Supporting local students and graduates

An evaluation of the Office for Students
Challenge Competition:
'Industrial strategy and skills:
support for local students and graduates'

For the Office for Students

September 2023

An evaluation of the Office for Students Challenge Competition:

'Industrial strategy and skills: support for local students and graduates'

By the Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC) for the Office for Students

Written by Rosie Alexander, Tristram Hooley & Robin Mellors-Bourne

© Office for Students 2023

Careers Research & Advisory Centre (CRAC)

CRAC is a non-profit organisation, registered as a charity in the UK, that provides research, innovation and intelligence to those who support career development of people of all ages, in education or work in any sector. It also owns and manages Vitae, a programme which promotes the career and personal development of researchers in higher education, and the enhancement of the research environment in which they work, in the UK and increasingly worldwide.

Contents

1. Executive summary

Background

Individuals' careers are pursued in spaces and places. Where we live, where we study, where we work and the connection between these places makes a difference to the opportunities that are available to us.[1] Yet, individuals are rarely free just to follow opportunities wherever they may be. A range of personal, practical, familial, societal and legal ties, affinities and constraints mean that our careers always have to navigate the art of the possible within geographical constraints. While graduates are typically more mobile than non-graduates, their mobility decisions continue to be complex and intertwined in their lives.[2] Importantly, in the context of this Office for Students (OfS) funded programme, the evidence shows that the most mobile graduates (those who move for university and then move away again after university) have some of the best graduate outcomes.[3] In contrast, students with lower levels of mobility are less likely to be in professional employment.[4]

The OfS Challenge Competition: 'Industrial strategy and skills – support for local students and graduates' (more commonly referred to as the *'Improving outcomes for local graduates'*) was launched in October 2018. The competition aimed to support universities and partnerships to deliver innovative projects targeted at supporting local graduates and students, and through doing so improve both graduate outcomes and local prosperity. Funding allocations were announced in May 2019 with funding awarded to 16 projects based across different English regions. A total of £5.6 million of funding was made available by the OfS, with a further £4.9 million of in-kind support. The funded projects, which together constitute what we refer to as the programme, ran from Spring 2019 for three years (with many extended to later in 2022 due to the Covid-19 pandemic).

Programme reach

This evaluation demonstrates that, overall, the projects aspired to engage 6500 students (or graduates) and 1400 employers between them. Over the life of the programme, the target student (or graduate) participation was exceeded, with total participation of 6933, while the employer target was largely achieved, with the programme reaching 1269 employers. This is a significant achievement given that many project activities took place during the Covid-19 pandemic.

---

[1] Alexander, R., & Hooley, T. (2018). The places of careers: The role of geography in career development. In Valérie Cohen-Scali, J. Rossier, & L. Nota (Eds.) *New perspectives on career counseling and guidance in Europe: Building careers in changing and diverse societies* (pp.119-130). Springer.

[2] Alexander, R. (2018). Geography, mobility and graduate career development. In C. Burke & F. Christie (Eds.) *Graduate careers in context* (pp. 85-95). Routledge.

[3] Ball, C. (2015). *Loyals, stayers, returners and incomers: Graduate migration patterns*. HECSU.

[4] Ball, C. (2019). Graduate labour market myths. In C. Burke & F. Christie, *Graduate Careers in Context: Research, Policy and Practice* (pp. 57–70). Routledge.

Outcomes

89% of student or graduate participants were positive about their participation in the programme with improvements evident in relation to:

- Confidence in their potential ability to get the type of employment that they would want;

- Employability skills and, in some cases, technical skills;

- A sense of 'belonging' to the university community, local community and/or to an employment sector;

- Interest in remaining in the local area after graduation;

- Clarity of career intention and aspiration;

- Understanding of the local labour market, the needs of local employers and the relevance of their skills and experience to local employment.

87% of employers participating in the programme reported that their participation had brought value to their business. Specific value was identified in the following areas:

- Extra capacity within the business (especially for those employers hosting internships or placements);

- New skills leading to business improvements (especially technical or digital skills);

- Market insights particularly relating to young people's perspectives and interests;

- Improved recruitment processes supporting graduate applicants from diverse backgrounds;

- Improved awareness of the value of employing graduates, including those from a wider range of subject specialisms than they would previously have considered.

Alongside valuable outcomes for employers and students/graduates, the projects also demonstrated wider valuable outcomes for the partnerships themselves. These included:

- Improved understanding of the regional graduate labour market, achieved through bespoke research activities or monitoring and evaluation activities;

- Improved networks between stakeholders (students or graduates, employers, universities, and in some cases the wider regional communities) often facilitated through forums, conferences or sectoral events;

- Generation of spin-off activities or potential activities through the partnerships established and the insights developed.

Legacy

Subsequent to the completion of the projects, the majority of projects reported aspirations to mainstream at least some parts of their delivery, demonstrating the high perceived value of the projects by stakeholders. In addition, the innovative nature of many of these projects led to a number successfully receiving or contributing to external awards or accolades. These awards have included:

- Birmingham City University's Graduate Re-Tune project won the 2022 Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services Award for Excellence in Building Effective Partnerships. The university also then went on to win the award for Higher Education Provider of the Year at the 2022 Education Awards;

- Manchester Metropolitan's RISE scheme (known in its proposal as its Third Term Programme) won the Guardian University Award for Course Design, Retention and Student Outcomes in 2020;

- De Montfort University won the 2021 Times Higher Education award for Outstanding Support for Students, for activity in its Leicester's Future Leaders project.

Learning

The evidence shows that universities developed approaches broadly in line with one of five different models:

- **Curriculum development models:** focusing on the establishment of new modules or programmes in the curriculum to meet regional skills needs;

- **Employer intervention models:** focusing on supporting employers with graduate recruitment and often, but not always, involving development of a recruitment agency;

- **Career guidance or coaching models:** focusing on strengthening or extending career guidance or coaching support for students who are identified as most in need;

- **Graduate internship programmes:** focusing on establishing and promoting new local graduate internship programmes;

- **Student employability programmes:** focusing on offering a structured programme of activities to targeted students and often, but not always, including a work-related project, placement or internship.

Broadly there is evidence that all of these approaches achieved valuable outcomes. The most successful projects combined multiple different interventions of varying intensity, and took a holistic approach targeting all parts of the labour market: employers, students or graduates, university provision and staff, and wider contextual factors.

For the purposes of evaluation, each project developed its own theory of change (and an overall theory of change was developed by the evaluation team). Although projects largely worked in the ways anticipated in their theories of change, they also identified learning from their activities in relation to aspects of the local labour market that was less widely anticipated. These would be valuable design considerations for future projects in this area and are set out below:

Students

- **Broadening student engagement and supporting belonging**: addressing the evidence that the students who are most in need of support may not always be the most likely to proactively engage with projects.

- **Informing student expectations of activities and employment:** making sure that students understand the rationale behind activities and expectations of them.

- **Recognising family, financial and caring responsibilities:** understanding that these pose significant barriers for some participants, and therefore designing activities that account for these.

- **Considering student mental health:** designing activities that are appropriate for those with mental health needs, and potentially building in mental health support.

- **Addressing transport issues:** identifying issues with accessibility in local labour markets in respect of transport issues, and identifying ways of overcoming these challenges.

Employers

- **Broadening employer engagement:** recognising that employers with a history of employing graduates are more likely to proactively engage with a university and targeting employers who may not have previously worked with universities.

- **Informing employers' expectations of activities and graduates:** supporting employers to engage with graduates, especially where they have no history of prior engagement.

- **Tackling bad and prejudiced employers:** recognizing that issues of prejudice and inequality exist in parts of the labour market, and challenging poor employment practice.

HE providers

- **Building-in time and resource for curriculum change:** recognizing that universities are complex institutions and curriculum change can take time and resource.

- **Building systemic collaborations and capacity between stakeholders involved in graduate transitions:** identifying opportunities to bring all labour market players together to increase understanding of the local labour market and build capacity for innovation.

Context

- **Identifying and addressing variable ideas and expectations of 'graduate employment':** recognizing that different labour market actors (students, universities, colleges and employers) may have different understandings and addressing this early on.

- **Recognising the layered nature of the labour market:** especially understanding that it contains routes with different levels of vocational specificity, and has interwoven relationships with wider labour markets and providers.

- **Recognising the likelihood of a changing economic context:** building in resilience for the potential impact of labour market shocks.

Recommendations

A number of detailed recommendations from this evaluation are listed at the end of the report. Broadly, these can be grouped into five key thematic areas:

1. The value and viability of addressing inequalities in students' or graduates' access to labour market opportunities due to their location and/or their mobility.

2. The importance of defining carefully the problem/issue that a funded project is seeking to address.

3. Effective implementation of a project requires the issues being addressed and the proposed solutions to be considered holistically, giving attention both to the range of different actors in the skills and labour system and how they work together, and to the wider social contexts of students and their individual needs for support.

4. Clarity is needed from the outset about achievable and observable outcomes and impacts.

5. It is increasingly important to consider the sustainability of project activities beyond initial funding.

2. Introduction

Individuals' careers are pursued in spaces and places. Where we live, where we study, where we work and the connection between these places makes a difference to the opportunities that are available to us.[5] Yet, individuals are rarely free just to follow opportunities wherever they may be. A range of personal, practical, familial, societal and legal ties, affinities and constraints mean that our careers always have to navigate the art of the possible within geographical constraints. While graduates are typically more mobile than non-graduates, their mobility decisions continue to be complex and intertwined in their lives.[6]

The inter-relationships between individuals' careers and the places in which they live and work have consequences far beyond the individual. Local economies are dependent on the supply of skills that they can attract, with graduates' skills particularly prized.[7] Higher education (HE) providers are required to report on the transition to employment of their students and therefore have clear drivers to ensure that students make positive transitions into work.[8] What is more, HE providers are also participants in their local communities, large employers in their own right and connected to the local economy in a host of ways.[9] In this role they have a clear interest in supporting local economic development in the communities in which they are based.

In the UK, all of these personal, local, organisational, social and economic issues interact in a geographical context in which the economy is strongly weighted towards London.[10] Graduates are disproportionately located in London, with the city retaining most of the students who study there and attracting many graduates from other regions.[11] This has led to concerns about the way in which regional mobility functions as a 'conveyor belt' pulling young people towards

---

[5] Alexander, R., & Hooley, T. (2018). The places of careers: The role of geography in career development. In Valérie Cohen-Scali, J. Rossier, & L. Nota (Eds.) *New perspectives on career counseling and guidance in Europe: Building careers in changing and diverse societies* (pp.119-130). Springer.

[6] Alexander, R. (2018). Geography, mobility and graduate career development. In C. Burke & F. Christie (Eds.) *Graduate careers in context* (pp. 85-95). Routledge.

[7] Amendola, A., Barra, C., & Zotti, R. (2020). Does graduate human capital production increase local economic development? An instrumental variable approach. *Journal of Regional Science*, 60(5), 959-994; Binnie, G. (2022). Employability Blog Series: The great levelling up debate – the role of graduate employability in regional prosperity. *HEPI*. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/05/13/employability-blog-series-the-great-levelling-up-debate-the-role-of-graduate-employability-in-regional-prosperity/

[8] See HESA's Graduate Outcomes site at https://www.graduateoutcomes.ac.uk/ for further information on this.

[9] Collinson, S. & Taylor, A. (2020). Civic universities and inclusive local economic recovery: How can universities do even more to support regions in crisis? https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/civic-universities-and-inclusive-local-economic-recovery-how-can-universities-do-even-more-to-support-regions-in-crisis/

[10] McCann, P. (2016). *The UK regional-national economic problem: Geography, globalisation and governance.* Routledge.

[11] Kollydas, K. (2022). *What influences the geographical mobility behaviour of university graduates?* HEPI. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/02/14/what-influences-the-geographical-mobility-behaviour-of-university-graduates/

London.[12] Against such a background there is considerable policy interest in the idea of rebalancing the economy away from London, with various recent innovations including the Levelling Up agenda and HS2 speaking directly to this aim.[13] Rethinking how universities interface with graduate mobility therefore has some big implications for students, graduates, universities and the local and national economy.

OfS Challenge Competition

The OfS Challenge Competition: *'Industrial strategy and skills – support for local students and graduates'* announced in 2018 was a funding programme aiming to respond to concerns about the geographical distribution of graduate opportunities and inequalities of access to them depending on graduates' locality and mobility.[14] It recognised that many graduates are not as mobile as has often been assumed[15] and that patterns of mobility often exacerbate existing regional inequalities, rather than mitigating them. Mobility matters and universities have an important role to play in facilitating individuals' career transitions and mobility.

The OfS sought to engage HE providers (or consortia including HE providers) in designing projects to 'deliver innovative approaches for graduates and particular student groups' and 'contribute to improved outcomes and local prosperity'. The programme aimed to identify key learning in two areas:

- What interventions work best in a variety of different regional and local contexts to support progression into highly skilled employment;
- What interventions work best for different types of students and graduates.

In principle, initiatives could include both interventions designed to increase graduate mobility and to improve graduate transitions ('local outcomes') in areas where these have typically been more challenging. The scope of the competition was deliberately broad and provided the opportunity for universities to think about a variety of different ways they could support graduates to manage issues of space and place and enhance positive graduate outcomes. As we will see, most universities that participated in the programme interpreted this in a similar way, relating primarily to improving the connection between their graduates and the labour market local to the university.

---

[12] Smith, D. P., & Sage, J. (2014). The regional migration of young adults in England and Wales (2002–2008): a 'conveyor-belt'of population redistribution*?. Children's Geographies*, 12(1), 102-117. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.850850

[13] Bounds, A. (2019). Time running out to rebalance UK economy away from London. *Financial Times*. https://www.ft.com/content/4fcc064c-dae4-11e9-8f9b-77216ebe1f17

[14] Office for Students. (2019). *Improving outcomes for local graduates*. https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/skills-and-employment/improving-outcomes-for-local-graduates/

[15] Britton, J., van der Erve, L., Waltmann, B., & Xu, X. (2021). *The impact of living costs on the returns to higher education*. Department for Education. https://ifs.org.uk/publications/impact-living-costs-returns-higher-education

Through the challenge competition, OfS made £5.6 million available in the funded programme to facilitate the development of local initiatives to address these issues. Ultimately 16 projects were awarded funding, from a much larger number of proposals. Most of these projects were led by a university and supported by a wide range of partners drawn from local government, the education system and business. They also represented a wide variety of different approaches and contexts and were geographically spread across the country. Although no projects were awarded in London, this was not a deliberate competition strategy. It should be noted that the programme became known more widely as *'Improving outcomes for local graduates'* and we refer to it that way in this report. The successful funded projects were led by the following universities and colleges:

- Bath Spa University
- Birmingham City University
- University of Birmingham
- University of Bradford
- Canterbury Christ Church University
- De Montfort University
- University of East Anglia
- University of Hull
- University of Lincoln
- University of Liverpool
- Manchester Metropolitan University
- Newcastle College University Centre
- University of Nottingham
- University Centre Peterborough
- Coventry University (Scarborough)
- Teesside University

About the evaluation

The contract to evaluate the *Improving outcomes for local graduates* programme was awarded to CRAC on the basis of its proposal which included support from the Institute of Student Employers as a partner. The evaluation sought to identify impacts of the programme in relation to its aims and to identify the most effective approaches developed by the participating providers. It had both formative (i.e. "how could things work better?") and summative ("did it work?") aims, including:

- Identification of interventions that work well and less well in supporting local progression into employment and greater productivity for employers;

- Identification of interventions that stretch the mobility of graduates geographically;

- Exploration of how these interventions target and support particular types of students and graduates;

- Identification of any positive spill-over effects on a wider range of stakeholders including employers, but also organisations, providers and students outside the funded projects;

- Dissemination of good practice to sustain, amplify and multiply the innovations developed.

At the initiation of the programme, the evaluation team met with the leaders of the 16 funded projects to explore their project aims and objectives in depth. The evaluation team supported each project to develop a theory of change, which outlined their planned activities, outputs, outcomes and impacts.[16] In some cases, projects also brought in an evaluator from within their provider or a related organisation to provide more input or ongoing support. Once a theory of change had been produced for each project, the evaluation team supported the project team to plan their evaluation activities to provide evidence and insights relevant to the key components of their theory of change. Such an approach helps to test the underpinning theories and logic, and provides insights into how and why different activities achieve the impacts that they do.

Following the development of individual project-level theories of change, the evaluation team devised a wider programme-level theory of change (Figure 1). Note that the term 'enabler' is used to highlight activities within projects that supported the key activities designed to achieve the desired outcomes and impacts (hence an alternative term would be 'enabling activities') rather than factors external to the projects.

---

[16] A theory of change helps to surface the underpinning reasoning (or theory) behind a project, outlining how and why activities are related to outcomes and impacts.

Figure 1. Programme-level theory of change
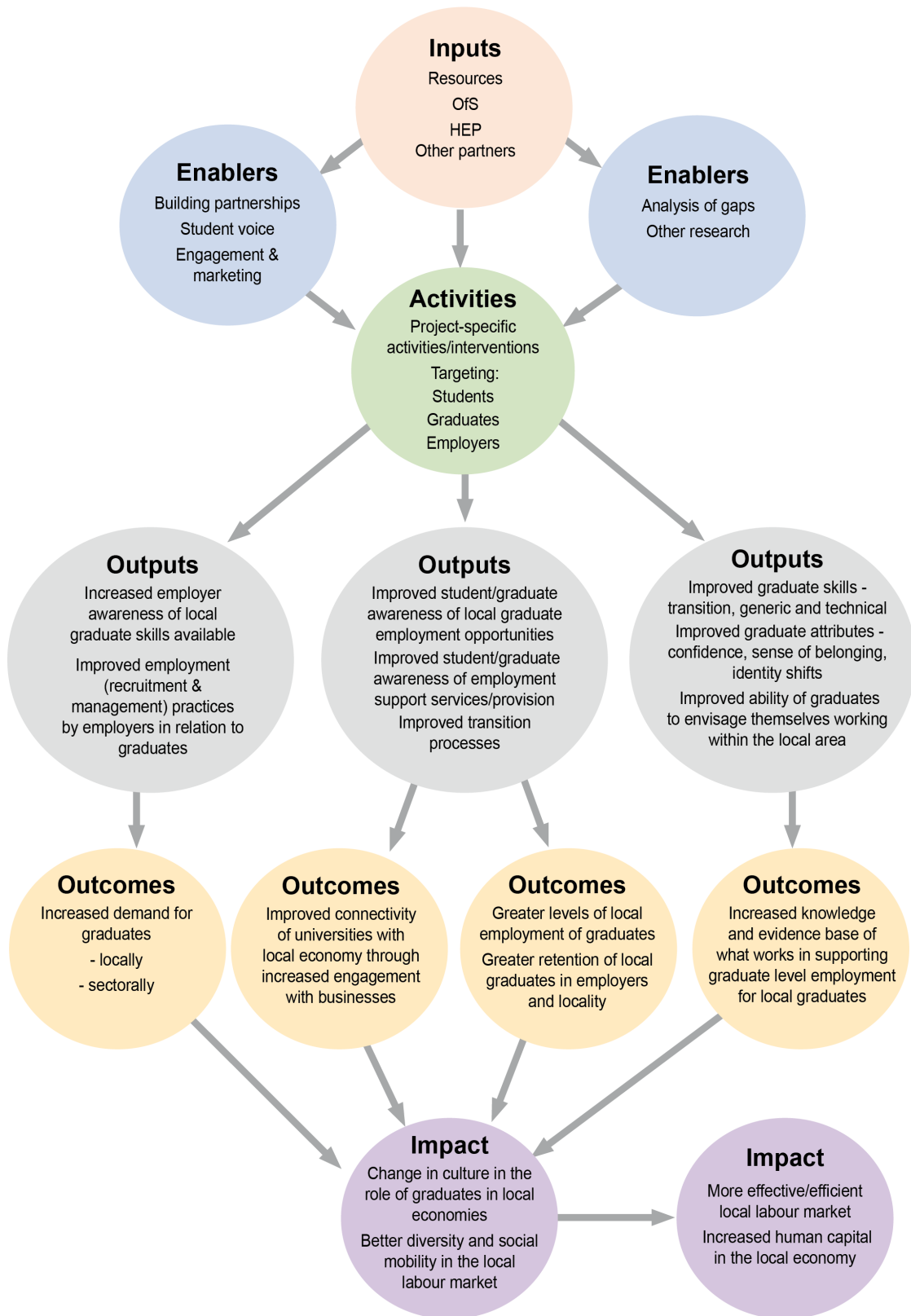
This theory of change seeks to articulate the way in which inputs to projects (funding and effort from HE providers, supported by a range of enabling activities) were transformed into funded activities that then led to observable outputs. These outputs in turn led to outcomes and impacts, which may not always have been directly monitored through the evaluation but were theorised and observed where possible.

