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The lived experience of employability for undergraduate Interior Architecture & Design students

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The lived experience of employability for undergraduate Interior Architecture & Design students

Sally Billau
BA(Hons), PgCert HE, FHEA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of
Sheffield Hallam University
for the degree of Doctorate in Education (EdD)

May 2024

Candidate Declaration

1. I hereby declare that I have yet to be enrolled for another award of the University or other academic or professional organisations whilst undertaking my Doctor of Education. None of the material contained in this thesis has been used in any other submissions for an academic award.

2. I am aware of and understand the University's policy on plagiarism and certify that this thesis is my work. The use of all published or other sources of material consulted have been properly and fully acknowledged.

3. The work undertaken towards the thesis has been conducted in accordance with the University Principles of Integrity in Research and the University Ethics Policy.

4. The word count of the thesis is 68,178

Signature: *Sally Billau*

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Date	May 2024
Award	EdD
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Director of Studies	Professor Colin McCaig

Abstract

Graduate employability (GE) is a significant strategic issue for various stakeholders in England's Higher Education (HE) sector, driven by government policy developments, technological advancements, globalisation and changing labour market demands. However, it is clear from the literature that student voices are absent from the employability debate (Higdon, 2016; Tomlinson, 2018). The data on which this thesis draws aims to bridge that gap.

This thesis investigates the students' lived experience of '*employability'* within BA (Bachelor of Arts) Interior Architecture and Design (IAD) programmes in six post-1992 universities in England. Creativity is one of the UK's biggest strengths and the UK is regarded as a leader in the field, in terms of economic potential and global cultural influence. However, critics highlight that international competition, rapid technological change, and a complacent approach by recent governments to the sector's commercial potential puts the UK at risk of losing its leading position.

This thesis draws upon data generated through a small-scale, exploratory, and qualitative empirical study, adopting an interpretative approach to data collection through focus groups and document capture. This thesis addresses critical research questions: (1) How do students conceptualise employability? (2) How do students experience employability? (3) What do students perceive as the critical employability barriers and facilitators?

This thesis highlights that students experienced employability through various learning opportunities delivered as part of and alongside their course curriculum. It draws upon students' insights significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic and finds how this has changed their working patterns and significantly changed work placement opportunities.

Data analysis reveals that:

1. University study is considered part of a *journey* to securing a *good* job, although students worry about graduating into an uncertain and ultra-competitive career landscape.
2. Students feel the need to be *different* or have *an edge* in the job market, but this is a *fuzzy* concept and is open to interpretation.
3. Social and cultural capital significantly affects students' employability opportunities, often beyond the discipline-specific skills they have learned.
4. Students want universities to be more proactive in career development via expanding employer networks, connections, collaborations, and partnerships.
5. Students want more effective and prompt university support in sourcing work placements as they recognise that they can enhance career prospects and expand professional networks. However, broader structural inequalities impact students in achieving their goals as there are disparities between students who want to do a work placement and those who do one.

6. Some students feel unprepared for the workplace, citing insufficient teaching in career-building skills and specialist digital technologies - this results in a lack of confidence as students feel they are left to *fend for themselves*.
7. Live projects involving external stakeholders are important opportunities for students to engage with the employability agenda. However, some students report a disconnect between knowledge and action and worry that this unknowing will affect their ability to secure a good graduate job.

This thesis raises essential questions about the success or otherwise of the student experience within an employability context in the creative field of IAD. It will help inform university practice relating to Art and Design employability interventions, and other vocationally oriented course HE provision. Greater use of the student's voice will enable universities to better tailor these provisions to suit the interests and needs of their students.

Keywords: Higher Education, Employability, Social & Cultural Capital, Skills, Student Voice, Lived Experience, Creativity, Interior Architecture and Design, Art and Design, Vocational.

Word count: 535

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Abbreviations

AGCAS	The Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services
AHSS	Arts, Humanities, and Social Sciences
APP	Access and Participation Plan
CBI	Confederation for British Industry
CIHE	Council for Industry and Higher Education
CV	Curriculum Vitae
DHLE	Destination of Leavers from Higher Education
DFEE	Department for Education and Employment
ESECT	Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team (ESECT)
GE	Graduate Employability
4IR	Fourth Industrial Revolution
HE	Higher Education
HEA	Higher Education Academy
HEI's	Higher Education Institutions
HERA	Higher Education and Research Act 2017
HESA	Higher Education Statistics Agency
IAD	Interior Architecture and Design
IFS	Institute for Fiscal Studies
LEO	Longitudinal Education Outcomes
OfS	Office for Students
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
STEM	Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics
TEF	Teaching Excellence Framework
UCAS	Universities and Colleges Admissions Systems
UUK	Universities UK

VFM	Value for money
WEF	World Economic Forum

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.0 Overview

There is an established expectation by a range of different actors, including employer groups, university Vice-Chancellors, central government and policymakers that graduates leaving higher education (HE) in England must have a collection of broad, transferable employability skills and attributes that are required for a dynamic and contemporary workforce (Robbins, 1963; Dearing, 1997; Confederation of British Industry [CBI], 2022; Augar, 2019). This focus on graduate employability (GE) has grown in emphasis over the last ten years, influenced by UK government policy on, for example, the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) (DBIS, 2016) in England, university league tables and the value for money (VFM) agenda in HE agenda (Hewitt, 2019).

Many English universities have developed bespoke, institution-wide GE strategies to address the priority of students transitioning out of university and into the workplace. Indeed, the employability of graduates has become increasingly prominent in the stated (modern)[1] mission, branding and functioning of a sizable number of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) in England. This development is manifested, for example, by many universities providing a wide range of GE initiatives and opportunities through both mainstream and extracurricular activities, for example, by offering:

- centralised careers services
- publishing bespoke typologies of behaviours and attributes of their university graduates
- integration of skills development within degree courses
- standalone skills development modules
- work experience and work placements
- sandwich courses

[1] Many polytechnic HEIs were established in the 1970s and 1980s to boost skilled labour in engineering, science and technology. These institutions were granted the right to be named universities in 1992. The term “modern” is often used to describe these post-92 universities.

- year abroad placements
- virtual work placements
- improved role for employers in co-delivering in the curriculum.

A key theme underpinning much of the above is a focus on developing employability skills. The literature review in Chapter 2 of the thesis shows that the dominant discourse and conceptualisation of GE in UK HE is primarily equated with Human Capital Theory (HCT) which posits that people can increase their productive ability through education and skills training. Concerning graduates, this equates to them having the necessary “key”, “core”, “transferable”, “skills”, and “attributes” (on top of the subject or discipline knowledge they have acquired) to meet the needs of employers and the broader, dynamic, economy (Dearing, 1997; Yorke, 2006; Holmes, 2015; Higdon, 2016: Barnett (2003). Chapter 2 (p.34) of this thesis will explore the contested meaning of skills.

However, as will be argued in Chapter 2, there are conflicting and contested views in the literature that suggest HE students need more than skills development for the contemporary job market and that universities are taking an over-simplistic and instrumentalist view of GE. In contrast, some critics have argued that HEIs must be aware of and respond to the structural and intersectional barriers that can significantly affect a graduate's entry into the paid labour market. Indeed, the Office for Students (OfS) requires education providers to set out in Access and Participation Plans (APP) how they will improve equality of opportunity for students from disadvantaged backgrounds to access, succeed in and progress from HE. For example, the literature indicates the following (singular and combined) features (this is not an exhaustive list) can lead to unequal student progression into the labour market:

- social class
- gender
- disability
- ethnicity
- prior educational attainment
- if a student has had work experience

- where the student lives in the country
- classification of degree
- the subject studied (OfS, 2021; Mason et al., 2009; Salecl, 2018; Higdon, 2016; Bullock et al., 2009; UCAS, 2022).

Several writers have been critical of the HCT skills-dominated discourse and argue that the student employability trajectory is more multifaceted and complex than skills acquisition, with a need to better understand individual graduate identities and the social, cultural, and psychological 'capital' that underpins the discussion on employability (Holmes, 2015; Tomlinson, 2010). The global pandemic has had a disproportionate impact on students who are from underrepresented and disadvantaged groups in developing their employability as they transition into post-graduate jobs. For example, a report by the Sutton Trust (2021: foreword) found that the majority of students had a prolonged period outside of education, with "the largest impacts felt by those from the poorest backgrounds".

What is clear from the literature review is that there are significant gaps in knowledge and evidence in the HE-employability interface. Specifically, there is limited empirical research on how students are experiencing the dynamic employability environment in universities. Little is known about how undergraduate students feel about their ability to compete in a fast-changing job market. Indeed, more published work is needed to capture student voices on these significant policy developments. The study presented in this doctoral thesis challenges the dominant 'skills discourse' by exploring how undergraduate students experience and perceive 'employability,' thus supplying a broader and more holistic understanding of GE.

The rest of this introductory chapter sets the context for the thesis and is presented in four parts. The first section provides the rationale and motivations for devising and conducting the study; the second gives a brief historical and contemporary background policy context on the employability-HE interface in England; the third section highlights the specific focus of the research on the discipline of IAD and highlights the value of the arts, humanities and social sciences; the fourth section outlines the research design and summarises the study's central aims and objectives; it identifies the original contributions to knowledge made by the study and

explains how I will disseminate the research. This section also gives an outline of the thesis structure. The succeeding chapters of the thesis focus on a literature review (Chapter 2), the research methodology (Chapter 3), the research findings, (Chapters 4, 5 & 6) and a concluding discussion and recommendations chapter (Chapter 7).

1.1 Motivation for the Study

The research topic and focus appeared from my experiences as an Interior Design practitioner and now as an academic. This combined set of experiences has produced a personal passion for understanding the student experience of the HE-employability interface and my attempts to support creative learners in getting the skills, knowledge and personal attributes needed to succeed in a competitive and dynamic IAD job market. In the following section, I set out my motivations for conducting this study.

1.1.1 Positionality and Rationale for the Study

I was an Interior Designer for a national architectural practice in the UK for over fifteen years, starting my career as a graduate designer and concluding as an Associate Director. During this time, I worked on various design projects for commercial and public sector clients as part of a larger design team. In 2008, I started a new career in HE as a Senior Lecturer in IAD at a large modern university in England. When commencing this doctorate study, I was responsible for teaching several core modules within a full-time, three-year undergraduate IAD degree programme, where employability is an essential focus of the course learning outcomes.

As Chapter 3 of this thesis sets out in detail, I am aware of my multiple roles in this research and the subjective nature of the study. I have worked as an Interior Designer and have employed many graduates in a national design practice. I am now an academic but still work closely with employers at a national level. For this research, I situate myself as an educational practitioner because it is close to my identity and passion for the subject (Maguire, 2004; Salzman, 2002). There is a clear institutional-level strategy at the university where I work to improve GE outcomes by

combining Highly Skilled Employability (HSE)[2] across all years through various means, including, but not exclusively:

- developing employability skill sets
- offering placement options
- providing live[3] projects for students to engage with clients
- arranging employer talks and visits to employers and design studios
- creating and using alumni networks
- offering enterprise development and other work-based learning opportunities.

These interventions - within, alongside and outside of the formal curriculum - are common across many UK IAD departments in HE providers. Given this context, there are three key reasons why I have undertaken this study.

First, and as noted above in the overview, is recognition in the relevant literature that there is a need to examine broader conceptions of employability in HE from a student's stakeholder perspective (Higdon, 2016; Tomlinson, 2007 and 2008). Many of the students I have worked with have expressed their expectations that studying at university would support them in getting specific and generic employability skills needed for the graduate job market. Students have also expressed to me their worries and anxiety about entering a highly competitive graduate labour market within IAD and have said they find it hard to think about or plan for a future career. This tendency not to systematically plan for career preparedness for the job market is noted in the literature by Ahola and Kivinen (1999) and O'Donoghue & Rabin (1999). Students become more aware of these challenges, especially in the final year of a degree course, which can trigger deep anxiety about what lies ahead (Marick and Watkins, 2001; Pfeffer and Sutton, 2000).

---

[2] Highly skilled employment (HSE) is defined as jobs within one of three groups in the Standard Occupation Classification (SOC) system: managers, directors and senior officials, professionals, and associate professional and technical occupations. The SOC is the classification the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) uses in its Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS).

[3] Live projects generally involve negotiating a brief, timescale, budget and product between an educational organisation and an external collaborator for mutual benefit. The project must be structured to ensure students gain learning relevant to their academic development. (Shreeve, Sims, Trowler, 2010; Sara, 20199; Anderson, J. & Priest, C., 2012). Developing a Live Projects Network and Flexible Methodology for Live Projects. Paper presented at the *Live Projects Pedagogy International Symposium 2012*, Oxford Brookes University, May 2012.

The personal encounters with students I have outlined above concur with some of the evidence from the academic literature and the dominant discourses on employability; that is, students view HE as an investment in their futures and as a means to equip them with the proper skills for graduate employment, which is well-paid and of high status (Advance HE/HEPI, 2019; Ingleby, 2015; Stewart & Knowles, 2000). These questions, concerns and fears from students are critical reasons for me to explore the lived experience of employability. In doing so, I aim to understand if students feel equipped with IAD-specific and more generic skills to contribute to different labour market contexts. In addition, I want to know how universities and their academic departments respond to the GE agenda in HE.

It is clear from the academic literature explored in Chapter 2 of the thesis that the employability agenda in the UK has been studied and conceptualised by the government, policymakers, employers, and academics. More needs to be understood about employability in the English HE context from a student perspective, particularly in the subject areas of IAD. Indeed, Tymon (2013, p. 849) terms students studying at university as a stakeholder group that is "the missing perspective" of the employability debate and highlights that students are uncertain about their agency in employability.[4] Consequently, as direct stakeholders, there is an empirical need to hear students' authentic voices on their lived employability experiences to contribute to the broader discussion, given that this is such a significant development. This lived experience can inform and influence how HE providers conceptualise and deliver the employability agenda within IAD.

Secondly, I wanted to explore more specifically what skills, attributes and experiences undergraduate students consider are needed for the modern workplace. In doing so, the research aimed to understand how developing skills and graduate attributes can inform the IAD and broader HE curriculum. Several employers in IAD that I have worked with have told me there needs to be more skills and competency

[4]. There is an increased focus on the 'student's voice' in HE. However, recent policy reviews and documents relating to the student voice in the employability debate show limited evidence of students' views of employability provision (Artess et al., 2017). There is also a growing, more comprehensive set of expectations by external agencies, such as the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) in England, which stipulates that HEIs are required to encourage students to participate in strategic development that impacts their learning (QAA, 2023).

amongst the graduates they want to recruit. These employers argue that they take graduates' academic credentials for granted but that HEIs must do more to prepare students to be *work-ready* and to “hit the ground running” (CBI, 2019b; CBI/Birkbeck Education 2021) for a dynamic and productive labour market when graduates start employment.

This sentiment from employers is found in several academic and employer sector studies, suggesting a gap exists between what universities do to support graduates for workforce preparedness and what employers expect (Mason et al., 2009; Gunn et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2022). By saying work readiness, employers tend to emphasise a set of capabilities the graduate should hold rather than specific subject knowledge. Therefore, understanding what students think about employability skills as part of the learning process and their preparedness for the world of work (Parsons, 1989) underpinned this rationale for conducting the study. Employers' views are essential to the employability agenda in HE, and in response to these pressures, I explore some of the leading themes in the literature review in Chapter 2 (p.34).

Finally, I wanted to analyse, in the literature review, the changing expectations of UK government policy on employability and the implications this has for HEIs. Some writers argue that globalisation and technological developments have led to a transformation where the responsibility for developing employability and workplace skills has moved away from employers to individual graduates and, de facto, to the universities where they study (Smith, 2012). Employability is now seen increasingly as a core obligation of HE providers; it is not a disconnected operation or the sole preserve of careers education and information, advice, and guidance (CEIAG) departments in an institution, but one that is embedded and incorporated into student learning outcomes (Cranmer, 2006). Pukelis et al., (2007) argue that it is now expected that HEIs handle the smooth integration of graduates into professional life.

It has become a customary practice that HEIs, like my own, adopt various approaches to increase employability opportunities and skills offered to their students, as highlighted in several academic studies (Pegg et al., 2012). As the Advance HE influential report by Tibby & Norton (2020, p. 5) states:

> “To be addressed effectively, employability should be embedded into all learning and teaching policies, processes and practices and considered throughout the student lifecycle, from the very start of a student's progress to completion of their studies".

However, as research by the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) in the UK has shown, many HEIs still need an agreed definition for embedded employability (AGCAS, 2022) which is a theme we will explore in Chapter 2 of this thesis.

1.2 Background Policy Context

As will be discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2, governments worldwide are asking universities to prepare students for professional work with the relevant employability skills and attributes to succeed in a dynamic labour market. In the UK, this has been a priority for Governments of different political persuasions for several decades. There are two main drivers for this development.

The first significant development relates to the changing international economic and employment dynamics that have pressured universities to play an essential part in a global *knowledge-based* economy (Browne, 2010: Abstract; Hilage & Pollard, 1998), especially in the context of the financial crisis at the end of the first decade of this century. The intensifying pressure of global economic competition and rapid social and technological change has placed a more pronounced focus on graduate students having a series of ‘generic’ employability skills (McGowan & Andrews, 2017; Sin & Neave, 2016). Commentators and researchers argue that the need for this more generic skill set of graduates is, in part, a response to the employment market in the UK and internationally. This dynamic is a response, in part, to the Fourth Industrial Revolution [4IR], which “represents a fundamental change in the way we live, work and relate to one another” (WEF, 2023, para. 1) highlighting a shift

away from manufacturing to fields characterised by innovation, knowledge, the introduction of robotics and the application of artificial intelligence.[5]

The second significant driver for change examined in this thesis is the changing HE policy context, with much greater oversight of universities' responsibilities to achieve employability outcomes. The OfS in England was formed in 2018, after introducing the 2017 Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) as the new regulatory body for HE in England. As part of its far-reaching powers of regulation, the OfS introduced statutory conditions for universities to publish Graduate Outcome (GO) metrics to give transparency on graduate employment prospects. Further pressure on universities to show impact on the employability agenda was the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), which focuses on how HEIs prioritise GE skills. Increasingly, the UK Government uses the graduate employment rate for each undergraduate course as a proxy measure to assess the quality of UK university provisions. The graduate-level data of each university is also included in many University League tables such as the QS World University Rankings, Times Higher Education, The Guardian HE League table, The Complete Guide to Universities, etc.

The rationale for these policy developments is that such data will help future students make informed choices about the expected salary return on their degree investment. According to the OfS, these developments also aim to increase the accountability and quality of expanding HE provisions in the UK. As will be explored in Chapter 2, this measure of employability across the English HE sector has become a significant and contested way of comparing university performance (Dunbar-Morris & Lowe, 2023).

Given the political and policy context, successful graduate outcomes for all students are an increasingly critical priority for many UK universities. As noted, universities have responded to this policy context by creating and starting various employability initiatives and the approach to enhancing employability will vary from institution to

[5] The 4IR is a catch-all phrase to describe the current era of fast technological change characterised by integrating new technologies, including the capability of the internet and the arrival of artificial intelligence, automation, digital technologies, and biotechnology (WEF, 2023).

institution. However, many have chosen to integrate employability as a compulsory element of the curriculum (Knight & Yorke, 2004; DfE, 2021).

As discussed in Chapter 2, developing students' employability has been driven by government policy over recent decades in England and by other leading designated bodies like the UK Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), which publishes the UK Quality Code for HE. The most recent QAA report (2023) finds the core practices placed on all HE providers and requires that "The provider supports all students, to achieve successful academic and *professional outcomes*" (my emphasis). The QAA presents examples of how HEIs can develop employability skills and embed employability into their strategies. It also identifies features of good practice in universities and finds two broad approaches to practising employability. The first is embedding employability in the curricula so that universities develop courses that meet industry needs and ensure that skills to enhance employability are embedded. The second area is working with employers. This theme includes work placements, internships, alumni, and other guest speakers (QAA, 2017, 2023). Rae (2007) argues that a whole university's experience should create employability skills combined with the broader world of work.

In summary, the nature of HE is evolving, with universities required to be more transparent to potential students and accountable for how courses meet a wide range of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) on student satisfaction and GE. Higdon (2016) has argued that HEIs are under pressure to prepare students for the labour market by developing employability strategies, including a curriculum that develops employability skills. Some commentators (Alderman, 2016) have voiced concerns about HEIs facing greater surveillance by the state, as shown by the introduction of the OfS. The role that HEIs should play shows what Cromford (2005, p. 41) has described as "an exceptional instrumentalist approach" to defining the meaning of HE, replacing or eroding a long-established view of what universities' purposes are. This conceptualisation of GE is a theme examined in the literature review in Chapter 2 (p.34).

1.3 The UK Creative Industries and the Value of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences (AHSS)

The creative industries[6] rank among the world's fastest-growing sectors. A frequent claim made by many in these sectors is that they supply high-quality employment, drive innovation, and support civic and social well-being. Creativity is one of the UK's biggest strengths and the UK is widely regarded as a leader in the creative sector, both in terms of economic potential and global cultural influence. However, it has been argued that in the UK is at risk of losing its leading position in the creative industries, with critics highlighting international competition, rapid technological change, and a complacent approach by the government to the sector's commercial potential (Confederation of British Industry), 2019a; Sherwood, 2023; House of Lords, 2023).

The creative industries were not featured in the 2022 Autumn Statement nor included in the then Conservative Government's five priorities for growth (PM speech on building a better future, Prime Minister's Office, 2023). Critics argue that this lack of focus and chaotic domestic policies are not meeting the sector's needs and risks affecting the UK's future prosperity (Campaign for the Arts, 2023). The creative industries generate £115.9bn in gross value added (GVA), nearly 6% of the British economy, and employ 2.3 million people, as well as contributing to the country's status internationally (Creative Industries Policy and Evidence Centre, 2023). A government report by the House of Lords (2023, n.d) calls on the DfE to:

> "Encourage students to learn a blend of creative and digital skills; improve careers guidance; reverse the decline in children studying design and technology; change lazy rhetoric about 'low-value' arts courses; and make

[6] The terms 'creative industries' and 'creative sector' refer to the DCMS definition of industries "which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property". Nine sub-sectors fall under this definition: • music, performing and visual arts; • museums, galleries and libraries; • publishing; • IT, software and computer services; • film, TV, video, radio and photography; • design and designer fashion; • crafts; • architecture; and • advertising and marketing (House of Lords, 2023).

apprenticeships work better for small and medium-sized enterprises in the creative industries".

The House of Lords report (2023) also highlights that schoolchildren should be encouraged to combine the study of arts and creative subjects with science and technology to meet the sector's needs. Indeed, the number of students taking creative subjects such as art, music, design technology and performing arts at GCSE level has fallen significantly over recent years, partly because of government policy emphasising traditional subjects, including maths and science.

The CBI (2019a) also finds the rapid decline in the teaching of creative subjects in schools as a cause for concern, highlighting that the fourth industrial revolution (4IR) will transform the future of work and jobs where those with essential levels of creativity are likely to be more resilient to automation. The CBI (2019a) argued that creativity must be considered equally important to numeracy and literacy in all schools, given that it can help young people build curiosity, persistence, and self-confidence. It highlights the inequalities and disparities between state and private schools in teaching creative subjects, calling out for every person from all backgrounds to be allowed to engage in innovative education alongside STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics), digital skills, and entrepreneurship.

Given the global economic and UK policy context, there is a significant emphasis on the employability opportunities provided by STEM subjects. These areas of HE provision are critical drivers in response to 4IR and the need for the UK to remain competitive globally and supply a higher return on investment (Browne, 2010; WEF, 2017). The claim often made is that STEM subjects are equated with graduate-level employability, good earnings, and meet the needs of a more dynamic labour market.[7]

[7] Data provided by the Universities and Colleges Admissions Systems (UCAS) for 2021 shows that acceptance rates for computer science courses have risen by 50%, acceptances to engineering by 21%, and acceptances to newer Artificial Intelligence courses up by 400%, all in the past decade (UCAS, 2021).

The ascendancy of the political and business sector support for STEM academic subject areas in the UK has been paralleled by a critique of AHSS[8] in HE. However, critics discuss the need to have an education system that "recognises the strength [of both STEM subjects and creative and arts subjects] and brings them together" (Caine, 2023, as cited in Sherwood, 2023; House of Lords, 2023). They argue that the current education system does not equip young people with the skills they need for the modern world of work.

Heightened policy and media discourse have also focused on which university courses offer degrees that some commentators view as *low* and *high* in value. Indeed, the Augar Review in 2019 highlighted concerns about *low-value* degrees. Arts and Humanities subjects were singled out as *low value* due to their earning potential and, therefore, should command lower investment. In contrast, the CBI (2019a) found that post-18 education should holistically recognise the value of creative education at broader economic, social, and cultural importance rather than purely focusing on graduate earnings. However, in 2021, the OfS approved cutting 50% of arts courses funding, redirecting it into STEM subjects (Weale, 2021).

The Campaign for the Arts is a group that champions and promotes access to arts and culture in the UK and they estimated that such cuts to arts risk the financial viability of future education of the next generation of professionals in the creative industries which have contributed over £111 billion a year to the UK economy (Campaign for the Arts, 2023). This pervasive and damaging discourse is challenging for creative and arts graduates, where various social and political commentators have questioned the perceived value of such courses.

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[8] Arts, Humanities and Social Science (AHSS) graduates are collectively categorised and defined as individuals who have completed HE in one of the following subject areas: Social studies, Law, Business and Administration, Mass communication & documentation, Languages, Historical & philosophical studies and Creative arts & design. Higher Education Statistics Agency (2018). JACS 3.0: Principal subject codes | HESA.
See: https://www.hesa.ac.uk/support/documentation/jacs/jacs3-principal

AHSS subjects have come under particular political and media pressure to demonstrate their value to the economic performance of the UK economy (Johnson, 2020). In an analysis of data on degree courses and graduate earnings, the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) highlights that students studying subjects in creative arts earn lower salaries relative to what they might have earned if they had not gone to university at all (Britton et al., 2020). The IFS article argues that too many students enrol on courses that do not benefit them or the economy.

More recently, in July 2023, the Prime Minister at the time, Rishi Sunak (Adams & Crerar, 2023), responded to the final part of the Augar review of tertiary education and confirmed that the government would force universities to limit the number of students taking "low value" degrees. The OfS will cap courses where fewer than 60% of graduates are in a professional job, going into postgraduate study or starting a business within 15 months of graduating. The numbers cap is unlikely to affect the Russell Group or Oxbridge universities, whose students tend to enter "highly-skilled" jobs requiring a degree and above-average earnings. Instead, critics say that it will penalise universities and courses with a high proportion of working-class students, who have fewer financial resources or family support and are thus more likely to drop out or be able to move to geographical areas of higher wage demand. This move will most likely negatively impact the working class and black, Asian and minority ethnic applications.

Critics argue (CBI, 2019a; Sherwood, 2023; House of Lords, 2023; Prospects, 2023) that questioning the value of studying creative subjects threatens the UK's ability to deliver excellent education and meet the economic needs of the 4IR. They said this could lead to a shortage of creative talent entering this sector in the coming years, potentially stifling its continued growth (Prospects, 2023). In addition, the arts can help improve our mental health and wellbeing, helping to reduce anxiety, depression and stress (Tymoszuk et al., 2021). The HEartS Survey (2021), explored the impact of the arts and culture on health and well-being, from individual, social, and economic perspectives. The results found that "...more arts engagement was

associated with higher levels of wellbeing, social connectedness, and lower odds of intense social loneliness”.

The discipline of IAD, which is the focus of this study, is found within the field of AHSS. IAD relates to remodelling existing buildings to create experiential, experimental and functional spaces through architectural and design interventions (Higgins, 2015). Graduates may secure roles across various creative careers, including interior design, exhibition design, lighting design, architecture, set and event design, furniture design and visual merchandising (Prospects, 2021). This study is significant because it gives insights into the employability skills, attributes and experiences of a particular cohort pursuing a particular subject (IAD) at the undergraduate level within AHSS.

1.4 Research Design

As noted above in Section 1.2 (p.22), the current model of employability in English HE has been dominated by government and industry bodies (see, for example, CBI, 2022), which promote employability skills and attributes. The premise of the research reported in this thesis is that employability is more complex than students just developing a series of employability attributes and skills required by employers. Indeed, there is more of a dynamic interconnection of social, cultural, and financial capital when graduates navigate paid employment (Higdon, 2016; Higdon et al., 2017).

To understand the above dynamic of the students’ lived experiences and beliefs of employability, the research adopts a qualitative approach to generate a multi-faceted understanding of these complex issues in its real-life context (Bryman, 1988). A qualitative process that helped to understand students’ experiences and behaviours from their perspectives was conducted across several geographical locations. Using multiple locations for this study illustrates many sources of evidence of real-life events across various institutions.

Whilst qualitative techniques can receive criticism about their lack of robustness as a research tool (Silverman, 2000), replicating experience across multiple programmes should help increase confidence in the method's robustness. Chapter 3 (p.83) of this thesis will elaborate on this further when the Methodological approach to the research is outlined. The study embraces a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2000; 2006; 2008; 2009) as a strategy for conducting qualitative research, as it allows for a richer understanding of the topic being researched and can help to uncover perspectives that may have been overlooked by traditional research methods. This approach seeks to understand the "why" behind a participant's behaviour through exploring their social and cultural perspectives.

1.4.1 Aims, Objectives and Research Questions

The study starts from the proposition that the employability-HE interface would be better understood by drawing upon the lived knowledge of those students studying IAD. This research focuses on HE providers of IAD in England.

The following aims (A) set out the purpose of the study:

- **A1:** This study supplies an in-depth understanding of IAD students' lived experiences and perceptions of employability when it exists within the HE undergraduate curriculum.
- **A2:** This study explores the barriers and facilitators to employability from a student perspective.
- **A3:** The understanding from this thesis will inform universities on how the employability agenda can be expressed and delivered in a model that takes account of the student's voice.

The above aims were carried out through the following research objectives (RO):

- **RO1:** Gain access to six contrasting undergraduate IAD programmes in England willing to contribute to the research.
- **RO2:** Undertake focus groups with students to explore how different institutions address employability in undergraduate IAD programmes.
- **RO3:** Analyse the data from focus groups using thematic analysis.
- **RO4:** Share the provisional findings with the participants and the broader field.
- **RO5**: Write up and disseminate the project and contribute to a pedagogical debate.
- **RO6:** Inform university practice and policies for supplying art and design employability skills supported by robust data collected in its natural setting.

The aims and objectives outlined above produced the research questions (RQ) shown below, which also informed the design and execution of the focus groups. The findings of the focus groups are reported in Chapters 4, 5 and 6.

- **RQ1**: How do students conceptualise employability?
- **RQ2:** How do students experience employability?
- **RQ3**: What do students perceive as the critical employability barriers and facilitators?

1.4.2 Contributions to Knowledge and Dissemination of the Findings

Following an extensive review of education literature I propose that this is the first doctoral-level academic qualitative study of employability within IAD courses in England, which provides an opportunity to establish a new set of understandings of this under-researched group of stakeholders. This thesis makes three original contributions to knowledge and scholarship. These are:

1. The study supplies deep insight into the complexity of the lived experience of employability from the perspective of Interior Architecture and Design students, set within several contrasting English universities during the COVID-19 Global pandemic.

2. The research combines theoretical perspectives into the HE-employability interface to produce new insights into human and social capital by offering participants narratives.
3. The research challenges an oversimplified set of government policy approaches and assumptions about employability in UK HE. This research contributes to the understanding and conceptualisation of GE not simply as a set of skills and attributes needed for the workplace, but as a socially constructed process determined partly by broader socio-economic dynamics and barriers.

I return to these contributions in detail in the concluding chapter of the thesis (Chapter 7, p.226-232). The research findings will be disseminated in several formats. I plan to feed the research insights into various post-doctoral research networks by way of a peer-reviewed paper and use this as an opportunity to find best employability practices at the academic programme and university academic department level; this may take the form of a collection of discussion papers and recommendations for changes to policy and strategy. I also intend to disseminate the findings through relevant academic and practitioner conferences. I am especially keen to decrease the gap between research and practice, influence teaching practice, and raise awareness of the findings; this may take the form of presenting papers external to the university where I work to share the findings. I aim to disseminate the work to individual participants in the study by providing them with a study overview. This is a positive research practice, and I plan to contact those students involved in the project to give them a summary.

1.4.3 Thesis Structure

The thesis is divided into seven chapters. Following the setting of the research context provided in Chapter 1 (p. 15), Chapter 2 (p. 34) reviews the literature and shapes the policy and conceptual framework for the research. Chapter 3 (p.83) seeks to set out the methodology, outlining the philosophical assumptions. This chapter details the ontological and epistemological basis for the research approach

and considers the ethical dimensions of conducting a small-scale qualitative study. Chapter 4 (p.133) organises and reports the study's main findings, focusing on employability in the curriculum. Chapter 5 (p.159) organises and reports the study's main findings, focusing on employability beyond the curriculum. Chapter 6 (p.186) reports the study's main findings, examining the value of capital, focusing on *who* and *what* you know. Chapter 7 (p.201) closes with a discussion as it interprets and describes the significance of the findings in the context of the relevant academic and policy-related literature and the research questions and makes recommendations for various practical applications. The thesis ends with a concluding summary.

1.5 Chapter Summary

This chapter introduced the study by outlining the research context, rationale, aims, objectives, and research questions and showed the motivations for conducting the study. It briefly explored the background policy context and clarified why it is important to focus on the discipline of IAD.

The chapter highlighted how the original contributions to knowledge within this research area would increase understanding of students' lived employability experiences in IAD, focusing on their voices. The next chapter reviews the literature on the development of employability in English HEIs. It examines literature from the perspective of HEIs, government bodies, commentators, and critics to examine HE institutions' role in the broader economy, specifically in developing GE. It explores the so-called massification of HE in the UK with increasing numbers of students from diverse backgrounds who now take part in UK HE. The chapter also considers how GE has become more prominent in the political discourse following the recent debates about the need for more STEM-related skills versus the *low* economic value and relevance to the UK economy of some university academic courses, especially those in the AHSS (Augar, 2019).

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.0 Introduction

Chapter 1 of this thesis shows that GE is becoming increasingly central to the mission and functioning of many UK universities (Dearing, 1997; Tomlinson, 2005). This chapter further develops the points raised in the introductory chapter and offers a critical overview of the literature on various aspects of the employability-HE interface in the UK. However, it is essential to note that there is a specific focus in this thesis on the development of employability in English HEIs. It draws primarily from UK research and policy development, but also upon literature from other countries. There are four main sections in this chapter (the systematic process that was adopted for the literature review can be found in Appendix A (p. 240 - 248).

The first section explores the contested meaning of employability within the context of HE. The second section of this chapter explores the literature on Human Capital Theory (HCT) (Becker, 1975; 1992, 2002; Schultz, 1960; 1971), which is central to the debate around employability in HE. The third section examines debates around graduate skills and attributes from an employer's perspective, then scrutinises skills from a government perspective and examines the influence of the QAA of England on University provision. The concluding section of the chapter explores the development of the GE discourse in the context of the changing conceptualisation of the contemporary university (Brown et al., 2002 & 2004; Tomlinson, 2007; Holmes, 2013). It discusses the distinction between the historical purpose of HE versus the needs of employers and the pressure placed on HE by Government policy (Deboick, 2010). This chapter explores to what extent HEIs in the UK should prepare undergraduate students to transition into graduate-level employment (Mason et al. (2009); Thune & Støren, 2015; Hidden, 2016) and raises different philosophical positions on the very purpose of HE. The chapter concludes with a summary by highlighting the significance of this work, given the lack of research on students' lived experience of employability.

2.1 Graduate Employability (GE) in HE

The GE debate in the UK HE sector is gaining considerable attention in the educational and policy literature. Nevertheless, for researchers curious about the employability-HE interface, a fundamental question to address is: What is GE in HE? The literature review suggests that employability stands for different things to different writers and stakeholders. Artess et al., (2017), for example, point toward the problems of definition when they conducted a significant literature review for the Higher Education Academy (HEA) and found that there was a broad range of terminology or definitions surrounding employability (Artess et al., 2017). Thijssen et al., (2008, p. 167) also found that employability may be “an attractive but confusing professional buzzword”.

2.1.1 Defining Employability

To help focus the debate on the definition, it is worth exploring two prevalent aspects in the literature. The first refers to employability as a graduate's ability to secure a job. The second relates to developing attributes, qualities, and skills considered essential to employers. A central theme in the literature is that *employment* and *employability* are sometimes conflated. Some writers' definitions have emphasised employment participation underpinning “employability". According to De Vos et al., (2011, p. 438), employability is a person “securing a job”. They note “the continuous fulfilling, acquiring or creating of work through the optimal use of competencies". However, Wilton (2011, p.87) argued that such a simplistic approach is inappropriate given that it “is possible to be employable, yet unemployed or underemployed”.

Indeed, other commentators have shown the difficulties with this definition; “Employability is not just about securing a job” (Harvey & Locke, 2002: p. 21). Other factors external to the individual student or graduate can decide if they become employed - for example, factors like the state of the economy, whether jobs are available, and discrimination in the job market (McCowan, 2015). For Harvey and

Locke (2002), it is essential to acknowledge that for a graduate to be employable, it will depend on individual and external factors.

Rich (2015), in his review of the HE employability paper for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI), makes the functional distinction between *employment* (labour market status - that is, having a job) and *employability* (having the right skills and preparedness for work) within academic and policy literature.[9] The prevalence of the academic literature recognises this distinction between employment and employability - and, as we will see below, employability is the mixture of a set of skills, knowledge, understanding and personal characteristics.

Table 1 (p.37) captures some of the most significant and often quoted definitions found in the literature review. Several authors from different disciplinary backgrounds have argued for a more unified description for integrating conceptual frameworks of employability (Knight & Yorke, 2004; Helyer & Lee, 2014; Forrier et al., 2015; Smith et al., 2018; Small et al., 2018; Peeters et al., 2019). However, in defining employability in the Western employability literature, it became clear that three sets of contributions are referenced the most:

1. Hillage and Pollard (1998)
2. Harvey (2001; 2003)
3. Yorke (2006).

[9] As later sections of this chapter will argue, there is a paradox in existing metrics used by the UK Government to measure 'employment' rather than 'employability'. Indeed, the introduction of Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) data is even narrower, focusing on how much income graduates earn while in employment.

Table 1: Selection of Key Definitions of Employability

Hind and Moss (2005, p.1)	Social behaviours and skills you can learn to help you interact and work with others in various situations.
Pegg et al., (2012, p. 4).	A set of achievements - skills, understandings, and personal attributes - make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which helps themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy.
Hillage and Pollard (1998, p.2)	The capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment.
Harvey (2003)	Employability is not just about getting a job. Conversely, just because a student is on a vocational course does not mean that somehow employability is automatic. Employability is more than developing attributes, techniques, or experience just to enable a student to get a job or to progress within a current career. It is about learning, emphasising less on 'employ' and more on 'ability.' The emphasis is on developing critical, reflective abilities to empower and enhance the learner
Yorke (2006, p 8)	A set of achievements - skills, understanding and personal attributes - makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which helps themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy. … A Graduate's achievements and his/her potential to obtain a graduate job should not be confused with the actual acquisition of a graduate job.
Bowden *et al.,* (2000, p. 3)	The qualities, skills, and understandings a university community agrees its students would desirably develop during their time at the institution and, so, shape the contribution that can make to their profession and as a citizen.
Holmes (2001, 2013)	[Graduates must have a set of skills but also] act in ways that lead others to ascribe them the identity of a person worthy of being employed"
CBI (2007, p. 11) and National Union of Students (2011) and Universities UK	A set of attributes, skills, and knowledge that all labour market participants should have to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace.

Hillage & Pollard (1998, p.2) of the Institute for Employment Studies in the UK carried out a report on developing a framework for the Department for Education and Employment (DfEE). Their study's principal findings focused on building students' ability (skills, understanding and personal attributes) and were seen as helpful in making students employable. The authors see employability broadly as an individual's ability to:

1. gain initial employment
2. maintain employment
3. move between roles within the same organisation
4. obtain new employment
5. secure fulfilling work

The authors proposed a much-used model in the HE sector having four elements that make up an individual's employability:

1. Assets (including knowledge, skills, and attitudes)
2. Deployment (this refers to career management skills, job search skills and strategic approach)
3. Presentation (this refers to the ability of an individual to present oneself through CVs, interviews, references, and qualifications)
4. Personal and labour market context (this relates to the individual being able to manage their employability assets to the maximum, but recognising this depends on circumstances like caring responsibilities, disability, job openings, and selection behaviour of employers).

Harvey's work (2001; 2003) also says that employability is more than just developing and articulating a set of attributes that enable a student to secure a job. Harvey's position is that university students should develop a range of critical reflective skills that can empower and enhance the learners and prepare them for a range of opportunities post-graduation.

As we will see in Chapter 3 of this thesis (p.83), both these conceptions of employability partly reflect the views of the 1997 Dearing Report, which found essential critical skills relevant throughout life and not just in employment. The

definition offered by Holmes (2001; 2013) is distinctive in that he highlights the process by which the graduate identity appears over time and views this because of engaging with opportunities and employers. This perspective is reflected in Tomlinson's (2012) research, which suggests that how individuals engage with the world of work depends on their self-perception as future workers.

A widely acknowledged and respected definition of employability originated from the research completed by the Enhancing Student Employability Coordination Team (ESECT) (Yorke, 2004, 2006; Yorke & Knight, 2006), who developed the *USEM* model (see Figure 1, p. 40). This work is based on several years of research with employers, students, and academics. The acronym in employability relates to four cross-cutting elements:

1. **U**nderstanding (of the subject being studied)
2. **S**kills
3. **E**fficacy beliefs (the student's personal qualities and self-beliefs) are critical to the extent that they feel they can make a difference.
4. **M**etacognition (a learner's ability to reflect on their thought process and choose an effective strategy - developing these strategies can improve student performance).

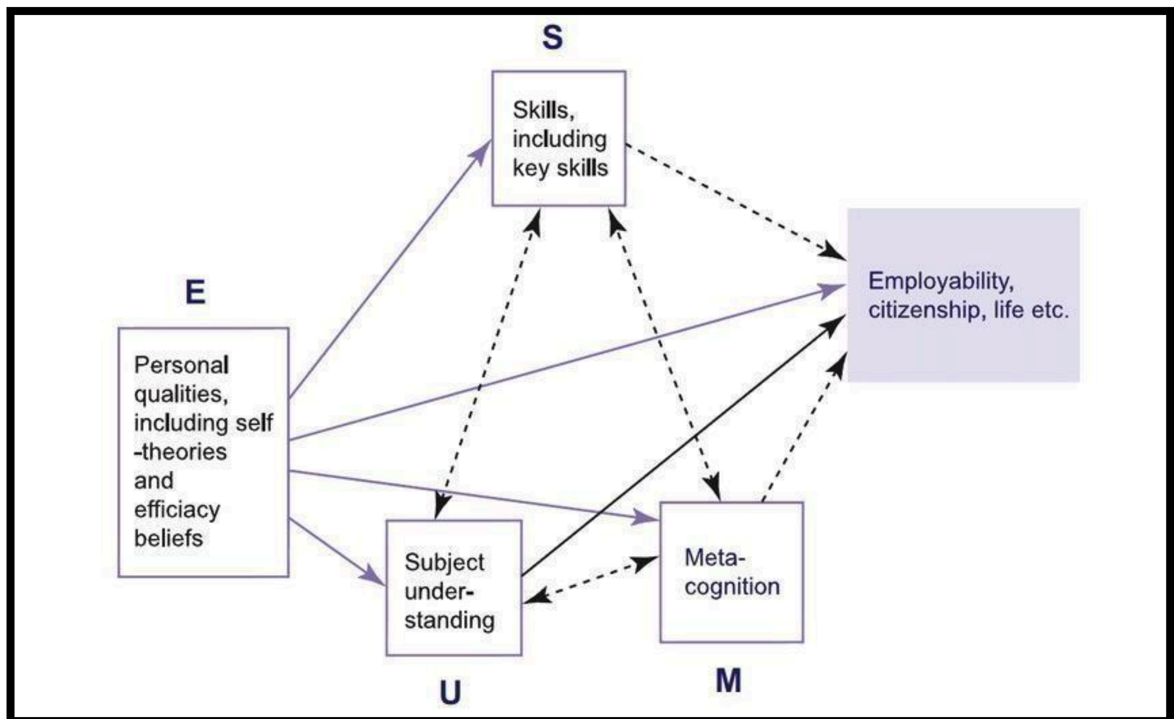

Figure 1. The USEM model of employability (adapted from Knight Yorke, 2002).

Yorke (2006) highlights that employability is a complex and dynamic concept dependent on an individual's ability to mix achievements within a specific context. Whilst constantly evolving, it is linked to the ability to learn from experiences. The Advance Higher Education Academy states in HEA documentation *Defining employability in higher education* (HEA, 2016) that Yorke’s is the most widely used definition of employability. Yorke agrees with Hillage and Pollard (1998) in that he connects the concept of employability with the ability of an individual to get a job. However, he also refers to a graduate job that suits them.

At clear odds with Yorke's (2006) focus is, however, government policy which sets out in the white paper *Success as a Knowledge Economy* (2016), that the most important outcome for a graduate is finding employment. The paper finds that the purpose of HE is to offer *good value* education, with access for all, resulting in employment at the end of it. Later sections of this chapter will return to this matter in more detail.

However, this policy implies that HE is a means to employment, illustrating salary's value over more comprehensive university learning. As noted in the introductory chapter of the thesis and later in the literature review of this chapter, the UK government's existing metrics measure employment rather than employability. This approach by the government is indicative of the marketisation of HE with a narrow focus on employment, measuring how much money a graduate earns.

In summary, there is a need for a standard definition of employability. It is difficult for students, staff, and employers to understand what is essential to this development and what is not. Given this, for our purposes here, I intend to adopt the definition of employability by Yorke (2006) as my working definition for this research. It is the most comprehensive approach in that it is concerned with graduate skills and abilities alongside the development of a personal career path, the success of which will contribute to more comprehensive social benefits. However, this definition will be challenged in the next section of the chapter, where the concept of social and human capital is explored, and a more nuanced approach to understanding employability is discussed.

> “A set of achievements - skills, understanding and personal attributes - makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community, and the economy. A Graduate's achievements and his/her potential to obtain a graduate job should not be confused with the actual acquisition of a graduate job". (Yorke, 2006, p. 8).

Having shown a working definition of employability for this thesis, the next section of the chapter will explore the theoretical underpinnings of this research, namely the notion of human capital and the skills and attributes commonly needed from graduates entering the labour market.

2.2 Graduate Capital/s

When discussing employability, a critical element in the literature relates to a broad body of work within Human Capital Theory (HCT). The origins of HCT can be traced to the neoclassical economic theory views of education and training as an investment in human capital. The basic premise of HCT is that HE can contribute to the wider economy of a country by adding to the productivity of graduates in paid employment. Theodore Schultz (1960) first developed the theory in the 1960s, and it has since become one of the most influential economic theories:

> "I propose to treat education as an investment in man [sic] and to treat its consequences as a form of capital. Since education becomes part of the person receiving it, I shall refer to it as Human Capital … it is a form of capital if it renders productive and serves value to the economy" Schultz (1960, p. 571).

Becker (1962; 1975) is another crucial writer on HCT and argued that education expenditure should be seen as an investment. Becker highlighted that although there is no immediate return on the investment, it is a long-term return in the form of higher salaries as opposed to individuals with a lower level of education. This investment can take the form of both time and money. The time investment is the time spent in education, while the money investment is the cost of tuition, fees, and other expenses. At a UK national level, with the introduction of the modern-day student loan system in the 1990s, the argument suggests that individuals invest in their education by taking out individual student loans to increase their future earnings potential.

The proponents of HCT argue that education in general increases productivity in two ways. First, education provides individuals with the knowledge and skills needed to be more productive in their jobs. Second, education helps individuals develop cognitive and non-cognitive skills, such as problem-solving, critical thinking, and communication (Thomas et al., 2013). These skills are also valuable in the workplace. There is a large body of empirical evidence that supports human capital

theory. Studies have shown that individuals with higher levels of education tend to earn higher wages, have lower unemployment rates, and be more productive in their jobs in comparison to those with lower levels of education (Britton et al., 2020).

According to Robson (2023), the relationship between HCT and GE is clear; graduates with higher levels of education are more likely to be employable than individuals without. This is because they have the knowledge, skills, and cognitive and non-cognitive skills that employers seek. Several authors have claimed that there are diverse ways that universities can support their graduates to be more employable. Drawing upon the earlier review of the employability definitions in the literature, students can be provided with the skills and knowledge they need to succeed in their chosen field. This can be done by providing students with internships, work-based learning opportunities, and access to industry experts (Department for Business Innovation & Skills, 2012; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Scott and Davies, 2017).

Another way universities can aid their graduates to be more employable is by supporting students in developing their cognitive and non-cognitive skills. This can be done by allowing students to take part in leadership development programs, team-building exercises, and public speaking workshops. Universities can also help their graduates to be more employable by aiding them in developing their networks (Tomlinson, 2017; Scott and Davies, 2017; Ford et al., 2015). This can be achieved by allowing them to meet with potential employers, attend networking events, and take part in alumni mentoring programs. In addition to the above, below are other ways universities can help their graduates be more employable. Igwe et al., (2020), in their analysis of the factors that decide the development of employability skills in HE, noted that to enhance students' HC and employability skills, HE should focus on four specific areas:

1. Critical thinking
2. Connectivity
3. Creativity
4. Collaboration

This mix of soft skills, transferable skills and entrepreneurial skills aligns with the World Economic Forum’s (2023) top ten skills for 2023 and the top ten skills deemed to be on the rise. The WEF highlights that analytical thinking and creative thinking remain the two most important skills for workers in 2023, noting that cognitive skills are reported to be growing in importance most quickly, reflecting the increasing importance of complex problem-solving in the workplace. However, it puts forward that surveyed businesses report creative thinking to be growing in importance slightly more rapidly than analytical thinking.

