

Inclusive Employability Development through the Curriculum: An Educator's Toolkit

Report of CODE webinar, 27 November 2024

The Centre for Online and Distance Education (CODE) held a webinar on 27 November to introduce a toolkit of online resources to support educators - both academics and professional careers staff - in designing curricular activities to support employability for all students, particularly disadvantaged ones. This had been developed during 2023-24 with funding from the UK's quality assurance agency for higher education, [QAA](#). The webinar was presented by the three project partners, all London-based educators: **Dr Linda Amrane-Cooper**, Director of CODE and Director of Academic Practice in Online and Distance Education at the University of London, **Dr Aranee Manoharan**, Senior Associate Director for Careers and Employability at King's College London and **Gemma Kenyon**, Director of Careers and Employability at City, University of London.

After introducing the speakers and welcoming delegates in her role as CODE director, Linda handed over to Gemma to 'step back' and explain the rationale behind the project, what *inclusive employability in the curriculum* means and why it matters. During the last few years the number and diversity of higher education students in the UK and similar countries have increased, but students from less advantaged backgrounds still face barriers to success in the graduate labour market. One important reason for this is that these students - with, for example, financial difficulties, caring responsibilities or long commutes - find it difficult to take part in the extra-curricular activities that give students confidence and that employers often use to distinguish between applicants. The curriculum, however, reaches all students. The more that employability-based activities can be embedded in that core curriculum, the more these disadvantaged students will be able to take part and, crucially, to learn from them. However, if these students are to engage with them fully they need to be designed with inclusivity in mind.

Gemma explained that the team had been motivated to apply for funding from QAA because inclusivity is still a neglected part of the careers agenda in UK higher education. Although there are many similarities in other countries and the toolkit has been designed to be used worldwide, their work sits within the landscape of higher education policy in the UK and is influenced by this agenda.

The new government in the UK has continued to focus on graduate skills and outcomes. All universities are required to produce metrics about the percentage of their graduates in either further study or professional jobs 15 months after graduation. There is both a 'carrot' and a 'stick' approach to this: the carrot is the Teaching Excellence Framework, which grades institutions' teaching as Gold, Silver or Bronze using a number of metrics including outcomes, and the 'stick' is the baseline threshold or B3 condition for outcomes that is set by the Office for Students. Institutions that fail to meet this threshold may be penalised and potentially courses may even be shut down. Each institution in the UK, as

elsewhere, will have ‘gaps’ in outcome and attainment between students from different demographic backgrounds and reducing these gaps is key to improving outcomes more generally. Institutions have set up access and development plans to focus explicitly on closing such gaps.

Following this general introduction, Linda asked delegates to think about the question

What are the barriers when supporting students from disadvantaged backgrounds to develop their employability?

and submit answers using Menti. The answers provided were wide-ranging and thought-provoking. They could be divided into broad categories: financial, including the cost of housing; geographical, including travel costs and the location of internships; time-based, including caring responsibilities; and more psychological, such as the lack of confidence and social and cultural capital experienced by disadvantaged students.

Introduction to the Toolkit

Gemma introduced the [toolkit](#) itself as a collaboration between the three institutions: King’s College London, London and City Universities. The team involved included academics and careers professionals with expertise in both curriculum design and inclusivity, and they designed the toolkit to have a dual purpose:

- To make specific employability modules in the curriculum more inclusive
- To enable all students, regardless of their background, to develop employability skills in their discipline-specific modules.

This should enable the toolkit to be useful to all educators, regardless of their specialism and of the design of the programmes of study that they are working within.

She then showed delegates around the [toolkit website](#), beginning by explaining that it had been divided into three sections:

- **Prepare:** resources to help educators design curricula with both employability and inclusivity in mind
- **Deliver:** resources to help deliver inclusive employability development through the curriculum
- **Evaluate:** resources to enable developers and users (the latter including both educators and students) to evaluate the toolkit as a whole and individual items in it.

Prepare

The ‘Prepare’ section begins with a link to a document that summarises some core principles for embedding inclusivity and employability in the curriculum, and then links to more specialised resources. Some of these are designed for academics and

others for careers professionals, and there are also sections on understanding barriers and assessing outcomes.

