff and students’ views of employability within HE by presenting findings in the participants’ own words, which was possible as all of the interviews and focus groups were recorded and auto transcribed via Microsoft teams.

According to Soobrayan (2003), in qualitative research the chief research instrument is the researcher him or herself, and the ‘ethics, truth and politics of research was consequently a deliberate exercise in taking risks, making choices and taking responsibilities’ (Soobrayan 2003, p.107/8). This was key to the research, employability should not be viewed in isolation; instead, it is intrinsically linked to the political, economic, academic and social context in which it operates. Soobrayan proposes six ways of dealing with politics arising from work-based research:

1. Understand both the surface and deep meaning to the main stakeholders of the research and its findings.

2. Informally come to understand the context in which the research is to take place. Talk to those in the workplace and informally appreciate the issues, frustrations and tensions in evidence even before the research is undertaken

3. Come to terms with your political agenda in carrying out the research and determine how far you are prepared to be manipulated by the research site politics

4. Be confident of the outcome of the research and the use to which it is to be put, try not to be the bullet in someone else’s cocked gun.

5. Accept the political context of all research and thus appreciate that your intention may not be the same as that of your research participants.

6. Engage in the politics but retain your integrity, credibility and dignity.

(Soobrayan 2003, p.107/8)

Soobravan’s (2003) work quoted above was important to this research as it gave a framework to apply when conducting the research from within researchers workplace. A strength of this approach according to the literature, pointed to the researcher’s existing experience of the organisation and their understanding of the culture and knowledge of the business or the area the research was being conducted in. It is also important to acknowledge the power relations at play between the researcher and key stakeholders in the research, as this too has an influence on research outcomes. ‘There is no straightforward polarity of academic autonomy and state instrumentalism, as no research is separate from policy’ (Ozga 2000, p.76). It has however been acknowledged by Ozga (2000) and this was why it was essential to acknowledge positionality, in having a position of power through a current academic role, it may impact the research role undertaken.

**4.4.2 Methods**

To help illustrate the methods used, table 3 below shows the approach in pictorial form. Two cohorts were selected, one group studied at a pre-1992 university and the other at a post-1992 university. This distinction ties back into the research objectives for the thesis.

**TABLE 3:**

***Qualitative methods***

Research HEIs

1 pre-1992 University – UNIVERSITY A

4 semi-structured interviews and 2 focus groups were carried out in each university

1 post-1992 University – UNIVEERSITY B

Convenience sampling of students used to ensure all strata represented

A total of 4 focus groups of students at both a pre and post 1992 university

A total of 8 semi-structured interviews with employability connected roles in pre- and post-92 universities

As detailed, the research focused on two HEIs in England, one a pre-1992 RGU and the other a post-1992 Alliance university, referred to respectively as university A and B. The rationale for choosing the samples for the semi-structured interviews and focus groups is discussed in the next section of this chapter.

**4.4.3 Sampling Method**

Arranging access to primary data for research needs careful consideration and planning. As with many professionals involved in contemporary research projects, undertaking research in a workplace can be a common practice. This often represents the most convenient and practical approach for many who are attempting to make change through research in their organisation (Stenhouse, 1975). This was the approach the research took as the primary research was conducted during a global pandemic, which restricted both travel and access on campuses.

This study adopted a convenience sampling approach to both the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups. A convenience sampling approach can be defined as ‘selecting sample units on the basis of how easily accessible they are’ (Easterby-Smith et al 2012, p.228). This related to the decision to select Universities A and B, which were selected partly due to ease of access as all English universities potentially were viable options. The interviews with the selected staff were mirrored in each organisation, with similar job role holders being interviewed (full details in section 4.4.6 on page 62). As well as having easy access to these institutions, my familiarity with both HEIs meant that virtual networking due to the constraints of the COVID-19 pandemic was also made easier than it might have been in unfamiliar HEIs. This is not to say the organisations were selected without thought to the research objectives. They were deliberately selected, as one was a pre- and the other a post-1992 university, to see if any contrasts existed. The benefits of using convenience sampling is it is cheap, efficient and simple to implement. For this research the latter two were the main drivers along with its perceived norm in contemporary student sampling (Bornstein *et al* 2013).

Convenience sampling was also used in this research for the focus groups, which contained students from a particular course and level. This type of sampling does not aim to be representative of every student and the findings could not be used to generalise all students in English HEIs. It was decided to select undergraduate final year students as they have had three to four years of learning experience and are concentrating on their next steps towards employment upon graduation. These participants were considered likely to have an optimum understanding of their own student experience and of how they felt employability was supported within their university. The interpretivist position on this sampling approach is that all findings are relevant and should be presented, as everyone has their personal view of employability, derived from their own learning journey. A possible limitation of this approach could be that this data will only give a snapshot and may not provide a full picture, therefore questioning how representative the results may be. This was not deemed to be an issue for change, as the thesis aims to add to the body of knowledge and research on employability in English HEIs, through a sample of participant voices. This thesis does not make general recommendations from the findings, instead considering them in relation to the overall research conducted when making recommendations.

**4.4.4 Online Survey**

As detailed at the start of this chapter, each student participant was sent a link to an online survey to gather the demographics of the participants in the focus group and to ensure they had thought about employability in HE prior to the focus group taking place. The findings used for this research are outlined in table 2 on page 57 and in appendix C.

**4.4.5 Focus Groups**

A focus group is a small group of people brought together to explore feelings, ideas, perceptions or attitudes by a moderator (Denscombe 2011), in this case on the topic of employability within HE. Focus groups were chosen as one of the research tools as they offer the opportunity to obtain student perspectives on employability in a less formal setting than that of an interview. Moreover, focus groups offer the opportunity for students to add to or build on what is said by other participants during the group discussion. It was acknowledged that questionnaires might have potentially yielded a higher number of respondents, but questionnaires would only provide superficial information, whereas focus groups allow for greater depth of comments and personal responses to the questions. In allowing student participants to build on what their peers say, focus groups allow them to consider other angles to the discussion, which could not have been explored through a questionnaire. The advantage of this approach was that participants’ own words could be used rather than imposing interpretations.

At both universities, a final year student representative on the Business Management undergraduate course was approached to support the selection of participants for the focus groups. Both representatives were asked to recruit two focus groups of eight students. The approach taken by the reps was to arrange the time and date with their participants, with the intention to conduct the focus groups virtually due to the pandemic restrictions. However, with the pressure of study and other commitments it ended up being a joint effort between the reps and me, the researcher. As well as conducting the research, I organised the dates and times, and sent the invitations after student representatives had made a connection with a possible participant. The total numbers anticipated were two groups of eight from each university, which would total sixteen students from each of the institutions. It needs to be acknowledged that this primary research was being conducted in the middle of a global pandemic, and as such engaging students to participate in a virtual focus group proved difficult at both universities. This was expected due to the additional and sustained pressures everyone in the sector was experiencing at this time. All four focus groups went ahead, the final sample size was slightly lower than planned, with the four groups totalling twenty-three; the biggest group was eight and the smallest was just two, but all yielded interesting discussions. Table 3 on page 57 gives some context to the types of students and numbers involved in each of the focus groups

and shows a relatively equal split of male and female students and home or international students to gain differing perspectives. The most notable difference in group composition related to work experience. One focus group contained students that had all been on year-long placements, whilst the others contained students that had some other type of work experience such as part-time work, short-term placements or internships.

In order to give validity and to check the reliability of the questions, a pilot focus group was conducted in March 2020. The pilot was conducted to ensure that the questions worked well and there were no technological or logistical issues. This was done in a live physical classroom, but with the restrictions imposed shortly after this from the COVID-19 pandemic, all the subsequent focus groups needed to be conducted virtually, as too were the interviews. The original ethics application was modified to take account of these changes and sent back to the Sheffield University Ethics team to ensure the changes would not impact the ethical approaches of this research. The research was originally planned for March and April 2020, but it was nearly a year later before it could go ahead and adopting a convenience sampling approach helped to ensure that the primary research could begin in early 2021.

Each focus group followed a format with questions prepared in advance of the session taking place (Refer to appendix B). The questions were developed from areas of the research objectives and from the work and findings when completing the literature review. Some changes to the questions and approach when conducting the focus groups were made as a result of the pilot. An example of this is a question around the pandemic and Brexit was added and their view of the overarching reason for HE learning or preparing for the world of work. All students were given the opportunity to contribute and prompts and encouragement were given when students did not respond initially. The focus groups were largely successful due to the piloting that had been conducted some months before.

**4.4.5.1 Piloting of Focus Groups**

As mentioned above, the focus group format was initially piloted in March 2020, however the landscape changed radically when the COVID-19 pandemic began. This gave an opportunity to reflect and repeat the process the following year in the first quarter of 2021, as some practicalities had to change. For example, face to face primary research was no longer possible. A positive outcome of this, however, was the opportunity to reflect and to revise the questions, the proposed sample size and the approach, moving from face-to-face focus groups to virtual sessions which would be run remotely. Having the flexibility to reflect on the pilot findings was helpful. The review suggested that two smaller groups, rather than one large one, would be more fruitful, as this format would give all the participants an opportunity to discuss and contribute to the questions posed. On listening back to the pilots, it allowed me to see that it would be acceptable to prompt the participants to elicit fuller responses. This was not done in the initial pilot due to concerns about influencing or leading the responses. In the pilot of two groups, it was observed that if one participant answered a question, others felt it exempted them from answering. Listening back to the recordings, it became clear that the research required a wider sample of responses and this was facilitated through smaller groups and by encouraging responses from all participants. This approach was checked with the research supervisor and was deemed acceptable.

The main motivation for the focus groups was to gain an understanding of these students’ perceptions around their experiences of employability modules and the support they receive when seeking graduate employment from their university. The questions were formulated from engaging with the literature on employability in HE and personal observations as an insider researcher. The reason for selecting a pre- and post-1992 university was to explore whether there are differences in the approaches to employability between the two types of institution. This was a theme that ran through the semi-structured interviews, which were conducted with HE staff participants too as the next section covers.

**4.4.6 Semi-structured interviews**

A semi-structured interview may be defined as one where the broad categories of questions have been set, however some deviation is inherent in the design of the interviews in order to explore areas of interest (May 2011).

This was one of the primary research approaches taken. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allowed some flexibility to probe and develop questions based on the answers given. Structured interviews were discounted as it was felt that having a pre-defined list of questions would narrow the possible answers. The intention in using a semi-structured interview approach was that interviewees would feel comfortable with the open-ended questions and might consequently speak more freely on the topics raised in the interviews. The aim here was to give the interviewee the opportunity to elaborate on key points or elements of interest that might not initially have been considered when discussing employability. Unstructured interview questions were also considered but it was decided that these were too loose, and interviews might deviate from the main topic as a result.

Four university staff from both the pre- and post-1992 institutions were selected to participate in the interviews. The staff were all connected to employability within their university roles. Where possible, the roles were closely mirrored between the institutions. Specifically, these roles or job titles were:

1/ Associate Dean of Student Experience/Education from the Business Faculty,

2/ Associate Head of School for Student Experience/Education

3/ Two staff connected to the respective faculty careers services at each institution were included to represent differing levels of seniority within the university and the varying views at each level.

These participants were chosen as they held positions that were important within the area of employability, particularly in relation to the student sample. The questions were created from the initial literature findings and the background information as an insider researcher was already available, this aligned with the research objectives and gave the basis for the areas to focus on. The coding document details the profiles of all the participants to give background and context to their responses, (see Appendix C on page 149). Questions to this group focused on their understanding and perceptions of employability within HE and how it was addressed or supported within their area of responsibility.

The intention was to compare differences in findings between the two institutions, as well as comparing differences at the level of job role and responsibility. The interviews went well, with all staff appearing open, honest and keen to contribute. The discussions were free flowing, although it was noted that the interviews within the post-92 institution seemed easier and less stifled, possibly due to the prior working relationships with these participants. On reflection, the interviews went smoothly, yielding some expected and unexpected results. It was felt that face to face interviews might have allowed staff to be more relaxed and conversation to flow even more as they would not have been fully recorded, but considering the constraints of the pandemic, the semi-structured interviews and the focus groups were successful.

**4.4.7 Inviting Participants’ Feedback**

It was important to ensure that participants’ words were truthfully represented. To aid this, participants were contacted when the draft findings had been completed. They were invited to provide feedback on how the anonymising was represented and to ensure the words used were in the correct context and had been interpreted as the participants intended. All participants were encouraged to supply contact details after the data collection stage. Participants were emailed and a small minority of students could no longer be contacted via the email addresses they had provided. These participants were searched for on LinkedIn to see if contact could be made. All accessible participants were sent the draft findings chapter for their comments and feedback by a given date. Only two participants responded, and they were happy with how the chapter had been compiled using their words. It was assumed the others were content as no issues were raised. This was additional work, but it was a necessary step to ensure that, in creating a narrative through the thematic analysis, it was truly reflective of the participants’ responses.

**4.4.8 Desk Research**

Desk research gives a further dimension to this research, and it investigates and presents information from existing and available data areas which questions, supports or enhances the small-scale findings of this research.

The two universities in this study constituted a small sample to base conclusions on, so in order to understand more, some desk research was conducted into what other universities do for their students regarding employability. Websites for HEIs were investigated to gain an indication of their employability offerings for students. Four RGUs and four post-1992 universities were randomly selected by choosing pre-1992 universities the researcher was familiar with and came to mind, then corresponding post-1992 universities that were geographically matched in order to identify any notable similarities or differences. The logic here was to increase the number of institutions for the desk-research element to give support to the findings of University A & B. The focus was on checking how other pre- and post-1992 institutions marketed their approaches to employability rather than a scientific approach to selecting and sampling. This is represented in the table 4 starting on page 80 presented in chapter 5, which fed into the overall findings.

**4.5 Data Analysis**

**4.5.1 Thematic analysis and coding**

Thematic Analysis is growing in popularity but still there is no single, universally accepted definition or approach applied. Moreover, what constitutes a theme is also unclear and is continuing to change (Braun and Clarke 2006, Bryson 2015). ‘Thematic analysis lacks a clearly specified series of procedures’ (Bryson 2015, p.586). Bazeley (2013) expresses caution about thematic analysis and suggests that many researchers claim to adopt a thematic approach but are vague on how the themes emerge or are identified. She stresses the importance of not just specifying themes but justifying their significance too. This section will explore the approach used as well as how the themes were developed through engagement with the data

A thematic approach was taken with this research as it is organised and methodical and allowed for patterns in the research findings to be identified (Clarke and Braun 2013). This approach can be described as a method of gathering similar views and opinions into single entities and attempting to draw general themes based on the participant groups (Braun and Clarke 2006, Bryson 2015). This was how the primary data was approached, it was then cross referenced with the literature from chapters 2 and 3. The advantage of this was that a large volume of information could be distilled into broad themes which could be explored and as a researcher you can have a closer connection to the data than might be the case if software such as NVivo was used to analyse the findings. Whilst this approach has attracted criticism, most notably that themes are identified in a subjective manner (Braun and Clarke 2006, Clarke and Braun 2013). To ensure this criticism was not a factor in this research, it was used under the guidance of the research supervisor and in conjunction with the words of participants. This allows any subjectivity to be verified by the reader, and participants have an opportunity to review the findings and analysis before the thesis was finalised and published. Linking back to the methodological approach for this research, having an interpretivist approach may lead to questions around subjectivity and generalisation of findings.

The approach taken for the thematic analysis was organic in style and started with listening to the recordings of the interviews and focus groups to get an overall sense of the sentiments of the sessions. All the interviews and focus groups were recorded via MS Teams, which meant auto-transcribing facilities could be added to each recording. This was useful although not entirely reliable, as some of the words were misheard by the transcribing software. This problem was overcome as all transcriptions were reviewed and any discrepancies rectified. The transcription review process also provided an early opportunity to identify initial themes that were emerging. In the first phase, four possible themes were noted. (See appendix D page 151, which shows initial themes and revisited themes emerging). As Appendix D shows, the four initial themes were from participants words and discussions:

· 1: Economic (Macro) Education versus Employability - this theme remained constant throughout the review process.

· 2: Homogeneous/Heterogenic – Same or Different (Micro); this theme was not in the final version as it was more of an area which was common to other themes making it more of a thread running through the findings.

· 3: Student Voice – Does this exist or is this being missed? This was a theme from the outset.

· 4: Unprecedented Events – E.g.: Brexit and the Pandemic; in the final themes, this emerged as an area which was common to other themes again being deemed as a thread rather than a distinct theme.

The recordings of each interview and focus group were listened to multiple times to ensure that the four initial emerging themes were present and growing in prominence. Mind maps and highlighting of participants spoken words were noted, where they were thought relevant to one of the emerging areas as the appendix E (pages of notes shown in pages 152-162). The themes were revisited, reviewed and updated on four occasions until the final themes were confirmed as listed below:

* Theme 1 – Education versus Employability
* Theme 2 – Universities as Businesses
* Theme 3 – Embedding Employability – What is the best approach?
* Theme 4 – The role of Student Voice of Employability in HE

This confirmation of themes allowed timings to be noted for anything that might be useful later in the findings. Appendix E pages 152-162 detail the mind maps created and the thought process documents for the developing themes.

To test if these approaches were working, theme one was selected and verbatim responses to the questions relevant to this theme were noted. As with the earlier step, the timings of key comments were noted to help with the write up of the findings later in the research. Consideration was given to qualitative data analysis software to support the thematic approach, but due to the small-scale quantity and size of data collected, a manual analysis of the findings was deemed to be more appropriate. For this research this was the best approach for this research as it brought the research findings closer and allowed emerging themes to be identified. The findings were organically developed from my theoretical and personal understanding of employability allowing the revisiting of the themes as they were drafted. Referring to appendix D, this shows the four revisits and revisions to the themes in this research until the final themes were established.

Once the pilot attempt verified that this approach worked, a content analysis was applied by conducting a word search on terms that were deemed key to the research findings. This was a secondary process as it had clear drawbacks; first, the research was auto transcribed and therefore was not as accurate as it might have been had the transcription been done manually through the research process. Sometimes the transcription misrepresented words that were unclear or where the speaker was not clearly heard. Secondly, other terms might have been used for the same wording or theme e.g., ‘pre-1992’, ‘traditional’, ‘red brick’ or ‘Russell group university’ are all terms which refer to similar groups of universities and were used interchangeably. Another area where this was noticeable was with the Coronavirus pandemic, with some participants referring to it as ‘the pandemic’, others ‘COVID-19’, whilst on some occasions the discussion appeared to be about the pandemic but it was not directly referenced.

Themes and threads are recurring motifs in the text that link to the data. Themes or subthemes or threads in this research derive from reading and re-reading the transcripts (Richie et al, 2003) and additionally in this case from repeated listening to the interviews and focus groups to draw initial findings. This showed patterns emerging and threads which ran across themes, such as homogeneity and heterogeneity in HE. It does not tell researchers how to identify themes. Instead, the process comes from finding recurring ideas and repetition criteria for patterns in words or phrases leading to a theme. Within this research it was felt discourse analysis alone was too narrow and too tightly focused on individual words and would not accommodate the range of participants and their perceptions. In HE, students and staff can often use different terminology, and this too cannot always be seen in patterns of individual words; sentiment and intention also need consideration (Nokkala and Saarinen 2018) as noted in the last paragraph.

There are limitations to taking a thematic analysis approach, it can be seen as subjective and reflect the researchers views or agenda, but in order to limit this all stages of establishing themes were checked regularly with the research supervisor to ensure another perspective could be considered. There is always a concern of impartiality when taking an interpretivist approach to research.

This research shows that participants spoken words are used throughout the findings to illustrate points being made, it is therefore important that participants anonymity be protected. To that ends a coding system was used to ensure that participants would not be able to decipher which quotes were theirs, thus preserving the anonymity of the participants involved in this research. The assumption being if participant themselves could not identify themselves, general readers would know the identity of quotes used. Appendix C page 149 lists all participants in a coding table, detailing who took part by listing their demographics and background in HE to provide an understanding of the context for their contributions and quotations within the research. The demographics chosen are presented in appendix C page 149 and were chosen to see if there was a balance in gender and geographical background.

All contactable participants were e-mailed to see if they would like to review the draft of chapter 5 which gave coded quotations from both the interviews and the focus groups. All but one participant who could be contacted wanted to read the chapter and so it was emailed to them directly. There were no concerns raised by the participants around the coding, anonymity or representation of words used. This additional step was also helpful with considering the ethical elements of the research.

**4.6 Ethics**

**4.6.1 Ethical considerations**

For any research, it is important that ethical rigour has been applied. A key aspect of ethics for this research was related to my positionality, as I had worked and had a professional relationship with some interviewees. Despite the criticisms levelled against insider research, the benefits must be acknowledged. To mitigate these risks, it was important to recognise them at the earliest possible stage and try to control everything that can be controlled. The inherent bias that comes from being ‘inside’ can also be seen as a positive as an insider is more likely to pick up on subtleties, might be more trusted and might be able to identify key questions within the research. This prior relationship could have influenced their reactions and answers, as they might not have seen me as a neutral interviewer.

This means there was a need to ensure ethical and research guidelines were followed and a concerted effort was made to remain impartial and not to influence the research, as personal concepts of reality or perception may well differ to those of the interviewees. This was done in accordance with the University of Sheffield’s ethical guidelines and BERA (2018) ethical research guidelines. Appendix F on page 163 demonstrates that research for this thesis has obtained ethical approval prior to any primary research being collected. Participant information sheets (see Appendix G on page 164) were provided and informed consent forms (see Appendix H) signed prior to the research activities taking place, as would be expected. Thought was given to this research by addressing the ethical considerations, and attempts were made to minimise the risk to myself and the participants by anonymising and coding the findings (Denzin and Lincoln 2008). This was adhered to throughout the ethics process and the conduct of the primary research. All interviewees and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage of the research.

All interviews and focus groups took place virtually and no specific details or questions were issued beforehand, so that all responses could be captured within the recorded sessions. All notes and recordings were held securely within a password protected account in accordance with the ethical requirements. As well as retaining the recordings, some parts were transcribed and were securely stored in accordance with the ethics protocol. Lastly, reflecting on the work of Sikes and Potts (2008), and as highlighted in the section on insider research, as an insider researcher it is not possible to un-see something discovered in the process of the research. There were occasions where my roles as both researcher and HE professional crossed, and an ethical awareness and consideration was given to such circumstances in advance, although this did not occur during the research.

It is the constant review and movement between roles within the research (Enosh and Ben-Ari 2016) to ensure ethics are adhered to. This was something to be mindful of, especially when considering the ethical approaches for this research. Fook and Askeland (2007) proposed that in order to be reflexive thinkers, we must make elements of ourselves strange by trying to distance ourselves from them. Reflexivity is about questioning our own attitudes, thought processes, values, assumptions, prejudices and typical actions, to understand the roles and relationships connected to others (Bolton 2010). It was important in this research to be mindful of this and agreed with Verdonk (2015) who quoted Bolton in her article on reflexivity. Although challenging, the process of researching and understanding the concept of reflexivity allowed me to question myself and my ethical conduct whilst collecting the data and interpreting the findings. Further consideration was through the use of the participants’ actual words when presenting the findings for analysis as too was the opportunity participants had to check how they had been presented in the findings.

Access to participants for research needs careful consideration and planning. As with many professionals in contemporary research projects, it is often undertaken in the researcher's own workplace. This is more convenient and the most practical approach for many, who are attempting to make change through research in their organisation, where they may also work and study too (Stenhouse 1975). The work of Sikes and Potts (2008) and Marshall (2016) acknowledges that research and reflexivity can present threats to traditional research approaches as it is more focused on personal views and opinions. It can cause conflict in relationships and interpersonal dynamics, which can change in ways that cannot be reversed.