Methodologically, activities undertaken by the central evaluation team comprised the following:

- Regular dialogue with and bespoke support for individual projects, including consultancy to support their evaluative activities. This typically took the form of visits and meetings in the early part of the project, but moved online after the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. Meetings by the research team with project leads and key project stakeholders were open conversations, with detailed notes taken by the researchers on the progress of the project and two-way discussion around impact and evaluation issues;

- A rapid evidence review of key literature and data sources that could support the evaluation of the programme. The evidence gathered through this review informed the development of the project approach and instruments. The key findings and underpinning theories identified through this review are presented in this evaluation report largely in Chapters 2 and 3;

- Interviews, roundtables (workshops), observations and focus groups with project participants and stakeholders. Three programme roundtables were organised by the OfS and detailed notes taken by the research team. In certain projects, opportunities were taken for additional focus groups, interviews and observations. These were agreed with project leads and detailed notes were taken;

- Online employer surveys conducted across the three years of the programme, which elicited 126 responses from a total of 115 different employers. This was a non-probability sample without a clear sampling frame, due to a lack of central information about project participants. However, responses represented organisations of a range of different sizes, spread across 17 sectors, and which worked with 13 of the 16 funded projects. Based on the number of employers recorded as participants, this represents a 9% response rate. This rate is fairly typical in online research, but means there were substantial numbers of non-respondents.[17] Given this, it is very likely that there is some sample bias in the responses elicited;

- Programme-wide online student and graduate surveys, again conducted across the three years. These elicited a total of 810 responses from current students (56% of respondents) and graduates (44%), drawn from all 16 funded projects. Again, this was a non-probability sample which in these surveys achieved a 12% response rate. Given the substantial number of non-responders it is again likely that there is some sample bias in the responses elicited;

- Analysis of project monitoring data collected by the OfS from the projects;

- A meta-analysis of the local evaluations conducted by the 16 projects.

---

[17] Hooley, T., Marriott, J. & Wellens, J. (2012). *What is online research?: Using the internet for social science research*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Analysis was undertaken throughout the projects and this was included in a series of interim reports presented to the OfS. Summative analysis was undertaken at the end of the programme and guided by the programme-level theory of change. By drawing together data from all these activities we are able to form a detailed picture of the impact of the *Improving outcomes for local graduates* programme.

In approaching a summative evaluation, a structured approach was taken. Initially an analysis of project proposals and reviews of the individual theories of change was conducted to identify the different ways the projects approached the 'local graduate' problem and the project designs they adopted – focusing on what they intended to do and why. Secondly an analysis of the final evaluation or monitoring reports for each project was conducted to identify themes in project implementation, and their outputs and outcomes. Data was triangulated with evidence from the programme-wide surveys and dialogues with project leads in order to generate robust findings.

The evaluation approach taken can be understood as a theory-based evaluation informed by the programme-level theory of change set out above. In theory-based evaluation, the features and issues that are focused upon in the evaluation are guided by an explicit conceptualisation of the programme (a theory of change). The aim of the evaluation is then to establish whether that theory is borne out in practice.[18] Our approach was also influenced by realist evaluation which recognises that in a complex, multi-faceted programme such as this, many different kinds of organisations are delivering different interventions in different contexts and so we should be careful about proposing universal theories based on the evaluation.[19]

It is also important to be clear that this was primarily a formative evaluation focused on exploring the possibilities created by a series of innovative new projects. The diversity of the projects and the existence of multiple aims and objectives and associated monitoring meant that the evaluation could never create a simple statistical answer to the question 'what works?'. Rather the aim was to examine the diverse experiments and provide evidence that might underpin both future programme designs and deeper research and evaluation projects which might test interventions aimed at 'local graduates' through the use of more developed counterfactuals and quantitative methods.

Structure of the report

This report is structured into a series of chapters. Following this introductory chapter, chapter 3 explores the rationale for the programme in more depth, before identifying how the programme and individual projects defined their aims and objectives. It introduces a typology of the approaches that the projects adopted. A summary of each project is provided in Appendix 1. Chapter 4 explores the key outputs from the projects including the numbers of students, graduates and employers supported. Chapter 5 examines the effects of Covid-19, which proved

---

[18] Fitz-Gibbon, C. T., & Morris, L. L. (1996). Theory-based evaluation. *Evaluation Practice*, *17*(2), 177-184. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0886-1633(96)90024-0

[19] Westhorp, G., Prins, E., Kusters, C. S. L., Hultink, M., Guijt, I. M., & Brouwers, J. H. A. M. (2011). *Realist evaluation: an overview*. Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation. https://library.wur.nl/WebQuery/wurpubs/fulltext/173918

to be a major theme for all of the projects, impacting their operations in a variety of ways. Chapter 6 then explores the implementation of the projects, with a focus on the challenges that projects faced and the ways they overcame them. Chapter 7 explores evidence on the outcomes from the projects, identifying a series of headline themes across which impacts were identified. Chapter 8 returns to the programme-wide theory of change, exploring whether the programme worked as expected, outlining the evidence for the theory, and the limitations identified as part of the evaluation. Finally, Chapter 9 identifies reflections and lessons for the future.

3. The rationale for a programme for local graduates

In this section of the report, we explore the underpinning rationale for the *Improving outcomes for local graduates* funding programme. We start by outlining the evidence base that informed the programme in the first place and the focus on graduate mobilities. We then explore how 'local graduates' were defined and understood by the funded projects in their proposals, as informed by the guidance given to providers in the competition, and the particular problems they set out to solve. The chapter ends with the introduction of a typology of approaches utilised by the projects, developed from the evaluation.

Graduate mobilities and graduate outcomes

Research has suggested that graduate mobility trajectories can be categorised into five potential pathways:

- **repeat movers** – those who move for university and then move again after university to a new area;

- **university stayers** – those who move for university and then stay in the vicinity of their university afterwards;

- **late movers** – those who attend university in their home area but move away after university;

- **return movers** – those who move away for university and then return to their home area;

- **non-movers** – those who neither move for university nor after university.[20]

Existing evidence shows that the most mobile graduates (those who move for university and then move away again after university) have some of the best graduate outcomes.[21] In contrast, students with lower levels of mobility are less likely to be in professional employment. Of all the groups, return movers are the most likely to be in non-graduate employment.[22]

Developing insights into how and why some graduates are less mobile than others reveals that mobility varies with characteristics such as gender, ethnic background, degree classification and university of study.[23] The least mobile graduates are more likely to come from backgrounds that are poorly represented in HE. Given this, the aim of finding ways to support graduate mobility and facilitating more positive labour market destinations in local areas becomes an important issue of equality. However, the evidence also indicates a level of complexity in the dynamics of

---

[20] Faggian, A., McCann, P. & Sheppard, S. (2006). An analysis of ethnic differences in UK graduate migration behaviour. *The Annals of Regional Science*, 40, 461–471. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00168-006-0061-y

[21] Ball, C. (2015). *Loyals, stayers, returners and incomers: Graduate migration patterns*. HECSU.

[22] Ball, C. (2019). Graduate labour market myths. In C. Burke & F. Christie, *Graduate Careers in Context: Research, Policy and Practice* (pp. 57–70). Routledge.

[23] Faggian, A., McCann, P. & Sheppard, S. (2006). An analysis of ethnic differences in UK graduate migration behaviour. *The Annals of Regional Science* 40, 461–471. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00168-006-0061-y

employment and migration. So, for example, subject of study and sector of employment are also related to mobility trajectory, with research finding that graduates from social sciences are somewhat less mobile than other subject areas,[24] and that those in healthcare or education are also often less mobile.[25] In contrast, those with higher levels of mobility are more likely to have studied technical subjects and be in management, engineering or business roles.[26] Age is also an important factor, as is relationship status, in guiding graduate mobilities.[27]

Another area of challenge with understanding the relationship between mobility and employment destination are definitional challenges with what we consider 'mobility'. So, for example, most existing research considers mobility in terms of regional mobility, and this can obscure the significance of more localised mobilities. Depending on where a person lives, their transport connections and personal circumstances, travelling to another town or city (or part of a town or city) for education or employment can involve significant barriers. The development of a new HESA graduate mobility marker in 2022 has started to address some of these complexities, breaking graduate mobility down from regional to local/unitary area of domicile, region of study and local/unitary authority of work.[28] Another challenge in understanding graduate mobilities is the way that mobilities may change over time; for example, research has identified that there is considerable residential instability in the first years after graduation.[29]

A final significant consideration when exploring student and graduate mobility is the role of location. So, for example, looking at mobility for HE, it is possible to observe regional patterns in mobility pathways both in terms of the extent of student mobility and the destinations of students.[30] Graduate migration and employment also show something of a regional dimension with the strength of the graduate labour market varying in nature and extent across the country.

---

[24] Faggian, A., McCann, P. & Sheppard, S. (2006). An analysis of ethnic differences in UK graduate migration behaviour. *The Annals of Regional Science* 40, 461–471. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00168-006-0061-y

[25] Ball, C. (2015). *Loyals, stayers, returners and incomers: Graduate migration patterns*. HECSU; Peer, V., & Penker, M. (2016). Higher education institutions and regional development: A meta-analysis. *International Regional Science Review*, *39*(2), 228–253. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160017614531145

[26] Ball, C. (2015). *Loyals, stayers, returners and incomers: Graduate migration patterns*. HECSU; Peer, V., & Penker, M. (2016). Higher education institutions and regional development: A meta-analysis. *International Regional Science Review*, *39*(2), 228–253. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160017614531145

[27] Faggian, A., McCann, P., & Sheppard, S. (2007). Some evidence that women are more mobile than men: Gender differences in UK graduate migration behavior. *Journal of Regional Science*, 47(3), 517-539; Bond, R., Charsley, K., & Grundy, S. (2008). *Scottish graduate migration and retention: A case study of the University of Edinburgh 2000 cohort*. Scottish Affairs, 63.

[28] HESA. (29 November 2022). *Getting a move on: The creation of a new graduate mobility marker* https://www.hesa.ac.uk/insight/29-11-2022/new-graduate-mobility-marker

[29] Sage, J., Evandrou, M., & Falkingham, J. (2013). Onwards or homewards? Complex graduate migration pathways, well-being, and the 'parental safety net'. *Population, Space and Place*, 19(6). https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1793

[30] Donnelly, M., & Gamsu, S. (2019). Spatial structures of student mobility: Social, economic and ethnic 'geometries of power'. *Population, Space and Place*, *26*(3). https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2293; Allen, K., & Hollingworth, S. (2013). 'Sticky subjects' or 'cosmopolitan creatives'? Social class, place and urban young people's aspirations for work in the knowledge economy. *Urban Studies*, *50*(3), 499–517. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098012468901

This has led some to suggest that rather than thinking of the graduate labour market as a single market it is potentially more appropriate to think of a series of intersecting occupational, sectoral, local, regional and national labour markets.[31] With London a key centre of graduate employment, it is notable that patterns of migration and graduate outcomes somewhat buck the trend in the capital, with regional 'returners' to London having stronger employment outcomes than regional 'loyals'.[32] There is an intersection here in relation to housing and employment, as returning to the family home can provide considerable savings on accommodation costs, but the relative advantage of this cost saving varies considerably depending on where the family home is located. For students with family homes in the Greater London area, for example, there may be a considerable advantage, compared to those with family homes in small regional or remote labour markets.[33]

Defining 'local graduates'

Identifying the relationship between relative levels of mobility and graduate outcomes, guidance provided to those bidding for the OfS Challenge Competition that resulted in this programme suggested proposals specifically aim to support "*the transition to highly skilled employment and improving outcomes for graduates who seek employment in their home region*"(p.2).[34] Here, by focusing on 'home regions', the understanding of 'local graduates' could potentially include non-movers (those who stay in their home region for study and remain after study) and return movers (those who leave their home region for study but return after graduation). Stayers are also potentially included, depending on how 'home' is conceptualised (if it includes, for example, graduates who moved to a university location and settled there to the extent that they feel it is 'home').

Focusing on graduates in their home regions suggests that there are potentially three logical approaches to improving graduate destinations:

1) Increase mobility capital (the confidence, skills or ability to move) of graduates who are non-movers or potential returners so they can move elsewhere to access a wider range of employment;

2) Support the transition of returners into their 'home' labour markets. This would involve either:

   a) universities supporting their own graduates returning to their home labour markets at some distance from the university wherever they may be;

   b) universities supporting graduates of other universities who have returned home to a labour market that is proximal to the university in question; or

---

[31] Ball, C. (2019b, October 14). There's no such thing as the national graduate labour market. *WonkHE*. https://wonkhe.com/blogs/theres-no-such-thing-as-the-national-graduate-labour-market/

[32] Ball, C. (2015). *Loyals, stayers, returners and incomers: Graduate migration patterns*. HECSU.

[33] Milburn, A. (2009). *Unleashing aspiration: The final report of the panel on fair access to the professions*. The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions.

[34] Office for Students (2018). *Office for Students Challenge Competition Industrial strategy and skills – support for local students and graduates.* Office for Students.

c) a combination of the above approaches, for example utilising reciprocal agreements between universities to support graduates in their region;

3) Support the transition of non-movers and potentially university stayers (if, as discussed above, an expansive notion of 'home' is adopted) into the labour market that is local to them, with this labour market also being proximal to the university.

Although there was the potential to develop projects in all of these areas, the way the funding guidance to providers was framed meant in practice the projects all predominantly fell within the last of these categories. Some projects included a secondary focus on returners from other universities to the local labour market (category 2b above), and in one project (Advantage Tees Valley) there was a small strand of activity supporting students to increase their mobility (specifically focused on encouraging overseas mobility through a Summer Abroad programme).

The focus on supporting non-movers and university stayers to enter the local labour market emerged partly because of the framing of the programme and bid documentation. So, for example, the bid template asked projects to specify the "*region or local area which the programme will support*". This effectively restricted the possibility for projects to work across labour markets or regions, which would be important in projects that aimed to increase mobility capital, or to support returners to labour markets across the country. The regional framing of the programme documentation appears to align well with wider university missions and agendas which focus on universities as key stimulators of regional economic growth.[35]

The regional focus is important because it also changes the way that graduates are thought about – graduate mobility becomes less of a 'problem' that needs to be fixed, but rather graduates become part of a regional development solution, potentially a catalyst for change. Helping improve student transition to employment within the region is anticipated to help regions thrive. Notably this focus on regions also impacted on the student groups targeted by the universities through the programme, so that implicitly in many projects 'local graduates' were understood as either those graduates who reside in the vicinity of the university after graduation, or those students who *may* choose to reside in the area after graduation. Effectively this brought all students into scope for many projects, including those who would potentially otherwise be highly mobile and unlikely to face significant barriers to transition. Promoting local labour market opportunities to students could persuade some graduates to remain in the vicinity of their university.

A further important framing in the programme documentation was a focus on students from under-represented backgrounds. This is broadly aligned with the research discussed in the previous section that identifies the intersectional relationship between graduate mobilities and various dimensions of inequality. A focus on inequalities was particularly embedded in the bid criteria, where projects were instructed that they should meet one or more of the following OfS priorities:

---

[35] Harding, A., Laske, S., & Scott, A. (2007). *Bright satanic mills: Universities, regional development and the knowledge economy.* Routledge; Charles, D. (2003). Universities and territorial development: reshaping the regional role of UK universities. *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, 18(1), 7–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/0269094032000073780; Universities UK. (2015). *The economic role of UK universities.* Universties UK.

- To improve the rates of progression of students from under-represented groups, particularly those from minority ethnic groups and those with disabilities;
- To improve graduate outcomes of mature students or part-time students intending to remain in their local area for study and post-study work; or
- To address skills gaps by ensuring that interventions developed to enhance graduate outcomes respond to and reflect local labour market demands.

In practice, most projects addressed the last of these points, given their focus on regional labour markets. Some projects also incorporated a focus on disadvantaged students, typically aligned to the first of these points, and often focused on minority ethnic students. Those with disabilities, mature or part-time students were not a major focus in any of the projects.

A combination of the framing of the programme in relation to 'local graduates', regional labour markets and equality and diversity outcomes resulted in projects typically identifying their target populations in certain ways, depending also on whether they focused on supporting students who had already graduated or students prior to graduation (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Definitions of 'local graduate' used by the projects

Temporal frame	Definition of 'local graduate'	Category in scope	Potential additional focus
Post-graduation	Local graduates (living in the region of the university)	Non-movers, university stayers, with some focus on return movers (from other universities)	Focus on 'disadvantaged' as those most likely to have poor outcomes
Pre-graduation	Students who could become local graduates	All students currently enrolled	Focus on 'disadvantaged' (as the most likely to have limited mobility and poor outcomes)
	Students whose home location is in the local region	Non-movers	Focus on 'disadvantaged' (as the most likely to have limited mobility and poor outcomes)

Those projects that aimed to support students who were non-movers (whose homes were in the region) often struggled practically with how to define and target these students. There were questions, for example, about the boundaries of 'local' and how to target local students without stigmatising them. Practical and ethical considerations sometimes resulted in projects opening access to project activities to all students but running them in a way that was expected to capture local students. In some projects this included targeting activities to those from disadvantaged backgrounds (who were presumed to have lower mobility as well as challenges in transition), or studying degree programmes with weak destinations statistics (also presumed to have lower mobility and challenges in transition), or running activities in a way that would capture the interest of local students (for example, running activities specifically about the local labour market, or in the case of Manchester Metropolitan University running activities during the

summer break at a time when non-local students might be presumed to have returned to their home regions).

Defining the 'problem' that projects sought to address

Having explored how projects defined 'local graduates' we also analysed the successful project proposals to explore how projects understood the problems that they sought to address. Unsurprisingly, the framing of the OfS programme influenced the way individual projects conceptualised the problem(s) they were trying to address.

Projects typically identified two key problems as follows:

- **Regional development problems**, specifically regional skills needs or skills gaps;
- **Poor graduate outcomes** for some graduates (sometimes defined as local graduates, sometimes graduates from under-represented groups and sometimes from particular programmes of study, and more commonly a combination of several of these).

The key 'problem' therefore was identified as one of transition – regions were felt to have employment (or capacity for employment) and a supply of graduates, but the problem was in connecting regional skills supply with regional skills demand. Beyond this overall framing, however, projects understood the specifics of the problem in different ways depending on whether the problem was primarily seen to lie in relation to skills demand, skills supply or skills development (see Figure 3). In practice, projects often articulated several of these problems but differed in the emphasis they placed on them.

Figure 3. Defining the problem that projects were seeking to address

Source of the problem	Who is responsible	What the problem is
Skills demand	Employer	Employer awareness of graduates
		Inclusivity of employer recruitment processes
Skills supply	Student/graduate	Student/graduate awareness of local opportunities
		Student/graduate level of aspiration or confidence
		Student/graduate employability skills
		Student/graduate other barriers (e.g. transportation)
Skills development	University/ programme	Labour market change resulting in new or emerging skills needs

With the problems framed in relation to different parts of the labour market (employers, graduates/students, and/or education providers), this meant that in practice certain kinds of employer, student/graduate or university programme were particularly targeted. So, for

example, large multinational companies are typically understood to have good awareness of graduates and to have established graduate recruitment programmes. The problem of 'employer awareness of graduates' therefore is seen to lie particularly with non-traditional graduate employers, often, in the case of these projects, small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs).[36] Similarly, for graduates and students, the issues of aspiration, confidence and employability skills are often identified as particularly acute for 'non-traditional' students. In slight contrast, the issue of 'awareness of local opportunities' is potentially an issue for all students and graduates, and it could be argued that it is relatively mobile students, including those who have moved away from home to access university, who are likely to be the least aware of local opportunities. In relation to university responsibilities, again, certain types of activities or programme were prioritised including: programmes where there are identified issues with transition (e.g. the WRIPA-PLUS project targeted physics students); activities targeted at raising awareness or skills relevant to specific sectors (e.g. the Digital Grad Accelerator and Graduates for a Greater Manchester projects which focused on the tech and digital sectors); or facilitating pathways between university and the labour market in specific sectors (e.g. the Creative Pathways and North Yorkshire coastal projects).

Exploring the projects

In this section we offer a brief summary of each of the 16 projects funded within the programme (Figure 4). Summaries providing more detail on each project are presented in Appendix 1.

Figure 4. Overview of the 16 funded projects

Project	Lead Partner	Focus
GradTalent Development Agency	Bath Spa University	The project provided specialist graduate employment services to graduates and SMEs in the South-West region.
Graduate Re-Tune	Birmingham City University	The project provided additional support to unemployed graduates in the Birmingham City region.
Transformation West Midlands	University of Birmingham	The project supported targeted students and recent graduates with a personalised programme of support and coaching.
Graduate workforce Bradford	University of Bradford	The project addressed the unemployment and under-employment of local black, Asian and minority ethnic graduates through business development, support for unemployed graduates, community engagement and action research.

---

[36] A notable exception is the Lincolnshire project, that targeted larger employers.

