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# **RESPONDING TO THE EMPLOYABILITY AGENDA: DEVELOPMENTS IN THE POLITICS AND INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS CURRICULUM IN ENGLISH UNIVERSITIES<sup>1</sup>**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

With some of the lowest levels of graduate employability across university campuses, and the non-vocational nature of most Politics/International Relations (IR) undergraduate degree programmes, the discipline faces a huge challenge in responding to the increasingly prevalent employability agenda in higher education. Indeed, as Politics/IR students feel the burden of the £9000 annual student fee now charged by most universities,<sup>5</sup> and an ever-more contracting and competitive jobs market, a review of existing employability training and learning in the Politics/IR curriculum in universities has never been so essential. As such, this paper – based on a Higher Education Agency (HEA) funded project, *Employability Learning and the Politics/IR Curriculum* – explores the employability learning provision in a cross-section of English higher education institutions (HEIs) with a view to identifying examples of good practice in order to generate reflection on how best the discipline can respond to the employability agenda. The original project maps how employability is ingrained in various Politics/IR departments’<sup>6</sup> curriculum. Here we present some of our preliminary findings.

The bulk of this paper is formed by a discussion of the results we have gathered to date. Before proceeding to the data, however, we begin this paper by setting out the background to the employability agenda. In particular, we seek to highlight the ways in which the employability agenda has developed and been framed in higher education, as well as detailing the statistics on graduate employability in Politics/IR in order to provide some quantitative context. In so doing we aim to lay out the scale of the practical and pedagogic challenges we face as a discipline. We then go on to discuss the methodology of the project, before finally presenting and analysing our findings.

## **THE EMPLOYABILITY AGENDA IN HIGHER EDUCATION**

### **Background**

Employability is now a familiar discourse in higher education, one driven by business and which owes much to earlier terms familiar to those teaching in universities such as ‘core skills’, ‘key skills’, ‘transferable skills’ and ‘generic skills’. In the wake of the 1997 Dearing

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<sup>5</sup> The average fee across English and Welsh universities for the 2012-13 academic session was £8,389 with over half of all students studying programmes that charge a £9000 annual tuition fee (UCAS, 2012)

<sup>6</sup> We use the term department throughout while recognising that in many HEIs have Schools of Politics/IR.

Report (National Committee of Enquiry Into Higher Education, 1997), HEIs introduced codes of practice in curriculum development requiring programme specifications to identify specific learning outcomes in the ‘core skills’ of communication, numeracy, information technology, and reflective learning. The 2006 Leitch Review of Skills was the first hint of a more focused attention on employability. Leitch identified the need to develop what he called ‘high skills’ in graduates to ‘enable businesses to compete in the global economy’ (Leitch 2006, p.21. See also Moore, 2010, pp 48-70). The then government minister, John Denham, welcomed the Report’s recommendations, arguing that United Kingdom (UK) graduates ‘feel less prepared for their jobs after graduation’ and that ‘we simply do not have enough people with high-level skills in the workplace’ (Denham, 2008). Higher Ambitions (BIS, 2010), the Labour government’s Higher Education Framework document, went on to set out a number of recommendations for increased business – university engagement to address the perceived low attainment of employability skills among UK graduates.

The new Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition government have continued this trend by first requiring universities to publish ‘Employability Statements’ outlining their strategies for playing a larger role in delivering highly-skilled graduates (HEFCE 2010). This was justified on the basis that ‘modern economies are knowledge based and universities are central to how we prepare for that’ (Cable 2010). More recently, from September 2012 onwards, the Coalition government has gone on to more or less reduce employability to employment, compelling UK universities to publish Key Information Sets (KIS) on each of their undergraduate programmes giving details, among a long list of other things, of graduate employability rates, average graduate earnings, and the most common job types attained six months after finishing the programme (see <<http://unistats.direct.gov.uk>>). Links to all of this data are also now required to be provided on the UCAS website for undergraduate admissions, as well as universities’ own websites and prospectuses. Further Performance Indicator data is also collected and published by the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) (see <<http://www.hesa.ac.uk>>). The employability data available on all these government agency sites is based on annual Destination of Leavers in Higher Education (DLHE) surveys. Notwithstanding issues about the reliability of HESA data and its usefulness to students (Dill and Soo 2004), the dissemination of this employability performance data is designed as a tool for people making university applications to use when making their choice of programme of study and university. In essence the data provides a quantitative guide to help students make a choice on what and where to study – where and what programme to pay their £9000 annual tuition fee on. Employability could thus not be more high profile in the higher education sector.

The Coalition government have also been encouraging further business-university collaboration in order to provide more opportunities for students to gain professional work experience. The government would like to see greater collaboration between the universities and the private sector to boost what it calls vocational higher education (BIS, 2012; 29) In particular the government has called for a significant boost in opportunities for placements during degree programmes, an increase in the number of part-time, sandwich, distance and modular learning programmes on offer to students, as well as an increase in the number of

fully funded apprenticeship scholarships (using OFFA funds to resource this) (BIS, 2012; Panel on Fair Access to the Professions, 2012).

So, in a little over fifteen years what began as a broad discourse about graduate skills has largely been condensed in government and the higher education sector into a discourse of graduate employment. The CBI, in association with successive governments, has led a more focussed attention in HEIs to the skills graduates need to find employment; employability is simply shorthand for 'the ability to get a job' rather than the kinds of higher skills of self-reflection and self-possession that could increase the ability to negotiate and develop over time, as well as get the all-important first job. Forcing universities to publish data on employment rates of graduates highlights the extent to which the employability agenda in higher education is focused on the end result of job realisation – which is just as dependent upon factors such as gender, race, and social class as it is on skills (McNabb et al, 2002; Moreau and Leathwood 2006; Morley 2001; Smith and Naylor, 2001). As such, the HEI employability agenda is rather less concerned with developing employable graduates as it is with employed graduates. As we discuss in the following section, in an increasingly constricted jobs market, this is not a comfortable position for Higher Education to find itself in, since many graduates will be unemployed or underemployed (not in graduate employment) through no fault of their own.

### **Graduate Employment**

Analysis of graduate employability data in general reveals the challenges most students currently face in securing professional- and managerial-type jobs once they have completed their courses. The following table from the HESA website indicates that graduate employment has declined by six per cent since 2007. During the same time period, graduate unemployment has increased by almost five per cent.

Table 1. Graduate employment and unemployment rates, 2006-2012		
Academic year	Employed	Unemployed
2011/12	71.0%	9.0%
2010/11	74.5%	7.6%
2009/10	74.4%	7.4%
2008/09	72.4%	7.6%
2007/08	74.9%	6.5%
2006/07	77.0%	4.7%

Source: HESA based on DLHE surveys and available at

[http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=1899&Itemid=239](http://www.hesa.ac.uk/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=1899&Itemid=239)

Accessed March 18<sup>th</sup>, 2013.

With less than three quarters of 2011 graduates in employment, and almost one in ten unemployed six months after graduation, newly qualified students confront a very difficult labour market. Of the quarter of a million or so graduates entering the jobs market each summer, recent DLHE data suggest that only 63% of these can expect to find graduate-level jobs in the first six months after earning a degree. More specifically, the data indicates that Politics/IR graduates are far less likely to attain graduate employment than many of their peers in other disciplines; this is especially (but not exclusively) the case for those who have graduated with Politics/IR degrees from non-Russell Group universities. Less than half of Politics/IR graduates from De Montfort University, University of Salford, Manchester Metropolitan University, Nottingham Trent University, and Sheffield Hallam University, for example, were in graduate employment six months after graduating. Overall in the Russell Group of universities – where other factors impacting student employability such as university reputation clearly provide some competitive advantage to students entering the graduate labour market – around a third of Politics/IR graduates are not in graduate employment six months after graduation according to DLHE data.<sup>7</sup>

All this data serves a purpose; it is designed to inform student choice. Prospective students are expected to use the DLHE survey data to compare employability rates for similar degree programmes at different universities. If this is the case, then prospective students will notice that 75% of Politics/IR graduates at the University of Bristol were in graduate-level jobs according to the most recent DLHE data. This compares with 30% of graduates from Queen Mary, University of London. For prospective students who prioritise employability performance when making the choice, such data will likely determine the choice of university. Outside of these intra-disciplinary issues, what is likely to concern Politics/IR departments more generally is the extent to which their degree programmes perform poorly in the DLHE employability data compared to other social science disciplines, notably Economics. At the University of Birmingham, for example, 91% of the most recent cohort of Economics graduates featured in the DLHE data are in graduate employment six months after earning their degree, compared to only 65% of Politics/IR graduates. If potential students are weighing up employment prospects as part of their decision-making on what discipline to study at university, then given the comparatively low levels of graduate employability in Politics/IR compared to several other disciplines, we should expect student recruitment to Politics/IR programmes to decline, thus creating further challenges for departments even in our most elite institutions. This has already begun to happen. In September 2012, the Politics/IR department at one Russell Group University suffered a more than 50% fall in undergraduate recruitment.<sup>8</sup> More generally, UCAS data shows a 4,148 drop (11.5%) in the number of applications for Politics degree programme in the 2012 cycle from the previous year, which is higher than the fall of 6.6% in total applications between 2011 and 2012. The

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<sup>7</sup> Newcastle University has some of the highest graduate employment rates in Politics with 80% in graduate employment six months after graduation. More typical of the Russell Group are Manchester University, Leeds University and the University of Birmingham, where 60% of Politics graduates are in graduate employment six months after graduating. (Data source: [www.unistats.direct.gov.uk](http://www.unistats.direct.gov.uk), accessed 18 March, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Confidential data made available to the authors by staff managing recruitment data.

