

**CAREER ACTIVATION PROGRAMME:
EMBEDDING PROFESSIONAL
EXPERIENCE AND CAREER FOCUS TO
BOOST GRADUATE OUTCOMES AND
CLOSE THE EMPLOYABILITY GAP**



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**EPD
Feedback
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SUMMARY

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The Career Activation Programme is a sector-leading approach which aims to improve students' experience, skills, and chances of securing rewarding careers. City, University of London is one of the first UK universities to make professional experience and career-focused modules a mandatory and integrated part of every undergraduate course for new students.

As the university of business, practice and the professions, City works closely with employer partners to ensure all experiences, whether they be projects, placements, or alumni panels, are meaningful, relevant and improve professional-level skills. In 2021/22, 75% of our students came from BAME backgrounds, 44% from Widening Participation, and 30% from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Although it is early days in the initiative, and success will ultimately be measured by graduate outcome metrics, league tables and student satisfaction surveys, we have seen:

- a reduction in the attainment gap between White and BAME students, and between UK UG students living in areas with the highest and lowest levels of relative deprivation (as measured by Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD)).
- The BAME awarding gap decreased from 12.1% in 18/19 to 4% in 2020/21,
- The gap between students from IMD Q1 and IMD Q5 has reduced from 6.7% to 0.6%

CONTEXT



Work placements and careers guidance are longstanding and important facets of university education, but City's new [Career Activation Programme \(CAP\)](#) takes student employability to a whole new level. Recognising that the diverse backgrounds of our students can mean barriers to dedicating spare time to employability activities, the Careers and Employability department led by Gemma Kenyon, created the CAP. Implementation of this ambitious, institutional strategy was completed in 2022/23; all undergraduate courses now have 'career focus' education and professional experience as core, credit bearing components. Channeling City's 'we learn' value, the strategic vision was based upon large scale external research which examined determinants of long-term success in the labour market. To our knowledge we are the only large UK university to have embedded these two distinctive aspects of employability support as core in all UG programmes.

More than half of our undergraduate students come from the bottom 40% of areas for deprivation when measured by IMD, and the large majority commute, sometimes long distances. These factors, among others, can present additional barriers to dedicating time outside of study to activities which develop employability. "We recognise that many of our students have complex lives. Some have caring responsibilities or part-time jobs, so find it more difficult to get experience opportunities outside of their studies. We also have a high proportion of students from disadvantaged backgrounds who don't have a network of people they know in professional occupations that they can call on to secure placements. By making experience and support an integral part of the curriculum, we're levelling the playing field."- [Gemma Kenyon, Director of Careers and Employability](#).

Several City courses already offer a year-long placement in industry, but that experience isn't available on every course and not every student necessarily wants to add a year to their studies. Similarly, not every organisation can offer such a long placement. To address this issue, the University has teamed up with a wide range of employers, from global blue-chips to local SMEs, public sector bodies to charities and action groups, to provide a wider range of experience placements and projects as part of the CAP. To achieve this, we leveraged and expanded relationships garnered from employer engagement on previous initiatives. We also developed extensive relationships with the local community and alumni via outreach activities such as business breakfasts.

RATONALE

City's institutional employability KPI is our ranking position in the 'graduate prospects rate' indicator in the Times and Sunday Times Good University Guide. This indicator is based on the proportion of UK graduates from undergraduate courses with a 'positive' employment outcome (graduate-level employment or further study) set against the proportion of those with a 'negative' outcome (non-graduate employment or unemployment). City's 2023 rank was 45th, and our aspiration was to be in the top 20.

Large scale research undertaken on behalf of the Department for Education in 2017 ("Planning for success: Graduates' career planning and its effect on graduate outcomes") into factors that determine the longitudinal employment outcomes of graduates concluded that two significant predictors of long-term employment outcomes are having Career Focus at the point of graduation and some professional experience.

