

ADOPTING A STRATEGIC APPROACH TO GRADUATE OUTCOMES: THE EMPLOYABILITY HEALTHCHECK MODEL



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SUMMARY

The employability healthcheck model (EHM) has been developed over a period of 20 years by Gradcore, a social enterprise, specialising in graduate employment and employability. Clients include over 70 universities across the UK and Europe, alongside a wide range of graduate employers. The model adopts a “look in, look out, look forwards” approach: evaluating current practice and collecting primary data to establish baseline employability activity, understanding, and ambition; reviewing and highlighting relevant external examples, case studies and best practice; and synthesizing the findings into a pragmatic set of recommendations with an underpinning report. This enables Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to adopt a strategic approach to achieving their graduate outcomes goals by engaging with key stakeholders to secure buy-in and future investment. Extensive engagement with employers and the integration of current, global labour market information (LMI) provides credibility to the recommendations and increases institutional commitment to adjust programme content and quality assurance processes which enable curriculum changes, at scale, to reach all students. This case study outlines the model, proving contextualised examples and further resources.

CONTEXT

The extent to which universities should prepare graduates for the workplace has been an ongoing debate for over 20 years (Holmes, 2015). Changes in UK policy have fuelled this discussion including changes to HE funding and the rise of ‘student consumerism’, accessibility of metrics enabling HEI comparison and heightened student expectations, alongside the advent of rapid technological change and resulting employer requirements (Priest, 2018). The marketisation of Higher Education and increased government regulation on graduate outcomes, have raised the profile of universities to address the skills gaps in what HE produces and what the workplace demands (Archer & Davison, 2008; Institute of Student Employers, 2021; Tomlinson, 2021). Furthermore, the role of employers in career development work has been questioned in relation to social inequality i.e. does their input to provide career-relevant experiences for those in education recreate this inequality or challenge and change it. Evidence from the secondary education sector suggests that high quality employer engagement often benefits those socially and economically disadvantaged students that need it the most, proportionally more so than for those who with more social capital that arguably need it less (Percy and Kashefpakdel, 2018). In this context, the potential impact of university-employer collaboration is significant and increasingly relevant in today's HE landscape.



Changes in UK policy have prompted universities to place messages around employer collaboration and access to high-skilled graduate jobs at the forefront of student recruitment. Graduate employability no longer resides within the domain of careers services but is increasingly accepted as the responsibility of the whole organisation (Bridgstock and Jackson, 2019). The enhanced role of employers in HE and the impact of labour market information (LMI) is visible across curricular, co-curricular and extra-curricular activity, through the expansion of work-integrated learning (Dalrymple et al., 2021). The rise in significance of LMI is also shown by the growth of initiatives such as industrial advisory boards, employer mentoring, and employability awards across the HE sector.

The Employability Healthcheck Model (EHM) has been developed by Gradcore, a social enterprise, working with 70+ universities predominantly across the UK over the last two decades. It enables HEIs to adopt a strategic approach to employability to enhance graduate outcomes, harnessing employer and labour market input to inform programme and curriculum development.

The EHM takes an institution-wide approach to improving graduate outcomes with an evidence-informed approach to develop employability strategies, embed employability in the curriculum, design staff development programmes, and create effective employer engagement plans. It is aimed at all levels of study, including postgraduate, and for specific learner groups, such as international or socially/economically disadvantaged students e.g mature, widening participation or BAME students. The model focuses on engagement with key stakeholder groups operating within the graduate outcomes space, with LMI provided by a wide range of employers specific to the institutional context. The process takes 3-6 months, with the implementation of the recommendations dependent on the strategic imperatives, timescales, and resources of the individual university.

METHODOLOGY & IMPLEMENTATION

The Employability Healthcheck Model is based upon a three-stage process – the Look In, Look Out, Look Forward approach (Figure 1).

Look in – evaluate current practice and activity, and establish baseline data.

