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Barriers to Embedding Employability: Are Academics the Problem?

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Abstract

Employability has long been a central, albeit often contested, concept within the discourse of Higher Education (HE) in the United Kingdom. Traditionally, discussions surrounding graduate outcomes have focused on a quartet of primary stakeholders: students; prospective employers; university policy; and government policy. While these groups undeniably play pivotal roles in shaping the landscape of graduate employment, this paper confronts a critical, often implicit, question: could academics pose a key barrier to the embedding of employability? We argue that academics, frequently perceived as a barrier and/or omitted from strategic institution-specific as well as sector-wide-policy discussions, are in fact integral and interconnected stakeholders whose active engagement is essential for robust integration of employability within the fabric of HE. This paper will offer a conceptual viewpoint in the evolving understanding of employability, explore persistent barriers to its effective integration, specifically examining the academic perspective, and offer forward-thinking case studies that champion a more holistic, interconnected, and culturally embedded approach, particularly emphasizing the vital contributions of academic and professional services colleagues.

Keywords

employability • academics • graduate outcomes • curriculum

The Evolving Discourse of Employability and the Academic Contested Place

The concept of employability has undergone significant redefinition over the past decades, moving beyond a simplistic notion of merely securing a graduate job (Romgens et al., 2020; Yorke, 2006). Early definitions, often driven by employer demands, focus on lists of soft skills (or 'mindset' skills) and hard skills that graduates should possess (CBI, 2009; Lowden et al., 2011). This 'possessive' perspective, which views employability as a set of static attributes to be acquired, has been critiqued for reducing the complex interplay of individual capabilities and labour market dynamics to a mere checklist with an advocation of a 'processual' understanding, seeing employability as a developmental trajectory, a continuous movement through and beyond higher education (Holmes, 2023). Employability is now increasingly understood as a multifaceted construct encompassing an individual's capacity to navigate and thrive within a dynamic labour market, encompassing knowledge, skills, personal attributes, and the ability to adapt to changing contexts (Cheng et al., 2021; Romgens et al., 2020). Our perspective suggests that this shift recognizes employability not just as an outcome, but as a continuous developmental process. A key aspect of this development often involves work-integrated learning (WIL), which, while beneficial, also presents various risks that require careful consideration (Xu, 2025). This evolving understanding aligns with a 'skills-first approach' to workforce development, as advocated by organizations such as the OECD (2025), which emphasizes the importance of skills and adaptability in a rapidly changing global economy – which in turn, will have implications for the metric systems of 'graduate outcomes' as a benchmark of curricula quality.

Impact of Multi-Dimensionality

Romgens, Scoupe, and Beausaert (2020) highlight this multi-dimensionality, proposing an integrated view that combines insights from higher education and workplace learning, emphasizing human capital, reflection on self and organization, lifelong learning, and social capital. They argue that these different streams of literature, often studied

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in isolation, can reinforce each other, providing a more comprehensive understanding of employability. Similarly, Cheng et al. (2021) discuss the 'duality of employability', acknowledging both individual capabilities and broader external factors like social, institutional, and economic conditions. This broader understanding moves beyond the singular focus on employment rates, which, as Cheng et al. (2021) argue, can be a crude and faulty proxy for true employability, failing to capture the nuances of graduate potential and societal contribution. The emphasis on measurable economic metrics, as highlighted by Barkas and Armstrong (2021), can dilute the value of critical-thinking skills.

Despite this evolving understanding, the traditional discourse often overlooks the intricate web of individuals and teams within HE institutions who are instrumental in shaping graduate outcomes. Far from being mere deliverers of content, academics are active shapers of student development. They are the ones interpreting policy, designing curricula, and ultimately shaping the learning experience that connects government aspirations with the practical demands of the workplace (Daubney, 2022). Correspondingly, dedicated professional services teams - such as careers advisors, placement officers, and skills development units - are not simply support functions, separate to the academic efforts, but are integral to bridging the gap between policy and practice (Cooper & Lamb, 2026; Lamb et al., 2024; McCowan 2015; Romgens et al., 2020). Our lived experiences (industry-active academics with combined teaching experience of over 40 years) suggests that without their active involvement, even the most well-intentioned policies struggle to translate into meaningful student experiences.