Our data indicated that on both of these counts, City UK UG students required more support. For example:

- 32.5% of UK UG 2019 students surveyed at the point of graduation have Career Focus
- In 2018 42.7% of UK UG final year students had undertaken some professional experience by the beginning of their final year (this drops to 37.5% when our School of Health graduates were discounted. 'Professional experience' defined as an internship or placement either independently or as part of a course, full- or part-time work related to my degree, or starting my own business.)

In recognition of these issues, our CAP was built on two foundational commitments. Namely, that:

1. Every undergraduate programme will contain core professionally relevant experience, helping students to develop graduate level skills in a real-world context; and
2. Every undergraduate programme will include Career Focus education as part of the core curriculum, thus supporting our students to develop career readiness

As far as we are aware, no other UK HEI is currently making these simultaneous commitments, providing a distinctive USP for our institution.

These radical commitments can be expressed in terms of the following vision for the student experience:

- Professionally relevant experience: The professionally relevant experience I undertook as part of my degree gave me confidence and extra skills I needed. It also gave me the opportunity to learn about a sector I'm interested in.
- Career Focus: My course included a module which helped me decide which area I want to go into, to understand that sector and advised me on how to get the job I want when I graduate.

This Vision was endorsed by our Education and Student Committee (February 2019), ExCo (April 2019) and Council (May 2019).

METHODOLOGY & IMPLEMENTATION

Partnership working with all Schools and relevant professional services over the past 3 years has enabled the realisation of this ambitious vision for all UG students. To achieve this, a new project group was created to oversee the curriculum change process which reported to the Education and Student Committee attended by all relevant senior members of staff. Throughout the implementation, the approach utilised existing 'business as usual' structures and processes such as annual programme evaluations and periodic reviews. The leadership involved multiple stages and partnership working with many parts of the university. The process began in 2019 when endorsement for the vision at all executive decision-making committees was obtained. Extensive partnership working with the School executive teams, the Students Union, professional services and students yielded the creation of a cohesive employability development plan. In 2020 the articulation of financial plans for this plan led to the creation of the investment funds required. Thanks to a City investment of £695,000, the CAP has now been fully implemented and all students beginning their course from 22/23 onwards are guaranteed to have both career focus and professional experiences as a mandatory part of their undergraduate course.



As outlined above, the two key foundations of the CAP are our 'career focus' modules and our embedded professional experiences. More details of these integral pillars of CAP are given below:

1. The first part of the CAP is to ensure the inclusion of 'career focus' modules (or elements of modules) tailored to individual programmes. Each module is core and credit-bearing and focuses on equipping all students with (i) an understanding of the career options relevant to their subject, (ii) support with career decision making, and (iii) a knowledge of how to present themselves effectively during competitive recruitment processes. There has been a gradual roll-out of these support activities from 2019 to 2022, with 55% of 2019/20 entrants receiving support, 60% of 2020/21 entrants, and 81% in 2021/22. In 2022/23, 100% of undergraduate students have 'career focus' as a core credit bearing element of their programme.
2. Secondly, we are committed to ensuring that all undergraduates complete professional experiences during their studies, in a format and at a time which suits them. We have created an innovative range of 15-credit professional experience modules which reflect diverse career paths. Roll-out began in 2019 and has now been completed with 100% of undergraduate students starting in 2022/23 experiencing a professional experience as a core, credit bearing element of their programme. These professional experience modules come in three types: Micro-Placements Programme (MPP), industry projects and social action projects.

2.1. Micro-Placements

On the Micro-Placement Programme (MPP), students complete a 140-hour project-based placement in the summer. Projects are sourced to enable the student to have ownership of a tangible piece of work they can deliver within the time period, that meets a genuine need for the employer and utilises graduate level skills. All stages of the process are handled by City's Employer Engagement team - Integrated Experience led by Wendy Browne, Employer Engagement Manager - Integrated Experience based in the Careers and Employability Department. This includes the sourcing and vetting of all placement opportunities. Extensive strategic partnerships are brokered to attract relevant, interesting and challenging projects for students. A dedicated adviser team works extensively with employers to ensure projects are pitched at the appropriate level for first and second year students across a huge variety of sector and size of organisation. There is a dedicated coordination team which supports and prepares the students for their placements with a series of comprehensive and tailored employability workshops, co-delivered with sought-after employers. Starting as a pilot of 32 students, the programme has grown substantially, with 450 students planned to avail of a Micro-Placement in summer 2024.