2012 figure also fell by 1,215 (3.5%) from the 2010 cycle – again a higher than average drop in the number of applications.<sup>9</sup>

Given these downward recruitment trends, lower levels of employability when compared other degree programmes, and the immediacy of the employability agenda, the discipline of Politics/IR needs to be serious about how to respond to the challenge. The context of £9000 tuition fees, increasing levels of graduate debt, a shrinking and very competitive graduate job market, popular debates about the added value of degrees to future earnings and employment prospects, and the non-vocational nature of Politics/IR degree programmes (with the exception of the Parliamentary Studies programmes offered by the University of Hull and the University of Leeds), are all likely to pose particular problems for debate. Furthermore, our discipline is evidently in a relatively weak position compared to more vocational degrees such as Law, or those which employability data indicates are somewhat better placed to provide a route to a graduate career, such as Economics. That said, Politics/IR departments (as with most disciplines) are often highly dependent on wider university priorities and spending on employability initiatives and support, with few extra resources available for departmental initiatives. As such, the success of departments is also determined by the quality of employability provision offered by the university central careers services. One such issue is the quality of the central provision for student personal development plans (PDPs). These have become very common in the university sector, and are often the main driver for student skills development, when linked to the personal or academic tutoring systems in place in HEIs. However, as Graves and Maher (2008) point out, the quality of these tools is varied, and most universities have yet to audit their effectiveness, meaning that many of the resources Politics/IR departments are forced to rely on remain unaudited and untested.

### ***‘Fit for work’ Graduates***

What was initially a strategy prompted by the Dearing Report (National Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education, 1997) to develop a framework for embedding core skills in learning and teaching that would assist students in the transition from education into employment, has since developed into a more specific strategy for enhancing the employment preparedness of graduates, in line with creating what business insists are the kinds of graduates needed in the workforce (CBI/UUK 2009). In this way, employability in higher education is being framed as a strategy for making graduates ‘fit for work’ (Moore, 2006, 2010). The Report encourages universities to work closely with graduate employers to develop employability-based approaches to curriculum development and delivery, in order to better develop ‘employment ready’ and ‘economically valuable’ graduates in all disciplines. More recently the CBI has published a joint report with the National Union of Students advising students on how to gain employability skills whilst at university (CBI/NUS, 2011). The employability agenda in its broadest sense seeks to deliver students with well-developed

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<sup>9</sup> We have included the data for 2010 because 2011 application figures are seen as unusually due to the introduction of higher student fee contribution in the 2012-13 academic year. UCAS applications data is available at <http://www.ucas.com/data-analysis>

social, cognitive and practical skills that are appropriate to work (Ellig, 1998, Gore, 2005, Graves and Maher, 2008, Groot and Van den Brink, 2000, Harvey et al., 2002).

Employability skills are thus conceptualised essentially as a set of largely practical and behavioural graduate attributes. Academics must seek ways of embedding skills learning and careers orientated teaching into the curriculum, using work experience and placement schemes, developing teaching methods to build team-working skills (such as group work), more diverse assessment regimes to develop broader communication skills (such as presentations), and use methods to advance situated and reflective learning (such as role playing exercises) (Anderson et al., 2006, Hager and Holland, 2006, Harvey and Knight, 2003, Knight and Yorke, 2004, Knight et al., 2003, Macfarlane-Dick et al., 2006). What now follows is a case study of how a number of Politics/IR departments in English universities have responded to the employability agenda. We begin by detailing our methodology, before going on to present and analyse our results.

## **EMPLOYABILITY IN THE POLITICS/ IR CURRICULUM**

### **Methodology**

The methods used to map the dynamics of employability initiatives in Politics/IR departments of English HEIs included web-based research of university and departmental pages in the public domain, and interviews with academic staff from a cross-section of universities. The web-based research worked to capture the students' view of different departments' employability initiatives, as well as demonstrating how universities and departments would like to be seen for marketing and promotional reasons (for a comparable method of pedagogical mapping see Foster et. al. 2012). In other words, this type of web-based research helped us to understand the narrative universities wanted to construct about themselves with regards to employability. However, in order to create a more robust data-set we complemented the web-based research with a number of in-depth semi-structured interviews with key academic staff working on employability within the departments we sampled for our web-based research. This worked to deepen our understanding of how employability was understood by the staff members who engage in curriculum-based and extra-curricular employability- and careers- oriented teaching. Whilst the web-based research allowed us to analyse the public message departments wanted to narrate, primarily to potential students, the interview data offered an 'insider' view as to the types of employability initiatives offered and the effectiveness of said initiatives. However, it is important to note that whilst we did not wish to explore the connections (or even disconnections) between the public view and the insider understandings of employability, we did want to collate a more complete understanding of how employability learning and career orientated teaching is delivered in a variety of institutions through our two-tiered method.

### **Sampling**

The universities chosen were drawn from a range of English HEIs belonging to a variety of university groupings; namely, post 1992, University Alliance, 1994, and Russell Group universities. These were selected as they offer a broad, and meaningful, cross section of university groupings - each of which have variable agendas with regards to employability which, in some cases, links to the character of their student cohorts on intake and the university's contacts with potential employers. As such, the following universities were selected to offer a cross section of urban based-university groups:

Table 2. English HEIs included in the sample surveys

Group	'Status'	HEIs
Russell Group	'Elite'	University of Manchester, The University of Bristol, University of Nottingham, University of Sheffield, University of Leeds, Queen Mary University of London (QMUL), University of Birmingham, University of Liverpool, University of Southampton, Newcastle University
Post 1992, University Alliance, 1994 Group <sup>10</sup>	'New'	Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), Nottingham Trent University (NTU), Sheffield Hallam University (SHU), Liverpool John Moores University, University of the West of England (UWE), De Montfort University (DMU), Oxford Brookes University, University of Westminster, Aston University, University of Kent, University of Leicester, Salford University, Hull University, Keele University, Northumbria University

The different characters of 'elite' and 'new' universities in relation to learning expectations, diversity of students, entry requirements and employer contact impacted upon our sample selection. Indeed, it has been established that 'elite' HEIs, typified by Russell Group universities, require students to enter with higher A-Level (or equivalent) grades and have slightly higher expectations relating to the student workload when they arrive at university (for example, Brennan et. al., 2009, found that Russell Group universities expect 28 hours of independent study per week, whilst post 92 universities expect 24 hours per week). In addition, it is understood that employers target 'elite' HEIs more frequently than 'new' HEIs due to the assumption that the best students reside in 'elite' institutions (Brown, 2007: 36). It has been noted that even prior to the financial crisis, the likelihood of a graduate from Oxbridge<sup>11</sup> being accepted on a 'fast-track' graduate career scheme is 8:1, whilst for a 'new' university graduate it is 235-1 (ibid.).

<sup>10</sup> Of course, some of these universities are 'newer' than others, with several in the group (Leicester, Aston and Salford) receiving their charters during the 1950s-1960s in the era of the Robbins report.

<sup>11</sup> This study excluded Oxbridge as it is seen as an outlier in relation to graduate employment.



Finally, another factor that determined our sample selection related to the differing student bodies associated with ‘elite’ and ‘new’ HEIs. As Stuart et al (2009: 36) note, ‘new’ universities are more likely to have a more diverse student body in relation to a variety of different identity intersections such as religious background, ethnicity, and age, whilst ‘elite’ institutions have a more homogenised student body and students are more likely to be white, middle class and aged 21 or under. Our sample was therefore driven by previous work (some of which is cited above), which has established the advantages (in relation to employability) that have been implicitly and explicitly linked to ‘elite’ institutions such as Russell Group universities. It follows that the sample of interviewees was based around academic staff members who had particular responsibility or professional interests in developing and delivering employability learning within the above institutions. As noted, the follow-up interviews worked to get an insider view of the employability agenda of selected departments, beyond that of the marketing and promotional material accessible in the public domain. From the sample outlined above, we managed to secure interviews with key members of staff from the following universities.