**4.6.2 Validity**

Validity, according to Easterby-Smith et al (2012, p.347) is ‘the extent to which measures and research findings provide accurate representation of the things they are supposed to be describing’. It concerns the appropriateness of the tools, process and data (Leung 2015). The validity of this research was vitally important if this thesis is to be seen as credible in the realms of HE research. Throughout this chapter, time has been spent discussing the validity of the research. To ensure methodological validity, semi-structured interviews with HEI staff and focus groups with undergraduate final year students at both universities used methods situated within an interpretivist paradigm.

Political and ethical considerations for research are important to give validity to the research, particularly as an insider researcher. The main aim of this research was to understand what employability means to students and to HE institutions through their staff. This thesis was also a personal learning journey, acknowledging as the researcher I was in a position of power in relation to some participants so they might have said what they think is the response I as the researcher wants to hear. There was an attempt to address this at the outset of the interviews and focus groups by stating an acknowledgement that this concern exists, whilst reassuring participants there were no right or wrong answers, just their views, perceptions and justifications. In doing so, as a researcher there was a need to keep in mind the potential influence of the power and politics related to my insider positioning as a researcher as well as an employee in HE.

**4.6.3 Bias**

Pannucci and Wilkins (2010) refer to bias within research as anything which might prevent fair or unprejudiced consideration of a subject or question. Bias was often thought of as a phenomenon that encourages participants to choose one outcome over another (May 2011, Wolstencroft and Crossan 2018). Bias can be perceived negatively, but this is not always the case, especially if acknowledged from the outset. This links back to the interpretivist approach and attempts to see participants’ views through their eyes or lens. Hodkinson (2006) argues being an insider researcher can add depth through positioning, and the knowledge gained as an insider can outweigh any potential negative impacts, which was the aim of this research. Adopting Hodkinson’s (2006) stance, the possible bias due to current roles and connections should not be perceived negatively as it also meant that interrogation of the data was conducted with a degree of understanding that an outsider might not possess. Taking an interpretivist approach allowed the assertion that there are multiple versions and accounts of what was perceived as reality, all of which needed consideration to give depth to the research.

Looking in more depth at bias, there are several key forms of bias which were considered for this research. Bias by design is an approach which suggests that the research methods should reflect the population and so too should the sample selection (May 2011, Mullane and Williams 2013). As discussed earlier, convenience sampling was an example of this, as all the questions can be put to any participant within the identified cohorts, since they are all deemed to be appropriate for the focus groups and the participants may have views to share. Secondly, bias by misrepresentation occurs where the research findings are not fairly interpreted, as the researcher might focus more closely on a particular area, suggesting differing outcomes to those intended by the participants in their responses. To address this, all participants in this project had the opportunity to review their comments in context before the thesis was submitted.

**4.6.4 Reliability**

Reliability in research refers to consistency of results (Heale and Twycross 2015) and considers whether consistent results would be achieved if the same sampling approach and questions were adopted on a different occasion. Ultimately, for this research the answer would be no. These results are not reliable, and it is important to acknowledge this. This research was not looking for reliability or consistency; it was seeking to give an insight into employability in HE through providing findings from a snapshot in time. At no time was there a suggestion this was a reliable or consistent result that could be applied to all HEIs or students (Denzin and Lincoln 2011). A key consideration throughout the research has been reliability and representation. In view of the convenience sampling and sample selection approaches taken, representation of the student cohort could not be guaranteed and the sizes of the focus groups were small enough to raise concerns. However, the aim was not to achieve a representative selection, but rather a selection of students that reflected an adequate mix of the sample group. This tied in with the principle that there are multiple realities and everyone has their own view or perspective. This also gave credit to the small number of participants.

**4.7 Limitations of the Methodology and Summary**

As with all research it is important to recognise the limitations of the methodological approach taken. This is not to say that the limitations cast doubt on the validity of the research, but rather it recognises the potential for problems if unchecked. In addition, when drawing conclusions from using this methodology, it is important to recognise that several factors within the wider context of employability in HE can affect graduate outcomes.

A key source of secondary data for this research was the statistics on graduate employment. When using the GO or its predecessor, DLHE, it is crucial to recognise that student success in the graduate labour market is dependent on factors other than their studies and employment, so the findings cannot be a conclusive link. Due to the lack of direct causation, specific links were not made with the research methods undertaken, so instead a caveat that multiple factors influence employability was applied.

In addition to this, the research was limited to a small number of undergraduate Business courses, so should not claim wider relevance within the findings. For graduates to secure graduate level jobs, employability skills were only one of the factors that led to employment. Other impacting factors might be student choice, such as decisions to go travelling, or external factors such as the ongoing pandemic.

Finally, students’ social capital might play a part too. Good universities with good career networks can assist graduates in securing roles. There have been anecdotal suggestions over the years that candidates with pre-1992 universities on their CV will be shortlisted ahead of those with post-1992 ones. Personal networks might play a part. Some students might go into family businesses or roles through networking rather than as a result of employability skills they have developed whilst studying. More students are choosing to start their own business.

In conclusion, the methodological approaches used in this research are based on an interpretivist paradigm which recognises that multiple views of reality exist. The qualitative methods employed allow the participants freedom to express their opinions using their own voices, and these voices are used wherever possible in the findings section. Whilst recognising the limitations discussed above, the coherency of the processes used means the insider researcher status did not dominate the findings.

**Chapter 5 - Findings**

**5.1 - Introduction to findings**

Chapter 5 collates the results of the research findings and considers the key themes. When analysing the findings from this research, several draft themes were identified before the four key areas that emerged most strongly were confirmed as the final themes. This was done by coding the data, grouping together relevant quotations using a mind map, and using a key quotes document. A manual paper, pen and highlighter approach was used to group quotes into emerging themes. This manual method worked best for this research as it allowed key quotes from both the interviews and focus groups to be captured. The research involved relatively small numbers, with eight interviews and four focus groups, which made the manual process easier to manage. This detailed exploration allowed the final themes to emerge, along with the threads that ran through themes, which are listed later in this section.

Once the approach was finalised, it became clear there were four dominant themes to the findings. Whilst there was some overlap and interconnectivity between themes, the four areas are distinct enough to be labelled separately, as explored in this chapter. The themes are:

Theme 1 – Education versus Employability

Theme 2 – Universities as Businesses

Theme 3 – Embedding Employability – What is the best approach?

Theme 4 – The role of Student Voice of Employability in HE

This chapter is structured so themes are explored separately, and whilst some commonalities were noted as each theme was discussed, the full drawing together of themes will be tackled in the concluding chapter where recommendations and limitations will be addressed. However, there was one overarching topic that needed to be addressed before looking at the four themes and this was what participants understood from the word employability in relation to HE from the outset.

Some staff interviewees focused on what employability meant to them before considering its position within their HEIs, courses or more generally how it impacted them or their students. As stated in chapter 4, participants’ words were used where possible to present their views without the interference of interpretation. Below are quotations from interviewees in their own words around defining employability:

“I think one of the challenges for employability is not to put people off by the label, because it is so much more than that, it is that self-discovery.” ***I6/30:16***

“Employability is about future proofing our student career needs and development. So that means for example making sure that they’ve got the skills for now and the future, they are understanding their career options and routes that they can progress with as they go on.” ***I8/ 8:50***

“It is moving the territory a bit more into personal and professional development rather than employability.” ***I6/20:19***

“I just think that our focus needs to be just getting students ready for that real world.” ***I5/10:33***

As the quotes show, these staff in HE regards employability as being about more than getting a job; this research suggests they see it as a road of self-development and personal discovery. All staff participants made the link to the development of skills, and some referred more specifically to hard and soft skills. This research concurs with the literature in section 2.3 of this thesis with Knight and Yorke (2006), Lowden *et al (*2011) and Williams *et al (*2015) discussing the imprecision of defining skills. The term ‘skills’ was used in general terms in several ways when related to employability development.

“…develops a lot of transferable skills, even if it is not sector skills, so I think by embedding in the curriculum a little bit more and making it that little bit more obvious to students, it will increase their confidence.” ***I5/3:04***

From doing a word search of the interviews, many terms were used by the participants interchangeably, but no-one clearly stated what these skills were or what they meant when using the term skills. This corresponds with literature which suggests that ‘skills’ is an umbrella term that is not clearly defined in relation to employability, but many articles and papers do not attempt to categorise what specific skills are included (Grazier 1998, Hinchliffe and Jolly 2011, Williams *et al* 2015). The interviewees used the following nine different terminologies for ‘skills’: soft skills, transferable skills, employability skills, personal skills, interpersonal skills, professional skills, sector skills, technical skills and practical skills. This lends weight to claims within the literature that the term ‘skills’ means different things to different people.

“I think universities or institutions haven’t got an institutional definition and so I find I talk about it (skills) differently depending on who I am talking to. If I am talking to an academic, I might start by talking about transferable skills, I might talk about how you can develop them in academic skills, there will be a point where they can flip that and they can start to talk to, use those skills in the workplace. If I am talking to a colleague I will talk more about the kinds of skills and experience when I am talking to professional services colleagues. See, I think it is definitely a buzzword, it is actually what I find interesting. It (employability) is a word that students do understand and resonates with.[sic]” ***I7/6:48***

The above quote demonstrates employability is a vague term, not clearly defined in literature, nor by the participants in this research. The following sections explore the key themes which emerged from the research into this vaguely defined buzzword, employability (Philpott 2006).

Concluding the introduction, it is clear the participants perceived employability as a development tool for students and each theme will be explored to see how this influenced the participants views or opinions as the research progressed.

**5.2 Theme 1: Education versus Employability**

When initially compiling the research questions and focus for this doctorate it became clear that my views and values as a researcher were not necessarily held or accepted by others. For example, I naively thought employability would be regarded positively by staff and students in HE. It was not until my research started that I came across alternative views. These different views are held by academics such as Readings (2002), Collini (2012), Docherty (2015) and Courtney (2017) who posit, HE should be a space for personal learning, gaining knowledge and development, not being focused on employability specifically. The division between the two areas is not as clear as first thought. Writers such as those listed above view employability as merely the latest in a succession of ‘fads’ that will be replaced at some point. Some express a view that employability development existed in HE long before the term was made popular and adopted as a measure of HE success. As the literature in chapter 3 traced back the history, before the term employability was coined in the 1960’s. Graduates were leaving university and being recruited into graduate level jobs, no-one questioned employability, it was seen as a biproduct of the learning opportunities within HE. These writers suggested employability skills are naturally acquired by going to university, learning subject specific knowledge and embracing the extra-curricular opportunities that form part of an undergraduate degree. They were more likely to view employability as a buzzword which serves a political agenda, rather than the benefit of the student body (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, Docherty 2015 and Courtney 2017).

When presenting the findings in this chapter, previously held personal preconceptions of student drivers, were called into question. For example, initial thoughts were, if courses provide support to aid student development ready for the world of work, students would be keen to engage with these. This research revealed this was not always the case and it could not be assumed that all students in HE are driven to embrace all that is offered, in relation to employability support. Care needs to be taken when grouping and labelling students as homogeneous, as it can give a misleading picture. Perception and personal views are key to this research, and it reinforces the idea some students may choose not to engage with the employability provisions. This may be a conscious choice, because of a hostility towards the whole employability agenda, for example, students viewing employability as a tick box exercise. This raises questions around student engagement with employability and the government agenda of measuring success through employment metrics. This may result in students and staff seeing employability as a tokenistic gesture, which may be because of students’ social capital (Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Tomlinson 2017, Cole 2020) or emotional intelligence (Goleman 1998), making employability irrelevant to their plans as they already have a clear plan or a network of supports to facilitate their move into graduate level employability when they decide the time is right.

It was interesting to note the views of one staff interviewee with over 8 years HE experience, who had been recruited into their university after graduating as a student. This interviewee was familiar with the student perspective, having been a recent graduate, and referred to employability as:

“A buzzword at the moment, I think people throw it around and not a lot of people really know what it is. I have to admit in my head I when I think about it, it’s everything that makes up an individual’s personality, skills set and abilities. Also, being able to apply that and understanding how they can use their strengths to find work and fulfilling work as well.” ***I7/6:16***

One of the pre-1992 students in their focus group, also referred to employability as a buzzword.

“We do Business Management so we take it for granted that employability is kind of ingrained into us…. If you do a different course, employability is not always so much that buzzword.” ***1/FG1 SU3 56:05***

This raises the question of whether the importance given to employability depends on the course being studied at UG level, something the embedding employability theme will deliberate later in this chapter. It also connects back to the literature on employability as featured in section 2.4 of this thesis with Philpott (2006) using the term ‘buzzword’ as well as others using similar words to illustrate vagueness (Grazier 1998, Hinchcliffe and Jolly 2011, Williams *et al* 2015). This was reinforced by its perceived prominence in the GO Survey, a measure that has gone through change recently and appears to have been met with some degree of cynicism by HE staff as the quotes and findings suggest. Employment has been around and connected to HE for over sixty years and shows no sign of fading away as it is firmly on the government’s agenda, a key driver for their view of how HE functions and therefore remains firmly on HEIs’ priorities too.

Staff interviews identified the complexities around employability for HEIs and course teams but also raised concerns that not all colleagues embrace employability within the curriculum.

“There is at institutional level, an ambition to ensure things happen within curriculum but I would say we are not there yet. It’s very much dependant on the course and to an extent the academic.” ***I2/7:58***

“Our academic colleagues carry a lot of weight. In their opinion it’s a traditional RGU, It’s research intensive and so that’s always a bit of a battle as well. I’m trying to get colleagues to see the value in it (employability).” ***I7/12:20***

“Having worked at a RGU and a Modern university before as well, there is quite a cultural difference amongst some members of staff around employability.” ***I8/6:26***

The above comments were all from the pre-1992 university participants which links to research objective 3 on the differences in approaches to employability from both the pre- and post-1992 universities. As one of the quotes suggests, the staff interviewed implied it can be difficult to get academic colleagues to value employability, but they do not fully suggest why. It may be that some academic colleagues see employability as a politically driven agenda linked to the economic imperative of pushing competition in HE, such as metrics, league tables and general marketisation or feel that students naturally develop employability skills, without the need to overtly provide for employability skills development (Readings 1997, Collini 2012, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017). These findings appear to suggest that it may be a mixture of the two, but both need consideration, as the next quotes propose.

“We do need to focus on educating any student that comes through our door. It doesn’t necessarily mean we’re educating them in subjects that they study in, but we are educating them to be ready for the real world.” ***I5/10:04***

“The TEF has done its job here, as there are lots of course leaders that are thinking about how can I build in employability as a standard part of this, things like mentoring and use of external mentors and workplace scenarios.” ***I3/9:46***

50% of staff interviewees felt the onus was on students to be proactive in managing and developing themselves for their futures, not on their course or institution. There was evidence of a value judgment possibly being made here around the motivations of students as a group, not as individuals. The quotes below start to map the scale of differences in the value staff participants appear to place upon the importance of employability.

“We have to remember we are dealing with adults. They are not all going to want to engage with it (employability) and sometimes you have to say okay, fine.” ***I7/28:17***

“Employability is about future proofing career and development – Behavioural skills, giving students the skillsets and mindset to go forward with their portfolio skills, skills not just for now, but for the future too.’ ***I8/8:50***

“You can only encourage and hope there is something there they can connect with” ***I3/14:38***

“There are a group of students and no matter what you do they are not going to engage with it.” ***I6/17:26***

These are interesting perspectives, focusing on reach and student motivations to engage. None of these suggest why some students, like some academics, do not engage with the employability agenda. It could be intimated; is it a result of students’ personal views on why the employability agenda is being pushed? What is the personal benefit to a student or member of staff in engaging with employability? Others expressed, as in the quotes below the view that courses or HEIs still need to try to engage students with employability.

“I think the employability (CPD) modules when students and staff engage are hugely beneficial. They encourage students to think about who they are and actually reflect on their skills. ***I1/6:00***

“You have to have the right members of staff in place in order to engage the students and switch them on to why this is interesting and important and useful and the rest of it …” ***I4/13:31***

This illustrates the differing views between university A and B, giving credence to the suggestion that differences in groupings confirmed a possible difference in views and approaches to employability between universities. Several staff interviewees highlighted the importance of students developing the ability to be self-reflective in order to know or see their fit within the labour market, echoing the findings of some contemporary writers such as Cole and Hallett (2019) and Tomlinson’s CGM model (2017). This research also suggested students are not always as self-aware as they might be when it comes to their skills for the labour market.

“Students will become more prepared because I think they lack confidence and I think that’s because they don’t really realise that they do have the skills that are necessary to go get a graduate job.” ***I5/2:44***

The readiness of students to access employability support was seen by several of the staff interviewees as a factor in achieving successful graduate outcomes. This readiness seemed to consist of qualities such as self-awareness, and the ability to be reflective and proactive and relates to the heterogeneity of students. The comments below from HE staff confirm the importance of reflection in employability development but it is not something that sits naturally in every learning experience.

“It’s (employability) is all about raising self-awareness and reflection and encouraging them (students) to go on and be proactive. Do things that will make them unique and distinct not just got a one size fits all approach.” ***I2/16:53***

“It goes back to that self-awareness and understanding yourself and selecting things rather than feeling pressured into doing everything or the student who doesn’t do anything. We have to remember we are dealing with adults. If they are not going to want to engage with it (employability) then sometimes you have to say okay, fine.” ***I7/28:08***

“Students by their nature don’t tend to be massively reflective. They just look at the next set of assessments. (CPD) this encourages them to reflect on themselves which I think is of great benefit when they go into the world of work.” ***I1/6:13***

“Reflection and reflective practice can be quite challenging but it is also the thing that opens doors to how you arrive at a work life balance.” ***I3/18:12***

The query over the role of students regarding employability leads on to broader questions concerning the overall purpose of HE and where employability fits into this purpose. The interviews attempted to understand what HE staff considered to be the primary function of HE.

“Primary function of HE…You’ve got to go for to produce graduates’ job ready students at the end of it (the degree)” ***I1/8:17***

This interviewee went on however to acknowledge.

“I am using that because if you go back to the Ruskin speech and you go back to everything the government puts in place in terms of metrics and funding. It is all linked to having a particular outcome which is student jobs.“ ***I1/8:37***

This ties in with the history mapping in chapter 3 where relationship politics and the economy have to HE through the entwining of employability. This dates to ‘The dawn of mass participation education’ with the Robbins report (1963) as a starting point. Initial assumptions would point to an emphasis on the economic rather than the educational imperative through employability but this participant disagreed.

“My belief is always of you do a really good job with students, they’ll get jobs. So basically, the driver is not the jobs, the driver (for universities) is making sure you’ve got an excellent degree…. In it actually students get good jobs and universities get good reputations.” ***I1/15:52***

It was notable that none of the staff interviewees questioned whether the employability agenda had a place in HE. Instead, they questioned how employability should be positioned and how it might be better measured within HE. Positing, the focus should not be separating the areas of education and employability but working on the overall offerings of HE to satisfy both. HEIs focus on employability differently which can be evidenced in how English HEIs structure and resources their approaches to employability. Some results were unexpected. Employability leads might have been expected to identify employability is the primary function of HE, but this was not always the case. This was another notable area in which the two universities differed in their approaches.

“If you look at the economy and policy it is to train people to put them in jobs, you know and equip them to be productive units…. It is about the marketisation, monetization of HE.” **I3 /20:46**

There were responses that recognised the push towards employability but the staff participants still had their own clear views on primary purpose of HE:

“I would not say employability, I would not say skills to some extent this is a little controversial, but actually it is part of somebody’s movement from being in self a dependent upon parents to being and independent person.” ***I8/27:52***

“It is the added extras over and above the technical content that I think is the important aspect of going to university.” ***I8/31:07***

“I think it should be a space primarily for development and discovery for students… But I think it is becoming much more about very defined pathways towards employment.” ***I6/26:30***

The last quote illustrates the tension between the views of some participants that HE should be for learning and self-discovery, and others who view its purpose as building employability. This again raised questions regarding the current balance in HE between the educational and economic imperatives. Staff interviewee I6 linked this to the need for students to be able to practise reflection and self-assessment in preparation for choosing a route after graduation such as graduate employment, further studies or an entrepreneurial route.

Some participants expressed an ongoing need for flexibility around employability and this featured in all of the themes. How employability in education is considered, when taking a business approach may make a course or HEI more appealing in the marketplace, whether embedded within courses or otherwise. Employability supports need to take account of, and be responsive to, the wishes and needs of students and the external environment. Macro changes, a turbulent labour market and the events of recent years have required employability provision to change and adapt to support students seeking to enter the graduate job market:

“Variables of how people change over their course of a 3 or 4 year period and keep the offerings suitable during that changing period. ***I6/40:30***

This staff interviewee went on to highlight their thoughts on employability going forward, noting the impacts of an ever-changing landscape. This was echoed in other interviews within university A:

“I think that agility going forward, that employability offerings need to have - That’s going to be crucial going forward.” ***I6/42:22***

“Employability is about future proofing our students career needs and development. So that means for example making sure that they’ve got the skills for now and the future” ***I8/8:50***

“I am really keen on employability it is something that has run throughout my career in HE and so it’s how we nail it. Especially, when you don’t always know which career you are preparing students for because it’s such a changing world out there. You are trying to prepare them for something that is uncertain” ***I4/42.21***

“Employability is about future proofing our students career needs and development***.” I8/8:50***

Interestingly when HE education versus employability was considered, all staff participants showed commitment to developing students, but often this could not be separated from their employability focus. There were a multitude of factors such as metrics, that required the structure of HE to be intrinsically linked to employability and all universities should respond to that. It can be seen in both university A and B, where organisational strategy puts employability at the heart of what each institution does as do the processes and procedures staff work to or comply with E.g.: from the interviews it was clear each institution had dedicated employability and careers staff. This considerable financial commitment goes some way to show the importance placed on employability to succeed through funding such departments. The reasons behind this were less clear but the results were the same: the provision of a resource or service to support students with their career planning and personal development.

In the student focus groups, participants were asked what they expected from their undergraduate degree and from their HE experience, and whether their student journey had delivered this. The responses were similar in all focus groups, with participants prioritising gaining a recognised degree as captured in the two quotes below:

“An expensive piece of paper” ***1/F.G1 SU6 11:04***

“My mum says, a degree doesn’t matter, unless you don’t have one” ***1/F.G2 SU9 0:34***

Delving deeper into the focus group findings, 100% of the students interviewed saw their HE experience to some extent as a means to an end. Students felt a degree was needed in the contemporary workplace to achieve any form of career progression, linking to the economic imperative. However, another common theme amongst the focus groups was the opportunity of experiencing the ‘student’ life and all that comes with being a full-time student, which related to the educational imperative. Five students saw HE as providing a good general grounding and a learning opportunity to understand their specialism (business) better. A further theme was around university being a logical next step or an expectation from school or family. Students clearly did not see a tension between education versus employability. Whilst subject-specific learning was regarded as important, it was not, however, the main motivation for all twenty-three of the students who took part in this study. This supports the contention that students are heterogenic and it also shows the importance of student voice in ensuring a positive student journey. This will be considered in depth in theme four of the findings.

100% of staff who were interviewed raised concerns over students choosing to go to university just to gain the subject-specific knowledge or technical skills, suggesting that education entails more than just academic learning. This challenges the ideology that focusing on academic education is enough for students to be successful in contemporary HE (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, Docherty 2015, Courtney 2017) and raises the proposition that education and employability should be a shared focus for students and staff in HE.