Academics as Stakeholders

The question of whether academics constitute a distinct stakeholder group in employability is itself a point of contention. The 'yes' camp asserts their centrality, arguing that academics interpret policy, design curricula, and directly influence the learning experience that connects government aspirations with workplace demands (Daubney, 2022). Daubney (2022) introduces the concept of 'extracted employability,' arguing that academics can clarify the employability value within their teaching without compromising academic rigour, thereby making the employability value of their existing curriculum explicit. Conversely, the 'no' camp fears that an overemphasis on employability risks diluting the core academic mission of fostering critical thinking, intellectual curiosity, and disciplinary mastery (Barkas & Armstrong, 2021; McCowan, 2015). Stoten (2018) further elaborates on this as a 'contested concept,' highlighting the cultural struggle within universities as they mediate between traditional academic values and external demands. This inherent tension is a tightrope upon which academics must tread carefully, as they balance disciplinary depth and intellectual rigour with the need to equip students with practical, employer-valued skills.

This leads to a fundamental question: 'Whose responsibility is it anyway?' Is employability solely the remit of a dedicated careers service operating on the periphery of academic life, or does the responsibility extend into the heart of academic faculties, embedded within curriculum design and delivery? The traditional view often places the burden on careers services, but as the CBI (2009) and BIS (2011) reports indicate, there is a growing recognition that employability needs to be a shared responsibility across the institution. The most effective approach, as suggested, lies in shared ownership and genuine collaboration between academic and professional services colleagues within a 'Third Space'. This collaborative model acknowledges that employability is not an add-on, but an intrinsic part of the holistic educational experience, requiring a shift from fragmented efforts to a truly integrated approach.

Barriers to Embedding Employability: Unpacking the Academic Dimension

Despite the growing recognition of employability's importance, several persistent barriers hinder its effective integration within HE, with academics often perceived as a central challenge. A primary challenge is a lack of understanding as to what employability is. Cheng et al. (2021) and Romgens, Scoupe, and Beausaert (2020) both highlight the fluidity of the term, leading to a lack of conceptual clarity. This ambiguity often manifests as a tension between a narrow focus on 'employment' (the act of securing a job) and a broader understanding of 'employability' (the lifelong capacity to adapt and thrive in a career). This conceptual disconnect can lead to misaligned efforts, particularly from academics who may interpret employability in a way that does not fully encompass employer needs or the broader skills agenda. Employers, for instance, often seek 'softer' skills and attitudes, which may not align with governmental definitions that prioritize vocational skills and which sit awkwardly with assessment design (Cheng et al., 2021; Lowden et al., 2011; Tsitskari et al., 2017).

A significant fear among some academics is the risk of HE becoming overly vocational, thereby losing its distinctive focus on intellectual exploration and critical analysis (Barkas & Armstrong, 2021; McCowan, 2015). This barrier stems from the perception that HE is not further education (FE), and thus, HE is not the appropriate place to embed more vocational considerations. Barkas and Armstrong (2021) articulate this as 'the price of knowledge,' arguing that the marketization and commodification of higher education, with

its emphasis on economic value and graduate outcomes, has unintentionally led to making sacrificial lambs out of wisdom and higher learning. McCowan (2015) questions whether universities should promote employability if it compromises their fundamental purpose of fostering human understanding through open-ended enquiry. This philosophical tension often translates into practical resistance to embedding employability initiatives, particularly in research-intensive institutions (Daubney, 2022).

What is Authentic Assessment, Anyway?

Another critical barrier, often stemming from the academic sphere, is a lack of understanding as to what 'authentic assessment' actually is. While authentic assessment has been flagged as a solution, a common challenge in practice is that academics may not fully grasp its principles or how to effectively implement it beyond traditional examination methods (Daubney, 2022). This can lead to a gap between the *intention* to use authentic assessment and its *actual* application, hindering its potential to genuinely evaluate and develop transferable skills. Furthermore, the issue of non-practising academics out of touch with employer needs presents a tangible barrier. While academics are experts in their disciplinary fields, many may not have recent or direct experience of the contemporary labour market. This can lead to a disconnect where the curriculum, while academically rigorous, may not adequately reflect the evolving skills and attributes employers are seeking (Lowden et al., 2011). This gap in understanding can create friction when attempting to embed employability, as academics may perceive employer demands as irrelevant or a threat to academic integrity.

The Student View

Students themselves often contribute to this barrier, frequently viewing career-related activities as 'add-ons' or 'side quests' rather than integral to their learning journey (Mahmood et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). Thompson et al. (2013) found that while many students recognized the value of extracurricular activities for employability, fewer were strategic in their involvement, often hindered by a lack of career planning. Mahmood et al. (2014) noted that while students understood the general benefits of work placements, they struggled to articulate specific skills gained, suggesting a disconnect between experience and self-marketing. This perception is further exacerbated by the 'Diving Board Theory' proposed by Beaumont et al. (2016), which illustrates a paradox: their sample of Marine Sport Science students' perceived that their employability increased year on year, but that their confidence in gaining graduate employment *decreased*. This was attributed to perceived barriers such as competition, lack of experience, and the state of the economy, highlighting that external factors and media narratives can significantly impact student confidence, regardless of skills acquired. Minten (2010) similarly found that sport graduates often felt underutilized and frustrated in their early careers, leading to high job mobility due to a mismatch between their graduate attributes and the demands of their roles.