- University of Nottingham
- University of Sheffield
- University of Leeds
- University of Liverpool
- University of Southampton
- University of Newcastle
- Sheffield Hallam University
- Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)
- Nottingham Trent University (NTU)
- De Montfort University (DMU)
- Oxford Brookes University
- Salford University
- Aston University
- University of Hull
- Keele University
- Northumbria University
- Newcastle University

### **Research Design**

As noted above, we conducted a web-based analysis of the employability and related webpages associated with the Politics/IR departments for the above named universities (11 of which can be considered ‘elite’ and the 14 of which can be considered ‘new’). The web-based research consisted of reviewing both school/departmental webpages and Universities’ career websites to consider how university careers services are marketed, and to which stakeholder groups. The intention was to consider how Politics/IR departments fit within overall university strategies, and how they in turn are conditioned by the discourses employed by the

university as a whole. In addition, we undertook several interviews with key ‘employability focussed’ academic staff. These interviews were largely conducted over the phone, although due to time constraints or interviewee preference, a couple of the interviews were undertaken via email exchange, and a couple were conducted face-to-face. The telephone interviews tended to be about 20-30 minutes long (although one lasted two hours) and were partially structured using the following questions:

To your knowledge...

1. What types of employability training does your department offer within the curriculum?
2. What types of employability initiatives, apart from that integrated into the curriculum, does your department offer?
3. Does your department offer any internship or placement schemes? If so, what programmes are these attached to and what is the student uptake?
4. Does your department offer year abroad opportunities? Are these programme related and what is the student uptake?
5. What employability skills do you believe your average graduate leaves university with?
6. What aspects of employability training do you feel your department does best and why?

These questions were chosen to establish the curriculum based and non-curriculum based employability initiatives developed within the selected departments and whether these were locally (read departmentally) or centrally (read school/faculty or college/university) managed and/or led. In addition, the questions sought to evaluate the emphases on employability initiatives and employability learning. In other words, we sought to investigate interlinking employability themes such as ‘skills based’ employability learning, ‘experience based’ employability learning (such as student mobility and placements driven), and ‘confidence’ and ‘empowerment’ building employability learning. As such, the interview analysis (below) focuses in detail on the three interlinking themes of employability outlined here (namely skills based, experience based and confidence/empowerment based).

## **The Survey Data**

In this section of the paper we present the results of our research of university and department web pages, as well as interviews with key academic staff in our sample. The web-based data discusses HEIs by name since all the material we use is in the public domain. The interview data, however, refers only to the classification of the HEI as either ‘elite’ or ‘new’ for comparative purposes. This is to uphold the anonymity of the participants in line with research ethics guidance.

### **Departmental websites: advertising employability**

Inductively, several points of particular interest were identified. These are references to employability or employment, the use and location of data, and the presence of competitive differentiation in discourse. Most universities followed similar formats, with a page for each degree holding a ‘fact file’ for the programme, separated by tabs listing relevant concerns (such as careers, modules, fees, and so on). Where universities hosted individual pages for each degree they offered (all did, although most were delivered centrally), the information below refers to a single honours degree in Politics (UCAS codes L200 or L2xx), usually advertised as a BA. The exception was UWE, which no longer offers politics but does offer politics and IR. It was notable that more ‘elite’ universities had the course page hosted by the department’s website (identifiable by the URL path), or had two separate pages hosted by the department and central services; the latter focussing on key facts and the former on teaching methods, strengths of the department, module options and so on. This allowed elite universities to emphasise large numbers of teaching staff (and concurrently, module options) and frequently the degree of their integration with parliament and other manifestations of institutional politics.

It should be noted that for many of the universities, the site of the politics degree is not squarely within a department of politics and IR. The vast majority of ‘elite’ universities host a politics department that engages in marketing direct to undergraduates (whether this department is monikered as politics or, for example, Government at LSE). However, at new universities there may be a disconnect between research groups and teaching groups (such as at Salford or Aston where teaching coalesces around ‘subject groups’, containing different staff members to the ‘research centres’), or a large multi-subject department without a politics-specific undergraduate focus (which was the case for many of the new Universities, and interestingly, Bristol). Furthermore, undergraduate-directed degree information may be contained centrally (via an ‘undergraduate/applicant portal’ or similar) rather than existing within the departmental websites themselves. This may be a reflection of the smaller size of ‘new’ departments on average. At the other extreme, at some universities (for example Sheffield and many of the other Russell Group universities) similar information was replicated across central services and the department (both containing an applicant ‘landing page’, plus specific information for each degree offered). Where this is the case, it is noted in the table.

Table 3: Departmental websites' use of employability in advertising courses to prospective undergraduates

HEI	Departmental information/site of politics degree	Politics Degree advertised centrally?	Landing page for UGs on department page?	Use of KIS data on degree info page?	Employability mentioned?	Notes
<b>SHU</b>	Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics.	Y, but linked to directly from department	Y	Y	Y	Very employability focussed – the landing page contains numerous references to teaching skills that employers want. Almost every aspect of the degree is framed in terms of employable skills – particularly academic exchanges, work experience, and dedicated application support.
<b>Sheffield</b>	Department of Politics	Two different pages, hosted by department and central university.	Y	Y – central page, N – department page.	Y – department page.	Employability mentioned on politics UG homepage, framed in terms of politics-specific careers paths (MPs etc), intellectual skills, and the prestige value of a 'good degree' from the department.
<b>MMU</b>	Faculty of Humanities, Languages, and Social Sciences	Y, but linked to directly from department	Y	Y	N	Virtually no mention of employability in landing page, faculty page or on course page.
<b>Manchester</b>	Department of Politics	Two different pages, hosted by department and central university.	Y	Y – central page, N – department page.	Y – central page.	No mention of employability or careers in departmental factfile. Tab on careers in central services factfile, mostly discussing skills and showcasing the careers service.
<b>Salford</b>	School of Humanities, Languages and Social Sciences / Politics and Contemporary History (due to be closed)	Y	Y/N – it exists, but is no longer linked from the faculty page.	Y	Y	Employability an explicit tab in factfile. Details of graduate destinations and links with industry, but less coverage of how the course makes students employable.
<b>LJMU</b>	N/A	No longer offered.	N	N	N	Department and course has been closed.
<b>Liverpool</b>	Department of Politics	Two different pages, hosted by department and central university.	Y	Y – central page, N – department page.	Y – both, but brief.	Employability mentioned on landing page, specifically with reference to parliamentary placement module. Careers pathways very briefly mentioned on central webpage as a nod to employability but without any

						specific focus on how the degree enables careers progression.
<b>DMU</b>	Department of Politics and Public Policy	Y, but linked to directly from department	Y	Y (but hidden! )	Y	Employability on departmental UG landing page reason #2 of 10 to study at DMU ('relevant courses'). No mention on central factfile page other than to offer the option of a placement.
<b>Leicester</b>	Department of Politics and International Relations	Two different pages, hosted by department and central university.	Y	Y – central page, N – department page.	N	Mentioned on the departmental UG landing page, but not in either of the course factfiles. Mentions transferrable skills and final year careers module.
<b>UWE</b>	Health and Applied Social Sciences	Y	N	Y	Y	Provision only at central university level due to closure of Department of History, Philosophy and Politics. Mention of employability based in careers, not the course.
<b>Bristol</b>	School of Sociology, Politics and International Studies	Two different pages, hosted by department and central university.	Y	Y	N, for either.	No mention of employability on either departmental web page or the central factfile, other than to cite 75% graduate employment.
<b>NTU</b>	Division of Politics and International Relations	Y	Y	Y	Y	Quite minimal careers coverage, based on previous graduate destinations and core generic skills.
<b>Nottingham</b>	Department of Politics	Y, linked to from UG department landing page	Y	Y	Y	Employability focus just lists graduate starting salary and advertises careers service.
<b>Aston</b>	School of Languages and Social Sciences / Politics and International Relations Group	N	N	Y	N	List of previous graduate destinations, and explanation of the placement year. No specific mention of employability.
<b>Birmingham</b>	Department of Political Science and International Studies	Y, integrated within department webpage	Y	Y	Y	Strong and detailed explanation of how the degree contributes to employability, together with sample careers and an explanation of available resources.
<b>Westminster</b>	Department of Politics and International Relations	Y, integrated within department webpage	Y	Y	Y	Emphasis on gaining work experience (part time jobs in London). Information about careers development services.
<b>LSE</b>	Department of Government	Y – linked to from department	Y (minimal )	Y	N	KIS data provided, no further information on employability or careers.
<b>QMUL</b>	Department of Politics	Y – linked to from	Y	N	N	No use of KIS data, or any other mention of careers data. The only

	and International Studies	department				department not to go into any detail at all.
<b>Leeds</b>	Department of Politics and International Studies	N – hosted entirely by department	Y (extensive)	Y	Y	Large amount of detail on career paths and support on the departmental webpage.
<b>Oxford Brookes</b>	Department of Social Sciences	Y – linked to from department	Y (minimal)	N	N	Mentions placement opportunities. No use of KIS data.
<b>Hull</b>	Department of Politics and International Studies	Y, integrated within department webpage	Y	Y	N	Mention of past destinations under careers tab. However, details of internship and study abroad opportunities listed elsewhere.
<b>Southampton</b>	Department of Politics	N – integrated within departmental webpage	Y (extensive)	Y	Y	Career opportunities, careers services and employability services are detailed on the undergraduate factfile. There is an additional employability webpage based at the department offering extensive information and support.
<b>Keele</b>	Department of Politics, Philosophy, International Relations and the Environment	N – integrated within departmental webpage	Y	Y	N	Detailed explanation of skills and careers but no mention specifically of employability.
<b>Northumbria</b>	Department of Social Sciences	Y	N	Y	N	Details of past careers and skills to be gained through the degree.
<b>Newcastle</b>	School of Geography, Politics and Sociology	Y – linked to from department	Y	Y	Y	Lots of information about careers and employability, the graduate employment rates for the department, and past destinations.