“That acquisition of knowledge and the absence of anything else, coming to university is a bloody expensive way to acquire that.” ***I8/39:07***

“If somebody goes to university to simply gain a qualification they are probably better to go down the apprenticeship route. “ ***I2/19:44***

However, the research findings suggested there were, at least at the university A, some students who focus only on their academic education, as the next quote suggests:

“You still see students coming through that say I just want to learn.” ***I6/29:38***

This view however, did not seem to be shared with the student participants in this study.

“If you just get a degree and nothing else, it’s not enough, you need employability too. Higher universities can’t rely on the degree only.” ***1/F.G1 SU8 54:00***

“…value added, this would be enhanced by employability, soft skills development.” ***1/F.G1 SU3 56:05***

Students viewed their degree as giving them employability prospects, but much of the discussion suggested that this is assumed or an expectation of HE, and the degree qualification in itself opens doors. All student participants felt that employability was important, especially within the context of the current labour market and uncertainties for their graduation as a result of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, the level of importance attached to employability differed, especially between the pre- and post-1992 students.

“If we do more things related to real business we will become more employable. Placement was by far the biggest development support.” ***1/F.G1 SU8 55***

“We have been on placement and we probably do have a better kind of reality and understanding of employability.” ***1/F.G SU2 55:39***

These findings suggest the level of employability support wanted or given within courses was dependent on the participant’s prior experiences, making a link to individual social capital. Their wants and needs were an important factor here. Students should be treated as heterogenic and supported accordingly. For example, student participants with work experience saw employability support differently to those without. This again may suggest a need for flexibility, as all students’ wants and requirements for employability through their student journey are individual. This means that flexibility, or as one interviewee termed it, agility, around employability supports and processes is needed.

“Employability is also about how well you sell yourself, you need to make yourself unique and different, so not a uniformed approach.” ***1/F.G1 SU3***

Section 4.4.8 on page 63 of the methodology discussed additional desk research conducted. Four RGU’s and four post-1992 universities were chosen at random and investigated through reviewing their published education strategies on their websites to see if the educational or economic imperative appeared to focus as a priority. The table below highlights some of the wording and approaches used for each institution’s strategy.

**Table 4. Website Review of pre- and post-1992 universities’ Educational Strategy**

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Institution Pre-1992** | **Confirming to a flexible and student focused co-creator / Student Voice approach** | **Institution Post-1992** | **Conforming to a curriculum based and embedded employability approach** |
| PRE-1992 CASESTUDY UNIVERSITY | ..Our students need to be challenged, enthused and supported as they develop a love of learning, curiosity and self-direction in their studies. | POST-1992 CASE STUDY UNIVERSITY | Educational strategy refers to 6 pillars and one entitled ‘Embedding Employability’ committing to clear course structure for students to follow |
| RGU A | ..Create a learning environment where the only boundaries are the limits of a student's curiosity. Reflection – to recognise the skills they need to acquire to differentiate themselves from the competition | MODERN A | Consistency of approach for all students, underpinned with employability modules at L4 and 5 |
| RGU B | A new central campus Student Opportunity Hub, acting as the focal point for the delivery of co-curricular opportunities and services to students. | MODERN B | Clear articulation of the enterprise offer from University MODERN B – covering student skills, graduate attributes, academic staff expertise, and business to business services |
| RGU C | We will support each student to develop a personal journey through their education. | MODERN C | Employability Programme (EP), which aimed to embed employability into undergraduate taught programmes across all academic disciplines. |
| RGU D | We will foster an appetite for enterprise and creativity, celebrating new discoveries, tackling societal challenges and equipping our students with the curiosity, entrepreneurialism and emotional intelligence .. | MODERN D | The core skills applicable to graduate careers are embedded in your course. All students experience an assessment related to a graduate role relevant to their course |

The findings from the table above suggests the four RGU universities, who were considered with university A in this research, strategically there was little specifically listed as embedded employability skills modules within curriculum; it is more ad-hoc and service centred. If students choose to engage with the services, all of the RGUs ‘education strategies focused on the educational imperative with flexibility and students as partners in their student journey. Among the four reviewed, the post-1992 universities seemed to use the terminology of ‘embedding’ employability and provide space within courses for employability skills modules to support their students. They placed a higher focus on curriculum and the economic imperative, which is aligned with findings from university B. There is no clear or obvious strategic divide in these findings, which concurs with the research findings of I6, in contemporary HE the traditional divides that once existed are no longer so clearly visible.

“I think there is an increased split between what is seen as research engines and high-volume teaching deliverers. Which used to be down the old party lines of pre and post 92’s but I don’t think that’s the case now. Each of these groups are trying to encroach on each other’s territory – I don’t mean encroach in a bad way.” ***I6/26:52***

As an interpretivist approach was taken for this study, it therefore cannot be presumed these findings would be consistent more widely across English HE but a clear pattern seems to be apparent in the above table. University B can be seen as a more skills-focused university, whereas university A focuses their courses around gaining subject knowledge and research as their drivers. It cannot be assumed that the words and strategies presented here are a clear and accurate reflection of what is happening in practice. This area would need further investigation and a larger sample to draw any meaningful conclusions, it does however indicate how universities appear to be addressing this agenda at a strategic level. There also appears to be a difference in the approach to employability within undergraduate courses more generally as the next quotes illustrate:

“I think it should be there if it’s optional then if the people who have the initiative and you know are proactive who are going to benefit from that.” ***1/F.G1 SU5 52. 25***

“I really like the idea of a compulsory module, Currently the resources are there but you have to be proactive.” ***1/F.G2 SU10 23:49***

“I definitely agree there needs to be a sense of employability. I don’t necessarily agree with it being kind of an assessed module. I don’t think that’s very engaging. I think people will easily drop out of things like that…. It is quite easy for us to say these things as we have all been on placement and we probably do have a better kind of reality and understanding of employability. “***SU.FG1 SU2 55.21***

“At the end of the day the purpose of getting a degree is actually getting a job afterwards or to start your own career.” ***2/F.G3 S1: 31:38***

These student quotes highlight students have different expectations of employability. When students can individualise their student journey, the reason why, is less of an issue.

“My approach is if you do a good job the rest will follow… the strongest leaders will focus on the transformational not the transactional.” ***I1/17:00***

This quote echoes the arguments of academic writers such as Readings 2002, Collini 2012, Docherty 2015 and Courtney 2017, who contend universities do not need dedicated ‘employability’ provision at all within course design; just teach well and students will go on and get jobs. However; this may be questioned in contemporary HE, failing to provide additional support for employability may be deemed a risky approach due to the increasing focus on this subject. Government continues to push for a knowledge economy, HEIs are a clear and direct link for the employment stream and should be actively seen to address employment metrics to compete in league table positioning.

In summary, no-one within the samples questioned the need for employability support; it was seen as beneficial. The dispute centred on how it should be situated within universities. This might have been because the sample for this research came from undergraduate business management courses, so some views held may have been similar. If the research had included creative or humanities courses, this might have presented different results. Ultimately, the main finding from this theme was there should not be a divide between education and employability, the two areas should work together. As history identified in HE before the term employability was actively addressed in universities, graduates were still going on to be productive members of the labour force. It has also shown the entwined nature of employability with economic drivers, so it is difficult to separate clearly education from employability in English HEIs today. It is important to understand how employability can be embedded into this dichotomy in which these two imperatives exist.

The negativity surrounding employability appears to be more when it is presented as a forced agenda from government that HEIs need to engage with to compete, survive and thrive. This is something is considered further in the next theme. Leaning towards the economic imperative and elements where universities function in part as businesses, applying metrics and competition.

**5.3 Theme 2: Universities as businesses**

Theme two contemplates whether universities are seen as businesses or whether the educational imperative still dominates. This was discussed in chapter 2 and can be traced back to the then Prime Minister James Callaghan’s Ruskin Speech of 1976, as well as more recently in the F&HEA 1992. The predominant message from the speech and act was a call for closer integration with industry, with measurement as a way of assessing performance and the importance of competition in the education market. These points align with subjects raised by participants and can be grouped together in this theme of universities as businesses.

A neoliberal approach may be seen as being ingrained for many staff within HE, as it has always been a part of their HE experience, but for many it is a more theoretical concept. Most academics do not think about it in their day-to-day work. It was interesting to view the different approaches taken by the two HEIs in this thesis. University B’s education strategy had six pillars (2015-2021) (accessed via their university website) listing ‘embedded employability’ in first place. This demonstrates the university’s overall commitment to employability through their strategic documentation. University A had an education strategy (2016-2021) (accessed via their university website) which referred to employability, but it was far less direct in the wording used and referred notably more towards supporting employability ‘which captures the value of learning and development experiences.’ The different strategic wording and approaches could also be seen running through the interviews and focus groups as this chapter aims to draw on. University B focused on the institution, where university A focused on students as the main driver in achieving positive employability outcomes. During this research it became clear that the concepts connected to neoliberal approaches did impact on employability, even though terminology such as customer and consumer were seldom used by participants.

A key point that emerged from the staff interviews was an awareness of the dichotomy between an educational and an economic paradigm. This manifested itself in the research when all staff interview participants discussed their responsibilities to the university as a business but also their educational responsibilities to students.

“I think employability has been politicised to quite an extent with the OfS and the idea that the TEF talks about the need for graduates to feel like they’re getting something out of their course towards a job.” ***I3/1:50***

This links back to the discussion of neoliberal approaches, trying to create a competitive HE market, supported by metrics and league tables. Discussions thus far have focused on the internal environment within HE and how it impacts employability, but employability cannot be attributed to just internal factors, no matter how good a course or an institution’s employability provisions are. If the external environment, funding, the COVID-19 pandemic or Brexit, are negatively affecting the labour market for graduates, then it stands to reason that students will be less successful in securing their expected graduate job, resulting in poorer GO results. Ultimately, if the labour market experiences a downturn as is currently being experienced due to the Pandemic and Brexit then opportunities for jobs will be negatively impacted across the country or beyond, across the globe. There has been a long-standing concern with graduate unemployment or underemployment if traced back the historical DLHE, current GO statistics and the new experimental 'Projected completion ad employment from entrant data’ (PROCEED) data. The PROCEED principle ‘PROjected Completion of Entrants into Employability Data’ introduced in 2021, projects the likelihood of students entering a specific course having a positive future outcome. Using the new PROCEED measure, it showed only 50% of students on Business Studies courses are expected to progress to graduate level jobs, which must present concerns for all stakeholders. This may be attributed to the labour market trends where low-skilled service roles are on the increase in England, raising concerns for the government’s push for a knowledge society. This is a concern for upcoming graduates given many highly skilled, professional or managerial jobs are not available currently. Vacancies are more aligned to less skilled entry but graduate level students may fill them to find employment.

The opening quote in this chapter from a staff participant at the post-1992 university highlighted their view from HE employability support. They posited the external influences have a major steer on HEI functions and the introduction of the PROCEED metric (OfS 2021) reinforced this. The interviewee also suggested there is tacit understanding that the inclusion of employability within marketing materials for courses is used to attract new students, with a perceived psychological contract the students enter into with their chosen university. S7, a pre-1992 student, articulated their discourse around this area of a university as a business, providing a service.

“If you get just a degree and nothing else it isn’t enough and higher universities (pre-1992) can’t rely on their position – Students need employability skills too” ***1/F.G1 S7: 54***

Open day events are a key way universities recruit their annual intake of students. These are marketised and branded to entice students to choose one university over another. This was raised by one student in the focus group.

“The reason I chose this (post-1992) university in particular was because of the welcome lecture by a past academic [sic]. She spoke a lot about employability and exposure to work, placements and things like that and I knew I needed more experience in other working environments to help me later on in my career.” ***2/F.G4 S11 7:49***

This quote shows employability was a key driver for this particular student and the importance of employability was reinforced at open days with references to performing well in relation to metrics and showcasing employer relationships. This links to metrics, allied to the selling of courses on open days, indicating that marketisation was deeply embedded in HE. This marketisation that was present in the sector contrasts sharply with universities forty years ago where the focus was on students impressing universities rather than the other way round. This supports Readings 2002, Collini 2012, Docherty 2015 and Courtney 2017’s claims that employability was always a feature of a HE experience before the term became widespread. Employability metrics featured in most themes within this chapter as it was such a major focus for HE. Staff interviewee I3 when interviewed was clear and direct in their view of their current university.

“More post-1992 universities are pushing to be up the rankings, looking for bits of the market to challenge Russell Group Universities (RGU)…. The directive is not what I’ve been used to, it is transactional and is an aggressive in its buying and expansion approach” ***I3/47:56***

This points to universities being seen as businesses offering a transactional commodity and it could be suggested engaging in aggressive competitive behaviour similar to many industry marketplaces. This quote suggested an interesting perspective, it is not stated how this view was formed but it was likely to be as a result of working in post-1992 universities where employability is at the heart of the corporate mission as too is competition and league table positioning. This was somewhat contrasted by a quote from a pre-1992 participant.

“...a feeling that a degree from this pre-1992 (RGU), you will go on and thrive and be successful. A lot of it is left to chance...” ***I2/29:30***

However, the focus on employment metrics varied in each institution, and differing values were placed on employability by the two institutions, which reinforces that there is no standardised approach. When conducting the staff interviews there is a difference between the two universities in their understanding and attitudes to employment metrics. The post-1992 interviewees were much clearer in knowing the focus for employability was the metrics in-place. This aided them to move into what was historically the RGU area of league table positioning as there was an emphasis on delivering on targets such as employability, making the division between pre- and post-1992 universities less clear as the desk research and I6’s earlier quote suggests.

“I think there is an increased split between what is seen as research engines and high-volume teaching deliverers. Which used to be down the old party lines of pre and post 92’s but I don’t think that’s the case now. Each of these groups are trying to encroach on each other’s territory – I don’t mean encroach in a bad way.” ***I6/26:52***

Staff participant I6 saw a clear division between universities, with not all focusing explicitly on metrics in terms of employment. This pointed to increased territorial competitiveness and a marketing strategy which competed for students, whilst at the same time prioritising research which seems contradictory but true. With league tables and metrics, it was difficult for RGUs to remain true to their traditional university values which blurred the distinctions previously held on pre- and post-1992 universities. Increasingly universities are dividing themselves with the introduction of teaching and non-teaching academic roles in order to meet the teaching and research targets set in HE. This has been evident in academic recruitment job specifications for HE over the last five years. Currently these metrics are integrated into university strategies to make and keep their institutions competitive in a statistically driven market of student recruitment and positive destinations.

“Too much emphasis on employability through metric, is what universities obsess with at the moment are the NSS and league tables.” ***I1/16.14***

”I would tweak the system, you don’t always have to rank universities all the time, you should absolutely celebrate success, but that doesn’t mean you need somebody (university) at the bottom and somebody at the top. The new TT is being far more target driven so this is to hit the metrics.” ***I3/27:00***

In the above quote, staff participant I3 questions if employability is about being student-centred, the reality was probably not, especially when the earlier chapters had employability so entwined in the economy and politics of English HE. I3 also made the point, metrics can be influenced by factors other than the university-provided employability provisions, and so there is no way to measure what exactly has led to that positive employment status after graduation. Below are some quotes from the staff interviews which appears to acknowledge the metrics for employability are perceived as wrong but they are what has to be worked with; there appeared to be staff acceptance in university B of the measures in place.

“The TEF has done its job here, as there are lots of course leaders that are thinking about how can I build in employability as a standard part of this, things like mentoring and use of external mentors and workplace scenarios.” ***I3/9:46***

”In general, it is very transactional, very KPI’s driven. Everything is about outcomes and when you’re looking at things like employability and the skills modules, like you said it isn’t about MEQs (module metrics)” ***I4/36.23***

As chapter 2 considered, there was much debate whether HE does or should adopt elements of a neoliberal approach encompassing marketisation. What was highlighted in 50% of the staff interviews was related to the alternative, economic imperative, around marketisation of HE and what HE should be for. This links to the prevailing neoliberal paradigm which has redefined the relationship between student and university from a strictly academic one, to one where the student is perceived to be a customer/consumer (Tomlinson 2017). Whilst a minority of interviewees considered that students should be viewed merely as students, as can be seen in the three quotes below, the neoliberal approach appeared to have been inculcated into the views of many staff participants.

“Students in my view are 100% customers now, but they consume HE. It is no longer you come in, you get what you get – that is no longer the case anymore.” ***I8/35:41***

“I think that the shift towards students being more consumers rather than a student. It certainly changes the way in which you would deliver and construct a programme, than perhaps you would have, demands of students are a critical one. What are those demands. Are they employability skills? “ ***I8/36:30***

“It is that kind of marketisation of universities that if often talked about is linked to this employability. Because what it doesn’t do – employability, is consider learning for learnings sake.” ***I3/2:19***

The focus of Tomlinson *et al* (2017) and their ‘Graduate Capital Model’ (GCM) is on individuals, developing themselves and their personal capital to align themselves to the right job markets upon graduation. This approach, along with the link to metrics for positive graduate outcomes and the steer of students to be focused on the labour market, demonstrates adoption of some neoliberal approaches.

The environment created within HE means universities use league tables and metrics to help position students starting their HE journey. The graduates themselves want to know how their predecessors have done in securing graduate level jobs upon completing their studies, thus supporting them to aim or aspire to do the same. One interviewee, an academic at the pre-1992 university with 25 years HE experience, referred to students as customers, which may have been a tongue in cheek comment but it does bear truth too and was along similar lines to Tomlinson’s (2010) views around students as consumers. Tomlinson (2010) argued students are not customers but are consumers of HE, suggesting that they must contribute to the process rather than be passive recipients of a process. Students should not be seen as customers; they must participate in the process in order to succeed. In the same way that enrolling at a gym does not guarantee that a member will become fit, signing up to a course does not guarantee academic success. Students must contribute to the process which may make them a consumer rather than a customer.

“I think you see it in sharp focus really. We’ve got a very diverse group that want different things at different times, in terms of ability, in terms of skills, in terms of subject specialism, in terms of preference and so on and (Students) they are paying in inverted commas ***customers*** for this.” ***I6/19:34***

Students as customers supports a neoliberal view, linked to the marketisation of the sector which was further reinforced by two other interviewees. This strengthened the idea HEIs were business entities, who needed to work to attract more customers for their product (their courses) to remain a viable option within their industry. This resulted in far greater competition in HE as chapter 3 charted throughout successive governments, showing a push for a more competitive HE sector, supported by the F&HEA 1992. Corporatisation and managerial approaches in HE were developments which raised concerns (Courtney 2015, 2017). Nonetheless, this research provided quotes and evidence from HE staff perspectives, elements of being customer focused and competing in contemporary HE strategies was the focus.

“Students in my view are 100% customers now, but they consume HE. It is no longer you come in, you get what you get – that is no longer the case anymore.” ***I8/35:41***

“I think that the shift towards students being more consumers rather than a student. It certainly changes the way in which you would deliver and construct a programme, than perhaps you would have, demands of students are a critical one. What are those demands? Are they employability skills? “ ***I8/36:30***

“It is that kind of marketisation of universities that is often talked about, is linked to this employability. Because what it doesn’t do – employability, is consider learning for learnings sake.” ***I3/2:19***

A key word search showed none of the students regarded themselves as being a consumer or customer. It is not clear why this is, but it might be assumed that they are customers or consumers of HE. Students may internalise their position, as it is commonly acknowledged therefore does not need stating. This contrasted with the OfS assertion that students look for value for money (OfS 2019). This research seemed to indicate instead that students appeared to be focused on value added as both students and staff in this research picked up on and quotes below feature. Adding value embraces far more than the financial aspects as a blog from De Main and Wolstencroft (2021) highlighted. The blog researched two post-1992 universities on what students’ value about their university experience and it was much more aligned with these research findings around extra-curricular activities and additional opportunities being perceived as adding value. Adding value in terms of enrichments rather than financially within courses as the participants below articulated.

“What students should come to university for? yes they need that technical learning but it is the acquisition of the value added.” ***I8/39:37***

“I think that if you move into business, critical thinking type skills are absolutely critical so I think that’s where the value is added.” ***I8/28:48***

“Employability in Business Management needs to be value adding.” ***1/F.G1 S3 54:10***

“We have been on placement (added value) and we probably do have a better kind of reality and understanding of employability.” ***1/F.G1 SU2 55:39***

Terms like ‘value added’ starts to move the landscape into a more neoliberal focused area of HE. This push was from the government through the OfS and the stakeholders of HEIs. This encouraged universities to participate in viewing students as customers (or consumers), as I8 stated with ‘students are 100% customers now…’ Students are looking for more than just a product, it is an experience, it is the opportunity for self-discovery. This was clearly acknowledged in 100% of the staff interviews, the focus of self-discovery, development and self-reflection was less clearly a thread in the student focus groups. Where students could see their self-reflection, it allowed them to see the benefits of investing in themselves through employability and staff felt this in turn supported the achievement of the GO metrics. There was a tacit understanding amongst HE staff of the importance of the university as a business. This was clearly shown by the following quote from I3.

“It’s the marketisation of universities that is often talked about with this linked to this idea of employability.” ***I3/2:10***

This view was not limited to one interviewee, the quote below taken from interviewee I6 an academic at the pre-1992 university, also voiced concerns around marketising HE;

“Within management schools it has become quite marketised, I think it has become a high-volume management education market. I think there should be more for people to think again about employability, I think it (HE) should be a space primarily for development and discovery for students. I think it is becoming too much more about very defined pathways towards employment.” ***I6/26.02***

In common with much of the research, a key point note was that the HE market and focus was not homogenous, not all university staff or institutions would share these thoughts or views, but there does appear to be a growing shared understanding of these type of views. What was interesting was the two quotes came from different job roles. Both the academic and the specialist employability staff indicated their parts of the university were becoming more marketised and this was in both institutions in this study.

It was clear that all the interviewees saw marketisation as a driver within employability. However, it meant focus elsewhere might well be lost. Attaching measures from a business perspective can motivate workers and allow them to see and celebrate their successes. Where the negativity seemed to be manifesting was in the over emphasis on employment metrics for staff in HE, suggesting the government drivers were too prominently the objective compromising the overall focus and feel of a course. Returning to I3, who clearly illustrates how employability has become an expected offering, so not always a positive force within the building blocks for all academic courses, this raised concerns around the leadership of employability. In university B, they structured employability in a new subsidiary business. It was suggested at times; this new venture was too target driven which also influences the student’s perception of employability and HE.

“Marketisation / Monetisation of HE, it makes it more difficult to do the sort of things that interest you because students see the degree a credentialism idea, the unit of currency. I need a degree for the next step.” ***I3/20:05***

The students who took part referred to or agreed with other participants that a primary purpose of HE was getting that “expensive bit of paper” as deliberated earlier in this chapter, there was no discussion that followed up on this around any other neoliberal terms only getting added value. The expense appeared to be regarded as the necessary but acceptable cost of undergraduate studies in England today.

This suggested there were two drivers in the move towards employability. Firstly, the political agenda as the literature review tracked back over sixty years with their influence and drivers for HE to have a competitive market, which the interviews in this research confirmed as metrics featured in all interviews conducted. Secondly, the push from students, for whom many expect employability to be an integral part of their studies, as they view their university experience as an investment in their future careers for which employability development is vital. This stressed the changing role of the student, they have power and are able to exert influence over what was presented to them, in short, they act as a customer (or consumer). This confirmed to some extent Tomlinson’s (2010) view that students have now become consumers, with choice, power and expectations to be fulfilled. This was despite the fact students did not state seeing themselves in the research explicitly as a customer, but some staff participants did acknowledge this in the interviews conducted. This may have been as a result of HEIs focusing on employability and meeting the metrics set.