In some institutions, academics are often omitted from conversations relating to employability. Despite being central to curriculum design and delivery, academics may not be consistently involved in strategic discussions about employability at an institution causing further barriers (Cheng et al., 2021; Daubney, 2022). This omission can lead to a lack of buy-in, misunderstanding of institutional priorities, and a perception that employability is solely the responsibility of professional services, further entrenching the 'silo effect' (Lowden et al., 2011). Decker-Lange, Lange, and Walmsley (2024) highlight the importance of 'knowledge exchange between universities' stakeholders' for entrepreneurship education and employability, reinforcing the idea that excluding key academic voices is a significant impediment.

Finally, practical constraints such as time and resources present significant barriers. Lowden et al. (2011) explicitly recommended that careers services be given more responsibility and resources to develop employability activities at faculty and departmental levels, acknowledging the existing pressures on academic staff. The CBI (2009) also highlighted that despite the recognized value of work placements, businesses themselves faced financial pressures that could limit their ability to offer opportunities. Realistically expecting institutions to meaningfully embed employability without imposing unsustainable burdens requires adequate institutional support and resourcing for innovative employability projects. As Xu (2025) points out, WIL programmes, while beneficial, introduce their own set of risks, including those related to psychological well-being, financial burdens, and equity and inclusion, which must be systematically addressed to ensure the overall value of WIL for students.

The Regulatory Imperative: Navigating the Office of Student Affairs' B3 Condition and its Impact on Academics

A significant contemporary driver shaping the employability agenda in UK HE is the regulatory framework imposed by the Office for Students (OfS), particularly its B3 condition on student outcomes (Stewart, 2022). This condition mandates that providers 'must deliver positive outcomes for students on its higher education courses,' specifically focusing on

progression into 'managerial or professional employment, or further study' (Stewart, 2022, Condition B3.3). This regulatory emphasis on quantifiable outcomes introduces a critical tension.

While the OfS aims to ensure value for money for students and taxpayers and incentivize quality, its focus on specific numerical thresholds for employment and progression metrics can inadvertently narrow the understanding of employability. As Cheng et al. (2021) argue, solely using employment rate statistics as a key indicator risks encouraging practices that prioritize employers' immediate needs above knowledge creation and the development of academic disciplines, potentially leading to a more 'vocation-driven' higher education. This echoes the concerns raised by Barkas and Armstrong (2021) and McCowan (2015) about the potential dilution of academic rigour and the 'price of knowledge.' The OfS's B3 conditions, while well-intentioned, risk reinforcing the 'possessive' view of employability (Holmes, 2023) by measuring it primarily through a 'tool-like' outcome rather than the complex, lifelong process of identity formation and adaptation.

For institutions, navigating B3 conditions means demonstrating compliance through data. This can lead to a focus on strategies that directly boost these metrics, such as increasing work placement opportunities or refining career services, which are indeed valuable. However, this pressure might inadvertently de-emphasize the broader, less quantifiable aspects of employability development, such as critical thinking, ethical reasoning, and holistic personal growth, which are fundamental to a truly 'employable' graduate in the long term (McCowan, 2015). The challenge, therefore, is to ensure that compliance with B3 does not lead to a reductive approach to curriculum design or student support. This is particularly relevant when considering WIL, where, as Xu (2025) highlights, a data-driven analysis can reveal hidden psychological, financial, and equity risks that might not be captured by simple employment outcomes, but are crucial for genuine student success and wellbeing.

Forward-Thinking Solutions: Fostering Interconnectedness and Culture

To overcome these barriers and navigate the regulatory landscape effectively, a fundamental shift towards fostering better connections and a pervasive culture of employability is required. This begins with developing shared definitions of employability that reflect its interconnected nature, moving beyond a narrow focus on immediate job acquisition to encompass the development of transferable skills, adaptability, and lifelong learning (Cheng et al., 2021; Romgens et al., 2020). Experience suggests that open dialogue between all stakeholders is crucial for achieving this shared understanding and authentic assessment plays a crucial role in this shift. Re-framing co-curricular activities is also essential. Instead of viewing them as 'side quests,' they should be presented as integral parts of the learning process, with assessments that value the journey of skill development as much as the final outcome (Clark et al., 2015; Thompson et al., 2013). Thompson et al. (2013) found that students recognized the value of extracurricular activities for employability but often lacked strategic planning. Clark et al. (2015) further supported this, noting that alumni who became recruiters highly valued extracurricular involvement, particularly when applicants could articulate the skills gained. Institutional schemes that encourage reflection on these experiences can significantly enhance their impact. Examples such as Workplace Related Experiential Learning (WREL) at York St John University and the Living CV at Southampton Solent University offer tangible models for innovative practice in this area.