Project	Lead Partner	Focus
Gradforce	Canterbury Christ Church University	The project supported graduate transition to SMEs in the region through a personal development programme for students and graduates and aimed to set up a fully managed recruitment service for employers
Leicester's Future Leaders	De Montfort University	The project worked with employers to support inclusive recruitment practices, whilst developing students through an internship accelerator programme and supporting graduates with in-work mentoring.
Gateways to growth	University of East Anglia (UEA)	The project provided recruitment support for SMEs and developed year-long internships for graduates to enable them to conduct short projects with local businesses.
WRIPA-PLUS	University of Hull	The project involved supporting curriculum developments in five universities, including embedding inclusive modes of work-based learning, professional skills development and employer delivery.
Embedding a high skilled workforce in Greater Lincolnshire	University of Lincoln	The project provided opportunities for students to work on consultancy-type projects designed by local businesses to increase student-employer engagement and improve connections between the universities and local employers.
Digital Grad Accelerator	University of Liverpool	This project recruited 18 digital interns per year who had a structured internship and then cascaded their learning to the wider student body via digital skills workshops.
Graduates for a Greater Manchester	Manchester Metropolitan University	The project delivered bespoke, accredited and immersive interventions to targeted students to develop their aspirations, awareness and skills of the creative and digital sector.
Stay and Succeed North East	Newcastle College University Centre	The project facilitated connections between employers and the curriculum through 18 year-long graduate internships.
Creative Pathways	University of Nottingham	The project encouraged students and graduates to engage with careers in the creative and cultural sectors through graduate internships.

Project	Lead Partner	Focus
Recruitment solution	University College Peterborough	The project supported transition into the local labour market, through developing an 'Employer Hub' to support employers, while students were supported to develop their employability skills through the creation of an online Career-and Employer-Ready course, and employability modules embedded in courses.
Improving graduate outcomes in health and social care on the North Yorkshire Coast	Coventry University (Scarborough)	The project aimed to support the Health and Social Care pipeline in the region, through the development of three new degree courses, outreach work with pre-HE students and employability support for current students.
Advantage Tees Valley	Teesside University	The project raised student aspirations through workshops, mentoring, employability activities and internships.

A typology of approaches

The way that projects understood the problems they were trying to address influenced project designs and activities. For example, where problems were identified in the skills and confidence gaps of students, projects designed activities to address these; where problems lay with employer awareness, then activities were designed to raise employer awareness. In practice, just as most projects identified multiple problems, they also typically planned multiple activities to address these problems, although again the exact balance of activities depended on where the most acute issues were understood to be.

An overview of the activities that projects engaged in is provided in Figure 5. The chart identifies different activities according to whether they were designed primarily with a student/graduate focus, an employer focus or a curriculum focus, as well as activities that combined two or more of these focal points. It is notable, as we shall go on to discuss, that several projects included a research or knowledge capture strand. In including this strand, universities typically recognised that they did not fully understand the issues and challenges of local graduate transition and by capturing learning and feeding this into the ongoing delivery of their activities they aimed to improve their impact.

Despite most projects combining several activities, typically projects focused on one or two major strands of activity and built additional activities around these. An analysis of the projects shows that there were five primary models undertaken:

- **Curriculum development models:** focusing on the establishment of new modules or programmes in the curriculum to meet regional skills needs;

- **Employer intervention models:** focusing on supporting employers with graduate recruitment and often, but not always, involving development of a recruitment agency;

- **Career guidance or coaching models:** focusing on strengthening or extending career guidance or coaching support for students who are identified as most in need;

- **Graduate internship programmes:** focusing on establishing and promoting new local graduate internship programmes;

- **Student employability programmes:** focusing on offering a structured programme of activities to targeted students and often, but not always, including a work-related project, placement or internship.

*Figure 5. A diagrammatic typology of approaches taken in projects*
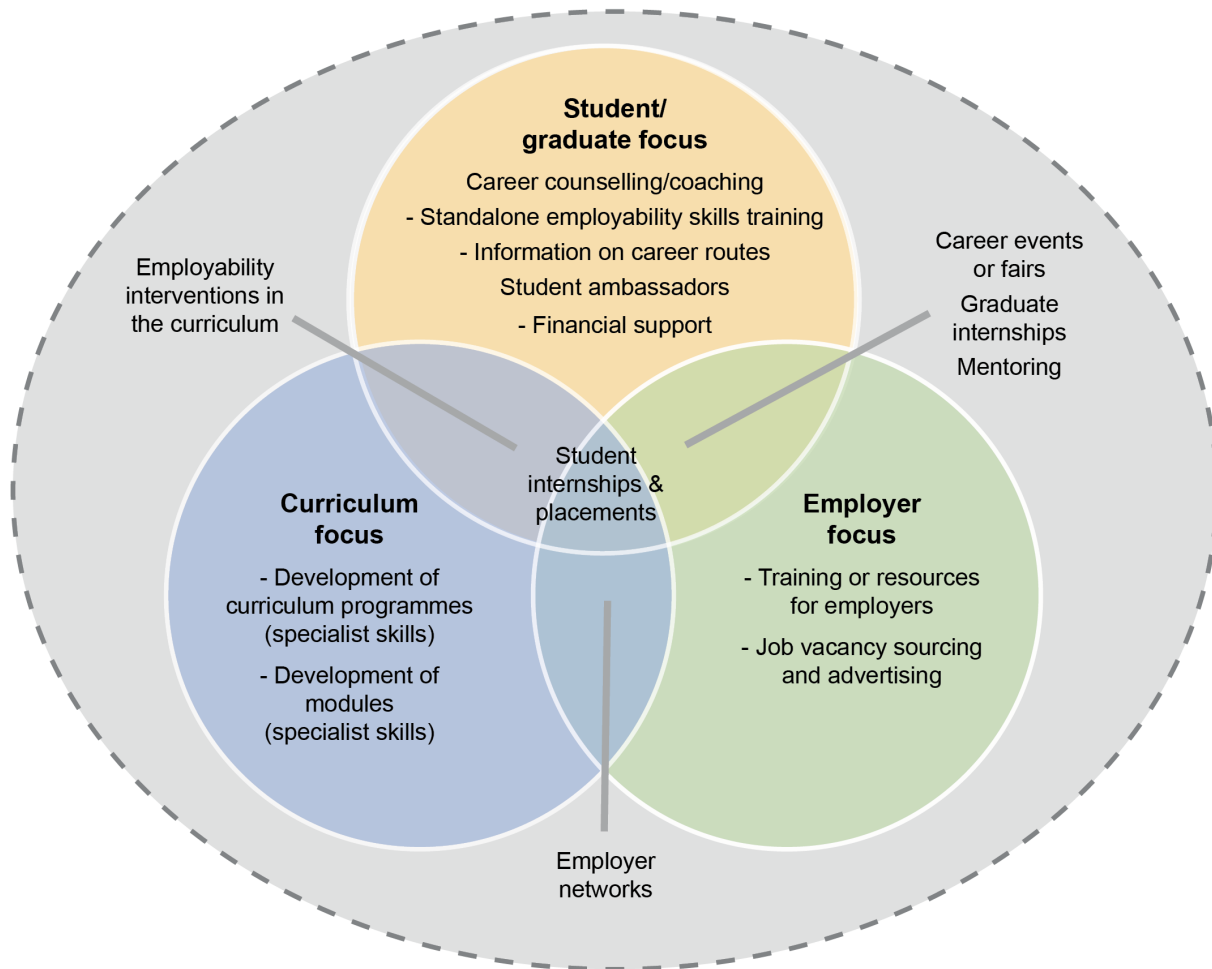
4. Participation

This chapter considers the overall reach of the projects in relation to the numbers of graduates, students and employers engaged, and the activities they were engaged in.

Project reach

The projects together originally proposed to engage 6500 students or graduates and 1400 employers. These targets were largely fulfilled, with our estimate of cumulative student/graduate participation of 6933 in total and a cumulative number of employers engaged of 1269. Figures 6 and 7 show how these totals break down between the different projects, for students/graduates and employers, respectively.

Figure 6. Total number of students/graduates participating in programme, by project

Students/graduates
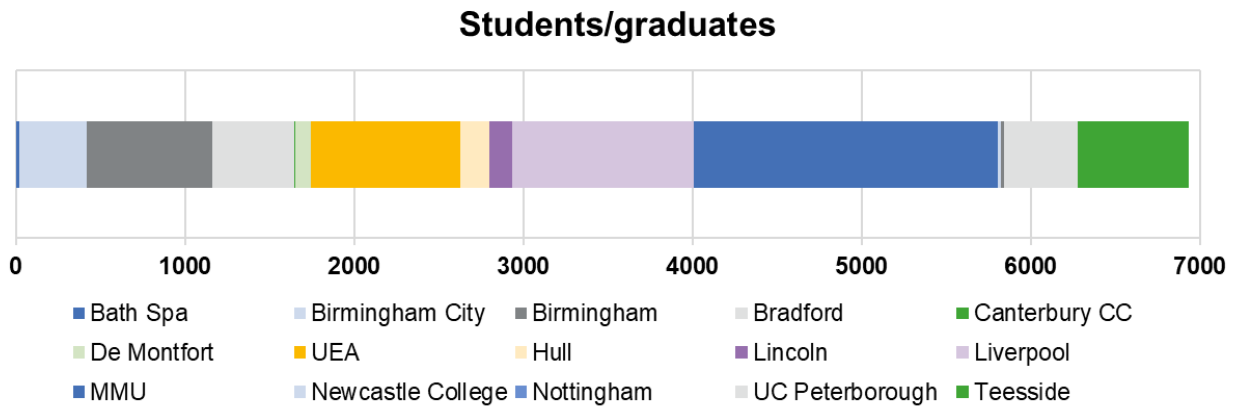
It is important to be aware that the different projects represented in Figure 6 reported different kinds of engagement with students or graduates. Some projects aimed for intensive engagements which reached relatively few students or graduates, while others aimed for less intensive engagements which reached far greater numbers of students or graduates. These charts do, however, provide a high-level overview of the number of individuals and organisations involved in the '*Improving outcomes for local graduates*' programme.

Figure 7. Total number of employers engaged in programme, by project

Employers
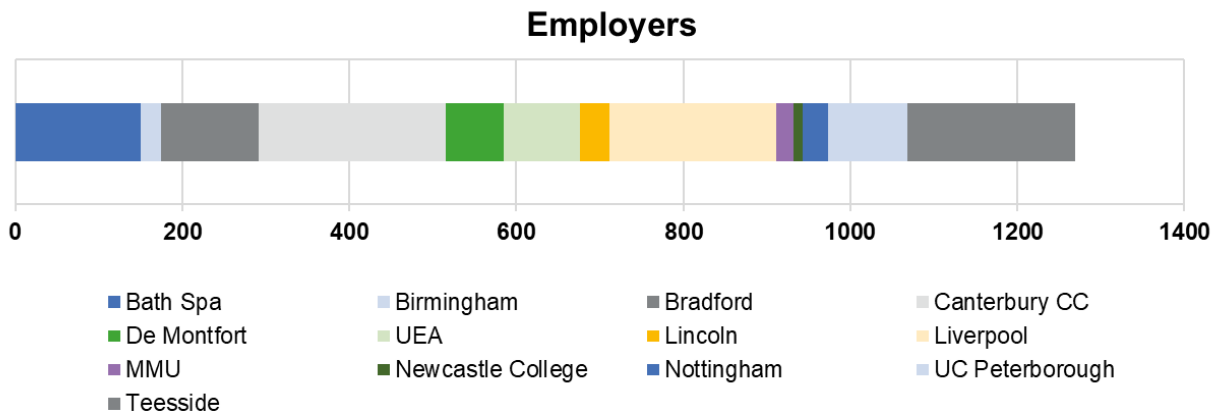
The programme-wide survey for students and graduates revealed that students had been engaged in a wide range of different activities. The nature and extent of activities is shown in Figure 8. This illustrates how the less-intensive activities (such as employer talks and employability workshops) engaged a greater number of participants than more intensive activities such as employer projects and internships or placements. It is also clear that participants typically engaged in several activities of different kinds within a project.

Figure 8. Proportion of student survey respondents involved in different activities (N=810, multiple responses allowed)
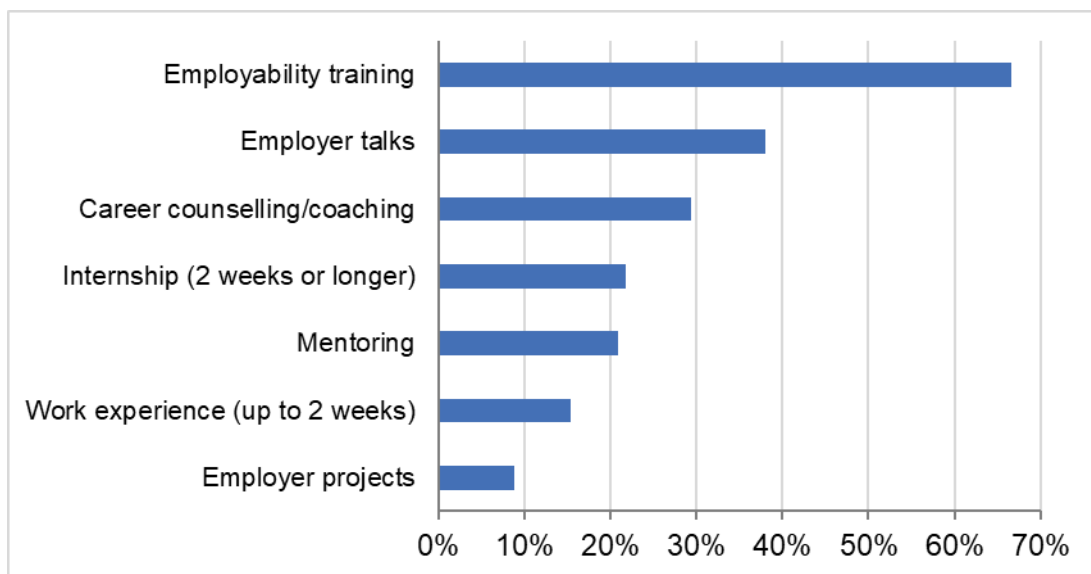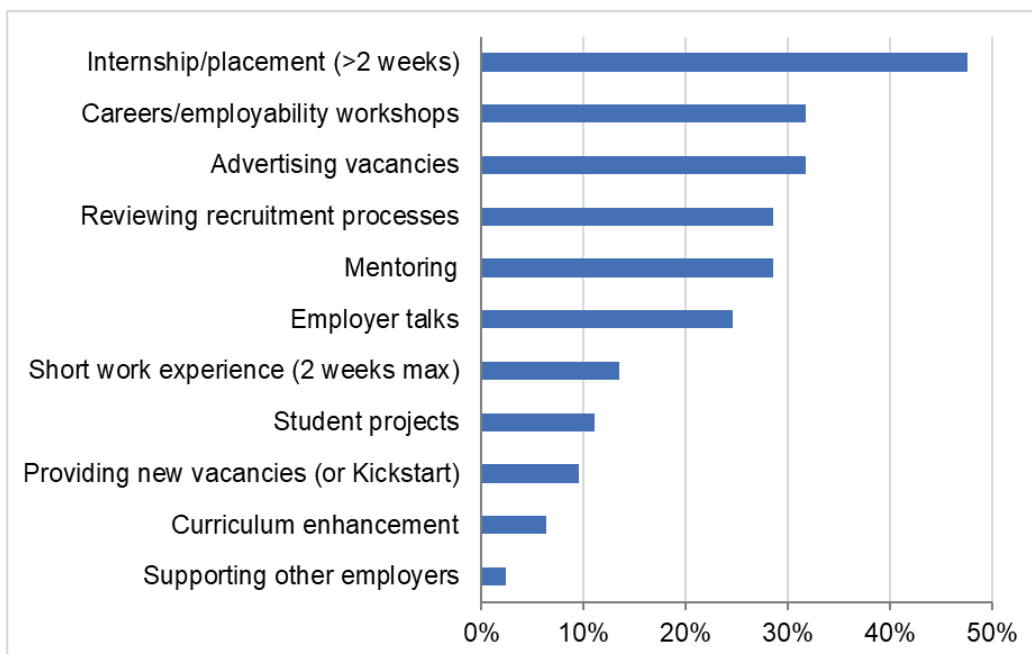
Figure 9. Proportion of employer survey respondents involved in different types of activity (N=126, multiple responses allowed)


The programme-wide survey for employers identified that employers had also been engaged in a wide range of different activities across the projects (Figure 9). The most commonly reported activity was placement or internship provision, but again these statistics show that in practice employers were often involved in several types of activity in a project. Qualitative data collated from projects' final reports identified several themes in terms of how projects had managed their engagements with students, graduates and employers, which we outline below.

Managing depth and breadth

The first theme we identified in the projects' evaluations is that projects typically sought to take an approach to engagement that combined deep engagement with a smaller number of participants alongside less intensive engagement with a larger number of participants. There were two different logics to these engagements:

Logic 1: Promotion to conversion

The first logic that projects used was aiming to disseminate information widely to multiple individuals or employers, and then to convert the levels of interest generated into specific outcomes.
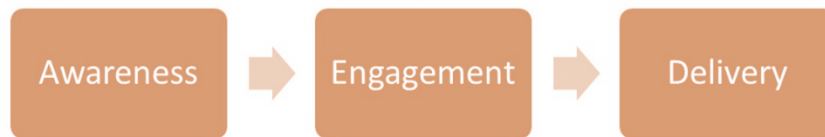
This logic was most apparent in those projects that set up recruitment agencies or placement schemes, where information was sent out to a wide range of students or employers about the schemes and the aim was to achieve for a certain level of uptake.

Logic 2: Cascading engagement

The second logic that projects used was to deliver a small number of deep engagements, and then cascade this learning through wider activities that engaged a larger population. This was particularly clear in projects that sought to engage a small number of graduates or students in intensive activities and then cascade their learning to a wider range of students. In the Digital Graduate Accelerator project, for example, 18 interns engaged in a programme of learning activities, and then cascaded this learning through workshops that reached over a thousand other students.

Targeted or universal services

A second theme in the project evaluations addresses whether projects decided to offer targeted services to specific students or graduates, or to offer universal services. In the Transformation West Midlands project, for example, the partner universities sought to extend coaching services to local students, but taking different approaches: for example, at the University of Birmingham coaching was a targeted service, and those who were deemed ineligible were directed to other careers services, while at Newman University the coaching was embedded into career service delivery as a whole.

Complexity in reporting

With universities taking different approaches to managing depth and breadth as well as providing targeted or universalised services, there is some complexity in how figures were reported across the projects. Three different approaches are evident:

1. Reported figures restricted to students deemed 'local' only;
2. Reported figures include both general uptake and 'local' student uptake;
3. Reported figures include all students.

The challenges in reporting relate back to the different definitions of 'local graduates' that projects utilised (see previous section), which meant that different student groups were 'in scope' for different projects. It is also important to note that reporting figures for 'all students' was also common for less-intensive activities designed to reach more students. In these cases splitting engagement figures into local and non-local students could be practically difficult.

Therefore, although the raw engagement figures provide some insights into the numbers of employers and students reached, they are not directly comparable between projects. To understand the relative efficacy of the different projects requires a much deeper analysis of what different projects aimed to do, how, and their relative successes. We move on to exploring these issues in the following chapters.

5. Impact of Covid-19

The *Improving outcomes for local graduates* programme was launched in May 2019, prior to the Covid-19 pandemic, but many of the project activities took place during the pandemic. This resulted in considerable changes to the projects and a great deal of disruption, including a modest extension to the duration of the programme. This chapter briefly considers the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, and in particular the national lockdowns, from March 2020 onwards. All projects reported substantial impacts on their delivery models and impacts on students and graduates, employers, and their own capacity for undertaking planned activities. These areas are explored in more depth below.

Impacts on employers

In the individual project evaluation reports, Covid-19 is identified as particularly impacting on **employer engagement**. As businesses' priorities shifted to focus on their own responses to the pandemic, projects reported difficulties in engaging employers on their advisory boards, panels or project steering groups. Projects also demonstrated a level of caution when approaching employers to ask for input, being aware that they did not want to add pressure to the employers.

A **slowdown in recruitment** by employers also impacted on the availability of graduate employment, making the context within which the projects sought to operate challenging. There were particularly acute impacts on the projects that sought to generate employment opportunities or placements, in terms of their capacity to facilitate such opportunities. Proposals to develop recruitment agency-like activities were abandoned in several projects, and one commercial vacancy platform some had identified for use was withdrawn from the market. Some projects decided to refocus their employer engagement activities to address these changes, for example increasing their focus on public sector employers and/or decreasing their focus on SMEs, many of which were known to be struggling during this period.

In the programme-wide employer survey, a substantial minority (23%) of employers corroborated the reports from projects, noting that Covid-19 had negatively impacted on their recruitment plans. Impacts were, however, not universally reported in the survey. In the project reports too, some unevenness in impacts by sector were noted, with the scaling back of employment opportunities less notable where they were operating with the public sector, for example.