2.2. Industry projects

A key component of the CAP and of our wider institutional offer are our industry-led consultancy projects, which are employer directed. These modules involve students working in teams to complete employer projects that address real-world concerns. For example, in our Bayes Business School, we run a final year module in Business Management where students work as consultants with employers on real-world business projects. Experienced business professionals work alongside the students as tutors. Similarly, Law firms offer commercial projects to our final year Law students. Business Management and Finance students also have the option to take on individual research projects again supplied by employers.

2.3. Sociology Social Action Projects

Our Sociology Social Action module enables community engaged learning through a core second year module. It is a collaboration between the Careers and Employability, and Sociology departments. The module was piloted as an elective in 2020/21, before becoming a core module delivered to 176 students in 2021/22. The module helps develop employability skills by bringing students together into groups to seek out an external community organisation to work with, typically through running events, raising awareness through social media and conducting research.



ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Whilst the evaluation of the CAP is in its early stages, we have established a range of short-term and longer-term performance indicators. These include the indicators laid out below:

Short-term impact (immediately post module completion):

- Feedback from students
- Module evaluation (specific programme delivery)
- Feedback from staff
- Review of partnership working between Schools and Careers & Employability (C&E)
- Medium-term impact (at the start of the following academic year)
- Careers Registration feedback (ie. do students self-report transition into a more developed phase of career readiness)
- The Career Activation Programme and Employer Engagement Strategy were highly commended for the Institute of Student Employers' 2023 University and Employer Engagement Strategy Award

Long-term impact (15 months post-graduation)

- Positive destinations in the Graduate Outcomes Survey. Our institutional targets are to be in the top 20 for Graduate Prospects in the Times Good University Guide and top non Russell Group, non-specialist HEI for Graduate Prospects in London.

As outlined above, the key foundations of the CAP are our Career-focus modules, our Micro-placements, our Industry Project modules, and our Social Action Projects. The evaluation data gathered to date on these key activities is laid out below.

Career focus modules

All 'career focus' modules are bespoke to individual programmes and focus on equipping students with understanding the career options relevant to their subject, support with decision making and knowledge of how to effectively present themselves during competitive recruitment processes. All modules are core and credit bearing. Pre- and post-module learning gain surveys from 2021/22 show that the majority of students are more aware of their career options (average 57% before the module City, University of London and 82% after) and how their skills and values relate to these options (average 59% before the module and 85% after) after the modules.