Examples of best practice come from Leeds, Southampton, Birmingham and Sheffield. These universities offer very detailed information to applicants about the content of the courses, how it relates to employability, and what other careers support is available. They equally target not only applicants but also offer information relevant to current students. At the other end of the scale, many of the ‘newer’ universities offered little or no department specific information other than that provided by the central services, although this did tend to be reasonably informative (indicating the relative lack of autonomy of these frequently smaller departments). Also of note is the fact that two universities (one ‘elite’ and one ‘new’) did not mention KIS data at all, which is likely to cause the universities problems given the pressure levied on universities to make this information available. Nonetheless, as is visible in Table 4, there may be competitive reasons for not advertising this information for at least one of the universities concerned (or the more prosaic reason that the website has not yet been updated in time for the 2013/2014 academic year).

Discourses across the categories were quite varied. Several universities put employability front and centre, some did not mention the word ‘employability’ whilst still discussing component aspects, and some did not mention it at all. Where employability was prioritised, some notable particulars of focus were graduate employment rates, the skills afforded to students, previous employment options (nearly always badged ‘typical’ or representative although the invariably prestigious and exotic examples listed are likely to be anything but typical for the majority of graduates in a shrinking market) and postgraduate study. In order to differentiate themselves, a number of strategies were used. Some universities for example clearly regarded having a good careers service (Manchester) or good links to Parliament and other formal institutions (Liverpool, Hull) as a competitive strength in attracting prospective students. However, some mentioned employability and employment sparingly or not at all. The most extreme manifestation of this comes from LSE, whose reference to employment is entirely minimal, despite having some of the most impressive employability of the bunch (90% in employment or training with an average salary of £24,000, the highest in our sample, further details of which are provided in Table 4 below). This may be because explicitly advertising employability when LSE is synonymous with careers in finance and associated sectors would paradoxically subvert the prestige of the institution.

However, this is not the case across the Russell Group. Elite universities were in fact on average the most likely to discuss employability, with mid-century Robbins report-era universities the least likely to refer directly to employability (20%), compared to 72% of Russell Group universities and 56% of new universities. Indeed, when the latter two categories are combined (as they have been in the rest of this report), a differentiation between the two categories is clear (72% versus 43%). This may seem counter-intuitive bearing in mind the findings reported elsewhere. However, this quantitative finding does not give the whole picture. Firstly, as shown, ‘Elite’ Universities were much more likely to have several webpages relating to their degrees, hosted at the departmental and central levels. This is potentially quite significant for the discourses employed, as it allows ‘Elite’ departments to concentrate on marketing themselves by discussing the intellectual capital and rigorous content of their degrees, leaving central services to discuss the less refined issues of money and jobs. This trend may be exaggerated by the fact that departments at ‘New’ universities were often bundled together in mixed staff groups, making it more difficult for them to assert a distinct intellectual identity.

Secondly, the research showed that the two categories of university engaged in subtle linguistic differentiation when referring to employability, with ‘Elite’ universities tending to emphasise the high regard their degrees are held in by employers due to the intellectual development the degree provides, whereas ‘new’ universities were more likely to emphasise the means through which employability was embedded in the curriculum, often via work experience or module-based learning. A good example of this differentiation is provided by the two Sheffield Universities. The Department of Politics, University of Sheffield state that their politics degree is a ‘subject that will stretch you academically, show you the world in a new light, and give you transferable skills that’ll appeal to a whole range of employers... Whatever career path you follow, a good degree from us will pack a punch in the

jobs market.’ Conversely, the Department of Psychology, Sociology and Politics at Sheffield Hallam state that ‘Our courses are focused on employability, applying theoretical learning to the real world. We’ll make sure you gain the skills employers want, like problem-solving, and how to handle and analyse data.’ The assumption on the part of ‘Elite’ universities appears to be that they need merely to signal the intellectual prestige of their offerings. Indeed, this is reflected in the KIS data, which suggests on average greater numbers of students going on to the more favoured options of professional jobs and postgraduate study.

Table 4: summary of data by university type

	Average salary	Number using KIS data on degree info page (departmental or central)	‘Employability’ explicitly mentioned in advertising	Total number of universities
<b>Russell Group</b>	£19,300	11 / 11	8 / 11	11
<b>Pre-1992</b>	£17,400	4 / 5	1 / 5	5
<b>Post-1992</b>	£17,600	7 / 9	5 / 9	9
<b>Total</b>		22	14	25

Table 5: Summary of KIS data (best and worst performers in each category highlighted)

HEI	Average Salary	% going on to work/study	% work	% in professional job
<b>SHU</b>	£15,000	86%	70%	43%
<b>Sheffield</b>	£18,000	<b>95%</b>	50%	40%
<b>MMU</b>	£16,000	85%		50%
<b>Manchester</b>	£19,000	90%	55%	65%
<b>Salford</b>	£16,000	<b>65%</b>	45%	45%
<b>LJMU</b>	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
<b>Liverpool</b>	£15,000	<b>95%</b>	70%	45%
<b>DMU</b>	£17,000	90%	<b>75%</b>	45%
<b>Leicester</b>	£17,000	80%	50%	35%
<b>UWE</b>	£18,000	90%	68%	55%
<b>Bristol</b>	£22,000	90%	50%	65%
<b>NTU</b>	£17,000	80%	60%	50%
<b>Nottingham</b>	£20,000	86%	55%	60%
<b>Aston</b>	£20,000	75%	45%	65%
<b>Birmingham</b>	£19,000	<b>95%</b>	60%	65%
<b>Westminster</b>	£18,000	76%	<b>36%</b>	60%
<b>LSE</b>	<b>£24,000</b>	90%	50%	70%
<b>QMUL</b>	£20,000	88%	41%	<b>30%</b>
<b>Leeds</b>	Not available	90%	55%	60%
<b>Oxford Brookes</b>	£21,000	75%	60%	50%
<b>Hull</b>	£16,000	75%	60%	55%



<b>Southampton</b>	£18,000	83%	59%	50%
<b>Keele</b>	£18,000	80%	40%	45%
<b>Northumbria</b>	£19,000	90%	70%	40%
<b>Newcastle</b>	£18,000	90%	60%	<b>80%</b>

### Website employability support: careers services

All central websites were, unsurprisingly, targeted to students in the first instance. However, there was a clear split between those careers services that exclusively marketed themselves to students (basing their websites on the quality and range of support made available to undergraduates) and those that marketed themselves as intermediaries, providing a portal for students, graduates, staff and employers. Student categories are also more or less variegated depending on the university. Some (Birmingham) distinguish between a large number of student categories (such as international students, postgraduate taught students, first years and graduates) while others are marketed at students generally (MMU). Elite universities were more likely to provide dedicated support to postgraduates (PG) and international students (unsurprising given their larger cohort of these students). As a result, central careers services presented a picture of employability as either student, staff, or employer-led.

This was further differentiated according to universities' means of targeting staff. Where staff employability pages existed, there was a conflict evident between offering staff development and supporting staff in their own careers (as is the case, for example, at Nottingham where staff and PhDs have a dedicated portal for guidance, help and support), and viewing staff as conduits for improving undergraduate employability (as is the case for example at Leicester). Where it was the case that staff were treated as the principal facilitators for student employability, staff development websites tended to explicitly frame things in those terms (for example Sheffield directs an 'employability strategy' at its teaching staff, to require them to think about their impact on undergraduates). This suggests that staff are variously viewed as agents with their own career management agendas capable of translating this model of agency to their own undergraduates, or simply aides to undergraduate job-hunting. The latter model seems increasingly problematic given the increasing number of academics moving between teaching and non-teaching roles throughout their careers, and perhaps suggests that the undergraduate employability agenda needs to be more deeply inculcated within universities.

Table 6. Survey of web site support for employability in sample of English HEIs.