Concerning the top ten skills deemed to be on the rise, technology literacy is the third-fastest growing core skill. This is followed by three self-efficacy skills which rank above working with others, in the rate of increase in importance of skills reported by businesses. These skills are resilience, flexibility and agility; motivation and self-awareness; and curiosity and lifelong learning, and they are skills that recognise the importance of a worker's ability to adapt to disrupted workplaces. Systems thinking, AI and big data, talent management, and service orientation and customer service complete the top 10 growing skills. While results from the survey judged no skills to be in net decline, sizable minorities of companies judge reading, writing and mathematics; global citizenship; sensory-processing abilities; and manual dexterity, endurance and precision to be of declining importance for their workers (WEF, 2023).

2.2.1 Tomlinson’s Graduate Capital Model

The work of Michael Tomlinson (2017) has been highly cited in the literature where he advances the notion of GE, which is linked to five employability capitals: human, social, cultural, identity and psychological (see figure 2, p.45). This approach places less emphasis on employability skills, which does not offer a detailed and nuanced picture of the resources needed by a graduate in transitioning from university to the world of work.

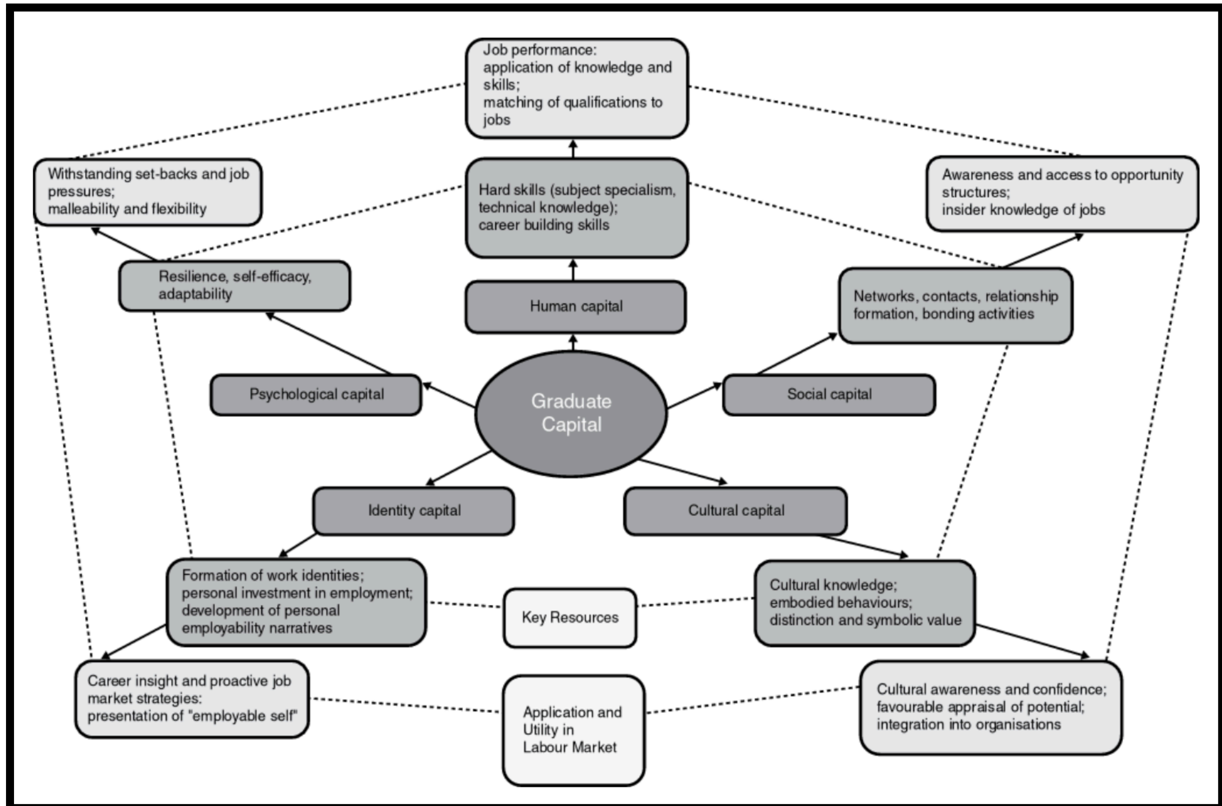

Figure 2. Tomlinson's graduate capital model (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 340).

As already noted, **human capital** refers to skills, knowledge, and experiences. It incorporates both hard and soft skills. Guiding students in human capital development requires universities to support students in connecting knowledge and skills with the actual demands of employees. Although there are significant differences in defining social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putman, 1993), there is a consensus that it is fundamentally about how people interact with each other so that they can collaborate, coordinate, and coexist. It is about having strong positive relationships embedded in favourable social structures with people from various backgrounds and positions (Claridge, 2014). It refers to the existing resources embedded within, available through and derived from an individual's connections. Networking best expresses this, as keeping a good network of contacts is vital. Tomlinson refers to “meaningful and gainful interactions between graduates and employers” and “making graduates more directly visible to employers” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 343).

Social capital is a contested term often defined in the literature about networks, norms and trust that allow individuals to achieve common aims (Schuller, 2001). It is argued that an individual can draw upon family, friends, and broader networks of people to use material gain, for example, by securing work-placement opportunities in the industry (Blackwell et al. 2001). Putnam (2000) draws attention to the individual aspect of social capital: "If we lack that social capital, economic sociologists have shown, our economic prospects are seriously reduced, even if we have lots of talent and training (human capital) (Putnam, 2000 p.289).

Cultural capital refers to the knowledge, disposition, and behaviours work cultures value. This means understanding the working environment. Some critics (Strauss & Quinn, 1997, p.198) call it the "cultural script". Possessing cultural capital allows graduates to show awareness of "the rules of engagement and modes of behaviours" and show their "social fit" within an organisation (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 349). Students gaining practical experience in the field they are studying through a placement best reflects this.

Identity capital refers to people's ability and readiness to position and present a version of themselves suited to the work opportunity they are looking for. Given that such self-marketability is significant to employability, Tomlinson (2017, p. 347) highlights that "Graduates need to be primed in the ability to present a compelling employability narrative that conveys their identities". In the context of IAD, self-identity is essential within the industry as graduates need to have something different (McCracken et al., 2015) to stand out from the crowd and Burke (2016) outlines the importance of students feeling confident. Tomlinson (2008, abstract) puts forward that graduates feel a sense of relative em*ployability* as they compete with other graduates with similar qualifications and credentials.

According to Tomlinson (2017), **psychological capital** refers to an individual's positive psychological state of development. In the context of Interior Design and Architecture, it can be challenging and competitive; therefore, graduates need to be

able to manage uncertainty in the industry. According to Tomlinson, graduates must adapt to changing contexts in their early careers and manage expectations by developing coping strategies for setbacks they will inevitably face. Tomlinson highlights:

> “For graduates, the challenge is being able to package their employability in the form of a dynamic narrative that captures their wider achievements, and which conveys the appropriate personal and social credentials desired by employers. Ideally, graduates would be able to possess the hard currencies in the form of traditional academic qualifications together with softer currencies in the form of cultural and interpersonal qualities” (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 348).

Here, Tomlinson (2017) refers to *personal* and *social* credentials as essential and required by employers. This more nuanced view of social capital reflects earlier research by Brown & Hesketh (2004, p.35), who discusses the rise of ‘personal capital’ within the graduate labour market, highlighting “the importance of whom you know as much as what you know” as being crucial to an individual's success in the workplace. Traditional academic qualifications and skills in the form of hard currencies (Tomlinson, 2012) are no longer seen to be enough, as graduates are now expected to show their passion and dedication to work.

There is growing pressure on graduates to show various personal qualities, too, such as being agile, active, independent, creative, a good problem-solver and a team player, adept at risk-taking and decision-making, and a good communicator (Laalo et al., 2019). All these skills and attributes are *soft currencies* (Tomlinson, 2012) that are not based on formal degrees or subject-specific ability (Brown et al., 2004) but, instead, are seen to present a compelling narrative of one’s employability within a competitive labour market. Therefore, the combination of these personal capitals - what you know - combined with social capitals - who you know - are essential to gaining professional opportunities. This analysis highlights that it is vital for students to build connections and networks at university alongside the development of more academic and subject-specific skills.

2.2 Employability and the Skills Agenda

A review of the literature suggests that a significant element of the employability agenda in HE relates to graduate skills. The question posed in this section is; What skills do employers need from graduates? Much of the debate on employability has been from government and employers' perspectives. Indeed, as we will see, employers, industry leaders, and bodies have contributed significantly to this discussion. This section of the chapter will consider some examples of the literature.

2.2.2 Defining Graduate Employability Skills and Attributes

The literature review suggests various terms to describe employability skills and attributes that employers look for in recruits. It is essential to note that the definitions of employability skills are also wide-ranging and often used without clarification. In an article by Tymon (2013, p.842), a helpful review of the literature finds the following terms are often used: “Generic skills'', “Graduate attributes'', “Characteristics'', “Values”, "Competencies”, “Qualities”, and “Professional Skills”. However, various employer reports have offered a synthesis of employer expectations of graduates.

According to Bridgestock (2009), soft skills are character traits and interpersonal skills characterising a person's relationships with others. In the workplace, soft skills are a complement to hard skills, which are defined as technical skills that are learned through education or hands-on experience. Soft skills include communication, time management, adaptability, creativity, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership. These combined skills are referred to as human capital. As noted in the earlier section of this chapter, HCT argues that individual workers have skills and abilities that they can improve or accumulate through training and education.

Table 2 (p.51) has indexed a range of expected workplace skills that graduates should have. These skills have been taken from several leading groups in the UK that represent employers. UCAS (2023b), the body that supports people making post-18 choices, supplied information, advice, and guidance, and named what skills they believed employers found were critical when employing a recently qualified

graduate. They note that employers seek employees with the correct attitudes, aptitudes, and formal qualifications. They also point to resilience, which is coping with setbacks and criticism. Employers, they argue, are looking for graduates who are motivated to overcome obstacles and keep calm under pressure.

As students from a much wider range of educational backgrounds now enter HE issues around *threshold concepts* and *troublesome knowledge* are becoming of increasing importance across all disciplines. The idea of *threshold concepts* was first developed by Meyer & Land (2003; 2004) and are defined as concepts that bind a subject together, being fundamental to ways of thinking and practising in that discipline. They outline that a threshold concept represents a transformed way of understanding, or interpreting, or viewing something without which the learner cannot progress. Thus, when a learner comprehends a threshold concept there is a transformed internal view of the subject matter, subject landscape, or even world view, and the student can move on. However, they highlight that as students encounter unfamiliar and uncomfortable territory, this may prove troublesome to certain learners for a variety of reasons. At this point, these new intellectual challenges may result in a state of liminality, "of being stuck and hovering on the edge of a boundary and not knowing how to cross it" (Meyer & Land, 2004, p.336). The authors put forward that alongside threshold concepts, threshold skills are the key skills that students require to succeed in their chosen degree. They purport that embedding skills into every module is the most authentic way to teach skills in context and provide students with the tools they need to build knowledge more efficiently and independently.

In a more comprehensive academic review, the QAA found 12 graduate skills based on recent literature reviews. The skills categories are provided in Table A8 (see Appendix A, p. 247). Evidence of employability skills development is the responsibility of HE providers and can be seen in the requirements for course accreditation. The QAA - the independent body that checks and advises on standards in UK HE - publishes subject sector benchmark statements. For Interior Design, these are defined in Table A9 (see Appendix A, p.248). Having defined

employability skills and attributes, the next section of the chapter will name the challenges employers have placed on the HE sector about graduate skills.

2.2.3 Employer View/s

A first degree for a prospective employee seeking a graduate-level post was once commonly considered a significant differentiator in the UK labour market. Indeed, the mantra of a so-called good honours degree (2.1 or 1st class) was a requirement for many Graduate-level jobs.[10] However, many commentators consider a *good* degree the minimum for many skilled graduate-level jobs, and graduates must also demonstrate additional employability skills (Yorke, 2006; Tomlinson, 2008; Mason et al., 2009; Thune & Støren, 2015; Hidden, 2016). This chapter reviews some of this literature and scrutinises the debate from a government perspective. Table 2 (p.51) lists the key graduate skills named by employer organisations.

Employers and industry sector representative bodies in the UK have long expressed uneasiness about graduate work readiness. Research that the Pearson Business School conducted found that a fifth of graduates were not workplace-ready by the time they had left university (Baska, 2019). The reason for this mismatch in what employers want and how HEIs are addressing this agenda is summarised in Tomlinson's (2012, p. 413) article on GE in the UK; “The problem has been largely attributable to universities focusing too rigidly on academically oriented provision and pedagogy, and not enough on applied learning and functional skills”. As Archer and Davison (2008) note, industrial leaders have argued that there is a significant mismatch in the skills graduates leave university with versus those employers require. The argument goes that graduates must gain the basic skills needed for successful employment.

Indeed, employers have pressured universities to provide graduates with broader transferable skills. Employers expect graduates to have well-developed skills and attributes to make an immediate contribution to the workplace - so they can *hit the*

[10] At the time of writing, it is interesting that some large national employers are changing their policies. on this and accepting students on graduate training schemes with less than a 2.2.

ground running (CBI, 2021; Brooks & Youngson, 2016). However, there is a range of views on what these skills for the workplace are. The CBI (2019a, p.45) report asserts, "Government, educational institutions, and employers must work together to ensure young people are leaving education prepared for the modern world".

Although the literature shows that employers do not speak with one voice, sector, and industry representative bodies like the CBI express significant concern about the skills deficiency amongst graduates and how this may affect the competition in the British industry. The CBI skills survey (2022, p. 17), which represented over 190,000 employers, said that the key finding from the survey is that "businesses are lacking confidence in their ability to recruit skilled workers to meet their current and future skills needs".

Employers cited in academic studies have consistently complained that they cannot recruit graduates with the skills they need or that those they have recruited do not have the required skills (Shah et al., 2015). However, the Department for Education (DfE) Employer Skills Survey (most recently published in November 2020) found that about 80% of employers believe that the HE graduate leavers they employ have the necessary skills. Employers said there was a lack of experience or maturity (8% in England) or a poor attitude or lack of motivation (6% in England).

Table 2. Key graduate skills named by Employer Organisations

CBI Education and Skills Survey, 2022 Skills: Creating the conditions for investment	● Communication and customer skills ● Teamwork ● Planning and organising skills ● Critical thinking and problem solving ● Digital skills or computer literacy ● Basic literacy and numeracy
Chartered Management Institute, September 2021 Work Ready Graduates: Building employability skills for a hybrid world.	● Self-management and motivation ● Digital communication ● Networking ● Teamworking ● Problem-solving ● Critical thinking
Institute for Student Employers Student, Development Survey	● Self-awareness ● Emotional intelligence

2021, March 2021	● Resilience ● Positive thinking ● Adaptability ● Taking responsibility for their work ● Creativity ● Self-motivation
CIPD. Employer views on skills policy in the UK, London, Chartered Institute of Personal Development, August 2022	● Problem-solving ● Planning and organisation ● Customer handling ● Communication ● Resilience and learning ● Literacy, numeracy, and digital
The World Economic Forum (2023) found the top 10 skills (in order of importance):	● Analytical thinking ● Creative thinking ● Resilience, flexibility, and agility ● Motivation and self-awareness ● Curiosity and lifelong learning ● Technological literacy ● Dependability and attention to detail ● Empathy and active listening ● Leadership and social influence ● Quality control

Universities have come under significant pressure from the government, employers, and industry leaders to ensure that they produce graduates with more than the academic skills associated with subject disciplines (Dearing Report, 1997). Employers have long argued that universities must create the key, core and transferable skills required by industry and employers. Clarke (2018, p. 132) argues that students in HE need to adapt their behaviour about career-building skills and attributes, saying that "individuals evaluate their chance of success in the labour market and how they approach job search".

Many reports have been produced in recent years highlighting that the skills gap makes it harder for employers to find and hire graduates. ISE (2022) found that one in three employers had altered their skill requirements due to the pandemic, with employers increasing their focus on graduates' soft skills. They emphasised the need for graduates with the *right attitudes,* including self-motivation, critical thinking,

and curiosity; they argue that these are all attributes needed to develop advanced technical skills.

However, it also asks if employers have realistic and sensible expectations about what they need from graduates. If businesses are to respond to the changing nature of work with an agile workforce, they need to invest in training in their workplace to continue lifelong learning from an educational setting into a business one (CBI (Confederation of British Industry), 2019a). The essential graduate skills named by Employer Organisations can be seen in Table 2 (p. 51). Graduate skills drawn from an academic literature review by the QAA (2017 & 2019) can be seen in Table A9 (p. 246).

In addition to the changing skills requirements are the workforce dynamics of changing occupations. Different reports have argued that graduates in the 21st Century will switch jobs ten or more times during their lifetime and that lifelong learning will be necessary for the workforce (WEF, 2016). Bakshi et al., (2017) research notes that in these more uncertain times with complicated technological changes in the workplace, there will be significantly more demands for a core group of skills, abilities and knowledge associated with rising occupations, strongly emphasising interpersonal and higher-order cognitive skills. These higher-level skills can be connected to the broader discourse around the knowledge economy. The UK Centre for Employment and Skills (UKCES), in their report The Future of Work: Jobs and Skills in 2030 (UKCES, 2014), noted that AI (Artificial Intelligence) and robots would be one of the main disruptors in the UK job market, affecting graduate-level jobs and skills. The report also highlighted the need for careers that could respond to climate change, alternative geographical centres of excellence and increased workforce casualisation.

The Institute for Global Change (IGC) (Coulter et al., 2022) names two main effects of applying technology to the labour market. Firstly, the development of ‘skill-based technological change' increases the economy's demand for higher-level skills. This is a process in which technology increases the productivity of high-skilled workers,

which raises the need for them compared to workers with lower skills. Secondly, it suggests that technology displaces jobs involving many routine tasks and increases those involving non-routine tasks, which are more challenging. Many non-routine tasks, such as management consultants and care workers, are a feature of jobs at the upper and lower levels of the skills spectrum. This development simultaneously raises demand for both low and high-skills at the expense of those mid-skill jobs characterised by routine tasks.

However, a recent report by Goldman Sachs (2023, April 5th) put forward that “Although the impact of AI on the labour market is likely to be significant, most jobs and industries are only partially exposed to automation and are thus more likely to be complemented rather than substituted by AI”. A study by economist David Autor cited in the report found that 60% of today’s workers are employed in occupations that did not exist in 1940. Autor et al., (2022) highlight that historically this shows that innovation drives job creation, showing that the technology-driven creation of new positions explains more than 85% of employment growth over the last 80 years. The authors are clear that while AI cuts certain types of work, it simultaneously makes people more productive in the work that stays because automation gives us better tools to work with.

A clear challenge was posed to the HE sectors in 1996 when the Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE) declared, “Most British people, most educators, and most students now believe that it is one of HE’s purposes to prepare students well for working life”. (CIHE, 1996, p.15). The HE sector in the UK has responded to this criticism by employers about the graduate's preparedness for the labour market. A Universities UK (UUK) report published in 2015 finds the role universities can play in meeting these employer needs, labour market productivity, investment in research and innovation and skills shortages (UUK, 2015). The senior leaders of universities are also keen to show the value they add to the UK economy. Professor Steve West, Vice-Chancellor of the University of West England, in an article (The Telegraph, 2 July 2016), notes the importance of “skills and mindset to drive growth and productivity:”

> “We need to equip graduates with the right skills and mindset to drive growth and productivity. Our role is to teach not just functional skills but focuses on real-world learning experiences that allow them to be adaptable and enterprising. and ready for work. As universities, we cannot work in isolation. We need to collaborate with businesses, the public sector, and the government to map skills shortages, develop courses, provide internships, and work placement opportunities. Universities need to do more to give students real workplace opportunities".

The QAA details graduate expectations in the Subject Benchmark Statements published for all subject areas. For Art and Design (2019), it defines the academic standards that a graduate can expect. The QAA sets out the principal aim of undergraduate education in art and design. They note that graduates must have the right knowledge and understanding, develop the necessary personal attributes, and apply skills to prepare students for continuing personal development and professional practice. As such, it requires graduates to have developed subject-specific knowledge and understanding, attributes and skills, and more generic graduate skills. As set out in the literature review in Chapter 2 (p.34), the QAA lists these as the threshold, typical and excellent levels of achievement. A QAA Subject Benchmarking Statement (2019, p. 5) tried to capture a range of design skills needed for the design economy in the UK and listed:

> “Abilities such as creative problem-solving, visualisation and the use of design methods. They are important skills in jobs ranging from engineering to electronic manufacturing, many of which are vital as we transition to a more equitable and sustainable economy".

Further research has found that in the UK, only 30% of employers look for graduates with specific degrees when recruiting, and instead, they seek graduates who demonstrate a range of skills and attributes (Pollard et al., 2015). In the classic work by Harvey et al., (1997), UK employers valued generic work skills more than disciplinary-specific ones. Similarly, Mantz Yorke (2012; n.d) argues that employers

tend to see a graduate's academic achievements related to the subject areas they have studied as "necessary but insufficient for them to be recruited into a particular industry or sector".

Indeed, Yorke (2012) argues that in some sectors of the economy, the subject discipline itself may be unimportant and, more significantly, the skills a graduate brings with them. Employers have made many attempts to codify their views of what skills and attributes graduates should have. In an earlier report, the CBI collaborated with the National Union of Students (NUS) and found several "key capabilities" that graduates should have (CBI, 2011, pp. 13–14).

The Skills for Jobs White Paper (2021) clearly shows a fundamental shift to align education and training provisions with employers' needs. This alignment will be achieved by bringing employers into the planning and managing education and training by creating local skills improvement plans. The white paper highlights that it will give employers more opportunities to set the focus of education and training by requiring all post-16 qualifications to conform to employer-led standards.

Journalistic and policy commentators such as Kernohan (2022) argue that there is much rhetoric about higher and technical skills qualifications, local skills improvement plans, and the impacts of upskilling on levelling up. However, more research is needed about local industry, graduate employment, and future skills. Some critics of the reform policies (McVitty, 2022) make a case for universities to support and challenge employers directly. They argue that universities must refine their outreach, recruitment, and onboarding processes to help them access the best talent and students with the best potential, not just those with the social and financial capital to accumulate a wide breadth of Curriculum Vitae (CV) friendly accomplishments. In line with this, reports from the Careers 2032 (AGCAS et al., 2022) employer round table review suggest that many employers would be open to better dialogue on assessing candidates' potential and their prior skills and achievements.

Research by the European Commission (2019) illustrates that problem-solving will become one of the most critical cognitive skills in the future. While workers will typically need to build a moderate level of digital skills, the most robust overall demand from employers will be for non-cognitive skills. Research by McKinsey (2018) suggests there will be less need for manual and fundamental cognitive skills and more of a requirement for technological, social, emotional, and high-order cognitive skills.

According to the WEF (2016; 2023), social skills such as emotional intelligence and persuasion will be in greater demand than technical skills such as equipment operation. Furthermore, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 2017 outlined that people will want to build *catch-all* skills aside from their industry-specific capabilities, such as problem-solving, social, emotional, and digital skills.

Findings from the UK Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) Digital Experience Insights Survey (JISC, 2019) highlighted that 70% of students feel digital skills are essential for their chosen careers, although only 42% think their course prepares them for the digital workplace. The current JISC survey (JISC, 2023) highlights that students want more opportunities throughout the academic year to develop their digital skills, such as basic training, as well as course-specific and workplace skills. The survey reveals that most students (61%) turn to other students for help with online and digital skills, as there is a lack of support for digital skills development from universities. The JISC survey (2019) also supplies insight into staff support of their digital skills development so that they can deliver the learning experience that students expect. When asked who supports them most in using digital technologies in their teaching, 33% responded that their colleagues provide this. Knight (2019) highlights that if staff are well-supported in developing their digital skills for education, students will feel the benefit, thus clearly showing the value of institutional investment in digital continuous professional development (CPD).

The debate around graduate skill sets and the need to develop more generic skills, as expressed by employers, is outlined by Harpe et al., (2009 & 2012), Green et al., (2009) and Santer (2010). These writers set out that employers require more focus on generic skill development to complement disciplinary ability and that this will ensure that graduates are fit *for purpose*. They argue that *fit for purpose* may be defined as graduate qualities, and they describe these generic skills as the ability to work in teams, good oral communication skills, and the requirement to be adaptable and flexible.

Harpe et al., (2012), in their research, found that academic staff gave preference to those graduate attributes most conventional to their discipline, highlighting that universities may need to change the curriculum and how it is taught to incorporate these more generic skills. They suggest a whole-university and more student-centred approach that encourages and measures the development of attributes across a range of extra-curricular activities.

Critics of the skills agenda question its narrowness and the transferability of skills from one domain to another (Bridges, 1993). This critique has led to alternative approaches such as those presented by Holmes (2001, 2013) and others, such as Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011), proposed a *graduate identity* approach, which acknowledges the relational nature of these attributes, as opposed to the "unobservable tool-like entities within the graduate" (Holmes, 2001, p.113). Boden & Nedeva (2010) also advocate that the employability agenda should only be partly satisfied with developing the skills to *get a job*. They argue that working towards employability involves developing reflective skills and attributes over an extended period.

The literature above shows the variety and range of skills and attributes employers and government agencies have identified as valuable to a dynamic UK economy. The overall review suggests some commonalities, like the soft skills needed from graduates. The university sector is also under pressure for not fulfilling expectations about producing graduates who can hit the ground running (CBI, 2022). Over the past three decades, this perspective is often perceived as one of the essential elements in developing government HE policy.

Having explored the skills and attributes commonly needed from graduates entering the labour market, the next section will examine the development of the undergraduate employability discourse in the context of the changing conceptualisation of the contemporary university.

2.3 A Brief History of Employability Policy in HE

To better understand the concept of employability and the skills debate in UK HE, it is essential to set this into a broader HE policy context shaping GE and employment debates. The review shows how British governments of different political persuasions have led to the conceptualisation of employability in skills development.

This section examines other conceptual arguments for the universities' role in the drive for employability. The chapter first outlines some of the critical policy developments around the expansion of UK HE and the key policy developments that have supported this. Then, it investigates in more detail the impact of marketisation and competition on the modern university, according to critics of neoliberalism. It addresses different perspectives of the employability narrative in the UK HE, focusing on the HE institutions' role in the broader economy, specifically in developing GE. This collective narrative will supply a broad overview and a thorough analysis of the key themes, issues, and positions that define the field around what a university is for?

2.3.1 From an Elite to a Mass-HE System in the UK

In the UK, the landscape and context of HEIs have changed significantly, particularly in response to expanded student numbers over the past 40 years. At the heart of this shift in HE provisions, there has, according to Scott (1995), been a move away from an *elite* system (by 4-5% enrolment rate of school leavers in the early to mid-20th century) to a gradual 'massification' of UK (and international) HE is enrolling between 30 and 50% in the 21st Century. This development has had significant implications for the very meaning of the university (Deboick, 2010). Bathmaker (2003) argues that by the early 1990s, a political consensus had developed in the UK that a mass

system that the economy needed to create a supply of knowledge workers to fill high-skilled jobs.

As will be argued in later sections of this chapter, there was a post-war consensus on extending access to universities. However, it was in 1997 that the then UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair, made a policy commitment that half of all 18-30-year-olds go into HE by 2010. Blair famously said, "Our top priority was, is, and always will be education, education, education. To overcome decades of neglect” (Blair, 2001, n.d).

Although the 50% target was not met by 2010, student participation rates in UK HE increased significantly from 3.4% in 1950 to 53.4 % in 2020 (DfE, 2021), resulting in 2.86 million students now studying undergraduate courses at HEIs in the UK (HESA (Higher Education Statistics Agency), 2023). This phenomenon was not confined to the UK. Global secondary and HE engagement was predicted to reach seven billion people by 2010; a tenfold increase since 1970 (Roser & Nagdy, 2018).

There are contesting political views on whether the UK HE sector should support the growth in student enrolments in HE. For example, in April 2022, the Tony Blair Institute for Global Policy made a case for further expanding HE, setting out a recommendation that by 2040, as many as 70% of young people should go into HE, thus potentially increasing economic growth by 5% over the next generation (Weale, 2022). In the Institute’s published paper, Lord Jo Johnson, a Former Minister of State for Universities, cites two critical reasons for the need for HE expansion. Firstly, to address the shortfall of highly skilled individuals to fill vacancies in professional occupations, and secondly, to plan for a future economy where highly skilled jobs in emerging technologies are forecast to grow.

The report referred to economies such as South Korea, Japan, and Canada, which have already boosted their participation rates to between 60% and 70%. The report goes into more detail about the skills and attributes that workers will need to prosper in the future labour market to complement rather than compete with innovative technologies, detailing “aptitudes such as critical thinking, communication, interpersonal skills, alongside technical knowledge” (Coulter et al., 2022, p.4).

However, this argument for widening access to HE (or the massification) appears to be in contrast to the Conservative government's scepticism about the expansion of HE, as they attempt to draw back from the 40-year growth of student numbers by potentially implementing student number controls and minimum eligibility requirements (O'Brien et al., 2019; Levelling Up the United Kingdom: Executive Summary, 2022). In July 2020, the then UK Universities Minister Michelle Donelan argued that social mobility was not about recruiting more students into university courses (Dickinson, 2020) and later went on to condemn universities for "recruiting too many young people onto courses that do nothing to improve their life chances or help with their career goals" (McVitty, 2020, n.d).

This potential shift in policy to reduce participation in HE is a move that Universities UK (UUK) strongly opposes, as highlighted by the President of UUK, Professor Steve West, as he sets out that this move would "hurt those from disadvantaged backgrounds the most" (UUK, 2022, December 20th). Furthermore, The Institute of Global Change (IGC) also challenges the popular notion that "too many go to university," claiming that it is rooted in the view that the UK produces more graduates than helps the economy, and that "public money is wasted on low-value courses" (Coulter et al., 2022, April 21st).

Commentators have argued that a significant and essential underpinning policy direction of successive British governments has been to justify the growth in student numbers entering university, which has emphasised the role of HE in developing higher skills for future employment and meeting the broader economy's needs (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006, Coulter et al., 2022). Indeed, one observer has noted that the expansion of the education systems across the Western world since the end of World War II was based on the premise that more education would increase national economic growth and improve access to jobs for individuals (Livingstone, 2009).[11]

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[11] See the earlier sections of this chapter which discussed the idea that education and training are investments that can add to productivity aligns with the human capital theory, which assumes that human beings can increase their productive capacity through greater education and skills training (Becker, 1975).

The discourse on employability in HE varies across different countries, but in the European Union (EU), employability is quoted as one of the four pillars of the European Employment Strategy. It is central to the policy development of the EU (Gracia, 2009), and work and economic growth is also the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal No.8. While the notion of employability is set up in countries such as the UK and Australia, it is a topic of much interest in other parts of the world (Crossman & Clarke, 2010; Mok & Wu, 2016; Tran, 2015). McCowan (2015) suggests that employability is promoted worldwide with support from supranational agencies and networks like the OECD, the World Bank, and the European Higher Education Area.

2.3.2 Employability as a Core Policy Purpose of UK HE

While exploring the literature highlights broad political agreement on the value of HE dates to its origins in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries (Holmwood, 2011), several factors are now redefining the role of HE. Government policy has been one of the critical drivers for changes in HE and a focus on graduate employment and employability. A vital element of this in the UK was a reduction in funding during the 1980s aligned with the new era of marketisation, which marked a shift in how society viewed the university. The thesis critiques the university's neoliberal perspectives to inform the contemporary narrative around English HE.

Having explored some key writers on the meaning of the university, the following section examines more contemporary policy influences on the purpose of HE. A brief review of a select number of government committee reports on the HE-Employability interface shows the presence of a powerful desire to develop deeper accountability of universities for producing work-ready graduates. In the UK, different governments have proven consistent faith in the role HE can play in meeting economic needs (Tomlinson, 2012). Five key Government-led reports are examined in detail, and reference is made to other HE reviews. It is helpful to draw upon the work of McCaig (2018), who has mapped a series of HE expansion and marketisation phases since the 1960s. I have adapted this model (see Table 3, p.63), which will help distinguish how the other policy developments have sought to pursue a range of objectives to

influence the role of the HE sector. We will see that the UK government recognises that various stakeholders have a role in the employability agenda.

Table 3. Drivers for marketisation in HE (adapted from McCaig's original typology, 2018)

Phase of marketisation and participation rates	Overall objectives	Key Policy Developments	Main Features
Pre-phase 1: Development of HE massification 1960-1980 Participation rate (England) young people 1963: 5%	Systematic growth and sustainable funding	Robbins (1963)	● Introduction of student grants ● Public funded system in HE ● Expansion of HEIs ● University places 'should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability' (The so-called Robbins principle)
Phase 1: Unification of HE 1980-1992 Participation rate 1980: 15%	Improve efficiency, accountability, and human capital	Further and HE Act (1992)	● Promote entrepreneurship among university and polytechnic leaders ● The binary system unites, and HE expanded to ensure competition ● To meet demand for human capital in future knowledge economy
Phase 2: Expansion of HE 1992-2000 Participation rate 1992: 30%	Diversity as a good	The Dearing Report (1997)	● Encouraged diversity and widening participation in HE ● A new landscape of diverse types of institution and modes of HE ● Introduction of partial fees of £1000
Phase 3: Differentiation of HE 2000-2010 Par rate 37% - 42% in 2010	Increased differentiation of the marketplace	HE White Paper (2003) The Leitch Review (2006) HE White Paper (2009)	● HEIs exhorted to differentiate in the marketplace to attract applicant-consumers ● Introduction of variable tuition fees ● Assumed only the most highly desirable universities would explain the highest fee of £3000 ● All universities charged £3000, thus competition of price was absent
Phase 4: Increasing competition in HE 2010-2015 Participation rate in 2015: 46%	Increased competitive differentiation	Browne Review (2010) White Paper Students at the heart of the system (BIS, 2011)	● Recommended no fee cap, but universities charging fees of more than £6000 faced a levy to support widening participation. Introduced a fee cap of £9000 envisaged that universities would charge maximum, only in exceptional cases ● All universities charge £9000; thus, price competence differentiation did not materialise.
Phase 5: Value for money in HE 2015-present Participation rate 2020: 50%	Risk and exit: the competition and correction of the market?	Green Paper (2015) White Paper (2016) Higher Education and Research Act (2017) Auger Review (2019)	● Introduction of TEF to actuate variable fees ● Created a single regulator - the OfS - which manages, via quality oversight and funding incentives, designed to encourage 'exit' for failing providers to be replaced by new alternative providers ● Core principle that the market cannot alone deliver policy outcomes, proposed undergraduate fee cut and attack on so-called low-value education courses.

Pre-Phase 1: Massification of HE

The Robbins Report (1963)

McCaig's (2018) schema presents the period of the 1960s-1980 as the development of so-called "HE massification". One of the first government-sponsored reports to comment on the role of universities and the employability agenda was the Robbins Report, published in 1963, under the title: Higher Education: Report of the Committee on Higher Education. The Robbins Committee, founded at a time of growing economic prosperity in the UK, was set up to review the pattern of full-time HE in Great Britain in the light of national needs and resources and to make recommendations to the Government.

The Report was a landmark document that significantly affected HE in the UK. Since then, it has underpinned many changes in British HE - notably the significant expansion - from an elite to a mass system. The Report found that HE was essential for the country's economic and cultural development and that access should be based on ability rather than social class. It suggested that universities had four main aims.

> "We begin with instruction in skills suitable to play a part in the general division of labour. We put this first, not because we regard it as the most important, but because we think it is sometimes ignited or undervalued". (Robbins, 1963, para 25).

The Report found this target - skills - as the priority. The Report also defined the:

- promotion of the general powers of the mind
- production of cultivated men and women, and
- commission of a common culture and expected standard of citizenship.

When the Robbins Report was published, there were still only 24 universities in the UK, with a further six being the first wave of 'new' universities (Scott, 1995). The main thrust of the Robins Report was that HE was a public good and that free university places should be available to all who were qualified for them by ability and

attainment. The report reveals that only about four in every 100 students entered full-time courses at university. Of this, only 1% of working-class girls and 3% of working-class boys went on to full-time degree-level courses. A review of the Robbins Report by Nicholas Barr (2014: xcii) supplied a valuable summary of the content of thinking about HE:

> “For many [the inequality in access to HE] was an acceptable, indeed inevitable, situation. Many in universities were convinced that they were already scraping the bottom of the barrel - “more means worse,” to quote a notion popular at the time - and that any further expansion would spell disaster".

The report recommended the expansion of student numbers from the 1963 level of 216,000 (9%) to 560,000 (17%) by 1980-81 (Robbins, 1963).

Phase 2: Expansion of HE

The Dearing Report (1997)

Over thirty years after the publication of the Robbins Report, the Dearing Report (Bill, 1998) also advanced the expectation of the role HE can play in the UK economy. Some commentators have argued that the influential Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) sought to break down the division between academic and vocational education, HEIs and industry as a clear turning point for this transformation of the very meaning of the university (Hayes, 2017).

The Dearing Report (under the auspices of the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education, known as the Dearing Committee) was the most extensive HE review since the Robbins Report (1963) was conducted. The Committee, chaired by the then Chancellor of the University of Nottingham, was tasked by the then-Conservative government with examining the possibilities for funding HE. The eventual report, which made over ninety recommendations, was instrumental in developing the policy narrative by the incoming Labour Government that universities

must engage with an employability focus and the role of working with the business sectors. Dearing recommended that HEIs offer skills critical to the future success of graduates in the labour market. The Dearing Report (1997, p.58) states:

> “Higher education has before it the opportunity to take a major part in enabling people, throughout their working lives, to renew old skills and develop new ones. To do so effectively, it will need to be responsive, adaptive, and proactive. To the extent it is, individuals and organisations will make full use of their resources. If there is not the will to respond to the needs of lifelong learners, individuals and employers will look elsewhere to commercial and overseas sources, and employers will develop their capabilities. There are threats as well as opportunities for institutions".

Wilton (2008) commented that, at the time of the report, Dearing had focused on critical skills such as:

- written and spoken communication
- numeracy
- basic computing skills
- teamwork
- learning how to learn.

Dearing highlighted these as crucial employability skills. Dearing required Quality Assurance guidelines for universities to integrate these skills within the curriculum. Graduates from UK universities would, according to Dearing, ensure national competitiveness with other countries, which could justify the expansion of the graduate labour market. The final primary outcome of the Dearing Report was to change the narrative of HE from being a public good towards a private good. The report emphasises HCT ideals about employability skills in a competitive job market - a theme examined earlier in this chapter.

Phase 3: Differentiation of HE

The Leitch Review (2006)

Further evidence of the developing interface between universities and the employability agenda was clear in the UK government-commissioned Leitch Review (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006, p. 3). This review examined the skills needed for the UK economy to thrive in an increasingly global economy. The report argued that the UK needed to increase its skills base to compete with emerging economies like China and India. The report recommended that the UK set a target for having the highest proportion of its population with higher-level skills in the OECD by 2020.

The report recommended that the UK increase the number of people attending university and aim for 40% participation by 2020. The report reinforced the view that HE is expected to contribute to the labour market and national wealth by ensuring universities develop students' skills and attributes for the labour Market. The Review - “Prosperity for all in the global economy - world-class skills’ (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006, p. 3). Leich concluded his report by arguing that universities should work much harder to build relationships with employers and that students leave university with the skills needed by the labour market. In short, an argument was made that HEIs should place more emphasis on STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) subjects, which would help the economy.

Phase 4: Increasing Competition in HE

The Browne Review (2010)

Gordon Brown's Labour Government commissioned an independent commission to review HE, particularly the funding system and student finance, and made recommendations for reform. The PM appointed Lord John Browne of Madingley, a former chief executive of BP and a significant leader in the energy industry. The eventual report, however, was delivered to the new Conservative and Liberal

Democrat Coalition government in 2010. The Browne report was significant in setting a vision for HE as a market. Universities need to become more business-like:

> “HEIs actively compete for well-informed, discerned students on the basis of price and teaching quality, improving provision access the whole sector, within a framework that guarantees minimum standard". (Browne, 2010, p. 8).

One of the review's key recommendations was shifting funding from the government to the student. Students would be supported by a new system of loans funded by the state, replacing the direct financing of courses through block grants. The report argues that only having a total market in HE, where teaching funding was dependent on fees, could ensure that the quality of HE was improved.

The report argued that student choice in an open HE market would drive up the quality of provision. The new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition embraced the Report in 2010 to reduce the fiscal deficit caused by the financial sector crisis. The coalition government sought cuts in all departments of 20 to 30%. The shift to student loans was critical to public sector funding cuts (Holmwood, 2011). The report led to the White Paper, Higher Education: Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011), which is critical to consider in later sections of this chapter.

In summary, for this section, the reports reviewed above show the pressures and changes that the Government has placed on the HE sector to support the development of a workforce with skill sets that align with the need of industry to support economic growth in the UK. The impact of HE on broader society and the economy has changed over time and in several ways (Kromydas, 2017). There has been a shift from the original role to expand human development and gain ability in a knowledge discipline to one where the concept of ‘employability’ is the central purpose of the university. A degree is a currency valued in the labour market (Kromydas, 2017). Having briefly contextualised the current political and social landscape, I will explore phase 5 outlined in McCaig's schema (see Table 3 p.63).

Phase 5: Value for Money in HE

The Augar Review (2019)

Theresa May, then Prime Minister, raised concerns about HE's future viability when she commissioned Sir Philip Augar, a banker, and equities broker, to Chair an Independent Review of post-18 Education and Funding (DfE, 2019). The findings and recommendations were published in May 2019 with a core message around the disparity between the 50% of young people who take part in HE and the 50% who do not. The report recommended that the:

> “Government should intervene to address recruitment to courses with poor graduate employability and poor long-term earnings before 2022-2023. Intervention should take the form of contextualised minimum entry thresholds, a selective numbers cap, or a combination of both". (Augar, 2019, p. 102)

This raises concerns over the implicit threat of some non-vocational courses at less prestigious universities. While universities need to be responsible recruiters, the assumption that the salaries of graduates can measure the ‘value’ of a course is simplistic, raising questions around ‘What is a university for?’ Should young people be supported in going to university if they want to, and does learning have value in and of itself? Another key proposal from the Augar Review was to cut the fee from £9250 to £7500 for undergraduate degrees and consolidation of “low value” courses. Here again, we see a narrative of prioritising STEM subject areas that produce a higher income for graduates and are essential for the UK economy.

The Marketisation of UK HE

A critical set of perspectives on employability in HE suggested that the current pedagogic discourse reflects a broader shift toward what has been called the ‘neoliberal university’ (Mathews et al., 2018) and has undergone a notable change in recent decades. One of the most significant has been the increasing influence of market forces (Holmwood, 2011; Evers & Kneyber, 2015; Ball, 2017; Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017).

This process, known as marketisation, has led to a transformation of the HE sector, affecting various areas of activity. Increasingly in the UK from the 1980s onwards, it is argued that this “market steering” is replacing or supplementing “government steering”. Brown (2011, p. 1) defines marketisation as” the application of the economic theory of the market to the provision of HE”. In addition, as Jongebloed (2003, p. 113) notes, added indications of marketisation in HE “aims at strengthening student choice and liberating markets to increase quality and variety of services offered by HE providers”. However, critics like Callender et al., (2018) argue that a neoliberal regime that offers students many choices — while widely seen as desirable and fair — builds on and extends societal disadvantage and does so in a way that obscures that process to all who take part (see also Dougherty, 2018).

A significant development in the marketisation of HE was replacing teaching grants with tuition fees in English universities. Following the Browne Review in 2010, commissioned by Lord Peter Mandelson, the then Secretary of State for Business, the earlier cap on student fees tripled from £3225 in 2009-10 to £9000 per year in 2012/2013 (£9250 from 2017) for full-time students studying at English universities.

An added and significant announcement was made that HE students who have *bought services* (the provision of education) were to be protected under the Consumer Rights Act (2015), (Mawji, 2016). Neary (2016) suggests that this was a significant step in seeing students as the *consumers* of HE, which positions a university as a *trader* and supplier of educational services, creating contracts between the student and the university. These developments have led some critics to argue that universities can no longer be considered institutions that offer a public good.[12]

Several commentators have argued that these increased fees have put pressure on HEIs to better evidence the *return on investment* that students have made. Indeed, a key part of the Browne Review (2010) was referenced earlier in the chapter. made this expectation clear; “Students will only pay higher charges if there is a proven path to higher earnings" (Browne Report, 2010, p.31).

[12] It is, however, worth noting that the so-called market on HE is a quasi-market in that Universities cannot charge UK students any fee they wish for an undergraduate degree and that charging less than £9250 would imply a course is of a lower quality than that offered by a competitor university.

A tension, then, is that now students pay higher fees, there has been an increased focus on student satisfaction. For some commentators, students see themselves as the “customers” or “consumers” of a degree course, which will give them a competitive advantage in the graduate labour market. This view sees education as a commodity that can be bought and sold like any other product. It has been argued that HE is becoming commodified as the market develops. Biggs & Tang (2011, p. 4) said:

> “As participation rates increase, institutions rely more on student fees. This means that students demand high-profile programs that are well taught and will enhance their employment prospects".

There are other manifestations of marketisation in HE. Parker (2014), for example, argues that HEIs are also becoming more corporate in how they are run and have adopted the managerial approaches often seen in the private sector. Indeed, underpinning this marketisation process has been the introduction of ‘new public management.’ (Hood, 1995) and the global fiscal crisis of the late 2000s, which has produced a fundamental shift in how universities define their institutional existence.

Marketisation has manifested itself in many national policy developments in the UK. It has been shared across many UK public services since the 1980s. A defining theme of marketisation is the competition between institutions to supply a specific service or goods. As already noted, the 1997 Dearing Report was a significant moment when students were, for the first time, identified as *customers* and the rationale was given to expand the number of students in the UK. This fundamental shift in expectations about a changed role for HEIs was captured in a statement made by Jo Johnson, the then Secretary of State for Education, that universities had to respond to the needs of employers and the UK workforce:

> “Higher Education providers need to provide degrees with lasting value to their recipients. This will mean providers being open to involving employers and learned societies representing professional curriculum design. It will also mean teaching students the transferable work readiness and skills that businesses need, including collaborative teamwork and the development of a

> positive work ethic, so that they can contribute more effectively to our effort to boost the productivity of the UK economy". (BIS, 2015, p.12)

This quote from Jo Johnson was to lay the foundations for one of the most significant pieces of legislation to affect HE in England, that being the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) of 2017, which is explored in detail in the next section.

The Higher Education and Research Act (2017)

The British government's introduction of the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA), passed in 2017, is the most significant piece of legislation in HE in the past 15 years to reinforce the marketisation of HE. Underpinning the HERA was the notion of choice for students/consumers, a central requirement of how a free market should function. A key theme in HERA was to create a competitive and diverse HE sector in the UK and to make entry into the HE provider space much easier for alternative and for-profit providers.

The Act promoted the creation of a competitive market and made it easier for new challenger HE providers in England to offer Degree courses. The then Minister of State, Jo Johnson, said these changes were needed; "Introducing more competition and informed choice into HE, we will deliver better outcomes and value for students, employers, and the taxpayers who underwrite the system" (BIS, 2016, p.8). The HERA made it much easier for new and alternative providers to be granted degree-awarding powers to compete with well-established universities. Private providers, argued by the Act, can be more responsive to the changing skills needs of graduate employers. They can also be more level in how they deliver provisions.

In a major step, the HERA also reduced the smallest student number requirements to secure Degree Awarding Powers (DAPs), thus enabling smaller and often private alternative institutions to be classed as HE providers. A paper by Hunt & Bolivar (2019) from the Centre for Global HE shows that there were 813 private providers in operation in the UK. The report notes, however, a degree of volatility in the private HE provider sector, with over 50 per cent ceasing to run over five years. The

resulting institutional diversity of HE has significantly affected the range and scope of subject disciplines now available to students in the UK. The student body has also diversified as more students have entered HE from various social, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds.

A vital feature of any marketplace is the transparency of the offer of a product and how this compares to the competition. This trait has manifested itself in HE. Several policy changes in graduate outcomes and employability have been launched. For example, the Government White Paper Students at the Heart of the System (BIS, 2011) placed a clear emphasis on measuring a series of quantitative outcomes from HEIs via introducing a Key Information Set (KIS). Launched in 2012, this standardised information about undergraduate courses could be compared across all HE institutions in England and Wales. It was a mandatory requirement for universities to publish data on the added value each course supplies students, including *success indicators* like National Student Survey (NSS) results, graduate prospects, and retention data.

A further example of changes that have made HE more accountable for its outcomes was the introduction of the LEO dataset (Longitudinal Education Outcomes) from the Department for Education (DfE), linking up tax, benefits, and student loan data.[13] This policy development allowed the use of the data to inform education policy and assess the performance of post-15 education institutions for the first time in the UK, providing insight and evidence on the long term employment outcomes and educational pathways for many individuals.[14] This dataset overlaps to an extent with the Graduate Outcomes annual national survey which has been designed specifically to provide insight into the experiences of higher education graduates. The Graduate Outcomes survey replaced the previous Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE) survey and the Longitudinal Destinations of Leavers from

[13] LEO data enables us to know how much UK graduates of different courses at different universities are earning now, either one, three or five years after graduating. https://wonkhe.com/blogs/a-beginners-guide-to-longitudinal-education-outcomes-leo-data/

[14] LEO data can now show earning breakdowns for courses and institutions in a combined format. For example, it is now possible to compare the earnings of a Mathematics graduate who studied at Oxford University with a graduate who studied Drama at the University of Salford. A key feature of this policy development has been giving prospective students information and data to help them make an informed choice about their path into HE.