Micro-Placements

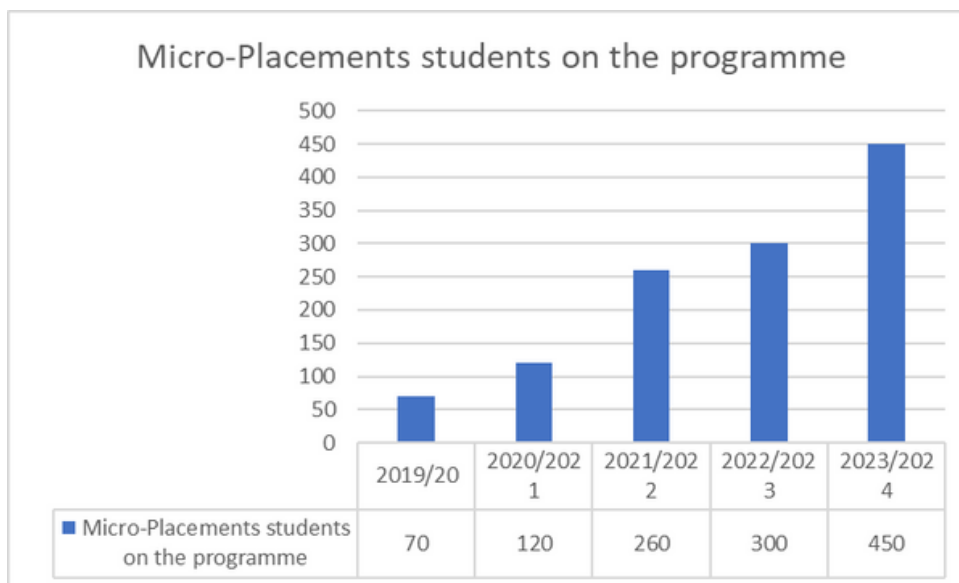
The total number of students impacted by Micro-Placements is larger than the number who go on to complete the placement (total of 821 in 2021/22) due to a larger number of students having access to pre-placement activities designed to improve placement readiness. Our evaluation of the MPP programme in 2021/22 was completed by 65% of the 260 placement students and was extremely positive. The survey showed that at least 25 students returned to their employer for further work experience or a graduate job. In addition, 92% strongly agreed or agreed that the MPP had helped them with career exploration, and 94% strongly agreed or agreed that they were more familiar with a real-life work environment and processes after the placement. The comment below was typical:



'I really don't think I'd be where I am today if I hadn't done it. For me, completing the Micro-Placement meant I had a job lined up after university and the experience I gained from this job allowed me to stand out and secure my current role with KPMG.'

At City we measure a student's "career-readiness" via a series of questions embedded each year in the registration process. Students rate their readiness to tackle their career post-graduation, with students at the lowest level of readiness falling into the Explore category, and those with the highest appearing in Succeed. We saw a 144% increase in students selecting Succeed, and a reduction of 31% in Explore, looking at Autumn 2020 (pre-placement) vs Autumn 2021 (post-placement). This demonstrates that a Micro-Placement has an important positive impact in increasing career-readiness. The distinctiveness and impact of the Micro-Placements was also recognised at a national level with one of our members of staff winning the 2022 AGCAS Outstanding Newcomer Award for Excellence for her work on the programme. We have also been finalists for eleven awards for the excellence of Micro-Placements, from the ISE Development Awards in 2018 to the NUE Best Placement Service in 2022.

Micro-Placements became a credit-bearing module in 2020/21 and have grown incrementally in scale over time (discounting the pandemic disruption in the summer 2020). The number of students completing a placement has increased by 93% from 138 to 260 over four years, and is planned to grow by a further 69% to place 450 students in 2023/24. Please see the table below which details students on the Micro-Placements Programme since 2019 with planned figures for 23/24.



To find out more about the impact of the placements on employers and our students, please see Appendix I and our Micro-Placements [video](#) and [blog](#) where students have shared their experiences of the Programme.

Industry project modules

Since 2021, 400 students have worked with over 30 employers across diverse sectors. Provision of an industry brief is a new method of engagement with City Careers & Employability, and we are excited to bring this offering to new and existing employer partners. Traditionally some larger organisations have found it challenging to offer a Micro-Placement given their own internship scheme commitments. However, this new type of engagement in term time offers a ready alternative to establish relationships, as well as to enrich the existing relationships City already holds with larger and smaller companies. The impact that these industry projects have had on our students across the institution has been significant. At a Teaching and Learning event in May 2022, we brought together an employer from a major law firm who had taken on a team of our students each year for the last eight years, and two of the students who had worked with this employer. The students highlighted the opportunities provided by this activity to build connections between the theoretical concepts learned within their course and the practical skills they would need for their future employment. The employer talked of being impressed by the insights that the students brought and also by the quality and professionalism of the student presentations. The Law School offered 16 commercial projects from Law firms to students. Engineering runs similar credit-bearing projects with Arup, Clancy and Evolve. Within the arts and social science, students were taken on by organisations such as London Higher where they are now being credited as initial researchers on a published report on student life in London.