 “The importance of employability, I think it is absolutely vital. We can’t produce graduates who are unemployable and we can’t have a situation where you’ve got work and university and there’s no link, so I would not change that.” ***I1/9:20***

This may have advocated a more consumer driven strategy for HEIs when suggesting what students wanted from their HE experience. That is not to say that other views did not emerge. Indeed I1, an academic with 20 years HE experience, stressed that whilst employability should be part of any good academic course structure it should not be the only driver, this goes back to the debate on educational and economic imperatives around the purpose of education. The point here was employability might be important but it questions whether it should be the key driver. I1 shared some thoughts on their concerns of what is currently steering HE;

“My worry of education is that now we are focusing so much on the outcomes, we’re not focusing on the process and putting enjoyment at the heart of our studies.” ***I1/10:10***

Interestingly, among the literature on marketisation (Clarke and Patrickson 2008, Minten 2010, Wright and Shore 2019) and the views of the participants, there did not appear to be the same emphasis on employability as an academic good, supporting individual and personal growth within students. Instead, employability appeared to be more linked to an end result of beating competitors or achieving metrics set confirming the view of Courtney (2015), who stressed the corporatised approach now used in much of compulsory education. However, this was not always the prevailing view as chapters 2 and 3 suggested there were two opposing views in academia as to a university primary purpose, in short the educational or economic imperatives.

Most of the primary research focused on both HE staff and students’ perceptions of employability within the HE student journey and there are some clear areas where differences existed. Some students recognised subject specific modules had learning opportunities that developed their subject knowledge but also offered personal development of skills through opportunities such as team-working or communication. Through the delivery of good technical module materials, employability development can too be conveyed. This linked to the earlier theme, educational versus economic paradigm, debating what HE is for. All interviewees questioned metrics for employability, and their effectiveness. For example, some students do achieve that positive graduate outcome, but it often comes years after they start or indeed finish their undergraduate courses, current metrics do not capture this as the statistics produced are limited to a specific timeframe, currently fifteen months. Similarly, employability in HE is often not the only reason a graduate succeeds making measures unreflective of HE inputs.

“What matters is the feedback you get when they’re out in employment…. Actually, now I get it, now I am in a graduate job. That’s what we should be assessing but that’s not how we are set up.” ***I4/36:52, 37:12***

Again, linked to literature and debates around universities as businesses, employability can be difficult when applying metrics as the turnaround of data and results are very slow, to meet targets set as the first comment below explains. It was also important to recognise student careers do not always start as soon as graduation for a whole plethora of reasons, not least students’ personal choices.

***“***I have to question if we do produce graduates that are ready to go into the market though, if I’m honest I am not sure across the board we actually do that. If you look at some of the Graduate Outcomes (GO). We haven’t had this years, the last ones the old DLHE 2016/17 this would suggest we don’t necessarily produce workplace ready graduates, because a lot of our students don’t necessarily go on to graduate roles.” ***I5/6.57***

“Even if they didn’t have a graduate job lined up, they would just take some time to do some more casual work to figure out, and transition into the graduate labour market. Maybe up to a year after graduating do some interim job or filler jobs.” ***I2/30:38***

Graduate unemployment and under-employment has been a concern since the late 1990’s, what was interesting was the percentage of students graduating and getting graduate jobs was higher before the term employability became prominent in contemporary HE. The current labour market landscape has a continued impact on students’ destinations upon graduation, exacerbated by recent factors such as the pandemic and Brexit but metrics do not seem to allow for such factors. Within this research staff and students were concerned with the impact the labour market had on them and their institutions. I5 was clear in their concerns as employers have a much bigger pool of new and recent graduates to choose from.

“We’re behind where others are especially in comparison to our competitors in the local area (3 Russell Group Universities RGU listed) (Interviewer: *Do you think it is because they are RGU?)* I think that students attending a RGU’s it automatically makes them more attractive to employers, than some of our graduates.” ***I5/20.18***

From earlier quotes in this chapter, it was clear contemporary HE staff are conditioned to see recruitment and delivery of undergraduate provisions as a competitive activity in which potential students are seen as customers and ultimately income. The impression I5, amongst others gave, was competition and metrics felt more divisive than supportive in creating positive student outcomes but that was not always the case as I4, an academic in university B raised:

“What matters is the feedback you get when they’re out in employment, actually now I get it, now I am in a graduate job, that’s what we should be assessing but that’s not how we are set up so I think it (leadership) is very transactional.” ***I4/36.52***

There are a growing number of views which this research concurs with, the metrics and measures for employability are not fit for purpose.

“Leadership in the TT (Employability Team) is not what I’ve been used to. It is aggressive in its expansion approach and the culture referred to by the senior leadership is ‘The Winning Culture’ which doesn’t sit comfortably with me as it assumes losers. The head has come from a recruitment background and, there is a feeling of employability is to hit the numbers, the metrics. It feels like a ***square hole and a round peg,*** the leadership is transformational but is applying a very tight transactional approach to delivering.” ***I3/47.56***

“It is very KPI driven and not always terribly supportive, but on the good side that [university B] has, it’s very easy to innovate if you want to try something new.” ***I4/37.31***

 “In general, it is very transactional, very KPI’s driven. Everything is about outcomes and when you’re looking at things like employability and the skills modules, like you said it isn’t about MEQs (module metrics)” ***I4/36.23***

The last quote indicates transactional processes within universities as they embody a business ethic in their current approaches to the functioning of the university. All staff in the research, shared a similar view, the metrics in HE for judging employability were not effective measures and not fit for purpose (Hyland and Merrill 2003, Simmonds 2008, Graeber 2015). Questioning the appropriateness of metrics rather than questioning the process of using metrics seemed to suggest some type of measure would be accepted. Wolstencroft and Lloyd (2019) found best performing courses were ones who focused on delivering a good course rather than meeting metrics, it was accepted metrics should exist, just in what format was the question. This showed clearly in the research as it seemed to be understood across HE staff that good embedding of employability does not necessarily have a direct correlation to the GO results. Factors which have impacted directly and profoundly on the current graduate labour market are Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic.

This research posed the question to interviewees - Would you change the balance in English HE as it is? The answer from I1 participant was clear.

”What I would change is how we assess our students and how we assess universities with the Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOs). So much pressure is to get students into particular jobs and if you don’t it’s a disaster for your league tables.” ***I1/9.39***

However, this approach appeared difficult to adopt given that the government drives the employment metrics set. A change in how league tables are compiled would directly impact the business of HE and the competitive element, as covered in theme 2 on page 83.

“I agree, it is not a level playing field. Even if you go to a Russell Group university from a working-class background, you don’t have the social (networks), economic (parental funding) or cultural (understanding how to behave) capital to succeed where peers from more privileged backgrounds succeed whatever, they can do far less on building their employability but still succeed in metric terms.” ***I3/29:00***

The quote mapped to recent literature from Friedman and Laurison (2019) with their work on the class ceiling, suggesting students have a built-in advantage when born into a wealthy family and students from a privileged background with good social and cultural network connections, with even without employability in undergraduate programmes, they are more likely to progress to positive destinations. This raised the point that a number of factors may impact metrics for the GO statistics.

In summary this theme raises questions of universities functioning as businesses and applying neoliberal approaches. To many, the interference from government in HE is impacting how HEIs are run as they must be seen to be engaging with the government’s employability agenda and their drive to produce a knowledge economy. It also highlights the current metrics and league tables in HE, questioning if they are fit for purpose as it does seem what is being measured cannot be attributed specifically to the HEIs employment or employability supports. Meaning if an institution is deemed to embed employability excellently within their courses, why then don’t all students have a positive outcome?

Students' personal plans or contacts and the labour market are key factors which impact the results but do not play a part in the data collection for the GO metrics. By questioning the factors contributing to positive destinations for graduates, this questions the metrics by which they are measured. HE may apply neoliberal approaches and by universities functioning in part as businesses but does it have a positive result on the employment statistics government strives for?

Having considered universities as businesses the next theme focuses on embedding employability in curriculum. The theme considers if there is an ideal approach for employability and importantly is it what students and curriculum staff want to see in their course structures.

**5.4 Theme 3: Embedding employability in the curriculum**

The research centres around the place of employability within HE and relates to research objectives. Is the best approach for employability to be integrated into curriculum or to be presented as optional extras students choose if and how they engage with? There is also the consideration of how specialised or technical modules accommodate employability. Both universities in this study engage to some extent with employability, but with very different approaches within their undergraduate Business Management courses as this section deliberates.

Terminology was key for employability; some participants noted the term ‘employability’ was a familiar term to students. The terms ‘employability’ or ‘careers’ for students were clear and attempts to change this terminology can impact the visibility and success of initiatives, as the post-1992 university has found.

“We’ve had feedback from quite a few students that they tried typing in careers on the website and you wouldn’t necessarily think to search for the talent team or talent connect which is our online presence. It’s very different especially for our final year students. Reach, getting to the students who need the support most, but are least likely to reach out.” ***I5/16:29***

Other interviewees also referred to issues with reach or connecting with students who may not proactively engage with their university employability supports. This may be an area for university leadership to consider when reviewing how to position employability within courses, as reach is fundamental to how successful the employability provisions will be.

“One (challenge) is the fact of reach, of what we do, could always be better, so peoples’ awareness of what we are doing (for employability)….. I think that’s always going to be a challenge” **I*6/14:37:49***

“Reach is a big issue about how much people know about employability.” ***I6/38:26***

One area that may boost reach of students is how universities signpost and embed employability supports. The post-1992 university embeds an employability 10 credit module in all three years for study at UG level. Students should be supported to understand the focus is personal development not just complying to pass the module assessment. There is a plethora of personal and professional qualities that extend beyond the linear or simplistic view of skills, which students need to be aware of to enable development (Holmes 2001, Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007, Higdon 2016, Cole and Hallett 2019).

“The [employability module] is three years where students have a degree of choice about what they select, so they can personalise their programme to make sure their CV is as attractive as possible and so is any perceived weakness.” ***I1/4:15***

“I don’t think we always tie things together well enough. This is why we need this bolt on employability module which then might be replicating stuff that’s already going on. ***I4/32:27***

“Embedding (employability) that needs to be through course design and how we manage courses.” **I4/34:14**

A significant difference between the two universities was university A had a skills and employability module embedded in year one of their undergraduate programme only, whereas university B embedded employability in all three years of their UG study. Each approach may work for some students but not all.

“First year module – [named] is to develop self-awareness and then at second and third year levels are more module level, guest speakers and case-studies with no formal employability module. ***I6/3:00***

“There are some very good examples of embedding employability (named) within curriculum, but there are others that it is seen as an add on rather than being seen as a value.” ***I2/8:25***

“You often see the two don’t mix, there’s my subject and then employability and we are trying to do exactly the same thing.” ***I7/11:58***

Both universities were quick to discuss other subject specific or technical modules with elements of transferable skills. For example, university B has modules that involve groupwork and more employer-focused activities such as an internship module. There were some positive acknowledgements of the benefits of embedding employability by universities, mainly focused on the outputs, the metrics, showing areas of engagement with the government’s employability agenda and also addressing the suggested good practice of embedding employability (Knight and Yorke 2002-2006).

“I think embedding gives it (employability) a little bit more of an even playing field, because it means that some students won’t want to do stuff unless its accredited, because they do focus on it more-so now.” ***I7/23:06***

“But that could take the form of an actual (employability) module going forward, because there is a case for it in year one so it makes sense.” **I6/6:42**

“To be honest with you, this is a continued discussion whether the credit bearing model (for employability) is best or not.” ***I8/13:52***

“In curriculum at undergraduate level it is changing from the same programme for all and we decide what is right for them. So, I think we’ve become more conscious of the fact not all students need the same things and that some students come to us with some employability skills.” ***I4/3:55***

In contrast to this, much of the post-1992 student feedback related to specific employability and skills related modules for their source of support and development, even amongst those who had taken the opportunity of work placements and engaged with central supports.

“I would definitely like to say a few things that helped me with my employability skills, my [employability and free choice university wide module for developing personally]. They helped developing networking skills and as part of this we had to open a LinkedIn account and profile…. I was not aware of speculative letters as part of job applications, it was great insight …. how to represent yourself and shine out in the employer’s perspectives.[sic]” ***2/F.G3 S1 23:38***

“Yeah, I agree with S1, that the [employability] module was really useful for me…. It really hit home that the further you get through uni, the structure is really useful.” ***2/F.G3 S3 24:18***

“[Employability] modules definitely help us not only build soft skills but the hard skills through these interactive classes.” ***2/F.G3 S5 26:08***

“I’d rate the uni services a 10 – It is simple as the university offers the services, but at the end of the day it’s if the student actually takes advantage of it.” ***2/F.G3 S5 26:58***

The post-1992 students appeared from the comments to be more reflective and aware of employability in their student journey. As this last quote shows, opinions on embedding employability are changing. There is no single, set approach for all courses, and there is a trend towards offering broader choices within employability skills development. Employability options for students will be improved across the board if students are treated as individuals, with their own needs regarding employability. As contemporary pedagogical research shows, development beyond a skill-centric focus, more broadly of a personalised student journey is desirable (Cashian *et al* 2015, Cole and Hallett 2019).

There has been ongoing debate, whether employability should be embedded in curriculum and if so how overtly (Knight and Yorke 2006). A module for employability skills, or more light touch with tasks being set in subject specific modules that helps develop transferable skills such as communication and team-working. This aligns with academic articles which suggest universities and the student experience should be a place for knowledge gain and a personal journey of discovery (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, Docherty 2015 and Courtney 2017), however the tension between personal knowledge gain and employability focused development is the dilemma.

University B indicated their education strategy focused one of its key principles on employability, to ensure it was given the importance it needed. It could be viewed two ways, one to influence positive responses to the metrics when measured or alternatively to give students a fuller learning experience that will support their progression into their chosen careers and the labour market.

“One of the things looked at as part of the validation process is employability… you need to show how it’s (the course) has direct links to employers and graduate jobs***.” I1/4:40***

“I think we have it (the balance of employability in courses) about right but we need to find other ways of making it part of other modules as well.” ***I4/31:22***

“We have some colleagues very interested in employability but we have others who aren’t interested. They are interested in their specialism.” **I*4/13:00***

“Some course teams can maybe pay lip-service to employability in validation processes but then do a purely academic programme for the next three years.” ***I1/7:27***

As the quotes above showed, the onus for university B was on the staff and institution. Much of this and other qualitative research was based on human thoughts, feelings and views that there may be no single answer to any question, and this was highly individual so cannot be assumed across all participants. The quotes below from university A staff appeared to put more onus on the students to be more proactive when it came to their student journey and developing their employability skills.

“It’s (employability) all about raising self-awareness and reflection and encouraging them to go on and be proactive, do things that will make them unique and distinct not just one size fits all approach.” ***I2/16:53***

“My own view is that a consequence of that, they (students) become more rounded, employable citizens who can go on and contribute to society in the future.” ***I2/19:06***

These quotes link to this research, supporting an individualised student journey. All staff participants were clear: the steer for this, particularly in relation to employability, was on the students to some extent to shape their experience. There were however, several comments suggesting that achieving joint buy-in from staff and students to employability was the optimum tactic going forward.

“You need buy-in from both staff and students, when it is present it works perfectly” ***I1/7:41***

“There are lots of colleagues who are doing very interesting things like the [employability] modules.” ***I4/11:57***

“My belief is always if you do a really good job with students they’ll get jobs. So basically, the driver is not the job, the driver (for universities) is making sure you’ve got an excellent degree and you’ve got all these (employability) things embedded in it, actually students get good jobs and universities get good reputations.” ***I1/15:52***

As with the last quote, some staff interviewees focused on the university experience and course content needing to be wider than the technical or subject specific content in order to address sufficiently the needs of students graduating into the current labour market. This might suggest the onus was being placed on the course content and supports rather than the student, as the quotes below discuss:

“It’s the added extras over and above the technical content that I think is an important aspect of going to university.” ***I8/31:07***

“Giving participants in HE the chance to grow as individuals and gain more awareness about the world we live in and their futures within it, to challenge themselves to broaden their knowledge to do something they are genuinely passionate about and deepen their knowledge within. To meet people and grow as individuals.” ***I2/19:01***

There may have been researcher misunderstanding at the outset of this research, that to be successful employability skills must be embedded as a module within the curriculum. This is not the case. A subject specific module could require students to work in teams, this would be an example of developing students and their learning gain for employability without a specific employability module being embedded. The development of skills in being able to navigate and work as part of a team is a consequence of the module delivery and ultimately can ensure that employability developments are supported too. The key to success is embedding student reflection of the skills acquisition through the undertaking of modules.

“I would say we have quite a lot of group work and we also have students from different places, so there is definitely modules that helped us to develop team management skills as well, like adapt to other cultures because that’s a very difficult thing and also I would say time management as there are those times when you have so many deadlines and you cope with.” ***2/F.G4 S10 32:48***

“They (the course team) have given us the opportunity so not just to do the dissertation I am going to do an internship (module) and I am very fortunate to be doing it in the VC’s (Vice Chancellors) office. It is not only a huge honour but it is giving me priceless practical experience to do a project. How to engage, how to increase engagement within the university during the pandemic.” ***2/F.G4 S12 35:15***

Both comments above were from university B, where students did seem more aware of employability skills and where their course offered them the opportunity to develop these skills within the curriculum, possibly because employability and skills development are something that has formed part of their academic student journey right from the beginning of their undergraduate study. Some students could recognise the opportunities to develop themselves, as they have been taught how to be reflective in their student learning experiences. The two student focus groups from university A seemed less clear regarding course learning around employability but could see how their overall university experience was developing them, as the quotes below suggested.

“If we do more things related to real business we will become more employable. Placement was my biggest development support.” ***1/F.G1 SU/8 55:00***

“I feel like having gone to university. I feel like it’s everything outside the actual content itself that’s made me more employable because it’s made me better at networking and building relationships. It’s like the social aspects of university that ended up what I’ve gained most and then getting that bit of paper.” ***1/F.G1*** ***SU1/17:12***

From the student quotes above it appeared students can, to some extent, reflect and see what activities they engaged with, to develop skills. How do university staff support and develop this further in students? One interviewee, I5, already noted that there is a lack of confidence in students when it comes to possessing the skills required for graduate jobs.

“Looking at embedding employability within curriculum so that their course embedded instead. At the moment there are key skills that are embedded within the course but they’re not necessarily as obvious to our students, that they’ve got these skills.” ***I5/1:38***

Much research, this included, tends to categorise students as a single group but it is important to acknowledge that students are individuals and have differing perceptions, drivers and needs. This was a key area of acknowledgement in this research for further work in the area of employability in HE.

“That’s my own view, that it’s a consequence of that, they (students) become more rounded, employable citizens who can go on and continue to society in the future.” ***I2/19:06***

Students may be expected to differentiate themselves out from their competitors in the job market, but how? As SU1 stated in their quote referring to spoon-feeding and levelling the playing field through embedded employability provision and generic support, this only reduced the chance to stand out and be different. This has raised questions in the research, do universities offer what students want? The next theme on Student Voice considered this further. Students’ thoughts and quotes on embedding employability are needed here to identify any similarities or differences between HEI staff and their students’ views. In the data for the focus groups, question 6 asked students:  Do you think supporting topics such as employability within undergraduate course delivery should be mandatory or optional?

Of the 24 students who took the survey, one participant took the survey but could not join the focus group on the day. Four student participants (16%) in the survey viewed employability as an optional choice, whilst the majority (20 students) suggested that employability should be embedded within course delivery as a standard practice. Interestingly the four students who stated it should be optional had work experience and were from the post-1992 university which already embeds employability in all three years of its main undergraduate courses. The focus groups confirmed an interesting point, which was that all universities use different approaches to employability, with some embedding it through skills modules as the post-1992 university does. Embedded employability was regarded favourably amongst the student participants, as it attempted to be innovative, and student driven. Some universities, such as the pre-1992 university, are currently less focused on the embedding through modules, but this was under review. It was felt that opportunities to do team-working and meaningful real case-studies had until now sufficed, with additional but optional supports based within faculty and central careers. However, when the focus groups took place, a similar question was asked, with different results. The question concerned how important students consider employability to be in an UG degree, and further asked whether employability modules should feature within courses.

100% of University B’s first focus group of students agreed that employability should be embedded in courses, including one student who had deemed it to be optional previously when completing the similar survey question. In the second focus group from university B, five out of seven agreed, which was more in-line with the survey, where three students had deemed it to be optional. Interestingly, 100% of responses from the other two focus groups at university A which does not have such modules embedded after the first year in courses, felt that mandatory embedding was their preference, many student participants agreed with this view. What was interesting to see, was in focus group 1/F.G1 once a single student queried the place or point of such modules within their course, the practicalities of how they would run, what they would offer and how they might be assessed, others then agreed and began to question too whether embedding in all levels was the best approach to take for employability development of students. So, from ten students in university A who all chose mandatory embedding of an employability module, in the initial survey, six continued to regard embedded employability as the right way for HEIs to approach employability. Two were less sure, and wanted to understand the practicalities of embedding it, and two had changed to question employability’s place as their comments below highlight. One student seemed to build on the previous students’ comments.

“I think it should be more of a balance, because as much as employability is important, obviously the graduate market competition is really tough at the moment. It’s tougher than ever and I think that if you’re kind of spoon-feeding employability to everyone then you’re kind of just level the playing field., whereas a lot of students actually have the initiative and proactivity to go out there and take on these things themselves.” ***1/F.G1 SU1 50:00***

“There isn’t a need to have a module on employability because for me anyway, I feel like learning about employability and just getting told these are the skills that you learn from it I wouldn’t find it beneficial. Instead, I would be looking at making modules really interactive with the business world. So, I still feel like there’s a divide between university and real life in business. “ ***1/F.G1 SU8 53.37***

This was interesting as it concurred with some of the literature around focus groups and online surveys or questionnaires. Focus groups are thought to allow space for students to verbalise and discuss ideas and questions within the group allowing richer results to be gained. A potential disadvantage of focus groups, as may have been the case here, is that one vocal student could influence others’ views and a groupthink tendency can emerge. However, it may have been that a valid point was made which allowed students to think through alternatives before responding. It may also question the validity of online surveys with the time and thought put into answering them. If the two questions are compared here, there are some changes between students’ initial answers in the survey and their focus group responses. This may be due to focus group influences during live virtual sessions, which was highlighted in the methodology chapter as an area of limitation when running focus groups, or because participants have thought through their responses more.

However, it should be made clear that these objections to employability being embedded in undergraduate studies came from very proactive students who took charge of their learning experiences by doing a placement year and made use of the additional employability services to ensure that the development of employability skills was prioritised. They constituted a minority at 16% of the sample, whilst 84% of the sample regarded the embedding of employability within their courses as a positive suggestion. Three of the four focus groups that took place had a 100% positive view that embedding employability within courses and curriculum was the students’ preference. They also identified elements within curriculum such as team-working, specialist industry placements, technical modules and extra-curricular activities as being beneficial.