HEI	Name	Staff portal?	Employers' portal?	Graduate portal?	How accessible and targeted is the website to these stakeholders?
<b>SHU</b>	Careers and employment	N	Y	Y	Nothing to note
<b>Sheffield</b>	Careers Service	Y	Y	Y	Also researchers
<b>MMU</b>	Careers and Employability	Y	Y	Y	Buried in sidebar

<b>Manchester</b>	Careers	Y	Y	Y	Stakeholders very clear
<b>Salford</b>	Careers and employability	Y	Y	N	Stakeholders not flagged, hidden in small links
<b>LJMU</b>	Graduate development centre	Y	Y	Y	Stakeholders not flagged, hidden in small links
<b>Liverpool</b>	Careers and employability	Y	Y	Y	Stakeholders in sidebar, staff access locked
<b>DMU</b>	Careers advice and guidance	N	N	N	Website a sub-page of overall student support
<b>Leicester</b>	Career development service	Y	Y	N	Stakeholders not flagged
<b>UWE</b>	Careers services	Y	N	N	Staff services buried
<b>Bristol</b>	Careers service	Y	Y	Y	Not easy to navigate
<b>NTU</b>	Careers	Y	Y	Y	Staff area password locked. Employability mentoring scheme offered.
<b>Nottingham</b>	Careers and Employability service	Y	Y	Y	Dedicated researchers and PhDs section into which staff is rolled
<b>Aston</b>	Careers and employability service	N	Y	Y	Nothing to note
<b>Birmingham</b>	Careers and employability service	N	Y	Y	Large range of tailored student services (e.g. international, PG)
<b>Westminster</b>	Career Development Centre	N	N	N (but mentions access rights)	Nothing to note
<b>LSE</b>	LSE Careers	Y	Y	N	Research staff and PhDs – locked. Large number of listed ‘patrons’ – i.e. blue chip firms. Links buried.
<b>QMUL</b>	Careers	Y	Y	N	Buried in task bar – focus on UG student support (incl. ‘start your own business’)
<b>Leeds</b>	Careers centre	Y	Y	N	Buried in task bar – focus on UG student support
<b>Oxford Brookes</b>	Careers and Employment centre	Y	Y	N	Stakeholders flagged
<b>Hull</b>	Careers and Employability Service	Y	Y	N	Hidden in sidebar.
<b>Southampton</b>	Career Destinations	Y	N	Y	Not organised around stakeholders
<b>Keele</b>	Careers and Employability	N	Y	N	Advertises services to academic faculties.
<b>Northumbria</b>	Careers and Employment	Y	Y	Y	University staff is the first option listed in the sidebar, but access is locked.
<b>Newcastle</b>	Careers Service	Y	Y	N	Portal for self-employment options.

This stakeholder strategy may also be evident in the names attributed to careers services. Six of the universities have ‘employability’ centres, two have ‘employment’ in the title, and this does not necessarily relate to whether there are employability resources directed at staff. However, there is an interesting split according to university type. ‘Employment’ was only used by the post-1992s, and ‘careers services’ were far more likely amongst the Russell Group. Newer universities tended to engage with multiple supportive discourses, such as employment, development, guidance, and advice. The types of signals these send to employers, staff, and students are of course impossible to ascertain within the context of this research (given that interviews are being conducted with only one of these groups) but the congregation of particular discourses within particular types of universities certainly suggests that universities are trying to gain a competitive differentiation via the language used.

Table 7. Content of employability related careers web sites in sample of English HEIs

	Employability	Employment	Development	Careers	Other	Total
<b>Russell Group</b>	3	0	0	7	1	11
<b>Pre-1992</b>	4	0	1	0	0	5
<b>Post-1992/Alliance</b>	1	3	2	2	1	9
<b>Total</b>	8	3	3	9	2	25

Despite the centrality of the term, definitions of employability are more often than not absent from staff development pages (when where these pages direct staff to be more conscientious in improving it), but there are a few notable exceptions – such as Manchester, Leicester and Sheffield. UWE have a detailed page providing multiple definitions of employability directed at staff (see Figure 1, below). Some universities use their employability strategies to frame employability as a cross-university agenda (Sheffield, Leicester) incorporating students’ unions, the wider academic community, employers, parents and university management in addition to careers services. This seems an obvious means of encouraging students to be self-motivated and to encourage them to use careers services (which was often mentioned in interviews as being problematic). University student employability strategies often focus on central provision of student PDP schemes designed by careers staff and supported by the personal or academic tutorial system provided at departmental level by academic staff. Typical examples of student PDPs include ‘LeedsforLife<sup>12</sup>’ at the University of Leeds and »Progress» at the University of Birmingham<sup>13</sup>. Interview surveys indicate that student uptake of PDP is at best patchy, and in most HEIs quite low.

<sup>12</sup> (<https://leedsforlife.leeds.ac.uk>)

<sup>13</sup> (<https://intranet.birmingham.ac.uk/as/employability/careers/progress>).

Figure 1. Multiple definitions of employability provided for staff at University of the West of England.

*'Having a set of skills, knowledge and personal attributes that make a person more likely to secure, and be successful in their chosen occupation.'* Sewell, P, in Hinchcliffe, R. (2001), **'Nice work (if you can get it): Graduate employability in the arts and humanities.'** The Developing Learning Organisations Project, Preston.

*'Employability skills have been defined after extensive collaboration with business by the CBI. They are a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy.'* CBI, 2010

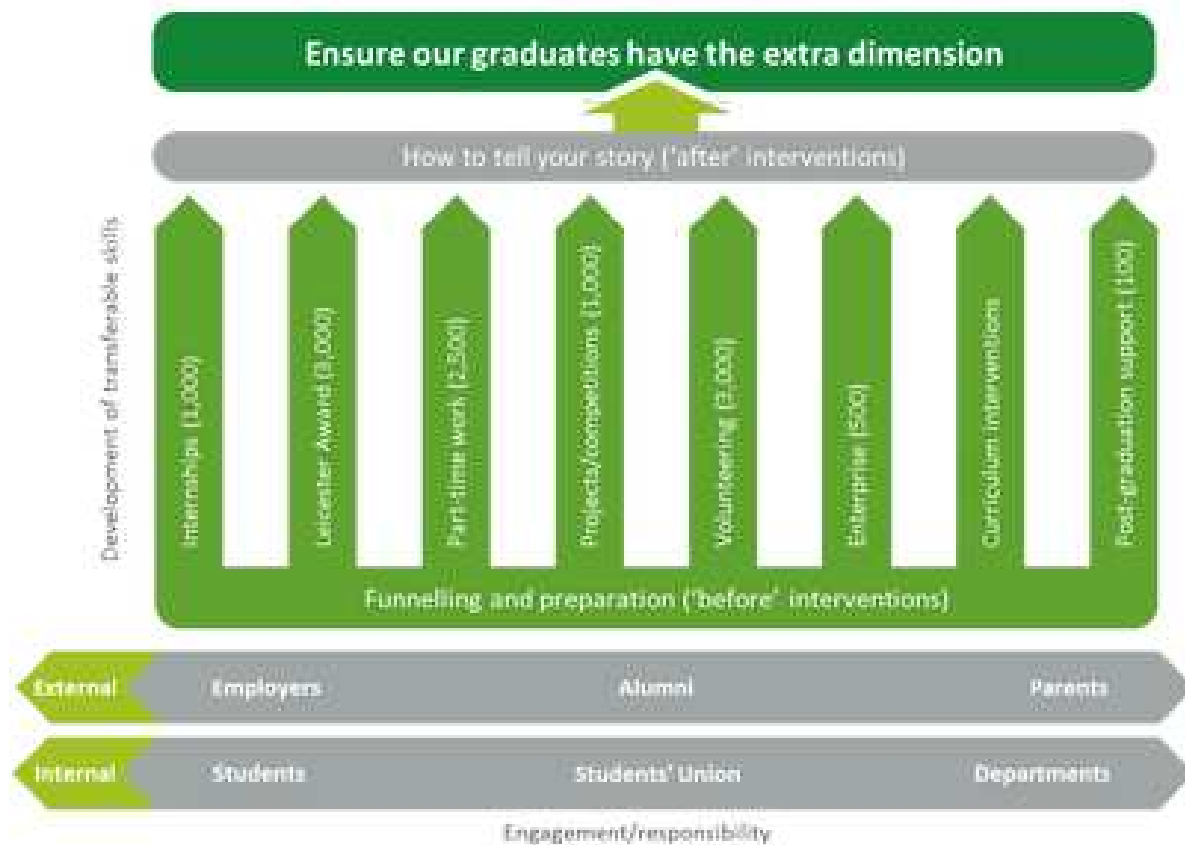
A fuller definition which acknowledges what the individual can control, what educators and advisers can influence, and the importance of context is as follows:

*'In simple terms, employability is about being capable of getting and keeping fulfilling work. More comprehensively, employability is the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment. For the individual, employability depends on the knowledge, skills and attitudes they possess, the way they use those assets and present them to employers and the context (e.g. personal circumstances and labour market environment) within which they seek work.'* Hillage, J and Pollard, E, **Research Report RR85, Department for Education and Employment, November 1998.**

Source: University of the West of England,

<http://www1.uwe.ac.uk/students/careersandemployability/careersservices/careersresourcesforstaff/employabilityresources.aspx> accessed 18 March, 2013

Figure 2. Leicester University's cross-campus framing of employability



Source: <http://www2.le.ac.uk/study/employability>, Accessed 23 March, 2013

Finally, it is clear that a large number of universities have remodelled their degree programmes to explicitly incorporate skills, placements, and the employability agenda (for example, LJMU's 'World of Work' programme). This trend is more apparent amongst newer universities, who, furthermore, were more likely to emphasise the skills agenda. There is a further group of universities (LSE, Aston) who emphasise their strong links to certain employers rather than the employability of their degrees, and given their investment in these areas clearly use it as a competitive advantage. Russell Group universities, in general, are far more likely to limit themselves to traditional support, such as CV help, and to target their advice to particular types of 'traditional' graduate schemes (such as law or accounting – Manchester is a particular example of this strategy), than 'newer' universities that employ more creative, holistic strategies.