Higher Education (LDLHE) survey for the 2017/18 graduate population onwards, with the first release in June 2020. The Graduate Outcomes data for a given academic year are collected from graduates 15 months after the completion of their HE course. Graduate Outcomes and LEO therefore provide different pictures of the graduate population in the UK. The LEO dataset measures graduate outcomes only in terms of whether graduates are in paid employment and, if so, how much they are earning and in what industry. It does not identify the universities with the best or most effective teaching, nor is it a measure of the 'value added' by a university degree. It is based purely on historical data so it cannot tell prospective students at any university or on any course what they will earn in the future.

The Graduate Outcomes survey collects a broader range of information about what graduates are doing and how they feel about it, collecting the activities, perspectives and current status of graduates. While these datasets provide a picture of the pathways of graduates after they leave higher education, for some commentators, this has resulted in a more outcomes-focused, metrics-driven evaluation of HE. As Hewitt (2020, p. 11-15) argues, there was a view by the Government that some HEIs were "gaming the system" and the Graduate Outcomes survey meant that "universities cannot rely on getting graduates into short-term employment to boost their employment statistics".

The employment destinations of university graduates have become an essential measure of their success in education (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017). These employability statistics are being displayed on university websites to attract students, and inevitably, as this employability metric gathers importance, the impact on universities league table rankings. This emphasis continues to amplify employability's focus on universities, increasing the pressure to deliver it. It could be argued that the sector has been driven by an 'audit culture,' where the performance of universities is now scrutinised, quantified, compared, and ranked all in the name of improving quality (Shore, 2008).

Indeed, introducing LEO data as a measure of graduate success has not been without its critics. In 2020, Hewitt (2020) produced a report (Getting on: Graduate Employment and its influence on UK Higher Education) for the Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) and the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS). The report found that the focus on graduate outcomes had fundamentally changed how universities were run. Whilst the report found that a clear focus on

graduate outcomes supported University Careers advisors, there needed to be more clarity about the spirit and appropriateness of LEO. The report said:

> “[The survey] highlights the influence that the availability of LEO data has on the idea of *low-value degrees*. The survey responses show career services do not share this enthusiasm. Instead, they are concerned about the reductive nature of this measure of graduate success, which relies solely on pay". (Hewitt, 2020: p.6)

In response to this narrative on low-value degrees, the UUK (UKK, 2022) has also compiled a list of eight core metrics to find outlier courses considered *low quality*, (UUK: Executive Summary, p. 1). They recommend that universities integrate at least one indicator from each thematic area into degree reviews. The list of core metrics includes the numbers that progress to high-skilled employment, continuation rates, and student satisfaction scores and covers student and graduate views, outcomes, and prospects. Critically inclined commentators, such as Tomlinson et al., (2021), argue that as policy influencers continue to develop how institutions improve their outputs and show their social and economic worth, this continued metrification of HE will further reinforce pressure on universities to focus on outcomes.

One of the HERA's most significant policy initiatives was the introduction of the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), a system for assessing the quality of teaching by universities. The rationale for the TEF, articulated by Joe Johnson, was it provided students with more information about the quality of teaching at different universities and the outcomes based on graduate-level employment or further study. He said universities would now be assessed “on the quality of the student experience, teaching standards and the role of providers in securing good outcomes for graduates” (DfE/OfS/The Rt Hon Jo Johnson, 2017, July 20th).

Finally, the HERA brought about a new regulatory body for HE. The OfS was introduced in April 2018 to become the regulator and competition authority for the English sector with a mandate to stand for the best interests of students and value

for money. The OfS fundamentally changed how HE was to be regulated. In February 2022, the OfS listed outcomes that *enrich [students] lives and careers* as one of four key aims.

The OfS has required, as part of the Conditions for Registration for each HE provider (Condition B3), to introduce minimum thresholds for student progression and graduate outcomes that it would expect HE courses to meet. Indeed, the OfS states that all HE providers must deliver successful outcomes for all students recognised by employers. While the OfS argue that this development is being implemented to find pockets of poor-quality education in England, critics like Callender et al., (2018) and Joyce et al., (2019) argue that further marketing the sector will damage courses essential in widening participation. To avoid sanctions they argue, universities will stop admitting students considered unlikely to progress which will impact students' social mobility.

2.3.3 Critiques of the Market in HE

The earlier sections have outlined a range of policy developments that have significantly influenced the mission and purpose of UK universities over the past 50 years or so. As a response, many universities have adopted the discourse of employability beyond the "pursuit of knowledge for its own sake" (Einstein, 2011, n.d.), as said by commentators in this thesis. Some critics argue that these changes undermine the value and purpose of the university (Moreau & Leathwood, 2006; Saurbier, 2020). This potential transformation of the meaning of the university is set against a neoliberalist backdrop in policy making. Neoliberalism is a widely used term with different definitions.[15] This thesis will explore neoliberalism as a lens to examine the increased emphasis on 'employability' in HE.

As already noted, the introduction of the TEF in 2017, with graduate-level employability and long-term earnings data becoming critical metrics used to judge UK university teaching quality (OfS, 2018, 2021), has undoubtedly affected the rise

[15] See, for example, Boas et al. (2009). Neoliberalism: From New Liberal Philosophy to Anti-Liberal Slogan. Studies in Comparative International Development (SCID), 44(2), 137–161. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12116-009-9040-5).

of the discourse on employability within HE. This development has intensified further in the context of Brexit and future skills needs of the British economy, along with reduced demand for less-skilled workers in the UK since the 1990s and 2000s (Coulter et al., 2022). To remain competitive, the UK economy needs high-quality HE institutions to provide the higher-level technical and non-cognitive skills needed to sustain a future labour market with increasingly sophisticated manufacturing and services industries (Coulter et al., 2022).

The particular focus on the university's role in developing employability is strongly associated with the emergence of the market-driven or pragmatic university (Barnett, 2015). As the cost of taking part in HE has increasingly fallen on individuals, many students, graduates, and their families now see themselves as stakeholders and demand that their increased expectations be met. It is argued that competition, consumerism, and declining state support for HE have pressured individuals to do all they can to be employable in a highly competitive economic market. The result is that employability becomes reduced to the level of the individual when it should be viewed in a broader political and economic context (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017).

According to Brennan et al., (2010), set against a backdrop of mass HE, the result is that there is more diversity and competition among graduates and the types of universities they graduate from. As more people get similar qualifications, it becomes increasingly important for graduates to prove unique qualities to add value to their employability, which may be derived outside of education or formal learning (Bathmaker et al., 2013; McKinsey and Company, 2018 & 2022).

Today's graduates must be flexible and agile within a job market that has continually shifting requirements (Clarke, 2008). Brown & Hesketh (2004) and McCracken et al., (2015, p.91) highlight the rise of *personal capital* emphasising “the importance of who you are as much as what you know”, which are outlined as a combination of hard currencies (such as work experience and extra-curricular achievements) and soft currencies (such as interpersonal skills, appearance, and accent).

McCowan (2015) has critiqued the promotion of employability in HE as problematic, highlighting its potential to result in a zero-sum game. McCowan argues that universities supply a range of support to students to help them find a job (writing a CV, preparing for a mock interview, performing in interviews). In addition, work placements are essential because they develop skills and supply key contacts in the workplace (McKinsey and Company, 2022; Brooks & Youngson, 2016; Fliers, 2018). However, McCowan (2015) says that these qualities enable an individual to obtain a job over and above someone else. They do not relate to improvements in the productivity of the individual, and hence, they amount to a zero-sum game. McCowan (2015) notes that in the context of care opportunities, they enable those lucky enough to have had that exposure to employability enhancement to gain an advantage over others.

Tomlinson (2012) aligns with this view, saying that UK universities' employability agenda actively disadvantages specific social groupings. Tomlinson’s (2012), sociological research has found that employability initiatives currently adopted by universities favour middle-class students. This is reinforced by the UCAS (Universities and Colleges Admissions Systems) Careers Advice page, where students are encouraged to develop skills through part-time work, sports, performing arts, clubs, societies, and voluntary work (UCAS, 2023a & 2023b).

Moreau et al., (2006) argued that viewing employability in isolation from the social-political context makes issues of inequality invisible and shifts the burden of employment success away from institutions and onto the individual. In a similar vein, the concept of deficit thinking holds students from historically oppressed populations responsible for the challenges and inequalities that they face (Bruton & Robles-Piña, 2009; Haggis, 2006). Overall, these perspectives serve as tools that maintain political systems and, in doing so, fail to place accountability with policies, practices and structures within educational settings (Davis, 2019).

As students transition from HE into a competitive workplace, they are encouraged to add to their skills by undertaking extra-curricular activities to mobilise other experiences into valuable capital. However, there are clear patterns of inequality in

students' experience of such opportunities, as a relative lack of financial resources and social networks are barriers for working-class students to accessing career-relevant internships and work experience (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Joyce et al., 2019; Boyes, 2022; Allen & van der Velden, 2001; Divan et al., 2022; Social Mobility Commission, 2023).

Research from The Sutton Trust (Montacute et al., 2021), Eyles et al., (2022), The IFS (Institute for Fiscal Studies) Deaton Review (Overman et al., 2022), Allen & van der Velden (2001), Divan et al., 2022 and Joyce et al., (2019) all highlight that a university experience is not equally experienced by all social and ethnic groups living in various parts of the UK. They find persistent inequalities of social class and ethnicity through institutional and regional differences and detail the increase of *commuter students* in localised areas, specific to universities and regions. Regarding social class, they highlight deeply entrenched historical differences in how social classes experience and make mobility decisions about HE.

In addition to social class, the research distinguishes clear differences between ethnic group disparities of where a student is from, and this has an impact on student mobility. They find that any policies looking to encourage more working-class commuter students to attend university or move would need to promote cultural change in elite institutions as the onus cannot always be placed on working-class and ethnic-minority students themselves to be the ones who need to adapt.

2.4. Summary

To highlight the relevance of this research and contextualise the current political and social landscape on which contemporary debates around employability are found, the employability narrative in this chapter has been examined from the perspective of HE institutions, government bodies, commentators, and critics. Literature analysis has focused on the role HE institutions play in the broader economy, specifically in developing GE. There is much debate around the validity of universities promoting

employability and how they do so, raising further questions about what and for whom the university is for.

This chapter has explored the contested definition of employability and highlighted that it is subject to varied interpretations in the UK and EU and across HEIs and businesses. It has studied the literature on HCT (Becker, 1975; 1992, 2002; Schultz, 1960; 1971) as this is central to the debate around employability. It has found the inequalities afforded by social and cultural capital and persistent inequalities of class and ethnicity that exist through institutional and regional differences. It has also raised critical issues about future university provision and curriculum development and enhancing employability through work-based learning and work placements. It has also highlighted the dissatisfaction employers continue to report with graduates' disciplinary skill sets.

This chapter has examined how the broader HE policy context has shaped GE and employment debates. The political aim for expansion and widening participation in HE resulted in the massification of HE and a new consumer system, with some critics (Brown et al., 2002 & 2004; Tomlinson, 2007; Holmes, 2013) raising concerns that students can buy positional advantage based on an individual interest where education is seen in terms of private goods. Critics like Holmes (2013) argue that this focus on employability undermines the university's core function of fostering understanding. Holmes argues that the employment and employability narrative is changing students, academics, and policymakers' beliefs of the purposes of HE.

This chapter has illustrated how British governments of different political persuasions have led to the conceptualisation of employability in skills development. It has found metrics in LEO 2017 and TEF 2016 as key to judging UK university teaching quality. It has articulated rising demands for a core group of skills, abilities, and knowledge in the future jobs market and illustrated how the competition and consumerism of HE had placed more pressure on individuals to succeed rather than viewing it in a broader social, political, and economic context.

While employability is a central focus in universities and of rapidly changing government policies, understanding employability from a student perspective is much more nuanced and challenging. Given the lack of research on students' lived experience of employability, it is essential to focus this research on students' feelings of their engagement with the varying strategies and approaches to employability they meet in their journey. This approach leads to the gap in understanding how students experience, interpret, and interact with the rapidly developing employability agenda within HEIs, specifically in Interior Architecture and Design. The thesis next explores the research method.

CHAPTER 3: THE METHODOLOGY

3.0 Introduction

This chapter sets out the research design used for this study. Each stage of the research process is discussed, stating the different strategies adopted, the instruments used for data collection, and the methods of analysis. The limitations of the research methods and the problems identified are integrated throughout and addressed in Chapter 7 (p.201). First, I describe the methodological framework adopted. Second, I present background information on how the research developed. Third, I outline the ethical considerations and approvals process for this research. Fourth, I outline the analytical strategy adopted to analyse the data.

3.1 Overview

This study is guided by a qualitative approach to explore and understand students' experiences and feelings of employability within the art and design curriculum. This type of research has achieved increased recognition since the 1970s in educational and academic research. Bryman (1988) suggested six criteria characterising qualitative research, presented in Figure 3, (p. 84).

When choosing a research strategy, it is essential to set out the philosophical assumptions the researcher acknowledges and the stance the researcher is likely to use (Cresswell, 2007). Regarding this educational research project and its connection to individuals' experience of creative studio learning, my views align with the qualitative, interpretative, social constructionist paradigm typology.[16]

[16] In a Social Constructivism worldview, individuals seek an understanding of the world where they live and work, developing subjective and varied meanings of their experiences. This leads the researcher to look for the complexity of views rather than a narrowed approach, with research relying as much as possible on the participant's view of the situation (Grix, 2001). Creswell (2007) states that these subjective meanings are negotiated socially and historically and formed through interaction with others (social constructivism) and historical and cultural norms.

1. *seeing through the eye of…*
2. *describing the detail of everyday settings*
3. *understanding actions and meanings in their context*
4. *emphasising time and process*
5. *favour open and unstructured research design*
6. *avoid concepts and theories at an early stage.*

Figure 3. Qualitative Research Characteristics as suggested by several scholars (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Bryman, 2008; Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005)

Researchers must recognise how their background shapes their interpretation of interactions as how they *position* themselves in the research acknowledges how their interpretation flows from their personal, cultural, and historical experiences. In doing this, the researcher can start to make sense of the meanings that others have about the world. To interpret the research, I adopt a reflexive, interpretative approach to data collection and analysis, with both the voice of the researcher and participants still being visible throughout.

3.2 Personal Stance, Positionality, and Reflexivity

Savin-Baden & Major (2013) highlight that researchers must recognise and articulate their viewpoint and positionality as this can affect and influence the research in several ways, including how to conduct the study, and the analysis of the findings. The perspectives below illustrate how my viewpoint and experiences have influenced my research interests, beliefs, and personal positions. In doing so, I interpret how these viewpoints influence the research design, analysis, and writing.

I frame and contextualise the research focus by exploring my educational and design practice context, informed by theoretical perspectives on reflexivity and professionalism (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). I position my personal and professional identity at the centre of all actions and choices to challenge

assumptions of the research to achieve trustworthy and reliable research (Maguire, 2004).

As a young design student, I chose a sandwich degree route at a polytechnic with six months of industry work experience. At the time, there were just four courses in England that offered this type of sandwich placement. I was interested in using the placement to try something new so I booked a flight to Milan, Italy, along with two friends. With my portfolio in hand, I spent four weeks walking around different design studios until I eventually secured a job, allowing me to stay in Milan for a further six months. This work experience enabled me to engage with new cultural surroundings while working in a multi-disciplinary environment with professionals involved in the design process from craft to engineering, and this cultural immersion was vital in developing an interdisciplinary and experiential outlook. When I returned to complete my final year of study, I combined the skills from working in a collective and trans-disciplinary studio outside of academia with a creative educational background and it was this that transformed my future design approach and thinking. Reflecting upon the literature on social capital in chapter two, my experiences of working in Milan enabled me to develop professional connections through networking afforded by international mobility.

These early experiences have influenced my approach to collaboration and design pedagogy and they have shaped my ideas around work experience. I firmly believe that working in an environment where knowledge is generated within a context of application and through working with multidisciplinary teams on specific problems in the real world (Gibbons et al., 1994), transformed my approach to design and learning. I approach this research from a '*real-world'* perspective and acknowledge my thoughts, feelings, culture, and personal and social history to inform and come close to the rigour required of good, qualitative research.

My professional identity has developed from that of a student designer to a designer in practice, then to educator and researcher. Wenger (1998) outlines that identity requires negotiation. From my early design education, my personal and professional

identity developed through challenging work and career opportunities. As a 1993 graduate, I experienced anxiety about whether I would successfully gain employment, similar to the concerns of students today. When I was a student, there were very few opportunities on my course to forge connections with industry, and little tutor support for finding a job after graduation. However, there were also fewer contemporaries seeking jobs in the design industry, and fewer students meant less competition for jobs[17]. Interior Design was not as popular as it is today and so there were far fewer courses on offer. I received a maintenance grant and financial support from my parents, and this alongside a part-time job meant that I did not have too many financial worries. After graduation, I was keen to remain close to home (in the north), but I was well aware that most design opportunities were focused around London. So, I decided to be entrepreneurial in my job seeking, and as the country was coming out of a recession, I set myself up as a freelance designer. This proved to be somewhat successful and I worked in this capacity for a year, developing contacts and experience, before gaining at first temporary, and then permanent employment, with an architectural practice.

On reflection, I think that the experience of searching for work in Milan helped me to navigate this difficult time and encouraged me to consider a range of ways to try to develop work-relevant opportunities. I wish that, as an undergraduate, I had been more aware that the transition from a design education into the world of work (with the added challenge of being based in the north) was going to be a challenge, and that as a new graduate, I should be enterprising and go-getting. However, once I started to secure design work, I realised that although my design education gave me a strong foundation of skills, much more learning would take place *on the job*, which I had not been fully expecting.

This period of uncertainty around gaining work and then realising that it was just the *start of something*, has no doubt informed this thesis research question. My professional experiences have involved me working as a designer in a

[17] The Office for National Statistics (https://www.ons.gov.uk/) shows in the period March to May 1992, there were 984,000 people aged 18 to 24 in full-time education. HESA data (https://www.hesa.ac.uk/) shows a total of 2,862,620 students enrolled in 2021/22.

multidisciplinary team, and I believe that this has influenced my approach to collecting data through a collaborative, focus group method. My approach to data analysis is also informed by my creative design background as I viewed thematic analysis as an exploratory and flexible tool that would enable me to see patterns across the data. I visualised these patterns with diagrams to make visual connections between themes, adopting an iterative approach. Importantly, applying a thematic analysis approach encouraged researcher reflexivity. I continued to refine and adjust themes over some time while reflecting critically on personal biases, assumptions and preconceptions. Using a journal also helped me to check against any potential bias as it gave me a space to record my thoughts and feelings (see p.108).

Salzman (2002, p. 104) describes reflexivity as a “constant awareness, assessment, and reassessment by the researcher of the researcher's influences and contributions that may impact subsequent research findings”. Etherington (2000, p.32) views researcher reflexivity as the “capacity of researchers to acknowledge how their experiences and contexts, which may be fluid and changing”. She outlines that if one is aware of how our thoughts, feelings, environment, culture, and personal and social history inform us as we dialogue with participants and transcribe their conversations while writing our representations of the work, then that may come close to the rigour that is required of good, qualitative research. I adopted a reflexive, interpretative approach to data collection and analysis to achieve trustworthy and reliable research (Maguire, 2004).

Etherington (2000) talks of using reflexivity to close the illusionary gap between the research and those being researched and between the knower and what is known. She discusses collaboration and consultancy with participants to encourage a sense of power, involvement, and agency. To ensure both the voices of the researcher and participants were visible throughout the research, I included *Researcher Perceptions* in the early coding process to give a voice to my attitudes and feelings and to try and mitigate any bias and manipulation of the findings. A journal gave me a space to

record my thoughts and feelings, and I used this to help check my potential bias (Mortari, 2015).

The Interior Architecture and Design discipline incorporates various teaching practices, including the university studio,[18] lectures, seminars, workshops, live projects, and events. As a designer turned educator, I strongly advocate for flexible learning environments that provide opportunities to mix educational and professional experiences. These experiences can provide opportunities for the "transfer of learning from the university environment into the workplace environment, and then back into the students' learning" (Mestre, 2002, p.3). Enabling students to collaborate with clients in educational settings can provide critical links between the *real world* (Kolb, 2015) with lessons learnt in the university studio. My cumulative experience as a professional practitioner in the workplace and as an educator has led me to believe that it is the ideas, knowledge, and skills developed at university, combined with exposure to 'real-world' practice, that contribute to graduate employability.

It is this mix of industry, educational and personal experience that underpins my interest in *real-world* education. This, along with the drive to incorporate HSE into the programme at the university where I teach, informs my research interest around how IAD students experience employability when it is embedded in the curriculum.

3.3 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework is a lens through which research is viewed, and concepts are the theoretical underpinnings used to frame research in a particular field (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). Therefore, a clear conceptual framework will anchor my research in the context of known models and established theories used by

[18] In art, design and architecture education, learning is intimately bound up with the studio. In this space, students create with, or under the guidance of, an 'expert' tutor (Schon, 1987). Although no definitive description of the studio prevails, some core features can be identified: the specific use of material space, project-based learning, learning-by-doing and the requirement for students to experience physical, temporal and cultural immersion. These features support the studio's central purpose: developing independent and professional creative practitioners (Orr & Shreeve, 2017). Corazzo, (2019) also talks of the studio as a physical space and a mode of teaching and learning. https://shura.shu.ac.uk/24656/

scholars in this field. It will also offer insights into how my research will build upon earlier contributions to the body of knowledge.

My philosophical assumptions align with the qualitative, interpretative and social constructionist perspectives (Andrews, 2012), where social worlds develop from individuals' interactions with their culture and society. Interpretivism and constructionism aim to understand the world of lived experience from the perspective of those living in it (Andrews, 2012), learning primarily through interpretation, and further developed through discussion. The dialogue within a community stimulates ideas, so within my practice, the university studio is a community for idea exchange and discussion. Constructionism advocates student-centred, discovery learning where students use what they already know to acquire more knowledge. Students learn through participation in project-based learning where they make connections between different ideas and areas of knowledge facilitated by the teacher rather than using lectures or step-by-step guidance (Alesandrini & Larson, 2002).

The terms social constructionism and constructivism are used interchangeably and subsumed under the generic term ‘constructivism,’ particularly by Charmaz (2000, 2006). Constructivism proposes that individuals mentally construct the world of experience through cognitive processes, while social constructionism has a social rather than an individual focus (Young & Colin, 2004).

Berger and Luckmann (1966) are regarded as a considerable influence on social constructionism. They put forward that knowledge is developed through many social processes and interactions and is a shared rather than an individual experience. My experience of art and design teaching practice within a studio culture aligns with social constructionist typologies, as constructionist learning attaches as much meaning to the learning process as it does to securing new knowledge. In other words, the journey is just as important as the destination, and the process is just as important as the outcome. This philosophy is an integral part of the studio culture on the course in which I teach.

The rationale for adopting a Constructivist Grounded Theory approach

Having outlined my philosophical perspective, it is important to choose a research methodology that aligns with this approach. Having explored a number of possible approaches, including Case Study, Phenomenology and Narrative, I opted for Constructivist Grounded Theory (CGT) as it is a research method that focuses on generating new theories through inductive analysis of the data gathered from participants rather than from pre-existing theoretical frameworks (Delve, 2021a). In this qualitative research approach, I, as the researcher, sought to understand a social phenomenon and construct theories through participants' experiences, using an iterative approach to data collection and analysis.

Proposed by Charmaz (2008; 2009) constructivist grounded theory is a later version of the grounded theory developed by sociologists Glaser & Strauss (1976). However, unlike Glaser & Strauss, Charmaz argued that the researcher is not a neutral observer but a co-participant in the study. She sets out that data, research processes, and theories are not discovered but constructed by the researcher and research participants. While Glaser & Strauss discourage exploring literature related to the areas of inquiry before data collection in the earlier theory, Charmaz encourages investigating the research topic before data collection without forcing the knowledge obtained on the research process. This approach therefore, gave more flexibility to my positionality as a designer, educator and researcher.

A constructivist grounded theory approach allowed me to understand research participants' lived experiences and address questions about this complex social phenomenon (in this case, students' experience of employability) and construct theories through participants' experiences, using iterative data collection and analysis. As the data collected was from a number of different institutions, each time data was collected and analysed it informed the basis for further collection and analysis of the ongoing data (Charmaz, 2008; 2009). However, Bryne (2022) highlights that a constructionist epistemology has particular implications concerning thematic analysis, namely that in addition to the recurrence of important information, meaningfulness is highly influential in the development and interpretation of codes

and themes. So while a theme may have presented regularly within the data, by adopting a constructionist epistemology, I acknowledged the importance of recurrence but appreciated meaning and meaningfulness as the central criteria in the coding process (Braun & Clarke, 2012; 2014; 2020).

Charmaz (2008; 2009) outlines that the constructionist version of grounded theory redirects the method from its objectivist, mid-20th-century past and aligns it with 21st-century epistemologies. Chamaz argues that a constructionist approach enables the researcher to construct categories of the data. This approach allows for an interpretative understanding of the studied phenomenon that accounts for context, rather than if the theory appears from the data. Chamaz (2008) suggests that constructionists see participants' views and voices as integral to the analysis and the data presentation rather than prioritising the researcher's views. To interpret the research, I adopted a reflexive, interpretative approach to data collection and analysis, with both the voice of the researcher and participants still visible throughout. Charmaz (2008, p. 397-398) details that a 21st-century social constructionist grounded theory rests on certain principles, notably:

- the research process itself is treated as a social construction;
- research decisions should be examined;
- the methodological and analytical strategies should be improvised throughout the research process;
- data should be collected to discern and document how the research participants construct their lives and worlds.

This approach appealed to me and resonates with my position that the social constructionist researcher believes that knowledge is constructed and not created (Andrews, 2012) and has a social rather than an individual focus (Young & Colin, 2004). As a theory of learning, social constructionism aligns with my learning and teaching experiences in a studio environment where students collaborate to co-create purposeful artefacts with a shared meaning using various tools, media, and contexts.

As learners solve problems and discover the consequences of their actions – through reflecting on past, immediate, and new experiences – ideas and concepts are socially formed, and learners construct their understanding. What this means to me is that learning is thus an active and collaborative process that requires a change in the learner. Moreover, this is a part of the knowledge discovery process; this can lead to developing a teaching-learning framework that empowers student authority and learning (Rob & Rob, 2018).

3.4 A Qualitative Research Approach - Collecting Data

For this thesis study, the multiple sources of data collected included focus groups and document capture, as illustrated in Table 4 (p.92). The focus group data aimed to capture and illustrate the lived experience of students within the undergraduate IAD curriculum, and in a collaborative setting. The data was collected towards the end of semester two as this is often the time of year when many employability activities occur, and students are *in the moment*. Documents were reviewed to compare the different discourses around university employment strategies to give insight into how programmes implemented the varying dimensions of employability into the student journey. The data from the documents supplied excerpts, quotations, official reports, and policy.

Table 4. Data collection methods.

Data Type	Data	Participant/s	Timings
Focus groups	Eight semi-structured, in-depth, and open-ended focus groups, each ranging from two to six students.	Six focus groups with 2nd-year IAD students (19 students in total). Two focus groups with final-year IAD students (5 students in total).	April and May 2021.

Data Type	Data	Participant/s	Timings
Document capture	Reports, articles, and websites from online searches	N/A	December 2021 to June 2022

3.4.1 Student Focus Groups

The focus-group approach was a suitable way to gain a range of collective student views within a limited period and about the research topic (Grix, 2001). This interactive approach enabled participants to contribute and compare their experiences with each other, explore issues of shared importance, and generate innovative ideas around personal employability experiences, which individual interviews would not have allowed.

The literature (Morgan, 1988; Race et al., 1994; Powell & Single, 1996; Gibbs, 1997; Morgand & Kruger, 1997) identifies that a focus group as a method of data collection is relevant for obtaining several different perspectives on the same topic; in participants own words; discovering new information, for instance about a product; gaining information on participants views, attitudes, beliefs, motivations and perceptions; examining participants shared understanding of everyday life; understanding why people think or feel the way they do. Stewart and Shamdasani (2014) highlight benefits such as discovering the collective perspective, involving diverse groups, and synthesising and confirming ideas and concepts.

It is essential to consider the potential weaknesses of focus groups. Barbour and Schostak (2004) talk of hidden agendas, performance within a group setting, the *messiness* of the encounter, issues around getting to the truth, and the tactics and strategies researchers may employ to *unearth* information. Halcomb et al., (2007) show problems around confidentiality, managing group interactions and showing complex verbal and non-verbal responses from participants.

It is reassuring to read Kreuger (1993) highlights the downsides to most data collection methods. Although it is essential to consider potential problems, it is helpful to understand the value that a particular plan may bring. Having considered the challenges of this method of data collection and tested out this way of gathering data through an earlier pilot study, I was confident that this interactive approach allowed an opportunity for participants to compare their experiences with each other, explore issues of shared importance and potentially generate current ideas around employability. The focus group was the method that I used for this study.

The data for analysis and synthesis was collected during a series of semi-structured focus group interviews, which each took around one hour to complete (Kreuger, 1993; Grix, 2001; Stewart & Shamdasani, 2014). The semi-structured approach gave me a broad framework and the flexibility to probe specific issues with follow-up questions. The research involved eight focus groups across six modern post-1992 universities in England, UK (see Table 4, p.92). It involved nineteen second-year and five final-year undergraduate students, all studying in the BA (Bachelor of Arts) Interior Architecture and Design programme (see Table 6, p. 98). This approach generated eleven hours of audio and video output, totalling 51,343 words of transcription data. This work was conducted from May to June 2021, and due to COVID restrictions, all focus groups took place online through the Zoom platform. All participants consented to the meetings being audio and visually recorded, and the audio recording formed the basis of the early transcription work.

There are two main types of online focus groups: synchronous and asynchronous. Synchronous focus groups are similar to traditional face-to-face focus groups as they feature real-time interaction between the moderator and participants but use platforms such as Zoom instead of actual classrooms. A benefit of this is that participants' first reactions and opinions are more spontaneous in real-time interaction, which may give researchers more reliable results. In asynchronous groups, participants login and answer discussion topics independently through discussion groups. Benefits include the ability to overcome global time differences, and they give more time for participants to focus and reflect on responses

(Oringderff, 2004). For this study, participants took part in a synchronous focus group.

There are benefits and limitations to using online focus groups. However, the primary benefits of this study included wider geographical access to students, which would have been more problematic to achieve with face-to-face focus groups. The software also captured real-time discussions, as I downloaded the transcript at the end of the focus group. However, while this saved many hours of transcription, there was a significant quantity of editing to ensure that the transcripts reflected discussions, as the software had difficulty interpreting some accents. However, this saved time and ensured accuracy in the written transcripts. For students, it meant they could join the group in their surroundings as they did not need to attend university.

There are limitations to using online focus groups, as participation can hinge on respondents' computers, internet access and the use of cameras. It can be difficult for the moderator to manage the discussion online, and limitations exist in group dynamics. There can be a lack of nonverbal cues and an absence of vocal cues, making it more difficult for the moderator to notice inflection and intonation, and meanings can be misconstrued. There are also issues around online security and identity, which will be discussed in more detail later. For this study, all participants did have their cameras switched on which meant that I was able to pick up on any visual gestures. It also enabled me to build up rapport with students and allowed them to do so with the other participants.

I used a pre-prepared focus group schedule (Appendix B, Figure B7, p.263) and grouped questions into themes. Flick (2006) asserts that a research study is only as good as the research question, implying that the research question drives the research. It was necessary then that the research questions were clearly stated and included interrogative sentences that highlighted the phenomenon to be studied and showed what I (the researcher) wanted to know about. The organisation of this was based on both literature and personal experiences (Litosseliti, 2007). I arranged questions into 4 themes; opening questions; transitioning questions, key questions;

and closing questions. I purposefully left the questions open, as I was interested in discovering how students framed their responses to their experiences, views, and feelings. I used the schedule to remind me of critical stages and to ensure the approach was consistent for all focus groups.

The research questions for this study were addressed within an archetypal framework of interpretivism and constructionism. A key principle I adopted for this study was to reflect participants' accounts of their attitudes, opinions and experiences as faithfully as possible, while also accounting for the reflexive influence of my interpretations as the researcher. I adopted a manifest and latent approach to coding as I was interested in trying to identify any hidden agendas rather than just the surface meaning (Bloor & Wood, 2006). According to DeSantis & Noel Ugarriza, (2000) and Spencer et al., (2003), themes are usually abstract, difficult to identify and not dependent on quantifiable measures, so a latent approach to coding was able to capture something important about data about the research questions, and represent some level of response pattern or meaning within the data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun & Clarke, (2006) discuss that thematic analysis incorporates both manifest and latent aspects of coding.

I was prepared to use sentence completion tasks, where participants were asked to complete a sentence such as "…the best thing about collaborating is…". however, this was not required. Instead, I used an open-ended approach, such as "Tell me about…". An example of an opening question that I used was: "*Tell me about opportunities you have had to work with clients on live projects".* During the opening questions, I was interested to hear about students' personal experiences of employability through live projects and collaborations. This was followed by further questions that required participants to consider facilitators and barriers to employability, as part of this process: "*What were the benefits of doing this"? "What difficulties came from doing this"?*

An example of a transition question included: “*Tell me what the university can do to offer more support to students as they transition from university into the workplace”* I used this question to frame employability as a transitioning journey.

Examples of key questions included: “*What does “employability” mean to you”?* and *“What do you think employers want from design graduates”?* I used these questions to determine how students conceptualise employability.

Litosseliti (2007) identifies that there are benefits to students taking part in this process as it can help them reflect on their development, and identify skills or attributes for further development. It can also help participants to think about aspects of their career they wish to improve upon.

3.4.2 Coding System

To contextualise the participants' voices, a coding system was adopted to show the university participants were from, their year of study and whether they were searching for a placement at the time of the focus group. Final-year students who had already undertaken a placement or university enterprise scheme were also included in the coding process. (See Table 5, p. 97).

Table 5. Coding system used to participants characteristics.

Code	Finding Feature
Uni.03.	Identifies the university the participant was from. For instance, this participant was from University 03
L5.	Illustrates the year of study. For example, this participant was in their 2nd year
L6.	Illustrates the year of study. For example, this participant was in their final year
P_no	Illustrates if the participant undertook a placement or was searching for one. For example, this participant did not do a placement or was not searching for a placement
P_yes	Illustrates if the participant undertook a placement or was searching for

	one. For instance, this participant did a placement or was searching for a placement
P_yes*	Illustrates that the student had a placement at the end of their 2nd year, but it was cancelled due to COVID-19
P_yes**	Illustrates that the student was undertaking a university scheme, working within the university setting in paid work (not design related) during their final year of study, to develop their skills and experience

Table 6. Coding system to identify the university for each participant

Pseudonym	Year group	Gender	UK International student	University
Della	2nd year	Female	UK	University 01
Steph	2nd year	Female	UK	University 01
Paige	2nd year	Female	UK	University 01
Nora	2nd year	Female	UK	University 01
Heidi	2nd year	Female	UK	University 01
Haley	2nd year	Female	UK	University 01
Frankie	2nd year	Female	International	University 02
Eva	2nd year	Female	UK	University 03
Melina	2nd year	Female	International	University 03
Elaina	2nd year	Female	UK	University 03
Lucia	2nd year	Female	UK	University 03
Elsa	2nd year	Female	UK	University 04
Holly	2nd year	Female	UK	University 04
Esther	2nd year	Female	International	University 05
Norah	2nd year	Female	International	University 05
Clara	2nd year	Female	UK	University 06
Siena	2nd year	Female	UK	University 06
Nina	2nd year	Female	UK	University 06

Michael	2nd year	Male	UK	University 06
Henry	2nd year	Male	UK	University 06
Archie	2nd year	Male	UK	University 06
Adam	Final year	Male	UK	University 06
Julia	Final year	Female	UK	University 06
Kieran	Final year	Male	UK	University 03
Cleo	Final year	Female	UK	University 03
Helena	Final year	Female	UK	University 03

3.4.3 Time, Place, and Participants

I adopted a purposeful sampling approach for this study as I intentionally selected participants based on their characteristics, knowledge and experiences (Creswell, 2014). The eligibility criteria included: participants to be a 2nd year or final-year student, studying interior design, or interior architecture and design; courses to be from a geographical spread across England (see Table 6, p.98). Having determined the eligibility criteria, I compared courses from the UCAS website. Courses for consideration included the same JACS code 21 (W250-W252), course titles including Interior Architecture, Interior Architecture and Design, and Interior Design; courses with UCAS points ranging between 104 and 128 points. From the search on the UCAS website and at the time of writing[19], twenty-four courses offered Interior Architecture, Interior Design, and Interior Architecture and Design with a JACS code of W250. Forty-one courses are offered: Interior Design, Interior Architecture, Interior Architecture, Interior Design, Interior and Spatial Design, Spatial and Interior Design, and Interior Architecture and Spatial Design. However, there were variations to the JACS code for these courses, so they were not included in the selection criteria.

[19] A later search (April 2023) on the UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Services (UCAS) website for full-time undergraduate Interior Design courses commencing September 2023 identified 196 courses from 71 providers. A similar search for Interior Architecture and Design courses brought up eighty-nine courses from thirty-four providers. Many of these courses offer a sandwich option alongside a standard three-year route, which reflects the high number of courses identified.

I also considered the TEF 2019 ranking and the university ranking in The Complete University Guide, alongside my professional contacts, as this potentially gave me access to more universities. It was also important that the universities selected had a strong history of art and design education. These courses are usually Bachelor of Arts (BA) in the post-1992 sector with long-standing vocational and technical education history. They may align more with the broader employability agenda than pre-1992 universities (Stoten, 2018). Given that the sample study was based on six out of twenty-four courses with similar course titles and JACS codes, the results are a quarter of these courses. Participants from these courses therefore should offer a representative sample of student views and experiences of employability within the taught curriculum.

Securing the educator's help.

Getting the educator on board for the research proved to be more of a challenge than I had expected, so this proved to be a lengthy undertaking. I sent out four rounds of emails (to five courses each time) to ensure that I had six courses that gave their first approval to go ahead to the next step (see Appendix B, pp. 249-267). I then adopted the following process:

- Emails were sent to course leaders along with an Educator Participant Information sheet. The information sheet outlined the project and asked them if they would like to take part in the research project, involving a student focus group and an interview with the academic.
- When course leaders gave their consent to proceed, I forwarded on an email for them to share with their student groups through their Blackboard sites. This communication included a poster and a Student Invitation to Participate information sheet (in PDF format - see Appendix B, Figures B2, B3 & B6) detailing the research project. The poster and participant information sheet set out the study's aims and rationale and included the time, date, and location of the focus group. The invitation was open to all level 5 students on each course and recruited using tutor networks. The aim was to recruit a diverse group of participants, consisting of 4-8 students from each course so that they

were representative of the larger student group in terms of age, gender, and ethnicity. Some course leaders suggested that final-year students would be interested in taking part, so these participants were recruited using the same process. For this study, I undertook two separate focus groups at two of the universities, which included focus groups with final-year students.

- Course leaders emailed their students the Invitation to Participate letter and the poster and asked them to email me directly if they were interested in taking part. When students emailed me, I replied to them directly, asking for their consent to take part via a Google form. I also used this form to collect some initial data on each participant, including name, age, year group (2nd or 3rd year), gender, UK or International student, and the university they attended. Due to a limited response rate, I accepted every student who showed an interest in taking part in the focus groups. Litosseliti (2007) highlights that focus groups usually are formed with people who have specific common characteristics and similar levels of understanding of a topic, rather than diverse applicants. This was the case for my focus groups, as students who responded to the call to take part appeared to have some genuine interest in employability.

The use of pseudonyms

All participants' identities have been anonymised using pseudonyms, and this, along with the participant and university characteristics, can be seen in Table 5 (p.97) and Table 6 (p.98). Pseudonyms in qualitative research are essential, given that anonymity and confidentiality are necessary for ethical research practice (Allen, 2016). All participants were informed that pseudonyms would be used to anonymise the data collected, and the pseudonym process was incorporated at the transcription stage.

When choosing a pseudonym, I kept the first letter the same as the participant's name. As well as making it easy for me to remember the participant stories, I think using names makes the data more reflective of ‘real life’ and helps the reader to interpret the narrative. For instance, if a participant named Emily was born in 1993, I

would type E into the search bar of the website BabyNameVoyager to see popular female names from the same decade and select one of those. I then undertook a member-checking exercise, allowing each participant to accept or decline the pseudonyms. Member checking is commonly used in qualitative research to keep validity and is integral to creating trustworthiness in qualitative research (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Stake, 1995).

3.4.4 Document Capture

Although the research is framed around online, face-to-face focus groups, other sources of information within the study sites underpin the research. Document reviews were used, and information was collected from published university documentation, including learning and teaching strategies, curriculum reviews, etc. The data collected was used for contextual purposes to compare and contrast the university and course characteristics from those institutions that took part in the focus group study.

Summary of university and course characteristics

A review of the institutional and IAD course characteristics from the six sample universities that took part in the study reveals similar approaches to employability across institutions, ranging from live briefs and work experience opportunities to staff within programmes having industry experience and employer involvement in programme provisions. This similar approach to supporting the employability agenda and the development of student's skills through a range of means illustrates that universities are responding to the government's employability agenda. A summary of these characteristics is captured in Table 7 (p.103).

Table 7.
Interventions that support the employability agenda and the skills development of students.

	UCAS Tariff points	Staff profiles on university websites	Staff with professional background in industry	Information about Employability or Careers support on course webpage	Live briefs provided as part of the curriculum	Study trips overseas	Students can Present at a design exhibition	Research informed curriculum	Employers are involved with the course delivery	Engaging with Alumni	Studio environment that mimics 'real-world' working conditions	Placement available as a choice
UNIVERSITY 01	120	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Optional	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
UNIVERSITY 02		No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Unknown
UNIVERSITY 03	128	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
UNIVERSITY 04	112	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
UNIVERSITY 05	104-120	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Unknown	No	Yes	Unknown	Yes	Yes
UNIVERSITY 06	112	Limited staff profiles	Yes	No	Yes	Optional	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Common themes that support the employability agenda

Further review of the data captured reveal four common and central themes that support the employability agenda. These themes resonate with discussions in the literature review in Chapter 2 (p.34), outlining the UK government's emphasis on the types of skills and attributes employers value.

Table 8:

Summary of Analysis: Common themes that support the employability agenda

Theme	University ID
(i) Live Project Briefs	Uni 01, Uni 02, Uni 03, Uni 04, Uni 05, Uni 06.
(ii) Work experience + work placements	Uni 01, Uni 03, Uni 04, Uni 05, Uni 06
(iii) Staff as a practitioner with industry experience	Uni 01, Uni 02, Uni 03, Uni 04, Uni 05, Uni 06.
(vi) Employer involvement in programme provisions	Uni 01, Uni 02, Uni 03, Uni 04, Uni 05, Uni 06.
(v) Professional Services supporting student employability	Uni 01, Uni 02, Uni 03, Uni 04, Uni 05, Uni 06.

i) Live project Briefs

All the course websites showed live briefs as a central part of studio practice and design pedagogy. There were variations around the terminology used, including live design projects, real-life project briefs, live briefs, and external clients. All courses highlighted opportunities for live briefs in the course overview, and course teams regard it as an integral part of their learning and teaching strategy. Live briefs are also noted in the QAA guidelines that were reported in Chapter 2 (p.34).

ii) Work experience and work placements

A theme appearing from this review is the significant emphasis placed on work experience and placement opportunities. As previously outlined in Chapter 2 (p.34), work placements can help students build academic ability and gain 'real-world' experience. On a placement, students can gain genuine experience of workplace culture and behaviour, with opportunities to apply skills to practise and learn how to build and support professional relationships. The work experience opportunities for students vary by university, but it is part of the 'offer' for five of the six IAD courses. However, the focus group data reveals that the uptake of work placements is exceptionally low at three of the sample universities (Uni 04, 05 and 06), with less than 10% of students undertaking work placements, improving to 25% at university 03 and better still with over 50% of students doing work placements at university 01.

iii) Staff as practitioners with industry experience

All the websites from the sample universities refer positively to tutor ability and industry networks within the discipline, highlighting a core staff team with a range of industry experience, with some continuing to practise in the industry alongside education. Three out of the six universities include staff profiles on the course webpage.

vi) Employer involvement in programme provision

There was a strong emphasis on engaging stakeholders in employability. All courses highlight employer engagement as an essential aspect of course delivery. This takes place in various formats, from guest lectures, client-led briefs, the alumni community, university-organised networking opportunities, mentoring schemes and industry professionals as studio tutors. This includes more significant 'one-off' semester events to weekly timetabled sessions.

v) Professional Services supporting student employability

All six sample universities found central professional services departments with the remit to supply information, advice and guidance for students and graduates by building skills, experience, and contacts to improve students' employability.

3.5 Ethics and Ethical Approval

Research ethics are about the moral values and principles that guide and underpin the research process, and researchers must consider both aspects in a research study. Bogdan and Biklen (1992, p. 49) define ethics in research as the "principles of right and wrong that a particular group accepts".

The university I work at has a dedicated research ethics policy, and all research undergoes ethical scrutiny through the university's ethics review system and is approved by the ethics review board. As part of this process, I referred to the British Educational Research Association guidelines (BERA, 2018). I followed all university procedures to gain participant consent, copies of which can be seen in Appendix B, Figures B1 to B8 (pgs. 249-267). The Ethical Approval Number for this thesis is: ER29505643, which was Approved with Advisory Comments.

3.5.1 Ethical Challenges

The focus group approach enabled participants to discuss, formulate and change their views and make sense of their experiences; there are limitations and implications in using this method. I will now show and expand on the thesis study's practical and technical issues.

3.5.2 Confidentiality, Power, and Interpretation

A particular issue to consider in focus groups is confidentiality (Litosseliti, 2007). In my study, before the start of the focus groups, participants were reminded that they should keep everything said in the focus groups confidential. However, it is difficult to assure participants of this when sharing with others in a focus group. To encourage candour in the focus group, students were assured that no reference to individuals or situations would be found in any reports or publications. Participants were advised in the Participant Information Sheet that pseudonyms would be distributed to the study's participants during transcription to ensure confidentiality.

Issues around assumed power were carefully considered as it is essential that, as a researcher, I am as transparent in my research as possible (Litosseliti, 2007). The

research process involves ethical questions that revolve around issues of power (Litosseliti, 2007). Issues of assumed power also bind the right to withdraw, as participants may have felt that withdrawing from the research would change how the researcher regarded them or reflected on how they may be treated. In this instance, students may have felt they could not withdraw, as doing so may have damaged or affected any future working relationship.

I was very aware of my position as module tutor at my university and I would have been perceived as an external tutor, and therefore potentially someone in a position of power, to students at other universities, raising potential concerns around perceived power and bias. However, I did not directly contact any participants to take part in the study with whom I had a tutor relationship, to avoid any obligation on participants' perceptions that they have to take part or that non-participation would affect them or impact their education in any way. Moreover, the Participant Information Sheet highlighted that if participants knew the researchers refusing to participate would not impact on their relationship with them or the institution. Participation in the study was entirely voluntary and participants were informed on the Information Sheet, the Consent Form and again at the start of the interview, that they may withdraw at any stage during the focus group without the need to provide a reason for this.

Participants were advised that only the researcher would access the audio files, which would be stored on an encrypted drive on the university network, accessible only via password-protected computers; the anonymised typed transcripts have been similarly stored. However, they are used as appendices of evidence for assessment. The two doctoral supervisors will read them, and other staff involved in the module assessment and grade verification will read them. Participants were advised that if any work or images were used in the research, anonymity would be addressed by removing all names, and generic labelling would be used.

3.6.3 Bias and Manipulation

The literature finds that the researcher, moderator, or group facilitator plays a critical role in deciding the outcomes and experiences of the focus group (Gibbs, 1997; Grix, 2001) and highlights the importance of the moderator in understanding the topic, as well as the culture and traditions of the focus group participants. Litosseliti (2007) also says that perceived or actual power differences between the moderators and participants can harm the quality of the focus group discussion. Barbour and Schostak (2011) discuss issues around power structures between interviewer and interviewees within focus groups and how this may problematise discussions as natural ways of 'getting' to the data. They highlight that presumed power, social status, and knowledge of the researcher may be used to manipulate the process.

It was necessary then to show any conflict in the planning stage so that issues arising could be managed appropriately. Given that one programme is at a university where I work and teach, it was essential to find any conflict in the planning stage of the research project so that issues arising could be managed appropriately. I decided to include the theme 'Researcher Perceptions' in the early coding process to give a voice to my attitudes and feelings and mitigate any bias and manipulation of the findings.

3.5.4 Value, Trustworthiness, and Insider / Outsider

Given that I was a tutor to a small selection of the participants, I was aware that they may have made assumptions that I knew issues because I was their tutor and, therefore, treated me as an insider (Tierney, 1994). To counter this, participants were always asked to explain their points of view and issues. This was to ensure that participants were not making the assumptions that as a tutor, I understood their experiences.