> "...employers' recruitment activities... were scaled back at all levels, except in those organisations directly related to the pandemic response, for example the NHS and Bradford Council."
>
> Graduate Workforce Bradford

Impacts on students and graduates

As with employers, many projects also identified substantial negative impacts on **student and graduate engagement**. In the programme-wide survey, impacts on **student and graduate confidence** in finding a job they want were also evident, with students in 2020 suggesting that Covid-19 was having a strong negative impact on their ability to find a suitable job although levels of concern steadily dropped after that (see Figure 10).

Figure 10. Proportions of students agreeing that Covid-19 made it less likely that they would find the job that they wanted (from student survey responses, N=740)
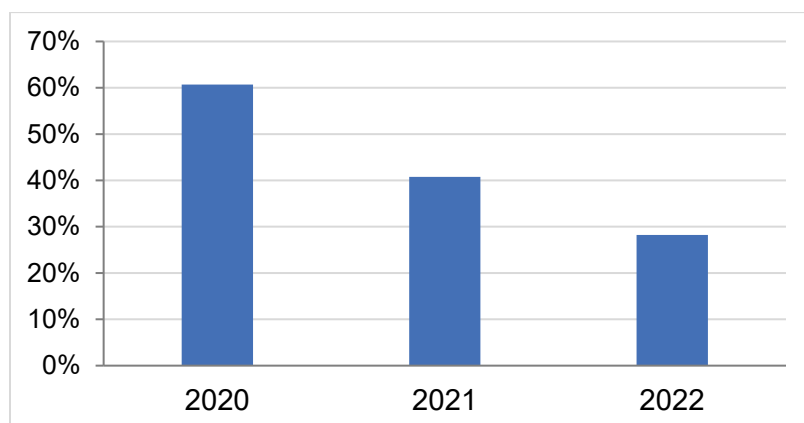
The final reports from projects also suggest that the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on the ability of students or graduates to engage in project activities. These impacts were particularly acute for students with caring responsibilities, for those struggling with mental health impacts of lockdown, and those who needed to prioritise paid work.

> *"Students and graduates became disconnected from the university with many focusing on home responsibilities and the care of their families."*
>
> Graduate Workforce Bradford

However, a negative impact on student engagement was not universal. Where projects utilised models that were suitable for online delivery and were quick to adapt, activities could become **more attractive and accessible**. At Manchester Metropolitan University, for example, there was a huge increase in interest in what became known as the RISE programme, which the project team interpreted partly due to students being *"restricted in terms of any other activities they could engage in due to the national lockdowns"*. The Graduate Skills Builder project in Lincoln also identified that a move to online delivery made some activities more accessible to local students who had faced barriers with mobility, due to the lack of availability of transport or other factors (such as caring responsibilities). However, the capacity of online activities to attract additional students was also commonly reported to be 'tailing off' over time.

The pandemic is also described as **changing student aspirations** in ways that could work in favour of some projects. In the Digital Grad Accelerator project, for example, and Graduates for a Greater Manchester, the focus of both projects on the tech and digital sectors was felt to be serendipitous, given that the Covid-19 pandemic led to a surge in interest in online and digital ways of working. Other changes include Birmingham City University reporting that with the shift to hybrid working local graduates reported that they *"would be willing to consider roles outside of Birmingham, if the job was right"* and the Transformation West Midlands project noted increased interest in postgraduate study as a result of perceived labour market instability. These changes highlight the fluidity of the context, including the changing aspirations and needs of graduates, and the changing labour market contexts within which the projects were operating.

Impacts on universities, partners and delivery approaches

Covid-19 also had a significant impact on the capabilities of universities and partner agencies to deliver activities as anticipated. This particularly included **challenges with staffing**, including furloughing of staff, reductions to working hours, and re-prioritisation of business objectives (especially in partner agencies), all of which impacted on the ability of projects to deliver activities as anticipated. In some cases staff recruitment was challenging, or projects adjusted recruitment; in the WRIPA-PLUS project, for example, rather than recruiting a 1.0 full-time equivalent (FTE) communications officer, the shift to online delivery meant that the project hired a 0.5 FTE content developer and a 0.5 FTE web developer instead.

Although projects sought to adapt quickly, in practice there were often **delays to project activities** and many projects asked for, and were granted, an extension. Delays related to universities' challenges in adapting delivery but, also, the capacity of students and employers to adapt. Graduate Workforce Bradford identified that it *"took time for communities to adapt to the new online world"*. In practice some aspects of projects may have experienced more significant delays than others, with universities typically describing more delays to the employer side of their work, either through a lack of engagement, or a strategic decision to not pursue engagement during the early days of the pandemic and put businesses under even more pressure. Data from our employer survey also confirmed that Covid-19 had delayed some aspects of project work.

> *"Our work with the university has been somewhat delayed by the pandemic and with the main student leaving, but we look forward to moving things forward again and developing the engagement further."*
>
> Employer survey response: SME, digital and tech sector

Where projects were suitable for online delivery then impacts on project design were limited. This is particularly the case for projects which involved curriculum delivery, whereby project delivery was moved online in a parallel way to other elements of the curriculum.

> *"The embedded nature of the sub-project within the Psychology programme meant the impact of lockdowns was less dramatic and planned curriculum activity adjusted to required modes of teaching and learning across the university."*
>
> University of Manchester

However, other projects engaged in substantial **revision of project approaches**, structures and expected outcomes. The University of East Anglia, for example, described how they had to *"pivot and re-profile key performance indicators in response to the increasing challenges in obtaining feedback."* Their intended development of full-service recruitment agency activities was postponed and reduced in scale, although they were one of several projects to become a Kickstart gateway. Meanwhile their planned deployment of interns through Norfolk's innovation hubs was abandoned as the market for such consultancy amongst SMEs was thought to have disappeared. Alternative opportunities for the interns to develop skills and experience had to be found.

Other projects reported on how they had been **focusing or streamlining activities** to reduce complexity. Canterbury Christ Church University, for example, scaled down its activities with

further education partners, choosing to focus on their own institution. De Montfort University also described reducing their target for engaging businesses in their recruitment toolkit and instead offered a smaller number of businesses a 1:1 consultancy support service. Overall, although projects generally narrowed their work, a change to online delivery meant that in some cases additional activities could be offered. For example, the Creative Pathways project in Nottingham ran additional events and WRIPA-PLUS developed multiple online resources.

A fear that shifting online would lead to a loss of impact was reported across projects, especially those that had planned for work placements, work-related projects or workplace visits. Employers taking part in events also reported some loss of impact in their reduced ability to identify talent.[37] Projects themselves also reported some limitations in building networks with employers and other organisations.

> *"Covid lockdown has reduced the Project Manager's ability to bring DWP[38] Work Coaches and Graduate Re-Tune Consultants together in face-to-face meetings to build a broader team culture, celebrate success and provide learning and development opportunities for all team members."*
>
> Graduate ReTune

However, as with other effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, some variation in impact was evident; for example, although the Graduate Skills Builder project in Lincoln identified broadly negative impacts of limitations to face-to-face activities, they also noted that in some cases *"the ease of participation in online meetings increased the involvement of senior leaders within participating organisations, thereby increasing students' exposure and profile"*. Equally, University Centre Peterborough also noted that the shift to online delivery assisted with some aspects of employer engagement: *"businesses are now far more open to chatting to students when the university provides more flexibility in the ways the SMEs can engage, such as online chats, virtual tours"*.

Where projects had proposed evaluation measures that relied upon comparison of university-level graduate employment outcomes (i.e. hoping that effects of the project would be observable through changes to university-level results, year to year), these largely became ineffective in the context of larger scale pandemic-induced changes to those results.

Summary

Overall, the Covid-19 pandemic had some effect in changing the scope, nature and/or extent of almost every project delivered within the programme. Many projects reported substantial learning and a number of upsides to the rapid shift to principally online delivery of activities. However, on balance, Covid-19 (unsurprisingly) proved to be disruptive and led to some diminution of the reach and impact of the projects, as well as to their fidelity to the programme's original aims.

---

[37] Christie, F, Page, C., & Lupton, B. (2021). *Report 4. Partner perspectives on Rise Digital activities*. Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre. Manchester Metropolitan University.

[38] Department for Work & Pensions

6. Implementation

Having explored how the backdrop of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on projects, this chapter now considers the implementation of the projects, with a focus on the challenges they faced and how these were overcome. The underlying data are drawn primarily from a thematic analysis of the project final evaluation reports, together with some data drawn from the employer and student/graduate surveys.

Student and graduate engagement

Key to successful implementation of the projects was effective student or graduate engagement. Learning from the activities of the projects, a clear theme is that attempting to engage students through mailshots or general 'promotion' often had limited impact.

Some projects attempted **targeted approaches**, which were generally felt to increase the likelihood of engagement. However, the process of targeting could be challenging. De Montfort University for example, sought to target graduates for mentoring, however the project team were advised that GDPR prevented the use of data to allow this. The targeting of students rather than graduates potentially met fewer barriers, so in the Transformation West Midlands project target students were identified through the careers registration process.[39] Other barriers to targeted approaches include concerns about stigmatising local graduates. Manchester Metropolitan University, for example, deliberately widened the scope of their activities to all students in order *"to navigate with sensitivity the risk of any deficit implications associated with just seeking to reach local students".* However, even where targeted recruitment campaigns were launched, there remained limitations on uptake. So, for example, although Transformation West Midlands generated 247 expressions of interest in their coaching, only just over half of these students subsequently engaged.

Engagement (in terms of numbers) was less of a problem where projects were delivered as a **mandatory part of curriculum**. The uptake of mandatory curriculum activities was very high indeed for some projects; for example, the development by WRIPA-PLUS of a module at the University of Nottingham which was mandatory for all year 3 BSc and MSci Physics students reached approximately 200 students. At University Centre Peterborough, an employability module was embedded into all courses in its business school. There was some debate in the project reports, however, about whether mandatory activities always achieved the desired outcomes, so in the Graduate Skills Builder (GSB) project in Lincoln it was noted that some student impacts *"were more likely to be realised when students participated in GSB voluntarily (rather than as part of an assessed component of a taught module)".*

Typically reports identified most effective engagement when activities were delivered in a way that was **accessible and immediately relevant** to students or graduates engaging with them 'where they were'. The role of intermediaries, other students or staff who could encourage engagement was noted across projects. The University of Nottingham, for example, noted that their project achieved strong uptake from one department because that department was *"highly*

---

[39] Careers Registration is a process used by some universities to identify the career needs of students. It is embedded into student registration and annual re-enrolment processes.

pro-active in promoting the scheme to their undergraduates". In Newcastle College, the project's challenges with recruitment in specific areas also led them to make a direct recommendation for the future that *"targeted support staff employed within these areas would be a good consideration as this would allow us to build up relationships, encouraging students to engage".* Other projects identified that student ambassadors and peer engagement were effective. At the University of Nottingham (as part of the WRIPA-PLUS project), for example, ambassadors were credited with growing social media followers. At De Montfort University, the creation of a 'Project Student Lead' position led to the recruitment of a student who had an established profile as a social media influencer.

Embedding signposting or recruitment within other activities was also highly effective. The Graduate Re-Tune project engaged graduates when they attended JobcentrePlus to access Universal Credit. At this point, graduates were likely to perceive a referral to additional graduate careers services as relevant, meaningful and timely; they were also potentially in a better place to act on the interventions being offered. It was notable that the graduates in that project typically had a low awareness of their HE provider's careers service before being referred. The theme of low awareness of careers and employability services prior to engaging in a project was a common one in the project reports, demonstrating the limitations of generic careers and employability marketing for some students. A related point was made in the Graduate Workforce Bradford project which highlighted that *"making graduates aware of specific vacancies and providing application support was more likely to result in a successful outcome than generic services or communications alone".* Again, there, specific communications targeted to students or graduates at points where they would be perceived as relevant was identified as a more effective approach than more general service promotion.

The importance of **ongoing personalised engagement and communicating relevance** were also highlighted across the life of projects. Limitations to follow-up emails with students or graduates were noted, with a preference for more personalised telephone calls. De Montfort noted that in future iterations of the project, to increase retention on the wraparound internship programme, *"more rationale is required for the graduates to understand why they are asked to undertake certain tasks and what the benefits are of doing so".*

A key finding here is that it is important for projects to provide access to interventions that are relevant, timely and appropriate to the students or graduates. If they do this, then once students or graduates become engaged there is the possibility for '**virtuous circles**' – with projects frequently reporting that, once engaged, students or graduates often then also engaged in further career or employability activities. The evaluation activities at Manchester Metropolitan University suggested that there may be 'tipping points' for students in relation to their ongoing engagement, with the achievement of 100 'RISE points' (which approximate to the amount of co-curricular learning undertaken and can be used to gain additional practice credits on a degree transcript) being one such tipping point.

> *"Learning, and engagement were to a great extent self-perpetuating. An important challenge, therefore, seems to be around encouraging students to make their first engagement."*

Manchester Metropolitan University

Employer engagement

Alongside student or graduate engagement, employer engagement was also a key part of successful project delivery for most projects. The project reports note that **employer engagement can vary across sectors, regions and project activities**. The Newcastle College University Centre project, for example, achieved good engagement with engineering employers but experienced a lack of engagement from digital technology employers. Engagement could also vary across activities within a project. As an example, Graduate Workforce Bradford achieved only 20% of their target for employers engaged in mentoring but were over target in other activities such as engagement in sector events. There is some suggestion that recruitment to mentoring activities could be a particular challenge. Graduate Workforce Bradford reported that: *"the experience of the Project Team in their efforts to engage employers in mentoring indicates that they would like to be involved in mentoring, but this was not the right time to do so".* And in the Digital Grad Accelerator project at Liverpool, it was noted that no formal digital mentors were recruited, with students instead identifying their own mentors as part of the programme.

As with students, employer engagement **did not always convert** into the specific activities that projects sought to support. Canterbury Christ Church University noted that there was: *"a natural level of attrition as you would expect in any business development pipeline: internal restructuring, changes in business needs and other factors unrelated to GradForce impacted on the SME's capacity to take on new graduate recruits".* In contrast, in several cases, projects described what were effectively '**deep engagements**' with large regional employers, who contributed to multiple different activities. Graduate Workforce Bradford, for example, described working 'extensively' with West Yorkshire Police to support graduate recruitment, resulting in the police force providing targeted support for ethnic minority applicants, and a curriculum partnership with the university's Department of Sociology and Criminology.

A key challenge in employer engagement that was often reported was that of **matching employer needs and student interests**. In the programme-wide employer survey, 95% of respondents reported that they had a positive experience working with their university partner. However, where employers were negative about the experience, it was usually because some aspect of the project had failed. Normally this could be interpreted as a poor 'match' between employers and students or graduates; this included, for example, being unable to fill vacancies, or a poor 'fit' between employer and student when vacancies were filled.

> *"We advertised some of our vacancies through the careers portal, although we did not receive interest from any graduates in the vacancies that we had available."*
>
> Employer survey respondent, SME, education sector

> *"Working with the university was positive overall, however, our intern was not a good fit. They were not suited to the position or working in a small business, and the internship was brought to a rapid end."*
>
> Employer survey respondent, micro-company, digital & IT sector

Issues of compatibility between students and employers were also identified in the project evaluation reports. Canterbury Christ Church, for example, talked about the difficulties of matching students and available opportunities: *"this was not always possible, as at times, the*

student's career aspirations were not always compatible with the sector, role, company or location". Similarly in Transformation West Midlands, the project noted a challenge that *"the sectors of interest from participants did not always mirror the areas of expected growth in the region, i.e. cyber, manufacturing (and VR technologies), digital, transport and sustainability, gaming and creative industries".* Issues around 'matching' employer and student interests were felt to be exacerbated at Canterbury Christ Church University due to the challenges of employer location and transport accessibility.

Challenges of managing expectations were often particularly highlighted in relation to SMEs. Typically, SMEs were often identified as not always offering jobs at the right 'level' for graduates. Some projects described working with SMEs to address their expectations; Canterbury Christ Church University described *"working closely with SMEs to ensure that posts are at the right level to attract graduate talent. In some instances, this resulted in revising the role and salary to reflect the fact that it was a graduate-level position".* Other projects identified problems from the graduate side, with graduates struggling to identify the value of jobs in SMEs or possible roles if they were not overtly advertised as 'graduate jobs'.

University and partner activities

The ability to implement the activities intended in project plans was crucial to the success of projects. In relation to this, Covid-19 had a large impact, as noted previously, but more general themes were also apparent in the projects' final reports.

Challenges with **recruiting staff** and **staff turnover** were noted quite commonly across project documentation, potentially exacerbated by Covid-19 (see chapter 6). The partnership model adopted by projects also created some vulnerabilities in relation to staff turnover and recruitment in partner agencies. Challenges with internal recruitment processes were also noted in several places, creating delays or contributing to failure of recruitment. So, for example, in the WRIPA-PLUS project two universities did not hire student ambassadors *"due to complications because of the pandemic, and delays to HR processes".*

There were also some challenges with **cross-partner working.** These included challenges in connectivity between institutional finance systems (WRIPA-PLUS); challenges with data sharing and monitoring across partners, even where GDPR agreements were in place (Graduate Workforce Bradford); and non-disclosure agreements and the nature of employers' work restricting the ability to plan internships (Newcastle College University Centre). At a larger scale, the Birmingham City University project identified limitations in how to support graduates returning to the area from other universities without partnerships being in place with other universities.

Where projects focused on curriculum interventions, the capacity of projects themselves was sometimes limited by **wider systemic issues.** The introduction of one of the specific modules in the WRIPA-PLUS project, for example, faced challenges in overcoming some resistance to embedding employability-related content in the curriculum (and reported lack of space to do so), while another module was rejected by the university's Board of Studies. The North Yorkshire Coast project, which introduced new Health and Social Care degree programmes, noted ongoing challenges with securing enough placements for students. And the Manchester Metropolitan project identified that although they supported students to obtain digital skills, that not all 'digital skills' could be developed in the short time frame available. This project also

identified how *"tech digital and creative digital offer very different career opportunities, despite their blending in city policy documents".* These points demonstrate some of the challenges for universities seeking to provide interventions to support skills gaps in their regional economy, based on internal challenges, external challenges and defining and identifying appropriate responses to specific gaps.

Summary

The implementation of projects relied on positive student/graduate and employer engagement, and the capacity to deliver activities as planned. Overall, despite disruptions from Covid-19, projects generally did successfully engage participants and delivered most intended activities, albeit with some re-planning and re-profiling. Key learning from the evaluation shows that for students/graduates and employers, interest in the projects did not always convert into engagement, but where they were successfully engaged a virtuous circle of engagement could be triggered. Engaging students was most effective when activities were offered at an appropriate time, and where they were seen clearly to be relevant. Employer engagement was most effective where employer expectations were aligned with student expectations and positive 'matches' were made between students and employers.

7. Impacts

This section of the report focuses on the impacts of the projects in relation to students, graduates, employers and universities, together with any wider impacts. When considering impacts for the students or graduates, the results are focused on 'local' students or graduates (earlier classified as 'non-movers' or 'university stayers') as these were the students or graduates targeted by and participating in the projects and who responded to our surveys.

Impacts for local students and graduates

Students and graduates taking part in the projects reported a very high level of satisfaction with the programme with 89% of survey respondents reporting that they were positive about their participation. More broadly, a range of impacts were evident in relation to confidence, skills, career plans, mobility intentions and engagement in career-building activities.

Confidence and skills

Data from the programme-wide student survey shows that students/graduates identified a range of skills that they felt participating in the project had given them (Figure 11).

Figure 11. Proportion of survey respondents identifying that participating in the programme has improved different skills (N=787)
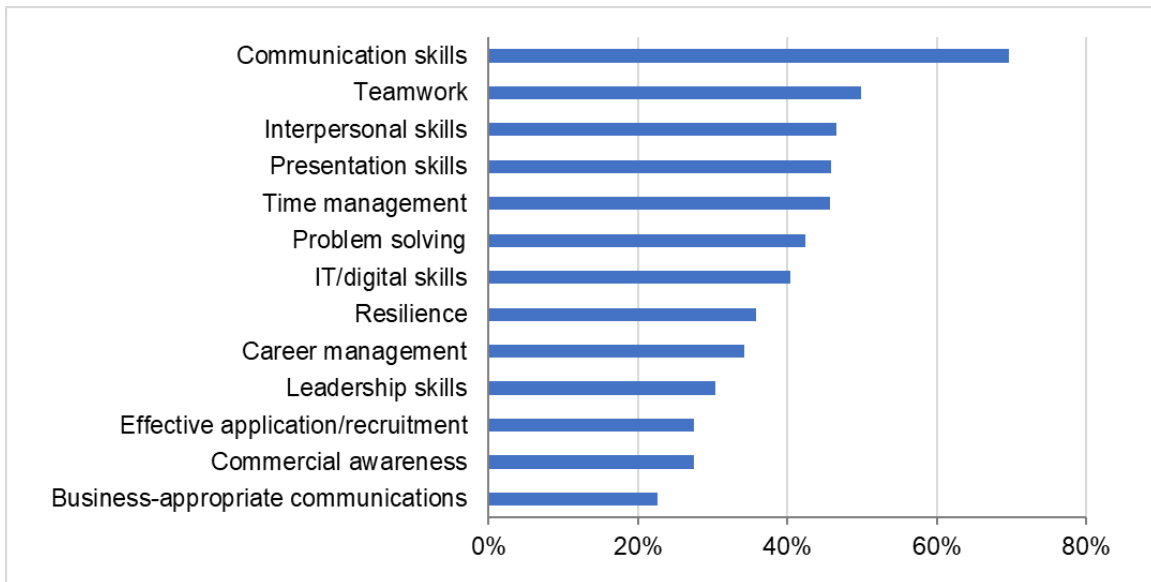
Related findings from the programme-wide survey were replicated in the individual final evaluation reports for the projects. **Impacts on confidence and skills** were often reported as near universal: Transformation West Midlands reported that based on entry and exit questionnaires 93% of participants reported learning gain; Canterbury Christ Church identified

that 100% of participants in their Grit workshops[40] noted impact 'across a range of areas'. These areas included *"being more focused about their future; more able to set and review goals for the future; better able to articulate their knowledge, experience, qualities and attributes they bring to the workplace; better able to deal with any setbacks in securing a job; and clearer about how their attitude and mindset will support them in getting a job"*.