Case Study 1: The Living CV at Southampton Solent University

The Living CV project at Southampton Solent University exemplifies a forward-thinking approach to student employability, driven by a collaborative vision between professional services and academic staff (Lamb et al., 2024). This initiative moves beyond the traditional static CV, aiming to create a dynamic, evidence-based portfolio that captures students' skills, experiences, and achievements in a more holistic and verifiable manner. The Living CV is a process where students are continually recognizing learning gained throughout their course and the value that this brings to their future employability by translating their module learning outcomes into CV outputs from the first semester of their degree. As they progress through their studies, they collect compelling evidence of all the skills and achievements they are gaining. Course academics help them to understand this learning by co-creating these CV ready summary statements as they work through their course modules. This collaborative design ensures that the Living CV is not merely an add-on, but an embedded tool that encourages continuous self-reflection and skill development throughout the student journey. Professional Services, like Solent Careers, aid with this continuous reflection while also offering additional experiences and opportunities to develop their professional self.

Case Study 2: Workplace Related Experiential Learning at York St John University

York St John University's WREL framework is another prime example of successful collaboration between professional services and academics to enhance employability (Cooper & Lamb, 2026). WREL is designed to be authentically embedded across modules at each level of study, ensuring that work-focused aspects are integrated throughout the curriculum rather than being confined to a single module or year. The framework

outlines increasing levels of rigour, intensity, and proportion of learning hours dedicated to WREL as students progress through their degree. Professional services staff, particularly those in placement and employability roles, work closely with academic departments to identify and facilitate WREL activities, such as talks, panels, projects, placements, consultancy, and simulations. A key feature is the emphasis on external engagement, with external organizations often consulted during the design of WREL activities and involved in both the introduction and assessment phases. This ensures that the learning is directly relevant to industry needs and that students receive authentic feedback, which can then be reflected upon in their assessments and contribute to their career development learning. The success of WREL lies in its systematic integration and the shared responsibility taken by both professional services and academics in its delivery and assessment, but a key consideration for this institution is the geographical destinations of the graduates and the demands of the local economy, as many graduates opt to remain in the region. An advantage of this is that local networks established throughout the students' teaching-and-learning experiences can be tapped into upon completion of studies; a disadvantage is that the local economy pales in comparison to the richness of that in the capital, which in turn, impacts upon graduate-outcome data.

Ultimately, truly embedding employability requires a fundamental shift in institutional culture. This necessitates buy-in from the very top, with a clear articulation of a shared vision that values graduate outcomes alongside academic excellence (CBI, 2009). Recognizing and rewarding academics and professional services staff who champion employability is crucial. The BIS (2011) report suggested that government funding mechanisms could be used as a lever to encourage HEIs to develop employability skills, implying that top-down incentives can drive cultural change. Creating spaces that encourage cross-disciplinary collaboration and the sharing of best practice will help dismantle existing silos and foster a more integrated approach (BIS, 2011).

Finally, empowering students as active agents in their own employability journey is paramount. Students should not be viewed as passive recipients. This involves fostering self-awareness, developing effective career management skills, and providing access to meaningful work-integrated learning opportunities (Mahmood et al., 2014; Thompson et al., 2013). The mindset needs to shift so that students perceive employability development not as an add-on, but as an integral part of their overall learning experience (Clark et al., 2015). This proactive engagement, from our perspective, is key to students effectively navigating the transition from education to employment.