Look out – review and draw on relevant external examples, case studies and best practice.

Look forward – synthesize findings into a pragmatic set of recommendations with an underpinning report.

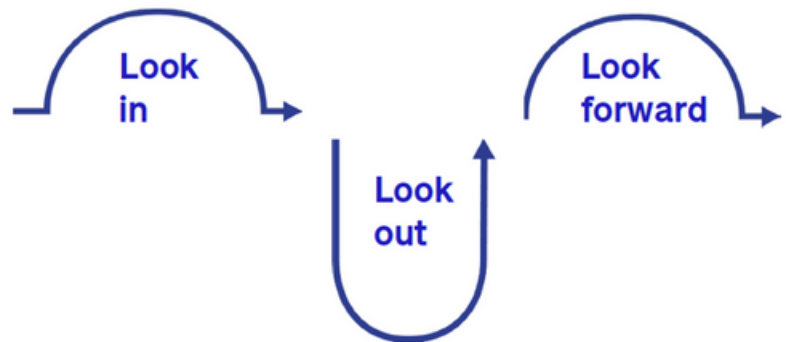


Figure 1: The Look In, Look Out, Look Forward Approach

The model is adapted for each institution, depending upon their strategic priorities, student demographics, local and regional mix of employers, graduate destinations, investment available, and the time period available. Figure 2 shows the core elements of the model:

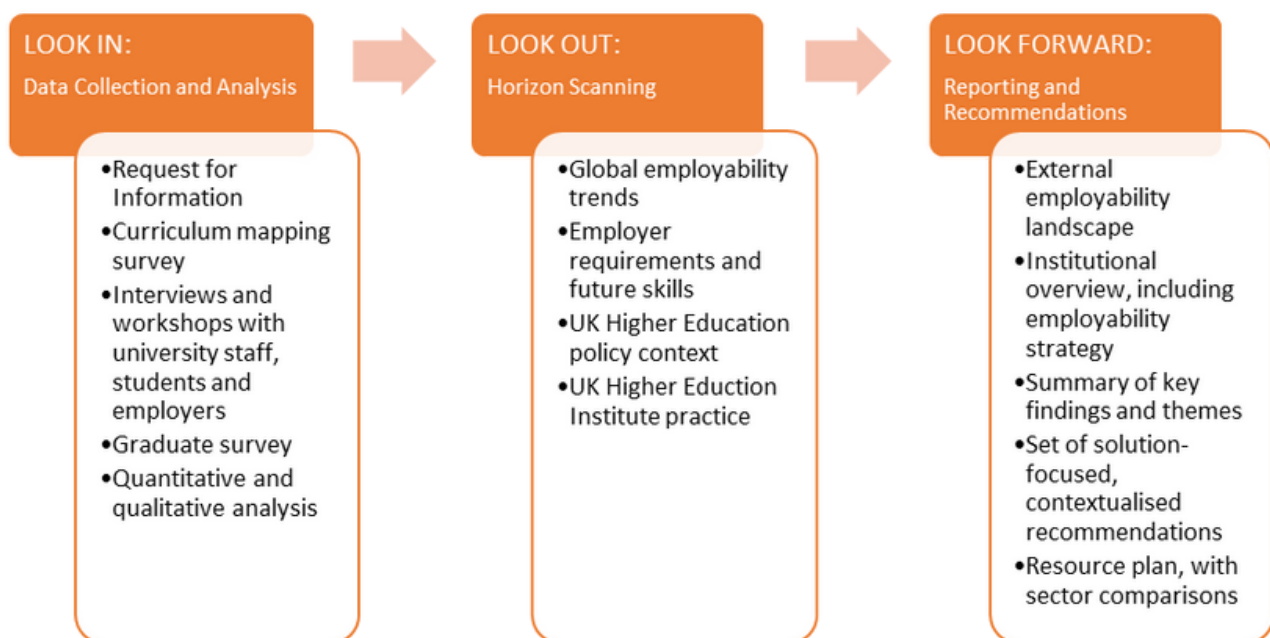


Figure 2: The Employability Healthcheck Model

Firstly, the Look In stage utilises a variety of methods to collect primary data from key stakeholders, including a representative sample of university staff, employers, students, and graduates. This is carried out by independent Gradcore researchers, with most activity conducted virtually (a legacy from the global pandemic), alongside some face-to-face interaction according to participant preference.