There were, however, a few indications in the reports of some **limitations to the development of skills and confidence**. The Graduate Skills Builder project in Lincoln, for example, noted different extents of learning for different students depending on how far they were willing to go outside their 'comfort zone'. Other projects noted that some students may require more intensive support than others, especially those who were most lacking in confidence or facing barriers around anxiety and mental health more generally.

Alongside skills and confidence, it was notable that several reports discussed impacts in relation to **belonging**. At Liverpool, student belonging was directly measured and at the mid-point of their participation in the project, 93% of participants said the project had helped them feel that they 'belonged' with regard to the university; whilst 80% said that this was the case with regard to 'the community'. In this project, increased belonging was understood to impact on confidence, with confidence liaising with both university staff and employers also reported as increasing.

Building **student communities and networks** was a feature of a number of projects and was also felt to increase student confidence. Feedback from group coaching offered through Transformation West Midlands, for example, suggested *"by having peers together, learning from one another, eradicated feelings of social isolation".* At the University of Nottingham, the project directly aimed to support graduates to connect with each other through their cohort model, and impacts were again noted more widely.

> *"Graduate interns talked positively about the bonds that developed between each year group and, for some, across year groups. This helped them develop friendships and long-term contacts, as well as helping them feel more settled and embedded within Nottingham."*

> *"One of the benefits of this approach, as reported by the interns, was that it allowed them to talk as peers and share any problems or concerns they may have had with others, which they may not have done directly with their line managers. Having done so, they typically realised any questions or issues they had were often similar and this gave them confidence to raise issues with line managers or work colleagues. Nurturing them as a team helped some to develop confidence to open up communication with their managers."*

<div align="right">Creative Pathways, University of Nottingham</div>

Impact on career pathways

With improved confidence and skills, it could be anticipated that participants in the project would be more likely to achieve positive employment outcomes. Some projects were able to explore

---

[40] Grit is a charity delivering intensive personal development and coaching programmes for young people and the adults that support them, which supported the Canterbury Christ Church project

the actual destinations of participants (especially where they worked with final year students or current graduates). However, other projects, especially those that worked with students further from graduation, were unable to report clear data because project timelines did not allow sufficient time to collect evidence of impact on graduate destination.
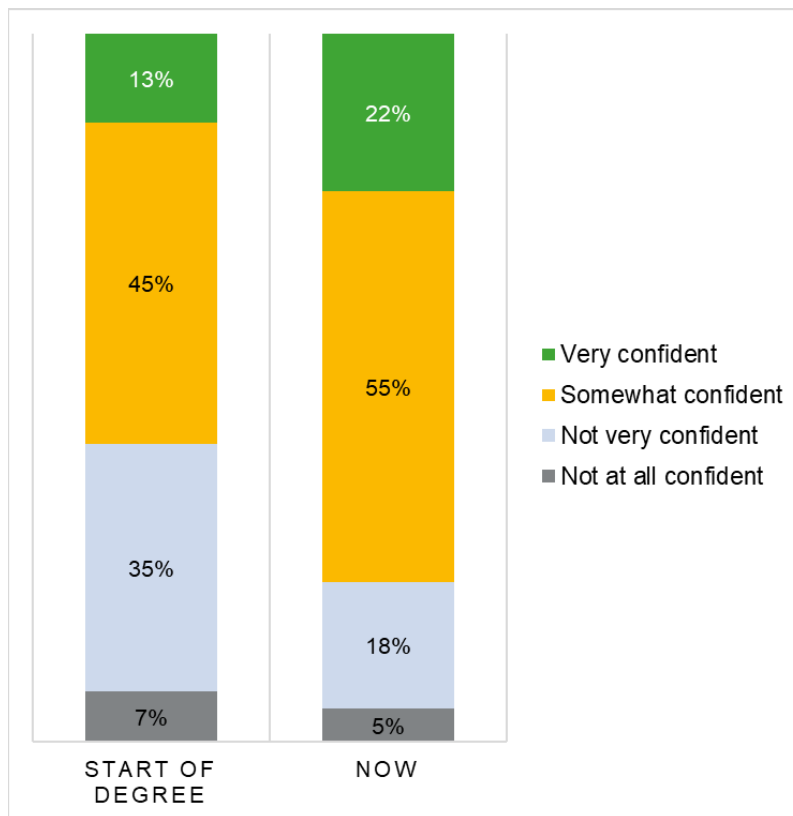
Many initial proposals had hoped that it would be possible to track participating students' destinations using the Graduate Outcomes Survey.[41] In most cases the challenges of identifying and matching data, as well as the time lag between delivery and the survey (which takes place around 15 months after graduation), meant that this was not possible. While the Graduate Outcomes Survey provides a powerful high-level data source for providers, it offers a more limited tool for the evaluation of more targeted interventions such as those described in this report.

Where they were identified, employment outcomes were generally noted as positive for project participants. However, it is important to note some limitations in the data available. For example, understanding how far employment outcomes were due to projects (rather than wider factors, such as the state of the labour market) was challenging. Further, some projects noted that **positive outcomes could look different for different individuals**. Transformation West Midlands, for example, noted that *"there is a tension as to what success looks like in the eyes of different stakeholders. For some coachees, having a local job that developed their skills as the first step was the key goal, using their strengths. For others, it was a graduate scheme"*.

Potentially a better measure of impact on graduate outcomes is student and graduate perceptions of their career options. In the programme-wide survey, data showed that, overall, participants had become more confident about their chance of finding the kind of job that they were interested in (Figure 12).

---

[41] The Graduate Outcomes Survey is a national annual survey which tracks where graduates go after they leave university. For further information see https://www.graduateoutcomes.ac.uk/.

Although overall the findings were positive, the evidence that over 20% remained feeling not very or not at all confident when surveyed after their programme activities was perhaps notable, as were results that suggested a small minority of students actually became <u>less</u> confident during the project (Figure 13).

Figure 13. Change in participants' confidence about finding the kind of job they want (student/graduate survey responses, N=759)
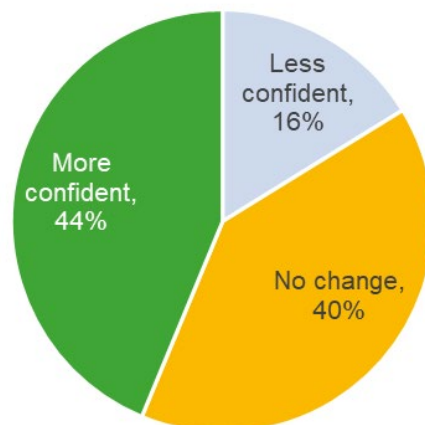
An important factor here is that the projects were taking place within the **wider contexts of the labour market.** Turning to qualitative data from the project reports, continuing concerns about impacts of Covid-19 on the availability of jobs, as well as approaches of employers to equality and diversity, were both identified as resulting in limitations to graduate perceptions of the workplace. So, for example, the Graduate Skills Builder project in Lincoln identified more limited impacts for students who *"expected to encounter significant barriers to pursuing graduate employment".* In the Gateways to Growth project, the University of East Anglia also noted that *"some of the participants with postgraduate degrees... expressed some concerns with being overqualified for certain roles, whilst some participants were concerned with the high levels of competition amongst graduates in the marketing sector".* The role of contextual factors was clear when we looked at data from the programme-wide student survey about why and how their confidence had changed. Only a minority of respondents (32%) felt that their participation in the project had contributed to a great extent to their improved confidence about their career prospects. The majority (53%) felt that their increased confidence about finding a job that they were interested in was attributable to some extent to their participation in the local graduates project. This highlights that other factors were also contributing to changes to confidence.

Thinking about more specific impacts on graduate career confidence, projects that utilised work placements or work-based projects typically reported that exposure to working contexts, where students could apply skills, **built students' confidence about the relevance and value of their skills** and their overall employability. This was seen too in comments from employers:

> *"Our project was very real for the students that contributed to it and they gained so much from seeing how a small business works and the impact their work could have."*
>
> Employer survey response, SME, education sector

Specifically, projects that aimed to expose participants to varied activities and experiences, often identified that this encouraged participants to **think more broadly about their career options**. This was particularly the case for projects which utilised internships; the University of East Anglia, for example reported that *"participants generally seemed more open to a bigger variety of roles following the internship experience".* Similarly, the Graduate Skills Builder project in Lincoln identified that, as a result of engaging in the project, participants were more aware of the transferability of skills and that the activities they engaged in *"challenged pre-existing ideas of the relevance of a degree programme to different sectors and employers".*

> *"Before the placement I was unable to think outside my regular setting, which is a medical setting, or my role as a scientist. But through the placement, I was able to think more broadly."*
>
> Digital Coach, University of Liverpool

However, some **limitations to broadening aspirations** were also noted in the project final reports, including Lincoln's Graduate Skills Builder project identifying that impact in this area was limited where participants had entered the project with a clear specific prior career plan. Similarly, in Nottingham a slightly less favourable assessment of the programme was made by an intern whose *"career interests didn't align closely with the work of the partner organisations".* Therefore having a close enough alignment or 'match' between work placement or activity and

student career interest was identified as important. An alternative interpretation could be that activities might most optimally be targeted to those with less well-formed career plans.

Although most projects sought to encourage graduates to think broadly about their options, a notable exception was the North Yorkshire Coast project by Coventry University (Scarborough), which sought to address a **specific vocational pipeline**. Here, by introducing an increased number of health and social care courses to the university, more locally based routes were offered into health and social care roles in the local community. Given the vocationally focused nature of the courses, increases in student numbers translated relatively directly into local graduate employment, with all the Adult Nursing course graduates from 2020/21 going straight into employment and over 80% of them in roles locally (in Scarborough), and 100% of Nursing graduates in 2021/22 accepting roles in the local (Scarborough) workforce.

As well as influencing career pathways, projects typically identified impacts on participants' ability and willingness to engage in other **career-building experiences**. For example, an increase in awareness of and interest in careers services was sometimes facilitated through being involved in a different activity, such as a work placement. The Newcastle College project, for example, reported: "*there has been a clear increase in students' awareness of our employability services".* The Manchester Metropolitan project also identified an impact in relation to actual uptake of additional 'career-enhancing behaviours.' One potential reason for this increased uptake was that participants were more career-oriented, with more understanding of their own needs, and of the purpose and potential benefit of engaging in activities. Indeed, the Transformation West Midlands project identified that although some participants before the project had no awareness of the careers service, others were aware but *"missed communications or [were] overwhelmed by the volume of career and other communications, because of 'too much choice'".*

Impact on mobility pathways

As well as employment outcomes, projects also typically aimed to influence the mobility intentions of graduates. The programme-level survey of students/graduates explored their intentions to remain in the area for work, and when their original intentions were compared to their current intentions a small increase in intentions to stay was apparent (Figure 14).

The final evaluation reports for the projects also reported **increases in interest in working in the local labour market**. De Montfort, for example, noted that out of 30 students, at the start of the project ten had no plans to stay at all, and by the end of their four-day project conference six had changed their minds and wanted to stay locally. Graduate internship projects, such as at Newcastle and Nottingham, directly facilitated transition into the local labour market, and even after the end of the projects, participants tended to remain in the local labour market. So, for example, in Nottingham most of the interns interviewed for the final evaluation did not come from Nottinghamshire (only three out of 19) but 63% (12 of the 19) were *"still living in and around the Nottingham area and all bar two had no plans to leave the area in the near future".* The retention of graduate interns in the local labour market was likely partly due to the evidence that internships can often evolve into full employment at the same organisation, and the ways that interns develop relationships and a sense of belonging in the graduate labour market in the area. In Nottingham the significance of strong friendships that developed with others in the intern cohort had *"helped them feel more settled in Nottingham and more likely to stay".*

University Centre Peterborough also reported that almost all the graduates they had managed to track and who were in employment were working locally, although with the caveat that most had lived in the region prior to their degrees (i.e. could be considered to be 'non-movers', see chapter 3).

Limitations on the extent to which intentions to stay local could be influenced were however noted in the Lincoln project, particularly noting two key limitations: firstly that some participants

even after engaging in the project still felt there were a lack of graduate jobs in the area, and those who had 'strong ties to another region' were less likely to be interested in staying in the local region.

Given the way that the projects' aims were framed in relation to local labour markets (see chapter 2), no projects reported outcomes in relation to non-movers becoming more mobile. Therefore, it could be argued that the prior evaluation objective (see chapter 2) 'identification of interventions that stretch the mobility of graduates geographically' could not be met, as no projects aimed to make a substantive impact of this type. However, for a student who moved to attend university, and had a positive local employment near the university as a result of participating in a project, it could also be argued that they had become more mobile by not having either to return home or to move to one of the main employment hubs such as London.

Employer impacts

Based on results obtained in the programme-wide survey of employers, the overwhelming majority of employers (87%) reported that participating in the project had brought value to their business. The key behavioural changes that they reported are shown in Figure 15.

Figure 15. Proportion of employers changing their behaviour following participation in the projects (N=110)
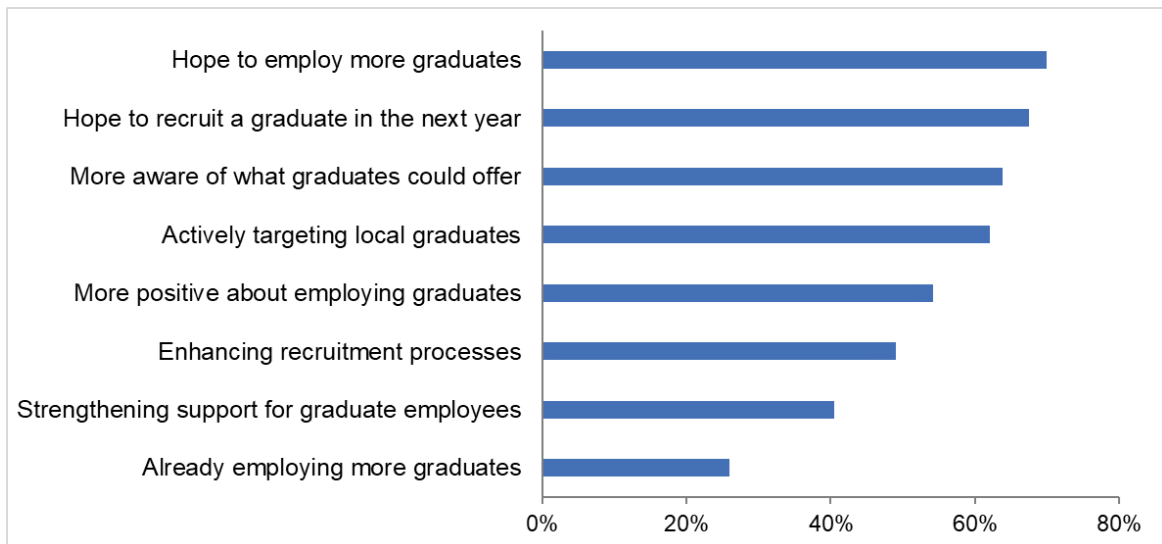
These impacts can broadly be divided into changes in employers' attitudes to employing graduates and changes to recruitment and onboarding processes which will facilitate graduate employment. These areas are considered in more depth below.

Attitudes to graduates

The programme-wide survey revealed that prior to the project only 53% of employers reported that they specifically targeted local universities (to recruit graduates), with a further 13% saying

that they employed graduates but did not specifically focus on those from local universities. At the end of the project, 64% agreed that they were more aware of what graduates could offer to their business and 54% were more positive about recruiting graduates. As a result of this, 26% reported that they were already employing more graduates than at the start of the project and 67% said that they hoped to recruit a graduate in the next year. A similar proportion (62%) said that they would actively target local graduates in their recruitment and 70% said that they would hope to employ more graduates in the future.

Employers were generally positive about the skills that graduates could bring to their business or organisation, and particularly valued the potential of graduates in terms of problem-solving, technical job skills, digital skills, communications and teamworking (see Figure 16).

Figure 16. Proportions of employers reporting different skills that they believed graduates would bring to their business (employer survey, N=125)
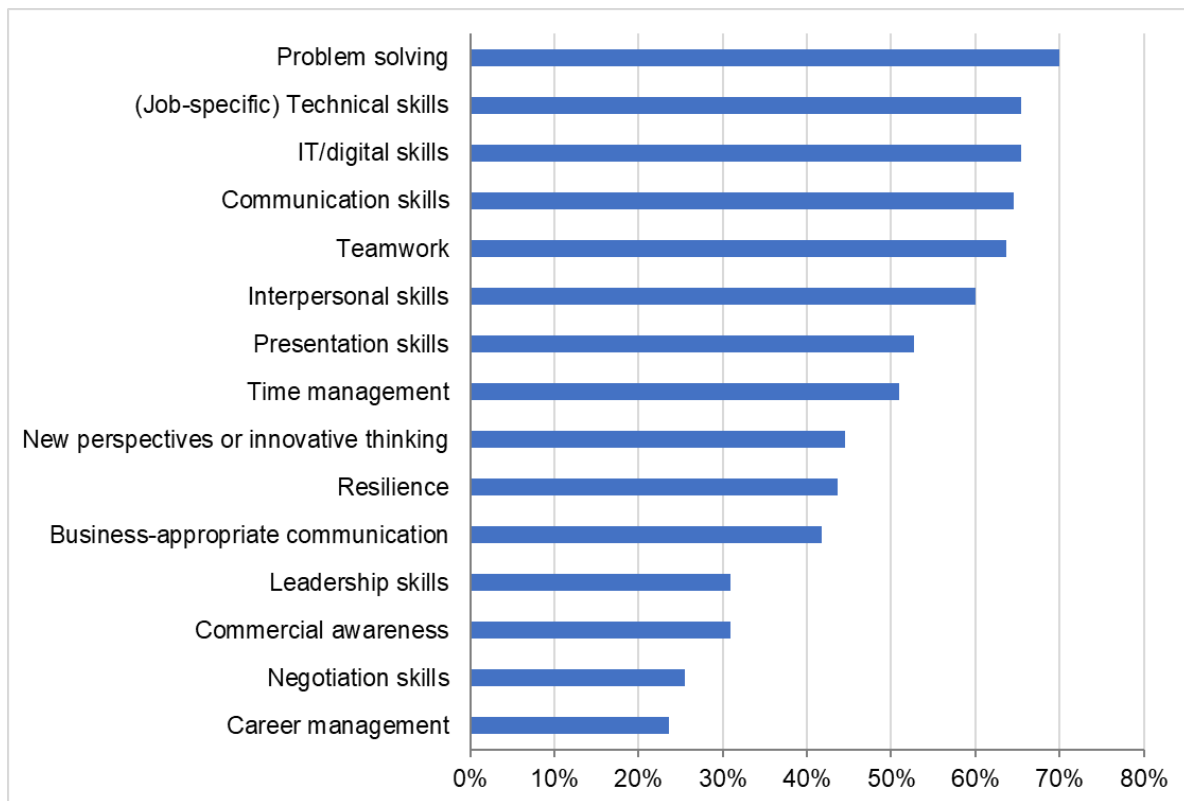
Just as graduates potentially broadened their scope in relation to the kinds of jobs they would consider, there was some indication that employers may also have **broadened their scope** in relation to the graduates they would consider employing.

> *"Employer interviews provided evidence of an increase in awareness of the potential benefits and particularly of the transferable skills offered by HE students and graduates. For employers linking up with the careers services for the first time this meant that they were now working with students from a*

variety of disciplinary backgrounds rather than just those disciplines perceived as directly relevant to their organisation."

GWB Lincoln

However, projects' final evaluation reports also noted an important **limitation to the level of impact on employers**: employers that engaged in the project had volunteered to do so and were, perhaps, therefore more open to the potential for increasing engagement with graduates, than on average. Although impacts were apparent for the employers that engaged, there were, naturally, many other employers in these local labour markets that did not engage, and this would limit the total extent of labour market change resulting from the projects.