The summary document provides several helpful illustrations of the principles involved, starting with two ways of approaching inclusion: on an individual level, where disadvantaged students are supported with resources tailored to their particular situations, and on a structural level, in which the curriculum is designed to support a diverse student body through incorporating a wide range of appropriate pedagogies. It sets out six basic principles for embedding employability in the curriculum:

- Gain an understanding of your students
- Start with the degree programme and its overarching goals
- Design the curriculum at programme level, involving the whole student journey
- Use a range of pedagogies and assessments that enable skills and capacity development
- Incorporate ‘recruitability’ in the student journey: how are students prepared to manage their own careers?
- Review and evaluate what you have achieved on an annual basis.

Another way of looking at learning - whether employability or discipline-focused - is to distinguish between learning *about*, which is largely factual and surface-level, learning *for* and learning *through*. The latter two are more active and designed to achieve deeper learning; learning *for* involves, for example, case studies and scenarios and learning *through* includes real-world projects and work-based learning. And, finally, these principles can be put together into an employability map or curriculum design that takes the process from a definition of the knowledge and skills that students require to an evaluation of the whole process.

Deliver

The ‘Deliver’ section links to a variety of learning activities that have been developed by and tested with practitioners, all with inclusivity in mind. The links are divided into groups according to the type of activity, for example ‘peer-assisted learning’ and ‘student participation and feedback’. Many of the activities are accompanied by a proforma in a standard format that summarises what is involved, including check boxes to indicate the size of class and type of delivery (in person, online or hybrid) that it is suitable for and linking to external resources. The category of ‘real world learning’ includes activities that link the curriculum explicitly to relevant employers. Gemma used a tool for [supporting students to research organisations and professions](#) through an ‘inclusive lens’ as an example to explain how these proformas can be used.

Evaluate

Gemma explained that the word ‘evaluate’ has been used widely during the development of the toolkit. This section includes resources for educators to evaluate the whole toolkit or individual tools; for gathering feedback from

students, and from employers or alumni if they have been involved in the activities. Students can also use some of these tools to evaluate their own careers or employability goals throughout their learning journey.

Aralee, who had been involved in developing many of the tools, then delved further into the toolkit to explain in more detail some ways in which it can be used. She started with the 'Prepare' section which, she said, was probably the most versatile because it dealt with the universal topic of curriculum design. Going back to the two ways of approaching inclusion, she explained that this section focuses mainly on the idea of structural inclusion and making the curriculum inclusive by design. The toolkit encourages academics to understand who the students in their classrooms are and how they learn, and to think about their programmes as a whole: what are their overarching goals, and how are students expected to progress year by year? So, the range of pedagogies and assessments can be designed to help those students develop from the first year through to Masters level. Assessments should, where possible, go beyond the 'traditional' essay- and lab-based formats to cater for different student circumstances and learning styles, and this is as true for employability-based as for discipline-based education. One area where many students (not only disadvantaged ones) struggle is group work, and specific resources can be provided to help with this type of assignment. There are also resources for building module-level materials together into the curriculum, mapping them into a coherent programme of varied pedagogies and incorporating employability and capability development. She has been involved in workshops at several universities that take academics and careers professionals through this process together.

She then asked delegates to respond to another prompt, this time using Slido:

If you had no limitations, what do you think your university should do to inclusively develop employability through the curriculum?

This prompt elicited a good number of suggestions, many both imaginative and practical. They included micro-internships, incorporating employability into assessment, 'live' problem-based learning, group assessments and reflection. Individualised support can be provided for students who need it; one interesting suggestion here involved the use of artificial intelligence and/or virtual reality. Another suggestion concerned the provision of specific resources for international students, who often experience barriers to accessing UK higher education in general and employability resources such as internships in particular.

Aralee then threw the presentation open to questions, beginning with one from the chat: what specific resources are available for supporting neurodiverse students from disadvantaged backgrounds? Gemma responded by highlighting tools in the toolkit for, for example, giving feedback in an inclusive way that helps build students' confidence. Aralee pointed out that she has encountered this question in workshops, and that it is helpful to remember that a wide range of conditions and experiences are included under the umbrella term 'neurodiversity'. All people will encounter difficult working relationships, and tools designed to help

all students navigate working relationships will help these students as well. Linda mentioned the need for toolkit users to provide feedback, highlighting an evaluation that she had carried out with two of CODE's student research fellows.

To conclude the webinar, the three presenters pointed out that the feedback they had received from educators so far has been consistently positive. Many academics are already grappling with these ideas despite their heavy workloads, and they should be encouraged that the toolkit also includes resources that can help them develop their own careers.