“I think because our degree is very theory based, that wouldn’t be that attractive to employers so we definitely need to build on other skills that we can actually take into the workplace.” ***2/F.G3 S4 33:59***

“I am a fresh graduate too but since I had the employability from our degree, I believe we would stand out in the employer’s mind, okay she has the knowledge but as well she built an entire portfolio of what skills she has gained throughout the entire year. So that would kind of give me an upper hand in that interview.” ***2/F.G3 S1: 35:43***

In summary, this theme of embedding employability raised links to the literature in chapter 2, and the importance of embedding employability as a central function of contemporary HEIs (Knight and Yorke 2003, Cole and Tibby 2013). From this research it was clear both staff and students see the importance of employability in a students’ journey through HE but how that is addressed did not reach a consensus. This research explores the debate about whether, or how, employability should be promoted in undergraduate business courses. It acknowledges that one approach might not suit all students, or indeed all courses. It also considers more widely some of the issues around reach, terminology and whether the onus is on staff or students regarding employability. The research did appear to reveal concerns over student reach and a perceived disconnect between what universities offer and what students want. The next theme on ‘Student Voice’ considers student approaches to employability within their HE experience, and whether what students are asking for is being delivered on.

**5.5 Theme 4: The role of Student Voice on Employability in HE**

The final theme focuses predominantly on the students who participated in this research. It was clear that students have opinions, and their voices are important (OfS 2020), as they can offer insights and perspectives staff may not have considered. This broaches the concept of students as collaborators or partners, which is a fast-developing area within contemporary HE. Chapter 2 considered a definition of Student Voice: ‘The aim of empowering students to make decisions about teaching and learning practices is known in academic parlance as Student Voice’ (Hämäläinen *et al* 2017). The findings of this research suggest that now, maybe more than ever, students and student voices need to be heard, as they have ideas and feedback to offer. The OfS are driving this agenda too (Cook-Sather 2018, Holker 2019, Lander 2020). This is important for the overall learning experience but in such changing times, HE students can be seen by some HEIs as partners or co-creators in their learning environment, impacting change in their modules, courses or HEI. This refers to not just listening to students as the term Student Voice might suggest but including them in the process of change for curriculum design and supporting fellow students in buddying or mentoring approaches (Bovill 2015, Cook-Sather 2018, Holker 2019).

The latest developments in HE are starting to go beyond merely capturing the Student Voice, into inviting students to influence and change the HE spaces they occupy. This was seen by the OfS (2020), advocating students should be placed at the centre of what HEIs do. Quotes from this research suggests external drivers such as OfS are linking this area back to supporting the economic imperative by encouraging students to expect employability within curriculum.

“I think employability has been politicised to quite an extent with the OfS and the idea that the TEF talks about, the need for graduates to feel like they’re getting something out of their course towards a job. “ ***I3/1:50***

“The importance of employability, I think is absolutely vital. We can’t produce graduates who are unemployable and we can’t have a situation where you’ve got work and university and there’s no link, so I would not change that.” ***I1/9:20***

What emerged from the research was interesting, the post-1992 university staff talked most about competition with regards to their competitors, but it was the pre-1992 students who saw HE and particularly the area of employability as a competition*.* This shows differing views and values around the student voice and employability based on this research sample*.* It also allows a shift in the alignment of learning to a more holistically student driven approach (Donald *et al* 2019)

The theme of students as partners and students’ voices being heard and listened to was evident in the research findings. Students from both institutions referred to opportunities within their courses that allowed their voices to be heard but more importantly for them to feel that their contributions had helped create a better course and learning environment for themselves, their peers and future students. The first evidence of this came from a student at the pre-1992 university who was directly involved in a mentoring ambassador role to support new students embarking on their studies:

“in terms of [named employability module], just going back to this point what I will say is [named employability module] as a module has come a long way since we did it and we know that because a few of us are ambassadors and we work with someone who runs that module and he has completely transformed it.” ***1/F.G1 S5 38:24***

There was evidence of good practice in this area from this research showing HEIs through the involvement of students in curriculum decisions, but it was interesting that participants rarely mentioned this. Student S1 from the post-1992 university volunteered during the summer of 2020 to support course development to move the first-year employability module online. She recorded videos of what she did to shape her learning journey, reflecting on what she would like to have known as a first-year student starting her student journey. This was an example of co-creation by her and staff to support new students.

There is however, a more cynical view of HEIs encouraging student collaborations in response to pressures from outside influences, either from within HE or from government funded bodies such as the OfS, rather than from any innate desire to involve students in decision making. The other notable quote in this research came from a post-1992 university student who was permitted to try an alternative to completing a dissertation in the final year of their business degree:

“So, what I’m doing, I’m doing an internship and I’ve been very fortunate that I’m doing internship within the Vice Chancellor’s office. So not only is it a huge honour to work with the VCs office but it is also giving me priceless practical experience to do a project. My project is how to engage, how to increase engagement within the University during the pandemic. So, it is definitely something which I’m doing, but I know if I do a good job, it may help students of the future that are going to be students during the pandemic.” ***2/F.G4 S12 35:18***

This participant could see the benefits of working on a project within the university. This appears to be a win/win, as the student has the benefit of developing skills that are transferable into the workplace, and their work might contribute to shaping the curriculum and approaches to teaching in the continuing COVID-19 pandemic. For this student, the project was on staff and student perspectives of online learning and delivery during the pandemic, something universities are looking to develop further. Student SU1 from the pre-1992 university was clear in their views of how employability should be approached in HE, and considered that the onus was on students to drive their own learning and development for future employment:

“I think it should be more of a balance, because as much as employability is important, obviously the graduate market competition is really tough at the moment. It’s tougher than ever and I think that if you’re kind of spoon-feeding employability to everyone then you’re kind of just level the playing field, whereas a lot of students actually have the initiative and proactivity to go out there and take on these things themselves.” ***1/F.G1 SU1 50:32***

This quote was in stark contrast to the same student’s views when taking the initial survey on their demographic information and initial thoughts around employability. The survey results discussed earlier showed that initially twenty students considered employability should be mandatory within course curriculum, SU1 being one of them. Four students felt that an optional approach was preferable, but as stated earlier their view changed during the focus group session. It was interesting to note that although the focus groups did not ask any specific questions around student contributions as partners or co-creators, there were elements of this which the participants identified and recognised as important. This related to the research finding that not all students want or need the same thing and that creating a heterogenic style is preferable to a one-size-fits-all approach. This raises the question of how courses and wider institutional education systems should allow for this going forward:

“Not all students need the same thing.” ***I4/4:03***

“I think it’s just making them aware that these are where you go to look for (employability related) things. I think part of the problem at university is we do bombard students a bit, there is almost too much choice…. More is they need to be self-selecting.” ***I7/23:47***

In the interviews with staff there were comments about the Student Voice and the possible impact on course recruitment, design and delivery. Staff appeared to be somewhat cautious with this approach of adopting design in response to feedback and the Student Voice, and this research suggests why this might be. The research found students want different things from their student journey, so changes in response to one cohort may not be as well received by another cohort, raising concerns about how courses should address this and indeed whether students are best placed to inform curriculum of course decisions.

“There is a balance between (and this is something we discuss quite regularly) giving them (students) what we know is good for them and conversely giving them what they want. Quite often those two things do not marry up particularly well. “ ***I8/36:01***

Staff interviewee I7, viewed students involvement in curriculum design differently, putting the onus on students to steer their degree path where I8 above raised concerns, suggesting students may not know what they need or is good for them to effectively influence curriculum

“HE it is about students taking ownership of it (their degree journey) and having the confidence to take ownership of it because we can’t provide tailor made career development programmes.” ***I7/36:45***

This may suggest the view ‘you don’t know what you don’t know’ (Sikes and Potts 2008). This may question whether students are best placed to make the decisions on their courses when they have little data, background or context to make those decisions. This posed the question of what students wanted from HE and what is good for them. It also questions who is best placed to know what students need in terms of employability support. This supports the view that students are individuals and heterogenic and should be supported as such in their HE journey.

“HE it is about students taking ownership of it (their degree journey) and having the confidence to take ownership of it because we can’t provide tailor made career development programmes.” ***I7/36:45***

Considering these quotes, the introduction of student co-creators needs to be carefully managed in order to work effectively for all stakeholders involved. As academics we regularly see module feedback forms where one student loves the way a module is structured and another student will complain the module was not structured enough. This was the case in recent years with the employability module at university B. In response to the Student Voice, which gathered negative feedback from some students, the employability module was overhauled to allow students more freedom and choice to develop their own heterogenic learning pathway which would meet their individual employability needs, as this is what students seemed to be calling for.

If the responsibility lies with students, whether they choose to take up employability offerings outside their course curriculum connecting to employability, being individually driven by students themselves, this might further add to the issue already raised of reach. This was something the pre-1992 students focused on, when employability events were optional how they chose to engage differed as opinions in the quotes below suggest.

“ I think it (employability) isn’t currently done the right way… I think there is definitely some bits missing, there is a disconnect there.” ***1/F.G2 SU9 13:11***

“But our management school, they have this employability hut, whereby you can go there for guidance and stuff like that which is good. I have used this.” ***1/F.G2 SU10 14:19***

“They (employability team) send round emails which can be useful, but I don’t read the emails or access the careers stuff. “ ***1/F.G2 SU9 15:20***

“Obviously, the resources are extra, I don’t think they put as much emphasis on how important it (employability) is, I think they could definitely emphasise the importance of employability.” ***1/F.G2 SU9 23:07***

“I am not keen on employability as an assessed module, it’s not needed.” ***1/F.G1 SU2 51:03***

“If we do more things related to real business, we will become more employable.” ***1/F.G1 SU8 54:25***

The staff participants identified here is often variation in what students want and need. From analysing the interview data, it appeared more strongly in the pre-1992 staff views, if employability was happening within their course or more widely in their university, the students should be able to choose whether or not to engage. It was assumed at the post-1992 university that employability forms part of every student’s learning journey through curriculum.

“We have to remember we are dealing with adults. They are not all going to want to engage with it and sometimes you have to say okay fine.” ***I7/28:17***

“If it’s (employability) not done well, can lead to students questioning why they have to do this, it is not essentially what they want to study.” ***I2/15:37***

Participant I6 directly related employability to the Student Voice, as buy-in from the students was key to the reach and effectiveness of employability support:

“I think student voice is so important in terms of making this kind of offering around employability successful.” ***I6/32:44***

This was echoed in I2’s words below, referring to the power held by students in contemporary HE:

“ The thing that has the power to make the most difference is student voice. If students start to demand and ask for more, support more in this area, then change is easier. They have more power than they realise. “ ***I2/37:50***

The increased use of employers, alumni and support staff such as student unions, faculty and central support staff for employability more specifically ran throughout the interviews as a common thread. HEIs’ commitment to employability may be questioned if many of the tools used are add-ons from outside the course and optional. It may only be proactive students who benefit from these supports and they are often not the ones who need the help, linking back to the concerns around reach discussed earlier.

“Our Talent team give extra-curricular support, there are a small amount of engaged students for which this is great, but the big issue is if staff and students don’t buy in, how do we reach the hard-to-reach students?” ***I1/10:28***

“I think that the shift towards students being more consumers rather than a student. It certainly changes the way in which you would deliver and construct a programme, to perhaps you would have - Are there employability skills?” ***I8/36:30***

This raises the question, should HE staff give students what they want, when they want it or should HE be adapting the course delivery to ensure all students are obliged to engage with the employability agenda? This research showed that the Student Voice from the focus groups gave a clear message of how they felt employability should be delivered from SU.FG1 SU1 50:32’s (quoted earlier) articulation of employability being a competition and therefore levelling up the playing field for students should not be the approach. Others saw employability as an opportunity to develop themselves to stand out amongst competition in the graduate recruitment market:

“Ultimately it is a competition for that job so obviously people want to make themselves different from the rest. If you have a whole cohort who have all had these employability support networks, just given to them, handed to them it limits the competition.” ***1/F.G1 S1 51:09***

“Universities don’t say some to university [sic] and we will get you a job. They say come to university and learn further about subjects and you’ll get a deeper understanding of different types of business.” ***1/F.G1 S5 52:13***

“It is important for you to stand out to the employers. So probably someone else from another university has the theory based that would come from the course. I am a fresh graduate as well, but since I had employability forced in our degree, I believe that we would stand out in the employer’s mind….. she has built an entire portfolio of what skills she has gained throughout the entire year, so that would give me an upper hand in that interview” ***2/F.G3 S1 35:41***

The post-1992 students saw employability in curriculum as a way to stand out, not as a levelling of the playing field as one student articulated.

“We will have a first-class degree, but how are we different from each other and employability course helps us to differentiate ourselves to some extent. ***2/F.G3 S1 36:08***

Students steering and creating their own student journey through flexible approaches was evident in the post-1992 university’s employability module. This was based on a loose framework which allows students to choose a pathway that is right for them. The pre-1992 university had addressed their Student Voices by offering extra-curricular optional activities where students could choose if or when they engage. This indicates the developing importance of students as co-creators, who are not being told what they need, but are able to shape their journey together with their course staff. This might result in students committing more to employability if they feel part of the process, as literature suggests (Cooker-Sather 2018, Holker 2019). At the pre-1992 university, a student participant stated that they did not want a levelling of the playing field, but it seemed this was exactly what university staff were aiming to provide as per literature recommendations from Parutis and Howson 2020.

“I think embedding gives it (employability) a little bit more of an even playing field, because it means that some students won’t want to do stuff unless its accredited, because they focus on it more-so now.” ***I7/ 23:06***

This view again raises questions around ‘you don’t know what you don’t know’ (Sikes and Potts 2008). Perhaps students do not yet know what is right or best for them, as I8 (36:01) articulated in their interview, which was quoted earlier in this theme. Other previous themes demonstrated that not all students are motivated or driven by the same thing. Some of this might be due to their social capital, their background, family and networks available to them. Their perceptions of the purpose of their HE experience and their motivations to succeed in their degree might also be factors.

The focus groups elicited differing views and opinions on HE and employability, which led to the question of whether there was a sense of entitlement among some students. If they do not value or engage with the employability offerings through their course and overall student experience, do they still expect to have a positive outcome after graduation? It also considered what some students saw as valuable to their studies.

“Having gone to university I feel it is everything outside the content that has made me more employable, as it has made me better at networking and building social relationships, it’s like the social aspect of university ended up what I’ve gained most out of my degree and then getting that bit of paper.[sic]” ***1/F.G1 SU8 17:12***

One student from the pre-1992 university spoke of the challenge of gaining graduate level employment upon completion of their undergraduate degree as a competition, as highlighted earlier in this theme.

“I think it should be more of a balance, because as much as employability is important, obviously the graduate market competition is really tough at the moment. It’s tougher than ever and I think that if you’re kind of spoon-feeding employability to everyone then you’re kind of just level the playing field., whereas a lot of students actually have the initiative and proactivity to go out there and take on these things themselves.” ***1/F.G1 SU1:50***

This quote starts to link to Student Voice, where each individual students needs around employability is different, starting to show a progressive shift in HE towards a more holistic approach to employability in HE learning (Cole and Hallett 2019). It also raises concerns of whether course teams and universities are listening to students and the Student Voice of what they want or need to succeed.

“I think it should be there if it’s optional then if the people who have the initiative and you know are proactive who are going to benefit from that.” ***1/F.G1 SU5 52. 25***

“There isn’t a need to have a module on employability because for me anyway, I feel like learning about employability and just getting told these are the skills that you learn from it I wouldn’t find it beneficial. Instead, I would be looking at making modules really interactive with the business world. So, I still feel like there’s a divide between university and real life in business.“ ***1/F.G1 SU8 53.37***

“I definitely agree there needs to be a sense of employability. I don’t necessarily agree with it being kind of an assessed module [sic]. I don’t think that’s very engaging. I think people will easily drop out of things like that…. It is quite easy for us to say these things as we have all been on placement and we probably do have a better kind of reality and understanding of employability.” ***1/F.G1 SU2 55.21***

In summary this theme moves the discussion on from what HEIs do for student employability, steering the onus from universities and staff to placing the onus on students. It features the importance of students in the creating and development of employability activities for students. This theme highlights the rhetoric changes moving employability away from skills acquisition to encouraging students to take ownership of their career planning. Students who participated agreed employability supports were needed in HE but their views on how it is, or should be, delivered varied. Some felt that graduate employability was a competition and therefore should not be formally taught, as doing so might level the playing field. Others felt that embedding employability in the curriculum worked but acknowledged that the framework needed to be flexible to allow for individual student choice. It appeared that HEIs are working on opportunities to level the employability playing field for students by providing standardised support and teaching, but this may contradict what the Student Voice is asking for. University leaders must, as some of the interview quotes illustrated, contend with political and external stakeholders who are pushing for more students with employability skills to succeed in the labour market as soon as they graduate.

The research findings suggest that there should be a shift to put students as individuals at the heart of their personal, unique HE experiences if HEI employability strategies are to be effective. This research suggests supporting students and equipping them with attributes for their careers, if students are placed at the heart of employability more success may come. Student engagement with employability support can be improved by involving students as partners (Matthews 2017, Holker 2019).

**5.6 Summary of Findings**

In summing up the findings and themes, there are connections between the literature review and the research findings for this thesis. For theme one, education *versus* economic imperatives, the suggested focus may be better expressed as education *and* employability, creating an environment where one complements rather than challenges the other. It is important to cover both the educational and economic imperatives although the approaches taken to supporting this in courses may be different as theme three highlighted. Theme 2 focuses on how universities have devolved and are much more business-like in their structures and approaches with budgets, funding and metrics playing key roles in contemporary HE.

The findings suggest a loose and flexible framework for how employability support should be delivered, a more fluid approach is endorsed. This is as a result of the wants and needs of students being highly individualised, so the need for differing approaches. This reinforces a thread that was common to all the themes, which was that students are heterogenic in nature and this needs to be accounted for by university staff supporting employability within courses.

This also moves the conversation on to deliberate where the focus for delivering on employability in HE should be, on universities or students themselves? It may be argued, universities currently are resourcing and funding many initiatives to support employability and students to be graduate ready but the levels of reach or to what extent students choose to engage is down to them and their personal motivations and drivers. This research is starting to see a need for a shift in narrative around employability in HE, moving beyond a skills-centric focus onto a more individualised and holistic approach which allows students to reflect and self-assess their development needs, giving support to the development of the student voice in course changes. (Cashian *et al* 2015, Cole and Hallett 2019).

Chapter 6 considers the overall findings and discusses the key results in relation to the research objectives set. Recommendations and conclusions of the research will be summarised. Chapter 6 will also allow for reflection on the researcher’s journey and the changing views along the way.

**Chapter 6 – Discussion and Conclusions**

**6.1 Discussion**

It is prudent to revisit the research objectives set out in chapter one and to consider how the research findings have influenced the discussion, recommendations and conclusions. Recommendations are made in this chapter, considering how this research adds to the literature which already exists and drawing on the discussion and conclusion of this thesis. The research objectives set out were.

*RO1: To consider the place of employability in English Higher Education*

*RO2: To explore who is responsible for developing employability skills in graduates?*

*RO3: To identify any differences in the drivers for employability between pre- and post-92 HEIs*

Moving on to the discussion from the findings, the word ‘employability’ clearly has numerous different meanings as the literature review and this research indicates. The terminology around employability and clarity over its positioning are highlighted within this research by both staff and students. The wider literature review also suggests differing interpretations and perceptions of employability, including differences in individuals’ understanding of what is meant by embedded employability (Knight and Yorke 2003). The research findings confirmed to some degree, that employability was down to personal interpretation with no two interviewees having exactly the same view of what employability meant. This aligned with the vagueness in the literature of employability (Philpott 2006), either being perceived positively or negatively instead of moving along a continuum as students navigate employability during their studies. This was an area for further research and consideration, linking to the idea that students need to be considered as individuals in their employability journey. For employability supports for students to be effective, it needs to focus on the student journey (Barkas 2011, Pegg *et al* 2012, Cole and Tibby 2013, Tomlinson 2017, Cole 2020) not on being strategically or metric driven (Bridgstock 2009, Cole and Hallett 2019). This corresponds with some findings of the research; all students have differing start and finish points for their HE journey and so their needs and drivers for developing employability skills also vary; it was not necessarily an upward trajectory. This thesis found the student journey through HE has lots of internal and external factors linking to employability. The discussion focuses on three key parts: how employability is integrated, the drivers for employability such as metrics, and finally, who the onus of employability lies with. This section begins with a discussion on how to integrate employability, with a focus on homogeneity and heterogeneity.

**6.1.1 Homogeneity or Heterogeneity?**

Heterogeneity is a recurring thread throughout this research. The thematic analysis shows differences in student opinions and their needs in relation to employability development. There are also differences in how staff approach and support students on their HE employability journey.

Universities A and B have very different approaches, linking back to heterogeneity. Many students want to be part of the construction of a bespoke and individual learning opportunity. This area is another good example of different approaches working for differing students, courses and HEIs. This research focused on Business Management undergraduate courses, but during the interviews staff gave examples from a number of alternative courses, suggesting that different approaches were also adopted at course levels within both the pre- and post-1992 universities.

Building on this, a student’s HE journey should be seen as a heterogenic journey rather than one which is consistent for all students. Simply put, a student’s starting point and background may have a direct influence on their degree award and also, more importantly in this research, their pathway to employment. This would not be easy to implement as currently many models and areas of good practice concentrate on students as a collective. This research shows students are individual, diverse and come from different backgrounds and starting points, as noted in chapter 5. This research advocates a more individualised approach to students and their employability needs and wants, whilst recognising the challenge of delivering this. This would require flexible curriculum and employability initiatives within HEIs to allow students to personalise their employability journey within a loose framework set out by HEIs in conjunction with their curriculum teams and student body. In considering what this might look like, much of the literature positively supports embedding employability within curriculum (Knight and Yorke 2006). This research considers how this can be done and how HEIs can move away from the homogenic, one-size-fits-all approach which appears to have developed over time. The findings raise concerns at this approach as all students do not start their HE journey at the same point or on an equal footing. For example, the progress of a student born into economic privilege, attending a prestigious university, cannot and should not be measured in the same way as that of a first generation HE student, particularly when it comes to employability. This leads on to the next area for discussion, metrics in HE employability which addresses universities as businesses.

**6.1.2 Economy, politics and metrics**

A key area emerging from this research was the economic and political influences on HE and its graduate drivers and outcomes are far more deeply entwined in the business of HE than anticipated. Returning to neoliberal approaches in HE as covered in theme 2, there are factors such as marketisation, metrics, and competition, that impact staff. As a result, HEIs face pressures to deliver against metrics, as it may impact their position in the league tables if they do not. The impact of this on individual staff and their perceptions of employability was more negative than had been anticipated. This research suggests this was because the metrics do not fully measure the development of employability in students, it measures employment outcomes, which is different.

This illustrates the influence of the marketised model of HE which views students as customers, rather than one which views them as more discerning individuals who do not come to university to buy a standard product. Each university experience is unique and universities need to embrace this where possible. Students have very different HE journeys for a number of reasons, including motivation, priorities, and social capital. All of these will impact on their ability to secure what the metrics deem to be positive destinations after graduation. So, to apply employment metrics to students as a collective is bound to have limitations as all students have personal aspirations that may not fit with getting a graduate level job upon graduation. Thus, measuring HEIs on positive graduation outcomes they deem fit feels unfair especially if a student has engaged and excelled with the offerings of employability throughout their course to find, for whatever reason they cannot take up a graduate level job upon graduation. This reflects badly on the university’s employment and employability results but the reality is the student has had a positive development experience. The performative culture (Ball 2003) that much of HE inhabits would suggest that employability is a measurable outcome which is a product of the students’ experience whilst at university, whereas the reality is far more complex.