Adjusting recruitment and onboarding processes

With employers more positive about recruiting graduates as a result of participating in a project, the programme-wide survey also indicated a general willingness to develop organisational systems and enhance recruitment processes to attract more graduates (49%) and strengthen the support that they offer to graduate employees (41%).

At the simplest level, **changing recruitment methods** could involve utilising more university recruitment channels and platforms. One employer in the survey, for example, reported the value of "*being able to advertise directly to graduates at the time they are looking for work*" and "*offering a platform to recruit good quality placement students*" (Micro employer, digital and tech sector).

More broadly, employers in the survey reported gaining **insights** into what students were looking for in employment opportunities and this was felt to be helpful when planning recruitment activities. Responses included a comment about the value of *"insight into students' job seeking/application behaviours, what they look for in employers and what puts them off! [And] engaging directly with potential candidates"* (Large employer, finance and professional services sector). Another commented about the experience providing them *"with an understanding of what graduates wish to see from an employer"* (Large employer, public sector).

In some cases, insights into the needs of graduates could lead to **changes in recruitment and onboarding** processes. These impacts were particularly clear in relation to employers who were seeking to support the diversity of their intake, which was likely to be at least in part because several projects had a direct focus on diversity, and two projects developed an inclusive recruitment toolkit for employers that focused on ethnicity. Reverse mentoring was also mentioned both as valuable by employers in the survey and in project evaluations as beneficial.

> *"The reverse mentoring scheme really helped us to identify areas where we needed to improve in order to be a more inclusive and relevant employer for graduates.... Getting the viewpoint of graduates to enhance the diversity and inclusion of our company, particularly in relation to graduate recruitment."*
>
> Large employer, finance and professional services sector

> *"A number of employers made tangible changes as a result of the reverse mentoring scheme. For example, changes to their website by way of images*

*and video stories for greater inclusivity; working with faith/cultural societies;
simplification of job descriptions to ensure that language is not a blocker;
modifications by way of gender neutral language; ensuring diverse
representation on recruitment panels; communicating the culture of the firm in
social media; relatable role models at campus events; formulating a plan to
identify and implement key learnings from the scheme."*

<div align="right">Transformation West Midlands</div>

Again, final project reports noted some **limitations in change to employer recruitment
processes**, especially among SMEs. These related to their capacity to adjust aspects of their
recruitment strategies; for example, the lower salaries in many SMEs were felt to be a barrier to
recruiting graduates (and this was something not easily overcome). Equally, the Graduate Skills
Builder project also reported that SMEs *"described a lack of organisational precedent for
offering graduate schemes, a reluctance to market roles exclusively to graduates and a lack of
resource for 'graduate' salaries and for supporting the development and implementation of
graduate schemes".* Similarly, the University of East Anglia stated that employers reported that
there remained barriers around the attractiveness of companies in local areas where salaries
were perceived as low, there were 'not enough job perks' or there were few opportunities for
progression. There are deeper questions here about how far employers are able to respond to
perceived needs and interests of graduates.

Direct impacts

As well as adjusting behaviours, there was also evidence that project activities had a direct
impact on the productivity of employers. This was particularly the case for employers who
hosted work placements or internships. In the Newcastle College project, for example, one
employer who hosted a graduate placement reported that the project had **freed up staff
capacity**, because the intern took on some duties that *"allowed myself [the employer] to focus
on other parts of the business where I might not have had the time without his skillset".* Other
employers felt that participating in the projects provided **development opportunities** for their
existing staff, such as managing or mentoring an intern. One response to the employer survey
commented *"mentoring is a two-way process and by supporting students those providing the
mentoring are also enriched"* (Large employer, public sector).

The most commonly reported benefits, however, came from the **fresh ideas and expertise** that
students had brought to the organisation. **Tech and digital skills** were frequently mentioned,
which may partly have related to the focus of two projects in this area (Liverpool and
Manchester). The Liverpool project in particular trained interns in the use of digital tools and, as
their evaluation report noted, introducing these to employers could have immediate benefit –
one company, for example, benefited from the introduction of a particular piece of software,
another from the evaluation of an app, and another in utilisation of Search Engine Optimisation.

*"Young people of today have fresh, new bright ideas that will help our
business to change for the better."*

<div align="right">Employer survey, SME, retail, hospitality or tourism</div>

*"As a small employer we are dedicated to what we do best, but blissfully
unaware of aspects such as web hits, marketing, social media etc.... We now*

have a much better understanding of our business in terms of web performance and socials, as well as a marketing plan."

<div align="right">Employer survey SME, education sector</div>

Another frequently mentioned contribution of students and graduates to employers was **insights into the perceptions of young people**, and this was particularly valuable for companies who sought to target services or products to this group. The Liverpool project evaluation noted: *"where image and profile within a market-demographic was important to the business model, the presence of young graduates in the workforce, who were connected to and part of current trends in consumer behaviour, was very advantageous to the company".* A similar point was highlighted in the Nottingham report:

> *"Many partners stated it had been helpful to have graduates bringing a youthful and fresh perspective, enabling the host organisation to review what it delivers, how it targets its audiences and also bringing much needed skills to the role (notably around confidence in using social media and some design software – opening up the use of new technologies to help partner organisations with marketing materials and databases). "We work with a lot of young people (our audience) so having young talent with fresh perspectives helped us to link more closely and relate to them better."*

<div align="right">Creative Pathways, University of Nottingham</div>

Which interventions were most effective?

The wide variety of activities offered to students, and the differing project contexts, make it difficult to come to summative conclusions about what the best approaches might be. The challenge of comparing impacts between projects is compounded by the fact that the projects often aimed to do different things (see previous sections) and used **different kinds of measure**. Where some used 'pre' and 'post' questionnaires, others used post-activity surveys, and still some others used different specific measures. In the Transformation West Midlands project, for example, the 'career EDGE' framework was used to measure employability skills.[42] The University of Manchester sub-project team created a career self-efficacy survey based on the work of Bandura and Taylor and Betz.[43] The University of Liverpool used the JISC digital skills framework to measure impacts on digital skills.

Extent of impact

In exploring different interventions, a broad comparison can be drawn between interventions in terms of the extent of impact that they <u>aimed</u> to achieve. Referring back to the typology of approaches outlined in chapter 2, it is reasonable to consider that some projects aimed for deep

---

[42] Dacre-Pool, L. (2020). Revisiting the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 44(1), 51-56. https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.4408

[43] Taylor, K. M., & Betz, N. E. (1983). Applications of self-efficacy theory to the understanding and treatment of career indecision. *Journal of Vocational Behavior*, 22(1), 63–81. https://doi.org/10.1016/0001-8791(83)90006-4

impact with a small number of graduates and employers (an example here would be a graduate internship programme) whereas others aimed to provide information or support to a much wider group of students and employers, which itself would have much less direct impact. Issues of breadth and depth also appeared in relation to skills-based interventions. For example, in both the Manchester and Liverpool projects, impact was clearly identified in relation to the development and deployment of digital skills, but limitations were apparent in that the projects did not have either the time or capacity to impact on more complex technical digital skills.

Projects that offered slightly less in-depth intervention, but focused on **career interventions and skills building**, typically identified significant increases in confidence and skills but this **did not always translate into graduate employment** outcomes that were observable within the lifetime of the evaluation and with the measures used. In the Transformation West Midlands project, as an example, over 90% of graduates identified an impact in relation to their confidence and skills (a level that exceeded the project target), but a lower proportion (68%) of participants were recorded as having progressed into some form of employment or further study (which was below the target proportion).

Those projects that focused on **graduate internships** appeared to have a greater conversion rate of internships into graduate roles. So, for example, the Creative Pathways (Nottingham) and Stay and Succeed (Newcastle College) projects both reported strong successes from their graduate internship programmes. Out of 11 interns placed in the Stay and Succeed project, *"ten of them have progressed and secured higher positions at the same or a larger engineering firm and one student who did not complete their internship has chosen to go back into education and is currently working on their MSc"*.

Although internships potentially offered greater conversion rates to sustained employment, a few points should be remembered. Firstly, these can be potentially costly to provide (depending on how they are funded), and they reach relatively few individuals. Indeed, at Nottingham the costs of providing the internships were identified as a key challenge in the sustainability of the project beyond the funded period. Secondly, internships are often selective, and therefore individuals who are furthest from the labour market may struggle to access these.

Intensity and depth

To aid in this analysis of different kinds of intervention, data from the programme-wide surveys was analysed. Student and employer responses about the activities that they had participated in were recoded into three groups according to the intensity of the activity:

- **Extended**. This covered the 226 student and 72 employer respondents to the surveys who had participated in an internship (a placement of longer than two weeks) or an employer-sponsored extended project. In the case of employers we included those employers who had offered a new graduate vacancy, e.g. through the Kickstart scheme;

- **Multiple**. This covered the 108 student and 13 employer respondents who had participated in at least three different types of activities, e.g. career counselling, employability workshops and mentoring;

- **Focused**. This covered the 474 student and 41 employer respondents who had only participated in one or two of the shorter (not-extended) activities.

When we looked at the satisfaction level reported for these three depths of activity there were slight differences suggesting that satisfaction was somewhat higher for those who participated in a more intense programme (either extended activities like internships or engaging in multiple activities, Figure 17).

Figure 17. Proportion of student/graduate survey respondents very positive or positive in terms of their satisfaction with their project activities, by intensity of activity (N=801)
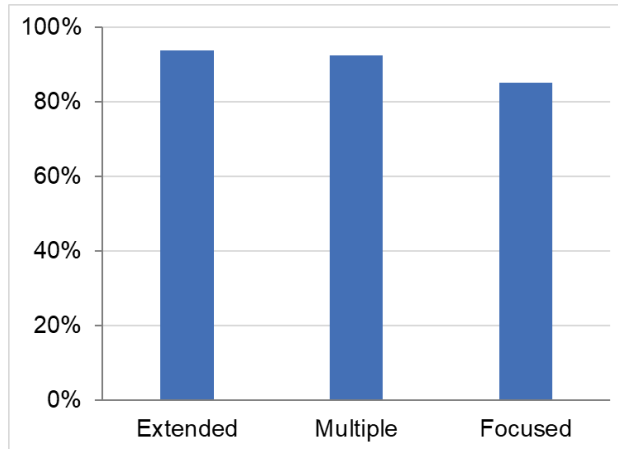
Employers broadly indicated a similar pattern, with those that had been involved in more intense interventions more likely to conclude that it had been a positive experience and one that offered value to their business (Figure 18).

Figure 18. Proportion of employer respondents who agreed that participation in the programme was positive and valuable, by intensity of activity (N=125)
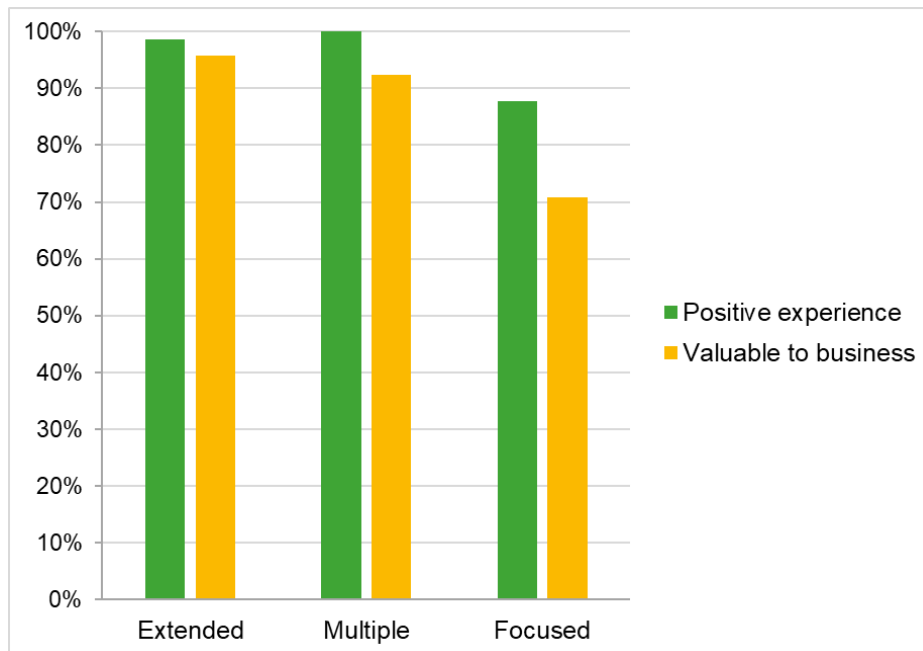
The same pattern also seemed to hold true when we looked at the mobility decisions of student participants. Slightly more of those who had participated in a more intensive type of intervention were more likely to have changed their mind in a positive direction (Figure 19).

Figure 19. Student/graduate survey respondents' extent of change in intention to remain in the local area, by intensity of activity (N=768)
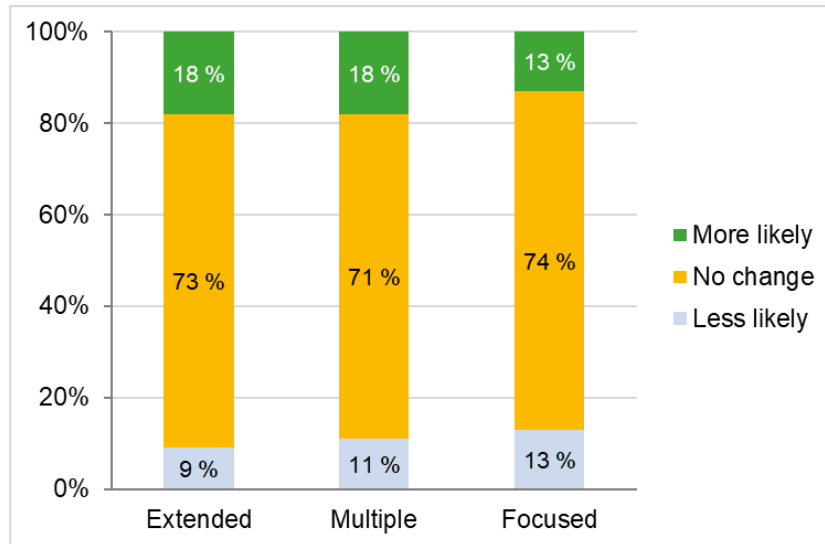
The pattern was a little less clear in relation to participants' change in confidence level about finding a job that they wanted (Figure 20), but to some extent did reinforce the message that more intensive interventions were associated with a greater chance of a positive change to confidence levels.

Figure 20. Student/graduate survey respondents' change in confidence about finding the type of job they want, by intensity of activity (N=758)
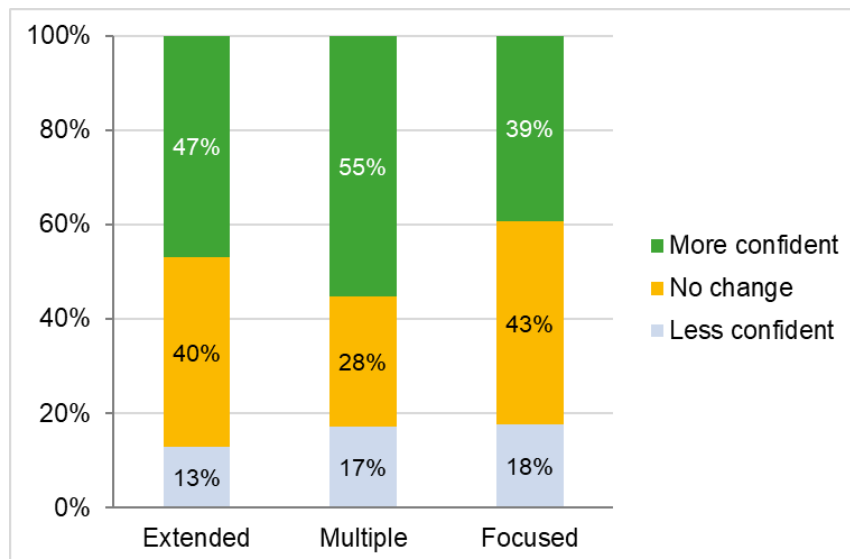
These findings were echoed in the employer survey, with employers who had participated in more intensive forms of intervention more likely to report that they were more aware of graduates and that they were more positive about recruiting graduates (Figure 21).

Figure 21. Employers' increase in awareness of local graduates and positivity about employing graduates, by intensity of activity (employer survey respondents, N=108)
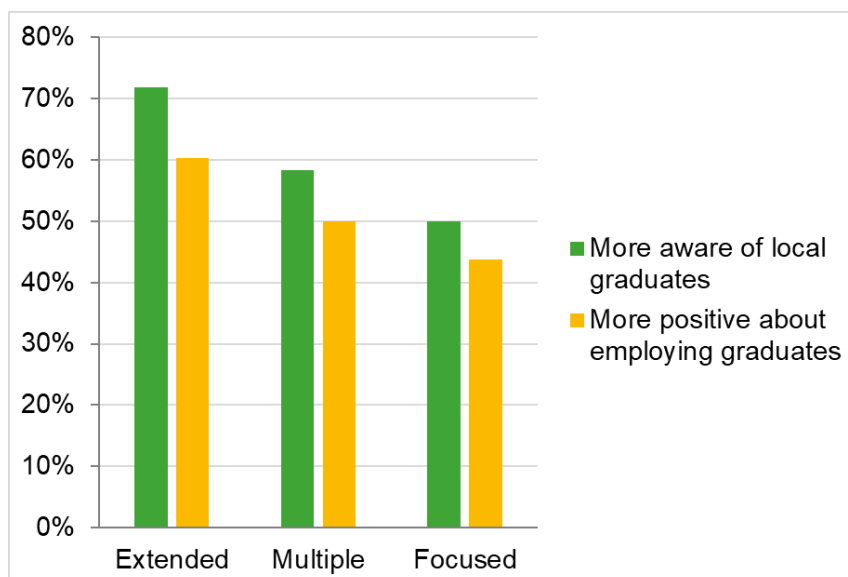
This analysis suggests that, on balance, more intense programmes of activity seem likely to have delivered greater satisfaction, an increased likelihood of remaining in the local area and increased confidence in finding a job that the student/wanted, as well as delivering a more substantive impact for the employer engaged.

Wider impacts

Alongside student, graduate and employer impacts, projects reported a range of wider systemic impacts on graduate transitions.

Building knowledge and relationships

The first key impact that many of the projects noted was an increased understanding of all stakeholders in relation to the graduate labour market. Many projects embedded a **formal research element** into their design, and certain impacts often stemmed from this activity. In some cases, research outputs included analysis of the labour market on a regional or sectoral basis. The Manchester project, for example, specifically included labour market analysis, conducted in partnership with the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (HECSU). Other projects also sought to generate baseline data and statistics; for example, in the initial stage of the Birmingham City University project baseline data were generated to identify the scale and scope of graduate unemployment in the region. Similarly, the WRIPA-PLUS project involved a 'Work Mobility Study', which aimed to analyse the migrational patterns of WRIPA physics graduates using data from both graduate destinations and outcomes surveys over the last 10

years. In the University Centre Peterborough project, a doctoral research project was embedded and this resulted in at least one published output on HE providers' considerations to support the creation of alliances with SMEs.

Other projects utilised data collection as part of monitoring and evaluation processes, and/or disseminated that through more informal information sharing at project boards, or networks, to embed processes of ongoing learning and reflection. Some projects utilised student-led research projects or activities (for example, Liverpool and De Montfort). Where research findings were useful for projects directly, they were also felt to be valuable for **improving understanding and partnerships between stakeholder**s in relation to the graduate labour market (e.g. students and graduates, universities and employers).

> *"The generation of an empirical evidence base had provided a platform for conversations about equality, diversity and inclusion in employment as well as practice to support students and graduates progress to a positive graduate destination. Presenting the research has raised awareness and kickstarted thinking"*
>
> *Project partner organisation, Graduate Workforce Bradford*

> *"The research has given staff confidence (in having diversity conversations) as their observations are backed up by research evidence"*
>
> Careers Professional, Graduate Workforce Bradford

Forums and networks were also key ways of generating evidence and insights, and of building shared understanding among labour market stakeholders (including students, employers and universities). In the Bradford project, this extended to a wider community, including the city's South Asian Discussion Forum. Feedback highlighted the importance of not only knowledge-sharing but also relationship-building in these networks. For example, in Bradford an employer participant in a roundtable event stated that the event offered *"a bridge between industry and students and connect(ed) people on a human-to-human level".*

> "*[The project had] allowed me to get a better network [at the universities], definitely. I think the careers team there, they knew… we knew that it was mainly via emails is what the communication was before that… and we'd attended, like I say, some careers fairs there, but nothing… basically the work that we've been able to do since that is just to create better relations with the people…."*
>
> Employer, Graduate Skills Builder, Lincoln

> *"The Employers Forum running over two years has provided the partnership with a channel to engage further with local employers, with contribution from students/graduates, to review ways of working, to ideate and to continue developing the local diverse graduate talent pipeline. Input from academic researchers would further strengthen the eco-system."*
>
> Transformation West Midlands

Conferences and events, especially sectoral, were also identified as successful for promotion and bringing stakeholders together: *"The CU Scarborough Health Conference 2022 was a huge success, and the planning of the 2023 conference is already underway. The feedback from*

employers, students and delegates was encouraging. The CU Scarborough team has been inundated with requests for information for the 2023 conference and offers to provide keynotes and guest lectures/workshops."