This stage commences with a Request for Information (RFI) for key strategy documents and data outputs, to provide context and topics to be explored during qualitative data collection, including:

- University strategy
- Teaching and Learning strategy
- Employability strategy
- Access and Participation Plan
- Graduate Outcomes Survey data and reporting (institutional or School/Faculty level), including Professional/Managerial information and Equality and Diversity data
- Career registration summary data (if applicable)
- University comparator group list
- Employability team organograms
- HR recruitment, progression, and development policies and documents



Gradcore workshop

As an example of our incorporation of university strategy, a recent EHM carried out at Teesside University was informed by their Future Facing Learning initiative - their distinctive approach to Learning and Teaching, which has been designed to provide students with the skills, knowledge and expertise to thrive in complex and uncertain futures. The core themes drawn from this strategic approach then provided topics to be explored during the primary data collection phase with key stakeholders.

To determine current employability practice and activity, and establish baseline data, the range of consultation and insight activities with stakeholders includes:

- Detailed benchmarking survey to identify current employability activity in the curriculum, completed by course and module leaders
- Workshops with academic and professional service staff
- 1-2-1 interviews with academic and professional service staff from across the university, including senior leaders
- Employer roundtable events with a range of primary, secondary, and tertiary employers (local, regional and global) across all sectors
- Focus groups and vox pops with students across all levels of study
- Alumni survey with graduates from a range of discipline areas

Employer input is tailored to suit the economic profile of the region, providing contextualised LMI to inform employability recommendations. For example, the regional economy surrounding the University of Kent consists largely of SMEs and public sector organisations; participants to the employer roundtable during the EHM in 2023 were recruited to reflect this and hence shape the key findings and recommendations. In contrast, due to the nature of their programmes, many graduates from the University of the Arts London (UAL) develop portfolio careers and freelance working; the UAL employer roundtables were populated largely by alumni running their own creative practice or agency. This unique employer grouping led to a focus on enterprising mindsets and associated entrepreneurial skills forming a key part of the Creative Attributes Framework for Enterprise and Employability, which was refreshed alongside the EHM.

This stage is completed through an inductive reflexive thematic analysis of the qualitative data, aimed at identifying the key themes of most importance to university staff, students and graduates, and employers (Braun and Clarke, 2019). This is supplemented by a quantitative approach designed to collate and summarise curriculum mapping data. This data helps us to identify current employability provision across Schools/Faculties and Year groups and to gauge understanding and opinions on the subject of employability.

Secondly, the Look Out stage involves horizon scanning to review global, regional, and local employability trends. A strong focus on LMI and an assessment of employer engagement with graduate employability, helps us ascertain whether universities are providing the skills, knowledge and behaviours required by employers today, but also those identified as essential for the future. In addition, the UK Higher Education policy context is reviewed to identify current drivers, enablers, and barriers, that face the sector and the individual HEI. For example, where the university has a high proportion of widening participation students, the significance of Action and Participation Plan targets approved by the Office for Students is highlighted; this was the case for the EHM with Bath Spa University where 4 in 5 students had at least one marker of disadvantage.

During this second stage, we also highlight relevant examples, case studies and best practice from across a range of comparator universities to provide inspiration and motivation for change. This process draws upon external expertise from advisers and associates, and the internal Gradcore knowledge developed through the deployment of the EHM model across a multitude of HEIs over the last two decades.