The advantage is that I would know that an outsider does not, as Tierney (1994) suggests, that participants are likely to talk freely with an insider. A difficulty, however, is the blurring of boundaries between the researcher and those being researched, resulting in unhelpful bias, subjectivity, and an inability to 'see' other

points of view (Devault, 2004). A further implication is that participants may not have gone into as much detail as they might have done with someone unknown to them, thus reducing the overall quality and validity of the data.

3.5.5 Welfare

The welfare of the participants and the researcher were priorities beyond any scope of the study. It was essential to minimise distress, discomfort, and embarrassment to participants/researchers. I was aware that some participants might have negative experiences around the issues being discussed and may have felt distressed or pressured if they had to share their experiences with others. They may also have felt a sense of failure compared to other students who may have had more positive experiences. This outcome could result in participants feeling angry or let down, and they may sometimes try to blame others who were part of the group.

To avoid this, I highlighted at the outset that the focus group was not about discussing individuals by name but more an opportunity to understand the range of experiences that participants have had. If necessary, I would have directed students to meet in person with the work placements Team or Student Support at their universities and directed them to the safe online community, the ‘Big White Wall.’ This offered participants many opportunities to discuss any issues causing them distress in person or online with trained professionals. Students were also signposted to this service in the Participant Inform Sheet.

3.5.6 Social Position and False Consensus

Potential problems exist around clear and hidden ‘pecking orders’ within any group setting and participants' histories, leading to animosity and conflict, which may have manifested during the focus group process (Barbour & Schostak, 2011). This approach to eliciting real ‘experience’ and ‘views’ is subject to social conventions and is specific to time and place. Participants co-produced an account of themselves and their ideas around their experiences during this process. It may have been subject to consensus and conformity (Barbour & Schostak, 2011) as individual behaviour is subject to group influence.

To alleviate this, I discussed with participants beforehand that there were no right or wrong answers and recommended that they were not expected to reach a consensus (Litosseliti, 2007). Further limitations of group settings are that participants with bold personalities can dominate discussions (Gibbs, 1997) while others remain silent. However, this can be dealt with through firm moderation of the group. For example, dominant participants can be dealt with by acknowledging their opinions and soliciting other opinions. Sentences like “Thank you. What do other people think?” can be helpful. Conversely, it is important to elicit further information from shy participants with comments like “Can you tell me more about that?”, “Help me understand what you mean”, or “Can you give an example?”. In one of the focus groups, there was a dominant participant and I found that this approach helped to bring in other participants' opinions and experiences.

3.5.7 Issues around Generalisation

Due to the open-ended nature of focus groups and the influence of situational factors, it can take time to interpret and analyse the results. This data is text-based and centred on the researcher’s observations and is therefore considered subjective, as it is not based on ‘hard’ data. The data may be considered not verifiable as it has been acquired based on opinions, suggestions, and interpretations. In this type of analysis, the researcher’s feelings, beliefs, and personal understanding of the issues are more important than any statistical analysis of complex data. Given this form of analysis, the researcher must be sensitive to any inherent bias in the data (Smith & Todd, 2009).

However, Firestone (1993) notes that replication in different conditions reinforces generalisability in qualitative investigations since the consistency of results when conditions vary indicates that findings are robust. This study includes data generated from eight focus group studies carried out at six different universities, across a geographical spread. In addition, Hallberg (2013) is clear that stating the philosophical tradition underpinning research determines the kind of generalisability that can be obtained and pursued, and prevents misunderstandings. Having already

set out that an interpretive philosophical assumption underpins this research, the study aimed to understand the world of lived experience from the perspective of those living in it (Andrews, 2012), learning primarily through interpretation and further developing through discussion. Hallberg (2013) determines that by recognising and acknowledging the existence of this other form of generalisation, the qualitative meaning can be balanced out. In addition, Creswell (2014, p.35) talks of "worldviews" as a general philosophical orientation concerning the world where research plays a crucial role, and that the researcher will bring a perspective to their research. In doing this, researchers can try to create a thoughtful and informed set of meanings that people may have about the world in which they exist.

3.5.8 Consent and the Right to Withdraw

During the research planning process, I referred to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) Ethical Guidelines and followed all university ethical processes. Once I was granted ethical approval to go ahead with the research study, I sought approval from student and educator participants. I sent them separate information sheets outlining the aim and rationale of the project, along with crucial information to help them make an informed decision about whether to take part in the research study (see Appendix B, pp. 249-267).

Digital written consent was gained from participants, giving their permission to store and use the data in any future publications/conference presentations. I confirmed to participants that any information that could show the participant, institution, or anybody else mentioned during the interview would be anonymised through pseudonyms during the transcription and scanning process.

When participants agreed to take part, students were asked to sign a STUDENT participant consent form, and educators were requested to sign an EDUCATOR participant consent form. As it was signed remotely, the consent form required an electronic signature. This form was returned by email to me before the focus group or interview date. Participants were advised in The Participant Information Sheet that

they could withdraw without giving reasoning or decide not to answer a particular question.

Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at the start of the focus group or interview. They could retract any statements or their whole involvement up to two weeks after the focus group/interview. I asked them to contact me via the methods in the Participant Information Sheet if they wish to do this.

3.5.9 Dissemination of Information

The university I work at is committed to making its research as widely available as possible. It supports the principles of free access to make publicly funded research outputs available through unrestricted online access. While the data collected has been used to inform the thesis, the results may be given via conferences and publications either during or after the completion of the thesis. I deposited a copy of the research output into Elements,[20] and deposited my work in subject repositories relevant to their discipline (ADMRC - Art, Design & Media Research Centre). The audio files and the transcripts are stored in the Research Store for the duration of the thesis phase – the approximate completion date being October 2024. The audio files will then be removed, and the transcripts and scans will be stored securely for ten years. Image files and scans will be stored securely for ten years.

The research findings will be disseminated in several formats. I plan to feed the research insights into various post-doctoral research networks by way of a peer-reviewed paper and use this as an opportunity to find best employability practices at the academic programme and university academic department level; this may take the form of a collection of discussion papers and recommendations for changes to policy and strategy. I also intend to disseminate the findings through relevant academic and practitioner conferences. I am especially keen to decrease the gap between research and practice, influence teaching practice, and raise awareness of the findings; this may take the form of presenting papers external to the university where I work to share the findings. I aim to disseminate the work to

[20] https://elements.shu.ac.uk

individual participants in the study by providing them with a study overview. This is a positive research practice, and I plan to contact those students involved in the project to give them a summary.

Having set out the research design approach and examined the different strategies utilised for the thesis, including the instruments used for data collection, the methods of analysis, and the ethical considerations and implications for the research, I now outline the analytical strategy adopted to analyse the data.

3.6 Analytical Strategy

The decisive step of the research approach is planning the data analysis strategy. It is essential to consider the approach to categorise and interpret the data. Qualitative research data is usually very dense with information and ideas. At this point, the researcher must go through the data, analyse the meanings, and then extract the parts most relevant to the research questions. I adopted thematic analysis (TA) as a qualitative data analysis approach to find data patterns. First, I outline the complexities of dealing with data before justifying why thematic analysis is a proper analytical strategy for this research. I then explore this process before finding the strengths and limitations of thematic analysis as a data analysis strategy.

3.6.1 The Complexities of Data Analysis

There is extensive literature on collecting and analysing qualitative data across different paradigms and approaches (Creswell, 2013; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013), resulting in diverse meanings attached to data analysis. For example, Le Compte and Schensul (1999) define data analysis as reducing substantial amounts of collected data to make sense of them. Patton (1987) argues that three things occur during analysis: (1) data are organised, (2) data are reduced through summarisation and categorisation, and (3) patterns and themes in the data are shown and linked.

Miles and Hubermann (1994) define analysis as three interconnected pursuit flows. The first element relates to the reduction of data; the second shows the display of data; and finally, the authors discuss the creation of conclusions and verifying

concepts. There is a wide range of approaches to data analysis. Qualitative researchers draw upon different research philosophies to adopt varied approaches to qualitative research - including case studies, grounded theory, ethnography, phenomenology, narrative, action research and collaborative approaches (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

There are also debates about where and when analysis should take place. Le Compte and Schensul (1999), for example, suggest that data analysis should be carried out as data is collected in the *field*, and soon after the data has been collected. Therefore, while the researcher is still in the *field*, and later when the researcher is no longer in the *field*. Fieldwork is described by Savin-Baden and Major (2013) as the process of collecting raw data from natural settings. They highlight that it enables researchers to capture information about how individuals inhabit and experience their social worlds, and that researchers should use fieldwork when they want to collect primary data, get a first-hand view, gain thick descriptions, and understand a particular culture, practice, or setting.

Considering the *field* concerning the research, data was collected in the focus group through audio and video recording and note-taking as it was taking place. At the end of the interview, when I was no longer in the *field*, I went through the notes and found initial themes that were appearing from the data (See Figure 4, p. 115). This approach, however, brings in the question of whether data analysis can never be a *pure* process, as researchers will inevitably bring their thoughts, ideas, and biases to the research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

It is also essential to recognise that such researcher assumptions will be reflected in what counts as data for a specific project and to acknowledge that the researcher is not neutral. To interpret the research, I needed to adopt a reflexive, interpretative approach to data collection and analysis, with both the voice of the researcher and participants still visible throughout. Field notes are helpful here as they allow researchers to record behaviour, events, and surroundings from the research field. They may remind the researcher of certain situations later. I planned in time to make

field notes straight after the focus groups to ensure they were as correct as possible. These first notations were not detailed notes but more akin to reminders to summarise phrases or exciting observations.

From the review of the methodological literature, there are diverse ways of analysing qualitative data. While researchers such as I may feel overwhelmed by the range and variety, there is no specific prescribed way to address the process. However, in all instances of qualitative data research, what is at stake due to a researcher's choices about these issues is the integrity, the study's validity, and the findings' value (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Given the type of data that I am analysing and my already said epistemological position of social constructionism, I shall now justify the use of thematic analysis as a relevant and proper data analysis strategy and give a concise overview of the literature on thematic analysis, precisely the strengths and limitations of this approach.

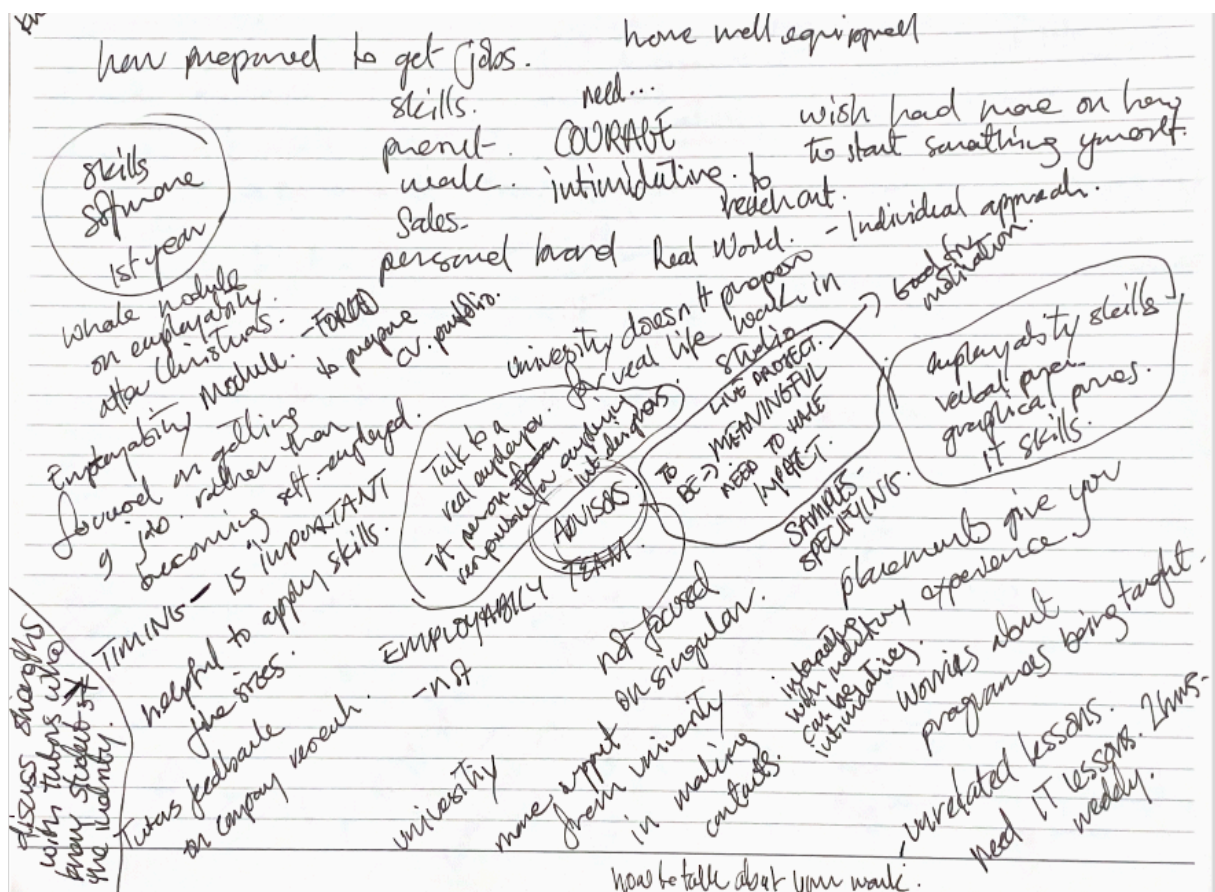


Figure 4. Field notes from the focus group

3.6.2 Thematic Analysis

Fereday and Muir-Cochrane (2006, p.82) describe thematic analysis as "a search for themes that emerge as being important to the description of the phenomenon". It is a method or process, the authors argue, for finding and encoding patterns of meaning in primary qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013); it isolates and organises the research themes that the researcher has found to be central to the event or development that is under study (Daly et al., 1997).

Braun and Clarke (2006) claim a thematic approach to qualitative data analysis should be adopted. Therefore, a thematic approach is fundamental to a wide range of qualitative data analysis, and learning these core skills is prudent for my continued development. The authors (Braun & Clarke, 2006) outline that such an approach comprehensively documents the themes found within a given data set. The core elements they decide on are:

- identification of themes
- analysis
- organising
- describing
- reporting.

This form of organising helped me to generate and construct data across broad topics from participants' subjective experiences rather than discover data. This flexible and accessible approach enabled me to explore relationships between themes that came together to tell an overall story and helped to supply a clear picture of participants' experiences. Braun and Clark (2006) also highlight that this form of analysis may be of particular interest to early career researchers, as it is an approach that can be undertaken at a pace, is simple and is easy to engage with.

The attractiveness of this approach is that it enabled me to examine how different participants articulated perspectives around employability so that I could frame similarities and differences to produce surprising insights (Braun & Clark, 2006). The

themes allowed me to see familiar features in the participants' constructed life-world experiences and examine their feelings of employability when embedded within the curriculum.

I adopted a *bottom-up*, data-driven coding process when interpreting the data and used the data to extract codes and themes for analysis and interpretation. However, as two focus groups took place at the university where I teach and with students I know, it was essential to recognise that my close connection with the project and participants may have affected the process. In addition, this influenced my approach to finding themes based on my attitudes, feelings, and biases concerning the subject matter before the coding process began.

This blurring of boundaries between the researcher and those being researched can potentially result in unhelpful bias, subjectivity, and an inability to *see* other points of view (Devault, 2004). In this situation, Drake (2010: p.85) highlights that "the validity of the insider requires reflexive consideration of the researcher's position". To try to alleviate this, I used a journal to reflect upon the research process and find conflicts around the practical, social, and ethical aspects of the data collection process that I faced.

The concept of trustworthiness and thematic analysis is highlighted as a concern for some authors (Holloway & Todores, 2003; Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in engaging the notion of trustworthiness, introduced a range of other criteria, which include the idea of a) credibility, b) transferability, c) dependability and d) conformability. The authors argue that these added levels of trustworthiness criteria parallel the conventional quantitative assessment criteria of validity and reliability as they are pragmatic choices for researchers concerned about the acceptability and usefulness of their research. In addition, the authors argue that other measures can be applied to enhance the credibility of research, which include:

- engagement that is prolonged
- persistent observation

- the triangulation of data collection
- researcher triangulation.

By engaging with these criteria and techniques when using TA in my analysis, I should keep the integrity and validity of the research. Nowell et al., (2017) provide a helpful set of procedures on how adopting a thematic approach can align with the trustworthiness criteria, as set out by Lincoln and Guba (1985). They define TA as a dynamic approach that has developed over time and involves moving through six key stages. Here, they find processors that will set up a quantitative parallel - the criteria of validity and reliability. I fully engaged with each phase and planned and organised the research process approach to ensure it met this trustworthiness criterion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Lorelli et al., 2017).

Some authors have found significant questions about the validity of thematic analysis as a distinct approach to understanding social reality. They argue that thematic analysis is a supplementary approach that should be used with others to support researchers in analysis (Boyatzis, 1998; Holloway & Todres, 2003). Braun & Clarke (2006) note that insightful findings can be generated by using a rigorous thematic analysis approach, while other authors (Holloway & Todres, 2003) argue that the flexibility of thematic analysis can supply a lack of consistency and coherence in generating themes that have appeared from the research data.

To help mitigate these limitations, I fully engaged with the criteria around trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I hoped to achieve credibility through my prolonged engagement with the research, including data triangulation of sources where I looked to compare people with different viewpoints. Researcher triangulation was undertaken to create a clear audit trail by keeping records of the raw data, field notes, transcripts, and a reflexive Journal helps other researchers systemise, relate, and cross-reference data and ease the reporting of the research process (Halpern, 1983).

Dependability was achieved through a documented process that was logical and traceable. The notion of “thick description” (Geertz, 1973, p.6) was a helpful context here as it characterised the process of paying close attention to contextual detail when seeing and interpreting a social meaning. Therefore, in my research, the *thick descriptions* of experiences can judge the transferability of the research, while a reflexive journal supplies an audit trail of the research process and findings (Lorelli et al., 2017).

I adopted thematic analysis as a qualitative data analysis approach as it is a relevant and reliable qualitative research method that can be changed for the needs of many studies, supplying a rich and detailed yet complex account of data within social constructionist principles. It is theoretically and methodologically flexible and compatible with a social constructionist paradigm, so it fits my epistemological position well (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This flexible and accessible approach enabled me to explore relationships between themes that came together to tell an overall story and helped to provide me with a clear picture of the participants' experiences.

I set out to analyse the data (see Appendix C, p.268-273) as I gathered it as ongoing data analysis helped me understand emerging themes, which informed the ongoing data collection. Reflexive journaling supplied an audit trail of the research process and findings (Lorelli et al., 2017). It helped alleviate concerns around my stance and positionality so that it was not detrimental to the research and encouraged reflexivity throughout the process.

Having engaged with the literature on thematic analysis and considered the merits and demerits of this approach, I am confident that generating and interpreting themes allowed me to understand better and analyse participants' ‘real-world’ employability experiences to illuminate how this may have contributed to their overall experiences. This data analysis approach fits with my epistemology and the data type for analysis. Having justified my use of TA as a data analysis method, I now apply these principles to the data set.

3.6.3 Data Handling and Familiarisation

To begin applying the principles of qualitative data (Appendix C, Table C1, p.268) to a data set, familiarisation of the data is the first part of the six-phase analysis process (Nowell et al., 2017) and transcribing the data is a key part of this familiarisation process (Reismann, 1993). Being both the interviewer and researcher, it is regarded as important to transcribe one's material (Easton et al., 2000), as human interaction is complex. The transcription process requires data reduction as researchers start to choose what features are interactions to transcribe the level of detail (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013).

I saw transcription as an excellent opportunity to develop these essential skills. I used Zoom transcription software to help me organise this aspect of data collection. In the focus group, there were between three and six participants, plus me, which meant there were sometimes several voices in the recordings, creating a large amount of data. At times, the data was complex to hear, and I was aware that all comments needed to be interpreted within the context of the group interaction.

At this point, it was essential to balance usability and accuracy (Bailey, 2008) and recognise how my background and experiences shape my interpretation of interactions. Bailey (2008) asks any researcher how you 'position yourself'. By doing this, the reflexive researcher can consider the personal, historical, and cultural context in which they live. Creswell (2014, p.35) talks of "worldviews" as a general philosophical orientation concerning the world where research plays a crucial role, and that the researcher will bring a perspective to their research. In doing this, researchers can try to create a thoughtful and informed set of meanings that people may have about the world in which they exist.

I decided to edit the audio transcription file in verbatim format to reflect the focus group discussions. Roberts (2004) highlights how the transcription process requires analysis and interpretation, which might reflect the researchers' assumptions about what counts as data for a particular project. I quickly realised this was not straightforward as I had to decide what data features would be important for the

analysis. I started by recording all aspects, including verbal tics (ah, um, like). However, as I went deeper into the process, I realised this level of editing was unnecessary to understand the overall themes being discussed. Therefore, for the data analysis, full verbatim including verbal tics, stuttering, false starts, repeated words etc was not necessary and clean verbatim was carried out.

Having edited the transcription material for all focus groups, I conclude that editing and transcription are iterative. Although prompt to undertake, it holds value for the researcher as it is the first part of getting to know the data. I made myself familiar with the transcript holistically before constructing codes (Ashworth, 2003; Ashworth, 1999) by reading, listening, and reading again and so immersed myself in the data (Savin-Baden & Major (2013), allowing me to get to know my data before breaking it apart and analysing it. Ashworth (2003) notes that this approach encourages detailed attention to the life world of the individual rather than prematurely looking across data to show commonalities.

3.6.4 Generating Initial Codes

Code in the context of qualitative research is a system of symbols used to stand for and label a theme. Codes can come directly from the data (inductive codes), be based on pre-existing ideas or literature (deductive codes) or be a mixture of inductive and deductive codes. This study's coding process was bottom-up, inductive, and data-driven. The literature (Jegede et al., 2020) highlights that coding is not precise and that it is an interpretative act that gives flexible options to the researcher. This is a problematic proposition, as it can be challenging to know if you are following the proper process and interpreting comments and conversations correctly.

It has been argued (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013) that researchers working with inductive methodologies use social constructionist and interpretive epistemologies that emphasise the emergent properties of the researcher working in a social setting where data have not yet been figured out. Thus, a researcher adopting this epistemological stance will argue that they are ‘generating data’ or ‘creating it from

new.' However, it is essential to highlight that the interpretation of the data will differ if done by researchers, as they may have different research intent and philosophical positions.

It will also depend on several factors, such as the research questions, projected outcomes, conceptual framework, the methodology adopted, the type of data collected, and the researcher's subjective experiences and preferences (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). It raises the question of whether qualitative research is ever wholly inductive as the researcher will bring their own experiences, ideas, and biases to the research, so it will take on both an inductive and deductive approach, showing that it is 'purely inductive' (Savin-Baden and Major, 2013). I was aware throughout this process that there were several influences at play here:

- my philosophical approach
- the research questions
- the data collected from the focus groups
- my perceptions and experiences
- biases that influenced my interpretation of the data.

Once I was familiar with the data, I then looked for patterns in meaning across the data, started to identify codes, and then organised the codes into general categories, following the practice advocated by Merriam, (2009). Reading the transcripts again enabled me to start to order codes, find patterns between codes, and see the repetition of codes across several themes. Then, working with *Delve*[21] coding software and referencing my first notes, codes were created in a first cycle using open coding. This approach resulted in the first round of loose and tentative subjects I could develop and evolve later. This process helped me to draw out emerging codes and find lines of further inquiry.

[21] *Delve*, a cloud-based CAQDAS tool for coding in qualitative research. With *Delve*, researchers can analyse transcripts from in-depth interviews and focus groups to find rigorous, human insights quickly. www.delve.tool.com

3.6.5 Categorising Codes

Once familiar with the data, I adopted an inductive thematic analysis method to find patterns in meaning across the data. The thesis research question guided the code development process: *Exploring the lived experience of employability for undergraduate Interior Architecture and Design students.* The literature advises that as researchers accumulate codes, they should then find a way to organise these into broad categories (Merriam, 2009). As I started to find patterns between codes and see a repetition of codes in the data, I started categorising them. Merriam (2009, p.186) sets out that this process should be as "sensitive to the data as possible", be "exhaustive", and "mutually exclusive", and should be "conceptually congruent", with all categories to be of the same conceptual level.

3.6.6 Converting Codes into Themes

I derived codes from the data itself as I used language and terminology from the participants so that codes reflected the perspectives and actions of the participants. This process helped me understand the direct stories, ideas, and meanings that research participants expressed. These codes were then organised into themes so that within each theme, codes were grouped that were similar to each other or about the same topic or general theme.

Alongside this, I also diagramed the data to curate it into a form that would enable me to visually tell the participant's story (see Figures 5, 6 and 7, pgs. 124-126 & Appendix C pp. 268-273). As a design educator, I use drawings to narrate stories about space, so diagrams and drawings are key forms of communication for me. As I identified patterns across the data, using the *Delve* coding software enabled me to rename codes and re-categorise codes to reduce the number of codes, making it easier to interpret the data. I continued using data visualisation techniques as a process-checking system alongside the *Delve* software. This helped me to clarify themes and check that sub-themes were under the correct central theme.

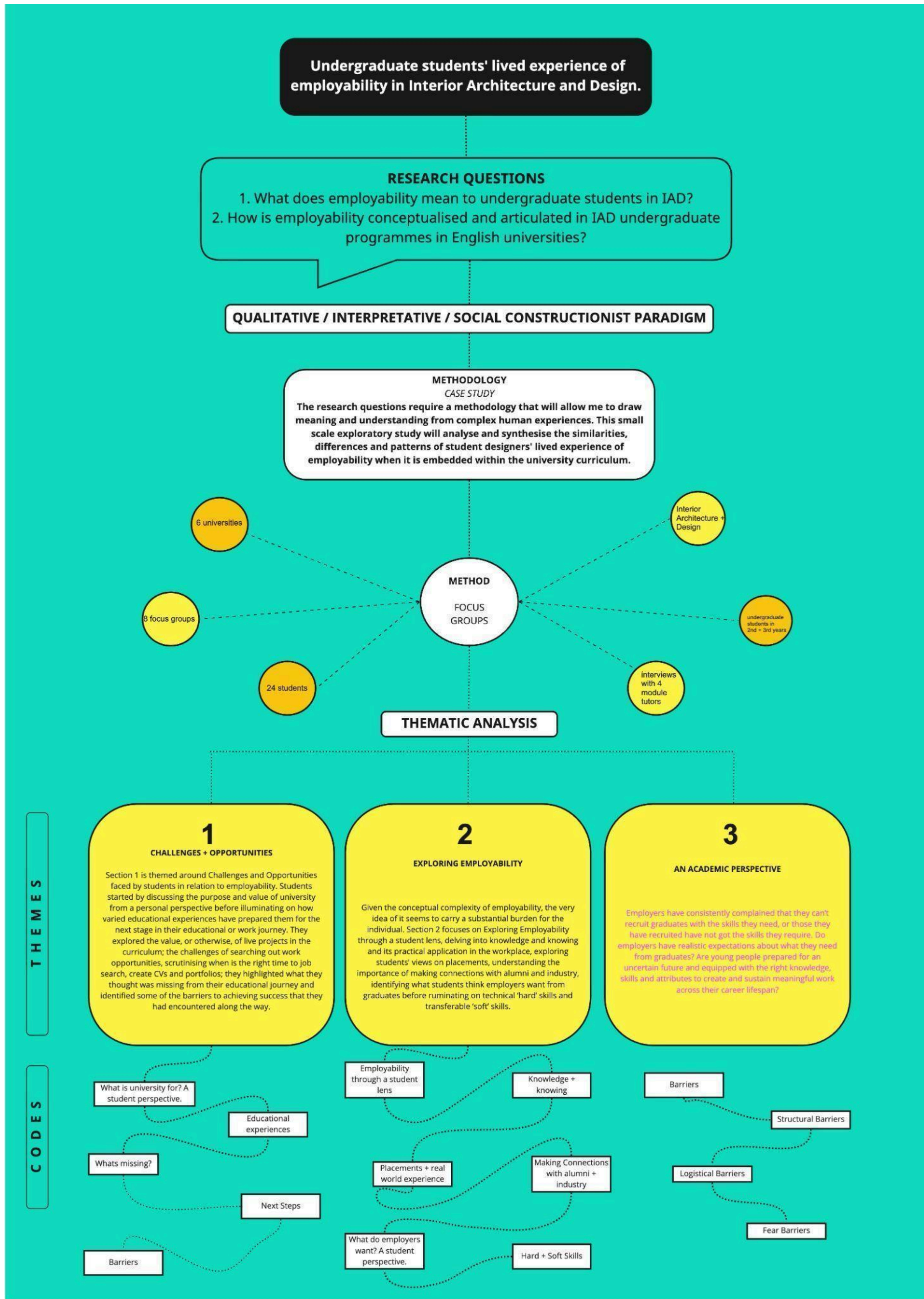


Figure 5. Visualising the data: An overview of the research journey

Figure 6. Visualising the data: Exploring participant excerpts.

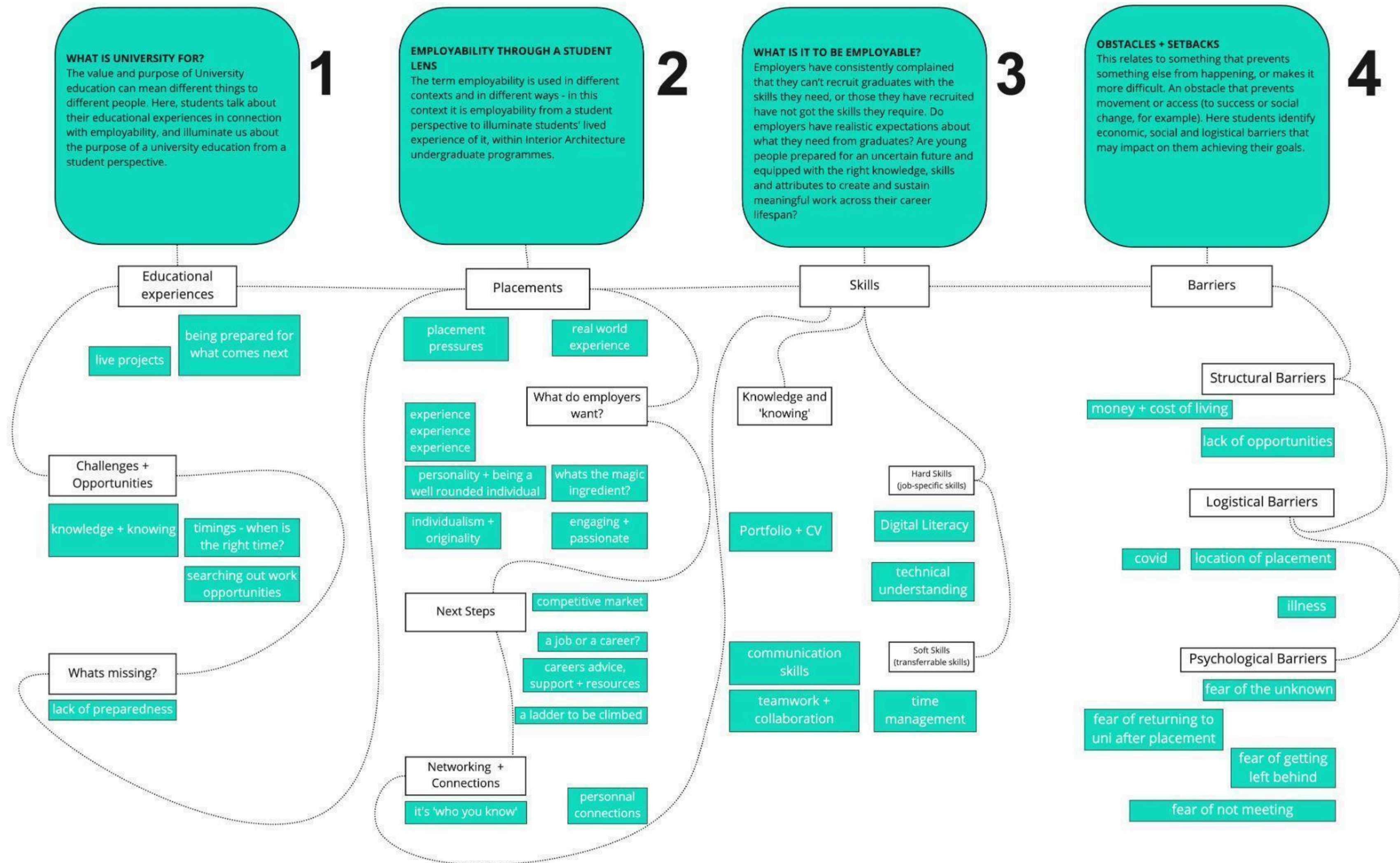


Figure 7. Visualising the data: Connecting themes and codes.

Braun and Clark (2006) suggest that after themes have been devised, there should be a refinement process. I reviewed the coded extracts and found broad primary themes in line with this. I then reviewed these to decide if they accurately stood for the meaning of the code and the data set. To triangulate this as an approach, I went back through the raw data of the transcript to ensure a consistent and correct method that the themes reflected the participant's voice.

3.6.7 Defining Themes

In this phase, Braun and Clark (2006) outline that researchers should write a detailed analysis that names the story or narrative each theme tells, as this will help to figure out critical aspects of the data captured under each theme. They also describe that the names of the themes should be punchy and give an immediate sense of what the theme is about. They set out that the researcher should consider how each theme fits into the overall story of the complete data set and the research questions. At this point, I discarded the theme around *Academic Perspectives* as I felt it did not fully connect with the thesis research question. While this theme gave insight into employability from the perspective of academics involved in module delivery, I wanted the focus of the research to be on students' lived experience of employability, giving greater attention to the student's voice. Therefore this data is not included in the thesis, although it may be used in future research.

From this, a vital principle of this phase is that by the end, the researcher should be clear about the themes, and what they are not. They should be able to describe each theme's content and scope accurately. I set out the renamed themes along with a definition of each theme. For example, *Educational Experiences* was renamed Employability In the Curriculum and included sub-themes that supply a view of the overall theme: 1. Conceptualising Employability, and 2. Lived Experiences of Employability. The sub-themes were then categorised (A Challenging Journey; Engaging with Central University Employability Teams; Formal and Informal Practices and Live Projects).

Each category included different participant responses that addressed or responded to the central theme. Each category focused on one notable specific element concerning the main theme. This is shown in more detail in Table 7 (p.103).

Table 9.
Primary themes were found and sub-themes and categories were explored.

CENTRAL THEMES	SUB THEMES	CATEGORIES	ANALYSIS OF THEMES
01. EMPLOYABILITY IN THE CURRICULUM	1. How do Students Conceptualise Employability? 2. Lived experiences of employability - core curriculum and co-curricular	● An uncertain employability journey ● Central teams ● Formal + informal practices ● Live projects ● work placements	● The term employability is used in different contexts and ways - in this context, is employability from a student's perspective. ● Exploring student perspectives: What does employability mean to students? ● Exploring students 'lived' experience of employability within the curriculum.
02. EMPLOYABILITY BEYOND THE CURRICULUM	1. The Value of Work Placements 2. Barriers to work placements	● COVID-19 ● Structural Barriers ● A hyper-competitive job market ● Fear and Anxiety ● Is a degree enough? ● Timings of work placements	● A barrier is anything that restrains or obstructs progress or access. ● What barriers have students met that have stopped them from doing a placement?
03. WHO - AND - WHAT YOU KNOW.	1. The Value of Capitals - Social Relationships and Networks - Knowledge + Skills	● Subject Specific Skills ● General skills and attitudes ● Networks + Connections ● Social Mobility	● Explores the importance of social networks when looking for a job. ● It is not what you know but who you know. ● Connecting with Employers + Alumni

These primary themes were then reviewed to find if they accurately stood for the meaning of the code and the data set. To triangulate this approach, I went back through the raw data of the transcripts to ensure a consistent and correct method and that the themes reflected the participant's voice. I then checked this alongside the data visualisation graphics. The primary themes were then renamed to be more reflective of the overall theme. A brief description of each theme was added (Table 9, p. 129).

3.6.8 Security, Quality and COVID-19

The focus groups and interviews were conducted through Zoom in line with COVID-19 social distancing requirements. All participants consented to take part virtually. The platform was used to audio and video record the process, and audio discussions were transcribed afterwards using Zoom software. As all data were collected through the video conference platform, it was important that I understood Zoom's Encryption Policy and that participants understood it, too. I took more steps to enhance security in the video conferences and followed university protocols and guidelines for using video conference software for research data collection.

I created private meetings for each session rather than using my Meeting ID, as using a PMI for a research session could have resulted in unwanted visitors joining a discussion when I was collecting data. To ensure privacy, I created a meeting password and a waiting room. Once all participants had entered the meeting, I locked the meeting so that no one else could join. I informed participants that they did not have to share their screens if they were uncomfortable doing so, and I turned off screen-sharing for other participants.

When using the Record function, I recorded it to the computer, promptly transferred it to the University Research Store and at once cut it from my laptop. All active research data is securely stored on the University networked storage system in both original and processed formats. To show drafts, I added a pseudonym identifier and version number to show drafts for each document. The data will be shared with other

researchers once the study is completed. This will be achieved by adding it to the university research data archive and allowing downloads.

Written consent was gained from the participants to store and use images and recorded data as part of the research study and for any future publications/conference presentations. Any information that could be used to find the participant, institution or anybody mentioned during the interview has been anonymised through pseudonyms during the transcription and scanning. Each student owns any intellectual property they created in their studies programme. The student will, therefore, own any images of student work used for the research.

Video conferences resulted in a distinct experience for participants and me, but there were also potential benefits. Reactions enabled participants to react during the focus group by sending thumbs up or clapping, and the in-meeting *chat* allowed participants to send messages to other users within the focus group. These features all have the potential to add to the richness of data generated and get to the heart of the student experience.

3.7 Summary

In this chapter, I present the methodological framework for this research. I have presented background information about how the research developed. I detail the ethical considerations, limitations and approvals process undertaken to give scrutiny to the research. I outlined the analytical strategy adopted to analyse the data. In summary, the study undertaken was qualitative, small-scale, and exploratory. It tried to investigate how students' varied learning experiences may have contributed to their employability experiences. Next, in chapters 4, 5 and 6, I present the findings from the data

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

4.0 Employability in the Curriculum[22]

4.1 Introduction

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 of this thesis report the main findings from the qualitative data collected in focus groups with student participants in six university settings in England. All relevant results related to the thesis research questions will be reported concisely and objectively. The thesis findings are derived from three central themes that came out of the coding process (see Table 9, p.129), and these major themes form the basis of the three chapters. Within each chapter, the central theme is organised into sub-themes. The sub-themes are then organised into categories, and it is here that different participant responses address or respond to one notable specific element about the central theme.

The main theme of Chapter 4 is concerned with *Employability in the Curriculum* and is organised into two sub-themes: (1) Conceptualising Employability and (2) Lived Experiences of Employability. This chapter will reveal participants' key motivations for studying at university. It will explore participants' understanding of employability, showing what it means. It will explore student narratives around their employability experiences inside the curriculum.

Chapter 5 concerns *Employability Beyond the Curriculum,* organised into two sub-themes: (1) The Value of work placements and (2) Barriers to work placements. It will examine the substantial impact of COVID-19 on the cohorts of 2021. It will reveal various structural barriers, including a lack of local opportunities and the cost-of-living crises that have affected participants' ability to secure relevant

[22] The HEA defines embedded employability as the teaching of employability that is included within the learning and teaching policies, processes and practices, particularly within the curriculum of a course. This approach should occur across a student's degree programme from the beginning to the completion. It will ideally involve a range of stakeholders, including students, academics, careers, and services, support staff, the student's union and employers (Bradley et al., 2019).

work-related placements. It will highlight participants' concerns about entering a highly competitive workplace where they worry if a degree is enough to obtain a graduate-level job. It will explore participants' placement pressures and examine the fears and anxieties that affect participants' achieving their goals. It will explore the timing of work placements.

The central theme of Chapter 6, *What - and Who - You Know*, is explored under one sub-theme: (1) The Value of Capitals. This chapter explores the values and behaviours influencing participants' decision-making around jobs and careers, including subject-specific and general people skills. It will also examine the importance of relationships and networks and explore social capital's critical role in getting a job in the arts and creative industries.

The findings in chapters 4, 5 and 6 are central to the three Research Questions.

- **RQ1**: How do students conceptualise employability?
- **RQ2:** How do students experience employability?
- **RQ3**: What do students perceive as the critical employability barriers and facilitators?

In line with Research Objective 02, I undertook eight focus groups across six universities to understand a range of student perspectives about their employability experiences and explore how different institutions address employability in undergraduate IAD programmes. The focus groups took place between May and June 2021, with participants studying Interior Architecture and Design at the undergraduate level. It, therefore, draws upon the experiences and insights of participants significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These participants, therefore, offer a particularly unique insight into the lived experiences during a particularly challenging and unprecedented set of circumstances faced by those studying in HE.

All references to participants in this research use pseudonyms, and this is explored in more detail in the Methodology Chapter 3, part 3.4.3. The participant characteristics can be seen in Table 5 (p.97), and the university characteristics can be seen in Table 6 (p. 98). To contextualise the participants' voices, a coding system was adopted to find the university participants were from, their year of study, and whether they were searching for work placements (see Table 5 on p. 97).

4.2 Conceptualising Employability

Table 10. Summary of Analysis: Conceptualising employability (n=24)

CONCEPTUALISING EMPLOYABILITY	
Sub-theme	**Summary**
1. **A Challenging Journey**	• Just over half of the participants saw employability as part of their journey, and the emphasis on securing a good graduate job was significant. • Several participants used metaphors such as *obstacle, ladder,* and *mountain* to describe their employability journey. • Half the participants needed more agency and felt uncertain about their future careers. • A minority of students felt in control of their future careers and saw it as part of their lifelong professional development. • Some participants wanted to see more of a connection between their education and industry as they spoke about knowledge gaps.

This section of the chapter starts by exploring student perspectives on employability, as it was suggested in the literature review that the student voice on employability and what it means to them is limited (Tomlinson, 2007, 2008; Higdon, 2016; Higdon et al., 2017). Participants in this study conceptualised employability by revealing what it meant to them, their motivations to study at the HE level and their apprehensions about what would come afterwards. The detail is illustrated in Table 10 (p.134) and elaborated on in more detail during this chapter. As noted in the literature review, securing a *good* graduate-level job is a crucial reason some students choose to study at university (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017; Clarke, 2018;

Advance HE / HEPI, 2019). The data from the focus groups in the research reported here confirmed these broader findings, as just over half of the participants (n=24) made a clear connection between university and employability, as they saw university as part of a journey to the end goal of securing a 'good' job, or as a gateway to a better career.

4.2.1 A Challenging Journey

For many participants in this study, the significance of their decision to study at university was an appreciation of the need to prepare themselves for the world of work and thus improve their employment and earning prospects. It was clear that several participants felt significant challenges around the need to succeed at university to secure a good degree classification and gain the skills needed to get a 'good' job (Ingleby, 2015; Stewart & Knowles, 2000). Second-year participants Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no) and Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) spoke candidly about why employability was essential to them. For instance, Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) had worked a range of part-time jobs since she was young, and she did not want to fall into the trap that some of her friends had done:

> "Some people come out of uni and say, 'Oh, this is just my in-between job before doing what I want to do,' but they just stay there. I was in the garden centre at home, and I saw someone who did marketing [at uni]...and they were still just working in the garden centre after uni, and so it shows the importance of getting some employability skills to help you get to where you want to go".

Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no) and Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) knew people who had been to university and returned home after completing their courses. These people had been unable to find a job in their chosen career and instead took on jobs in the Catering and Hospitality sectors. These experiences reflect research from The Handshake's Careers 2032 report (AGCAS et al., 2022), which found that most respondents felt that there were fewer job opportunities available for graduates in the creative IAD

sector, with students citing a hyper-competitive job market, which was noted as demoralising and demotivating. It also relates to literature from Ahola and Kivinen (1999) and Tomlinson (2016), who highlight that while HE is still a worthwhile investment, it is also a risky investment that brings added financial pressures alongside the pressure to succeed during and beyond HE.

The findings from the focus group studies suggest that students in a mass HE system have complex responsibilities, family lives, and paid work commitments. This complexity undermines the stereotypical picture of a student drifting through an undergraduate degree and enjoying the university experience. The image from the data reported in this thesis was much more complex, nuanced and challenging to the employability agenda. These findings relate to Tomlinson's (2008) work, who found that students in his study were developing sophisticated understandings of employability and the need to be flexible in their career journeys.

An analysis of the data shows that just over half of these (n=24) participants felt they were on an 'employability journey'. The emphasis on securing jobs appeared to be on many participants' minds. For second-year participants, Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no), Clara (Uni.06. L5. P_no), and Henry (Uni.06. L5. P_no), employability was about "getting a job". The following quotations reflect several of the views that were expressed:

> "It's all about jobs, careers, getting different skills, connections, I guess that's my broad sense of it, getting a job and finding some form of work". (Alex, Uni.06. L6. P_no).

> "The main thing I am thinking about a lot now is jobs. Gotta find one of them!" (Julia, Uni.06. L6. P_yes).

> "Achieving goals and getting to the next step…and always trying to move forward". Michael (Uni.06. L5. P_no).

A small number of the participants in the study used metaphors in their reflections as they talked about employability as an *obstacle* to be manoeuvred around; other participants, such as Archie (Uni. 06. L5. P_yes) and Henry (Uni.06. L5. P_no), used words like *ladder* and *mountain*. Employing these terms signifies that employability stands for a series of steps or stages to overcome, leading to a higher or better position. This is reflective of work by Higdon et al., (2017) who in a study of dance students' understanding of employability and their views about their dance futures, identified a key theme in the student data was that of journeying. Students from this study referred to metaphors that related to journeys, travel, routes, roads and paths.

Archie (Uni.06. L5. P_yes) summarised the *ladder* metaphor of employability as "gaining the necessary experience, through education or work, to become more desirable to them [employers]". He thought that the more experience and skills you had, the "higher up the ladder" you progressed. He outlined that after university, "you're in the [real] world, and so it's definitely like a ladder or mountain thing [to climb]". However, he found gaps between what he learned at university (such as developing concepts and ideas in the abstract) and what he thought needed to happen (delivering on a client brief) in the workplace. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) refer to this as the Knowing-Doing-Gap.

This notion of uncertainty and worry about future job prospects were further reiterated by second-year student Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no), who was clear that the employability modules on her course "stressed" her out as she saw "the difference between "what we know so far and what we are expected to know after graduating". She clarified that "looming" over her was the fear that although she is doing well in university, this does not mean that she will do well in the [IAD] industry.

Some participants highlighted a disconnect between knowledge gained at university and its translation and application in the workplace, highlighting gaps between what they know and want to practise. For example, final-year student Cleo (Uni.03. L6. P_no), was anxious about her future and uncertain about her career direction. Cleo said that when she started the course, she "did not know where [she] was going to

end up," and as she neared the end of it, she did not "feel any more certain" about her career direction, adding that she hoped things would "just fall into place".

For some participants, there was an unknown element around how they might access the graduate job market. Melina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) and Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) also questioned if there was a "magic ingredient" to getting a job, as they compared it to an elusive entity that was out of their reach or control. Melina added:

> "You are in uni, and then some kind of magic happens, and then you get a job, so I was thinking, what is the magic I need to get the job?"

The interview data showed that participants felt uncertain about their future careers, with little agency over what would happen after university, believing their futures were decided by fate or chance rather than through careful career planning. In the literature, Rotter (1990, p.489) describes this lack of agency as an "external" rather than an "internal" locus of control. Rotter put forward that those with an external locus of control believe that external forces, like luck, decide their outcomes.

Only a small number of the participants in the study viewed employability as more than "getting a job". Heidi (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) was in the minority when she mentioned that employability had "shifted," as she was focused "towards a career, as opposed to just a job," showing that she was thinking long-term about her professional development. Clara was the only student in all the focus groups who likened employability to "having someone take you on, and you have a job for life".

Holly was more wide-ranging in her view as she clarified that employability was based on how "likely" she was to get a job "compared to other people because of the different skills" she had learned at university. Like Heidi, Haley (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) was thinking about the future as she realised she would always need an up-to-date and impressive portfolio, so employability would always be at the forefront of her mind. Both Heidi and Haley appeared to feel in control of their future careers. These reflections suggest that these participants saw their employability journey as an

ongoing project, showing that there would be a need for lifelong professional development throughout an individual's career (Tomlinson, 2012).

Many talked about their time at university as central to their employability journey. Four of the participants, Eva (Uni.03. L5. P_no), Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes), Archie (Uni.06. L5. P_yes), and Lucia (Uni.03. L5. P_yes), saw university as the "next step" in an employability journey. However, many participants were unclear about precisely what these steps were. Lucia and Elaina spoke about their experiences of the education system as a process, which was summarised by Eva (Uni.03. L5. P_no), who supplied a clear rationale for her decision to study at university:

> "I would say [education] is like this lengthy process, and then you try to get a job. You're put on that pathway at school. I would say many people see the university in diverse ways…. that it's just the next thing to do, it is quite a crucial time to work out what you want, what you are going to present to the Labour market, and what you have got to give".

Eva articulated that university had allowed her to think about a suitable career direction and consider how she might achieve this. Eva is showing what Parsons (1989) calls *career maturity* as she is considering the measures she needs to take for these decisions to positively affect the outcome of securing a job and starting her career.

Second-year participants Henry (Uni.06. L5. P_no) and Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) highlighted worries about the financial debt they were increasing. Second-year student Henry did not want to wait until he had finished studying at university before applying for jobs as he thought this would put him under more pressure. He thought a suitable time to start looking was at the end of his second year as he was already feeling pressure to achieve his next goal - getting a job - and he was concerned about leaving university with a "large amount of debt". Elsa added that the very idea of employability "stressed" her out. She went on:

> “University is expensive; the whole course is costly". She added, “I’m doing exactly what I want to do, but the idea of doing all of this and then not getting to do what I want to do in the end, that is quite hard to come to terms with".