Systemic impacts and spin-offs

Some projects built insights into how labour markets worked and relationships across labour market players, and this could lead to spin-off benefits – particularly creating collaborative relationships that might be of advantage for future interventions. Employers working together on the Nottingham project, for example, noted that their collaboration had helped them to consider some funding opportunities together. Universities working together collaboratively, especially in a context where universities are often in competition with each other, was also understood to be potentially beneficial for future projects. In some cases, collaborative relationships between HE careers services and other careers providers were also established; for example the Graduate Re-Tune project worked heavily with JobcentrePlus, while University Centre Peterborough struck an arrangement with the National Careers Service to provide individual guidance to many of its local students who were eligible.

More immediate **spin-off activities** were evident in some projects. For example, at De Montfort students decided to develop a recruitment toolkit for students to mirror the inclusive recruitment toolkit that was developed for employers. At Bradford, all its student ambassadors volunteered to remain as ambassadors even after financial incentives ended. Other spin-offs were evident in the ways that projects reported the emergence of 'deep relationships' with some employers as a result of the projects – including where employers volunteered to engage in activities that were beyond the scope of the project. The combination of increased understanding of the issues and strong partnerships also led to **emerging lines of work.** In the WRIPA-PLUS project, for example, as the project developed it placed *"a stronger emphasis on supporting students from under-represented groups into work. For example, WRIPA collaborated with Living Autism to deliver staff training to better support students with autism or social communication impairment".*

The creation of deep relationships with employers, was, to some extent, mirrored in the creation of **deep relationships with students.** At De Montfort, for example, the recruitment of a single student, who was an 'influencer' with an established social media profile, supported engagement in a wide range of student activities. The cohort approach in Nottingham allowed interns scope to expand their learning: *"in effect, an intern at one organisation could learn about the work of six other organisations through the cohort approach and develop a much wider level of awareness of the creative sector than they would have done if the internship had been a simple six-month placement with one host".*

Expansion of targeted students and areas

Although projects aimed to support the transition of graduates into local labour markets, positive impacts were also evident more widely. For example, projects sometimes reported that not all graduates had entered the local labour market, but many had **transitioned successfully into other regional labour markets**. De Montfort tracked their core of 30 engaged ethnic minority students and noted that they progressed well, with *"the students progressing to a range of high-skilled occupations and exciting roles, albeit not necessarily in Leicester as we may have hoped".* Similarly, in projects that aimed to develop student skills in particular sectors, **these**

skills were applicable to other labour markets. At Liverpool, for example, feedback indicated that the digital skills sessions were generally valuable, although there was *"little content in workshops that was of specific local relevance with respect to employment in the City of Liverpool".* These findings were mirrored in the programme-wide student survey where, although data generally suggested that participants were more likely to see themselves working in the local area (see Figure 15), when the data were investigated more deeply to explore individual changes in intention, different patterns emerged. Within these respondents, a small minority actually reported that they were less likely to work in the local area as a result of project activities.

In other projects with a sectoral focus, impacts were also identified to be **wider than sector specific**. At Manchester, for example, *"reports of increased confidence and career self-efficacy were stronger than those relating to increases in digital skills".* In a number of cases, impacts were also identified as **wider than in partner universities,** and this included graduate-focused projects – where some engagement from graduates of other universities might have been anticipated (e.g. the GradTalent Development Agency and the Graduate Re-Tune project) – but also student-focused projects. For example, website data for the WRIPA-PLUS project suggested that students from non-WRIPA universities were also utilising the website.

Finally, project impacts were sometimes identified as positive even where **key elements of projects had failed**. In particular, projects that focused on employer engagement and the generation and advertising of graduate jobs, typically through the development of **recruitment agencies**, often struggled to place graduates directly. Canterbury Christ Church University, as an example, reported that they were only able to place six of their graduates, while Bath Spa recorded only 23 graduates as gaining graduate-level employment through the employer job vacancies managed by its GradTalent project. However, although placing graduates was often challenging, levels of employer engagement and student or graduate engagement could remain high, leading to some evidence of wider impacts. At Canterbury Christ Church, tracking the full cohort of graduates who had engaged in the project *"showed that 91% of GradForce students who we were able to track had either progressed into graduate employment or further study".*

External accolades

Finally, in this section on wider impacts, it is perhaps useful to note that the innovative nature of many of these projects led to a number successfully receiving or contributing to **external awards or accolades** which brought publicity to those projects and partnerships. These awards included:

- Birmingham City University's Graduate Re-Tune project won the 2022 Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services Award for Excellence in Building Effective Partnerships. The university also then went on to win the award for Higher Education Provider of the Year at the 2022 Education Awards;

- Manchester Metropolitan's RISE scheme (known in its proposal as its Third Term Programme) won the Guardian University Award for Course Design, Retention and Student Outcomes in 2020;

- De Montfort University won the 2021 Times Higher Education award for Outstanding Support for Students, for activity in its Leicester's Future Leaders project.

Summary

The evaluation demonstrates that projects achieved a wide range of impacts. Impacts upon students and graduates were evident in terms of increased confidence and skill range, enhanced career aspirations (generally broadening) and, in some cases, improved employment outcomes (where this was possible to measure), as well as changes in mobility intentions, with a greater interest in working in the local labour market evident. Impacts for employers included improved understanding of the value of graduates, especially those from non-aligned courses, changes to recruitment approaches both to facilitate greater appeal to graduates and to address issues like diversity, and direct impacts upon productivity (as students brought extra capacity, skills and insights into younger target markets). Wider impacts of the projects were also evident. These included impacts that extended beyond local labour markets; for example, there was some evidence that, with graduates generally gaining increased confidence and skills, for some this may have translated into being more open to moving away for work. Wider impacts also included the development of ecosystems of stakeholders (students, employers and university staff) and building knowledge and relationships to support future innovations or spin-off activities. Our analysis of impacts demonstrated that, on balance, more intensive programmes of activity generated a somewhat greater level of impact for students and graduates, for employers, and potentially also for the wider ecosystem. Where multiple activities or 'deep' activities were offered, relationships were strengthened for future engagements.

8. A theory of local graduate support

In this chapter we return to the theory of change for the programme, asking whether the projects worked as anticipated and what could be learned from these experiences about how to best support local graduates.

Returning to the theory of change

Broadly we can make a strong case that the theory of change worked as anticipated and that the inputs to this project did feed through and led to the desired outcomes and impacts, at least so far as they were observable in the timescale of the evaluation. In this section, we will work through the theory (Figure 22) and highlight key findings of the evaluation.

Figure 22. Simplified logic model within the theory of change
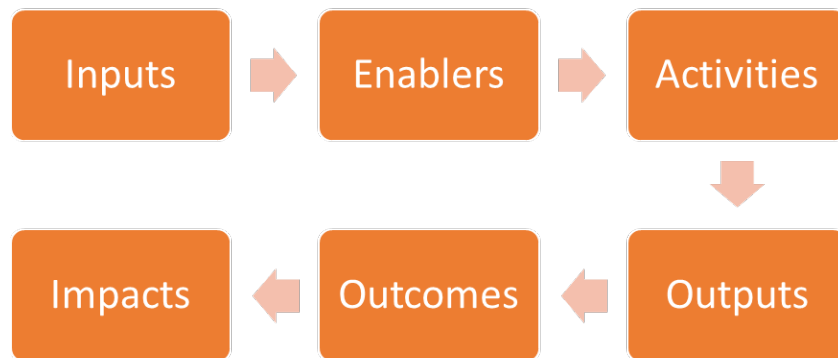
Inputs

For this programme, the OfS distributed £5.6 million to HE providers to run their projects as a result of the funding competition. Alongside this investment, we found evidence that the project leads and their various partners had provided additional resources, expertise and innovation. In the original proposals the providers cited £4.9 million of investment, with £2.8 million from the leads themselves and £2.1 million from partner organisations. The programme therefore represented, overall, a substantial investment into improving the careers of students and graduates.

Enablers

As noted in chapter 2, by enablers we do not mean external factors but 'enabling activities' within projects, which were separate from their primary activities but supported them. Many took the form of partnerships with other players in the local economy, which had been proposed or assembled by providers as they developed their bids for funding. These partnerships proved to be very valuable as the projects unfolded.

There was also evidence in the final reports for the projects that they had effectively listened to the student voice (utilising student ambassadors and incorporating feedback from participants

through focus groups and so on, some of which was reported in their progress reports). However, many projects went further than this and engaged students and graduates as partners in the delivery of the projects.

We hypothesised that engagement and marketing activities would be an important enabler. It was obviously critical that projects could successfully engage students, but it was less clear what constituted effective marketing for this purpose. Often marketing appeared to have been more successful through networks and word of mouth than more purposeful marketing activities.

Research and knowledge capture activities, either as a standalone strand or embedded, were part of most projects. Embedding evaluation activities from the start of the project supported this. Research activities enabled projects to gain a better understanding of the issues and markets that they were working in, and an interest in extending research activities was evident in many of the projects.

Activities

We have already set out considerable detail on the activities that projects delivered to support the careers of local students and graduates and encourage more of them to consider staying in the local area. It is clear that the investment in inputs combined with the enablers allowed projects to be successful in delivering a large volume of activities. Those activities could be broadly broken down into five models, delivered by projects in varying combinations and degrees of intensity:

- **Curriculum development models:** focusing on the establishment of new modules or programmes in the curriculum to meet regional skills needs;

- **Employer intervention models:** focusing on supporting employers in their graduate recruitment and often, but not always, involving development of a recruitment agency;

- **Career guidance or coaching models:** focusing on strengthening or extending career guidance or coaching support for students who were identified as most in need;

- **Graduate internship programmes:** focusing on establishing and promoting new local graduate internship programmes;

- **Student employability programmes:** focusing on offering structured programmes of activities that targeted students or graduates and often, but not always, included a work-related project, work placement or internship.

Outputs

The evaluation has provided at least some evidence for all of the main outputs that were hypothesised. Through a combination of local evaluation work and our programme-level surveys and data analysis, along with projects' final reports, there are strong indications that the programme led to positive changes for:

- **Employers**, including:

  - an increased awareness of local graduates and the skills that they could bring to their organisation;

-    changes to recruitment and management practices, designed to engage more graduates;

-    improved approaches to engaging graduates from ethnic minority and lower socio-economic backgrounds, although little evidence of a wider engagement with diversity.

- **Students**, including:

    -    increased awareness of the careers and employment support available and a greater recognition of the value that this could offer;

    -    improvements in skills, particularly in generic and transferable skills;

    -    an increased awareness of the employment opportunities available after graduation, both in the local area and nationally;

    -    enhancements to their ability to make transitions into employment opportunities, especially in the case of internship and placement programmes;

    -    increases to students' or graduates' career confidence and their capacity to imagine themselves building a career in the local area, although this did not necessarily always lead them to stay local.

Outcomes

Whereas the outputs here focus on changes experienced by individuals and employers, the outcomes address more systemic shifts in local skills and employment systems. The desired outcome was to move to a situation in which the local labour market worked more effectively, particularly by making more effective use of graduates.

Demonstrating such outcomes is more challenging than measuring outputs. However, we do have some evidence from the surveys and reports that suggested:

- The level of connectivity between universities and the local economy increased through these kinds of projects;

- There may be increased demand for graduates locally, particularly amongst employers who have directly engaged in a project within the programme. In most cases, the scale of the project was insufficient to demonstrate a clear shift in the functioning of the local labour market, beyond any impacts on specific employers. However, the theory of change seems theoretically sound in the rationale that it sets out for labour market change. Where employers are engaged and they experience clear short-term benefits (through placements and support with recruitment), they respond with greater longer-term engagement with the graduate market. If this could be scaled up, it would be likely to have larger and more systemic impacts;

- Whether that increased demand for graduates feeds through, in the shorter and longer term, to increased levels of employment, retention and progression for graduates is also difficult to demonstrate. What is clear is that demand for graduates does not necessarily lead to graduate employment if there is not a sufficient match between student and employer expectations. Addressing expectations by bringing together employers and students in a range of activities, underpinned by research and insights, is critical to supporting successful

transitions. Again, the programme evaluation suggests that the underlying theory of change here is sound, in that a greater level of positivity from employers and greater understanding of different expectations and experiences between labour market players can lead to longer-term shifts in the local labour market;

- Through the experimentation undertaken in this programme and the associated evaluations, we have also increased our understanding of what works in supporting graduate-level employment for local graduates.

Impacts

The ultimate aim expressed in the programme theory of change was to achieve a culture change in the role of graduates in local economies, leading to a more human-capital-rich local labour market that functions in an effective and efficient way. In addition, it was hoped that this would contribute to enhanced diversity and improved social mobility.

As discussed in the previous section, it is difficult to present any hard evidence for this kind of culture change. The small scale of many projects, the diversity of approaches utilised and the time-limited nature of the evaluation all make it difficult to offer certainty. We will discuss some suggestions for future evaluations that could help to provide stronger insights into how far projects of this nature could achieve labour market change in the final chapter of this report. However, it is reasonable to argue that the evidence of achievement of outputs and outcomes for these projects is theoretically consistent with the desired impact of wider culture change. There is an extensive literature that traces the individual, social and economic impacts of career development interventions of the kind deployed here, which would support this theoretical link.[44]

Key considerations for programme design

As suggested above, the theory of change provided a strong starting point for thinking about the kinds of intervention that were supported in this programme. If we want to shift the way that the local labour market works and make graduates and graduate skills more central to it, then it is useful to build partnerships, engage students and support them to research the local opportunity structure and the development of their careers. It is also important to engage employers and bring them into dialogue with local universities whilst giving them more direct experience of students. If this can be done, there is a strong chance that students will benefit as they develop their careers, and employers will find it easier to find the skills that they need. At sufficient scale and with substantive impact, this may lead to a bigger shift in the culture of the labour market.

Yet, the evaluation suggests there are a number of key design features that help to make programmes relevant and therefore effective. Many of these should be considered by funders and programme managers when developing future programmes. In this section we will explore what elements might be useful in informing the design of programmes to support the career success of local graduates.

---

[44] Percy, C., & Dodd, V. (2021). The economic outcomes of career development programmes. In Robertson, P., Hooley, T., & McCash, P. (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Career Development* (pp.35-48). Oxford University Press.

Student issues

Across the projects' final or evaluation reports, limitations to the capacity of students or graduates to engage in the projects, and limitations on their labour market availability after graduation, were noted. These included the following issues:

- **Student engagement.** In many cases students did not engage with projects to the extent envisaged. Engaging students in activities that were perceived as timely and relevant was important, but identifying mechanisms to help students identify the relevance of the project is also important. This may be achieved in a variety of ways, including peer or staff engagement. Without this being designed into projects there is a risk that projects will not reach those most in need of support. There is some indication in projects' final reports that a sense of 'belonging' was helpful to students both in engaging with the projects and in maximising their learning. Future iterations of projects, or similar projects, could consider in more detail the value of activities to support belonging, and those activities could be part of how to address uptake from those students who are most in need of support.

- **Student expectations**. The projects' evaluations raised a range of issues with students' perceptions about what would be expected of them in engaging with the various interventions and activities, as well as what would be needed to transition successfully into the world of work after their degree and/or achieve their wider career aspirations. Addressing and informing these expectations will be critical to ensuring positive participation in any future project; i.e. it should be designed to include management of expectations of participants.

- **Family and caring responsibilities**. Some students' capacity to engage in project activities, as well as their capacity to enter full-time work after graduation, and their capacity to be mobile, was influenced by their existing family and caring responsibilities. By viewing all students through a singular lens, many of the projects ignored some of the main issues that would shape students' engagement with their careers. The recognition of these familial ties is critical in designing interventions that seek to address spatial inequalities. The role of family can be thought of in relation to affective bonds, but also in relation to financial challenges. So, for example, the capacity of some students to remain in a local area is bound up with their financial situation. While some projects included paid internships, there is undoubtedly more room to consider how a student's financial position shapes their ability to remain local and engage with a local labour market.

- **Mental health issues** were identified by some of the projects, with both WRIPA and Transformation West Midlands attempting to address students' mental health through the activities that they were running. Many projects reported that Covid-19 had had an impact on students' mental health and that this had resulted in increased challenges. It is clear that students' capacity to participate in employability projects and, ultimately, to progress into a successful career is bound up with their mental health, but relatively few projects had anticipated this and designed interventions accordingly.

- **Transport challenges and a lack of local public transport networks** can create difficulties in matching graduates with graduate job opportunities in local areas. The existing public transport network means that employment located in city centre locations is often

preferred to out of town or rural locations, with many students reporting that work in the latter locations may be difficult or impossible to access.

Employer issues

Alongside the issues emerging for students, there were also a range of issues that we recognize in relation to the employers. These included the following:

- **Employer engagement.** Projects were successful at engaging employers that were generally already positive or interested in working with universities and graduates. However, to ensure greater impact in any regional graduate labour market, additional consideration needs to be given to the employers that do not already have interests in engaging with HE students and providers.

- **Employer expectations**. Employers involved in this programme sometimes could have limited understanding of the operation of universities and the skills and expectations of students. Educating and informing them therefore became an important part of certain projects.

- **Issues of prejudice, bullying and organisational inequality**. Although the employers with which the projects engaged were generally positive about engaging graduates, some revealed issues or concerns about dealing with students with caring responsibilities, disabilities, or from ethnic minority backgrounds. Such issues may require additional support for employers throughout the process of engagement to foster a process of organisational learning around diversity. In addition, in a very small number of cases, there were isolated issues of bad behaviour by employers, including bullying and prejudice. In future, projects should ensure that they have the capability to monitor and address any such issues if and when things do go wrong.

University and careers service issues

The delivery of these projects also revealed a range of other issues that were experienced by the universities at their centre. In many of these cases the provider's careers service was at or close to the centre of delivery for all or several of the interventions.

- **The challenge of curriculum change**. Many projects highlighted the value of embedding career- or employability-focused interventions into the curriculum. However, they also raised a range of challenges to achieving this, as university curricula are often fixed and it can be difficult to obtain the buy-in of academics for such changes, as well as difficult to navigate such changes through programme approval processes.

- **Challenges in accessing the right mix of students and employers**. Although the original theory of change included both partnership building and marketing as key enablers, it did not fully address the challenges that universities faced in building the right mix of employers and students and brokering connections between them. This process of engagement required universities to build their intelligence about both sides of the market that they were trying to engage and to develop their capacity to reach out to students and employers and manage their mutual engagement. The development of forums, networks and conferences or events were key in many projects to building the necessary understanding and collaborations for effective systemic change in provision of graduate support across stakeholders.

- **Understanding 'graduate employment'.** There was evidence across the project evaluations of different understandings of what were considered appropriate employment outcomes for graduates, and how these can vary across graduates and different types of employers. Universities, too, hold their own opinions about how to define 'graduate employment'. Such variation could be problematic in assessing the impact of projects and, especially, any consideration of whether one approach was more impactful than another. Research activities in the projects were particularly helpful in addressing this issue, and further research activities were often identified as important.

- **Understanding multiple graduate labour markets.** Recognising the variations in graduate pathways by sector was not addressed in the existing theory of change. While most projects aimed to support graduates generally into the local labour market, it is important to recognise that transition from all degree courses into any 'graduate job' is not possible. The development of a health and social care pipeline with vocationally specific degree provision in one project demonstrated this. If systemic change is desired in a regional labour market, then understanding the different extents of 'vocationality' of degree courses and the different labour market segments that exist within a regional labour market will be important. It is also important to recognise that projects aimed at local labour markets had impacts on other regional labour markets, and that there were limitations to the support that could be offered to individuals in local labour markets who had graduated from other (non-local) universities. Understanding the complexity that underlies national, regional and local labour markets and different sectoral markets will be important for future achievement of labour market change.

- **Wider shocks and changes in the political economy.** It is worth noting the absence of any recognition of the possibility of wider contextual shocks in the theory of change. The Covid-19 pandemic provided a powerful illustration of how such shocks can require radical rethinking of the design and implementation of projects such as these. It is very possible to imagine a range of other phenomena which might require universities to be similarly flexible, including economic down- (or up-) turns, changes of government, natural disasters or shifts in university funding or regulation.

Enhancing project design to achieve the theory of change

Based on these findings, we would argue that future projects addressing similar challenges and/or attempting to achieve similar outcomes should seek to refine their theory of change by including some or all of the design and implementation elements in Figure 23.