Tomlinson (2010) talks of marketisation and commercialisation in HE, where students are seen as customers or consumers of HE and ‘getting value for money’ is a clear focus (Tomlinson 2017, p.1). There may be concerns that the marketisation and consumerisation of HE may lead HEIs to attempt to standardise employability provision for all by resorting to a one-size-fits-all approach for students in HE, in order to meet HEIs’ metric targets. This research contemplates possible shortcomings in this approach. Firstly, as interviewee I7 identified, there were strategies and approaches in place to attempt to level up the playing field for students with regards to employability and graduate careers. However, some student participants in the research expressed they did not want an equitable experience where everyone has access to the same opportunities. This may be because as business students, their perception could be, they are competing in the same pool for a shrinking number of jobs. This thesis found a small percentage of students saw employability as a contest in which the competitive advantage would be secured by keen, proactive students and that levelling the playing field, as suggested by Parutis and Howson (2020), would reduce their ability to stand out from their peers. This raises the question of who is responsible for engaging students in employability essentials whilst on their HE journey?

Some HEIs and course leads when structuring employability within courses often assume all students are the same with the same start and finish point to be able to plan resourcing for a cohort, but as this research has shown this is not the case. A one-size approach may work to meet the metric targets but it may not sufficiently address the needs of students. The research findings show students have no thought for any metrics or employability targets; they are very much focused on what the university can do to support and develop them to be best placed when they are ready to compete in the graduate labour market. This leads on to the consideration of where or with who should the onus of responsibility lie with for employability?

**6.1.3 The responsibility for employability**

Throughout this research the view of employability in HE has seen a shift in the onus of employability in HE. It appears to be a changing area from focusing on what universities are doing for student employability, to something more focused on students taking ownership of their HE journey and personal career planning. This research has revealed that universities have less scope and influence on students and their engagement with the employability agenda than initially anticipated. There are numerous ways in which employability can be built into a student’s HE experience. There is no single, fixed way to deliver employability and the examination of universities A and B in this study is testament to this.

In contemporary HE there has been a push for students as partners and co-creators where HEIs listen to their students: HEIs cannot assume they know what students want (Bovill 2015, Cook-Sather 2018, Holker 2019). Student voice and employability are both part of the external drivers which exist in HE; this research questions how employability in the curriculum could be successful if students are not considered in the process or do not buy into the ethos of employability. A staff interviewee posed; do students know what they need or what is best for them and their career paths now? As the theme of employability in curriculum questions; is the onus on students or HEIs to drive employability in student journeys? As already acknowledged, students have differing starting points, aims and drivers. Students need to be seen as individuals, then supported as such.

Some students do not engage with aspects of employability although it may be beneficial for them and their future progression. This links back to one of the findings from this research showing that ‘reach’ for employability was an issue, and that more may need to be done to engage the unengaged when it comes to employability. Engagement with employability provision of HE often stems from an individual student’s personal desire or drive, and since each student is unique and different, it is only when a student has the desire to access employability supports that reach will improve. All staff interviewed in this research recognised the concerns over student reach for employability supports, suggesting students who need the offerings are often not the students using the services. This links to research objective 2 and who the onus of responsibility is on? Is it students’ responsibility to drive their learning experience or is it course staff? As already highlighted, students might not know what is needed or good for them with regards to employability development. Staff in HEIs must accept that not every student's journey is about the learning experience and preparation immediately for graduate jobs, every student has differing end goals. These findings are to an extent surprising, it was expected everyone would want to develop skills and improve their employability prospects. After all, students pay for employability provisions whether they use them or not. This research shows the impact of individuality, and it suggests that what motivates and engages one student might not have the same impact for another who has a different focus or objective. The current COVID-19 pandemic is a clear example of an impact on graduate choices or outcomes beyond HE’s control, however, it may still negatively impact the student’s career choices and the metric results when produced.

The findings indicate that students do not always know what is best for their careers whilst going through their undergraduate study and therefore welcome support, guidance or direction from their university. It should also be recognised that not all graduating students intend to go straight into the labour market with their aspirational career choices, as this research highlighted. This leads on to the students and their views regarding employability within their HE journey. An unexpected finding was the competitive nature of the students, who expressed different reasons for not wanting a standardised approach to employability support, as it was seen as levelling up in what was an already difficult job market for new or recent graduates. These findings suggest the onus is shifting in some areas to students being more proactive in developing themselves to secure future employment. The research findings are an example highlighting some of the current thinking regarding employability in HE, which leads on to its contribution to knowledge.

**6.2 Contribution to Knowledge**

The contribution this research brings to the topic of employability in HE is firstly it concurs with previous research that employment and employability are different. Within this research, staff resoundingly questioned the appropriateness of the current metrics for measuring employability in HE; this contributes and supports the growing number of researchers questioning HE employment metrics. As section 6.4 the recommendations will address, there is a need for HEIs to not just focus on what they provide but how students engage with the offerings around employability support. This research raised concerns around the success of ‘reach’ that universities are achieving and concludes in a time where HE funding and income is reducing so there is a push for HEIs to do more for less. The government are pressing ahead with the need for HE providers not only provide a service that supports learning but also success of students upon completion. In September 2022 the Office for Students rewrote the goals and target expectations for groups of students, pushing to address individual needs within the student experience and threatening fines for HEIs that do not meet the requirements.

This research is also offering insights into the perspectives of both HE staff and students on their views and perceptions of employability in HE. It is acknowledged, as an interpretivist approach to the research was taken, no sweeping generalisations can be made from the findings, although areas for learning can be realised. The findings suggested not all students want or need the same thing from their careers or employability learning in HE and so HEIs and course teams should not simply supply a generic skill-centric approach to delivering employability in HE. The conceptual models highlighted in section 2.4.1 addressed a move towards an individualised approach to students and their employability (Tomlinson 2017 and Dacre Pool and Sewell 2007). The contribution to knowledge here is more work needs to be done to support students in their individualised journey, if staff and student bodies work together that may more easily achieve more than first thought, I would suggest moving the conversation on to focusing on the whole student and their journey not just their course content. Lastly, it is important to recognise that in accommodating the individualised approach and student choice, educators should be aware that in some cases for some students it is irrelevant what you do to support the employability journey as some students will have their own ideas and plans.

**6.3 Conclusion**

Summing up the research discussion by revisiting the research questions, employability has continued to maintain a major role in HE and students’ study journey. There are numerous ways in which employability can be built into a student’s HE experiences. Good practice would involve building in employability in a flexible way to support students to drive this in relation to their own personal needs. There is no single, fixed way to deliver employability and the examination of the two universities in this study is testament to this. In concluding, it is important to reiterate the current targets such as the GO metric, which measures employment and not employability, is flawed when trying to ascertain how effective a students’ employability journey has been within their overall, HE experience and the impact this has had on their career and employment. Importance needs to be given to the ‘reach’ of students with employability provisions, this is an area HEIs, and course teams will need to lead on to ensure employability is accessible and supported within the student journey and to attempt to have a positive impact on the metrics to which the measures apply.

A key finding from this research was the economic and political influences on HE and its graduate outcomes are far more deeply entwined in the business of HE than anticipated. When initially researching for the literature review, it was surprising to find that several academics felt that employability skills had no place in course design and delivery (Readings 2002, Collini 2012, 2017, Docherty 2015**).** However, in summing up the research, their position can be better understood and is more closely aligned to those who see employability in HE as a positive (Lee 2002, Knight and Yorke 2002-2006, Tomlinson 2012,2017, Cole and Tibby 2013, Cashian *et al* 2015, Matherley and Tillman 2015, Artess *et al* 2017) than originally thought. They argue if a course is fit for purpose and well developed around the course subject then employability skills will naturally be developed, such as critical thinking, teamworking, and leadership skills. As this doctoral journey nears completion, there is an acknowledgement that more can still be done in the area of employability within HE, which leads on to the recommendations.

**6.4 Recommendations**

As the concluding section stated, the view of employability in HE is starting to shift the onus from focusing on what universities are doing for student employability, to something more focused on students taking ownership of their HE journey and personal career planning. The first recommendation would be that any framework applied for employability be done so with the clear intention of allowing free choice and flexibility where possible to best serve the needs and wants of all students.

Overarching findings from this research questions whether HEIs should be applying a ‘Homogeneous or Heterogeneous’ approach to employability support within HE. This question was posed at several levels, and the sub sections below suggest recommendations coming from this research:

**Student level –** It is recommended that students are encouraged to engage in employability in a clear but flexible way. An example of an approach to this recommendation is the establishment of a scheme, currently being delivered in university B, which was highlighted in this research. Employability is clearly embedded in course structure, through a module in each level of the undergraduate business management course, but the driver and pathway of how students apply employability is managed within a very loose framework. Students collect points which demonstrate their engagement with employability activities and their personal learning of skills and attributes ready for their world upon graduation. This allows students to drive their skills and development needs that are important to them and then reflect on how the process has helped them, planning what they need to focus on going forward. There is no easy way for HEIs and courses to address all students’ wants and needs individually, but through quality assurance and good curriculum design, engaging students in reflexive practice can start to develop supports for students to do this. It is recommended that good practice events and activities, whether overtly in or out of curriculum, should be shared in HE communities too.

It is recommended that the importance of student input to their learning and studies is built upon, students should continue to use their Student Voice to support changes and influence HE more widely. Summing up, this research has highlighted that students want differentiators when it comes to their employability to compete in the graduate labour market. This research allowed students to verbalise what they wanted with regards to development of personal and employability understanding. Competition and an individualised approach in some cases, in others an embedding in curriculum as a specific module, but with a loose framework to allow student choice.

Going forward it is also recommended, the government school review which focuses on pupils and the level of value added from when they start to their finishing their schooling is carefully monitored to see if there is merit in applying a similar approach to adding value in HE. This research agrees with the idea of supporting students as individuals on their HE journey and into their graduate careers, but we need to recognise differences in student backgrounds and social capital.

**University Level –** It is recommended, HEIs and course teams should find ways within course structures to support a more flexible approach to employability delivery. Some students are keen to develop their own employability skills, allowing them to stand out and adding value to the distance an individual student has developed during their HE experience. HEIs should focus on supporting a more diverse approach around students’ human capital, rather than having a skills-centred approach. The institution's role could be to support students’ personal development and diverse needs. For example: applying a human capital approach, if a student who is well connected, has networks and opportunities for a good graduate job upon graduation, they have a positive GO result but their university’s employability supports may have had little or no impact on this. Conversely, a student could have availed to all of the university employability supports during their time at university and have not secured their desired graduate role. Flexibility through student choice is a possible way to balance these variations.

There was also the question of cost versus benefit, are universities investing money into developing employability strategies which metrics do not measure is an area for further work to consider if there are other benefits? This research recommends this is an area for further research, possibly to consider the costs involved in supporting employability activities.

**National level –** Government bodies such as the OfS are areas universities can work with to try to influence changes. This research recommends a review of HE by educational bodies and researchers concerning the metrics associated with graduate outcomes. As the research overwhelmingly shows, of the staff interviewed, 100% raised concerns with the metrics for employability and whether the methods were fit for purpose or the best way to assess the university’s success when it comes to graduate outcomes. It may be more realistic for HEIs to review their responses to government statistics rather than suggest the government may change their approach in order to meet the graduate outcomes metrics. The Augar report has raised some valid points the government must address regarding HE and marketisation through target setting. It is recommended that this would follow the developments of economic drivers such as student numbers taking up a HE experience and the current reviews of the TEF which was ongoing at the time of this research completing.

The main discussion point centres on HE requiring a shift in focus, showing that employability support needs to be driven less by what universities provide, and more about what students do to drive their own employability skills provisions. Again, it is recommended that courses and HEIs focus on their students rather than metrics imposed. If HE staff deliver a worthy student experience, the student will be supported to succeed upon graduation and the metrics will be met, resulting in a win/win situation. Universities are caught often between delivering on the government or political directives and/or providing a meaningful course or service to support student’s personalised employability needs. As Interviewee I1 aptly summed it up;

*“My belief is always, if you do a really good job with students they’ll get jobs. So basically, the driver is not the job, the driver (for universities) is making sure you’ve got all these (employability) things embedded in it actually students get good jobs and universities get a good reputation”*  ***I1/15:52***

The quote above summarises this research perfectly. If students can be encouraged to consider their human capital through their student journey, it will encourage them to take ownership of their careers and they will graduate understanding the importance of employability beyond the restrictive lens of skills alone.

**6.4 Personal reflections on the research** **journey**

As part of the concluding chapter, it is important to share some of the learning I gained as a researcher during this doctoral journey. I have acknowledged my insiderness and positionality throughout the research project. As a stakeholder with a number of positions, from academic, to student, to parent, to researcher, this thesis has allowed me to track my changing perspectives of employability.

I embarked on this research with an idealistic perception that employability in HE was overwhelmingly good for all in HE, particularly when considering it in relation to supporting students to succeed. As stated in chapter 1, I believed that all students should want to actively engage with the employability supports on offer, whether in curriculum or as extra-curricular activities. Such employability supports would offer students better value for money and help them to achieve their career goals upon graduation. On reflection, this was a naïve and idealistic view, as the topic is much more complex. From reading more widely the academic views of employability, I can now see that everyone does not share the same view or vision for employability in HE. This has allowed me to see that my original lens may have been too narrow as a result of my background influences. My academic job role, my insiderness, led me to assume from the outset the best way to support employability in undergraduate business students, was by embedding employability within curriculum and creating specific employability modules within courses to address the cohort needs, but as I have come to understand, a one size fits all approach is not what is wanted or needed. This research has taught me two key things:

1/ You cannot assume what students want or need with regards to employability; all students are unique and individual and should be supported as such.

2/ Not all students want to actively engage with the employability agenda, and this can be for any number of reasons. They may already have taken their first steps on the career ladder arranged by personal networking, their social capital, a career might not be their priority upon graduating. They might wish to take a break for travelling or caring responsibilities, for example. Not all students have the confidence or want the pressure of a demanding career upon graduating.

Overall, as a result of having conducted this research, I am able to see there is no single way to provide employability support. Different approaches will work for different institutions, courses and students. Concerns remain that the decision not to embed employability in course structures could be an issue for reach longer term, but right now there is no one best practice approach which works for all students. The pre-1992 university appears to put the onus on the students for their employability learning and experience, which may work for many students in pre-1992 institutions but not for all. The post-1992 university in the research took a differing, more course-based view of employability, showing within their education strategy, course structure and the curriculum design, evidence of embedding specific employability modules within the business course structures. But there needs to be a balance, whether embedding modules in the curriculum or not, and there needs to be flexibility as students are heterogenic and have individual wants and needs. There may need to be a middle ground in order to appeal to more students. A framework which integrates with student choice and flexibility, as the HEA framework (Cole and Hallett 2019) does. Employability needs are unique, and HEIs face a significant challenge in determining how to support a more personalised student journey and curriculum choice so flexibility in employability frameworks is advised.

This research has been a real learning experience as values and positions I hold as an academic have been questioned, challenged and tested throughout the research. I started this journey with the certainty that every student would want to develop employability skills through their HE undergraduate journey, as it aids students to achieve their career goals upon graduation. I have come to realise through this research that not all graduates are focused on the same thing, not everyone wants to secure a graduate level job upon completion of their degree, therefore focus on the overall student experience and employability will address students’ development organically as they progress through their learning journey. I have also learnt more than expected about myself; I am determined and I need to be more confident in myself, my abilities and my earned right to do the job I do. This lack of confidence goes back to my introductory chapter when I reflected on my background and positioning.

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**Appendices:**

**Appendix A – Interview Questions**

**INTERVIEW SCHEDULE & PROPOSED DRAFT QUESTIONS**

**NOTE: These are possible questions – this may vary at the time of actioning**

* 1. **Demographics** 
     1. Age Range- 21-30, 31-40, 41-50, 51-60, 61+
     2. Gender Male/Female/Not Defined
     3. Job Title
     4. Ethnicity
     5. Number of years within HE
  2. **What do you understand by the word ‘employability’?**
  3. **Are employability skills embedded within your organisation at UG level, if so how?**
  4. **What are your perceptions of the benefits of this approach?**
  5. **What are your perceptions of the drawbacks?**
  6. **What do you view as the current primary purpose of UK higher education?**
  7. **If given the chance, would you change this primary purpose?**
  8. **How does your university support students to get graduate level jobs?**
  9. **What is your perception of the success of these procedures,**

**PROMPT IF NEEDED E.g.: How well do students engage?**

* 1. **Do you think the balance between developing employability skills and the overall learning experience for students is correct in English Higher Education ?**
  2. **Do you understand the concept of transactional vs transformational leadership in HE, which would you suggest your HEI uses and which do you think is better? Why?**
  3. **Have you anything else you would like to add?**

**Appendix B – Focus Group Questions**

**POSSIBLE FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONNAIRE – PRIOR TO DISCUSSION**

Student Gender: Male/Female/Not Defined

Student Status: Home / EU / International. - Country of Origin: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Is English your first Language: Yes/No

Will you be looking for work in the UK upon Graduation of your UG study? YES/NO

Have you done a work placement or worked whilst in HE? YES/NO

If yes what type : P/T work / Short Placement / Year-long Placement (You can click more than one)

Do you think supporting topics such as employability should be a mandatory part of your course of study? YES/NO

Have you accessed the Employability / Careers support whilst in HE? Never/Once/Occasionally/Frequently

Intention on Graduation: Grad Scheme or Job / Masters – Further PG Study / Self-employed / Family Business / Progress in current role / Don’t Know yet

Have you achieved an offer for your intention upon graduation (above)? YES/NO

Details;

Has your answer to the above changed during your Student journey? YES/NO

Why do you think this is?

On the Likert Scale below listed 1-10 (1 not at all – 10 instrumental help) how much help do you think your HE journey has been to supporting your future career steps?

1. 2. 3. 4. 5. 6. 7. 8. 9. 10.

**FOCUS GROUP QUESTIONS**

Why did you come to university?

What do you hope to get from your degree? (CODE TO FRAMEWORK – Process, Product, Practice)

Going back to the question on your student journey if your intention has changed what do you think were the drivers for the change?

What do you want from the HE Student journey – Did you get it?

What do you understand by the term employability?

Is employability and employment one and the same or different?

How do you view employability within your HE Journey? – Think back to the Likert scoring on the questionnaire

How important do you consider employability to be in an UG degree programme? If you had to give a number to this out of 10 what would it be?

Are there any gaps? Elements you would like to have had that your HE Experience didn’t provide?

POSSIBLE QUESTION TO BOTH GROUPS: Should learning be about the learning experience or developing the wider skills (Soft skills) ready for the world of work ?

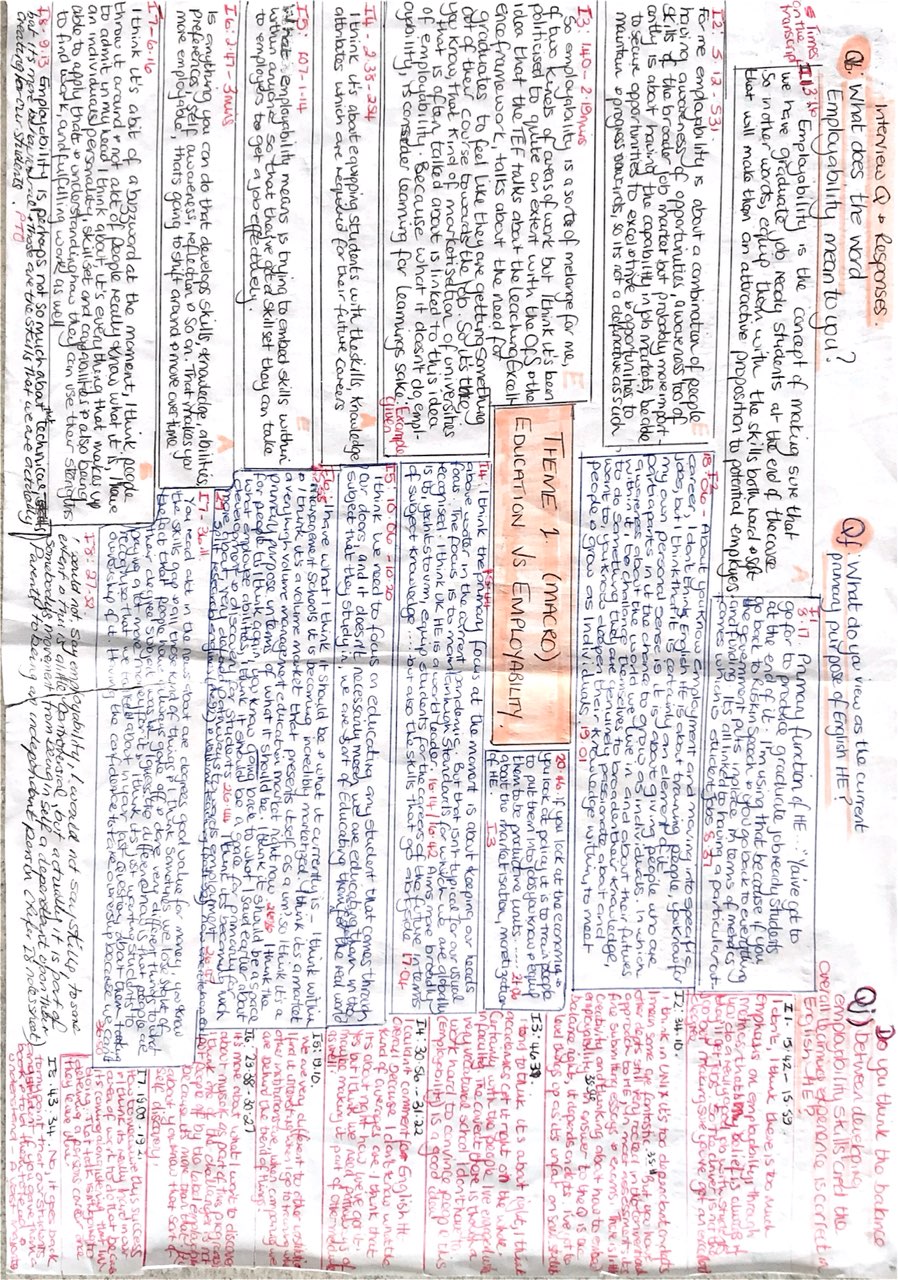
LASTLY, how do you think the pandemic/Brexit has or might impact your decision making around employability?