These worries around an uncertain career landscape relate to literature from Tomlinson (2017, p. 18), who put forward that students need to develop “psychological capital” which relates to the levels of resilience and adaptability that graduates need to develop in the face of an increasingly challenging labour market, which may include periods of unemployment.

To summarise the issues revealed through the data, it is possible to conclude that participants in this study were concerned about their career prospects after graduation. The participants articulated this phenomenon, in part, as a *journey* that started in School and continued throughout their education into university, with the ultimate quest being their eventual GE.

The journey is challenging, and the participants gave detailed examples of their apprehensions about their preparedness for an increasingly competitive labour market. The data from the student participants in this study suggests that students are increasingly aware of the difficulties they will face securing professional careers as they come to the end of their studies within a highly dynamic and competitive work environment. Many of the participants in this study felt unprepared for this journey and uncertain about their future careers, leading to questions about how universities support learners, which we turn to in the next section of this chapter.

4.3 Lived Experiences of Employability

As noted in the literature review, employers want to see graduates ready for work and equipped with the tools to integrate into the workforce as soon as possible (CBI, 2022). Many universities in the UK have responded to this policy discourse by embedding employability into the curriculum and supplying specialist career support.

Bridgstock (2009) argues that graduates must navigate the world of work proactively and self-manage their career-building process, which is especially important during a rapidly changing labour market and economy. From the focus group study, the participants revealed three key sub-themes about their employability experiences at the university. These are illustrated in Table 11 (p.141). and elaborated on in more detail during this chapter. They include (1) Engaging with Central University Employability Teams (Co-curricular), (2) Formal and Informal Practices (Core Curriculum and Co-Curricular), and (3) Live projects (Core Curriculum).

Table 11. Summary of Analysis: Lived Experiences of Employability: Core Curriculum and Co-Curricular (n=24)

LIVED EXPERIENCES of EMPLOYABILITY	
Sub-themes	**Summary**
1. **Engaging with Central University Employability Teams (co-curriculum)**	● A fifth of participants (N=24) were optimistic about the structured employability support provided by central employability teams. However, a third of participants did not feel that the employability support was well communicated or articulated by their university's employability teams and academic staff. ● Around half of these participants did not feel well supported in preparing to secure a job at the end of their course. This finding highlights poor communication of central employability resources and a lack of engagement by some participants, leading to a lack of parity of experience between participants.
2. **Formal + Informal Practices (curriculum + co-curriculum)**	● Just over a quarter of participants (N=24) from five universities found the range of formal and informal practices helpful in developing their employability. Examples included supplying professional services support delivered through employability teams and embedded modules focused on employability. Participants found all these helpful in preparation for future job interviews. ● A sixth of participants (N=24) felt that having a good relationship with their studio tutor was essential, leading to more informal discussions around developing their portfolios and CVs. However, this approach did not target the whole cohort, raising questions about parity of experience.
3. **Live Projects (curriculum)**	● The study found that meaningful external engagement needed to be improved in the live project opportunities for

	around a fifth of student participants from three universities (N=24). ● Just over a third of the focus group participants (N=24) from four universities had a positive experience of live projects and felt they added to their overall employability. These participants reported developing skills such as teamwork and time management.

The findings highlight that participants have varied career support needs at various stages of their educational journeys, showing that universities need to build a range of relevant services and support around participants' lived experiences and aspirations and consider the diversity in the student body and the changing job market.

4.3.1. Engaging with Central University Employability Teams

Sub-theme one generated from the data involved the organised and structured employability support provided by central university employability teams or career departments. These central university units often supply extensive job searches, interview and assessment preparation, career planning, support, and general advice (Hewitt, 2020). Evidence from the Student Academic Experience Survey 2019 (HEPI/ Advance HE, 2019) suggests that 46% of students in the survey selected career services as the most reasonable use of their tuition fees. Such provisions are sometimes described as co-curricular in that these activities sit alongside the formal curriculum and are developed and delivered by university career services departments.

Some participants in the focus group study felt this type of support was crucial. Heidi (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), and Julia (Uni.06. L6. P_yes) spoke positively about the many "timetabled events" provided by the centralised university employability team, both online and in the design studio. Heidi thought the mock interviews were “constructive,” and she explained that these opportunities had helped her prepare for formal interviews as the employability advisor had given her

many “tips and tricks" to search for work opportunities. It was clear to Heidi that much effort had been put into online resources. The employability team had been “constructive and flexible” and these opportunities, Heidi felt, gave her the confidence to plan and prepare for the future. However, she supported that as a student, you had to be proactive and “reach out for help". Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) discussed how she used the sessions designed for larger cohort support organised by the central professional services employability team at her university:

> “No one else turned up to the session, so I had a 1-1 with two people in the employability team, and I had questions answered, and it was a brilliant conversation".

Steph reported a positive experience from her personalised and individual meeting as it enabled the team to focus on her specific requirements, however, it highlighted a lack of engagement by the larger cohort. This could suggest that there is more of a need for one-to-one general employability support rather than larger cohort delivery. However, the focus group data also suggests that this lack of engagement may be due to poor communication of career resources available and the timeliness and relevance of provision. Many students were not accessing the help available, which will be explored in more detail in Chapter 7, Section 7.3.2 (p.218).

A less favourable set of responses from the student data is reflected in comments by Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), who discussed that she found placement searching “a little bit stressful, especially in the current circumstances [during COVID-19]”. However, she found the regular weekly sessions the centralised employability team offered helpful and went to them when she “needed advice". Steph said that the employability team responded well to her needs, showing that it was “an excellent service". Having had some practice interviews with them, she became more confident about finding a placement. Only one of the participants, Julia (Uni.06. L6. P-Yes*), talked more widely about the range of resources and facilities that her university offered to support alumni employability. She was optimistic that this would be a valuable resource for the future:

> “It's quite good that we've got access to the career stuff ….it used to be for five years, but now I think we always have access to it [lifetime access], and I think that's good".

It was noticeable, however, that just under a third of participants (n=24) from the focus group research felt they needed help engaging with some of the employability opportunities offered at their university. Participants thought this was due to poor communication about the range of employability resources, including how to access them. For example, Elaina's (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) concern was the availability of employability resources and the opportunities to speak to her studio and personal tutors:

> “Maybe I haven't made the most of the fact that I have studio tutors and a personal tutor. I don't think I made the most out of speaking to them. There is help available through uni, but I'm not aware of it; I’ve not found it, and it's a bit hidden. So, I think, there is support; it's just that you must go through all these channels, and that's not made clear".

For Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes), the range of support opportunities was not sufficiently communicated to participants and was a complicated process. Other participants voiced similar concerns about not engaging with the central employability support services at the right time. Final year mature student Alex (Uni.06. L6. P_no) was in the last few weeks of his course and was “trying to figure out” his CV. It was five years since his last job, and with just a few weeks to go until he finished his degree, he was worried as he felt ill-prepared and not ready to enter the workplace. He recognised that he did not “pay enough attention” to his CV development during his second year as he reflected, “[I should have] made more of an effort to have 1-1s with the employability team and even done some of the mock interviews”. This is an interesting point to note, as one would assume that mature students would be better equipped for graduate employability, although this may only be the case if they have had experience of working in the same sector.

Alex's account reflects research from Tomlinson and Holmes (2017), whose studies into how undergraduate students made career decisions, found that final-year students only think about life after university intermittently and in minor depth. Their research also found that many students do not consider career issues until they become aware of impending job application deadlines, often during their final year. However, at this point, it can be difficult for students to contemplate how they can enhance their career prospects by adding *value* to their degree, such as qualification through work experience, extracurricular activities, or volunteering. This will be explored in more detail in the discussion in Chapter 7, Section 7.5.2 (p.235).

Second-year student Lucia (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) also articulated this sense of variable engagement with the centralised support services and found a lack of ownership by the students themselves. She felt tentative about entering the world of work and highlighted that she felt “prepared a little bit” to start searching for work opportunities. She had discussed her CV with a university placement advisor, built her LinkedIn account, “cleansed” her social media and was starting to think about how she might “stand out from the crowd” and “individualise her work". However, Lucia thought it was hard to “actually search for jobs".

When Lucia's peer, Elaina, spoke about a mock interview that she had with the employability team at their university, Lucia said that she did not know this service existed. This finding highlights poor communication of central employability resources and a lack of engagement by some students. Poor communication of university services can lead to a lack of parity and experience among students.

Several other participants also reported a lack of proactive engagement with the employability support team at their university. For example, final-year student Cleo (Uni.06. L6. P_no) said she was unsure whom she had seen from the employability team during the previous two years. However, she remembered speaking about this with students in the year above who told her, “Oh, there will be jobs...if you look for them, they will be there". From her experience, this was the only time she had had

advice about jobs and careers at university. Cleo explained that she was “worried” about the future and wanted to know what she should be doing to prepare.

Some of the participants in the study raised more specific questions about the generic versus specialised support from the central employability and careers teams. Second-year student Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) spoke of a lack of industry focus in her meetings with the employability team. She outlined that she had “a meeting with the careers person, but it was so general, I don't know whether it's enough, and I feel like it needs to be more industry-focused". Haley (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) reflected:

> “I would say that there's been this kind of active and passive involvement with employability… Sometimes, the tutor introduced the employability team during one of our studio lectures and said, ‘You must listen to this’... So that was passive because we're forced to listen, which was fine and especially useful, and then we've had to seek things out as the girls have said. However, I'd say that the only time that we've had any kind of active tutor engagement is only if we've just been in the studio".

When Haley discussed tutor input, she spoke positively about activities that required students to be passive in their learning, whilst she was negative about aspects of teaching where students had to be more active. Haley is implying that she is more likely to depend on information from others about career development. This is reiterated by Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), who outlined that at her university, while the support was there, students had to seek it out and proactively ask for help when needed. This finding resonates with Tomlinson’s study (2008), highlighting that students rely on being provided with career information rather than seeking it out themselves.

Several participants found engaging in group sessions provided by centralised employability teams. However, it was notable and concerning that a quarter of the twenty-four participants in this study felt that they needed a more personalised 1-1 approach. Final year student Cleo (Uni.06. L6. P_no) said she did not think there had

been enough “personal advice” on searching for job opportunities. Second-year student Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no) also wanted more 1-1 support in helping her prepare for industry and her future career. She felt insufficient focus was on them “as a singular person, as it [employability sessions] was done mostly in groups".

Four participants raised concerns about the purpose and timeliness of centrally supplied career advice sessions. Second-year student Henry (Uni.06. L5. P_no) was clear that he did not see the relevance at the time of some of the career readiness sessions, highlighting that “sometimes [it] went in one ear and out the other". He also spoke of the “scare factor” of entering the workplace, which heightened towards the end of his 2nd year of study. However, now that employability had become more relevant to him, he was concerned that there were no timetabled events for him to attend or sign up for. He saw this as bad planning on behalf of the university. This will be discussed in more detail in Chapter 7, section 7.5.2 (p.235).

Nina (Uni.06. L5. P_no) added, “I feel we have had a lot of [career readiness sessions], but maybe not at the right time". Another second-year student, Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no), agreed with Henry (Uni.06. L5. P_no) in that she had a “greater sense of urgency” to engage with the employability support available as she approached the end of her degree. She declared, “You have to start thinking about the future".

Henry, Nina, and Holly all exhibited “present-biassed tendencies” rather than a future orientation (O'Donoghue & Rabin, 1999, p.103). When timetabled career events took place, employability seemed too distant a concept for them. For instance, they may have had an imminent deadline for their project work, making it more difficult for them to think about and plan for the future. Hence, this lack of engagement could have been due to participants focusing on what was happening to them at the time, rather than thinking about the future.

Henry discussed the “scare factor” of the workplace, while Holly outlined a “greater sense of urgency,” pointing out that employability had become more prominent in

their final year of study. Marick and Watkins (2001) refer to this as a ‘trigger’ for action; however, when this ‘trigger’ took place - towards the end of the 2nd year in Henry’s case - the timetabled career readiness content had already been delivered, causing him to feel ill-prepared for what lay ahead and, subsequently, he felt unsupported by his university.

Siena (Uni.06. L5. P_no) touched upon consistency and concluded that if the career readiness sessions had been more regular throughout her course, this might have helped students to “keep on top of it". She voiced that optional sessions were too easy for students to opt out of. Now she, like Henry, Nina, and Holly, wanted more help; she declared, "There’s nothing to sign up for." Julia (Uni.06. L6. P_yes) said that basic employability skills should be delivered in the first and second years, followed by a “more targeted approach” for applying for jobs in the final year. Her view was that in the final year, students needed “more CV-specific things like applying for jobs, finding jobs, like what the actual applications and interview processes are like".

To summarise this section, the data presented here show that some students proactively engaged with and took advantage of the services provided by centralised Employability teams, highlighting the benefits of this engagement in preparing them for interviews, developing CVs, etc. However, some participants recognised they had not proactively engaged with the support, partly because it needed to be better articulated or appear more relevant. Participants were more reliant on being supplied with career information rather than seeking it out themselves, and they found it challenging to think about and plan. Some group activities were considered too generic, with participants articulating a preference for more individual and personalised career support. Several participants felt they needed to be better supported in preparing to secure a job at the end of their course.

The focus group findings show that some participants see universities' guidance and advice as ineffective in enhancing their employability. This study suggests that universities must communicate more effectively where and how students can seek

support to help students take control of their career journeys. The delivery timing is essential as this impacts how students engage with the content. Students also need to be encouraged to take responsibility for engaging with these resources to support their employability skills development. These issues will be explored in more detail in the Discussion and Recommendations in Chapter 7 (p.201).

4.3.2. Formal and Informal Practices.

The second theme to appear from the data relates to the formal and informal employability practices experienced by participants. Alongside the central professional services that supported employability skills development, some participants talked about the support offered within the curriculum. A quarter of the participants in the study (n=24) found that specific modules on their programmes that focused on employability were essential to them and instrumental in developing the employability skills required for the IAD industry (including developing CVs and portfolios, writing cover letters and targeting companies for placements or graduate work). For instance, one participant, Hayley (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), was incredibly positive about a 2nd-year Communication module, which included an employability section with a timetabled week to get feedback on CVs and portfolios. “We saw lots of examples,” said Hayley, and she said this helped her to feel more prepared for the future:

> “I probably wouldn't have felt that employable for specifically designed roles because, like Norah, I've had casual work, but I wouldn't have felt prepared without that module".

Several participants referred to these embedded modules as helping them prepare for future job interviews. For example, Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) was optimistic about a 2nd year integrated module she was studying, which focused on employability, as she felt she could now go confidently into interviews. This module would continue in her final year, allowing her to develop critical skills and explore career opportunities. She highlighted:

> "The module itself is constructive. We've done CVs, we've done practice interviews, and we're currently doing portfolios, and the alumni talks are excellent. We just had one recently that wasn't just interior design focused, it was from people that had come out of the course and had gone into different routes besides interior design, and I think that was interesting as well because it gave lots of people an idea of 'oh I can do this, or I can do that, I don't have to go straight down the route [of interior design]', so I think they're excellent. We have got one tutor specialising in employability, so he's helpful to go to and knows everything".

The findings here show that participants appear more engaged when employability is delivered through consistent and clearly defined modules and curricula and a range of internal and external content. This outcome may partly be because there is little requirement for students to be proactive and search out the information. Instead, they depend on others to supply information (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017).

The focus group studies found that participants experience support in formal ways through professional services and in-curriculum modules, but also informally with tutors in the studio.[23] In a more informal approach, a quarter of the participants, including Norah. (Uni.05. L5. P_yes), Julia. (Uni.06. L6. P_yes), Elaina. (Uni.03. L5. P_yes), Steph. (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), Haley (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) and Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) spoke about the impact of positive relationships with their Studio Tutors[24], which they found helpful with job preparation and job searching.

For example, Haley (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) highlighted that if a student has an amicable relationship with their tutor, they might say, "Hey, how are you getting on with work placements, and do you want me to look at your portfolio?". Participants were positive that Studio Tutors had practical knowledge of the design industry, with one student highlighting that a tutor had been "telling us as much as they can from their

[23] The studio often reflects teaching practices where tutors engage with ideas, conversations, knowledge and expertise with their students rather than adopt didactic approaches based on the certainty of expert knowledge. (Shreeve, Sims, Trowler, 2010).

[24] A Studio Tutor is a key member of the design teaching delivery and normally an Interior Designer or Architect with practical knowledge of the design industry. They work in the studio with students design projects but can advise on portfolios and industry work. Discussions are often informal.

experience, to give us an idea of how the workplace might look" (Hayley, Uni.01. L5. P_yes).

Among the student participants from the sample universities, several reported that the informality of this support was vital. Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) and Hayley (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) said these informal discussions were down to a good tutor relationship. Steph added that she had emailed her tutor "quite a few times because he seems to be up on portfolios and employability". He gave "a lengthy reply with feedback on everything and added some excellent links, too".

Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) was positive about her relationship with her tutor. However, she added that she had to "reach out" for help. Participants' experiences show that they value academics helping students in this informal way, where they are encouraged to engage with the process of balancing their studies with their career efforts around searching for work placements and jobs. However, these unscheduled moments of support benefit small numbers of individual students and may not help the wider cohort, further reinforcing patterns of inequality in students' experiences (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Boyes, 2022).

In summary, based on the evidence from the twenty-four participants who took part in the focus group study, the findings show that participants have wide-ranging experiences of formal and informal employability practice. Participants valued how employability was embedded within credit-bearing modules. Participants were optimistic about the less structured approaches to employability and felt the relaxed nature of the studio support brought significant benefits. However, this support appeared to be more ad-hoc and dependent on the working relationship between the tutor and student. It was more focused on individuals rather than the wider cohort. This range of experiences highlights potential inequalities between different student groups. The discussion and the recommendations in Chapter 7 (p.201) explore these issues in more detail.

4.3.3. Live Projects

The third sub-theme to appear from the data relates to specific opportunities for students through *live* projects. In recent years, there has been a move from traditional stand-alone student placement experiences towards a greater variety of integrated and flexible programs, including live projects. As the responsibility for developing workplace skills has shifted from employers to individuals and educational institutions, there is an expectation that graduates can adapt quickly to the workplace (DfE, 2021). By incorporating a greater variety of integrated and flexible programs into the curriculum, HE aims to improve students' job readiness and ability to secure suitable jobs after graduation.

Many IAD courses in England view live projects as opportunities for students to connect with industry. They are regarded by those who deliver them as an essential part of the student learning experience and often involve negotiating a brief, timescale and budget with an external collaborator and the university. Commentators such as Sara (2011) outline that live projects are essential in educating future designers because, in contrast to more conventional teaching methods, live projects develop the collaborative and participatory skills essential to future practice, including communication, negotiation, and professionalism.

Out of the six universities taking part in the study, five courses included live projects in the curriculum, and one offered live projects as an extracurricular activity. Given the prevalence of live projects within the discipline and their importance in a course's 'employability offer,' it was essential to hear the student's perspective on live projects. Just over a third of the focus group participants (n=24) from four universities saw the benefits of live projects. They were essential and valuable in dealing with 'real-world' issues and supplying industry insights. These participants said live projects allowed them to meet and talk with clients and offered them insights into what it was like to work in the industry.

However, the study found that meaningful external engagement needed to be improved for around a fifth of the student participants (n=24) from three universities.

These participants held opposing views as their live project experiences resulted in little contact with the client. Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no) raised concerns about preparing for a design environment as she had never been to a designer's studio. She was unfamiliar with “the process of getting information from a client and working with a client". She did not think it had been included in her learning experience, as she clarified that she thought it was necessary “to develop contact with real-life interior design".

A quarter of the participants (n=24) from University 01 said they had access to optional, extra-curricular live project opportunities within their course. Those participants who did opt in concluded that being involved with a live project helped to develop their teamwork and time management skills. Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) opted to take part in an extracurricular project because she wanted to work as part of a team, as she thought this was an important skill to develop. She outlined:

> “It's important to be a bit more flexible with work because when you're going into a job, it's not going to be on your terms…. working with a team is what employers like to see".

When talking about his own experiences of live projects, final year student, Kieren (Uni.06. L6. P_no), enjoyed:

> “Actually, meeting the clients and having parameters to work within … [and he highlighted that] … a live project was one of the most enjoyable projects [he worked on] … because the client was able to define the project briefly".

These focus group findings also reflect findings in the Careers 2032 (AGCAS et al., 2022) Report, which highlights that more meaningful contact with external stakeholders can result in students building confidence and assuredness across various situations. This approach can help students make informed decisions about their careers throughout their learning journey, reduce fears about the future and develop confidence. It also helps students to expand their networks in the industries

they intend to enter. Clara (Uni.06. L5. P_no) talked positively of the "pressure of working with live clients," highlighting that you often work on "a real-world problem that needs solving" and not just a made-up university brief. Clara concluded:

> "You must impress [the client] and get what they do and what they want, and that's your end goal. When you've got a live project, it's the real world, it is a real problem... but when it's just your problem, you put it to the back of your mind and don't think about it as much".

Clara enjoyed the 'real-world' nature of live projects as it encouraged her to take a more professional approach to her work and gave her "more confidence" in talking to clients. In addition, Siena (Uni.06. L5. P_no) added, "[You have to be] more mindful and sensitive…it's important to think about the client". Siena had seen her confidence increase through working on a live project, as she had presented her work and talked through ideas with clients, a theme that was also re-iterated by Clara (Uni.06. L5. P_no), who articulated that by having to:

> "Bring something to the table to show that you're willing to put your ideas out there and have a conversation about it; this helped to develop confidence in my work".

Archie added that working on a live project was helpful for him as it highlighted skills he needed to improve on:

> "I thought I was confident because I've presented to tutors, and you just get used to doing that every week. Then we got to present the live project to the client, and I realised that I spoke seven billion miles an hour and was just talking so fast. When I finished, I was like, *I said that so fast, I was so nervous.* So [from that experience] feeling confident when presenting to an actual client is something I need to build on".

These collective experiences highlight that working with external clients in a meaningful and collaborative way has helped just over a third of the student

participants (n=24) to develop critical skills such as communication and professionalism, resulting in higher confidence levels (Bridgestock, 2009). The Careers 2032 (AGCAS et al., 2022) report also parallels the focus group findings, highlighting that external ability can result in students building confidence and assuredness across various situations. In addition, working on live projects has helped some students understand how they might fit into an industry setting. Final year student Helena (Uni.03. L6. P_no*) said that working on a live project forced her to be *"more considered"* in her design process and helped her:

> "Figure out what it will be like in industry and to respond to someone's wishes …. [and she thinks that it has been] … helpful to have the opportunity to work with real-life clients".

However, while Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no) enjoyed live projects and thought they were important; she wanted more industry-focused opportunities in her course. She put forward:

> "They [live projects] give much more of a sense of what to expect in industry…. and that's what I miss at uni [because there are not enough live project opportunities]".

While just over a third of participants (n=24) were clear about the benefits of working on live projects, other participants such as (Esther, Uni.05. L5. P_yes), Lucia (Uni.03. L5. P_no), Eva (Uni.03. L5. P_no) and Norah (Uni.04. L5. P_no) experienced minimal client engagement. Esther expressed that she had:

> "[We have had] quite a lot of collaborations with industry partners, but they could … have been a bit more in-depth … I'm sure the intentions behind it were great, and I'm incredibly grateful that our teachers took their time to reach out to those studios…but possibly because they are swamped, they couldn't attend most of our presentations, and the main thing we got from them was the brief".

Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_yes) spoke of a group project “that was a very good experience, although it had little to do with interior design”, and she concluded that the live projects she had been involved with were “sort of purely theoretical” and the industry partner “wasn’t too useful, and so it was just feedback from another person, and not really like a client/designer relationship”. Esther was clear that while she has enjoyed some of these live project experiences, she wanted more meaningful engagement and concluded:

> “I think we [students] need more courage. It's very intimidating to reach out [to clients] without knowing where you stand on a scale of employability and as an interior designer in general. How do people from the industry who aren't your teachers perceive you? This is a massive problem for me. My projects are well received by uni, but do they fulfil industry standards?... We lack this knowledge about how we fit into the real world".

This lack of meaningful experience was also expressed by Norah (Uni.05. L5. P_yes), Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_yes) and Eva (Uni.03. L5. P_no), who had all previously worked on live projects, but again with little client contact. Eva concluded that because there were few chances to ask the client questions, “it was like a live project…. but not really live,” a sentiment experienced by several participants.

This range of experiences shows that there have been varied approaches to live projects across the six university settings. In the literature, Tomlinson (2017) discusses the need to develop bridging experiences through employer engagement. This approach could be formal or otherwise but must include meaningful and gainful interactions between graduates and employers. Tomlinson argues that higher employer engagement enables students to access valuable employer knowledge and makes students more directly visible to employers. For live projects to provide students with positive bridging experiences, they must be purposeful and sustained. In a similar vein, the findings of the HEA (2006) study contend that universities

should design a pedagogy to stimulate engagement with students and address learning tasks that reflect professional practice:

> "A pedagogy that optimises students' academic development is likely to be beneficial to the development of their employability, [...] in richly resources contexts" (HEA, 2006, p. 12).

The findings from the focus group study (n=24) illustrate that student experiences vary widely across the six participating universities. Key findings show that a fifth of participants wanted more substantial involvement with external organisations beyond a first project introduction. Participants sometimes had minimal contact with external partners, describing it as a tick-box exercise. This finding may have been due to insufficient resources or external connections between academics, industry, and the university. However, the focus group findings illustrate that a positive live project experience is decided by meaningful collaborations, relationships and partnerships between clients, design studios, employers, academics, and universities. Participants found that live projects could be good for developing critical general skills such as communication, collaboration, confidence, and professionalism and for giving students greater industry insight.

4.4 Summary

This chapter has drawn on the qualitative data collected from focus groups with participants in six university settings in England. It was concerned with understanding the central theme of Employability in the Curriculum. The findings in Chapter 4 were presented as two sub-themes: (1) Conceptualising Employability and (2) Lived Experiences of Employability.

Theme 1 revealed diverse student narratives about how participants experience employability. Here, participants made clear connections between university and employability, as they saw university as part of a journey that would help to improve their employment and earning prospects. The findings revealed that students in a mass HE system have complex responsibilities, family lives, and paid work

commitments that affect and influence their career decisions. It revealed vital motivations that influence students to study at the HE level.

Theme 2 examined employability in the curriculum through core curriculum and co-curricular activities. Participants highlighted the value of organised and structured employability support that central employability teams offer. However, they also revealed a need for more engagement with this career support. This was often due to poor communication and timing about what was available and when. Participants enjoyed the formal and informal approaches to employability within the curriculum but highlighted the need for more meaningful and sustained live project opportunities.

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS

5.0 Employability Beyond the Curriculum

5.1 Introduction

The central theme of Chapter 5 is concerned with *Employability Beyond the Curriculum* and is focused on two sub-themes: (1) The Value of Work Placements and (2) Barriers to Work Placements. It will examine how students value industry work placements and report on how they are widely seen as beneficial in enhancing students' employability. This chapter will also examine the substantial impact of COVID-19 on the 2021 cohort. It will reveal how various structural barriers, including a lack of opportunities and the cost-of-living crisis, directly affected students' ability to secure relevant work-related placement opportunities. It will highlight students' concerns about entering a highly competitive workplace. It will reveal barriers students have met in obtaining work placements and set out some fears and anxieties that have affected students in achieving their goals.

5.2 The Value of Work Placements

This section explores participant perspectives on work placements, as illustrated in Table 12, (p. 160). Many students go to university to study, learn and develop skills around their subject area and gain knowledge through a range of theoretical and practical means within and beyond the university. The literature review in Chapter 2 (p.34) shows that there is now an increasing emphasis on placement opportunities forming a key part of undergraduate education.

Work placements can help students gain practical experience in the field they are studying, and students can use the placement to test the industry and decide what they want to do in their future careers (DfE, 2021). In 1997, the Dearing Report found work experience as a crucial feature of an undergraduate's employability and skills development (Dearing, 1997). This is reinforced by UCAS (2022, June 24th), which refers to findings from a survey that showed two-thirds of employers are looking for

graduates with relevant work experience because it helps them to prepare for work and develop general business awareness.

Many IAD courses in England offer work placements as an optional part of the undergraduate course, lasting from six months to one year, between the second and third year of study. In different universities, work placements count towards a student's degree or contribute to a Certificate qualification, showing proof of experience gained through working in the industry. A search on the websites of the six universities taking part in the study shows that each university promotes placement opportunities to students, highlighting how they enhance students' career prospects, expand their professional networks, help students discover the real world and improve their academic performance.

The results from participants (n=24) showed that industry work placements were widely seen as beneficial to two-thirds of the focus group participants in enhancing their employability. This finding is illustrated in Table 12, (p.160), and elaborated on in more detail during this chapter.

Table 12. Summary of Analysis: The Value of work placements (n=24)

THE VALUE OF work placements	
Sub-themes	**Summary**
01. "A placement is invaluable".	● Industry work placements were widely seen as beneficial to focus group participants in enhancing their employability. ● A third of participants saw a placement as an opportunity to experience the 'real world' and test out the area of work they were interested in. ● Just less than a third of participants thought that doing a placement would take the pressure off them in their final year, as it would make it easier to get a graduate job.

5.2.1 “A Placement is Invaluable”

Norah (Uni.05. L5. P_yes) was clear about the benefit of a placement: “...the whole point of doing a placement is to make you more employable". She thought that doing one would help her become “a better designer” and prepare her for her final year. Nora predicted that this collection of skills and industry experience would lead to a better degree qualification and a good graduate job. She was clear that this bridging of skills and experiences would “appeal to potential employers” when looking for a graduate job (Tomlinson (2017). For Norah, a placement was “invaluable". Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_yes) found that doing a placement was “worth it” to get that “hands-on experience of working in the industry”. She also saw it as a good opportunity to test if this was what she wanted to do after graduating. Similarly, Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) found that employers always want graduates with “at least two years' experience,” and this was the key reason that “work placements are so crucial".

For a third of participants, a placement was seen as a way of gaining ‘real-world’ experience, but within the safety of their studies. Final year student Julia (Uni.06. L6. P_yes) discussed how she had developed her communication and networking skills during her placement. Meanwhile, Melina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) perceived that searching for a placement would give her more of an idea of what she would need to do to get a graduate job. She also acknowledged that a placement “would take some of the pressure off [of her]” in her final year. Likewise, Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) was pleased that she had secured two shorter work placements. Otherwise, she would be “feeling quite nervous” about her final year. For Michael (Uni.06. L5. P_no), the value of doing a placement would make it “easier to get into a job afterwards". However, he decided not to do one as he did not want to extend his degree by another year.

The above excerpts illustrate that some students recognised the importance of developing their career-building skills (Bridgestock, 2009) through a placement, as they thought this would affect their performance at university and future career prospects. Focus group participants also found that work placements supplied an excellent opportunity to add practical industry experience to their university

education, which was seen to be beneficial in bridging skills, knowledge, and experience gaps (Tomlinson, 2017). Participants found that this gave real value to work placements.

5.3 Barriers to Work Placements

Employability strategies in universities promote benefits for students to be involved in all kinds of work opportunities, including work placements, internships, holiday work experience and part-time work, noting that this counts as evidence of their accumulating skills on their CVs. While the results from participants (n=24) taking part in the focus groups showed that work placements were valued, the uptake of work placements was low across five out of the six universities in the study (Table 13, p. 163). This reflects the research report commissioned by the DoE (2021), which highlights that despite the often-mentioned advantages of sandwich-year work placements, the proportion of students undertaking sandwich work placements has been shrinking over recent years. The challenges students face with work placements have been reflected in the broader academic literature. One study (Bullock et al., 2009) found the critical concerns for students who opted out of an opportunity to take up work placements included:

- A focus on managing the transition to university life and not wishing to make that more difficult by needing to engage with a placement programme
- Responsibilities to commit to their student accommodation in advance
- Social commitments to their flatmates and friends
- Uncertainty about the nature and demands of work placements
- The lack of encouragement by academic staff
- Costs related to placement.

Table 13. Summary of Analysis: Barriers to work placements (n=24)

BARRIERS TO WORK PLACEMENTS	
Sub-themes	**Summary**
01. COVID-19	● COVID-19's impact was substantial on the 2021 cohort as many workplace work placements were put on hold, meaning many participants had to rethink their placement plans. ● A fifth of participants highlighted that their placement search had been affected by the COVID-19 crisis, resulting in a need for more interviews and placement opportunities.
02. Structural Barriers	● Some participants experienced structural barriers, including limited opportunities for work placements in particular geographic locations, compounded by financial constraints faced by participants and their families; ● A fifth of the participants highlighted that they were limited in their placement search due to financial constraints. To keep costs down, participants found they would need to live at home to do a placement, but a lack of placement opportunities in hometowns and cities countered this. Participants voiced concerns about how this might affect potential future job opportunities. ● A sixth of participants highlighted the cost of living as a critical factor that affected their decision not to do a placement, citing that some companies only pay travel costs or do not pay at all, making it impossible for them to do a placement.
03. Hyper-Competitive Job Market	● Some participants found finding work placements in a highly competitive graduate labour market challenging. They regarded this lack of relevant experience as their most significant barrier to getting a job. ● Two-thirds of participants thought having the required work experience would be their most significant barrier to getting a job.
04. Placement Pressure	● Participants revealed that universities actively encouraged and 'pushed' work placements. However, some participants felt under-supported by universities in sourcing work placements. ● Around a fifth of participants in the study (N=24) felt increased pressure to find a placement during their second year. ● Around half of the participants (N=24) taking part in the research found summer work placements as an excellent time to gain work experience without it adding to the duration of their 3-year degree.

	However, this did not align with the placement requirements at some universities.
05. Fear + Anxiety	● Participants experienced a range of fears and anxieties around work placements, influencing their decision not to do one. ● A third of the participants described having experienced emotional barriers that affected them achieving their goals, including the fear of not being good enough, the worry of not meeting expectations, the feeling of being overwhelmed and the worry of not being adaptable across a range of scenarios.

The focus group research found a disparity between those participants who wanted to do a placement and those who did one. This disparity showed a range of factors that affected students' placement choices. When focus group participants were asked if they had met any setbacks, obstacles, or barriers to undertaking work placements, the findings from the focus group participants drew parallels with key findings from the Careers 2032 report (AGCAS et al., 2022). These included practical, material, logistical, structural, and emotional barriers. Participants highlighted limited local opportunities for obtaining industry work experience, financial constraints, the impact of COVID-19 and the limiting effect that fear and anxiety can have on career confidence. These barriers affected participants' learning experience and, thus, their potential career development. These themes are illustrated in Table 13 (p.163) and elaborated on in more detail during this chapter. This section will discuss five barriers to work placements. It highlights that these barriers can be attributed to six key factors:

5.3.1 The Impact of COVID-19

Student narratives from the focus groups highlighted that opportunities for young people to get workplace experience had been affected by the COVID-19 crisis. In 2020, many students' plans were put on hold or disrupted as companies made redundancies, stopped recruitment, and scaled back their graduate outreach programmes. In 2021, many work placements did not occur as intended, and some students who had secured a placement offer saw them withdrawn as the coronavirus pandemic continued to cause significant economic disruption. While placement

searching and post-university life should be filled with adventure and exciting job offers, for the 2020 and 2021 cohort of placement students and graduates, the reality has been far more uncertain (Ball, 2021).

In May 2021, when the focus groups took place, the research data revealed that one-fifth of the focus group participants identified as students who wanted to do a placement. However, many of them said that they were struggling to secure one. Students put this down to COVID-19 and the resulting lack of opportunities as businesses continued to be uncertain about recruiting placement students and graduates. The participant experiences from the focus group studies reflect findings in the Careers 2032 report (AGCAS et al., 2022), showing that 30% of students think the economy after the COVID-19 pandemic will make it harder to find a job (Female 32% vs. Male 26%).

Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes), Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no), Heidi (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_yes), and Nora (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) had all sent many applications to design studios, but they had not been selected for interviews. Elaina was worried that due to COVID-19-19, it was not a good time to look for work placements. She was concerned that she would never "be able to get anything". Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) had been looking for a placement near her family home in the Southeast of England. She could not find anything suitable, so after a re-think, she decided to go straight into her final year of study and, instead, look for a summer internship after she had graduated.

Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_yes) also needed placement help. Hence, as an alternative, she successfully applied for a university six-week Summer Design Internship, followed by a University Placement Scheme focusing on marketing. The Marketing Placement Scheme was due to be completed alongside her final year of study, “much like a part-time paid job,” and although this was not a design placement, Holly was keen to develop other more general skills which she thought were valued in the workplace.

Neither Heidi (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) nor Nora (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) had secured a placement. Heidi had been told by tutors, “Just take anything,” but frustratingly, nothing was forthcoming even after sending out many speculative applications. Nora

thought that employers were delaying offering work placements. Both Heidi and Nora, therefore, decided to continue into their final year without undertaking a placement. These student experiences reflect findings from The Handshake's Careers 2032 report (AGCAS et al., 2022), where around half of those taking part felt that the pandemic had set back their early career prospects.

This range of experiences also reflects data from the Institute of Student Employers (2020), highlighting how the pandemic has disrupted many employers' businesses, leading them to make tough decisions about their staffing and affecting the number of placement opportunities. However, Prospects Luminate reported in the Early Careers Survey (Smith et al., 2022) that in the cycle 2021/22, placement student numbers were starting to recover. Still, they found it would take another two years to recover to pre-pandemic levels. They reported a considerable shift in the graduate recruitment process and ruminated on the permanent transformation of graduate recruitment into a more digital and remote working paradigm.

The fallout from COVID-19 and its effect on the student learning experience has been immense. It has affected how students and graduates learn, interact with peers and tutors in the studio, and interact with employers in the workplace. Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) voiced her concerns about the broader impact of COVID-19 as she had seen a study about the pandemic in which:

> "Two-thirds of the people that were made redundant because of the pandemic were under 25. I understand why, but that makes you want to be even more employable and to work even harder because there's just not as much out there now".

Elaina (Uni.03. L5. _yes) was clear about the impact of COVID-19 on her situation. She wanted to do a placement and needed to "get paid, even a tiny bit". Her Mother was made unemployed during COVID-19, so she intended to live at home while doing a placement to give her mum money for her food and board. Elaina went to a university in the north of England, near her hometown. However, she had noticed that most design opportunities were in London. Financially, working in London was

not an option for her, but she was concerned that staying close to home would limit her future career prospects and earning potential.

Elaina's experience parallels research findings from the OfS (2021), The Sutton Trust (Montacute et al., 2021), and Eyles et al., (2022), highlighting that access and graduate employment patterns vary significantly across England, with location affecting work and salary post-study. In addition to these disparities around place, Elaina had an autoimmune disease that had "really hindered" her during COVID-19, and she now felt "behind" where she should have been at this point in the year. Similarly, COVID-19 affected final-year student Alex (Uni.06. L6. P_no) about his placement search and mental health. He was clear:

> "There was a part of me that did want to find a placement, but I also feared looking for a placement. I still wasn't confident in looking for a job, and I didn't want to travel too far away".

Alex suffered from mental health struggles during COVID-19. He tried to remain close to his elderly parents over this period. However, money was "an issue," and he became overwhelmed. He explained," I shut down a bit [during the COVID-19 lockdown]. I did not want to do much apart from just doing my work". Alex's experiences highlight that universities must recognise that practical needs are different from material needs and that people's mental health and emotional state are equally worthy of acknowledgement. Personal contact, reassurance, and validation can help remove psychological access barriers.

The data revealed that many participants who wanted work placements could not secure them and thus missed valuable work experience. Final-year student Kieran was disappointed that he did not do a placement and went straight into his final year. He reiterated that he "would have loved to have done one, but I think the pandemic stopped the opportunities".

The research found that participants' study experiences were significantly affected as the studio was substituted for student bedrooms, work placements were cancelled, and live project opportunities were put on hold. Participants were significantly affected by financial constraints that meant some needed to live at home, with limited work prospects. Some participants' families suffered great hardships as COVID-19 hit some of the most deprived areas of the UK and disproportionately affected ethnic minorities and people with disabilities (Levelling Up the United Kingdom, 2022). Many participants suffered from mental health issues that affected their mental and social well-being. The full impact of COVID-19 on these participants and graduates is not fully known.

The research data for this study draws upon the experiences and insights of IAD participants significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings from the focus group studies show that the impact of COVID-19 on students has been immense, especially for the cohorts of 2020 and 2021. These participants, therefore, offer a particularly unique lived experience insight during an exceptionally changing time faced by those studying in HE. The Discussion and Recommendations in Chapter 7 (p.201) will explore these issues in more detail.

5.3.2 Structural Barriers

The work of Tomlinson (2008) notes that many of the students in his study regarded employability as a challenge, highlighting that the management of career journeys was the responsibility of individual students. He found little evidence that students discussed structural barriers and factors like gender, social class, and ethnicity concerning employment. Interestingly, the focus group participants in this study reported on structural barriers[25], including a lack of local opportunities with the cost of living directly affecting relevant work-related opportunities. The study found that a fifth of the participants (n=24) wanted to do a placement as part of their course.

[25] Structural barriers are obstacles that affect a group disproportionately and perpetuate or maintain stark disparities in outcomes. Structural barriers can be policies, practices, and other norms that favour an advantaged group while systematically putting marginalised groups at a disadvantage.

However, financial, and logistical constraints meant that these students felt limited in the scope of their placement search and, so, decided against doing one. As such, they felt this lack of experience would affect their potential future work opportunities, as two-thirds of participants (n=24) highlighted that not having the required work experience would be their most significant barrier to getting a job. The focus group findings reflect the Levelling Up the United Kingdom Report (2022), which proves that geographic differences in the UK are significant and have widened over recent decades, with differences in productivity mirrored broadly in pay measures and skills. Cleo (Uni.03. L6. P_no) was pragmatic about the lack of placement opportunities near her family home. Due to financial reasons, she needed a placement near where she was studying or in her hometown. She was clear:

> “It's cheaper to live at home, but then the opportunities [for work placements] are much less where I live than where I study. So, it was a financial issue of finding somewhere affordable to rent that was a big consideration".

Consequently, this resulted in Cleo deciding against doing a placement. The lack of design-related jobs in Cleo’s hometown and the competition for jobs in her university city meant that placement opportunities for Cleo were almost impossible to find. Similarly, Nora (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) wanted to do a placement but thought she would struggle if a company is not “offering enough money". Again, the structural limitations on finance and location were significant for Nora. She was clear that:

> “Unless you have parents [to support you] or something like that, you're not going to be able to live there [in London]. If it's too far to commute from home, it wouldn't be possible".

Haley (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) agreed with the issues raised by Nora and Cleo, as she spoke of the “hurdles” of searching for work placements. She thought a work placement would be impossible to fund if it were not paid and that the success of obtaining a work placement “depends on how location-specific you're being". She clarified that “Finance is a thing. Location is a thing,” as she explained that she

wanted to be closer to her family during a placement year. Still, a lack of design-related work opportunities near her hometown would directly affect her ability to secure a placement. Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) also highlighted that location was a key consideration for her. She explained that she needed to be:

> “Either close to my accommodation at uni or home because I've had to book my uni accommodation so early, so I don't want to try and find somewhere else as I’ll already be stuck here. I come from quite a small town, and having to be in London all the time and even commuting or living there is just a terrifying thought, but it does not feel like there are too many other options".

While universities often have local industry connections, this was limiting for Haley as she wanted to look further afield. However, she found little university support to do this. Haley wanted her university to provide more support to students looking for placement opportunities on a national and international basis. In a post-COVID world and with the introduction of Teams and Zoom, there appear to be more opportunities for students to undertake placements remotely which may help with cost and geographical location issues. However, remote placements also have some challenges such as a lack of face-to-face interactions, a lack of mentorship, and a lack of a sense of belonging.

Helena (Uni.03. L6. P_yes*) was “shocked” by the small number of students who did a placement on her course as it was much lower than she expected. While Helena attributed this to the difficulties of obtaining a work placement in a “very competitive industry,” the focus group findings found other issues that affected student choices around work placements. The data highlighted that key factors influencing whether students did a work placement were attributed to location and finance. Work placements were also more challenging for mature commuter students and those with family responsibilities.

Some participants, such as Archie (Uni.06. L5. P_yes), highlighted the cost of living as a key factor in deciding whether to do a placement, especially as he thought

some work placements would be unpaid or would only cover travel costs. He lived away from home without family support, so he chose not to do a work placement. Although it was interesting to hear him declare that he would “feel bad” not doing one. Michael (Uni.06. L5. P_no) lived at home and was a “commuter” student. He worked two part-time jobs while studying and could not contemplate losing both to do a placement “where I might not get paid". Given these limitations, he decided that doing a work placement was not for him as he could not contemplate losing his paid employment, as he needed this to pay for his living and studies throughout his degree.

Many participants like Michael (Uni.06. L5. P_no) live at home during their studies or do not move far from home to study, and students such as this are also more likely to remain in their hometowns or cities at the end of their studies. Research conducted by The Sutton Trust (Montacute et al., 2021) and Eyles et al., (2022) highlights that for students such as Michael, this limited movement in geographical location can affect their chances of finding better-paid employment. This finding is further supported by The Levelling Up the United Kingdom Report (2022), which highlights that where people grow up has a lasting impact on their life chances. Low levels of social mobility across parts of the UK illustrate that family background matters, and children from disadvantaged backgrounds have poorer future job and income prospects. The report also says that these differences have become more acute due to the impact of COVID-19.

Michael (Uni.06. L5. P_no) lives in a northern town and is the first student in his family to attend university. Given his commute and family circumstances, more significant financial support would have helped him once he entered university. Michael is illustrative of geographical disparities that affect students and graduates in England, illustrating that place matters. The earlier literature review (OfS, 2021; Montacute et al., 2021; Eyles et al., 2022) highlighted that access and graduate employment patterns vary significantly across England, with location affecting options for work and salary potential post-study.

The findings show that these participants were faced with several constrained choices guided principally by the economic cost of student fees and living expenses combined with personal commitments. Critics such as Callender et al., (2018, n.d) note that students are not free to realise their full potential and HE aspirations and ambitions, as they cannot divorce their choices "from their socio-economic backgrounds, untouched by social structure and social inequalities". Dougherty and Callender (2017) call for improved career advice, information and guidance in schools and colleges aimed at disadvantaged students that could help students' decision-making.

In summary, the narrative of these participant experiences has highlighted disparities in work opportunities between places. Over a fifth of participants cited a lack of work opportunities in hometowns and cities, all worsened by the cost-of-living crisis. Several participants highlighted financial pressures directly affecting their decision not to undertake a placement, potentially affecting their future earning potential.

Therefore, given the precise patterns of inequality in students' financial resources and social networks, universities need to take a more proactive approach in opening access to broader networking opportunities for working-class students so they can access career-relevant internships and work experience (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Boyes, 2022). This situation should not be left to the individual as this will further compound social inequalities. These issues are discussed further in Chapter 7.

5.3.3 A Hyper-Competitive Job Market

While students and graduates value work experience and acknowledge that employers value it, too, many have found it difficult to access. From the focus group studies, two-thirds of participants (n=24) reported that not having the required work experience would be their most significant barrier to getting a job. Research conducted by Mason et al., (2009, p.19) seems to concur with this, as they argue that the probability of being employed is "significantly and positively related" to graduating with a first-class or upper-second degree or students who have taken a long placement (one year or sometimes two or three months) in their degree.

Participants discussed the importance of being employable in a competitive job market. Paige was worried that if she did not get a placement, she “probably wouldn’t be able to get a job either". She expanded further, outlining that having no work experience would make her feel like she was struggling and not “employable enough". Paige had an internal locus of control, believing it was purely down to her efforts if she got a job. This finding reflects the literature from Salecl (2010), who argues that if everything employability-related is the individual's responsibility, then failure to succeed also rests with that individual. However, in a highly competitive graduate labour market, the inability to achieve may result from factors outside individuals' control.

A key finding from the data was that some participants related employability to “competitiveness” for IAD jobs. Esther’s (Uni.05. L5. P_no) comments showed this. She described a need to find her “niche” and to “somehow fit into the job market". Esther felt that, in a crowded and competitive job market, she needed “something different” or “extra” to offer to an employer.

Findings here align with the literature from McCracken et al., (2015), who highlight that having “something different” or extra to offer to an employer in a competitive job market to stand “out from the crowd” was part of the selection decision process made by graduate employers. Tomlinson (2008) also found a sense of “relative employability” with students feeling they were competing against other graduates with the same degree qualifications and with similar university backgrounds

From the focus group study, just under a fifth of participants (n=24) highlighted concerns about entering a highly competitive workplace. These participants believed a degree alone was insufficient for obtaining a graduate-level job. These beliefs are reflected in the literature by Yorke (2006), who highlighted that a good degree was now the essential minimum for many skilled graduate-level jobs, and graduates must also prove added employability skills.

Tomlinson and Holmes (2017) critique that the currency of a degree qualification has altered within a mass HE context as graduates get similar credentials. They highlight that added work beyond a capability is often needed to show an individual's 'value' and 'uniqueness.' Similarly, Dore (1976) aligns Massification with credential inflation, highlighting that as more people climb the qualification ladder and get higher-level credentials, the distinguishing value of these credentials declines.

Della (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) addressed her concerns about working in a "competitive industry" as she found that gaining experience was a significant worry. While she had secured some work experience in a non-design area, she acknowledged, "it's quite important to get experience in the field that you want to go into as well". She did not have this relevant experience and was worried that the lack of it would affect her future potential work opportunities.