Finally, the purpose of the Look Forward stage is to provide each university with an evidence-based set of contextualised findings and recommendations which enable them to develop, implement and evaluate an employability strategy appropriate to suit their institutional ambition and goals. For instance, the recommendations for Sheffield Hallam University reflected their particular institutional commitments to:

- civic responsibility and social mobility;
- embedding an authentic work experience framework for all levels of study, to generate social capital, and job opportunities; and
- graduate retention within the region.

The EHM report provides context with reference to both the external employability landscape and an internal institutional overview, alongside commentary on key findings and themes. It provides an evidence-based set of recommendations, enabling senior leaders to make informed decisions about future action, priorities, and investment. Employer engagement is critical at this stage – our experience shows university staff are more inclined to adjust curriculum content and quality assurance processes when recommendations are underpinned by robust employer input and LMI.

For example, Bath Spa University commissioned Gradcore to conduct the Employability Healthcheck Model during the summer of 2022. The aims were to refresh the employability offer, enhance Graduate Outcomes performance, and provide a foundational report for the incoming Head of Careers and Employability. The University's Education strategy placed employability as a central facet:

- *"Education Strategy Objective 1: Ensuring the professional application of our programmes and the employability of our Graduates are central to programme design and delivery, with opportunities for experiential learning and skills acquisition, application and articulation throughout each programme."*

The curriculum mapping survey conducted as part of the Look in stage provided a detailed snapshot of employability provision, from levels 4-6, across all schools in the University. This mapping data from the EHM showed a clear commitment to embedding employability in the curriculum but there was still some distance to travel for this to be consistent, widespread, and meaningful. In particular, the EHM highlighted the need to ensure work-based learning and placement opportunities in more courses, with flexible delivery models. For example, whilst a placement year was offered to all new degree students, take-up rates remained stubbornly low, demonstrating this delivery model was not appropriate to all.

Following the EHM, the Placements team tested a series of models to establish which might be most effective at Bath Spa. These models were then evaluated in terms of whether they were scalable, targeted, embedded, and personalised. These new models included: a five-week Virtual Internship Programme with employers setting challenges for the students and functioning as judges in a final pitching session; an online internship with live business input from Practera (an experiential learning platform that develops employability skills and enables educators to engage learners with real experiences); and the development of an enterprise and entrepreneurship experience within the Work Placement Open Module. Whilst still in the early stages of implementation, there is a real appetite for these pilot initiatives across the institution. Practera, in particular, received excellent feedback from participants, and the University is now planning to embed similar schemes next year.

ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

To illustrate the Look Out, Look Forward approach and the EHM in more detail, our collaborative project with Kingston University is outlined below:

Background:

The EHM was deployed at Kingston University in 2020/21. Early analysis showed that employability was not as visible as it could be, with the potential to be embedded more widely across the curriculum. Initial recommendations included adopting a “joining the dots” approach to raise the profile of employability, both internally with staff and students and externally with employers. For instance, joining the dots for students meant ensuring that curricular (and extra-curricular) employability was visible, explicit and reflected upon. This was particularly important to aid those with lower social capital and help students to make connections between sometimes subtle employability development and its long-term application for them in the labour market. The overall impact of this early-stage intervention was evident in the feedback provided by a key Employability Manager who worked with us on the plan and reported that the Healthcheck had enabled them to see what they were doing really well and what they were doing less well, and it gave them a path forward.