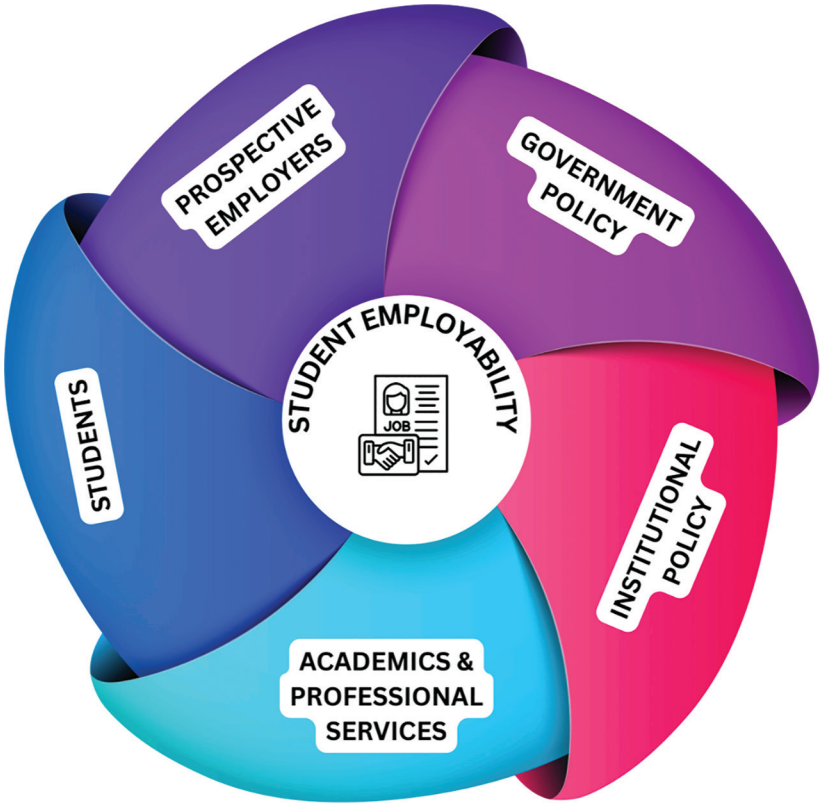

Figure 1. Stakeholder Circularity.
Note: (Authors' own work).

Conclusion

The journey towards fully embedding employability within UK Higher Education is a complex undertaking, requiring a profound shift in institutional culture and a re-evaluation of traditional stakeholder models. By explicitly recognizing academics and professional services staff as integral, rather than peripheral, to this agenda, universities can unlock new avenues for collaboration, innovation, and holistic student development. This holistic integration of employability, driven by an expanded and interconnected stakeholder model, will enhance the value of a UK HE degree for individuals, and ultimately, cater to socio-economical needs.

Recommendations

This paper explores the role of academics in the context of employability, and of the complex issue of 'employability' as a whole. Moving forward, research avenues to further explore relate to the meaning and interpretation of two terms that have arisen in our study of the subject: 'authentic assessment' and 'higher thinking'. Some academics in our research have cited the latter as diminishing in its significance because of work-related learning and this is an observation that requires further examination. Furthermore, we aim to explore how stakeholders within the higher education sector can themselves become more integrated within the teaching-and-learning experience. With this in mind, we have iterated the conceptual model as proposed by Lamb, Buckley and Vieth (2024) in such a way that leans more towards a circular process rather than linear.

The circularity of this concept model highlights the integration of key stakeholders within the teaching-and-learning experience aligned to employability and the strengthening of graduate outcomes. At the heart of the model is 'student employability': an aspect of that experience that evolves and iterates can strengthen and weaken throughout the learning journey. Supporting that 'heart' are the stakeholders that we argue as being integral to that journey, rather than separate entities that offer additional 'add-on' support. By identifying employability as a lifecycle in itself, as well as the institutional and external support systems that are provided by these key stakeholders, this conceptual model highlights the value of holistic and collaborative stakeholder working.

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Rachel Lamb is a leading academic and practitioner in Fashion Media and Communication, currently based at Southampton Solent University. Combining a professional background as a journalist with 24 years of experience in Higher Education, her specialism lies in practice-led learning and embedding real-world employability initiatives into the curriculum. This pedagogy is evidenced by the courses she leads consistently achieving results significantly above benchmark in Graduate Outcomes (GO) data. Rachel's contributions to teaching excellence are recognised nationally; she is a National Teaching Fellow (NTF 2025) and a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy (SFHEA). She writes regularly on pedagogy, employability, and student co-creation methodologies. Institutionally, Rachel is currently leading a major curriculum transformation to block teaching and oversees institutional staff development as the head of the university's Course Leader Network. She also directs institutional initiatives focused on student employability, including the flagship Living CV project.

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Sarah Cooper is a senior lecturer at York St John University, with a professional background in journalism. She has worked internationally, in Australia, Hungary and the UAE, and has also taught in Hong Kong and Spain. She has taught in HE for nearly 20 years, specialising in communications, fashion marketing and employability. Her doctorate focused on the impact of haptics upon the consumption of journalistic content and current research activities revolve around haptics and its impact on trust, and initiatives relating to the embedding of employability in the HE curriculum. Sarah has been an external examiner at University of Arts London and the University of Leeds, and has been an external advisor at the University of Salford.