The data presented here reinforces the literature by Barnett (2003) that graduating millennials are entering an exceptionally dynamic and volatile job market. Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no) and Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) recognised their inevitable competition as they entered the job market. However, Elsa knew securing a decent job was not solely dependent on personal merit. She was clear that even if she achieved her desired educational outcome and obtained a 'good degree,' this alone may not be enough to secure a 'good' job (CBI, 2019a). Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no) expanded further:

> "We know that it's hard to get a job in the creative industries as it's especially competitive. I think, therefore, that it's always there in the back of your mind… "what comes next?"

Archie (Uni.06. L5. P_yes) was worried about entering a "saturated [employment] market" where lots of students and graduates were searching for the same work experience opportunities. He calculated the number of student designers in his year course, considered the number of IAD courses across the UK, and concluded,

“That's quite a lot of people going into it [interior design]”. He added, “I worry…. will I get anywhere near a job, or will I just be outnumbered by other people”.

A graduate of 2022, and at the time of writing (May 2023), Archie is employed in a non-design role and contemplating doing a postgraduate degree in a bid to help him get the design job he desperately wants. Given the increase in IAD courses over the last ten years, Archie was perceptive in his observations. In addition to this competition, compared to just five years ago when only a handful of courses included a sandwich placement choice, now most university IAD courses offer an optional placement year. This has resulted in many more students fighting for work placements, work experience and jobs.

Lucia's (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) decision to go to university was her response to what she perceived as a “competitive” labour market. She felt a university experience would equip her with the skills needed to support her in the next step of her career. However, she knew she would be job searching across a competitive field. She was concerned that it would be difficult “if everyone looks the same". When asked what she thought employers were looking for, she guessed this included “originality”.

In agreement, Eva (Uni.03. L5. P_no), Melina (Uni. 03. L5. P_yes), and Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no) found the importance of appearing “different” in a competitive job market. Eva spoke about” standing out”. Melina agreed but thought employers were looking for “something extra”. Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no) reflected that it was vital for her and her peers to “fit into the job market” and be “well-equipped” with a range of subject specialist and general people skills, so they had the confidence to find their own “niche”.

These quotes illustrate that students are acutely aware of the competitive nature of the job market and that there is a need to be distinctive. It also relates to literature by McCraken (2015), whose work with graduate employers suggests that a degree is insufficient to prove ability and potential. He highlighted that when employers make

selection decisions, candidates need something ‘extra,’ an ‘edge,’ or to ‘stand out from the crowd,’ which is key.

Cleo (Uni.06. L6. P_no) wanted to gain experience working in the IAD industry, as she thought she had a “good skill set” that she wanted to “put into actual reality". Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) summarised the catch-22 challenge of gaining experience; “Employers are looking for people that already have experience...but that's why you're there… because you need experience”.

When final-year student Kieran (Uni.03. L6. P_no) was looking for a placement, he was surprised by the lack of opportunities available. After many unsuccessful applications to design practices, he started to think, “When am I going to get the opportunity to showcase my skills?” He thought it was strange that employers wanted to employ graduates with experience but were not prepared to offer work experience to students (Thomas, 2022).

These experiences link to the literature. The UCAS page ‘What are employers looking for?’ (2023b) highlights to students that employers are looking for graduates with good key transferable skills and the ability to network with the right attitude. UCAS (2022, p.1) states that when employers are recruiting graduates, “attitudes and aptitudes are often seen as more important than formal qualifications”. UCAS (2023b) advises students on supporting existing skills and developing new ones through part-time work, sports, performing arts, clubs, societies, and volunteering. It highlights that “universities, colleges, and employers will be looking for the wider contexts in which you have developed your skills and experience". UCAS is clear that engagement in these activities develops different skills and experiences, and it is essential to “demonstrate that you have a positive attitude".

In brief, this relates to literature from Tomlinson (2012), who highlights that putting the responsibility of employability onto the individual enables those lucky enough to have had that exposure to employability enhancement to gain an advantage over

others, favouring middle-class students and actively putting them at an advantage in specific social groupings.

Additionally, for students who have worked hard to master subject specialist skills at university, having the “right attitude” can seem difficult to grasp, especially as it can mean different things to diverse groups of people and in different workplace cultures. Expanding further on the value of experience, Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no) highlighted that during the employability module of her course, she explored job vacancies and used LinkedIn to get a “feeling of what is usually expected of a graduate". She reflected:

> “They usually always require you to have at least two years of experience, which is why work placements are crucial. All advertisements mentioned something about IT skills too, at least all the ones I've seen".

Holly’s (Uni.04. L5. P_no) biggest concern about applying for jobs was “they all want people with experience". She worried that getting a job would be “so hard,” and she was concerned that she would not get a company to “take a chance” on her. In a similar vein, Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no) articulated her thoughts:

> “Even though we are going to leave this university with a degree, as far as I get the feeling from the industry, I think the degree is almost a secondary thing to the experience they want to see".

To summarise, the findings from this study show that participants are aware of the increased competition they face when looking for jobs. Many participants feel the need to be different or to have the edge over their competitors, but this is still a *fuzzy* concept and open to interpretation. Participants reported that the challenges of gaining experience are immense, and they regard the lack of it as restrictive for their future careers. Participants know that employers want graduates with experience; however, they feel employers need to be more active in supplying placement opportunities to students. Due to the unprecedented competition, participants worry

about completing their degrees and are apprehensive about not getting a job doing what they want. Chapter 7 (p.201) will discuss these issues further.

5.3.4 Work-Placement Pressures

While many focus group participants recognised the value of obtaining work experience, the data shows several participants faced work placement pressures. Around a fifth of participants (n=24) in the study spoke of feeling increased pressure from their university to find a placement during their second year. This issue was further highlighted by Paige (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), who felt placement pressure as she had never had a job before. She was clear:

> “It's essential to get something through placement because otherwise, I'll be finishing my course and going into the world potentially without any experience".

The findings from this study showed that many universities encouraged participants to do work placements, as the research suggests that work placements can directly affect graduate outcomes. However, the pressure on students to do a placement can be impactful. Clara (Uni.06. L5. P_no) had considered a placement but wanted to finish her course and “deal with it after,” although she wondered if she “should apply for places” and just try to get one. Clara felt pressure to apply for work placements even though she did not think this was the right decision for her.

This pressure was also felt by Heidi (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) and Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no), who spoke about being “actively encouraged” by their courses to do a placement, as they highlighted that their universities “pushed work placements quite a lot". Heidi clarified that she did not want to do a placement [for that length of time] but felt “pushed” to apply. Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) added that an emphasis on becoming employable had increased during her second year, as students were expected to apply for work placements and start to get interviews. Holly agreed:

> "You start getting pushed towards work placements [in the 2nd year], and they start building CV stuff into our modules that forces you to think about it a bit more".

Another issue raised by participants was about how their universities were preparing students for work placement. For example, Helena (Uni.03. L6. P_no*) said there was little guidance from her university about seeking and preparing for work placements. In February 2021, she decided to be proactive and start the process independently to feel more "secure" about it. She created her CV and portfolio, and after researching potential companies, she started applying for work placements. She outlined her concern about the pandemic's impact on her job search and her potential to work in an office, especially as she had "never had a full-time job in the industry". She concluded that she had no experience and "does not feel very prepared". Esther said that although her university encouraged her to do a placement, her cohort was "not actively supported in looking for work placements". Esther was clear that she wanted more help from the university. She concluded that:

> "[It was not focused enough] on us as a singular person, as it was done mostly in groups [She thinks it would] "yield much better results if someone from uni could help us find work placements where companies are looking for people".

This comment is indicative of previous data highlighting more of a participant preference for one-to-one employability support, rather than larger cohort delivery. This lack of university support was echoed by Melina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes), who added that doing a placement would "take some of the pressure off" during her final year, as she thought it would give her "a much better chance to secure a job" at the end of her course. However, when Melina (Uni.03. L5_p.X) approached the placement team at her university, she recounted that she was told that she "should search by myself, so I think that's not helpful".

This lack of support reflects research from Handshake's Careers 2032 Survey (AGCAS et al., 2022), which found that students want more support from universities to secure term-time employment, with some pointing to the growth of jobs and volunteering opportunities on campus. However, it is noted in the literature by McCowan (2015) and Divan et al., (2022) that if a student needs to be in paid employment, offering more volunteer opportunities is unlikely to address their development needs and will further worsen social and cultural inequalities (Calendar et al., 2018). Students also highlighted the time it took to search and apply for work placements as a key reason against doing one, citing that this took their time away from their project work, which they regarded as more important.

For some participants in the study, it was clear that adding a placement to their three-year course was problematic. Around half of the participants taking part in the research (n=24) thought that summer work placements were an excellent way to gain work experience without adding to the length of their studies. However, for many universities, summer placements do not fall within their placement models, and therefore, students do not gain any academic credit for this at the end of their degree. Haley (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) was clear that if she could not find a placement, she would take a year out and:

> "Do my best to pick up bits of design work where I could, and although I wouldn't get the placement certificate, I'd still be gaining some kind of experience".

Haley recognised the value of gaining experience beyond an academic certificate and she was keen to get the experience through other means if possible. Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no) wanted more flexibility around when work placements took place, as she was clear that she would "go for a placement at any time of the year," highlighting the benefits of doing a placement during the long summer break. While actively encouraged to find a summer placement by her course, she was not actively supported in finding one. These participant experiences highlighted that students want universities to be more flexible with their placement models to make placement

achievable and accessible for broader groups of students. The focus group findings also illustrate that universities must be more supportive, flexible, and adaptable around the sourcing and timing of work placements.

In summary, the findings from the focus groups illustrate that many participants experience a range of pressures around work placements (Callender et al., 2018; Dougherty et al., 2017). The findings also show that HE institutions' role in helping and organising work placements varies widely between institutions, students, and the type of work placements available.

5.3.5 Fear and Anxiety

Emotional barriers can include fear, worry and anxiety, emotional sensitivity, and a general lack of adaptability. If disproportionate, these emotions can stop someone from doing something that may result in a positive outcome. A third of the participants (n=24) described having experienced emotional barriers at university that affected them in achieving their goals, including the fear of not being good enough, the worry of not meeting expectations, and feeling overwhelmed.

The fear of the unknown overwhelmed both Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) and Kieran (Uni.03. L6. P_no). Elsa said she was worried because she had not done a placement as she did not know the landscape of the working environment. This gap in her experience made her question if Interior Architecture was the right career for her. Final year student Kieran (Uni.03. L6. P_no) added:

> “I’m petrified about what comes after graduation … [I feel] a bit prepared for it…but at the same time I’m not sure …. [I am worried] about getting stuck in a job that I won't enjoy".

Kieran (Uni.03. L6. P_no) and Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) lacked confidence in their future careers. This lack of confidence was reflected in the findings in The Careers 2032 report (AGCAS et al., 2022), which detailed that students lacked confidence in

their future careers, which increased as they progressed through their course. Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) added that she was worried about entering a "very competitive" field, as she had also been "super unwell ... .and so my first-year work is not up to scratch". Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) questioned if she was "employable enough," highlighting that she did not think her software skills were good enough. She concluded:

> "I'm worried that I'm not going to be able to get anything [a job] and that it's not the right climate [due to COVID-19]. It's always something that I wanted to do [interior design], and I guess there's the financial pressure as well".

Elsa (Uni.04. L5. P_no) was concerned about her adaptability in taking a year out to do a placement and then returning to the university to complete her final year. She thought it would be difficult for her to adjust to a change in pace and year groups. She was also concerned about moving from somewhere "very hands-on in a working environment and then returning to a learning environment". For this reason, she decided against doing a placement. Norah (Uni.05. L5. P_yes) worried if her best "would be enough [for the industry]?" The idea of not being good enough was also shared by Siena (Uni.06. L5. P_no), who wondered if she had made the decision not to do a placement for the wrong reason, as it was:

> "Out of fear that I don't feel ready to go into a work environment…. I do think it is important [to do a placement], even though I have not chosen to do one, so I'm shooting myself in the foot".

Elsa, Norah, Siena, and Holly all appeared to be risk-averse when making placement decisions, citing various fears that prevented them from undertaking a placement. Tomlinson (2017) argues that universities need to help graduates develop their psychological capital so that they are more able to adapt to changing contexts and develop coping strategies for setbacks that they may meet. Second-year student Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no) spoke about "being scared" of not finding a job when she graduates. As she looked ahead to finishing her studies, she contemplated that she

might think, “Great, I've got a degree, but am I going to be able to get a job?”. Holly added:

> “The fear of the unknown, about what the industry is like, is a huge thing for me, making me feel extremely nervous about getting a job. It's not even about if I have the skills, it’s more “Do I want *this*?” I don't even know what *it is*, but I think that's quite a massive thing for me".

This worry over failure to succeed reflects literature from Tomlinson (2017), who highlights that universities need to make students aware of structural factors so that they understand that a failure to succeed may be the result of factors outside of an individual's control, especially in a highly competitive graduate labour market. Universities also need to manage students' expectations about the challenges of transitioning from education into the workplace, especially for those who have had a relatively *easy* education journey.

In summary, the findings from the focus groups highlight that participants experience a range of fears and anxieties that affect the pursuit of career opportunities. The findings from this study show that participants were fearful about the future and anxious about what would come next. This fear grew as students moved through their studies, and for some, it made them question whether they wanted to continue their careers as interior designers. Some participants were concerned about their adaptability and feared returning to different cohorts after a placement year. Others were anxious about the level of debt they would leave university with, which was compounded by potentially not getting a job in their chosen career. Some participants were worried about not getting a placement, leaving them feeling unemployable and inadequate. These fears and anxieties affected participants in diverse ways and at other times. Chapter 7 (p. 201) of the thesis will explore these issues in more detail.

5.4 Summary

This chapter has drawn on the qualitative data collected from focus groups with participants in six university settings in England. It was concerned with understanding the central theme of *Employability Beyond the Curriculum.* The findings presented in Chapter 5 were presented as two sub-themes: (1) The Value of work placements and (2) Barriers to work placements.

Theme 1 explored *The Value of Work Placements,* revealing that industry work placements are widely seen as beneficial to participants in enhancing their employability. They are seen as good opportunities to experience the 'real world' and test out an area of work before graduating. Some participants found that placement would take the pressure off them in their final year, as they thought it would be easier to get a graduate job. Theme two examined *Barriers to Work Placements* and revealed that participants met various structural, material, practical, logistical, and emotional barriers. participants spoke candidly about obstacles that affected their ability to obtain a placement.

The research data for this study draws upon the experiences and insights of IAD participants significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These participants, therefore, offer a particularly unique lived experience insight during an exceptionally changing time faced by those studying in HE. Participants discussed how COVID-19 had changed their working patterns and affected placement opportunities. Participants experienced issues around social mobility as they reported a lack of local opportunities and the cost of living directly affecting their ability to secure relevant work experience. It highlighted concerns about entering a highly competitive workplace and revealed that participants worry that a degree is insufficient to obtain a graduate-level job.

The pressure to succeed beyond HE in the workplace and the challenges of being a commuter student highlighted a lack of placement opportunities in limited geographic locations and competition for those work placements that did exist. A deficiency of university support in sourcing work placements compounded this. This lack of

support and opportunity meant some participants could not take advantage of these *real-world* experiences. It revealed worries and anxieties that affected participants achieving their goals and obtaining work placements. It also reported that a mix of fear, worry and anxiety resulted in a lack of confidence about their futures.

Next, the central theme of Chapter 6 will explore *Who - and - What You Know* and is focused on one sub-theme; (1) The Value of Capitals. This chapter will examine participants' decision-making around jobs and careers, examining issues around subject-specific and general people skills. It will reveal the importance of relationships and networks when getting a job. In doing so, it will offer a more nuanced insight into the challenges faced by participants across the six sample universities taking part in the study.

CHAPTER 6: FINDINGS

6.0 “Who - and - What You Know”

The findings revealed that various issues influenced participants' decision-making around work placements, jobs, and careers. Crucially, for many participants, it depended on the sum of their relationships and networks - *who they knew* - that enabled them to mobilise their knowledge and skills - *what they knew* - to give them better access to opportunities and potential job openings in the labour market. This perceived need to develop networks emphasises the need for universities to help participants develop alumni networks and form more substantial and meaningful connections with relevant industry employers.

6.1 Introduction

This chapter draws upon the qualitative data collected from the focus groups in six university settings in England. An essential step in the research was to explore what participants valued and regarded as necessary when looking for jobs. The central theme in Chapter 6 concerns what one student in the study referred to as “Who - and - What You Know” (sic) and is presented as one sub-theme that appeared from the data. (1) The Value of Capitals. This sub-theme is organised into categories where different participant responses address or respond to one notable specific element in the central theme (see Table 14, p.187).

6.2 The Value of Capital/s

In the focus groups, participants discussed issues around their social capital, relationships, and networks, illustrated in Table 14 (p.187) and elaborated on in more detail during this chapter. The findings illustrated that participants recognised how social capital could be instrumental in getting a job (Tomlinson, 2017). Participants revealed that it was their relationships and networks - *who they knew* - combined with their knowledge and skills - *what they knew* - that would enable them to gain better access to opportunities and potential job openings in the labour market.

Participants valued hearing from *authentic voices* about the realities of the workplace. However, they wanted universities to organise industry events proactively to expand employer connections.

Table 14. Summary of Analysis: The Value of Capitals (n=24)

THE VALUE OF CAPITAL	
Sub Themes	**Summary**
01. Relationships and Networks	● Around a fifth of participants regarded relationships and connections as hugely important when getting a job. They believed their social capital - *who they knew* - was just as important as their knowledge and skills - *what they knew.* ● Data from the focus group data highlighted that participants value hearing authentic voices from design industry professionals. A third of participants found it helpful when stories and everyday industry experiences were shared through alumni and employer events. Participants highlighted that they wanted their universities to organise events proactively.
02. Knowledge + Skills **Subject Specialist Skills** **Graduate Skills + Abilities**	● Two-thirds of participants from all six universities found that an essential feature of their time studying at university was preparing them for the future job market through gaining knowledge and developing skills. ● A fifth of the participants voiced concerns over developing knowledge and confidence in career-building skills, digital technologies, and specialist software. Participants reported that due to insufficient teaching, they were left to 'fend for themselves' ● Over half of the participants thought that developing their skills would add to their 'graduateness' and make them more employable.

6.2.1 Relationships and Networks

As noted in the literature review in Chapter 2 (p.34), the UK HE sector has been challenged by Government and employers to strengthen links with industry and community contacts. The argument made (CBI, 2019b) is that this can make university courses more relevant to the real world of work and help graduates make better-informed decisions about their careers in a chosen sector. The focus group

data reflected the literature (CBI, 2019b), as participants regarded relationships, networks and connections as hugely important when getting a job.

A fifth of participants (n=24) believed it was not just the combination of skills and knowledge that would secure them a job in IAD. Crucially, for many participants, it also depended on their industry connections and relationships - ‘who they knew’ - their social capital (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Putman, 1993). This finding aligns with Higdon’s (2016) research, which found that students from the creative industries and arts subjects considered social capital a pivotal factor in employment success. Higdon’s work argues that accessing networks, industry contacts, and connections offering work opportunities is critical and relates to the earlier work of Brown and Hesketh (2004, p.35), who highlights the rise of ‘personal capital’ within the graduate labour market, emphasising “the importance of whom you know as much as what you know”.

Lucia (Uni. 03. L5. P_yes) thought it was helpful when her tutors invited industry professionals into the studio after tutorials each week. She noted that she had:

> “This huge view on getting employed...like it’s a huge monster….and when you listen to those experiences, you realise it isn't that scary, and it could be enjoyable”

Heidi (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) also stressed the importance of hearing from employers in the design industry, as she was clear that “having companies come in and talk” was helpful and informative as they make it clear that students going into the workplace “won’t know everything” (AGCAS et al., 2022). However, when pressed, some participants feared employers had unrealistic expectations about what placement students would know when they entered the workplace. Norah (Uni.05. L5. P_yes) was worried about this, but when an employer visited her studio to talk to students, it put her mind at rest:

> "The fact that employers understand that we're in the second year and we're not fully fledged designers yet, that takes a bit of the pressure off because they're not expecting us to be…. you know, amazing".

These experiences reflect the literature on the benefits of employer bridging (Tomlinson, 2017; Scott and Davies, 2017), highlighting meaningful and gainful interactions between graduates and employers. These interactions can be constructive for under-represented groups from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Social Mobility Commission, 2023).

Industry connections were significant for Cleo (Uni.03. L6. P_no). She recognised that she had a skill set which she wanted to put "into actual reality". She thought that having industry connections would make it easier to get noticed and would be instrumental in helping her secure the industry experience employers were looking for. This finding reflects literature from Tomlinson (2017), who says that social capital bridges graduates' educational, social, and labour market experiences and helps open their access to job openings. This view of the importance of social capital was also echoed by Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes), who raised concerns that "a lot of it is who you know, so if you do not have many contacts, then it is going to be a lot, lot harder". Elaina mentioned that her mother had some contacts in London and that this would be her starting point when job searching.

Eva's (Uni.03. L5. P_no) impression of the design industry was that it was *"a bit cliquey,"* further reinforcing the importance of making the most of any industry connections. Several years ago, a schoolteacher spoke to her about networking, building contacts, attending events, and "trying to make a good impression". She was also recently advised that volunteering could be an excellent way to gain work experience. However, as discussed in the literature review in Chapter 2 of this thesis, engaging with volunteering to assemble work experience favours middle-class students and actively disadvantages specific social groupings (Tomlinson, 2012).

Heidi's (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) course had strong connections with several local and regional design companies. However, she wanted to search further for a placement, so she felt these local and regional connections were less relevant. She wanted her university to set up broader national and international networks as she recognised that it was difficult for her to do this as an individual without university support.

She searched for and connected to alumni through LinkedIn and Instagram to expand Helena's (Uni.03. L6. P_yes*) networks and industry connections. However, she wanted her course to invite alumni into the studio to "discuss their journey and their steps to land that job". Helena wanted to hear from alumni who had done what she was doing, and she wanted her course to be more proactive and make this happen.

The findings from the focus groups revealed that sharing experiences helped to reduce fear about particular situations, which in turn helped participants to feel more prepared, empowered, and confident about the future. For instance, when Cleo (Uni.06. L6. P_no) spoke about her next step, she highlighted that "it's a big worry" and that she "wants to hear from people that have graduated during the last couple of years that have gone from doing what we are doing at uni to where they are now". Cleo thought hearing about alumni journeys would help her navigate the same path (Bridgestock, 2009). When alumni share personal stories about their experiences working in the industry, it can be a practical approach to exposing everyday experiences and perspectives. In addition, it can help to develop and enhance student learning and promote positive student engagement and confidence (Bridgestock, 2009).

Several other participants in the study (Archie, Uni.06. L5. P_yes), Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no), Kieran (Uni.03. L6. P_no), and Cleo (Uni.06. L6. P_no) spoke of the benefits of connecting with alumni. Archie (Uni.06. L5. P_yes) agreed that talks from students who were on placement, or students who were studying at the master's level, as well as alumni working in the industry, were "quite handy" as there were "lots of first-hand accounts" from people who have "actually done some of the different options". He

was clear that this helped him to contemplate his career from a more considered viewpoint. Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no) agreed that alumni talks helped her to understand how business works, which she thought was "so important," and they helped her to understand how her skills could fit into the workplace (Bridgestock, 2009).

Participants valued these shared experiences and wanted more of them. Kieran (Uni.03). L6. P_no) added that he would have liked more contact with alumni during his studies, adding that it was "scary to reach out to them…they were available [for us to reach out to], but…. It was scary". Kieran thought it would have been mutually beneficial to have contact with other year groups on his course, too. He added that students had tried unsuccessfully to "set up sessions across the years," which did not happen "due to busy workloads and timetabling". However, he wanted to "give back" and "help students in their younger years'. Thevenin et al., (2016) in their study on mentors and role models and the effect of this on self-efficacy and motivation, highlight that students with a person of influence reported higher self-efficacy and motivation towards the completion of their education. This will be discussed in more detail in the Recommendations section in 7.5.1.

To summarise, the data from the focus groups highlighted that participants believed their industry connections, networks, and professional relationships - their social capital - significantly influenced their placement and employment opportunities. Participants revealed that although universities have local industry connections, there was a need for more university support for students looking further afield for job and placement opportunities. This lack of support made it difficult for students to access wider networks. Participants valued meeting alumni as it helped them to picture their career path, gain more insight into potential career opportunities and take some of the fear out of the unknown.

Participants valued listening to employers' authentic voices, which helped shape a greater understanding of the workplace. These exchanges enabled students to explore their professional selves, understand how they might fit into a future world of

work, and broaden their industry contacts and networks. Participants also valued establishing connections with alumni and their peers, highlighting a need for universities to formalise these connections to develop students' self-efficacy and motivation. Chapter 7 (p.201) discusses these issues further in the Discussion and Recommendations section.

6.2.2 Knowledge and Skills

The literature review in Chapter 2 (p.34) highlighted much debate around graduate skill sets and what employers seek (UCAS, 2023a & 2023b). It was acknowledged in the literature review that there is much speculation about how the UK labour market will develop. It noted how the skills and attributes needed for 4IR will significantly change the types of jobs available in the next thirty years (WEF, 2016; 2017; 2023). The literature also highlighted (Tomlinson et al., 2017) that universities are essential in developing human capital through promoting learning, expanding human understanding, and enhancing graduates' employment outcomes.

Human capital can be broken down into two main categories, commonly called *hard* skills and *soft* skills. Firstly, hard skills are learnt and developed through formal subject-specific education, which refers to a person's knowledge, skills, and abilities. For students studying IAD, subject-specific knowledge is a strong part of their employability, with close connections between curricula content and, for many students, their future target employment. Given the specialist nature of work in IAD, human capital will be foundational to graduates' outcomes. However, even in specialist fields, critics decide that this is often insufficient (Tomlinson et al., 2017) and needs to be combined with more fluid, career-relevant soft skills.

Secondly, *soft* skills have more to do with who people are than what they know. They are defined as character traits and interpersonal skills that characterise a person's relationships with others. In the literature, (Tomlinson et al., 2017; Bridgestock, 2009) refer to soft skills as 'career-building' skills and describe them in terms of how a graduate navigates the labour market and knows how to apply for and access work.

Soft skills include communication, time management, adaptability, creativity, problem-solving, teamwork, and leadership. Soft skills are also called graduate, personal, and general skills.

This section of Chapter 6 explores Knowledge and Skills - in the form of hard and soft skills - from a student's perspective and is illustrated in Table 14 (p.187) and elaborated on in more detail during this chapter. Participants reported low confidence in subject specialist software, leaving them unprepared for the workplace. It also revealed an appetite to develop more graduate skills as participants regarded them as essential in improving their job prospects.

Subject Specialist Skills

The findings from the focus group studies revealed that two-thirds of participants (n=24) from all six universities found that an essential feature of their time studying at university was to prepare them for the future job market through acquiring and developing knowledge, skills, and ability about their subject specialism. Nora summarised a view held by many participants (Uni.01. L5. P_yes):

> "In the first year [employability] didn't seem as pressing, but this year it's been drilled into us too, you know, become employable, get those skills that will sell yourself in an interview…so that you can be the right sort of team member in a design firm".

However, a fifth of the student participants (n=24) voiced concerns over a lack of critical subject-specific skills, such as CAD and Adobe software. Although most participants said they were given basic introductions, a fifth felt there was insufficient teaching, leaving them to fend for themselves. Eva (Uni.03. L5. P_no) expressed her anxieties about entering the workplace because she and her cohort were "self-taught" on the specialist software. She thought employers would say, "You're doing it all wrong". Esther and her friend Norah (Uni.05. L5. P_yes) were "annoyed

enough by the lack of IT education" in their university that they took matters into their own hands and taught themselves 3D Studio Max [a specialist software package].

Several other participants expressed this theme of 'doing it for oneself.' For example, Esther (Uni.05. L5. P_no) highlighted wanting more specialist software training. She regarded the teaching of specialist software as essential to her education. However, she thought her university had a different view. Norah expanded on this further and clarified, "Straightforward IT stuff is well explained, but it is not enough for what we are expected to do [with our work], so we have to teach ourselves as it's quite important [in the workplace]". The participants thought it was important for graduate interior designers to show good skills across a range of specialist software in preparation for entering the workplace. However, they questioned their competency in these essential skills.

Frankie (Uni.02. L5. P_no) declared that at her university, there were not *"enough people"* that have the skills to teach this specialist software. Given the importance of these industry-specific skills, Frankie wanted her university to dedicate *"time and money in these areas".* These collective experiences from the focus group participants illustrate that some students lack confidence in critical subject specialist skills. This finding reflects results from the 2021 Prospects Early Careers Survey (Mason, 2021), which highlights that 32% of students are worried that they are not good enough or ready for a job as a graduate (Females 36% vs Males 19%). In the latest 2022/23 report (Smith et al., 2023), more than a third (35%) of those looking for a job or apprenticeship said they felt 'not at all' or 'not very' prepared for that step, rising to 42% for neurodivergent respondents and 44% for those with a disability.

These findings also reflect the 2022/23 Digital Experience Insights (DEI) survey (JISC (Joint Information Systems Committee), 2023), which found that students wanted more opportunities to develop their digital skills, including more support for using various software and applications. The survey results found that most (61%) students turned to other students for help with online and digital skills, and they called for better user experience on online learning platforms and improved

availability of course and support resources. The results also show that HE teaching staff would like to use technology more. However, half of those interviewed stated that support for using digital technologies came from colleagues through peer support rather than university specialist IT teams.

The JISC (2019) survey results show that although many university strategies promote digital learning and teaching, most teaching staff find developing digital practices under-supported and costly of their own time. To deliver the learning experience that students expect, academics must use a wide range of technology, from virtual learning environments to simulations and subject-specific resources. However, according to research from the JISC survey (2019), many academics must pick up these critical digital tools on the job, often with little support.

When discussing how they prepared for their future careers, just under a quarter of participants (n=24) highlighted the importance of developing good CVs and portfolios. Heidi (Uni.01. L5. P_yes), Siena (Uni.06. L5. P_no) and Henry (Uni.06. L5. P_no) all spoke about the importance of showing their skills in their portfolios so they could use them as tools to articulate their skill sets to prospective employers.

However, Eva (Uni.03. L5. P_no) thought there was “a bit of a skill” to creating them. Elaina (Uni.03. L5. P_yes) raised concerns that she did not know “how to go about creating them [CVs and portfolios] in the best way". She believed that the university should help students navigate this essential process. However, Elaina felt she was left to ‘fend for herself’ when putting her CV and portfolio together. In the literature, Bridgestock (2009) refers to knowing how to apply for and access work, such as through CVs and Portfolios, as Career-building skills. His research reveals that some participants felt under-supported in their employability. These findings are also echoed by Prospect’s Early Careers Survey 2021 (Prospects, 2021), which found that half (45%) of the 7,000 university students interviewed said they felt unprepared for a job or apprenticeship.

To summarise, the focus group findings show that participants felt under-supported in their learning needs across a range of specialist software and careers-building skills. While many digital platforms are used in the design industry, though anecdotal, employers I work with recognise that good knowledge of *all* the different software is impossible. Instead, they look for a proficient level of competency across one or two digital platforms, recognising that these skill sets will be transferable in the workplace. However, participants raised concerns about their competency levels in these areas, which resulted in anxieties about entering the workplace. This finding raises broader issues around teaching critical specialist software within universities. It also reflects the literature from Tomlinson and Holmes (2017), who highlight that universities are trying to plug deficits in formal subject-centred degree qualifications by implementing specific employability modules and employer-driven experiences.

The focus group findings also revealed a broad and diverse approach to supporting students in developing CVs and Portfolios, which are necessary and important job-seeking tools in the creative industries. Some participants reported needing more support in developing these critical career-building skills, as they felt ill-prepared for the workplace and their future careers. These issues are discussed further in the Discussion and Recommendations sections in Chapter 7 (p.201).

Graduate Skills and Abilities

It has been noted in the literature review in Chapter 2 that there is a range of opinions on what transferable skills are required by industry and employers. Clarke (2018) argues that students in HE need to adapt their behaviour to career-building skills and attributes that ease perceived employability. The data from the focus groups revealed much discussion around the value of graduate skills in the workplace. Graduate skills are also referred to as soft, personal, people, transferable, general, interpersonal, and general employability skills. They are a person’s attributes or traits that relate to social interaction in many ways, and are qualities that one might naturally have.

Many participants valued developing their graduate skills as they felt this would be important in the workplace. Over half of the participants (n=24), including Eva, Nora, Lucia, Archie, and Elaina, thought this would add to their ‘graduateness’ and make them more desirable to an employer. This reflects research from the ISE (2022), which has identified that the unpredictability of the pandemic has resulted in employers increasing their focus on graduates’ soft skills, placing more emphasis on graduates with the ‘right attitudes’ such as self-motivation, critical thinking, curiosity and resilience, as this is seen to offer a continuous learning mindset and linked with agility in the workplace. Barrie (2004) found that students perceive the need to develop a broader narrative of their employability, including skills, personal achievements, and credentials.

Alex (Uni.06. L6. P_no) felt that providing a good mix of graduate skills and abilities, such as creativity and personality, was necessary. Julia spoke about the importance of being reliable and organised. Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) thought adaptability and working to your strengths were vital, while Heidi (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) stressed the need to show employers that you are ready to learn, ask questions and “maybe not always look perfect". Della (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) thought being “productive, creative, willing to learn and having good presentation skills” was necessary. She spoke about effectively communicating these attributes to prospective employers in her CV and Portfolio.

Similarly, Nina (Uni.06. L5. P_no) and Julia (Uni.06. L6. P_yes) discussed the importance of developing their communication, networking, listening and problem-solving skills. Paige (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) wanted to show that she could be a “team player". She thought it was essential to show to employers that “you respect and know yourself as a designer, but you also have an understanding that you're not the best in the world". From their own interview experiences, Steph (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) and Paige (Uni.01. L5. P_yes) expanded on this, saying that employers wanted to see an applicant’s “passion for the subject” and a passion for the sector they would be working in.

Clara (Uni.06. L5. P_no) said that having a mix of subject specialist knowledge, such as “good technical skills,” combined with more general graduate skills, such as “being confident and a hard worker,” was necessary. She was unsure if she was thinking too casually about it. However, her view was that “they [employers] just want a decent human being… like a nice person". Eva (Uni.03. L5. P_no) wanted to develop teamwork and collaboration skills and broaden her social networks. She had recently been thinking about:

> “How you present yourself in the job market, so when we all finish our degrees, how employable we are, how attractive [in terms of skills] we look to an employer".

Eva was contemplating her transition from education into employment, and in doing so, she was considering how to show the graduate skills and abilities employers look for alongside more subject specialist skills. Several participants highlighted confidence as an essential attribute. Julia (Uni.06. L6. P_yes) found that it was essential to develop confidence at university as she highlighted:

> “My confidence has gone from zero to a solid eight because of coming to uni and from the course and uni life, I guess. I’m much more confident than I was before I came to university".

Continuing the theme of confidence, Holly (Uni.04. L5. P_no) was clear that group work helped to develop her confidence:

> “When we did our group project, people had different ideas about what we wanted to do, so I think learning how to deal with that and work with different people is important".

These participant experiences show that exposing students to different situations can help to build students' confidence. In the literature, Bathmaker et al., (2013) and Burke (2016) highlight that having the confidence to negotiate different situations is

essential. If students are exposed to institutional cultures, including the critical cultural actors - i.e., current students, academics, industry professionals and prospective employers - this will help to expand their horizons. Norah (Uni.05. L5. P_yes) spoke about a module where she learned key skills such as:

> “How you present [your work] to potential employers and how to make your presentation more attractive… also how to initiate a conversation with them, so that was helpful".

The focus group findings highlight those graduate skills such as teamwork, problem-solving and communication, for instance - when meaningful, are valued by students and that showing them [in CVs and Portfolios] will help to improve job prospects. However, as previously noted, critics such as Tomlinson and Holmes (2017) highlight that university approaches to promoting and incorporating employability into the curriculum through specific employability modules, employer-driven experiences, and reflective self-assessment tools are merely plugging deficits in formal subject-centred degree qualifications.

The data from the focus group studies support these findings, as it has already been noted that a fifth of participants raised concerns over their lack of knowledge of critical subject-specific software. These participants certainly felt there needed to be more teaching of these critical skills and that they were left to ‘fend for themselves’ to plug the gaps. These issues are discussed in more detail in the Discussion and Recommendation section in Chapter 7 (p.201).

6.3 Summary

This chapter has drawn on the qualitative data collected from the focus groups carried out with participants in the six university settings in England. It explored what participants valued and regarded as necessary when looking for jobs. The findings presented in Chapter 6 focused on the central theme of “Who - and - What You Know”, organised into one sub-theme: (1) The Value of Capitals.

The findings revealed student narratives about what they considered necessary when deciding on jobs and careers. The importance of Social Relationships and Networks was examined. The findings illustrated that participants recognised social capital's critical role in getting jobs in the arts and creative industries. Participants valued hearing from alumni and employers about the realities of the workplace. However, they wanted more university support when looking further afield than university cities for placement and job opportunities.

Knowledge and Skills were identified as central to human capital development. The findings highlighted that those participants lacked confidence in subject specialist and career-building skills. Participants needed more support in their learning needs around specialist digital technologies and creating CVs and Portfolios. The data also revealed that participants valued developing general employability skills necessary to improve their job prospects.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 have presented data and discussed vital findings most relevant to the research questions. All pertinent findings have been reported concisely, objectively, and logically. Although by nature, qualitative research is subjective, with conclusions relying primarily on researchers and their interpretation and analysis of the data. However, staying objective in research is crucial to ensure that the data collected is reliable and valid. Next, Chapter 7 summarises and interprets the meaning of these findings and puts them into the context of the broader policy environment. It shows if the findings fit existing knowledge and identify any new insights that they contribute to. It also explains why these findings matter and identifies the consequences for theory and practice.

CHAPTER 7: DISCUSSION, RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

7.0 Introduction

This concluding chapter of the thesis restates the research aims and questions. Having outlined the findings from the study in Chapters 4, 5 and 6, this chapter summarises the key findings by reporting on the study's central themes. It then analyses the meaning of these empirical findings in the broader field of research and explains why these matters. This chapter outlines the study's limitations and offers recommendations for practical implementation and potential future research. The chapter closes with a summary and some concluding observations on the role of employability within the discipline of Interior Architecture and Design in the HE curriculum.

7.1 The Research Aims and Research Questions

This thesis was motivated by the proposition that the English employability-HE interface would be better understood by drawing upon students' lived experiences and their feelings of employability when it exists within the HE undergraduate curriculum. Literature on HE employability has been primarily from the employer and policymaker perspective, with, until recently, limited studies that draw on the lived experience of students.

The research conducted for this thesis found that university employability is developed and delivered in many ways. The study reveals how IAD participants engaged with the specific employability strategies they met at the sample universities that took part in the study. These insights could inform universities on how the employability agenda can be articulated and delivered in a manner that takes account of the student's voice. This research focuses on the providers of IAD in England.

The research has drawn upon data collected between May and June 2021 from twenty-four participants in six different university settings in England. The study drew upon focus group material with participants alongside the literature, documentation, and website material available in the six study localities. The key research questions that guided the thesis were:

- **RQ1**: How do students conceptualise employability?
- **RQ2:** How do students experience employability?
- **RQ3**: What do students perceive as the critical employability barriers and facilitators?

7.2 Discussion of Critical Findings

This section will examine and discuss how the key findings contribute to the broader field of research. In doing so, the central themes reported here will reflect those reported in the findings chapters (see 4.0, p.132 & 5.0, p.159 & 6.0, p.186). This chapter will synthesise the results and find implications for future practice.

7.2.1 Employability in the Curriculum

Conceptualising Employability

A key theme from the study was that most participants described employability as a challenging journey. They used metaphors such as *mountain, ladder*, and *obstacle,* with the end destination securing a *good* graduate job. The significance of this work is that the research highlights that concerns about graduating into an uncertain career landscape weighed heavily on many participants, citing increased competition for graduate jobs, a lack of local opportunities, financial pressures, and the pressure to succeed as key concerns. Smith et al., (2018) suggest that the probability of students being employed six months after graduation and in a graduate-level role is not related to undergraduate skills acquisition, but can be affected by the class of

degree, the subject studied, prior educational achievement and social class. This finding also builds on existing research by the Careers 2032 report (2022), Tomlinson (2016) and Ahola & Kivinen (1999).

Participants in the study reported in this thesis expressed difficulties navigating and planning their career journeys, which appeared to affect the level of control participants had over their employability. While a few participants proved self-management in their employability journey and regarded it as part of their lifelong professional development, the data shows that most participants felt they had little agency over their future careers. This lack of self-management may suggest these participants had an external locus of control (Rotter, 1990). Rotter (1990) highlights that those with an external locus of control believe that external forces, such as fate and chance, decide one's future rather than careful career planning. These results should be considered when academics and university careers teams consider how they can help students understand their locus of control, as doing so may allow students to feel more in control of their career planning.

Several participants highlighted a disconnect between knowledge and action, affecting their preparedness for the workplace. This thesis supplies evidence that these participants were concerned that what they knew was not enough for the workplace and that this misalignment between knowing and doing, termed as the Knowing-Doing-Gap by Pfeffer & Sutton (2000), would affect their ability to secure a good graduate job. This finding substantiates work by Tomlinson (2017), who highlights the importance of employer bridging through the development of work experience or other real-world employment opportunities. Tomlinson argues that bridges between formal education and future employment will advantage students if they wish to enter related fields of employment. When planning curriculum content, academics should consider these results so that a range of relevant industry-focused events are programmed into the curriculum to provide students with opportunities to synthesise their knowledge with the action of doing. These examples illustrate multiple influences on students' values and behaviours about their approach towards employability.

Lived Experiences of Employability

The significance of this work is that the research reveals that participants valued various approaches to employability and felt the resources offered by central university employability teams, combined with the informal nature of studio support, brought significant benefits. This finding adds to the body of knowledge by Pegg et al., (2012), who highlight that employability taught in close partnership with the university career services but led by academic staff who know the students and the context in which they work, is beneficial to the learning outcomes.

Participants in the research reported in this thesis appreciated employability when it was embedded within credit-bearing modules and through taught delivery. However, the data shows that some informal approaches appeared more ad-hoc and dependent on the working relationship between the tutor and student, focusing on individuals rather than the cohort. This finding is substantiated by literature from Bathmaker et al., (2013), who, along with Boyes (2022), show that this approach can reinforce patterns of inequality in student experiences.

Findings from this study suggest that a small number of IAD participants showed “career maturity” (Parsons, 1989) as they considered measures that would positively affect the outcome of getting a job. These participants regarded their career planning as an ongoing part of their lifelong professional development. However, a fifth of participants in this study did not engage with centralised employability teams, citing that they needed to be made aware of the resources and services available or did not see the relevance at the time. This inconsistent engagement led to unequal experiences between participants and across universities, raising significant questions about how universities ensure equity and parity of student experience.

The research highlights that the timings and frequency of career-related events and activities impact student engagement and must be carefully considered throughout the course programme. It adds evidence to research by O'Donoghue & Rabin (1999, p.103), who, through their study, highlight that many students have ‘present biassed tendencies' rather than a future orientation. This further substantiates research by

Tomlinson and Holmes (2017), who find that undergraduate students only think about life after university intermittently and in minor detail when making career decisions.

These findings should be considered by universities and academics when developing inclusive curriculum models to ensure that a range of formal and informal employability practices are available, fair, and accessible to all students. Universities and academic departments should also consider how students are inducted into the institution's centralised career departments and that the academic teams reinforce the importance of these services.

The research reveals that many participants took a passive approach to their employability, which suggests that students struggled to think about and plan for their future employment. These findings concur with Tomlinson’s study (2008), which highlights that students rely on being provided with career information rather than seeking it out themselves. The data collected here contributes to a more precise understanding of student behaviours and values concerning employability within the curriculum, and academic teams can use it to improve the support they provide to their students. It can also help academic and careers teams address issues around content delivery, relevance and timeliness when deciding how the employability offer is articulated to students.

It was noted in the literature review of this thesis in Chapter 2 (p.34) that the delivery of live briefs is an essential element of the employability agenda in IAD courses. Sara (2011) highlights that the quality of the student experience depends on the positive collaborations and partnerships between academics, employers, and careers services. However, the research reported in this thesis reveals that participant experiences of live projects varied widely across the six universities. Some participants wanted more substantial involvement by external stakeholders beyond a first project introduction. This thesis supplies evidence that participants wanted more access to practical opportunities to offer them valuable learning experiences and a potentially beneficial network of professional contacts.

The findings here are essential as they add to the body of evidence by The Careers 2032 Report (AGCAS et al., 2022), which finds that a collaborative approach can build student confidence across various situations. In addition, the HEA (2006) contends that universities must design a pedagogy that reflects professional practice, highlighting the need for universities to develop more sustained and meaningful relationships between academics, industry partners and university employability teams.

The literature on employability embedded within the curriculum shows some positive outcomes that link employer involvement in course design to positive employability outcomes. Mason et al., (2009) give examples of employer engagement, including guest lectures, supplying ideas and material for student projects, and commenting on the suitability of course content for future employability. Thune & Støren (2015) also give examples of employer-led involvement that include guest lectures, field visits, coursework in collaboration with an employer, research projects with employers and participation in practice periods. Higdon's research (2016) finds that undergraduates want connections with people from the industry to understand how the industry works. Higdon highlights the importance of these industry contacts in gaining work experience and finding paid work.

The data presented contributes to a clearer understanding of the meaningful value that participants place on employability activities inside the curriculum that contribute to their employability.

7.2.2 Employability Beyond the Curriculum

The Value of Work Placements

This work is significant as the research uncovers how employability is experienced beyond the formal curriculum. The data from this study reveals that how HE institutions help to organise placement opportunities varies widely between

institutions, students, and the type of work placements available. This substantiates research by The Department for Education (DfE, 2021), which in its report explored the value that work placements offered individuals while seeking to understand the varied nature of work placements across institutions, subject choices, and regions. The DfE (2021) review found that students' feel challenged in organising and taking up these work placements and work experience opportunities.

The data reported in this thesis supplies evidence that industry work placements were widely perceived as beneficial to participants in enhancing their employability. Participants perceived that educational skills combined with industry experiences would lead to a good degree qualification and graduate job. These student perspectives reflect research by The Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2012), which finds that graduates who have taken placement years are more likely to be in employment and have, on average, 8% higher pay than those who do not take a placement year.

Other studies (Blackwell et al., 2001; Reddy & Moores, 2006; Moores & Reddy, 2012) highlight that doing a placement has a positive effect on the likelihood of higher salaries and employment within six months of graduation. In a similar vein, Green (2011) and Santer (2010) in their research argue that while taking part in placement does not always result in increased academic performance, it does consistently and positively relate to better graduate employment prospects.

The research reported in this thesis emphasises the importance of participants understanding the working environment. This finding aligns with literature from Youngson (2016) and Higdon (2016), as participants regard work placements as good opportunities to experience the ‘real world’ and to test out an area of work before fully committing to it. Significantly, participants believe that completing a work placement will help to expand networks and enable them to gain insight into a particular field while being exposed to modern techniques and industry practices. This finding builds on existing research by Brooks and Youngson (2016), who highlight that completion of work placement opportunities can build social and

cultural capital amongst students and, in turn, positively influence graduate employment outcomes.

Barriers to work placements

Despite positive perspectives from many participants, this work is significant as the data reported in this thesis supplies evidence of a clear disparity between those participants who want to do a placement and those who do one. Participants in the study noted the significant barriers they had experienced in sourcing placement opportunities, which suggests broader structural inequalities impact graduate prospects for specific student groups. When reporting on inequalities, Allen & van der Velden (2001) found evidence that employers can be biased, as they may select graduates based on work experience, gender, and social background. This may explain why individuals with similar certifications gain varying degrees of success in the graduate job market. A further important finding was that participants reported needing more local placement opportunities in regional cities and hometowns, all worsened by the cost-of-living crisis.

This finding resonates with the work of Tomlinson (2012), who argues that UK universities' employability agendas actively disadvantage specific lower socio-economic groupings and favour middle-class students. Divan et al., (2022) argue that whilst published studies highlight that completing a work placement as part of an undergraduate degree relates to a positive advantage in the employment market, evidence is scarce on whether this advantage is experienced by all students regardless of factors such as background, gender, or ethnicity. Research by Callender et al., (2018) notes that the provision of multiple university choices can produce social inequality, highlighting that some students do not make choices that serve their interests. For instance, some students do not select the HE institution and programme that may best advance their career, as the research notes that they may not have been given adequate information on which to make a decision. These issues must be examined further so that universities develop effective strategies to reduce inequities, supply targeted support in accessing work placement

opportunities, and facilitate students in making the right decision for them on their university choice and chosen career.

Participants in the study report that the challenges of gaining work placements and work experience were immense. Participants reported examples of employers unwilling to provide placement opportunities to students while advertising for graduates with two years of industry experience. Seemingly, employers want the benefit of employer experience but without the burden of providing it. Participants regarded this lack of experience as restrictive for their future careers. These results add evidence to research from Thomas (2022), who believes that employers need to open-up more placement and work experience opportunities to help students develop the relevant graduate skills they need in a post-pandemic workplace. This element is especially suitable in regional towns and cities; as already noted, a lack of pertinent experience can affect individuals' future career development and salary potential (Montacute et al., 2021; Joyce et al., 2019).

The research from the study reported in this thesis reveals that a lack of practical hands-on experience gained through work placements has led some universities to attempt to close these gaps by offering in-house work placements and in-module opportunities to connect and collaborate with industry partners. Some participants were offered placement schemes to work part-time in various university departments. This move shows that some universities are rethinking their placement offer to ensure students develop the skills, hands-on knowledge, and application that businesses look for in their graduates.