Employer Engagement:

The university has embarked on delivering a progressive new model of education through its Town House Strategy that ensures the future skills most valued by employers are embedded in the curriculum for every student. Among the strategy’s four goals is the need to “partner with industry to develop our students’ sought-after skills as well as engage government bodies and organisations with our ideas and expertise in future skills to further debate and influence policy.” Kingston’s Vice Chancellor launched the institution’s latest Future Skills report, conducted with support from YouGov, at the Houses of Parliament last year. The report set out to understand what core skills employers were looking for from graduates and the university is now embedding the development of those skills within the curriculum, aligned with their graduate attributes. Kingston wants its students to be highly sought after, so early engagement was critical. To identify these core skills, the University sampled more than 2,000 businesses and 1,000 students. Employers included Coca Cola, John Lewis, Mastercard, TikTok, and Unilever. The research identified the key skills required by employers today and those skills that would be in increasing demand in 5-10 years time. These future skills took into account the rapid evolution within the labour force due to technological change, such as AI. This extensive employer engagement provided credibility for the skills strategy, and helped secure senior management buy-in and investment at Kingston. The top 10 skills identified were:

1. Problem solving and processing skills
2. Critical thinking
3. Communication skills
4. Digital skills
5. Analytical skills
6. Adaptability
7. Resilience
8. Creativity
9. Ability to build relationships
10. Initiative



Gradcore workshop

The Employability Healthcheck Model:

To help operationalise the Future Skills Strategy, Gradcore was commissioned to conduct the EHM. The Look-In stage involved engaging with over 320 staff, student and employer participants, through workshops, interviews, roundtable meetings, surveys, and an 'Employability Summit' event. A strategic data and document review completed the primary data collection. During the Look Out stage, we utilised findings from the extensive employer engagement outlined above, setting the skills strategy within the context of UK HE policy and practice. This horizon scanning activity contributed to the final Look Forward phase, by informing the reporting and recommendations tailored for Kingston University i.e. 'Joining the Dots'.

Investment:

As a direct result of the EHM, significant new investment was secured, which enabled the Careers and Employability Service to grow from 14 to 34 members over a period of 3-4 months. This growth including the creation of a brand new central Placements and Partnerships team. This Placements team was comprised of a Manager, two Business Development Consultant roles focussing on employer engagement for placements, and two Placement Co-ordinator posts to oversee the placements process in conjunction with Faculty teams. As well as supporting traditional sandwich placements and internships, the team works with employers to develop different models of work-related learning (WRL) to support academic colleagues to embed employability into the curriculum. These include credit-bearing placements for business development, consultancy projects, and live briefs. Service level agreements covering placements, have been introduced between the University and their two key stakeholder groups – students and employers. It is already widely recognised across the University that this team is essential to the project of embedding new forms of WRL across the curriculum. The findings from the EHM also helped to secure external funding. This included £1.7m awarded by the Mohn Westlake Foundation to help address students from disadvantaged and minoritised groups – groups which had hitherto benefited less from their degrees than students from more advantaged backgrounds.