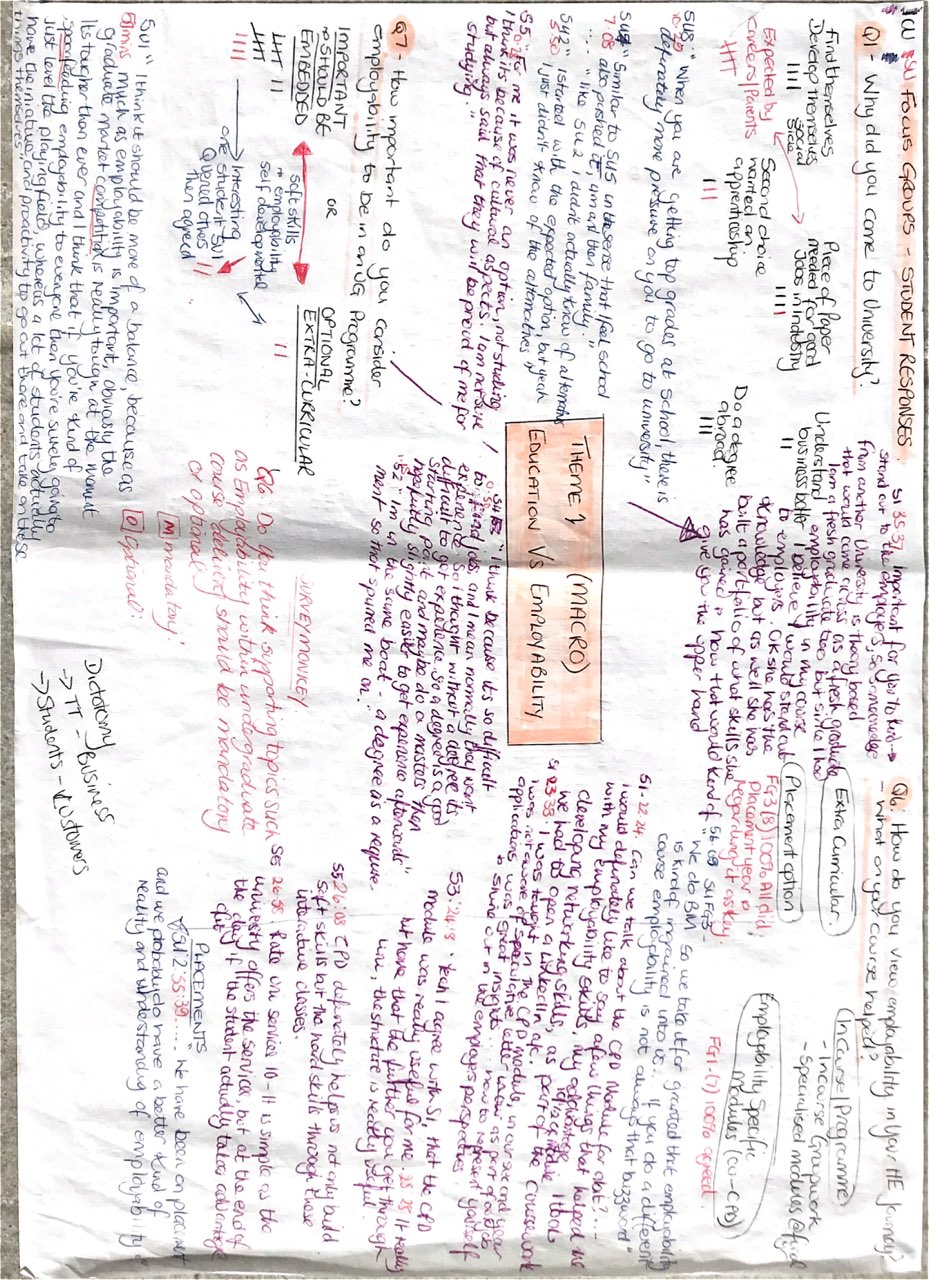
**Appendix C – Coding Document of Participants**

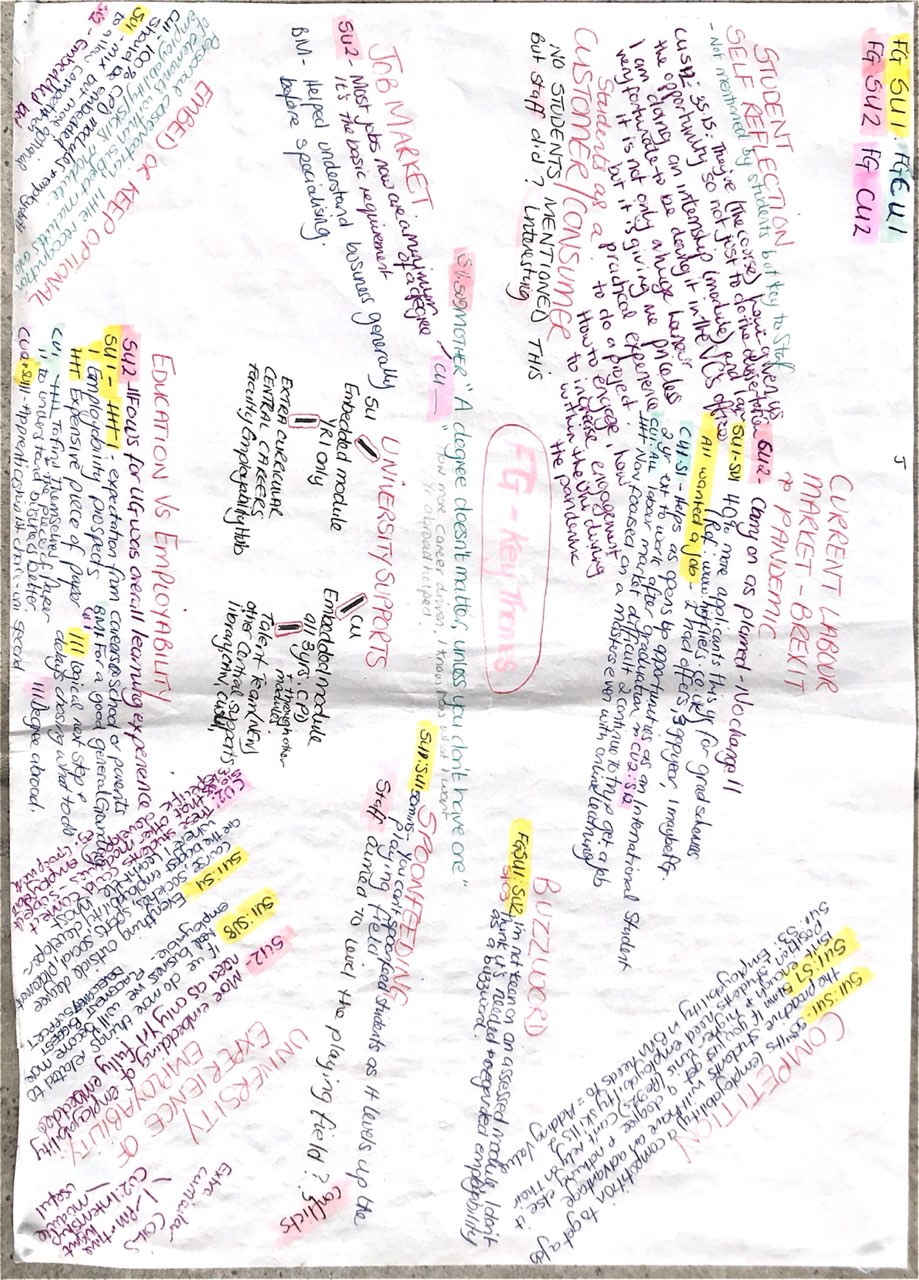
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| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **No** | **CODING** | **M / F** | **AGE RANGE** | | **STAFF /**  **STUDENT** | **Level/**  **Role** | **Post or Pre**  **1992 university** | **Years in HE** |
| 1 | I1 | M | 41-50 | Staff | | School Management | Post-1992 | 11 years |
| 2 | I2 | M | 41-50 | Staff | | Employability Lead | Pre-1992 | 15 years |
| 3 | I3 | M | 41-50 | Staff | | Employability Lead | Post-1992 | 3 years |
| 4 | I4 | F | 50+ | Staff | | Faculty Lead | Post-1992 | 30 years |
| 5 | I5 | F | 21-30 | Staff | | Employability support | Post-1992 | 5 years |
| 6 | I6 | M | 41-50 | Staff | | Employability Lead | Pre-1992 | 25 years |
| 7 | I7 | F | 31-40 | Staff | | Employability support | Pre-1992 | 9 years |
| 8 | I8 | M | 31-40 | Staff | | Faculty Lead | Pre-1992 | 8 years |
| 9 | 1/FG1  SU1 | F | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 4 incl Placement |
| 10 | 1/FG1  SU2 | F | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 4 incl Placement |
| 11 | 1/FG1  SU3 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 4 incl Placement |
| 12 | 1/FG1  SU4 | F | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 4 incl Placement |
| 13 | 1/FG1  SU5 | F | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 4 incl Placement |
| 14 | 1/FG1  SU6 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 4 incl Placement |
| 15 | 1/FG1  SU7 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 4 incl Placement |
| 16 | 1/FG1  SU8 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 4 incl Placement |
| 17 | 1/FG2  SU9 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Pre-1992 | 3 study only |
| 18 | 1/FG2  SU10 | F | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Pre-1992 | 3 study only |
| 19 | 2/FG3  SU1 | F | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 20 | 2/FG3  SU2 | M | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 21 | 2/FG3  SU3 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Post-1992 |  |
| 22 | 2FG3  SU4 | F | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 23 | 2/FG3  SU5 | F | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 24 | 2/FG3  SU6 | F | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 25 | 2/FG3  SU7 | M | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 26 | 2/FG4  SU8 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Post-1992 |  |
| 27 | 2/FG4  SU9 | M | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 28 | 2/FG4  SU10 | F | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 29 | 2/FG4  SU11 | F | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Post-1992 | 3 stud only |
| 30 | 2/FG4  SU12 | M | Under 25 | Student | | International Student | Post-1992 | 3 study only |
| 31 | 2/FG4  SU13 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Post-1992 | 3 Study only |
| 32 | 2/FG4  SU14 | M | Under 25 | Student | | Home Student | Post-1992 | 3 Study only |

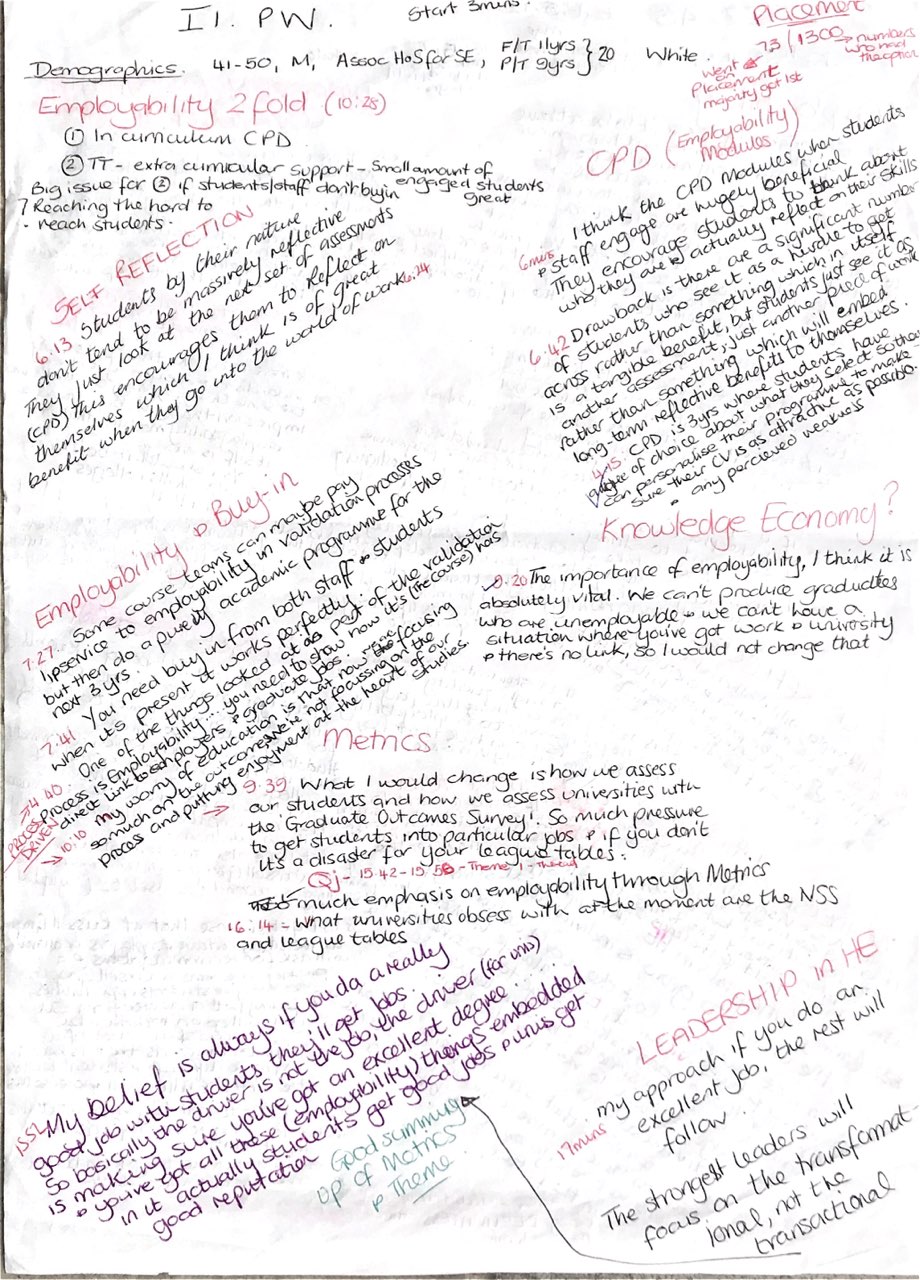
**Appendix D – Initial and revisited themes**

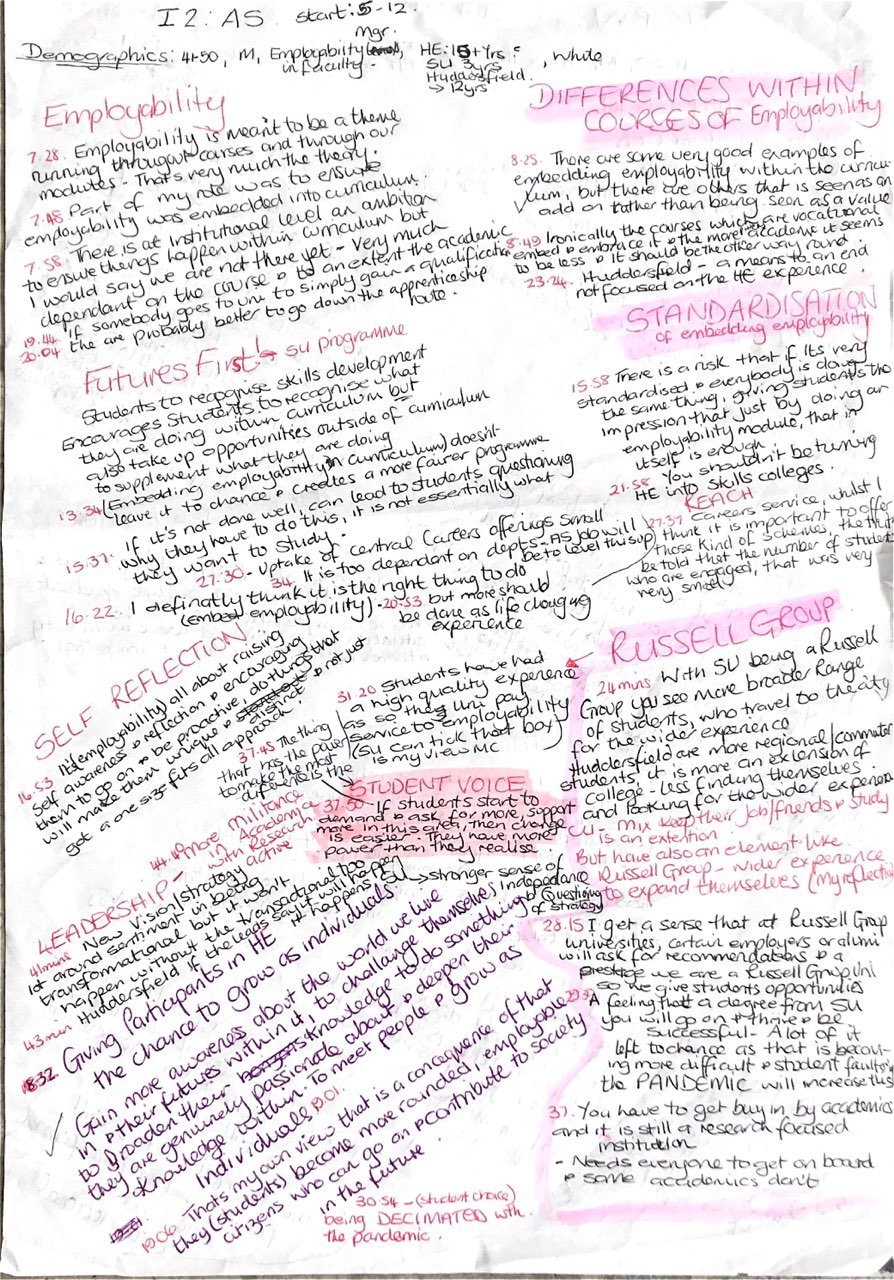
**Appendix E – Photos of the Interview and Focus Group Mind-maps and manual notes**