This finding adds evidence to research from McKinsey and Company (2022), who argue that university work experience can contribute 40 to 60 per cent of a worker's human capital. However, the report finds that universities must do more to support students, including; providing career counselling and guidance (Dougherty et al., 2017); offering career development workshops and seminars; encouraging students to take part in extracurricular activities and internships; partnering with employers to

create co-op and internship programs; offering job placement services to help students find jobs after graduation.

The study reveals other challenges participants faced with work placements. Several participant narratives highlighted that financial pressures had directly affected their decision not to undertake a placement, potentially affecting their future earning potential. Findings here are of importance as they add to the body of evidence by The Sutton Trust (Montacute et al., 2021), Eyles et al., (2022), the IFS Deaton Review of Inequalities (Overman et al., 2022) and Callender et al., (2018), which highlight that a university experience is not equally experienced by all social and ethnic groups living in different parts of the UK. The report finds persistent inequalities of class and ethnicity through institutional and regional differences that are "deeply entrenched" (IFS, 2018, p.22). Universities should consider these findings to ensure that all students have access to a wide range of opportunities that will develop and enhance their employability.

Despite these barriers, the significance of this work is that the research data from this study highlights that many participants felt pressure to do a placement. Some participants revealed they were *'actively encouraged'* and *'pushed'* to do a placement by the university where they were studying. However, despite this institutional emphasis on the value of taking part in a work placement, some participants reported being under-supported by their university in their placement search. Participants' accounts stressed the need for more effective and prompt university support in sourcing work placements, especially when looking further afield for placement and job opportunities.

This pressure on students to do work placements may result from the increased accountability that HE has come under through the LEO dataset and Graduate Outcomes survey (HESA, 2023); as already noted, the research suggests that work placements can positively influence GE outcomes (Fliers, 2018). However, some critics (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017) argue that the employment destinations of university graduates have become a measure of a university's success and that this

emphasis continues to increase the focus of employability on universities and, therefore, increase the pressure to deliver it.

The results show that participants are aware of the competition they face when looking for jobs, which builds on existing research by Brennan et al., (2010). Many participants highlighted that they felt the need to be *different* or to have *something extra*, over and above their academic qualification in IAD. Participants reported that they felt the need for an *edge* over their *competitors* (fellow graduates), but this was a *fuzzy* concept open to interpretation. The data from this study adds credence to research by Bathmaker et al., (2013), who highlight that as more people get similar qualifications, it becomes vital for graduates to show unique qualities to add value to their employability and to make them stand out.

This unknowing about the complexities of the job market is reflective of the pressure on individuals to do all they can to get a job. Tomlinson and Holmes (2017) argue that increased competition, consumerism, and declining state support for HE adds pressure to individuals to do all they can to be employable. The result is that instead of employability being viewed in a broader political and economic context, it is reduced to the level of the individual.

Interestingly, this research finds that despite participants being aware of and articulating the value of work placements, they were also acutely aware of the inherent structural barriers they faced. Given this, universities must be better equipped to identify disadvantaged students early in their journey and promote paid internships and virtual work placements that offer increased financial support. Universities must consider these results and provide the means for all students to develop their career credentials. Students should be able to demonstrate their adaptability through exposure to a range of situations, which in turn will help to increase confidence and develop professional networks.

7.2.3 “Who - and - What You Know”

The Value of Capitals

The literature review in Chapter 2 highlighted that a significant element of the employability agenda in HE relates to graduate skills and human capital development. However, this thesis supplies evidence that participants believed their industry connections, networks and ‘who they knew’ - their social capital - would influence their success in the workplace, often beyond university. Participants revealed that although many universities have local industry connections, there is a lack of university support for students looking outside these networks, making it difficult for students to access wider job opportunities.

It has already been noted that universities are recognised as environments for generating ‘employability capitals’ (Tomlinson, 2017). These include the acquisition of technical skills and knowledge gained through a degree programme (human capital), but also through the acquisition of networks that bring the student closer to their target employers (social capital) and through the behaviours and values that align with their target employer organisation (cultural capital), (Tomlinson, 2017). McCracken et al., (2015) refer to skills as currencies, noting that combining hard currencies (such as work experience and extra-curricular achievements) with soft currencies (such as interpersonal skills, appearance, and accent), results in ‘personal capital’. In doing so, he emphasises that the importance of “who you are as much as what you know is a key factor concerning employability (McCracken et al., 2015, p.91).

Social Relationships, Networks, and Values

This work highlights that participants want the industry to be more connected to the academic curriculum and for visiting professionals and alumni to be involved in the learning process. Participants in the study reported in this thesis highlight a lack of meaningful and sustained collaborations, connections and partnerships between universities and industry partners. Igwe et al., (2020), in their analysis of the factors

that decide the development of employability skills in HE, noted that to enhance students' human capital and employability skills, HE should focus on four specific areas, including critical thinking, connectivity, creativity and collaboration.

Higdon’s (2016) research finds that universities can help their graduates to be more employable by helping them in developing their networks. Tomlinson refers to keeping a good network of contacts through “meaningful and gainful interactions between graduates and employers” and “making graduates more directly visible to employers” (2017, p. 343). It has already been noted that participants wanted more access to practical opportunities that offer them valuable learning experiences and a potentially beneficial network of professional contacts.

Universities can achieve this by providing opportunities for students to meet with potential employers, attend networking events, and take part in mentoring programs. Careers services, in conjunction with course teams, have an essential role to play in creating short work placements, internships, and consultancy projects. These opportunities enable students to engage in projects with employers, which can supply a valuable stepping stone, particularly for students lacking social capital. Alongside this, universities need to provide opportunities for students to collaborate with peers on real-life group projects – virtually and in person – as these can offer valuable opportunities for students to meet people from campuses worldwide.

This thesis supplies evidence that participants recognise the importance of developing their cultural capital. Participants valued listening to employers' authentic voices, which helped to shape a greater understanding of the workplace (Higdon, 2016). Participants enjoyed hearing from alumni as it enabled them to start to picture their career path, gain more insight into potential career opportunities and take some of the fear out of the unknown. These exchanges enabled participants to explore their professional selves, understand how they might fit into a future world of work, and broaden their industry contacts and networks.

This finding is supported by Tomlinson (2017), who asserts that HE institutions must work hard to enhance cultural capital amongst diverse cohorts. As individuals show their 'social fit' within an organisation, they also develop confidence as they understand how to talk in different social groups or settings, which can positively affect their success in work or a career. However, Tomlinson supports that some graduates have more cultural capital than others, presenting equity challenges. This is reflected in the experiences of some of the research participants who spoke of a "magic ingredient" with regard to getting a job, and expressed uncertainty about "what is the magic I need to get the job?" (Elaina, Uni.03. L5. P_yes). Tomlinson (2017) asserts that HE institutions must work hard to enhance cultural capital to ensure students have equal opportunities. Universities can achieve this by direct employer engagement that may involve events, career fairs, and employer visits to generate a better understanding of what employers stand for and potentially offer.

The research in this thesis reveals that participants value being exposed to various circumstances, situations and events that challenge and engage them in critical thinking, promote learner autonomy, develop learner confidence, and expand their networks and connections. This finding may be illustrative of the multi-functionality of the university as courses try to strike the right balance between gaining knowledge, exposure to new situations and ensuring that students are equipped with the networks and skills they need to enter the workplace (Deboick, 2010).

Knowledge and Skills

An essential aspect of this study has been to better understand students' perspectives and experiences regarding the skills they believe are vital to them and their employability. The significance of this work is that the research reveals that most participants found that an essential feature of their time studying at university was preparing them for the future job market through acquiring knowledge and developing skills (Browne, 2010; Department for Business, 2009, 2011, 2015). However, the findings from the research reported in this thesis in Chapters 4, 5 and 6 highlighted that participants needed more support in their learning needs around career development skills and specialist digital technologies. Participants raised

concerns about their competency in specialist software, highlighting that they felt under-supported in their learning needs.

Participants found that more teaching of these critical skills was needed as they felt that they were left to *plug the gaps* and *fend for themselves*. Research by JISC (2019) and Knight (2019) highlights that some academics do not appear to be supported in keeping up to date with technological changes in the workplace, making it more difficult for them to support their students. Universities must support students to develop digital competencies by providing academics with proper in-house training and support or through specialist providers.

Several participants expressed this theme of *doing it for oneself*. For example, some participants did not feel that they had been supported to achieve career goals or in developing their CVs and Portfolios. Bridgestock (2009) argues that career-building skills are some of the most relevant skills graduates can develop before entering the job market in terms of being able to exploit job opportunities. However, varied participant experiences raise concerns over irregular and intermittent teaching of these essential aspects of employability across the six universities that took part in the focus group. It may also highlight issues around student engagement and attendance.

The uncertainty described by participants around their lack of knowledge of particular skills may be indicative of a degree of liminality (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2004), as they struggled to relate skills and knowledge to their career development, whereby some participants remained stuck in an 'in-between' state and became frustrated and lost confidence. One way of addressing this may be through a "skills week" that focuses on career-building activities with invited alumni and industry professionals to develop networks alongside skills.

The research from this study reveals that general employability skills - such as teamwork, problem-solving and communication, for instance - are regarded as meaningful and are valued by participants. Many participants believe that

showcasing these skills in CVs and Portfolios will help to improve their job prospects. The literature outlines that generic 'employability' skills are important to employers, and it suggests that discipline-specific skills alone are no longer sufficient for employers when recruiting (Tomlinson, 2008). Research from the ISE (2022) found that the unpredictability of the pandemic has resulted in employers increasing their focus on graduates' soft skills, placing more emphasis on graduates with the *right attitudes* such as self-motivation, critical thinking, curiosity, and resilience, which is seen to offer a continuous learning mindset and agility in the workplace.

The data presented significantly contributes to a clearer understanding of the meaningful value participants place on employability activities that contribute to their employability.

7.3 Summary of Findings by RQ

This section addresses how the findings help to answer the research questions.

7.3.1 RQ1. How do students conceptualise employability?

The research outlined in this thesis aimed to fill this gap by talking to IAD participants about their employability experiences with undergraduate degrees. These student voices reflected on their experiences, and this rich data should be used to inform and instruct university provision. Listening to the student's voice is commonplace at HEIs through student surveys at module, programme, and institutional levels and in the National Student Survey. Listening to the student's voice is well-established within HE debates (Dearing, 1997; Harvey, 1997; Neary, 2016). Indeed, Neary (2016) outlines that there have been many attempts to promote the development of student involvement in enhancing the quality of university life in UK HE. However, there is limited empirical research with students to understand how they are experiencing the employability agenda and little published work that captures the authentic student voice on this significant policy development. This research with IAD participants aimed to fill that gap by understanding

employability from students' own experiences and perspectives to inform future planning and practice of employability within HEI (Higher Education Institutions) provision.

The picture from the data reported in this thesis was much more complex, nuanced and challenging to the employability agenda. The data revealed that participants in a mass HE system have a complex set of responsibilities, family lives and paid work commitments that they juggle alongside their studies. Most participants talked about their motivations to study at HE level as they saw university as part of a journey to secure a *good* job or as a gateway to a better career. This finding further supports evidence from Ingleby (2015) and Stewart & Knowles (2000).

Participants conceptualised employability as developing a range of specialist skills alongside more general skills to succeed in the labour market. For students studying IAD, subject-specific knowledge was a strong part of their employability, with close connections between curricula content and, for many students, their future target employment. Given the specialist nature of work in IAD, human capital is foundational to graduates' outcomes. However, even in these specialist fields, critics decide that this is insufficient (Tomlinson et al., 2017) and needs to be combined with more fluid, career-relevant soft skills (Bridgestock, 2009). Given this increasing focus on soft skills, the findings from this thesis are relevant to a wide range of vocational focused courses in HE beyond the discipline of IAD, such as nursing, teacher training, law and engineering, etc.

Findings from the study reveal that concerns about graduating into an uncertain career landscape weighed heavily on many participants, citing increased competition for graduate jobs, a lack of local opportunities, financial pressures, and the pressure to succeed as key concerns (Smith et al., 2018; Careers 2032 Report (2022); Tomlinson, 2016; Ahola & Kivinen, 1999).

There was evidence that some participants had difficulty navigating and planning their career journeys. They felt uncertain about their future careers and were identified as lacking in agency, which suggested that some participants had an external locus of control (Rotter, 1990). In contrast, only a few participants showed career maturity (Parsons, 1989) and considered the measures they needed to take to positively affect the outcome of securing a job and starting their careers. These participants saw their employability as an ongoing project for lifelong professional development (Tomlinson, 2012). The findings illustrate that participants wanted to see more connection between education and industry as they identified gaps between knowledge and experience (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2000). Participants highlighted concerns that this misalignment would affect their ability to secure a good graduate job. Once again these findings are pertinent to a wide range of vocationally focused courses in HE.

To summarise, findings highlighted that IAD participants conceptualised employability as part of a journey to secure a *good* job or as a gateway to a better career. Findings reveal that some participants juggled complex sets of responsibilities alongside their studies. Some participants illustrated a lack of agency as they found it difficult to navigate and plan their career journeys. Many participants felt the need to develop more general skills alongside specialist IAD skills, to succeed in the workplace. Findings outlined here could be used to inform improvements in employability support and provision for IAD students and those in other courses with a vocational focus, and recommendations are outlined towards the end of this chapter.

7.3.2 RQ2. How do students experience employability?

The student experience of employability was varied across the universities taking part in the study. Participants discussed how their requirements for career support changed at various stages of their educational journeys. This illustrates that universities need to consider students' lived experiences and take into account the

diversity in the student body and the changing job market, by supplying relevant and accessible services and support. Participants identified that more personalised and individualised support was needed on a 1-1 basis, claiming that the support from the central employability and careers teams was too generic with a lack of focus on the creative industries. Participants identified the need for a more consistent and targeted approach to employability at the course programme level, to help students keep on track with this important aspect of their careers.

Some participants felt the support offered by institutional employability teams was crucial, and they valued it when it was embedded within credit-bearing modules. Participants valued the mix of virtual and in-person timetabled events, interview preparation and help searching for work opportunities. However, many participants did not feel that the employability support was well timed, communicated or articulated by their university's employability teams and academic staff. The data shows that many participants felt they had to be proactive to access support, leading to a lack of engagement. This potentially means that those students who need the most help were not accessing the support available. This may be due to a lack of agency, social capital, or structural inequalities (The Levelling Up the United Kingdom Report, 2022; Bathmaker et al., 2013; Boyes, 2022).

The data found that participants were more engaged when employability was delivered through consistent and clearly defined modules and curricula, with content delivered by academics and external practitioners, and with little need for students to be proactive in their learning (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017). Many participants lacked ownership of their career-building skills and displayed a passive approach to developing them, illustrating ‘present biassed tendencies’ (O'Donoghue & Rabin, 1999, p.103). Based on these participant experiences, universities should build employability content more closely into the curriculum, so that students are compelled to engage.

In contrast, the informal nature of the studio brought significant benefits to some participants. However, this support was provided on a more ad-hoc basis and the

organisation of it appeared to be dependent on a positive working relationship between individual tutor and student. This informal approach was focused on small student numbers rather than the wider cohort, raising concerns about the parity and equity of experience across different student groups (Bathmaker et al., 2013; Boyes, 2022).

As the responsibility for developing workplace skills has shifted from employers to individuals and universities (Council for Industry and Higher Education, 1996), there has been a shift towards a greater variety of integrated and flexible programs, including live projects. It is, therefore, important to understand students' lived experience of live projects. Participant experiences of live projects varied widely across the six universities taking part in the study. It was clear from the data that a positive live project experience was shaped by meaningful collaborations, connections and partnerships between clients, design studios, employers, academics, and universities (Sara, 2011).

However, the study found that meaningful external engagement needed to be improved for some participants. When successful, participants found that live projects were good for developing important skills such as communication, collaboration, confidence, teamwork, time management and professionalism (AGCAS et al., 2022; Pegg et al., 2012; Thune & Støren, 2015; Hidden, 2016). Live projects also gave students greater industry insight and helped to expand their networks. However, some participants revealed a distinct lack of engagement from external stakeholders, and participants believed that a 'tick-box' culture meant that although these opportunities were offered, the experience did not live up to expectations and was therefore misrepresented. Participants wanted universities to offer more practical opportunities for students to broaden their learning experiences and professional networks.

To summarise, findings highlighted that IAD participants valued careers support when it was embedded within credit-bearing modules and closely aligned to the curriculum. However, participants felt that the support from the central employability

and careers teams was too generic with a lack of focus on the creative industries. Participants highlighted a preference for more personalised career support delivered by academics and external practitioners alongside central careers teams, and they valued this when there were opportunities for 1-1 provision.

Most participants displayed a passive approach to developing career-building skills, highlighting that students who needed the most help were not accessing the support available. Some careers support was provided on a more ad-hoc basis highlighting issues around parity and equity of experience across different student groups. Participants valued practical opportunities for them to broaden their learning experiences and professional networks through live projects, but these fell short of expectations when there was a lack of engagement from external partners. Findings outlined here should be used to inform and instruct improvements in employability support and provision for IAD students, and recommendations are outlined towards the end of this chapter.

7.3.3 RQ3. What do students perceive as the critical employability barriers and facilitators?

A finding that appeared strongly across the focus groups was centred around work placements. Participant's experience of work placements was seen as a mixed blessing. The data reported in this thesis supplied evidence that industry work placements were widely perceived as beneficial by participants in enhancing their employability. These student perspectives reflect research by The Department for Business Innovation & Skills (2012); Blackwell et al., (2001); Reddy & Moores, (2006); Moores & Reddy (2012). Participants recognised the importance of developing their career-building skills (Bridgestock, 2009) through a placement, as they believed this would affect their performance at university and future career prospects. Participants also found that work placements supplied a good opportunity to add practical industry experience to their university education, which was seen to be beneficial in bridging skills, knowledge, and experience gaps (Tomlinson, 2017). Participants found that this gave real value to work placements. Without this, participants experienced

However, gaining access to placements and work experience was problematic for many participants (Thomas, 2022). Participants reported a lack of local placement opportunities in regional cities and hometowns, worsened by the cost-of-living crisis (The Sutton Trust, 2021; Overman et al., 2022). Participants described the significant barriers they had experienced in sourcing placement opportunities, which suggests broader structural inequalities that will affect graduate prospects for certain student groups (Allen & van der Velden, 2001; Tomlinson, 2012; Divan et al., 2022). Some participants regarded not having industry work experience as the most significant barrier to getting a graduate job.

The data this thesis reports on reveals that how HE institutions help and organise placement opportunities varied widely between institutions, participants, and the type of work placements available (DfE, 2021). Participants spoke candidly about the pressures they faced around work placements. Some participants revealed that they felt pressured by their university to develop skills and experience through paid internships and work placements to develop their body of work and experience (Smith et al., 2023). However, some participants felt under-supported by their universities in preparing for and searching for work placements (AGCAS et al., 2022; McCowan (2015). When searching for work placements, participants experienced a range of practical, material, logistical, structural, and emotional barriers. This included:

- limited local opportunities to obtain relevant industry work experience
- financial limitations that impacted their ability to do a placement
- familial pressures that limited the type and location of work placements
- the impact that COVID-19 had on work placements being cancelled or cut short
- the limiting effect that fear, anxiety and a lack of confidence had on placement searching and future career development.

Participants were aware of the competitiveness of the IAD graduate job market as some felt a need to offer employers something *different* or *extra* (Tomlinson, 2008). However, in the creative discipline of IAD, where competition for jobs is high, and the highest proportion of jobs are based in London and the South East of the UK, this can promote unfair access by shutting out those people who cannot afford to subsidise lowly or unpaid work placements or move from their local towns or cities (Smith et al., 2023).

Participant experiences highlighted that universities need to be more flexible with their placement models to make placement achievable and accessible for broader groups of students. The findings also illustrated that universities must be more supportive, flexible, and adaptable around the sourcing and timing of work placements, especially for those students looking further afield for placement and job opportunities. The research data for this study draws upon the experiences and insights of IAD participants significantly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. These participants, therefore, offer a particularly unique lived experience insight during an exceptionally changing time faced by those studying in HE.

The data illustrated that participants recognise social capital's key role in securing jobs in the arts and creative industries. Participants value the opportunities universities supply to expand their networks and connections, which are essential when looking for jobs. The data highlights that participants believe their industry connections, networks, and professional relationships - their social capital - significantly influence their placement and employment opportunities.

This thesis supplies evidence of the importance of developing students' social and cultural capital (Higdon, 2016; Tomlinson, 2017; Putnam, 2000) as some participants spoke of a *magic ingredient* with regard to getting a job. This uncertainty of the working environment and of their social fit within it, illustrates a lack of social and cultural capital as participants shoulder the responsibility of whether they will get a job or not, rather than acknowledging that other external forces outside of their control may play a part. The result is that employability becomes reduced to the level

of the individual when it should be viewed in a broader political and economic context (Tomlinson & Holmes, 2017).

The research highlights that participants value listening to employers' authentic voices as this helps to shape a greater understanding of the workplace. Participants appreciate hearing from alumni and employers about the realities of the workplace, highlighting the benefit of having access to mentors and role models in developing student self-efficacy and motivation. However, participants want universities to be more proactive in organising industry and alumni events to expand their industry connections. Participants highlight the need for universities to be better at promoting and communicating their employability offer and what they do, to the wider student body. The participant experiences here reflect Tomlinson (2017), who asserts that HE institutions must work hard to enhance cultural capital to ensure students have equal opportunities.

The research reveals that most participants found that an essential feature of their time studying at university was preparing them for the future job market through acquiring knowledge and developing skills (Browne, 2010; Department for Business, 2009; 2011; 2015). However, some participants highlight a need for more support in career development skills and specialist digital technologies. Participants report feeling left to plug these gaps and *'fend for themselves'* resulting in a lack of confidence as they went into the job market, indicating a degree of liminality (Meyer & Land, 2003; 2004) as they struggle to relate skills and knowledge to their career development.

To summarise, work placements were widely perceived as beneficial by participants in enhancing their employability. However, participants identified significant barriers in sourcing placement opportunities, suggesting broader structural inequalities alongside a general unwillingness by industry to provide these important opportunities. The findings reveal that the support in organising placement opportunities varies widely between HE institutions. Some participants reveal they feel immense pressure by their university to undertake paid internships and work

placements. However, some participants felt under-supported by their universities, particularly those looking further afield. The data illustrates that participants want universities to be more supportive in sourcing placements and more flexible around when placements take place. Participants experienced a multitude of barriers when searching for and undertaking placements, including practical, material, logistical, structural, cultural and emotional barriers. Participants value the opportunities universities supply to expand their networks and connections as they recognise social capital's key role in sourcing jobs in the arts and creative industries. However, participants want universities to be more proactive in organising regular industry and alumni events to expand industry connections. The data reveals that participants understand that university is preparing them for the future job market through acquiring knowledge and developing skills. However, some participants highlight a need for more support in their learning around career development skills and specialist digital technologies to better prepare them for their future careers.

This section illustrates how the findings answer the research questions. IAD participants conceptualised employability and reflected on their employability experiences. Participants exposed critical employability barriers and facilitators. This has revealed a source of rich data that must be used to inform improvements in employability support and provision for IAD students. The research findings will be shared in a short executive summary with the department (in the institution where the research took place) to discuss the practical applications of this research for supporting IAD undergraduate students in their employability journey. Recommendations are outlined towards the end of this chapter.

7.4 Original Contributions to Knowledge and Limitations of the Study

From the review of the academic literature it was evident that there was a mismatch between different stakeholders' understanding of employability in HE. There was also a significant lack of research which explored undergraduate student stakeholder

experience and perspective on the employability agenda. The aim of this doctoral study was to address the gap in knowledge by presenting qualitative accounts of undergraduate students' lived experience within the context of IAD.

Generalisability of the research findings

Given that this is an interpretivist study seeking to explore the lived experience of employability for participants across a range of HE institutions in England, the study was not designed to generate and test a hypothesis. Rather, its aim was to understand students' lived experiences and perceptions of employability through a detailed exploration of how students experience, interpret, and interact with the rapidly developing employability agenda within HEIs, within a real-life context. I engaged with participants in the study to uncover their beliefs, values and perspectives, and this became the basis of the research. This study narrates the real-life stories of participants, and this research has been used to construct and refine theories about their social world and experiences.

I make no claims in this doctoral thesis that my findings have total universality across more general HE contexts. However, I do contend that some of the patterns and themes from participant narratives may have a broader commonality with similar HE provision. Further, given how the literature highlights the role HE institutions play in the broader economy, specifically in developing GE, it is not unreasonable to suggest that what this study has revealed about participant experiences of employability in HE, would resonate (to a larger or lesser degree) with other vocationally oriented course HE provision. Similarly, whilst IAD courses within HE provision are inevitably diverse in terms of their provision, there are arguably some shared characteristics, i.e. they are typically vocational degree qualifications, which might provide sufficient grounds for some level of generalisability to be proposed.

Claims for originality and strengths of the study

In addition to earlier originality claims (see section 1.4.2, p.31) I propose that the study can make further claims on a number of fronts: subject originality; contribution to methodological knowledge.

Subject originality

Following an extensive review of education literature I propose that this is the first doctoral-level academic qualitative study examining employability through a student lens, specifically students studying in post-1992 universities in England, and as such it provides a new set of understandings of this under-researched group of stakeholders.[26] The following contributions are noted as significant to empirical knowledge:

- The first fundamental contribution to knowledge is by revealing how participants **conceptualise employability** in the curriculum as part of a learning *journey* that they are engaged with and a key goal of this journey is to secure a good graduate job (shown in Chapter 4, p.132). The language utilised by many of the participants showed that whilst some of them felt equipped to navigate this messy and uncertain journey, the qualitative data provides new information on the biggest sources of concern for students as they recognise the obstacles and barriers that hinder their employability journey; those being social, economic, cultural, emotional and physical. As such, this study builds upon the pioneering work of Higdon et al., (2017) and provides useful new and original information on the student voice and their perseverance to develop a career in design.

- More specifically, a significant finding of this study that will contribute to the literature are the **structural barriers that prohibited students from participating in work placements;** it was revealed that geography, financial costs incurred through travel, the wider cost of living crisis, and caring responsibilities were all identified (see Chapter 5, p.159). The literature review of this thesis noted that work experience gained through a placement is an important way in which students develop essential life skills and can serve as a pivotal starting point in a students employability journey. Evidence in a report for The Sutton Trust (Montacute et al.,, 2021) suggests work

[26] The QAA (2019) notes that an integral element in successfully embedding employability in the curricula is understanding and incorporating students' perspectives on the skills and experience they are acquiring through their studies.

placements provide students in HE with an important first step into the workplace. However, the Sutton Trust report also notes that students from poorer backgrounds are less likely to take up work placements than their middle class peers. In their report "The University of Life" (Montacute et al., 2021) noted that costs are often a barrier for working class students. They cite research where 20% of working class students who did not take up a work experience placement during university could not afford to do so. My own research adds to the literature which demonstrates that there are many socio-economic factors that are outside a student's immediate control that can impact on their ability to secure work placements (McCraken, 2015., Tomlinson, 2017).

- The study contributes new understanding to how participants feel that employability is a slippery and unknown concept as they exhibit fear and anxiety of developing important career building skills. The findings reveal a picture of students' uncertainty about their futures and a sense of **disconnect between their experience of higher education and the future workplace,** as they reveal a fear of the unknown resulting in a lack of personal confidence. This builds on the threshold concept theory by Meyer & Land (2003; 2004), (see Chapter 6, p.186). This study is important as it posits understanding around when and why some students struggle to relate skills and knowledge to their career development. This will serve an important diagnostic purpose in alerting course teams to areas of the curriculum where students are likely to encounter troublesome knowledge and experience conceptual difficulty, thereby informing programme design.

- Despite universities adopting elaborate and specific strategies for enhancing the employability of students including the role of university career services, the research reveals a **mismatch between what students say they need compared with the support they receive at university.** The Sutton Trust (Montacute et al., 2021) highlights concerns that disadvantaged students are less likely to make use of career services than more advantaged peers. The

qualitative data in my doctoral research provides new information on the student lived experience of employability with insights into how structured employability support is accessed within the university, and also the importance of more informal and hidden practices within the IAD studio setting.

- **My work confirms and adds to Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capital model.** Whilst the dominant discourse used by employers and policy makers focus on Human Capital Theory model promoting the need for employability skills, the findings of this doctoral study aligns with Tomlinson whose theory provides a lense from which to view the student experience of employability linked to five employability capitals: human, social, cultural, identity and psychological. Tomlinson supports that some graduates have more capital than others, presenting equity challenges. In this doctoral study I consider that some participants experience uncertainty of the working environment and of their social and cultural fit within it, illustrating a lack of social and cultural capital. These individuals shoulder the responsibility of their success or otherwise, rather than acknowledging that other external forces outside of their control may play a part.

Contributions to methodological knowledge

In addition to the empirical contribution this doctoral study contributes to methodological knowledge:

- Methodologically, the study **supplies a deep insight into the lived experience within the 'real-world' context of several contrasting English universities**. The methodological approach results in a more nuanced set of insights with a broad array of evidence around participants' employability experiences when embedded into the curriculum. I claim further originality because of the inclusion of multiple focus groups across a range of universities which offers a more holistic and arguably richer view of the student experience. The research contributes to the pedagogical debate and

adds to the field of research within the interior architecture and design programme. The empirical data collected from this research was conducted under exceptional circumstances between May 2021 and June 2021. It draws upon the experiences and insights of IAD participants significantly affected by COVID-19 pandemic. These participants, therefore, offer a particularly unique lived experience insight during a particularly challenging time faced by those studying in HE.

Limitations

Although this doctoral thesis offers many insights and practical constructions to the literature, as with every research project there are some limitations which are acknowledged as follows:

- In adopting a micro-scale research approach, it is recognised that it poses some limitations. Using the focus group method, I collected data from a reasonable sample of participants from six universities with unique characteristics. Leung (2015, n.d) highlights that most qualitative research studies are meant to study a “specific issue or phenomenon in a certain population or ethnic group, of a focused locality in a particular context, hence generalizability of qualitative research findings is usually not an expected attribute".

- This data has collected a range of rich and detailed insights and experiences that would not have been possible with a larger cohort of participants. Braun & Clarke, (2013, p. 50) categorise suggestions by the type of data collection and the size of the project (‘small’, ‘medium’, or ‘large’). For small projects, 6–10 participants are recommended for interviews and 2–4 for focus groups. The sample size selected was resource-intensive and time-consuming. Participants were in a more natural environment than they would have been in an interview setting. Kreuger (1993, p.19) highlights that participants are less likely to be controlled by the interviewer in this format as they are ‘influencing

and influenced by others - just as they are in real life” and the format of the focus group enabled me to obtain multiple views and attitudes.

- The study could have attracted a more diverse group of participants to take part. I did include a range of institutions in terms of geography and size. However, from this search, there were limitations of the courses that responded to my request to take part in the research. There were also limitations within these courses on the number of participants who responded to my request to take part. This impact may have been due to the timings of the focus groups (May 2021) in that many participants were busy finishing their final project work. However, this was also when many participants were thinking about employability. Those conducting further research may wish to expand on the number of universities taking part in the study and pay close attention to the times of any focus groups or interviews to maximise student engagement. This research did not specifically focus on equality, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) matters because of the sample size; however, this is something that further researchers may wish to focus on.

- The research could have focused more on understanding the distinct characteristics of each student who took part in the research - for example, gender, ethnicity, disability, mature, commuter students, etc. This could have supplied a much richer data set to contextualise the findings. However, I tried to mitigate these limitations by adopting a purposeful sampling approach, allowing me to focus on specific areas of interest and gather in-depth data. It is also commonly used in small-scale studies with limited sample sizes. I used an open-ended approach to posing questions, such as “Tell me about…” (Litosseliti, 2007). This approach helps students to reflect on their development and find skills for further development. Therefore, future research should explore these characteristics: gender, ethnicity, disability, mature, commuter students, etc.

- A further limitation concerns the document review. While this review enabled me to gather and organise background information and gain supplementary research data, it also required a level of investigative skill as different levels of information were available within different documents, leading to more searching to fill gaps. I was also mindful of the potential of biases, within both the documents and from me as the researcher. Bowen and O'Leary state that it is important to thoroughly evaluate and investigate the subjectivity of documents and your understanding of their data to preserve the credibility of your research (2009; 2014). To mitigate this, I set out a clear process for document capture that incorporated a range of evaluative steps and measures as put forward by O'Leary's (2014) eight-step process.

- A final limitation is that the original intention of the research was to meet participants and staff in the universities in a face-to-face setting, which would have allowed a more natural flow to the focus groups. The impact of COVID made it necessary to transfer all interactions remotely. Whilst this had advantages in that I was able to meet students more easily from a much wider geographical spread than if done in person, I would have ideally liked to have visited the universities and gained a richer understanding of the student environment. However, a benefit of using a synchronous approach was that participants' first reactions and opinions were more spontaneous (than asynchronous), which may have resulted in more reliable results. This approach also gave me more comprehensive geographical access to participants than would have happened if they had been taking place face-to-face.

7.5 Recommendations

As noted above, the research findings in this study have contributed to a greater understanding of the students' lived employability experience within the IAD undergraduate curriculum. Having interpreted the findings, this section details several recommendations for various practical applications that respond to the data

results. These are arranged by organisation. It is recognised that due to the breadth of the term employability, these recommendations are generalised; there is no one-size-fits-all set of interventions. Nevertheless, the data from this study could supply case study material for universities to consider their practice.

7.5.1 Universities

Universities need to be more aware of and respond to the socio-economic status and wider structural barriers that can significantly affect a graduate's entry into the paid labour market.

- Universities need to better recognise the impact that COVID-19 has had on graduate employment and opportunities for career development and the vital role that career and employability professionals play in supporting graduates. As a result, they should explore the extension of access to the relevant university support and infrastructure, e.g., via career and skills development online learning resources.
- Although the proportion of students undertaking sandwich work placements has been shrinking over recent years, there is a danger of universities seeing work placements as the gold standard for work experience. Universities could embed flexible placements into the curriculum (rather than part of sandwich years) and explore a range of scenarios that will enable broader cohorts of students to take part in short and long placement-type experiences (virtual, physical and remote), across a wider range of locations, and at different times of the year, including the long summer vacation. Opportunities could include the creation of professional studios in the university, aligned to tutor expertise and industry partners. This would enable students to undertake small externally focused projects and enable them to develop their experience, confidence and professional networks. If universities want students to do work placements, they need to be much more proactive in building relationships with partner organisations in the creative arts to help more students secure work placements. This must be on a regional, national and international level.

- Universities must show how disadvantaged students can be provided with explicit and improved support. For example, better promoted paid internships and virtual work placements with increased financial support. This will help students add to their career credentials, expand their networks, develop confidence, and increase adaptability across various situations.
- Universities must better draw on alumni networks to provide targeted support to students through the provision of role models and mentoring. Developing more robust alumni networks will help courses develop relevant industry connections. Universities need to put the proper systems in place so that courses can easily access alumni details.
- Universities must ensure that staff have the right skills to support students. Academics must be provided with the time (in their workload planning) to undertake proper training in the learning of a wide range of modern technologies, (from virtual learning environments to simulations and subject-specific resources) so that they can deliver excellent digital experiences to students. Universities must prepare students for the workplace by teaching specialist skills and investing further in digital skills development. Students must be given proper access and support to learn specialist software and digital tools at university so that they graduate as confident and capable designers

7.5.2 Academic Departments

There is a need for academic departments to look at the holistic picture of student life to ensure that disadvantaged students are given improved support. Academic departments must develop inclusive and consistent employability support systems across courses, aligning with students' varied ways of studying and working and ensuring that a range of formal and informal employability practices are available, fair, and accessible to all students. Academic departments need to understand the complexity of students' lives better and carefully consider how the employability journey can be crafted around the specific needs of individual students.

The academic department should carefully consider how a programme can build a range of learning experiences into the curriculum to help students develop various career credentials and be compelled to engage. Students need to develop complex problem-solving skills, advanced communication, and teamwork skills so that these skills are well developed before they enter the workplace. Universities need to help students recognise their value, worth and uniqueness and ability to offer critical new skills and knowledge. Recommendations include:

- Communication of resources and opportunities must be streamlined to enable all students to engage with content more easily. Content must be delivered in the curriculum and at strategic points throughout the whole duration of the programme so that it is more relevant to students.
- Academic departments should consider how they prepare students for the future of work by promoting broader skills development, opening access to professional networks, and partnering with industry to deliver practical work experiences and live project opportunities. This may be through short studio projects working with students in another country, university cross-course and faculty collaborations, international competitions, and live projects with ‘real-world’ issues.
- With the university's support, course teams in academic departments must develop more robust networks with clients, design studios and employers, to ensure meaningful and sustained industry collaborations and connections to help develop students' career credentials.
- Course teams need to pay particular attention to the nuances of the creative industries and design into the curriculum access to various practical opportunities that can offer students valuable practical experience and exposure to a network of professional contacts. This could include portfolio and CV workshops, office tours of architectural practices and design studios, mini-live projects, or design charrettes.
- Despite some good practices noted in this study, there is a need for more opportunities for students to collaborate with peers on real-life group projects

– virtually and in person – as these can offer valuable opportunities for students to meet people from campuses worldwide.

- Universities and course teams need to offer a range of opportunities in the curriculum for students to develop entrepreneurial mindsets to work in self-directed ways that will be important in the future workplace. Universities could provide opportunities for industry partners to mentor students throughout this process.
- Incorporate CV building and portfolio planning into the curriculum at prompt points in the academic year and encourage industry connections to be part of this process. Embed and deliver critical career content to all students in a consistent and clearly defined way throughout the whole programme. One way of addressing this may be through a "skills week" that focuses on career-building activities with invited alumni and industry professionals to develop networks alongside skills.

7.5.3 Central Employability Teams

Whilst the current study found examples of good practice, it is vital that university careers and employability services are resourced appropriately to give targeted support to graduates most affected by COVID-19 and the challenging labour market. This may involve recruiting specialist practitioners or investing in further professional development in best-supporting graduates. Recommendations include:

- Centralised employability teams should continue offering opportunities for graduates affected by COVID-19 to develop their social capital and explore new ways of helping students develop meaningful professional relationships in a virtual environment.
- Central employability teams must produce easily accessible, engaging and streamlined content across a range of platforms that enables and empowers students. The services and resources must be well articulated and communicated so that more students can make the most of these opportunities. Students must be inducted into the institution's centralised

career departments and academic teams need to regularly reinforce the importance of these services. Central teams should consider how they can help students and graduates access experts and prompt advice on the broadest career choices.

- Central employability teams must work closely with academic departments and course teams to ensure group delivery of employability content is aligned with employability provision at course level, to ensure meaningful engagement from all students. Opportunities for 1-1 personalised support should be included in the curriculum.
- Central teams should work with academic departments to develop key opportunities, such as annual conferences and industry events, to give students opportunities to meet with industry experts and employers in a safe setting, encouraging students to develop and expand their networks.

7.6 Concluding Remarks

This doctoral thesis supplies insights into the lived experience of employability for undergraduate students studying Interior Architecture and Design from a small sample of English universities. This is prompt as the students' voice is currently lacking from the employability agenda for HE. Understanding the student's voice is imperative, and it should be used to inform HE practices and policies relating to Art and Design employability interventions so universities can better tailor these provisions to suit the interests and needs of art and design students.

The findings suggest that although university study is seen as part of a journey to securing a *good* job or as a *journey* to a better career, IAD participants lack confidence in their career-building skills and knowledge of specialist digital technologies. The result is that participants feel unprepared for the workplace and worry about graduating into an uncertain career landscape. Participants need an "edge" over their competitors, although this is a *fuzzy* concept and difficult to define. Some participants report a disconnect between knowledge and action and worry that this unknowing will affect their ability to secure a good graduate job.

The findings indicate that universities must do more to prepare students for the future of work by promoting broader skills development, opening access to professional networks, and partnering with industry to deliver practical work experiences and live project opportunities. All students must have equal opportunities to develop their social capital by creating more meaningful and sustained collaborations, connections and partnerships between universities and industry partners. Disadvantaged students need more transparent and improved support, for example, through better-promoted paid internships and virtual work placements with increased financial support. This will help students add to their career credentials, increase their networks, develop their confidence, and show their adaptability across various situations.

The findings point to a need for universities to change and reframe their approach to work placements to address critical issues around broader structural inequalities that affect students in achieving their goals. Universities need to pay particular attention to the nuances of the creative industries and explore a range of scenarios that will enable wider cohorts of students to take part in more flexible placement-type experiences. Universities need to draw on alumni networks to provide targeted support and mentoring for those experiencing the most significant challenges. Developing more robust alumni networks will help courses develop sustained and relevant industry connections.

The findings show that universities must build learning experiences into the curriculum to help students develop career credentials and be compelled to engage. CV building and portfolio planning should be incorporated into the curriculum at key points in the academic year throughout the programme, and industry connections must be part of this process. Critical careers content should be embedded and delivered to all students consistently and be clearly defined. In addition, opportunities should be provided in the curriculum for students to develop entrepreneurial mindsets.

While some employability provisions appear to be targeted to larger group delivery, universities need to better understand the complexity of students' lives and carefully craft the employability journey around the specific needs of individual students. Central employability teams must be aligned with academic departments to ensure that the timing and content of employability resources have more relevance to students. The communication of resources and opportunities needs to be streamlined so that students can engage with content more easily. Universities must recognise the impact that COVID-19 has had on graduate employment and opportunities for career development and the vital role that careers and employability professionals play in supporting graduates over future years.

APPENDICES

APPENDIX A. The Literature Review Process

- Table A1. The Literature Review Process
- Table A2. Search terms devised for use in databases for the Literature Review.
- Table A3. Types of evidence included in the literature search and inclusion/exclusion criteria from the Design and Applied Arts Index.
- Table A4. Types of evidence included in the literature search and inclusion/exclusion criteria from Proquest Eric.
- Table A5. Types of evidence included in the literature search and inclusion/exclusion criteria from Research into Higher Education Abstracts.
- Table A6. Types of evidence included in the literature search and inclusion/exclusion criteria from Business Source Premier.
- Table A7. The quality Assessment tool sets up the relevance of the search topic.

Table A1.
The Literature Review Process

A successful literature review involves three major stages: planning the review, conducting the review, and reporting the review (Xiao & Watson, 2019). In the planning stage, I found the need for a review and reviewed and refined the research questions. I developed a review protocol that included a detailed description of the methods to be used in the study to ensure a systematic, rigorous, and transparent process (Victor, 2008). To explore the range of critical perspectives on GE, search terms were devised in databases that included key themes such as HE, employability, art and design and student experience. The full range of search terms can be seen in Table 02. When conducting the review, I found and selected primary studies before extracting, analysing, and synthesising the data. The key findings from the literature review are reported in Chapter 2 (p.34). The types of evidence in the literature search offer a balance between substantial academic books, journal articles and other scholarly publications, including published research; 'grey' literature, for example, government reports; conference reports and research in progress. Methods for finding evidence included searches of databases, research registers, and citation tracking. I searched Google Scholar, DAAI (Design and Applied Arts Index), Education Databases on ProQuest, Research into HE Abstracts and Business Source Premier. These are often used databases by researchers across various disciplines. To ensure that sources were as up-to-date as possible, except for 'classic texts' such as major works written by leading scholars setting out formative ideas and theories central to the subject, I limited the publication date in the database search to between 2014 and 2021 (articles published in the past eight years), so that I could build the review on recent literature and consider information retrieval and synthesis in the digital age.

The above resulted in 828 articles retrieved across four databases (see Table A3, A4, A5 and A6). From the study's title, if the content discussed a range of critical perspectives on GE, I obtained its full reference, including author, year, title, and abstract, for further evaluation. After a first screening of the 828 titles, 75 studies were identified as interesting.

The quality of evidence in a literature review is as important as analysing the data itself, so it is critical to select a proper tool to analyse the strength of evidence and find any embedded biases. I formatted a series of questions that helped me consider the literature in a structured way (Table A7). Critically appraising a piece of research combines analysis of the study's design, the validity of the findings, the likelihood of bias, and the relevance of the overall results to other current research. I read the abstracts of the 75 studies to decide on their relevance to the research topic; *GE and HE- what is a university for?* A total of 27 studies were considered relevant as they referenced student experiences of employability across a range of disciplines, and so I obtained the full-text article for quality assessment.

After reading the full text of the 27 articles, this was then reduced to 15 articles. Relevant data were then extracted from the studies and added to a template. I then set about synthesising qualitative research using a meta-ethnography approach for reviewing and synthesising the findings of published qualitative research reports originally developed in education research by Noblit & Hare (1988). This method allowed me to connect qualitative themes across research to analyse and find concepts and themes that transcended individual datasets (Noblit & Hare, 1988).

Table A2.

Search terms used in databases to explore the range of critical perspectives on GE.

Search Terms
employability in “higher education”
art and design employability in “higher education”

employability agenda “English universities”
the contested nature of employability in “higher education”
“employability” and art and design curriculum in higher education
student experience
feelings, views, lived experience in “higher education”
interior design in “higher education”
interior architecture in “higher education”

Table A3.
Illustrates the search terms, search parameters and results across each database used in the literature review process from the Design and Applied Arts Index.

DATABASE: DAAI (Design and Applied Arts Index)	
Search Term	student experience AND employability
Search Parameters	2014-2021
Results	19
Search Term	interior design higher education AND employability
Search Parameters	2014-2021
Results	1
Search Term	student lived experience AND employability
Search Parameters	2014-2021
Results	1

Table A4.
Illustrates the search terms, search parameters and results across each database used in the literature review process from Proquest Eric.

DATABASE: PROQUEST ERIC	
Search Term	students AND experience AND employability

Search Parameters	2015-2021
Results	258
Search Term	students AND experience AND employability AND higher education
Search Parameters	2015-2021
Results	247
Search Term	students lived experience AND employability AND interior design AND interior architecture
Search Parameters	2015-2021
Results	0
Search Term	students views AND employability AND higher education
Search Parameters	2015-2021 scholarly journals
Results	61
Search Term	students' feelings AND employability AND higher education
Search Parameters	2015-2021 scholarly journals
Results	133

Table A5.
Illustrates the search terms, search parameters and results across each database used in the literature review process from Research into Higher Education Abstracts.

DATABASE: Research into HE Abstracts	
Search Term	students' feelings AND employability AND higher education
Search Parameters	2015-2021
Results	9

Search Term	employability and student experience
Search Parameters	2015-2021
Results	39

Table A6.
Illustrates the search terms, search parameters and results across each of the databases used in the literature review process from Business Source Premier

DATABASE: Business Source Premier	
Search Term	students AND experience AND employability
Search Parameters	2015-2021 Academic Journals
Results	60
Search Term	students views AND employability AND higher education
Search Parameters	2015-2021
Results	3

Table A7.
Identifies the Quality Assessment checklist tool used to carry out a review of the literature.

Checklist for a systematic review of the literature.	YES/NO
1. Did the paper address an important question?	
2. Was a qualitative approach, right?	
3. How were(i) the setting and (ii) the participants selected?	
5. What was the researcher's perspective, and has this been considered?	

6. What methods did the researcher use to collect data, and are these described in enough detail?	
7. What methods did the researcher use to analyse the data, and what quality control measures were implemented?	

Table A8.
Graduate skills drawn from an academic literature review by the QAA (2017 & 2019)

Graduate skill	Definition/ability to
Critical thinking	● apply a systematic and critical assessment of complex problems and issues and consider issues from a range of perspectives
Problem solving	● investigate problems and practical situations and formulate, evaluate, and apply evidence-based solutions and arguments
Information literacy/ Analytical	● locate, synthesise, and analyse information and data from a variety of sources, with an attention to detail
Communication	● effective knowledge, understanding and skills to a variety of audiences in a range of settings and using a variety of media
Curiosity to learn	● search broadly for insights and information across a wide range of situations and to challenge assumptions
Innovative/ Creative	● examine problems from a fresh perspective and develop innovative solutions
Collaboration	● collaborate, work in teams and groups, and lead where proper Interpersonal/Networking listen actively, negotiate effectively, be empathetic, and develop positive connections with others
Autonomy	● think independently, exercise personal judgement, take the initiative and be enterprising Self-management plan and organise my time, prioritise important tasks, work under pressure and to tight deadlines
Resilience	● respond flexibly and adapt my skills and knowledge when dealing with change, unfamiliar or challenging situations
Reflective	● Self-awareness use feedback productively, find and articulate my skills in a variety of contexts, and set goals for my continuing personal, professional and career development

Table A9.

Key features of employability shown in the QAA Art and Design benchmark statement (2019)

1. Studying art and design as an academic and intellectual pursuit develops cognitive abilities related to the aesthetic, ethical, and social context of human experience (Section 1.2)
2. Courses in art and design emphasise creativity and are designed to develop students; intellectual powers and their ability to communicate rigour in process and thought. Development of an enquiring, analytical, and creative approach, and development of entrepreneurial capabilities. (Section 1.6, page 3).
3. Learning in arts and design develops
   - Capacity to be creative
   - An aesthetic sensibility
   - Skills in teamwork
   - An appreciation of diversity
   - Appreciation of quality and detail
   - Ability to conduct research in a variety of modes
   - Capacity to work independently
   - Ability to communicate in a range of formats (Section 2.2, page 5).
4. Art and Design involves analysis and synthesis (Section 3.11, page 8)
5. Section 6.6 of the benchmark statement sets out a series of generic band graduate skills, which include
   - Self-management
   - critical engagement
   - group working and social skills
   - skills in communication and presentation
   - research and information skills.