### **Interview data and analysis**

To date we have interviewed staff with specific responsibility for issues related to employability in their school/development or have particular interests in this issue. All interviews were conducted on the basis of anonymity and in line with ethical research

practice. The following table sets out the results of our interview survey on employability. We have organised the data along three themes that examine developments in the programme (theme 1), pedagogic developments (theme 2), and lack of employability response (theme 3).

Table 8: Employability within the Politics/IR curriculum

Theme 1: Explicit Modules and Credit Bearing Schemes	<b>These include credit bearing placement schemes, credit bearing year abroad schemes and modules which focus on work, labour and employability</b>	<b>4 of the 6 ‘Elite’ university Politics and IR departments engage with these schemes.</b>  <b>6 out of 9 ‘New’ university Politics and IR departments engage with these schemes</b>
Theme 2: Implicit skills and Assessment regimes	This includes the skills acquired throughout the undertaking of a degree (presentation, communication, time-keeping etc) and skills developed through traditional and creative forms of assessment (report writing, independent research, policy briefings, poster presentations etc).	6 of the 6 ‘Elite’ university departments noted engagement with this theme.  9 of the 9 ‘New’ university departments noted engagement with this theme. However, often their responses were more tied to ‘creative’ assessment such as report writing, debating, group presentations and poster presentations than the implicit professional skills implicit in their degree programmes.
Theme 3: Lack of curriculum ingrained employability learning	This theme relates to universities offering no explicit training on employability beyond standard transferable skills gained through a typical degree programme.	1 of the 6 ‘Elite’ university departments noted there is no specific employability element to the curriculum.  1 of the 9 ‘New’ university departments noted there is no specific employability element to the curriculum.

As Table 8 highlights, some form of explicit employability module provision and credit bearing employability training is being offered by most of the Politics/IR departments involved in our interview survey. However, the interview responses from both ‘elite’ and ‘new’ institutions suggested that these tend to be related to specific modules and/or placements. The main difference between ‘new’ and ‘elite’ institutions seems to be that the latter tended to relate placements to formal ‘arena’ politics – particularly parliamentary and MP related placements, whilst the former tended towards a wider understanding of the job market for students of Politics/IR – noting the charitable and volunteering sector and public sector. From this sample, it appears that ‘elite’ institutions favour placements in areas of formal (British) politics, whilst, with the exception of one university, ‘new’ HEIs tend towards a more diverse range of careers suitable to students of this discipline. This may reflect the assumptions of the HEIs themselves as to the potential career paths for their particular students, or the aspirations of the HEIs in relation to what they expect their graduates to do after leaving university. In addition to standard placements and associated modules, one respondent from an elite HEI noted the importance of the year abroad as informing the dissertation (which is credit bearing). Modules associated with placements, the year abroad as informing dissertation research, or credit bearing placements themselves can be classed as ‘**experience based**’ employability learning – offering students’ experience to enhance their CVs to, consequently, become more attractive to employers. Conversely, 3 of the 9 ‘new’ universities’ Politics/IR departments offer ‘stand-alone’ modules on work and employment which reflect a more critical attitude to the workplace and organisations. Potentially, these modules offer a more ‘**empowerment based**’ version of employability learning – whereby students are taught (on credit bearing optional modules) about organisational cultures and the place of organisation within the national or international context, offering the skills to negotiate highly politicised environments.

All respondents noted tacit skills, which would be developed by students throughout their degree programmes. These invariably were relayed as ‘presentation skills’, ‘communication skills’, ‘team work’, and ‘critical thought’. In addition, one of the ‘elite’ HEIs noted their assessment regimes for some modules include ‘policy briefings’ which is an assessment directly linked to future employability. On the other hand 4 of the 9 respondents from ‘new’ HEIs highlighted their use of non-traditional assessments as key to the employability training implicit within the curriculum, highlighting simulation exercises, poster presentations and exhibitions and report writing. As such, comparatively, it seems there is a great deal of emphasis on assessment as demonstrative of employability learning, with ‘new’ universities offering greater diversity in the assessments they provide. This again could reflect the aspirations of departments with regards to their students’ future employment whereby ‘elite’ institutions conflate more traditional assessments with mainstream ‘political’ professions and ‘new’ universities see their future alumni within a variety of different professional fields. In other words, ‘new’ universities may be responding to the fact that their graduates are disadvantaged in the job market in comparison to ‘elite’ university graduates (because of the higher numbers of economically deprived and BME students) and, therefore, tend to diversify their skill set through a variety of assessment regimes in order to boost their employability by increasing their transferable skills. Nonetheless, these forms of tacit employability learning

can be considered ‘**skills based**’ and are invariably business-led and follow the skills lists set out by the CBI in their recent publications discussed above.

In the next table we highlight the employability initiatives developed outside of the curriculum, again organising the data around three themes depending on who the agents are driving the initiative; academic staff (theme 1), students (themes 2), or central support staff/careers services (theme 3). (This also reflects the categorisation seen in the web-based research above).

Table 9: Employability initiatives outside the Politics/IR curriculum

Theme 1: Staff led employability initiatives	Activities run by staff within the department – namely talks organised, placements run or additional activities organised by departmental academic staff	5 of the 6 ‘Elite’ university Politics and IR departments highlighted this theme  3 out of 9 ‘New’ university Politics and IR departments highlighted this theme
Theme 2: Student led employability initiatives	Activities run or initiated by students, particularly student societies	2 of the 6 ‘Elite’ university Politics and IR departments highlighted this theme  1 out of 9 ‘New’ university Politics and IR departments highlighted this theme
Theme 3: Department/Faculty/University led initiatives	Activities offered by the school/faculty or university, such as career services and forms of ‘skills awards’	5 of the 6 ‘Elite’ university Politics and IR departments highlighted this theme  9 out of 9 ‘New’ university Politics and IR departments highlighted this theme

In relation to theme one, it appears that academic staff from various departments are providing a range of employability activities designed for their student cohorts. Three of the ‘elite’ HEI respondents highlighted that some academic staff utilised their contact with alumni and other professionals to organise talks for students. Moreover, another ‘elite’ HEI



respondent highlighted that staff used their contacts to set up placements for students. From the ‘new’ universities, two respondents noted that they themselves facilitated a placement scheme for students (assisting them to locate and apply for placements) and another noted that staff organised talks for students using their own contacts. Overall, it appears that staff have to rely on their own networks to provide employability opportunities for students and that the institutional support for these initiatives is not particularly forthcoming. Some respondents suggested that the amount of effort put into such schemes is not recompensed by either student take-up (as these events tend to have a low student attendance) or institutional recognition. In addition to this two universities, both of which are classified as ‘new’, offer schemes for students to engage in research projects being undertaken by academic staff members. One of the respondents noted that this scheme runs through a university system whereby staff members apply to the university for money to order to pay students (who incidentally are also given an office and access to staff meetings) to undertake research. This respondent estimated that 40% of staff had had successful bids to this university funding and had since employed students to undertake research. This particular scheme offers students both ‘**skills based**’ and ‘**experience-based**’ employability learning, but time and effort is required from individual staff members in order for this initiative to materialise.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the responses to this question relates to theme two in Table 9. Indeed, a quarter of the ‘elite’ HEI respondents noted student-led employability initiatives, both in relation to events organised by their respective student societies or by individual students (seeking placements for example) themselves. However, only one of the ‘new’ HEI respondents noted this student ‘self-organisation’. This may be for a number of reasons, some of which we will put forward speculatively here: 1) Students at ‘new’ universities may be less likely to self-organise as they lack the confidence of students in ‘elite’ HEIs; 2) Students at ‘new’ universities are less likely to have the capital (social and financial) to self-organise; 3) Student societies may be less established or less inclined to put on employability focussed events; 4) Staff at ‘new’ universities may offer such comprehensive employability packages that students do not feel the need to self-organise; 5) Or a combination of these factors (which are by no means exhaustive).

The interviews suggest that much of the non-curriculum employability activities are delivered at a higher school/faculty or university level, with 14 out of 15 respondents noting these centrally organised services. Indeed, the three most common central initiatives offered to students were various forms of ‘skills award’ offered by universities (where students receive a certificate to show they have achieved various skill-sets throughout their university careers), student PDP tools (where students record and reflect upon their skills development – but note this process is usually designed around departmental level personal and academic tutoring), and support with writing CVs, filling application forms and practice interviews, also offered by centralised careers service staff. The skills award approach relates quite obviously to a ‘**skills-based**’ form of employability learning, whilst PDP and CV writing etc. could be considered to be more of an ‘**empowerment-based**’ form of employability learning, as it is related to assisting students in developing reflective skills and tools to negotiate with employers via their CVs and job interviews (to get into various careers). However, each of

these forms of employability learning are rarely tailored to the Politics/IR graduate and more often than not relate to generic skill sets and advice, with the exception of two HEIs (one elite and one new) who detailed local (read departmental) careers advisors and one further ‘new’ HEI, whereby the respondent recounted a module specifically designed for honing these employability skills in relation to politics specifically (and therefore is noted in the table above under theme 1).

