

## **What They Really Need: Student Perspectives on Integrated Employability**

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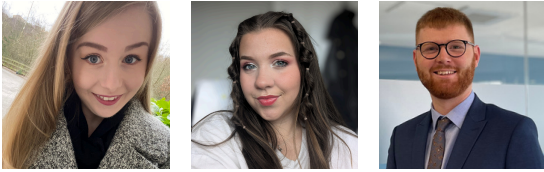
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*What they really need:*

## STUDENT PERSPECTIVES ON ENHANCING INTEGRATED EMPLOYABILITY



*NIKITA-MARIE BRIDGEMAN, Lecturer in Business Operations and Systems at Sheffield Hallam University, with input from recent graduates JOANNA SMALLEY and MATTHEW BAINES, explore student perspectives on integrated employability and the ways in which it could be used to better prepare students for the realities of the working world.*

Keen to ensure career readiness for graduates in an increasingly challenging job market, integrating employability into curricula is an area of growing focus across the higher education (HE) sector. Efforts towards this have taken a variety of forms, with collaboration seen between academics, professional services staff and industry partners alike, all of whom seek to embed innovative approaches to employability that suit the dynamic needs of students. While these moves towards integration are of course a step in the right direction, the perspectives that inform these approaches must be considered...where do student perspectives fit in?

### PREPARING STUDENTS FOR SUCCESS

As an applied university, Sheffield Hallam takes a practical approach to learning, giving students the opportunity to solve real-world problems through collaborative experiences. Across the university, employability is embedded into courses, providing in-curriculum opportunities for students to develop the all-important skills required in the world of work.

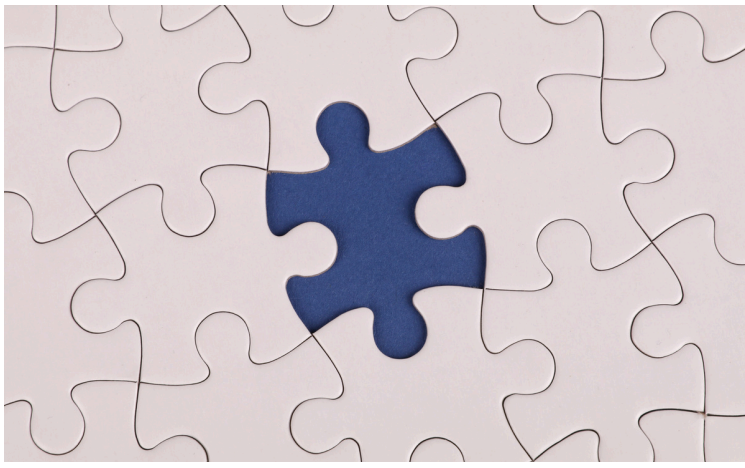
This approach is industry informed. The employers we work with highlight that, while they can teach new hires the workings of their organisation, what they expect on entry are the skills that enable graduates to immerse themselves in an organisation and demonstrate an ability to adapt to new challenges. Project-based opportunities to tackle industry challenges are well received by students, with industry partners who are directly engaged with these projects also reporting positive outcomes because of this approach to learning.

*'Assessments that mimic workplace deliverables, such as presentations and group projects, help students to develop professional skills beyond just academic essay writing.'* – Matthew

Offering students opportunities to engage with practical, industry driven tasks enables the development of vital skills and industry relevant knowledge. Equally, as these opportunities are offered at a curriculum level, students who may not be able to engage with extra-curricular activities such as internships or trips are provided with valuable experience which can be used to develop and demonstrate graduate attributes.

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***We should encourage students to challenge the status quo***  
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## MISSING PIECE OF THE PUZZLE

Teamworking, problem solving and critical thinking are key attributes that are not only in demand from employers but are well covered within employability integrated curricula. These skills enable the graduates who possess them to enter a variety of industries, securing roles that allow them to demonstrate the knowledge and skills they have developed at university. But when they get to the workplace, it is the realities of the everyday working world that provide our graduates with the greatest challenges.

*'In the workplace, you're often expected to be able to hold a conversation at meetings with senior members of staff. This is something we aren't prepared for at university.'* - Joanna

From understanding office dynamics and communicating with colleagues and clients, to meeting deadlines without scheduled checkpoints or clearly defined criteria, when entering the workplace, graduates are faced with a stark difference from the regimented timetables, assignment schedules and support systems in place at universities.

*'I understand why students are given so much structure and notice of upcoming deadlines and the tasks ahead, but this is not representative of the workplace. Additional challenges and changes along the way would be better.'* - Joanna

Consequently, we must ask ourselves: what else can we do to prepare students? Understandably, universities need to operate under a model that maintains a consistent approach, standardising the provision of learning and assessment to ensure quality. But in our efforts to prepare our students for the future, many of which are costly and time-consuming from a staff perspective, we should consider whether a different approach to integrated employability could be taken. After all, employers want employees that integrate seamlessly, suggesting that it's not just skills they need, but experience of appropriate behaviours.

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## REFLECTING WORKPLACE REALITIES

So, how can we prepare our students while at university?

- **Break down communication barriers:** Though necessary in some circumstances, the rigidity of communication between academics and students is not representative of communication in the real world. Can we support learners to use informal platforms like Teams appropriately?
- **Encourage students to challenge the status quo:** Universities often reward students for following a structured process. In contrast, workplaces need people who ask questions, challenge existing ways of working, and propose improvements. If we want students to succeed in a world that values innovation, we must allow them to be innovative. Failure is key to learning, so are there ways to let them fail safely?
- **Embrace ambiguity and adaptability:** Assignments have clear instructions and grading criteria. However, in the workplace, one often solves problems with little guidance or is required to learn on the job. To do this, consider whether it is possible to factor the reality of changing circumstances into tasks. Can we emulate the real world by providing new challenges along the way?

As students are confronted with an increasingly demanding labour market, we must evolve our approaches to ensure that our students are prepared for the realities of their next steps. Consequently, as we evolve, we need to recognise that employability isn't just about the big projects where skills development is obvious, but the small everyday interactions that shape our workplaces.



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