APPENDIX B. Ethics and the ethical approval process

- Figure B1. Invitation letter to take part sent to Course Leaders
- Figure B2. Participant Information Sheet sent to Educators
- Figure B3. Participant Information Sheet sent to Students
- Figure B4. Participant Consent Form sent to Educators
- Figure B5. Participant Consent Form sent to Students
- Figure B6. Digital poster to advertise the project to students
- Figure B7. Outline Schedule for use with Focus Groups
- Figure B8. Risk Assessment Form

Figure B1. Invitation letter to take part sent to Course Leaders

Dear (course leader),

This letter of invitation to enquire if you would like your course to take part in a research project, I am undertaking for my Doctorate in Education thesis study at XXXXXX XXXXX XXXXXX. I am researching students' lived employability experiences when embedded in the curriculum, focusing on students studying Interior Design / Interior Architecture and Design. I have adopted a purposeful sampling approach when selecting four courses within the UK, and I hope you will approve your course being one of them.

I intend to conduct a single focus group meeting as part of a research study at four universities with five to 7 second-year students, to increase my understanding of how employability is perceived and experienced by students within this discipline. The focus group meeting will last for 1 hour and must take place during April / May 2021. This can be physical or virtual, depending on government social distance guidelines and university protocols that are in place at that time. I am simply trying to capture students' thoughts and perspectives on these contemporary issues, and any responses will be kept confidential.

In addition, I intend to conduct interviews with module leaders as part of the research study to increase my understanding of how employability is conceptualised and articulated in IAD undergraduate programmes in English universities. The interview will last 1 hour and must occur during May/June 2021. Again, this can be physical or virtual, depending on government social distance guidelines and university protocols that are in place at that time. In doing this, I am trying to capture educators' thoughts

and perspectives on these contemporary issues, and any responses will be kept confidential.

There is no compensation for taking part in this study. However, the participation of the module leader and students will be a valuable addition to my research, and the findings could lead to a greater understanding of these contemporary issues.

Before deciding if you would like to take part, you must fully understand why the project is being done and what it will involve. Please carefully read the Participant Information Sheets on the following pages and discuss them with others. Ask me if anything is unclear or if you would like more information. If you want to take part, please complete, and return the Informed Consent Declaration form. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions.
Yours faithfully

Figure B2. Participant Information Sheet sent to Educators

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – EDUCATORS

Exploring the lived experience of "employability" within Interior Architecture undergraduate programmes.

1. **Legal basis for research for studies.** The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with proper safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at https://www.xxxxxxx.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research. However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately, and their rights are respected. This study was approved by UREC (University s Research Ethics Committee) with Converis number ER*xxxxxxx*. Further information at https://www.xxxx.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice

2. **Introduction.** I would like to invite you to take part in this research study. The aim is to conduct an interview remotely using a Zoom video conference platform with a L5 Interior Design / Interior Architecture and Design module leader to help me understand how employability is conceptualised and articulated in the IAD programmes in English universities. This will give me a more holistic understanding of issues affecting students' employability experience.

3. **Why have you asked me to take part?** You have been chosen as a participant because you are a L5 Interior Design / Interior Architecture and Design module leader at a UK university, on a course where I hope to recruit some L5 students to take part in a focus group.

4. **Do I have to take part?** It is up to you to decide if you want to take part. If you choose to take part, a copy of the information supplied here and the consent form. You can still choose to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, or you can decide not to answer a particular question. Participation is voluntary, and there is no obligation to take part. You do not have to supply any reason for not wanting to be involved; you will not be advantaged or disadvantaged by taking part, and you will not be contacted again.

5. **What will I have to do?** After completing the consent form, in a semi-structured interview, you will be asked to discuss how employability is conceptualised and articulated in IAD your undergraduate programme and how it is translated into learning outcomes and programme design. The semi-structured interview will be conducted remotely using a Zoom video conference platform, to help discussions between you, the participant, and the researcher. This will last up to 1 hour. At this virtual meeting, the audio content (and visual, if consent is given) will be recorded to be transcribed later. You will be able to approve the transcription and edit if necessary, so that it supplies a truthful representation of the discussions that took place.

6. **Where will this take place?** This will be a virtual interview, given the COVID restrictions that are in place now. You can attend from a setting of your choice, and you can choose to have your video turned on or off.

7. **How often will I have to take part, and how long?** You will need to attend only one interview, and it should last for no more than 1 hour. You may listen to the audio transcript if you wish, and I will send you a copy of the written transcript for you to approve.

8. If deception is involved in the study in terms of withholding information or supplying some degree of misinformation, participants need to be alerted to it if at all feasible, e.g. some information may be withheld initially but you will be fully informed after the experiment etc., and/or the researcher needs to consult with a relevant user group about the likely acceptability of the deception to research participants.

9. Are there any risks or disadvantages in taking part? The welfare of the participants and the researcher is a priority beyond any scope of the study, and it is essential to minimise distress, discomfort, and embarrassment to participants/researchers. No individuals will be discussed by name; this is just an opportunity to understand the range of experiences that participants have had.

10. **What are the possible benefits of taking part?** Taking part in this process may help you to reflect on the content and delivery of your curriculum.

11. **When can I discuss my participation?** You can ask any questions before the interview begins. Afterwards, participants will be given a simple, clear, and informative explanation of the rationale for the study design and the methods used. It will also ask for and answer participants' questions.

12. **Who will handle all the information when this study is over?** Sheffield Hallam University will own the research data.

13. Who will have access? Only the researcher will access the audio files, stored on an encrypted drive on the University network, accessible only via password-protected computers. The anonymised typed transcripts will be similarly stored, though they will be used as appendices of evidence for assessment. They could be read by the researcher's two doctoral supervisors and other staff involved in the module assessment and grade verification.

14**. What will happen to the information when this study is over?** The audio recordings and visual data will be removed following the completion of the doctoral study, circa December 2022. The anonymised transcripts, photographs and scans will be stored securely on the University server for ten years.

15. **How will you use what you find out?** The data will be used in the thesis itself. The data may be anonymised in future educational conferences and/or publications.

16. **Can anyone connect me with what is recorded and reported?** Pseudonyms will be given to the study's participants during transcription to ensure confidentiality. Similarly, if other staff names and/or institutions are discussed during the interview, they will also be given pseudonyms during the write-up.

17. **How long is the whole study likely to last?** Between January 2021 – December 2022.

18. **How can I find out about the results of the study?** The research will send the findings to all participants via a Zoom meeting in January 2022. If you wish to be informed about the findings of the main doctoral study in two years, please let the researcher know.

19. **What if I change my mind during the study?** You are free to withdraw from the study at any time during the focus group, and you can retract any statements or your whole involvement up to 2 weeks after the interview. Please contact me via the methods detailed below.

20. **Do you have any questions?** If so, please ask them or contact me via the methods detailed below.

21. **Details of whom to contact with any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study.** You should contact the Data Protection Officer if: •you have a query about how the University uses your data •you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your data has been lost or showed inappropriately) •you would like to complain about how the University has used your data DPO@shu.ac.uk

    You should contact the Head of Research Ethics if: •you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated. xxxxxxx.ac.uk Postal address: xxxxxxxxx

22. **GDPR (General Data Protection Regulations) Requirements** - data processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. Follow the link to a privacy notice which will recommend you about how your data is protected. https://www.xxxxxx.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research

Figure B3. Participant Information Sheet sent to Students.

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – STUDENT GROUPS

Exploring the lived experience of "employability" within Interior Architecture undergraduate programmes.

1. **Legal basis for research for studies.** The University undertakes research as part of its function for the community under its legal status. Data protection allows us to use personal data for research with proper safeguards in place under the legal basis of public tasks that are in the public interest. A full statement of your rights can be found at https://www.xxxxx.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research. However, all University research is reviewed to ensure that participants are treated appropriately, and their rights respected. This study was approved by UREC with Converis number ER*xxxxxxx*. Further information at https://www.xxxxx.ac.uk/research/ethics-integrity-and-practice

2. **Introduction.** I would like to invite you to take part in this research study. The aim is to enable Interior Design / Interior Architecture and Design students in HE to recount their employability narrative when embedded within the curriculum. Discussions will occur around sharing practice, skills and attitude, collaboration, real-life industry experience and student expectations. Students will be encouraged to reflect on the communication, design process, and consider how these experiences have developed any essential employability skills.

3. **Why have you asked me to take part?** You have been chosen as a participant because you are a 2nd-year student studying Interior Design or Interior Architecture and Design at a UK university.

4. **Do I have to take part?** It is up to you to decide if you want to take part. If you decide to take part, a copy of the information supplied here, and the consent form are yours. You can still choose to withdraw at any time without giving a reason, or you can decide not to answer a particular question. Participation is voluntary, and there is no obligation to take part. You do not have to supply any reason for not wanting to be involved; you will not be advantaged or disadvantaged by taking part, and you will not be contacted again.

5. **What will I have to do?** After completing the consent form, you will be asked to discuss and share your personal experience of employability when it is

embedded within the curriculum in a focus group and/or interview. The focus group will be a virtual unstructured discussion with the researcher and 3 - 6 other students. The interview will be a virtual unstructured discussion with the researchers, and this will last up to 1 hour. The focus group and/or interview will be audio recorded so that they can be transcribed later.

6. **Where will this take place?** This will be a virtual focus group and/or interview, given the COVID restrictions that are in place now. You can attend from a setting of your choice. You will be asked to turn your video on, but you may opt to turn on a different background to omit any references to your personal space. If you would like to keep your camera off, please let the researcher know before the start of the event.

7. **How often will I have to take part, and how long?** If attending a focus group, you will just need to attend one of these, and it should last for no more than 1 hour. There will be an after-session debriefing with participants in the form of a brief follow-up interview by phone or zoom to obtain participants' own feelings of the group dynamics and views that participants may have chosen not to show. If attending an interview, you will need to attend one of these, and it should last for no more than 1 hour. You may listen to the audio transcript if you wish, and I will send you a copy of the written transcript for you to approve.

8. **If deception** is involved in the study about withholding. information or supplying some misinformation, participants need to be alerted to it, e.g. some information may be withheld initially. However, you will be fully informed after the experiment, etc., and/or the researcher needs to consult with a relevant user group about the acceptability of the deception to research participants.

9. **Are there any risks or disadvantages in taking part?** The welfare of the participants and the researcher is a priority beyond any scope of the study, and it is important to minimise distress, discomfort, and embarrassment to participants/researchers. No individuals will be discussed by name; this is just an opportunity to understand the range of experiences that participants have had.

10. **What are the possible benefits of taking part?** Taking part in this process may help you to reflect on your development and help to show skills or attributes that you wish to develop further.

11. **When can I discuss my participation?** You can ask any questions before the interviews begin, and we will discuss your participation again at once after the discussion during the debrief.

12. **Who will handle all the information when this study is over?** Sheffield Hallam University will own the research data.

13. **Who will have access to it?** Only the researcher will access the audio files stored on an encrypted drive on the University network, accessible only via password-protected computers. The anonymised typed transcripts will be similarly stored, though they are likely to be used as appendices of evidence for assessment and so could be read by the researcher's two doctoral supervisors and other staff involved in the module assessment and grade verification.

14. **What will happen to the information when this study is over?** The audio recordings and visual data will be removed following the completion of the doctoral study, circa December 2022. The anonymised transcripts, photographs and scans will be stored securely for ten years on the University server.

15. **How will you use what you find out?** The data will be used in the thesis itself. The anonymised data may be presented in future educational conferences and/or publications.

16. **Will anyone be able to connect me with what is recorded and reported? Pseudonyms** will be given to the study's participants during transcription to ensure confidentiality. Similarly, if other staff names and/or institutions are discussed during the interview, they will also be given pseudonyms during the write-up.

17. **How long is the whole study likely to last?** Between January 2021 – December 2022.

18. **How can I find out about the results of the study?** The research will issue the findings to all participants via a Zoom meeting in January 2022. If you wish to be informed about the findings of the main doctoral study in two years, please let the researcher know.

19. **What if I change my mind during the study?** You are free to withdraw from the study at any time during the focus group, and you can retract any

statements or your whole involvement up to 2 weeks after the focus group. Please contact me via the methods detailed below.

20. **Do you have any questions?** If so, please ask them or contact me via the methods detailed below.

21. **Details of whom to contact with any concerns or if adverse effects occur after the study.** You should contact the Data Protection Officer if: •you have a query about how your data is used by the University •you would like to report a data security breach (e.g. if you think your personal data has been lost or disclosed inappropriately) •you would like to complain about how the University has used your personal data xxxxxxx

    You should contact the Head of Research Ethics (xxxxxxxxxxxxxxx) if: •you have concerns with how the research was undertaken or how you were treated. xxxxxx.ac.uk

22. **GDPR Requirements** - data processing is the performance of a task carried out in the public interest. Follow the link to a privacy notice which will recommend you about how your data is protected. https://www.xxxxx.ac.uk/about-this-website/privacy-policy/privacy-notices/privacy-notice-for-research

Figure B4. Participant Consent Form sent to Educators

RESEARCH STUDY: **Exploring the lived experience of "employability" within Interior Architecture undergraduate programmes.**

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies

		Yes	No
1.	I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.		
2.	My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.		
3.	I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.		
4.	I agree to supply information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.		
5.	I wish to take part in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.		
6.	I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be named), to be used for the purpose of assessment and future educational conference presentations/publications, e.g.		

	Thesis, journal articles, book chapters.		
7.	I understand that the study will occur remotely using a Zoom video conference platform, and I give my consent to take part.		
8.	I consent to be contacted after the event and take part in an individual interview if proper.		
9.	I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be named), to be used by other researchers.		

Participant’s Signature:
Date:
Participant’s Name (Printed):
Contact details:

Researcher’s Name (Printed):
Researcher’s Signature:
Researcher's contact details:

Figure B5. Participant Consent Form sent to Students

RESEARCH STUDY: **Exploring the lived experience of "employability" within Interior Architecture undergraduate programmes.**

Please answer the following questions by ticking the response that applies.

1.	I have read the Information Sheet for this study and have had details of the study explained to me.	Yes	No
2.	My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any point.		
3.	I understand that I am free to withdraw from the study within the time limits outlined in the Information Sheet without giving a reason for my withdrawal or to decline to answer any questions in the study without any consequences to my future treatment by the researcher.		
4.	I agree to supply information to the researcher under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Information Sheet.		
5.	I wish to take part in the study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.		
6.	I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be named), to be used for the purpose of assessment and future educational conference presentations/publications, e.g.		

	Thesis, journal articles, book chapters.		
7.	I understand that the study will occur remotely using a Zoom video conference platform, and I give my consent to take part.		
8.	I consent to be contacted after the event and take part in an individual interview if proper.		
9.	I consent to the information collected for the purposes of this research study, once anonymised (so that I cannot be named), to be used by other researchers.		

Participant’s Signature:
Date:
Participant’s Name (Printed):
Contact details:

Researcher’s Name (Printed):
Researcher’s Signature:
Researcher's contact details:

Figure B6. Digital poster to advertise the project to students

2 0 2 0 / 2 0 2 1

How do students experience employability?

contact the researcher directly if you are interested to attend this virtual focus group

Research project

Exploring students lived experience of "employability" within Interior Architecture undergraduate programmes.

Introduction

I would like to invite you to participate in this research study. The aim is to enable Interior Design and Interior Architecture and Design students in higher education to recount their personal narrative of employability when it is embedded within the curriculum. Discussions will take place around sharing practice, skills and attitude, collaboration, real-life industry experience and student expectations. Students will be encouraged to reflect on these themes and consider how their experiences have developed any key employability skills.

What do I do if I am interested to take part?

If you think you would like to take part in this research project then please send an email expressing your interest to s.billau@shu.ac.uk by 23rd April 2021. I would like between 4 and 6 second year students from your course to take part in the research study. After the meeting each student will receive a £10 amazon voucher by way of a thank you for taking part.

What will you be required to do?

If you are interested to take part I will ask you to complete a consent form to ensure I have your approval, Once you have given your consent, you will be asked to discuss and share your personal experience of employability when it is embedded within the curriculum, within a focus-group. Due to social distancing guideline, this will be a virtual discussion with the researcher, and 4-6 other 2nd year students from your course. The audio dialogue will be recorded on a voice recorder up to the end of the meeting so that it can be transcribed for analysis later.

When and where will this take place?

You can attend this virtual focus group meeting from a setting of your choice. Ideally I would like you to turn your camera on during the meeting, but if this is a problem you can let me know before the meeting and you can choose to turn your camera off.

Will I be required to do anything else after the focus group?

If I need to clarify anything with you after the focus group I may ask to speak to you briefly at a later time. If you do not wish to do this, you can opt out on the consent form and I will not contact you any further.

Key words

participation collaboration higher education narrative personnal experience student expectations real-life experience reflection employability skills

Key dates
Focus group meeting:

This 1 hour meeting will take place sometime during April 2021. The exact date is to be agreed between the researcher and the students participating and will be flexible to suit student availability.

Figure B7. Outline Schedule for use with Focus Groups

FOCUS GROUP SCHEDULE: THESIS STUDY

Provisional title of the main study:
Exploring the student lived experience of "employability" within Interior Architecture undergraduate programmes.

TIMELINE

FEB+MARCH 2021	Advertise Focus Group activity through university BB sites and ask Module Leaders to display posters in the studios
27 MARCH 2021	Deadline for participants to express their interest in taking part in the Focus Group
12 APRIL – 6th MAY 2021	Focus Group takes place in 4 university settings in the UK

APRIL / MAY 2021

Welcome	***An overview of the topic***
	Restate details on the information sheet – right to withdraw – any questions. Check that students know the audio is being recorded - sign consent forms
	Statement of the ground rules of the focus group and assurance of confidentiality. Ask students if they would like to add any other content to the ground rules.
	Outline the requirement to Be respectful of each other - No talking over one another – speak freely – there are no right and wrong answers – your opinions are vital – do not worry about being on the right track interested in hearing both positive and negative comments

Opening questions	***Individual experiences of live projects and client teams***
	Tell me about opportunities you have had to work with clients on live projects?
	What were the benefits of doing this?
	What difficulties came from doing this?
	What are your own experiences of working with external clients?
	Tell me how skills learnt from live client projects might be applied to future projects or new contexts.
	How prepared do you feel to enter the workplace as a graduate?
Transition questions	***Student learning + employability***
	How successful is the balance between academic input and practical hands-on experience on your course?
	Tell me what the university can do to offer more support to students as they transition from uni into the workplace?
Key questions	***Unpacking the concept of collaboration + employability***
	What does collaboration mean to you?
	What do you think makes for a successful collaboration?
	What does “employability” mean to you?
	What do you think employers are looking for from design graduates?
	Tell me what key skills you have developed during live projects?

	How do you think these skills can be applied in different contexts?
Ending questions	Are there any other issues connected with employability and skills development which have not been discussed that you feel strongly about and would like to bring up?
	Of all the issues discussed, which one is the most important to you?
Summary	Of ideas discussed + reflection
Finish and thanks	

Figure B8. Risk Assessment Form

Hazard	Who could be harmed?	Existing safety precautions	Risk level	Additional safety precautions needed to reduce the risk level?	Revised risk level	Action by whom?	By when?	Date completed
Participating in a zoom video conference and ensuring confidentiality, e.g. when researchers and participants may be at home with other members of their household	Participants			Before the study begins, I will inform participants that there may be risks specific to completing a study in a video conference such as confidentially risks.	LOW	SB	MARCH 2021	
				I will create private meetings for each session, rather than using my Personal Meeting ID as using a PMI for a research session could result in unwanted visitors joining a meeting when I am collecting data.	LOW	SB	APRIL 2021	
				To ensure privacy, I will create a meeting password and a waiting room.	LOW	SB	APRIL 2021	
				Once all participants have entered the meeting, I will lock the meeting which will not allow anyone else to join.	LOW	SB	APRIL 2021	
				I will be clear that participants do not have to share their screen, and I will disable screen-sharing for other participants.	LOW	SB	APRIL 2021	
Additional anxiety generated by the use of online technologies	Participants + Researcher			I will communicate with participants in advance, so they know what to expect when engaging in these video conferences.	LOW	SB	MARCH 2021	
				I will provide participants with written instructions for joining the Zoom call and any specific tools they may be required to use.	LOW	SB	MARCH 2021	
Collecting meaningful data in the current context - considerations about the quality of data likely to be collected under the current circumstances.	Researcher			I will familiarise myself with some of the tools within Zoom	LOW	SB	FEB/MARCH 2021	
				I will do a 'dry run' beforehand to test out the technology and features	LOW	SB	MARCH 2021	
				I will make use of zoom features including the *whiteboard* for participants to annotate on and *screen sharing* for participants to share work. The *polling* feature will allow me to create single-choice and multiple-choice questions during the focus group, and I will have the ability to download a report of polling after the meeting. The use of *reactions* will allow participants to react during the focus group by sending thumbs up or clapping and the in-meeting *chat* will allow participants to send messages to other users within a meeting. These features all have the potential to add to the richness of data generated and get to the heart of the student experience.	LOW	SB	APRIL 2021	

Gaining Participant Consent	Participant + Researcher			I will ensure that all participants have given their consent. As I intend to record using videoconference, it will be included in all consent information. Participants can give their initial verbal consent for the study to use a video conference platform (zoom) followed by written consent.	LOW	SB	MARCH 2021	

GENERIC RISK ASSESSMENT

Communication of significant findings		
Method of communication (describe): I as the main researcher will communicate the significant findings of the risk assessment to all people who may be affected by the activity.	Person/people to communicate findings: SALLY BILLAU	Target date(s): MARCH / APRIL 2021

Approval			
Carried out by:	Post:	Signature:	Date:
Approved by:	Post:	Signature:	Date:

Review of risk assessment
The frequency of the review is (refer to guidance):

Review date :	Carried out by:	Signature:
Review date :	Carried out by:	Signature:
Review date :	Carried out by:	Signature:
Review date :	Carried out by:	Signature:
Review date :	Carried out by:	Signature:
Review date :	Carried out by:	Signature:

APPENDIX C. Visualising the data

Figure C1. Mapping the data: An Overview of the Process. January 2022

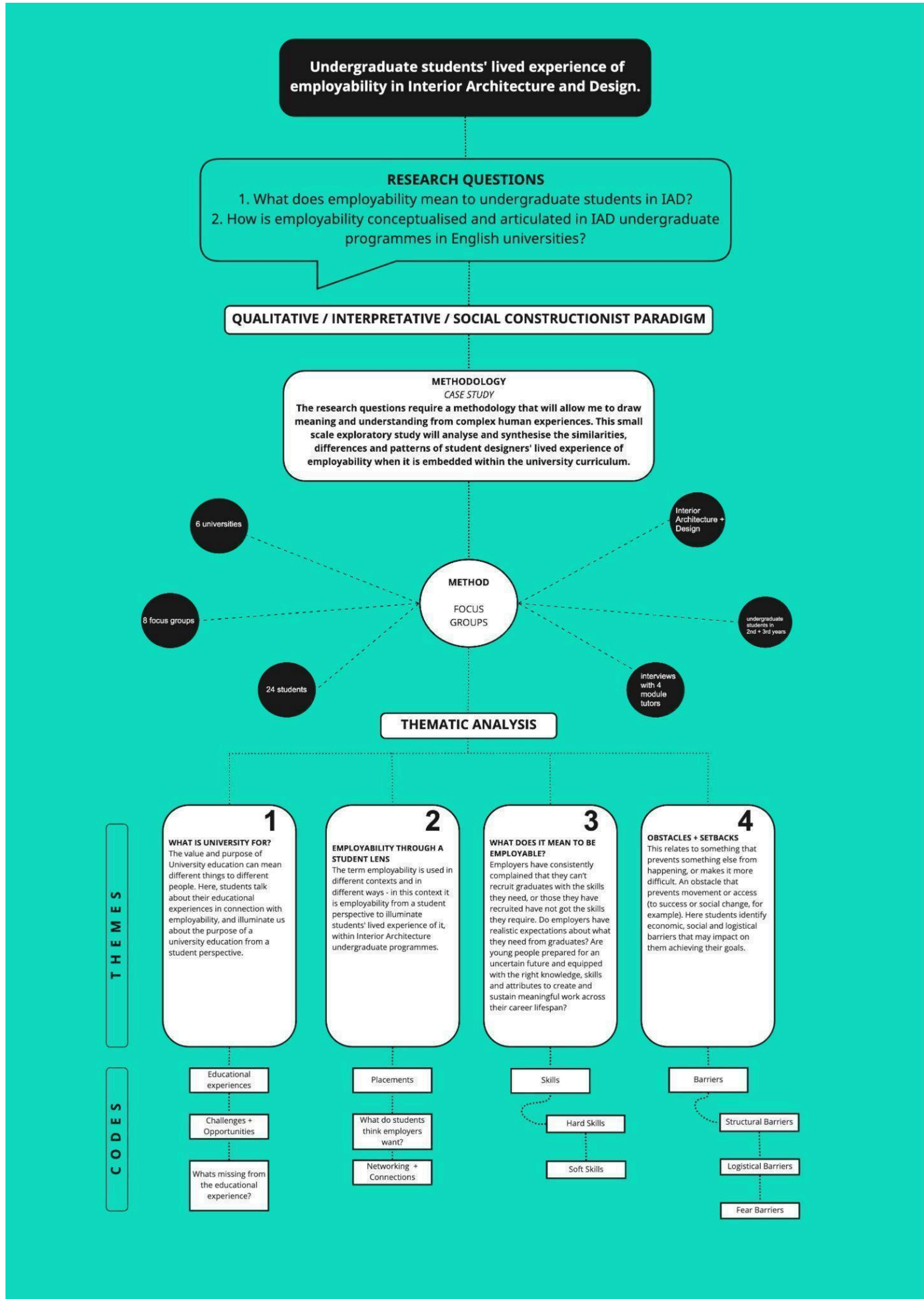


Figure C2. Mapping the data: Identifying Key Themes. January 2022

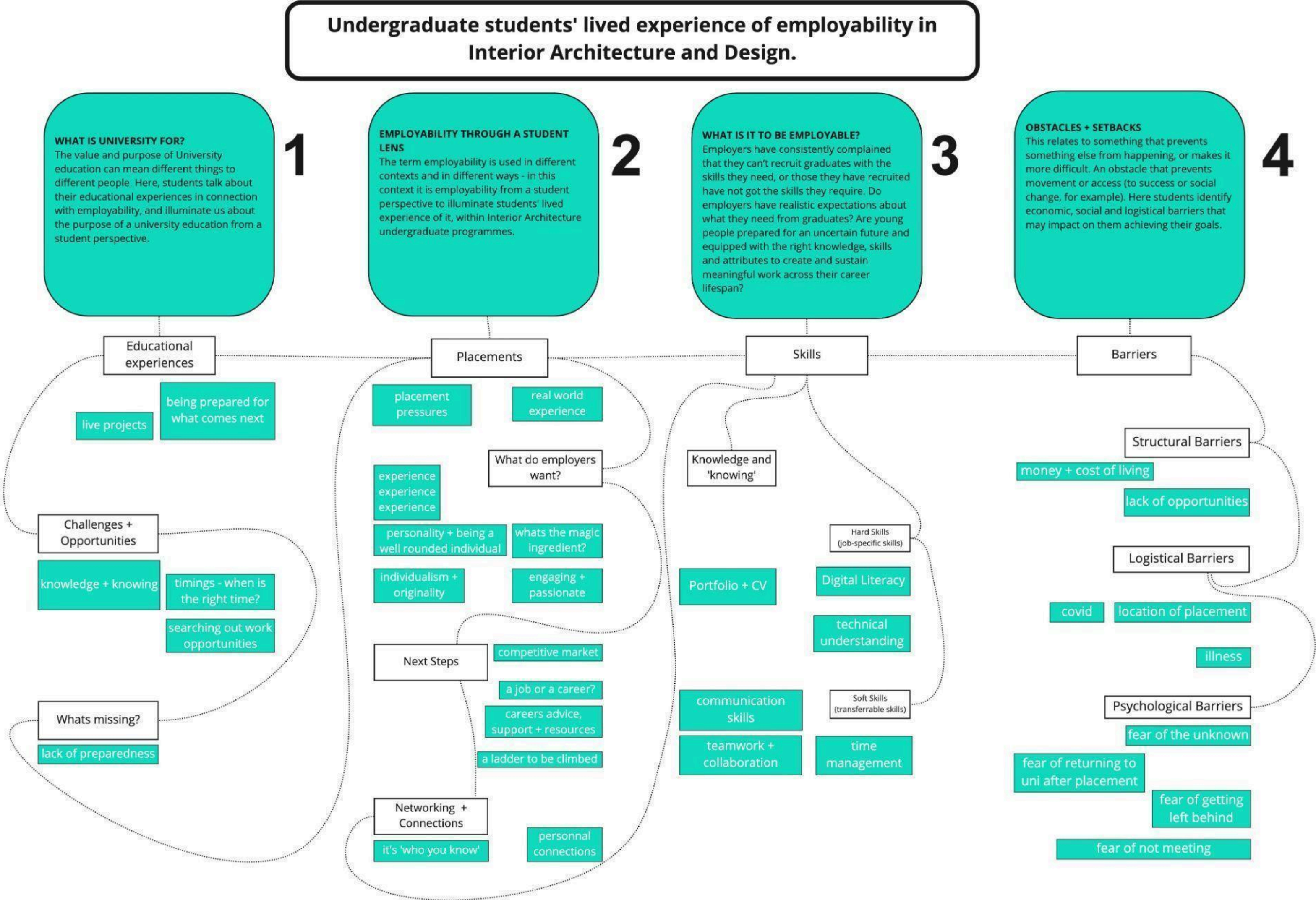


Figure C3. Mapping the data: Exploring Themes. March 202

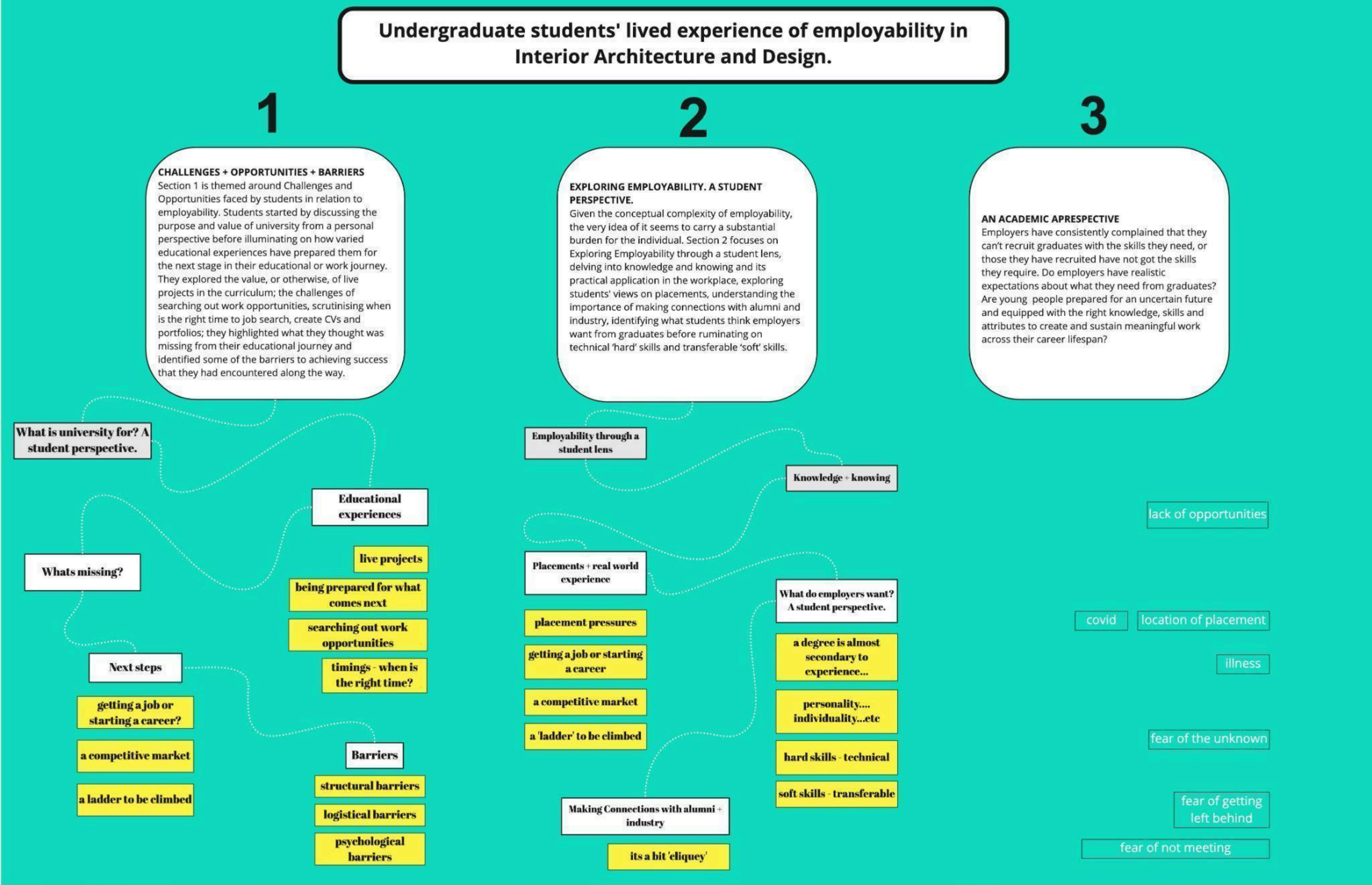
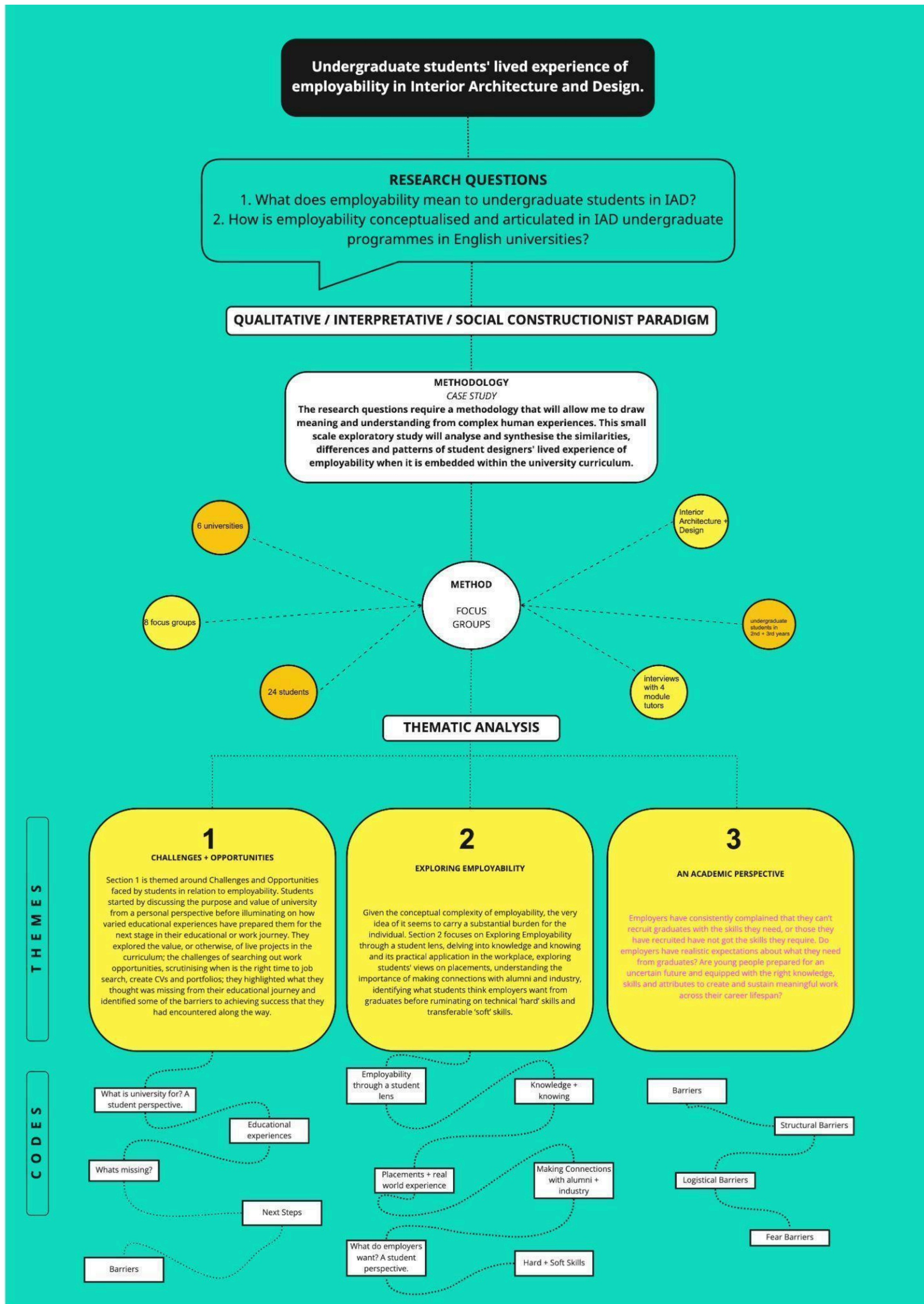


Figure C4. Mapping the data: Participant excerpts: The university. January 2022

Figure C5. Mapping the data: Participant excerpts: Lived experience. January 2022

Figure C6. Mapping the data, March 2022. An overview



APPENDIX D. University Employability Strategies

This chapter explores *University Strategies on Employability,* drawing on the university strategies that support the institutional employability agenda from the six sample universities that took part in the focus groups. The review of the university strategies reveals similar approaches to employability across the six institutions. However, this contrasts the findings from the student focus groups that show a more diverse approach to employability at the course level within the discipline of Interior Architecture and Design.

The results are central to Research Question 02, “How is employability conceptualised and articulated in IAD undergraduate programmes in English universities?” These findings give insight into how these sample institutions address employability at the strategy level in undergraduate IAD programmes, and they help to frame and contextualise student perspectives and experiences of employability as detailed in Chapter 4.

University Employability Strategies

This chapter describes the characteristics of the sample universities and courses that took part in the study to illuminate how employability is articulated in IAD undergraduate programmes in English universities. It focuses specifically on the strategies within the sample universities that support the institutional employability agenda. This section will contextualise the student participant qualitative data obtained from the six study localities reported on in Chapter 5, thus allowing later detail to be fitted into a basic university/department profile (Table 7, P.103). This section draws upon university websites and published strategies and statements in the public domain that focus on the employability offer. A general web search was conducted to find any articles, news features, etc, that refer to the focus of the thesis. This does not claim to be an exhaustive search of publicly available material.

Characteristics of the six participating universities

The universities taking part in the study were from a diverse geographical spread and with significant variation in overall student numbers, ranging from large institutions with over 35,000 students to small specialist arts-based institutions with circa 4000 students. It should be noted that the six institutions are all post-1992 universities in England, all have roots in technical and vocational education, and all are characterised as widening participation institutions. At the time of the research, no “Russell Group” HEIs offered courses in IAD. Table D1 (p.271, Appendix D) illustrates the characteristics of each university.

A coding system was adopted according to my view of things, to classify the universities to help protect the anonymity of people and institutions (Table D1, p.271, Appendix D). This and later sections of the thesis reports on the universities and courses in anonymised forms, showing neither the names of the universities nor the precise geographical locality from which they were drawn.

All six of the university's strategic plans refer to the employability agenda either directly or indirectly. The term “employability,” however, was seldom used; instead, other proxy terminology like *‘graduate career,’ ‘professional career', ‘highly employable,’ ‘real life project briefs,’ ‘industry experts'*, ‘industry experience' and *‘experienced practitioners”* featured heavily.

A strategic overview of the participating institutions and the characteristics of the IAD courses are detailed in Table D1 (p. 276).

Table D1.
Strategic overview of the six participating institutions and individual IAD course characteristics.

University 01 *Institutional overview*	1. A large post-1992 University with circa 30,000 students based in the UK, characterised as a widening participation institution. 2. Listed in the top 50 for graduate prospects (2022 Complete University Guide) 3. The strategy describes how it ***"empowers students … through industry industry-focused courses to experience life beyond the lecture hall".*** 4. It says that *'**to stand out in today's job market you'll need strong qualifications, industry experience and the skills to properly make yourself'*** 5. The university states that it will make courses professionally accredited 6. Work Experience is built into every course 7. There is a particular focus on providing links with global employers 8. The university has invested in developing the Employability and Enterprise team to enhance the career prospects and employability of its students'
University 01 *Course overview*	1. This course is a BA (Hons) in Interior Architecture and Design 2. The course provides students with the *'**key transferable skills that will prepare them for a graduate career in design'.*** 3. The Department states that *'**our courses are designed to prepare you to succeed in the interior design industry'*** 4. Students will be equipped with ***"the skills and experience to carry with you for the rest of your professional career"*** 5. The Department notes that students will study in a studio culture that reflects modern practice 6. Opportunities for live design projects. 7. Creative briefs from real clients and hear visiting industry experts deliver talks about their work

	8. Students will engage with guest lecturers and industry 1-year work placements 9. Study trips are an important part of this course; some are mandatory and others optional. 10. You can access the Employability team for up to 3 years after completing your course.
University 02 *Institutional overview*	1. The university describes itself as a modern, professional university based in the North of England with around 28,000 students and one of the largest university arts communities in the North. It is characterised as a widening participation institution. 2. Making students more employable is at the forefront of what the University says it does, so they organise thousands of work placement opportunities every year. 3. The university provides "***high-quality teaching to suit students' needs. It has a wide variety of online resources and a flexible learning approach, as they understand students need to work in their own time*** 4. This University is investing in its campus facilities and buildings. 5. Students can access a "***broad range of online resources and learning tools and attend sessions throughout the year to boost their employability skills, and they have access to these services for up to 5 years after graduation".*** 6. The university works with many employers and organisations across all different industries and sectors. Employer events run throughout the year, allowing students to chat with employers, see what opportunities are out there and build their professional network. 7. The university supports students to be commercially aware, future-focused, and ready for work.
University 02 *Course overview*	1. The course is a BA (Honours) in Interior Architecture and Design 2. There is a focus on sustainability in the design of interior spaces in this programme 3. The course information says ***students will be taught by experienced practitioners whose backgrounds are in top architecture and design industry***

	consultants and practices. Many of the tutors are alumni of the course and continue to work in practice. 4. There is a focus on ***live projects, allowing students to engage with real clients, user groups, experts, practising designers, and architects.*** 5. The course makes use of guest lectures from other design disciplines. 6. This course makes specific references to the alumni community and how they can make connections with students. There is an annual professional practice lecture that explores the careers of graduates who have gone to work in highly regarded design companies. 7. This course also provides a bespoke mentoring scheme which pairs final-year students with practising designers and alumni. 8. There is an IAD community support network and peer-to-peer support sessions. Students have access to evening events that include social activities to support their mental health and well-being. 9. There is also a focus in this programme for students to study with other design students to promote interdisciplinary study and develop teamwork skills. 10. A Professional Practice lecture series explores the careers of graduates working in design studios, and they connect students and alumni into a strong employment network.
University 03 *Institutional overview*	1. A large, post-1992 university with circa 32,000 students in the northeast of England, characterised as a widening participation institution. 2. The university has campuses in London and Europe 3. It is in the top 50 for graduate outcomes as listed by the 2022 Complete University Guide 4. The University strategy notes that its graduates are ***"critical, challenging thinkers who transform lives across the world"*** 5. All students can engage in experiential learning through clinics, work placements, study abroad and student-led research.

	6. A focus on developing leadership skills. ***The university states that 'we created confident leaders with stamina, determination, talent, and commitment to inspire and get results. We believe in hands-on experience to help you build your CV and work towards your dream career".*** 7. This university placed a particular emphasis on the number of courses they offered that professional bodies had accredited. *8.* To be recognised globally *as an outstanding and accessible university that … excellent outcomes. It has a target of 80% of students in graduate-level jobs.* 9. The university emphasises the benefits of students joining a society. The University has supplied a blog space where students share their experiences of joining student-led societies and the skills they develop in doing so. 10. This university emphasised the skills that can be developed through volunteering and worked closely with the student union to supply many opportunities to volunteer in the community. 11. A clear focus on students getting a placement. The university website talks about the opportunity to gain valuable experience in the world of work, which they argue makes students much more employable after graduating. The university has several placement teams in supporting undergraduate students with work placement
University 03 *Course overview*	1. There are options for a BA (Honours) in Interior Design and a BA (Honours) in Interior Architecture 2. The courses emphasise ***its collaborative relationships with national and international clients and practices. This, it argues, allows students to work on real-life project briefs with national and internal level companies.*** 3. This practice-based course ***adopts a research-informed teaching model** driven by **research and delivered by inspiring research-active and entrepreneurial staff.***

	4. The course notes that it encourages working in studio groups where students will learn to be flexible and collaborative. 5. The teaching staff are listed on the website and have run their own companies both large and small 6. The courses offer live and directed design projects 7. Students take part in site visits within live projects 8. Students can show a portfolio at a design exhibition 9. Students will take part in a European study trip 10. The staff teaching this course work closely with business and industry and have experience in professional practice 11. The course states that you will graduate as a highly employable, industry-ready professional
University 04 *Institutional overview*	1. This is a large post-1992 university based in the Midlands with around 25,000 students, characterised as a widening participation institution. 2. It places a great emphasis on work experience. This is guaranteed for all students, with a dedicated team that offers a range of career resources and opportunities. 3. The university ***"aims to help you [the students] become what employers need – a work-ready graduate with professional experiences. Our industry-level courses are designed to equip you to succeed in a competitive workplace"*** 4. A clear focus on employability mentoring to provide students with the opportunity to make connections with and learn from industry professionals. 5. Focus on ***'real-world' experience and teaching by academic staff, guest speakers and 'lectures from inspiring industry leaders*** 6. Offers a wide range of programmes, activities and support for students who want to develop entrepreneurial skills or launch and grow their businesses. 7. This university has developed many online resources to help students plan and practise their careers in a digital age. Students can upload their CVs and get immediate feedback

University 04 *Course overview*	1. The course is a BA (Hons) in Interior Design. 2. The course emphasises how the studio environment at the University is designed to ***'mimic' professional practice so students are prepared for the world of work. It also stresses that students will be taught by staff with industry experience.*** 3. The course offers placement opportunities in the industry in the UK and overseas 4. The course encourages students to enter competitions to strengthen their portfolio 5. This university encourages students to study overseas and gain international work experience.
University 05 *Institutional overview*	1. This university is a small specialist arts and design institution with circa 4500 students found in the southeast of England, characterised as a widening participation institution. 2. Listed in the bottom quartile for graduate prospects in the 2022 Complete University Guide. 3. In discussing the students at the University ***the strategy notes that students' future career success is at the "heart of our teaching curriculum and support services".*** *4.* The University outlines how it is developing its academic portfolio to make sure that ***"graduate career prospects derive every aspect of the academic experience".*** 5. This University has set targets for the percentage of graduates in self-employment 15 months after graduation (33% by 2030), the number of new companies started by graduates and the number of jobs created through startups" 6. International placement 7. Guest lecturers 8. The University's strategy emphasises "original and courageous thinkers, who feed the future of the creative industries, its". *9.* The University claims that they are "*producing future-proofed graduates …complex problem solvers and multi-disciplinary team players"*

	10. This university claims that it puts '*real world, real market challenges at the heart of everything we do"*
University 05 *Course overview*	1. The course details show ***the importance of developing vital professional practice and collaborative working skills.*** 2. The learning and teaching strategy stresses the blend of lectures, seminars, and tutorials. Studio practice, workshops, and practical demonstrations. ***There is an emphasis on visiting professionals contributing to the course.*** 3. There is the possibility of a placement year in professional practice.
University 06 *Institutional overview*	1. This is a large post-1992 university in England with circa 30,000 students, characterised as a widening participation institution. 2. Listed in the top 50 for graduate prospects in the 2022 Complete University Guide 3. The strategy sets out the challenges that universities face, noting that ***'as knowledge becomes more sophisticated, so is the task of equipping students for progression to stimulate and skilled careers .... Intensifies'*** 4. The strategy goes on to note that students will increasingly look to universities for ***'outstanding opportunities' and for a 'return on investment. The strategy refers to how it will design courses and programmes for students that 'provide students with the practical skills and knowledge they need to be successful.'*** 5. A strong focus of this strategy is the emphasis it places on entrepreneurship. 6. The strategy notes that "*The university [will be] an exemplar of what an enterprising university can be and can do – working with, for and alongside others'* 7. The strategy outlines what it expects from its students. Students at this university will be '*confident, creative, resistant and responsible – prepared for whatever they decide to do*".

	8. Students will "*have an edge in a rapidly changing world, able to thrive in their work and to make constructive contributions*" 9. The University states that 'our courses … have employability built-in … [students are] gaining sought after skills that make [the student] much more employable 10. The University highlights activities that will enhance employability, including practical problem-solving using 'real-world' examples, getting involved in project work, presentation delivery and report preparation, group work, gaining leadership skills, going on external visits, attending employer presentations, and going on work placements.
University 06 *Course overview*	1. The BA (Honours) Interior Architecture and Design course offers a placement year. 2. The course information says that students will ***'work with practising designers who bring their experience and networks to the course'.*** 3. The course is ***'employability driven through applied 'real-world' projects. The course will allow students to 'develop the confidence and skills needed to use innovative technologies. In addition, the course will allow students to 'build a unique portfolio to prepare for a career in interior architecture and design.*** 4. The course listing finds work placement opportunities between the 2nd and 3rd years of study in the UK and overseas. 5. Authentic live briefs external partners supply is central to the course 6. Field trips are offered in the UK and overseas 7. Networking opportunities with external practitioners and developing industry links.

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