Table 10. Placements and year abroad opportunities for undergraduate students

Type of HEI	Placement?	Student Uptake	Year Abroad?	Student Uptake
Elite	Yes – Formally integrated and short (3 week) placements under development	12 + (related to a particular programme)	Yes	Data Missing
Elite	Currently being negotiated/developed	5 informally arranged placements	Yes	Uptake increasing (although exact figures not available)
Elite	Currently being negotiated/developed	n/a	Yes	40 students on average per year
Elite	Yes – non-integrated (ad hoc)	10 informally arranged placements	Data Missing	Data Missing
Elite	No	n/a	Yes	6 students on average per year
Elite	No	n/a	Yes	Not many – unpopular option amongst students
New	Yes – Formally integrated	Data missing	Yes	3 students per on average per year
New	Previous formally integrated placements module available related to a specific project – which has since been completed	Approx 5 students	Yes	6-10 students on average per year
New	Formally integrated placements module	Estimated 20% of cohort	Yes (including	Data Missing

	commencing 2013/14		1 semester schemes)	
New	Yes – formally integrated	50% of cohort	Yes	Data Missing
New	Informally arranged placements	3 students last year	Yes	3 students on average per year
New	Yes –formally integrated	17 students last year	Yes	8 – 9 on average students per year
New	Yes – formally integrated	5-6 students per year (under 5% of cohort)	Yes	20% of cohort on average
New	Yes – formally integrated	Data missing	Yes	4-5 students on average per year
New	Formally integrated on some PS/IR programmes	Data missing	Yes	Data Missing

Although patchy it appears ‘new’ universities have, by and large, formally integrated placement schemes as part of their degree programmes. Indeed, some of these placement schemes are combined with the year/semester abroad opportunities where students participate in internships internationally (this was emphasised by two ‘new’ university respondents). ‘Elite’ HEIs appear to be behind in establishing placement schemes, with only one of the six interviewees emphasising an established and integrated placement module (which appears to be open only to students who have undertaken a very specific programme of study). Indeed, this data is indicative of the wider jobs market and we would argue that ‘elite’ institutions, rather than replicating the best practice already established by ‘new’ institutions in relation to placements, are instead responding to the restricted jobs market more generally. In other words, ‘elite’ institutions are recognising that it is becoming more difficult for their students to get jobs (as has been the case historically for ‘new’ institutions) and are therefore recognising the added benefits placements make to employability. However, when we consider student uptake for these placements opportunities, this appears to be low across institutions, unless the placement is a compulsory part of a degree programme.

In relation to the year abroad initiative, most institutions (‘new’ and ‘elite’) are signed up to ERASMUS or related schemes. With the exception of one ‘elite’ and one ‘new’ HEI, it appears that international opportunities are not particularly popular amongst students, despite their availability. Another issue, which three of the respondents noted, was that more students come in than go out, indicating a lack of mobility amongst English HEI students. There are a number of reasons recounted for the reluctance of Politics/IR students to travel abroad for study or placement opportunities. These range from language barriers, losing touch with

one's cohort (and effectively being a year behind), other familial or care duties, and financial restraints. This means the most mobile students are likely to be financially secure, bi-lingual or multi-lingual, have no other care or familial obligations and on degree programmes where the year abroad has a high uptake already (so they remain with their cohort). As such, it is unsurprising that an 'elite' HEI, with a less diverse and wealthier cohort, that reported a high uptake in relation to the year abroad opportunities. However, it was surprising that one new HEI noted a fairly high uptake (20%) with regards to the year abroad opportunities. When this particular respondent went on to remark that the success of the year abroad was likely to be a result of this initiative being fore fronted as part of offers made to students and fully integrated into the programme of study, and therefore not too disruptive to the students' experience. In addition, there were 1 semester international opportunities offered to students (which may mitigate some financial and care responsibilities). Also, this respondent noted that the year abroad was well advertised and convened by a dedicated and committed member of staff.

Overall, year abroad and placements schemes relate to '**experience-based**' employability learning and it appears many institutions are trying to promote these schemes and that student demand for these schemes is increasing. However, it is important to note that these types of schemes tend to be focussed on 'what employers want' as opposed to what can build student confidence (although the latter, in some cases, may be a by-product of the former).

Table 11: Employability skills most commonly developed by undergraduate students

Type of HEI	Skills developed by time of graduation	Skills Based	Experience Based	Empowerment based
Elite	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought, Numeracy and Life Skills (related to diverse student cohort)	Y	N	Y
Elite	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought, Group work, Quantitative methods	Y	N	N
Elite	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought, time management, team work and research training	Y	N	N
Elite	Missing data	-	-	-
Elite	Presentation, Communication, team work, numeracy and quantitative research skills, report writing	Y	N	N
Elite	'Skills in explaining the relevance of their skills' – being able to market themselves. Policy analysis, professional skills (through placements) and generic study skills.	Y	Y	Y

New	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought, networking through discussions with policy advisors and through ‘trips’ and confidence building.	Y	N	Y
New	Adequate communication and presentation skills	Y	N	N
New	Presentation, communication, group/team work, critical thinking, initiative, research skills, numeracy skills (albeit limited, IT skills	Y	Y	N
New	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought, group work and creating briefs and press releases	Y	N	N
New	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought, time-management, digital literacy, teamwork, global citizenship with an understanding of social, economic and environmental issues	Y	N	Y
New	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought and report writing	Y	N	N
New	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought, ITC, time management and self confidence	Y	N	N
New	Presentation, Communication (verbal and written), Critical Thought, leadership, organisation and time-management, IT, teamwork and research and analysis.	Y	N	Y
New	Presentation, communication, critical thought	Y	N	N

All universities, in response to the question, what employability skills do you believe your *average graduate leaves university with?* responded with a list of fairly consistent answers including communication, presentation, time/organisation management, and critical analytical skills. These skills appear embedded implicitly within the curriculum and are largely related to business-led ‘**skills-based**’ employability learning as detailed in CBI reports (CBI 2009, CBI/UUK 2010). Only one of the HEI interview respondents linked this question in an explicit way to ‘**experience-based**’ employability learning, which is perhaps related to the fact that the uptake for placements and international initiatives is fairly low in most HEIs – and therefore not something that is commonly acquired by graduates from a Politics/IR department. In relation to ‘**empowerment-based**’ employability learning, two of the ‘elite’ HEIs noted ‘life skills’ and ‘self-marketing’ and three of the ‘new’ HEIs emphasised skills related to leadership and confidence. Arguably, these skills work to empower students to negotiate in their potential workplace organisations, rather than merely equipping them with the skills businesses want to see in potential candidates.

Another interesting aspect of these results when comparing ‘elite’ with ‘new’ HEIs was that the former, when relaying skills beyond the standard skill-set, tended to focus on research training, particularly in relation to quantitative methods. However, the skill-sets which ‘new’ universities tended to focus on related to competence in the use of digital technology, using social media, writing press releases or briefing papers. Indeed, these proficiencies tend to be more media focused and perhaps more focused on qualitative, or even journalistic, research skills. Given that traditional social science has privileged quantitative methods this finding is quite troubling – as it reproduces this bias. In addition, it is demonstrative of the skills HEIs feel their students will need when they leave university, with ‘elite’ HEIs recognising quantitative and research skills to be of high importance (perhaps leading into the financial services and research careers or postgraduate education) and ‘new’ HEIs recognising new media and journalistic skills to be of high importance (perhaps leading into a range of administrative or creative career pathways). With ‘new’ HEIs it appears students are being prepared more for the world of work whilst, to some extent, ‘elite’ institutions are preparing their students for postgraduate education.

Table 12: Employability training department does best

Elite	Placements and widening participation
Elite	Delivering employability covertly and maximising students’ career options by offering diverse range of initiatives
Elite	Year Abroad
Elite	Data Missing
Elite	Research Methods Training
Elite	Self-confidence and motivation
New	Widening participation and confidence building coupled with maximising students’ career options by offering a diverse range of initiatives
New	Skills development within the curriculum
New	Building an understanding that students career choices work to construct the world we live in.
New	Placements and Year Abroad
New	Placements
New	Placements
New	Placements
New	‘Practice of Politics’ module
New	Data Missing

In relation to the final question, detailed in Table 12, a range of answers were given relating to placements and year abroad schemes (**experience-based**) and, to a lesser extent, skills development embedded within programmes (**skills-based**). Only two respondents, one from a ‘new’ and one from an ‘elite’ HEI, emphasised an **empowerment-based** response, which focussed on students building confidence and ‘shaping’ the world around them. Overall, what was surprising about the responses given to this question was that they seemed to conflict with the answers offered in relation to the previous question; namely ‘what skills does your average graduate leave university *with*?’ There is a disconnect between what many universities (both ‘elite’ and ‘new’) recognise as what ‘they do best’ and the skills they believe their graduates acquire. This may be due to the fact that **‘experience-based’** employability learning is more tangible as an initiative relating to best practice. Nonetheless, what is clear from this data is that Politics/IR departments in both ‘new’ and ‘elite’ HEIs, by and large tend to recognise employability learning in line with a business led agenda (based on skills and experience) rather than as a way to empower students in their future workplaces.