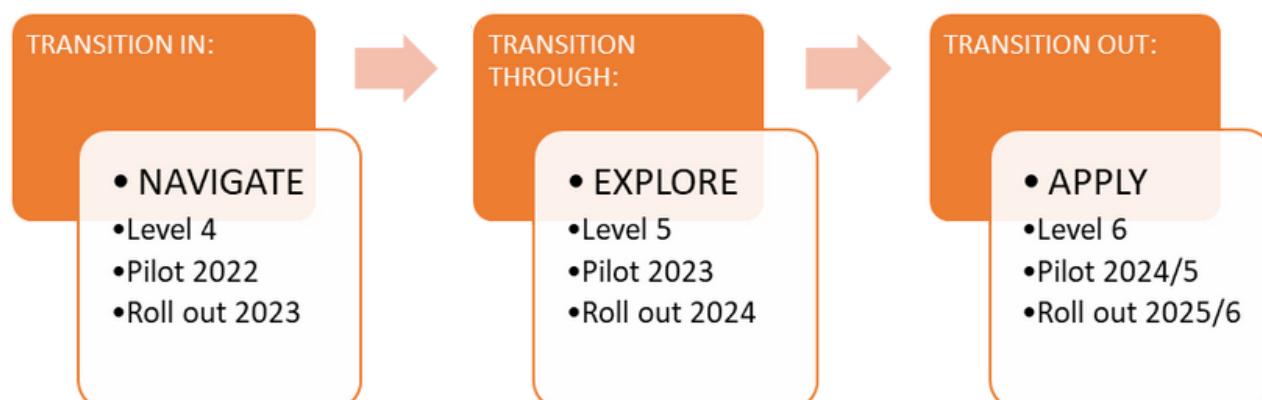


Figure 3: Kingston University Future Skills Framework

The Navigate Personal Development programme supports students to understand and articulate the value they bring to different professional contexts and opportunities, and to develop an understanding of who to articulate that value to. The Future Skills Graduate Attributes are the lens through which the students can articulate this self-awareness and confidence. Tailored workshops introduce these contextualised graduate attributes and show how they underpin course Learning Outcomes and summative assessments across level 4 study. This fully integrated approach with learning activities built into core modules, ensures that all undergraduates are reached in contrast to traditional bolt-on employability modules.

Whilst this project is still very much in its early stages, a pilot programme of activity was developed with Early Adopters in 2022. A few of these examples and the different approaches to embedding skills and employability across different subject areas are outlined below:

- In a shared first year Life Sciences module prototype, support for different areas of personal and professional development, and academic skills, was delivered through thematic 'chapters' spread across the full year of study. These chapters drew on material covered in lectures and seminars, and the general context of a life sciences student. Learning support was provided through Personal Tutor meetings and themed peer-support groups, where groupwork is enacted. These themes, activities, and groupwork in a peer-support group setting were all then reflected upon in a Reflective Log and Personal Development Plan (PDP). These assessments aligned to each 'chapter' of the module. In this way, the narrative of professional, personal, and academic development was woven explicitly throughout the module. The module leader, Nigel Page, School Director of Learning and Teaching, suggested that while there may well be a strong correlation between graduate outcomes and personal development, personal development is often approached as a 'bolt-on' that students are expected to pick up independently and with little support.
- In a shared Geography, Geology & the Environment module prototype, the cohort was taken off campus on a fieldwork exercise. Students were put into groups and tasked with activities and prompts that were derived from actual fieldwork students may experience in their professional lives. To support this trip, they also attended workshops on effective group working and reflective sessions afterwards to support the articulation of what it is they learned on the trip. This was then supported by a reflective report that students submitted with prompts around how they approached the activities, what they learned about the subject, and what they learned about themselves and their skills/attributes.

- In the Music Technology module prototype, students had two assessments that supported their personal and skills development. Firstly, students submitted a written Personal Development Plan, with three main sections: "Who Am I", "Where do I want to go" and "How will I get there" - each with a series of questions or writing prompts to support reflection and future planning. This assessment was supported by personal and professional development workshops, as well as conversations with their Personal Tutors. It was also supported by a longer-term project they were tasked with during the module using Design Thinking to explore different communities and challenges in the Music Industry. Academic staff taught them the Double Diamond methodology (A design and innovation process model popularised by the British Design Council in 2005) in the third Navigate Workshop, which allowed students to understand how to use the methodology for their research. This required them to research a community in the music industry, identify a challenge they may face, and propose a solution for this challenge. These types of activities helped develop empathy and a questioning mindset (in addition to other graduate attributes), but also began to cultivate commercial awareness by studying real-world examples so students could start to see different paths forward for themselves, potentially supporting their ability to engage with the second section of their PDP around where they want to go with their future careers. They were developing in tandem both a wider understanding of their professional opportunities, as well as their own awareness of self (and their values) in the contexts of different professional communities.