Sociology Social Action Module

It is too soon to assess the impact of our Sociology Social Action Module on graduate destinations, as our first cohort are only now in their final year. However, the first year of this new core module would appear to have been a huge success with a 95% completion rate by students and positive feedback from both students and organisations. For example, one of our partner organisations, the NSPCC, described their student as 'a great communicator', adding that:

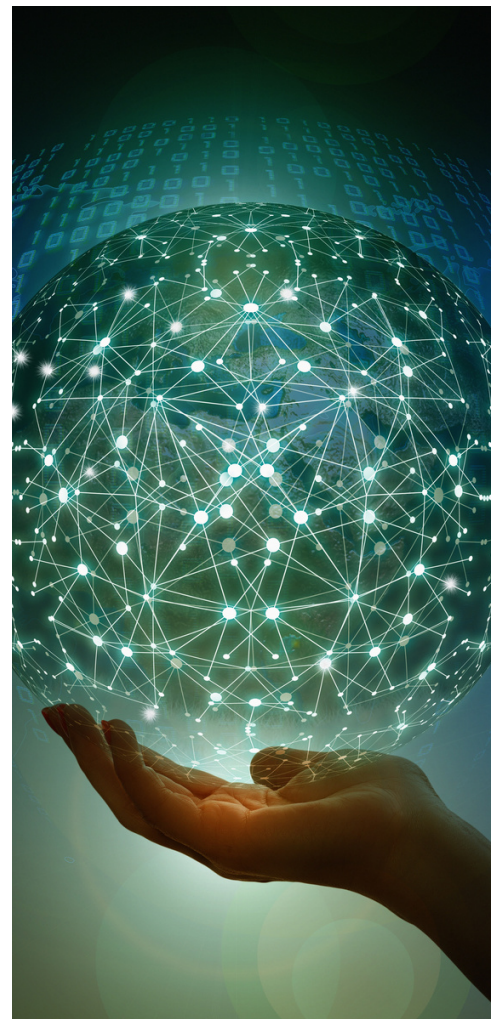
'her group has produced a very impressive professional fundraising initiative at my request. I have worked with other student groups but these students stood out, as a well organised, well executed group. They produced coherent, concise documents updating me regularly so I could follow their progress.'

We were awarded Silver at the [UK Social Mobility Awards \(SOMOs\) 2022](#) for our 'sector-leading approach to community-engaged learning' through the new Social Action Project. This collaboration evidences our drive to engage with the community whilst also tackling employability across the University, including in non-vocational disciplines with historically weaker graduate outcomes.

Overall CAP outcomes

As a result of the CAP, we have seen a reduction in the attainment gap between White and BAME students, and between UK UG students living in areas with the highest and lowest levels of relative deprivation (as measured by the IMD). The BAME awarding gap decreased from 12.1% in 2018/19 to 4% in 2020/21. In addition, the gap between students from IMD Q1 and IMD Q5 has reduced from 6.7% to 0.6%.

City students' overall progression into professional, graduate-level employment is institutionally strong. Whilst this strong performance is not inevitable, given our student demographic, it has long been core to our mission and a consistent strategic and operational focus. A 77.7% institutional graduate-level employment rate in the last Graduate Outcomes Survey (GOS) evidences City's excellence in supporting students to go on to achieve career success (Graduate Outcomes, 2019/20). Through Graduate Outcomes data and Graduate Voice questions, students stated overwhelmingly that we support them to realise their career ambitions: for example, in the 2019/20 Graduate Outcomes Survey, 80% of graduates reported that they 'agreed' or 'strongly agreed' that their current activity fits with their future plans and 81% reported that they feel their activities are meaningful.



CONCLUSION

City is proud of our record of enabling students to fulfil or exceed their potential and a large part of this success is contingent upon the Career Activation Programme. City works with a diverse student cohort and offers a wide range of academic, pastoral and career initiatives that enable us to ensure the success of all of our students, irrespective of background and prior opportunities. Through working in close partnership with employer, student and internal university stakeholders, we have managed to sustain this level of support and success through the challenging period of the pandemic. Our CAP has been central to our sustained achievement of strong academic achievement and employment outcomes.