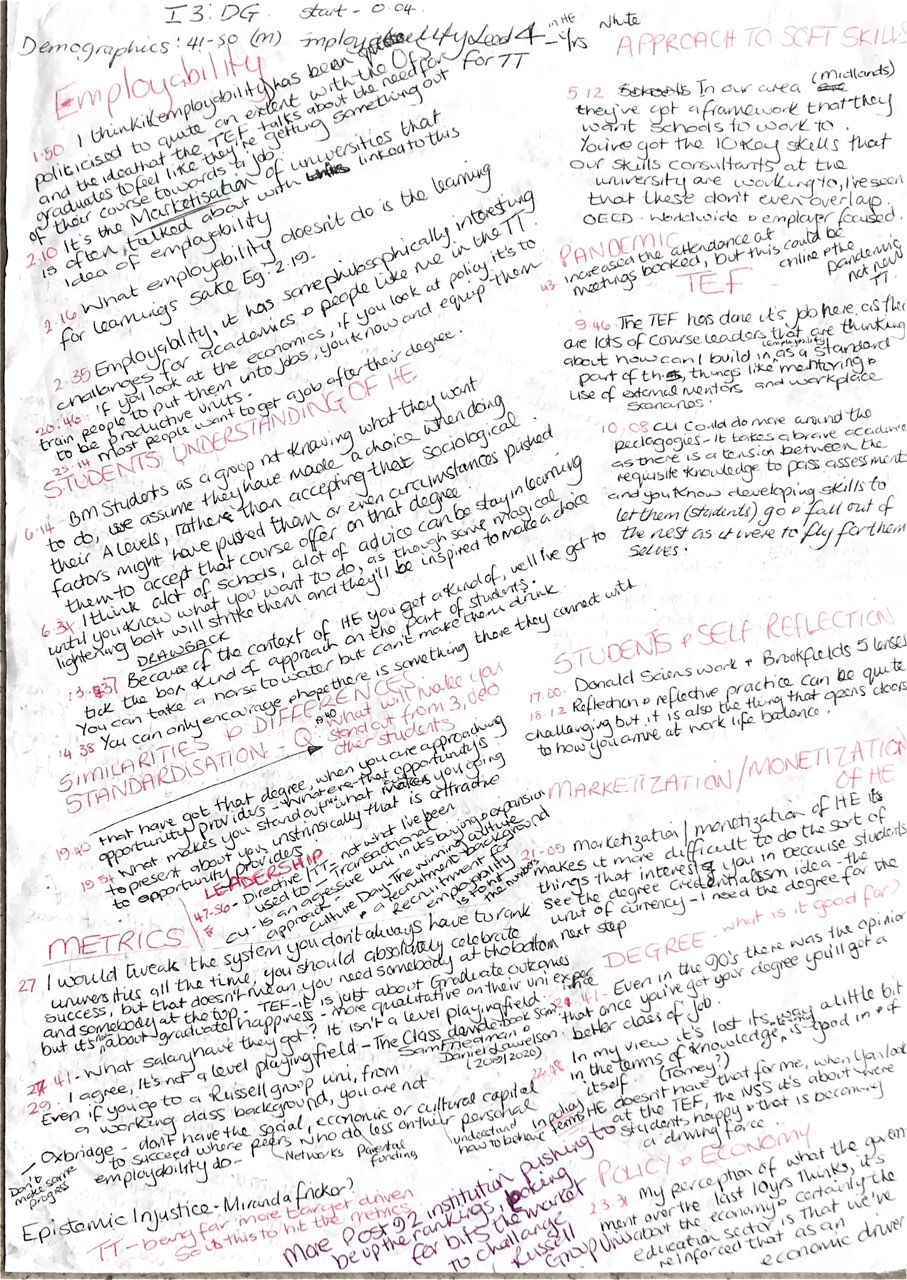


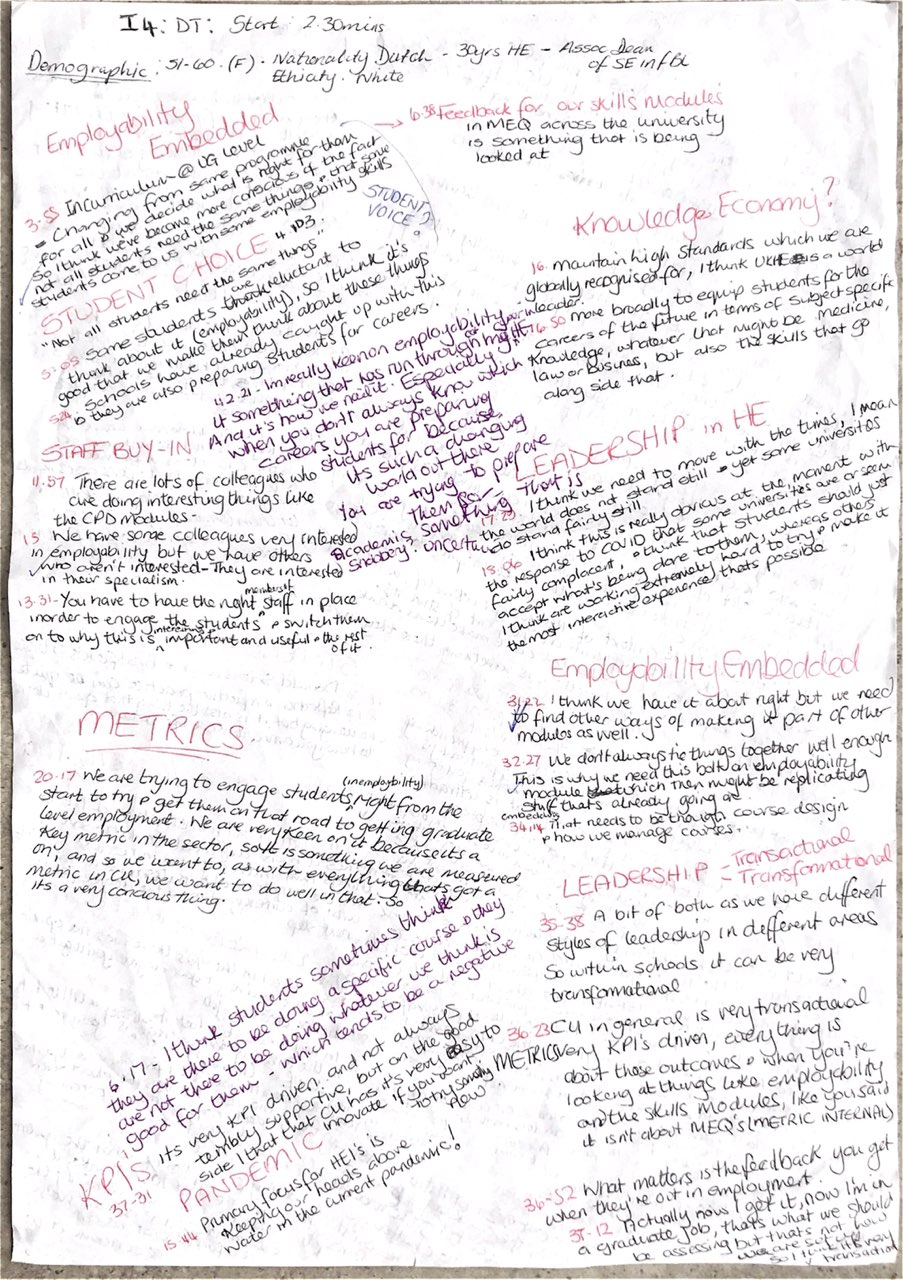


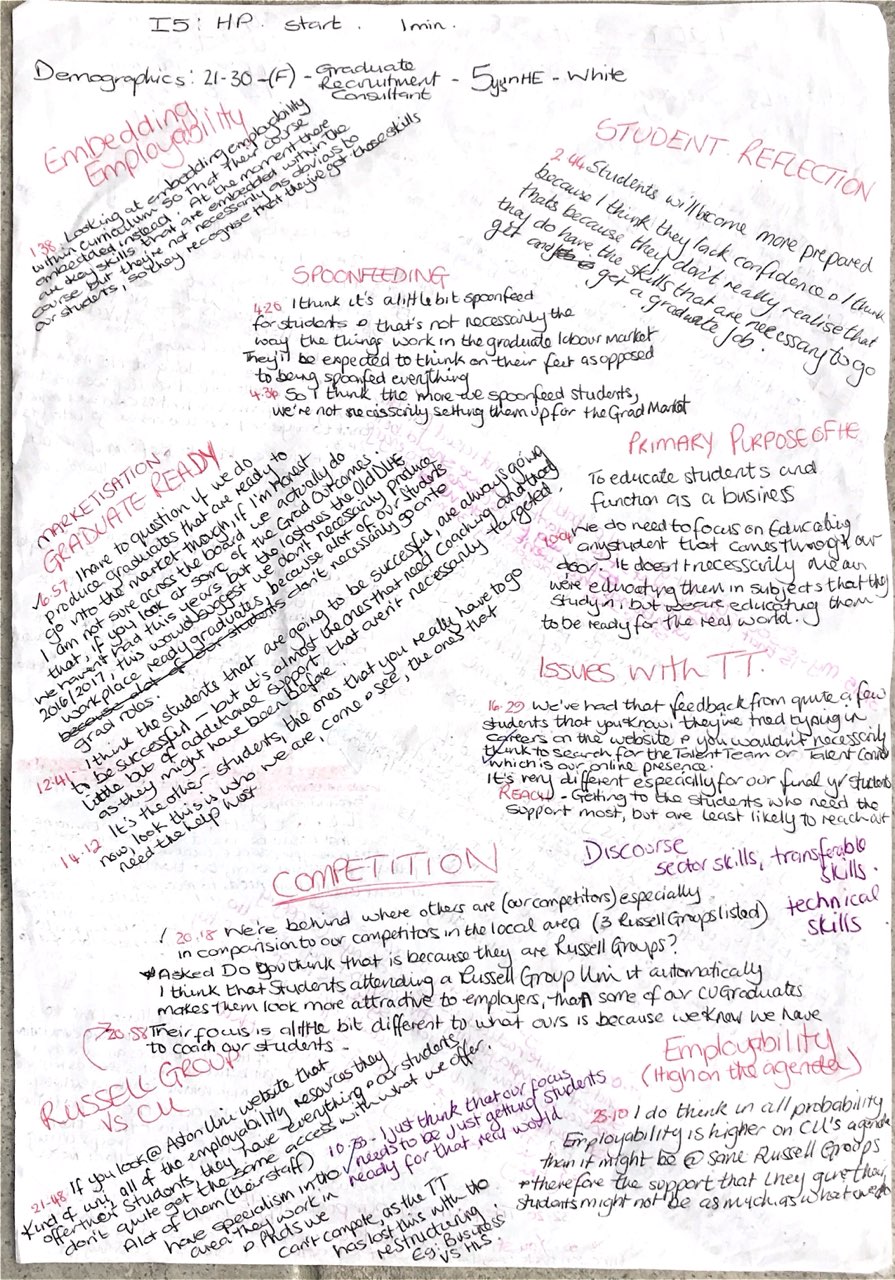


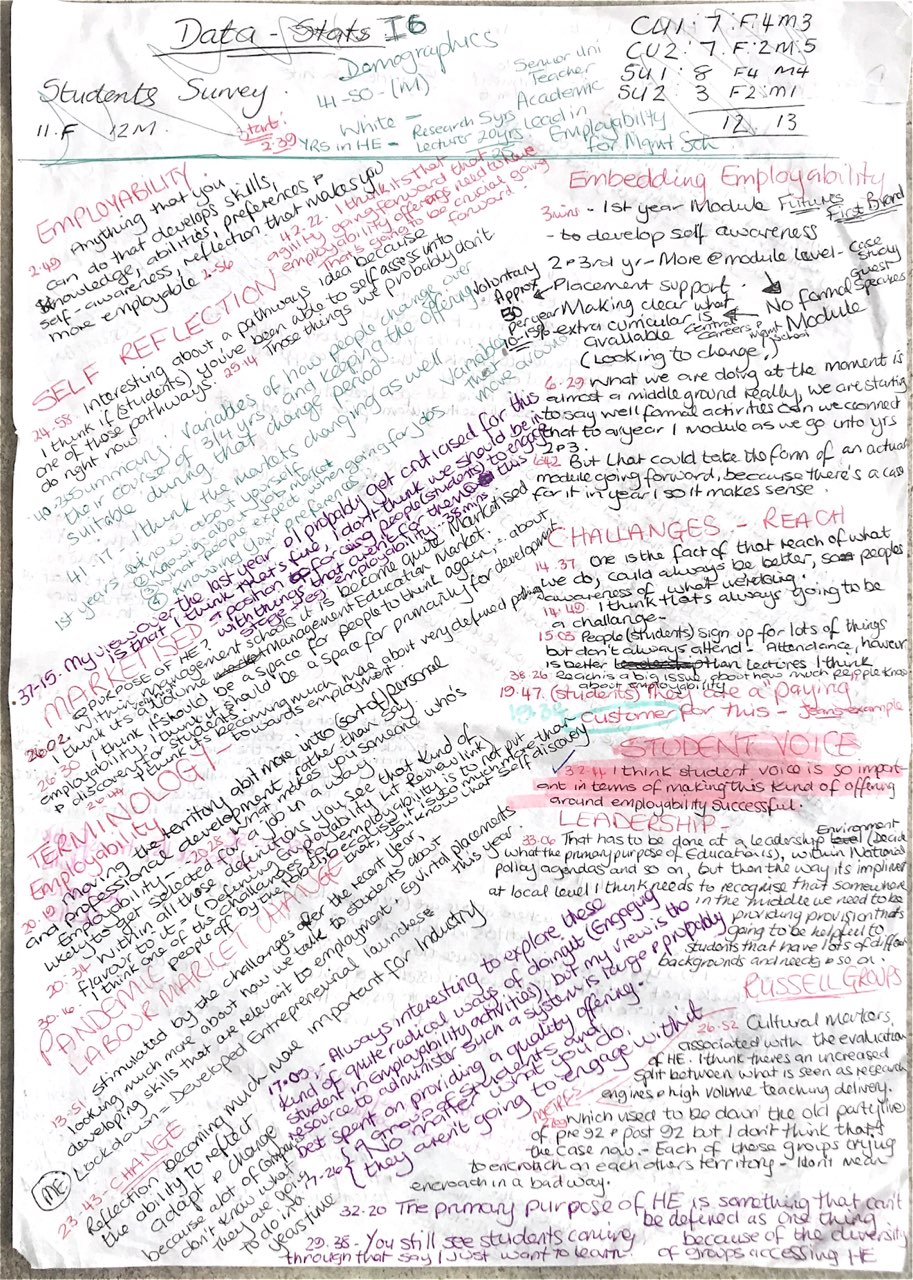


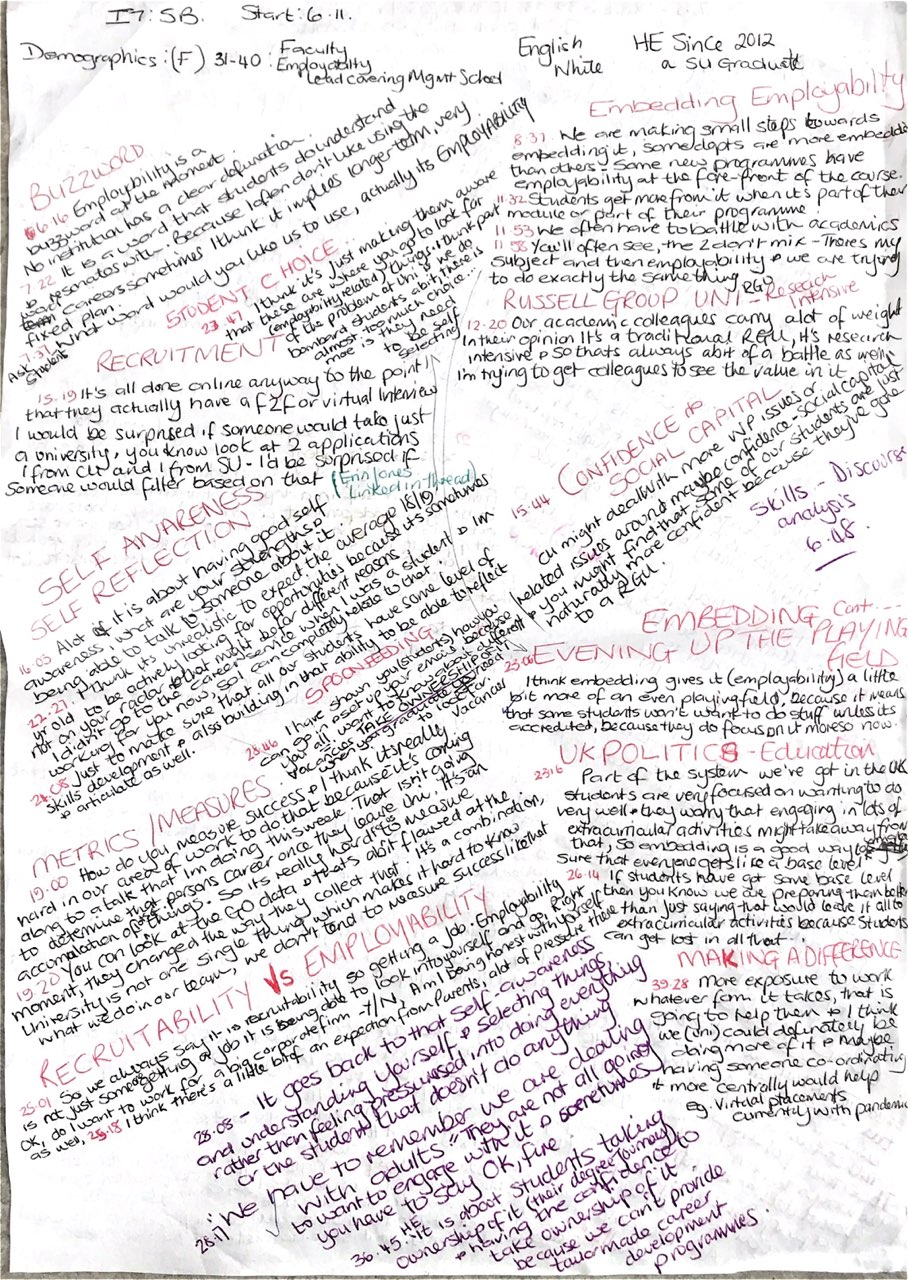


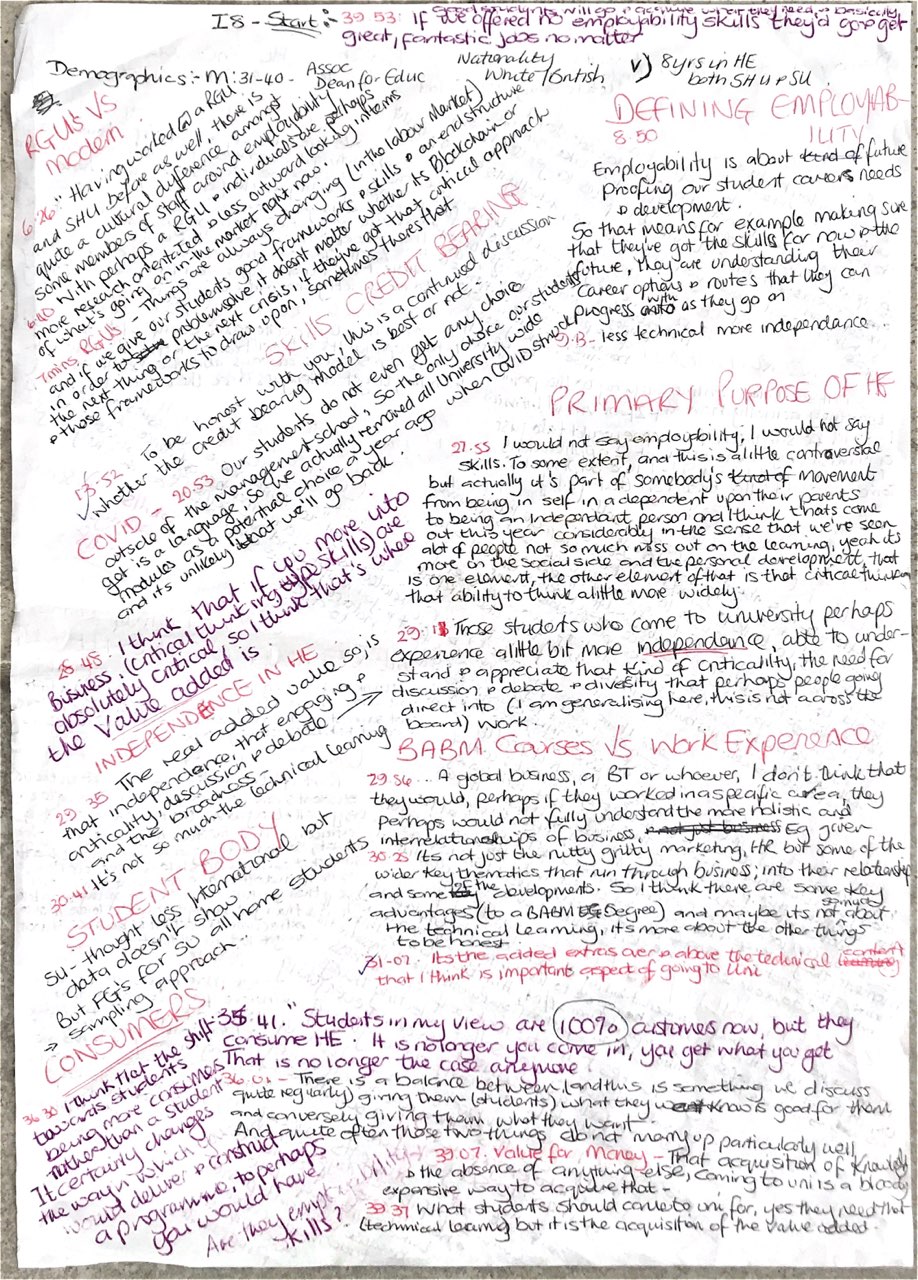












**Appendix F – Ethics Approval**



Downloaded: 07/04/2022 Approved: 21/02/2020

Mary Crossan  
Registration number: 150242280 School of Education  
Programme: Ed.D 2015

Dear Mary  
**PROJECT TITLE:** Employability within Higher Education

**APPLICATION:** Reference Number 031417

On behalf of the University ethics reviewers who reviewed your project, I am pleased to inform you that on 21/02/2020 the above-named project was **approved** on ethics grounds, on the basis that you will adhere to the following documentation that you submitted for ethics review:

University research ethics application form 031417 (form submission date: 12/02/2020); (expected project end date: 30/12/2020).  
Participant information sheet 1072635 version 3 (11/12/2019).  
Participant information sheet 1072634 version 3 (11/12/2019).

Participant consent form 1072636 version 2 (12/02/2020).

If during the course of the project you need to deviate significantly from the above-approved documentation please inform me since written approval will be required.

Your responsibilities in delivering this research project are set out at the end of this letter. Yours sincerely

Sophia Chahad Ethics Administrator School of Education

Please note the following responsibilities of the researcher in delivering the research project:

The project must abide by the University's Research Ethics Policy:

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rs/ethicsandintegrity/ethicspolicy/approval-procedure

The project must abide by the University's Good Research & Innovation Practices Policy:

https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/polopoly\_fs/1.671066!/file/GRIPPolicy.pdf

The researcher must inform their supervisor (in the case of a student) or Ethics Administrator (in the case of a member of staff) of any significant changes to the project or the approved documentation.  
The researcher must comply with the requirements of the law and relevant guidelines relating to security and confidentiality of personal data.

The researcher is responsible for effectively managing the data collected both during and after the end of the project in line with best practice, and any relevant legislative, regulatory or contractual requirements.

**Appendix G – Participant Information Sheet (PIS) – HE STAFF**

**‘Embedding Employability in HE’**

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – (HE Staff)**

You are being invited to take part in research on embedding employability within HE. Mary Crossan (Senior Lecturer at Coventry University) is leading this research. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand whythe research is being conducted and whatit will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The research will look at how employability is perceived and presented within English higher education. The research aims to consider what is meant by employability in higher education, and whether what is currently in place, is effective in its aim to support graduates into the world of work and progress them into desirable career paths.

**Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You are invited to participate in this study because you work at a UK university and at least part of your role involves the employability agenda. I am interested in your views on this role and how it fits into the overall strategy of the university.

**What are the benefits of taking part?**

This research is part of my doctoral studies and by sharing your experiences with me, you will be helping the sector better understand how the employability agenda fits into HE strategy.

**Are there any risks associated with taking part?**

This study has been reviewed and approved through the University of Sheffield’s formal research ethics procedure. There are no significant risks associated with participation.

**Do I have to take part?**

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet and complete the Informed Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate. Please note down your participant number (which is on the Consent Form) and provide this to the lead researcher if you seek to withdraw from the study at a later date. You are free to withdraw your information from the project data set at any time until the data is destroyed upon completion of the research study. You should note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports) prior to this date and so you are advised to contact the university at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study. To withdraw, please contact the lead researcher (contact details are provided below). You do not need to give a reason. A decision to withdraw, or not to take part, will not affect you in any way.

**What will happen if I decide to take part?**

You will be asked a number of questions regarding your role as it relates to employability. Ideally, I would like to audio record your responses (and will require your consent for this), so the location should be in a fairly quiet area. The interview should take around 40 minutes to complete.

**Data Protection and Confidentiality**

Your data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Unless they are fully anonymised in our records, your data will be referred to by a unique participant number rather than by name. If you consent to being audio recorded, all recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Your data will only be viewed by the researcher. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file. Any paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise risk in the event of a data breach. The lead researcher will take responsibility for data destruction and all collected data will be destroyed on or after the thesis completion.

**Data Protection Rights**

University of Sheffield is a Data Controller for the information you provide. You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. For more details, including the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner’s Office, please visit [www.ico.org.uk](http://www.ico.org.uk). Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the University Data Protection Officer at the University of Sheffield.

**What will happen with the results of this study?**

The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports and presentations. Quotes or key findings will always be made anonymous in any formal outputs unless we have your prior and explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name.

**Making a Complaint**

If you are unhappy with any aspect of this research, please first contact the lead researcher, Mary Crossan ([bsx315@coventry.ac.uk](mailto:bsx315@coventry.ac.uk)) If you still have concerns and wish to make a formal complaint, please email:

Darren Webb – Ed.D supervisor [d.webb@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.webb@sheffield.ac.uk)

In your email please provide information about the research project, specify the name of the researcher and detail the nature of your complaint.

**Appendix G – Participant Information Sheet (PIS) – STUDENT FOCUS GROUP**

**‘Embedding Employability in HE’**

**PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET (Student – Focus Groups)**

You are being invited to take part in research on embedding employability within HE. Mary Crossan (Senior Lecturer at Coventry University) is leading this research. Before you decide to take part, it is important you understand whythe research is being conducted and whatit will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

**What is the purpose of the study?**

The research will look at how employability is perceived and presented within English higher education. The research aims to consider what is meant by employability in higher education, and whether what is currently in place, is effective in its aim to support graduates into the world of work and progress them into desirable career paths.

The focus group will consider students views, reflections and opinions

**Why have I been chosen to take part?**

You are invited to participate in this research because you study at a UK university chosen as a case-study and you have studied elements of employability which have been worked into your study programme. I am interested in your views on employability in HE and how you see it fitting with the overall strategy of your course.

**What are the benefits of taking part?**

This research is part of my doctoral studies and by sharing your experiences with me, you will be helping the sector better understand how the employability agenda fits into HE strategy.

**Are there any risks associated with taking part?**

This study has been reviewed and approved through the University of Sheffield’s formal research ethics procedure. There are no significant risks associated with participation.

**Do I have to take part?**

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet and complete the Informed Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate. Please note down your participant number (which is on the Consent Form) and provide this to the lead researcher if you seek to withdraw from the study at a later date. You are free to withdraw your information from the project data set at any time until the data is destroyed upon the doctorate completion You should note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports) prior to this date and so you are advised to contact the university at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study. To withdraw, please contact the lead researcher (contact details are provided below). You do not need to give a reason. A decision to withdraw, or not to take part, will not affect you in any way.

**What will happen if I decide to take part?**

You will be asked a number of questions as a student participating in a focus group discussion around your Higher Education experience and how it focuses on employability. Ideally, I would like to record your responses (and will require your consent for this), so the location should be in a fairly quiet area. The focus group should take around 40 minutes to complete.

**Data Protection and Confidentiality**

Your data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Unless they are fully anonymised in our records, your data will be referred to by a unique participant number rather than by name. If you consent to being audio recorded, all recordings will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. Your data will only be viewed by the researcher. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file. Any paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise risk in the event of a data breach. The lead researcher will take responsibility for data destruction and all collected data will be destroyed on or after the thesis completion.

**Data Protection Rights**

The University of Sheffield is a Data Controller for the information you provide. You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. For more details, including the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner’s Office, please visit [www.ico.org.uk](http://www.ico.org.uk). Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the University Data Protection Officer at the University of Sheffield.

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Darren Webb – Ed.D supervisor [d.webb@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:d.webb@sheffield.ac.uk)

In your email please provide information about the research project, specify the name of the researcher and detail the nature of your complaint.

**Appendix H – Informed Consent Form (ICF)**

Participant No.

**INFORMED CONSENT FORM:**

**Embedding Employability in HE.**

You are invited to take part in this research study for the purpose of collecting data on embedding employability within UK Higher Education.

Before you decide to take part, you must **read the accompanying Participant Information Sheet.**

Please do not hesitate to ask questions if anything is unclear or if you would like more information about any aspect of this research. It is important that you feel able to take the necessary time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

If you are happy to participate, please confirm your consent by circling YES against each of the below statements and then signing and dating the form as participant.

|  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **1** | **I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions** | **YES** | **NO** |
| **2** | **I understand my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my data, without giving a reason, by contacting the lead researcher at any time until the date specified in the Participant Information Sheet** | **YES** | **NO** |
| **3** | **I have noted down my participant number (top left of this Consent Form) which may be required by the lead researcher if I wish to withdraw from the study** | **YES** | **NO** |
| **4** | **I understand that all the information I provide will be held securely and treated confidentially** | **YES** | **NO** |
| **5** | **I am happy for the information I provide to be used (anonymously) in academic papers and other formal research outputs** | **YES** | **NO** |
| **6** | **I am happy for the interview to be recorded** | **YES** | **NO** |
| **7** | **I agree to take part in the above study** | **YES** | **NO** |

**Thank you for your participation in this study. Your help is very much appreciated.**

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Participant’s Name** | **Date** | **Signature** |
|  |  |  |
| **Researcher** | **Date** | **Signature** |
|  |  |  |