Following the pilot modules conducted by the Early Adopters, the Navigate Personal Development Programme has evolved into a series of three 2-hour workshops entitled 'Understanding Each Other', 'Understanding Yourself' and 'Understanding Your Future', which are now embedded into the curriculum in over 30 different degree courses across the University, reaching over 1,000 students in the pilot year. Topics explored through the Programme include: Meeting New People; Strengths and Weaknesses; Building Confidence; Values and Motivations; Imagined Futures; Design Thinking; and signposting to support services. The Programme is flexible, allowing academic staff the opportunity to tailor delivery to suit their individual discipline area and student cohort. For example, in some courses the Navigate programme was embedded alongside the Personal Tutor (PT) system. This provided PTs greater insight into their students, allowing them to follow up on themes explored in the workshops to develop stronger learning communities. In other courses, the workshops were integrated with more in-depth exploration of salient issues including sustainability and anti-racism, aligning with other institutional strategies or initiatives.



The Future:

An indication of Kingston University's success with these initiatives was their award of Best Faculty Programme for the Navigate Programme at the Global Careers Services Summit in 2022. The momentum gained from these pilot initiatives with Early Adopters and the positive feedback they received from module leaders, students and employers has led to the further expansion of the programme. The current focus is on the remaining two phases of student transition and the future skills framework (as shown in Figure 3). A level 5 prototype for the Explore phase commences in September 2023, with implementation across all courses from September 2024. The Level 6, Apply phase, transitioning out initiatives will be developed over the next couple of years and will complete the programme. As students progress, they will be able to personalise their own learning, identifying the skills they already have and those they want to develop.

REFLECTION AND NEXT STEPS

The Employability Healthcheck model provides a partnership approach to establishing baseline employability activity, engaging with key stakeholders, and producing a set of practical recommendations. By acting as a critical friend, Gradcore highlights what is currently working for a university, and what needs change and investment to enable them to achieve their institutional objectives in relation to employability. By consulting with graduate employers and utilising current LMI, the EHM report and recommendations it gives rise to, hold credibility and traction with HEI staff, students, and graduates.

Shifts in the employability landscape have resulted in changes at the level of individual HEIs, including a move from bolt-on employability activities to those integrated within the curriculum. To maximise impact across all students, including the most disadvantaged, new course content is required to be credit-bearing and, therefore, essential for student progression to the next level of study. The EMH provides the evidence base and solutions-based recommendations to secure senior leadership buy-in, commitment to change from both academic and professional services colleagues, and the business case for future investment.

The next steps in the evolution of the EHM include evaluation through utilising the theory of change framework. This will enable us to understand the full impact of the model by outlining causal linkages in an initiative, clearly establishing its shorter-term, intermediate, and longer-term outcomes.



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Supporting documents

Please find further contextual resources for the Employability Healthcheck Model below:

Gradcore

About Us:

<https://gradcore.co.uk>

Case Studies:

<https://gradcore.co.uk/case-studies>

Bath Spa University

Education Strategy:

<https://www.bathspa.ac.uk/media/1188b-Education-Strategy-final.pdf>

Kingston University

Future Skills campaign and report:

<https://www.kingston.ac.uk/aboutkingstonuniversity/future-skills/>

Graduate Outcomes and personal Development – a peer supported approach:

<https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/rethinking-personal-development-peer-supported-approach>

The Centre for Graduate Success launched by Kingston University and the Mohn Westlake Foundation:

[Kingston University and The Mohn Westlake Foundation establish new graduate success centre to ensure all students have equal opportunity to thrive in careers - News - Kingston University London](#)

Practera

Experiential Learning:

<https://practera.com>

RISE

A business support initiative building a bridge between graduates and SMEs in the Sheffield City Region, delivered by Gradcore, the University of Sheffield, Sheffield Hallam University and Sheffield City Council:

<https://gradcore.co.uk/case-studies/university-of-sheffield>

Sheffield Hallam University

Rethinking the employability model:

<https://gradcore.co.uk/case-studies/sheffield-hallam-university>

Theory of Change

Centre for Transforming Access and Student Outcomes in Higher Education (TASO) resources for developing a Theory of Change framework:

<https://taso.org.uk/evidence/evaluation-guidance-resources/toc/>

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