REFLECTIONS AND NEXT STEPS

The academic year 2023/24 brings a fuller menu of professional experience modules for students, including industry projects for Occupational Psychology students and Actuarial Sciences. In addition, our focus will now also turn to implementing a similar career support provision for our postgraduate students. We also pursue a more in-depth evaluation of the short and longer term impact of the CAP.

Appendix I - Employer case study

Some of the organisations who have participated in Micro-Placements Programme (MPP) include the House of Commons, Lloyds Banking Group, FDM, Westbourne Partners and Kensington Park School. We conduct evaluations with these employers to assess the value and impact of the placements.

The feedback below is taken from an interview with Erin Neil, the Director of Short Courses at Kensington Park School, who offers a 4-week intensive summer Micro-Placement.

Can you tell us about your experience of working with the MPP?

"I have been involved with the MPP since summer 2018. We have had three brilliant City students from previous years with whom we remain in contact with and have been employed by us since the MPP ended in various capacities. Each summer we run our international summer school and we hire an MPP student to help with this."

"Our experience has always been excellent! We cannot speak highly enough about the benefits of having an MPP student working with us each summer. They have been amazing and incredibly dedicated to the school"

What kind of things did your student help with?

"Our academic summer programme is a big project for us, which requires a lot of work that must be completed in a very time-sensitive manner, with strict deadlines and in a high-pressure atmosphere. Staff and students change every two weeks and there is a great deal of effort needed to ensure a fantastic and safe experience for everyone."

"We had teens aged 14-17 from 26 different countries join us this summer and stay at our boarding residence. Our student started her placement the week before the courses began and worked closely with me and a former MPP student to finalise last-minute details for the project, ensuring we were prepared for our students when they arrived. "

"She helped us with the creation of a student feedback survey and worked to gather testimonials from students to use in our marketing material. It is hard to define everything she did as the list is exhaustive! From researching and booking activities, helping with emergency plans during a heatwave and general problem-solving, managing risks daily. "

"She worked in a front-facing role at reception and acted as a link between me and the students and staff. She completed training in areas such as safeguarding, health and safety and even gained her first aid qualification while sitting in with the medicine students for the day when we needed cover. "

"When the course began, she worked on a variety of things. We also employed her for three weeks after her placement ended, so she could assist me with the closing out of the project and see the summer programme through until the end. In total, she was with us for seven weeks."

"She developed excellent relationships with staff and students, who trusted and respected her immensely. She often went beyond, staying late to help with things, even when she did not need to. She was always calm, professional, dedicated, and responsible. She was able to see the project from pre-arrival to the final day, aiding me with closing project tasks, such as collating feedback and organising finance and health and safety files."

Would you recommend the experience to other employers – why?

Yes. The students are very well vetted and prepared. Each time we have employed a City MPP student, they have been top performing members of staff. The first time I joined the programme, the candidates were so great that we chose two! Having recruited many staff over the years, I am always delighted at the quality of the candidates the MPP programme sends to us. I highly recommend this programme.

Student feedback:

"I enjoyed the Micro-Placements Programme, it gave me insight into different businesses and sectors that I didn't even know existed. I've also learnt a lot about myself in terms of my strengths and weaknesses. The Micro-Placement team were always on hand for support too" - BSc Psychology student

"The Micro-Placement team were incredible at maintaining communication and providing all the necessary information to prepare us for the placement. There has been frequent webinars and talks to support us through the application and preparation process." - LLB Law student

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'Get ready for the world of work. Career activation at City.' (2019). Available at [CityUni11088_EmployabilityDevelopmentPlan_A5-Leaflet_WEB-AW-Single.pdf](#)

Career Activation Programme:

<https://www.city.ac.uk/prospective-students/career-development>

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eDk5o0nSd6U>



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