## **KEY FINDINGS**

- Skills-based employability learning is ingrained (implicitly) in the Politics/IR curriculum
- Experience-based employability learning is well established within ‘new’ universities and is becoming increasingly emphasised within ‘elite’ universities
- Experience-based employability learning tends to be centrally organised (with little departmental involvement) or locally organised in an ad hoc way by a few staff members and/or engaged students
- Although the student culture is changing (perhaps in relation to higher fees and a contracting job market) uptake of experience based learning tends to be fairly low
- ‘Elite’ HEIs tend to focus on skills associated with research methods training – thus shaping their students into prospective researchers or postgraduate students
- ‘New’ HEIs tend to focus on skills associated with report writing, IT skills and journalistic skills – thus shaping their students for administrative and creative careers
- ‘Elite’ HEIs focus on placements associated with formal political institutions
- ‘New’ HEIs focus on a diverse range of placements (including those related to the voluntary and third sector)
- Empowerment-based employability learning appears to be a focus of ‘new’ HEIs, although it is by no means well established in either ‘new’ or ‘elite’ HEIs.

## **ISSUES OF CONCERN RAISED BY SOME PARTICIPANTS**

Despite staff celebrating the efforts made by departments to improve outcomes for their undergraduates (and showing real pride in the achievements of their students), we were not

surprised to find that a number of commonly held concerns – and in some cases serious scepticism – about the employability agenda were voiced by several participants in the interview surveys. These are detailed below.

### **Employability as a business agenda**

Some interviewees commented on the fact that politics explicitly teaches the kind of skills employers ultimately do not want, insofar as it makes them critical and aware of power relationships in the workplace. Several also commented on the extent to which the need to provide opportunities for students to develop entrepreneurial and business skills was ideologically driven – ‘a neo-liberal agenda’ – and failed to account for students whose career options were driven more by a sense of public service (such as social work, teaching, or humanitarian work), and who feel that their civic engagement is not included in a business-led skills agenda. Others felt frustrated that they are constantly being told to ‘do employability more’ by university managers because they score low on DLHE employability, but are not offered additional central support for developing new initiatives.

### **Student Engagement problems**

By far the greatest concern raised by several colleagues in the interview survey was what was seen as student reluctance to engage with voluntary employability support (such as PDPs, or alumni events) and levels of student antipathy towards compulsory employability initiatives within their degree programmes. Some colleagues felt that trying to integrate explicit employability work within the curriculum irritates students because there is such an obvious disjuncture with the subject-specific curricular content. Students often approach their university careers as a means to an end (to ‘get a degree and go’) and fail to appreciate the advantages of engagement with the **experience-based** opportunities available to them. They ultimately are very attuned to wanting jobs, but feel that the degree itself should get them a job. They do not have to do ‘extra’ work within the university setting in order to make themselves employable, and so are generally very unenthusiastic about skills training.

This disengagement is particularly visible within research methods, which is one of the few areas where skills training sits explicitly within a Politics/IR curriculum (identified in particular by ‘elite’ HEIs). In sum, many colleagues felt that undergraduates are keen in principle on things that will make them more employable, but not so keen in practice. Students, some interviewees stated, do not value training within their degrees if it is labelled as employability. Most do not really think about their careers until the third year (unless they already have one in mind, in which case HEI-provided support will be of little use to them). To encourage earlier career awareness with first years students, one department at an ‘elite’ university had organised session with recent alumni to allow them to talk about how they got their jobs, and the things they did outside of their degrees to get there. The emphasis in most cases, however, is on students taking additional opportunities to boost their awareness of the need for early career planning and employability skills development. Trying to encourage students to do this, however, can be hard. This is perhaps undergoing a process of change as a



result of the rise in fees, but ultimately the onus is still on students to take up offers made to them by universities.

### **Placements**

Placements offer a way of embedding employability into the curriculum and provide **experience-based** workplace learning for students. Our interview data indicates that placement schemes were provided by central careers services or were heavily dependent upon (well-connected and/or dedicated) individual academic staff members. The former model is prohibitively expensive for most in the sector (since there are a limited number of employers willing to take placements, high set-up costs and a limited return for late entrants) and the latter relies on the precarious input of individuals. If they leave, specific employability support often goes with them, and in the absence of such individuals, departments may be exclusively dependent on the strategy of the university with little scope for independent initiative. Even where there is support for placements take-up or provision is tiny, typically less than 10 students, which in most cases, is less than five percent of that year's cohort.

### **(Limited) Resources**

If we assume that most students do not want compulsory skills training, how much additional support should departments be expected to provide? How much of our finite resources do we concentrate on the few students who do engage in employability skills training? And, on the flipside, how can we integrate employability 'by stealth' into our compulsory curriculum activity when facing a resistant or employability skills averse student body? Many interviewees spoke of feeling that a Politics degree already instils core employability skills on students (essay writing, group work, problem solving, presentations, report writing, critical thinking, analytical skills, etc). But if we are already doing enough, why is employment low for politics graduates?

### **Conceptualising Politics/IR Careers**

A final point of tension raised by several colleagues in the interviews related to issues about how as a discipline we think about careers. Politics/IR is a non-vocational discipline, even though many students do politics degrees because they want political careers (or associated careers, such as research or analysis). But as the KIS data on departmental websites demonstrates, most will not become MPs, or find themselves in associated careers (indeed, most do not even secure graduate-level careers, at least initially). So how should this feed into how we regard employability? Should we focus our resources on a small number working in political and affiliated careers (which students tend to be more receptive to); or be more realistic and broaden approach to less desirable, graduate-level jobs? Some departments adopt this widening approach, but as a result most of the schemes they provide access to are

either (a) standard business graduate schemes with blue-chip companies or (b) unpaid internships in small companies, both of which carry problems regarding academic incorporation and ethical implications. But the fact remains that finite opportunities, coupled with wider employability engagement by Universities, will necessarily mean a larger number of unattractive (and for the majority of Politics/IR students non-graduate, according to DIHE data) jobs. Many universities are uncomfortable with students realising this until they are graduates and beyond their responsibility.

## CONCLUSION

Central careers services in English HEIs continue to be primarily responsible for the delivery of employability skills training and learning to students whether this be through on-campus workshops or through on-line personal development planning tools. They remain the frontline service in response to the employability agenda, offering students opportunities to develop skills, guidance and information on careers and employment prospects, and empowering students to develop tools to negotiate their employment through CV building and interview preparation and training. But with the widespread publication of employability data for each and every degree programme in all HEIs, departments have become increasingly aware of the need (or are being compelled by their university) to find ways of responding to the agenda at discipline level. In sum, the increasing attention to employability in higher education has meant that those who teach Politics/IR in the university sector have had to find ways of instilling the generic capabilities that business has made clear they require of graduates. They must respond to externally driven demands that graduates are “fit for work”.

The data we have gathered through web-based and interview surveys indicates that, for the most part, this response has taken the form of offering **skills-based** and **experienced-based** employability learning, especially in ‘new’ universities, often as an attempt to level the playing field for their students who otherwise are disadvantaged in the graduate job market due to socio-economic factors. All the universities we surveyed offer this kind of employability learning. This dominant approach is based on staff being able to deliver career-orientated teaching methods and assessment regimes whereby students are offered opportunities to develop presentation skills, team working skills, and broader professional communication skills. Such developments are not new - only the discourse of employability around them is new. As a result, student engagement is patchy.

Some universities, more typically ‘new’ universities also offer what we have termed ‘**empowerment-based**’ employability learning. Students in these universities are encouraged to learn how to shape their fates by managing their own careers and employment in addition to their own skills development. There are clearly resource issues at play here; ‘**empowerment-based**’ provision is resource intensive, whether it is provided by central careers services offering CV guidance and interview practice sessions for students (which if most students wanted them, would be impossible to provide on a majority of campuses given

the very large student numbers), or through student PDPs which rely on personal and academic tutoring systems (where, typically, an academic may have up to 30 – and in some cases more – students to work with on a 1:1 basis). There are also tensions arising from what is clearly a business-led skills agenda, which most Politics/IR students, according to academic staff, currently feel apathetic towards (at least until their final year when employment issues become more immediate). There may even be issues of ideological resistance permeating universities. Until this is addressed to incorporate the perspectives and needs of all stakeholder groups – staff, students and employers – the employability agenda will fail to live up to expectations.

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