Figure 23. Potential enhancements to project design to achieve the theory of change

Students	Employers	HE providers	Context
Broadening student engagement and supporting belonging	Broadening employer engagement	Building-in time and resource for curriculum change	Identifying and addressing variable ideas and expectations of 'graduate employment'
Informing student expectations of activities and employment	Informing employers expectations of activities and graduates	Building systemic collaborations and capacity between stakeholders involved in graduate transitions	Recognising the layered nature of the labour market and that it contains routes with different levels of vocational specificity, and has interwoven relationships with wider labour markets and providers.
Recognising family, financial and caring responsibilities	Tackling bad and prejudiced employers		Recognising the likelihood of a changing economic context
Considering student mental health			
Addressing transport issues			

The intention of this report is not to construct a new theory of change, as that would best be done in context as part of the design of any new programme. However, the issues highlighted in this section and summarised in Figure 23 should be considered carefully in future project or programme designs that seek to achieve impact through similar logic models.

Beyond a theory of 'staying'

Finally, it is important to understand that the theory of change in this programme relates to the aims and objectives of the programme and its constituent projects. Given the way these programme aims were framed (see chapter 2), the existing theory of change can best be understood in relation to improving support for students and graduates to access local labour markets. However, evidence identifies that it is not 'non-movers' or 'stayers' who have the weakest labour market outcomes but 'returners', and the projects did very little to support these graduates, who return to their home region after university. Further, the projects did not seek to encourage non-mover mobility to other labour markets which, arguably, although less good for

local labour market efficacy, could offer benefits to the individuals in terms of providing them with more labour market options. Despite this, it was notable that some graduates demonstrated an increased mobility during the projects, which highlights that there are limitations in relation to thinking simply about local labour markets. In addition, some projects identified limitations in their ability to achieve impacts without further collaborations across regional labour markets. This was most notable in the Graduate Re-Tune project that identified the importance of collaboration with universities nationwide to help support graduate returners to the regional labour market.

In the future, projects that seek to address regional inequalities in graduate employment outcomes and in regional labour markets themselves will need to consider more fully issues of intra- and inter-regional mobility. Supporting graduate mobility, where appropriate, or supporting employer mobility (potentially, for example, through encouraging the development of remote working opportunities) could be important components of such activities.

9. Reflections and lessons for the future

The *Improving outcomes for local graduates* programme comprised many activities and innovations, specifically enabled by the programme funding, which sought to address an important and rarely addressed phenomenon. Governments, funders and universities have devoted considerable time and effort to ensuring equality and diversity in relation to a range of demographic factors with recognition that they structure participation in HE and in graduate careers. But the issue of spatial inequalities is often overlooked. This programme represents an important attempt to grapple with this issue. In this final section we offer some reflections on the programme that may support further thinking about this issue.

It is valuable, and viable, to address spatial inequalities

The projects demonstrated that it is possible to address spatial inequalities and to do something to improve graduate outcomes for students with lower levels of mobility capital.

The projects also provided us with a range of insights about the types of approach that might be effective in doing this. The previous section summarised the theory of change we developed, concluding that the theory proposed at the start of the project was useful, if incomplete. It also highlighted a range of issues that future programmes should consider. Nonetheless, it remains useful to summarise some of the key features that proved important to delivering effective interventions in this programme.

- **Thinking systemically**. While students/graduates were the primary beneficiaries of these projects, the most successful projects viewed interventions systemically rather than individually. This meant conceptualising what was being attempted as something that would involve and benefit multiple stakeholders. In such a conception, employers are brought in as genuine partners rather than purely as destinations for graduates' outcomes. Successful projects also actively engaged other partners and stakeholders in the local education and employment system, such as further education colleges, JobcentrePlus and local government.

- **Building multiple and intensive interventions**. There was clear evidence across the projects that deeper and more sustained interventions were more effective than one-off or light-touch activities. Interventions that included programmatic or sustained elements, as well as those that provided the opportunity for experiential learning, were generally valued more highly by both students and employers.

- **Recognition of diversity**. It was clear that when addressing issues of spatial inequality, it is not sufficient to develop a 'one size fits all' approach. As with other aspects of diversity, an intersectional approach is often the right one, with research being clear that demographics (class, gender, race, disability etc.) intersect in important ways with students' mobility capital. Furthermore, those students who do have substantial ties to localities, in ways that potentially limit their mobility, may experience these ties in a host of different ways, e.g. marriage and relationships, financial pressures and responsibilities, caring responsibilities, a profound sense of belonging in a locality or ties to locally situated forms of work. In each of these cases, universities need to be careful when designing interventions not to make normative assumptions.

Government / funders	Issues of spatial inequality are important to address alongside other forms of disadvantage. There should be funding for future projects in this area to support graduate equality of access to the labour market and enhance functioning of regional labour markets.
	Any funded projects in this area should include research and/or monitoring and evaluation activities to improve the evidence base around spatial inequalities and how best to address them.
Universities / careers services	Universities and career services should identify ways to support less mobile students including returners, recognising that these students experience challenges in accessing graduate employment. This might include the kinds of projects focused on the local labour market discussed in this report, but also building partnerships with other institutions and actors to help to support students when they leave the area during the critical few years after graduation when they are establishing their career.
	Universities and career services should identify ways to build capacity to engage with small and local employers alongside major graduate recruiters.

It is important to define the problem carefully

As we discussed at the beginning of this report, there are a range of challenges in relation to the definition of the problem that the programme was trying to address. Many of these revolve around the loose definition of a 'local graduate.' Is a local graduate someone who studies where they have grown up, someone who returns to their home area, someone who plans to work where they have studied, or everyone who neither studies nor works in London, or indeed in any large urban centre? Clarifying such a definition could have helped to create a greater degree of comparability between different projects.

In chapter 2 we argued that projects could potentially address spatial injustice by:

- increasing mobility capital (the confidence, skills or ability to move) of graduates who are non-movers or potential university returners so they can move elsewhere to access a wider range of employment;

- supporting the transition of university returners into their 'home' (e.g. where they resided prior to university) labour markets; and

- supporting the transition of non-movers and potentially university stayers (if as discussed above an expansive notion of 'home' is adopted) into the labour market that is local to the university.

In practice, we noted that most projects focused on the last of these and on strengthening the relationship between the university and its local labour market. This was a valuable activity, but it is only one possible approach and meant that some groups, particularly university returners,

were not actively targeted by most of the projects. In future projects it would be useful to clarify further what approaches are being encouraged and supported. In this case, the way in which the challenge competition application process was structured often pushed people towards a definition of 'local' as proximal to the university. This was appropriate for this kind of exploratory project in which universities were encouraged to define their own problem and develop innovative solutions. However, if future projects seek to address different types of 'local graduates' it will be important to carefully define this term to drive the desired outcomes.

Recommendations

Government / funders	In any future funding programmes, funders need to pay even more attention than they do now to how the framing of their funding will impact on the design of projects and ensure that targeted problems are defined carefully and the funding organised in ways that will directly address those intended problems.

It is important to understand issues and solutions holistically

Although project interventions focused on different parts of the skills and labour market system – universities, employers and students or graduates – the most effective approaches combined multiple activities aimed at different parts of the system. Partner agencies, employers and students themselves were important sources of support alongside interventions delivered by universities and careers services.

Thinking systemically about interventions, and building relationships between partners, is important. Further, the evidence from the programme shows that student decisions are made within wider contexts (family and community) and in relation to different needs (for example, caring, financial and health needs). Students and graduates also continue to meet wider structural inequalities in the employment system which need to be addressed. Future projects should consider how these needs are met in order to develop effective interventions.

Recommendations

| Government / funders | Governments and funders should recognise the significance of wider welfare and support systems in supporting spatially disadvantaged graduates: mental health provision, childcare and other care provision, financial support, and local transport provision are all themes identified as significant in this evaluation. In practice, this programme was right to encourage partnership bids which included non-HE partners. Funders should build this expectation into future funding, and ideally highlight the significance of such issues in their guidance to applicants.

Governments also have responsibilities to address wider issues of diversity and inequality in employment practices more widely. |
|---|---|
| Universities / careers services | Universities should consider ways of building support for students around mental health, childcare and other care responsibilities, and finance in ways that are integrated or in partnership with careers provision. |

	Universities and careers services have an important role in educating and supporting employer recruitment practices.
	Universities should identify ways of supporting student belonging in university communities as a first step towards engagement in graduate career pathways. This is likely to include both the strengthening of bonding within the university community (e.g. through peer support projects and encouraging student societies) and helping students to bridge into the wider community beyond the university through volunteering, work experience, employer engagement and other forms of community engagement.
	Planning interventions to address local employment options should address the problem systemically, deliver deep and sustained interventions and attend to the diversity of the cohort that they are addressing.

Clarity about outcomes and impacts is needed

It is important to be clear about the outcomes and impacts that are sought from any programme that is funded in future. There is a danger that existing university drivers and understanding about what constitutes a good outcome (and a positive 'graduate job') might shape projects in ways that are in tension with the aim of addressing spatial inequalities. Understandings of graduate jobs in relation to salary level, for example, were in tension in places both with what some employers (most notably SMEs) felt they could offer, and with what some graduates were looking for. The fact that graduates may aspire not to a 'graduate job' but might first want a smaller stepping stone was noted in some projects. That some graduates might only want to seek part-time work, and to combine this with caring responsibilities or other local responsibilities, could be an unfamiliar idea to some universities. One of the main findings of this project is that students' ties to the local area in which they are based are not solely built on economic factors and labour market position. Students' careers are more complex and involve meaningful ties to their local geographies.

These issues are exacerbated by the fact that many SMEs are less able to offer 'graduate level' jobs and less willing to define their jobs as solely available to graduates. Most projects argued that a stronger engagement with SMEs and other non-traditional graduate employers was essential to embedding the university more fully in the local labour market. But where this is done it could result in lower levels of what are identified as 'graduate jobs' and lower salaries. A recognition of this tension is likely to be important to any future projects in this area.

Challenges with defining outcomes and impacts are strongly related to decisions about what metrics to use to measure success. A number of projects struggled with knowing what and how to measure impact. If, as argued above, it is difficult to use traditional 'hard' measurements like the number of graduate jobs or salary as a summative measurement, alternatives need to be found. Some projects sought to define student outcomes such as 'confidence', 'skills' or 'job or career satisfaction' or employer outcomes such as 'business value' in ways that could easily be measured. Some interesting work could be seen by De Montfort University which sought to measure inclusion, job satisfaction, workplace belonging and career progression. Such approaches seem to point in a useful direction, with success potentially being judged through a

basket of objective and more subjective indicators. However, should such an approach be adopted it is vital that:

- Desired project outcomes and impacts are clearly stated so that meaningful and appropriate measures can be developed;

- Common measurements and approaches to impact evaluation are utilised across all projects in the programme to allow greater comparability between projects.

It is important to build in the need for project sustainability

The majority of projects' final reports recorded positive feedback from all their stakeholders and, across projects, there was an aspiration to mainstream aspects of project delivery. However, the viability of such mainstreaming of delivery has been variable.

In some cases, project innovations have been successfully integrated into the curriculum or into careers service delivery. For example, Newcastle College's 'Employer Showcase' within its engineering department and employability modules at University Centre Peterborough have been permanently embedded into curricula, and the latter's offer of individual guidance to students from the National Careers Service has been maintained beyond the project.

In other cases, particularly where initiatives required a relatively high level of spend per student, financial sustainability is more challenging. For example, although Nottingham's placement programme received overwhelmingly positive feedback, the expense of the scheme per participant is so high that the university is clear that any follow-on scheme would be reliant on external funding.

This raises the issue as to how long-term sustainability can best be achieved. In some cases, this programme's funding has acted as a pump primer, giving universities and other stakeholders the opportunity to undertake developmental or infrastructural work. In such cases the provider, or in other cases the local economy, has thereby increased its capacity to deliver more interventions in the long run. In other cases, the funding provided increased capacity to deliver an existing intervention enabling further evidence to be developed about needs and insights about the possible solutions to them. However, when the funding recedes, capacity is diminished and the intervention stops. In such cases there may be value in funders thinking about whether it is more important to focus on continuity and consistency than on innovation and experimentation.

Recommendations

Government / funders	Funders should reflect on the strategy they are using to support post-programme sustainability. Different types of project need different approaches to sustainability, and some may need ongoing funding if they are to be viable. For example, some projects can be easily mainstreamed into a university's core activities once the set-up costs have been funded, while others, such as placements, are more expensive and costs are less likely to be able to be borne by institutions alone.

	Graduate internships provide clear impacts on transition to the workplace; however, these are difficult to fund for small employers or universities. The identification of ongoing funding for local internship schemes would be valuable as it would provide a local counterbalance to the internship schemes offered by larger employers which typically draw students towards London.
Universities / careers services	Universities should mainstream a concern with spatial inequality and develop interventions to address this, such as the inclusion of regional or SME employers in wider sectoral employer events, or providing additional support to students with low mobility.

Final thoughts

The OfS Challenge Competition *Improving outcomes for local graduates* supported 16 projects across England to develop interventions aimed at supporting transitions of local graduates. The funded projects took a wide range of approaches aimed at different parts of the labour market: interventions aimed at supporting students and graduates, interventions aimed at employers, and interventions that involved redesign of university curricula. The projects demonstrated a wide range of early impacts for students, graduates and employers during the lifetime of the programme, and are likely to have had longer-lasting impacts on the function of local and regional labour markets.

The clearest impacts came from projects that engaged systematically with the issues of graduate transition, building relationships between stakeholders and understanding that all stakeholders have a role to play in supporting graduate transitions. Employer-led activities, student-led activities, and activities led by other agencies or organisations are all important components of support for local graduates, alongside university interventions and the activities of university careers services. Support for local graduates cannot be achieved by any one part of the system in isolation but requires cross-partner working. Further, effective support cannot rely on a single type of intervention. Building a programme of interventions to enable students, graduates and employers to engage to different extents and in different ways – according to their needs – is important. Events, networks and forums emerged as important mechanisms for bringing different parts of the graduate employment system together, for building understanding, relationships and partnerships to generate additional impact from activities, and for developing the capacity for future innovations and spin-off activities.

The themes identified in this evaluation demonstrate that, broadly, the projects worked mostly as anticipated, addressing student and graduate needs and building the capacity of employers. However, the evaluation also demonstrates that it is important not to focus on interventions as standalone activities, but to build synergy across partners and across activities. The importance of wider synergies was often not fully recognised in the projects' theories of change, although they could be implicit in the ways that many projects worked. The evaluation also identifies limitations in implicit understanding in some of the projects, and arguably in much of the graduate transition literature, where graduates are seen as individual actors all in pursuit of similar 'graduate level' employment goals. Instead, this evaluation underscores the variations in

student and graduate needs and aspirations, and the significance of wider contextual factors including families, finance and health. A key outcome of this programme for many of the partners has been in the knowledge they have gained about the needs of diverse students and diverse employers – often those that are least likely to identify with notions of 'graduate level' employment. Sharing this knowledge more widely through evaluation activities at both project and programme level has created a legacy for the future, in developing an evidence base to support future innovations in this area.

References

Alexander, R., & Hooley, T. (2018). The places of careers: The role of geography in career development. In Valérie Cohen-Scali, J. Rossier, & L. Nota (Eds.) *New perspectives on career counseling and guidance in Europe: Building careers in changing and diverse societies* (pp.119-130). Springer.

Alexander, R. (2018). Geography, mobility and graduate career development. In C. Burke & F. Christie (Eds.) *Graduate careers in context: Research, Policy & Practice* (pp. 85-95). Routledge.

Allen, K., & Hollingworth, S. (2013). 'Sticky subjects' or 'cosmopolitan creatives'? Social class, place and urban young people's aspirations for work in the knowledge economy. *Urban Studies*, *50*(3), 499–517. https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098012468901

Amendola, A., Barra, C., & Zotti, R. (2020). Does graduate human capital production increase local economic development? An instrumental variable approach. *Journal of Regional Science*, 60(5), 959-994.

Ball, C. (2015). *Loyals, stayers, returners and incomers: Graduate migration patterns*. HECSU.

Ball, C. (2019). Graduate labour market myths. In C. Burke & F. Christie, *Graduate Careers in Context: Research, Policy and Practice* (pp. 57–70). Routledge.

Ball, C. (2019b, October 14). There's no such thing as the national graduate labour market. *WonkHE*. https://wonkhe.com/blogs/theres-no-such-thing-as-the-national-graduate-labour-market/

Binnie, G. (2022). Employability Blog Series: The great levelling up debate – the role of graduate employability in regional prosperity. *HEPI*. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/05/13/employability-blog-series-the-great-levelling-up-debate-the-role-of-graduate-employability-in-regional-prosperity/

Bond, R., Charsley, K., & Grundy, S. (2008). *Scottish graduate migration and retention: A case study of the University of Edinburgh 2000 cohort*. Scottish Affairs, 63.

Bounds, A. (2019). Time running out to rebalance UK economy away from London. *Financial Times*.

Britton, J., van der Erve, L., Waltmann, B., & Xu, X. (2021). *The impact of living costs on the returns to higher education*. Department for Education. https://ifs.org.uk/publications/impact-living-costs-returns-higher-education

Charles, D. (2003). Universities and territorial development: reshaping the regional role of UK universities. *Local Economy: The Journal of the Local Economy Policy Unit*, 18(1), 7–20. https://doi.org/10.1080/0269094032000073780

Christie, F, Page, C., & Lupton, B. (2021). *Report 4. Partner perspectives on Rise Digital activities*. Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre. Manchester Metropolitan University.

Collinson, S., & Taylor, A. (2020). Civic universities and inclusive local economic recovery: How can universities do even more to support regions in crisis? https://blog.bham.ac.uk/cityredi/civic-universities-and-inclusive-local-economic-recovery-how-can-universities-do-even-more-to-support-regions-in-crisis/

Dacre-Pool, L. (2020). Revisiting the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability. *Journal of the National Institute for Career Education and Counselling*, 44(1), 51-56. https://doi.org/10.20856/jnicec.4408

Donnelly, M., & Gamsu, S. (2019). Spatial structures of student mobility: Social, economic and ethnic 'geometries of power'. *Population, Space and Place*, *26*(3). https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.2293

Faggian, A., McCann, P., & Sheppard, S. (2006). An analysis of ethnic differences in UK graduate migration behaviour. *The Annals of Regional Science*, 40, 461–471. https://doi.org/10.1007/s00168-006-0061-y

Faggian, A., McCann, P., & Sheppard, S. (2007). Some evidence that women are more mobile than men: Gender differences in UK graduate migration behavior. *Journal of Regional Science*, 47(3), 517-539.

Finn, K. (2016). Relational transitions, emotional decisions: New directions for theorising graduate employment. *Journal of Education and Work*, 30(4), 419–431. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2016.1239348

Fitz-Gibbon, C. T., & Morris, L. L. (1996). Theory-based evaluation. *Evaluation Practice*, 17(2), 177-184. https://doi.org/10.1016/S0886-1633(96)90024-0

Harding, A., Laske, S., & Scott, A. (2007). *Bright satanic mills: Universities, regional development and the knowledge economy.* Routledge.

HESA. (29 November 2022). *Getting a move on: The creation of a new graduate mobility marker.* https://www.hesa.ac.uk/insight/29-11-2022/new-graduate-mobility-marker

Hooley, T., Marriott, J., & Wellens, J. (2012). *What is online research?: Using the internet for social science research*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Kollydas, K. (2022). *What influences the geographical mobility behaviour of university graduates?* HEPI. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2022/02/14/what-influences-the-geographical-mobility-behaviour-of-university-graduates/

McCann, P. (2016). *The UK regional-national economic problem: Geography, globalisation and governance*. Routledge.

Milburn, A. (2009). *Unleashing aspiration: The final report of the panel on fair access to the professions*. The Panel on Fair Access to the Professions.

Office for Students (2018). *Office for Students Challenge Competition Industrial strategy and skills – support for local students and graduates.* Office for Students.

Office for Students. (2019). *Improving outcomes for local graduates*.

https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/skills-and-employment/improving-outcomes-for-local-graduates/

Peer, V., & Penker, M. (2016). Higher education institutions and regional development: A meta-analysis. *International Regional Science Review*, *39*(2), 228–253. https://doi.org/10.1177/0160017614531145

Percy, C., & Dodd, V. (2021). The economic outcomes of career development programmes. In Robertson, P., Hooley, T., & McCash, P. (Eds.). *The Oxford Handbook of Career Development* (pp.35-48). Oxford University Press.

Sage, J., Evandrou, M., & Falkingham, J. (2013). Onwards or homewards? Complex graduate migration pathways, well-being, and the 'parental safety net'. *Population, Space and Place*, 19(6). https://doi.org/10.1002/psp.1793

Smith, D. P., & Sage, J. (2014). The regional migration of young adults in England and Wales (2002–2008): a 'conveyor-belt' of population redistribution*?. Children's Geographies*, 12(1), 102-117. https://doi.org/10.1080/14733285.2013.850850

Universities UK. (2015). *The economic role of UK universities.* Universities UK.

Westhorp, G., Prins, E., Kusters, C. S. L., Hultink, M., Guijt, I. M., & Brouwers, J. H. A. M. (2011). *Realist evaluation: An overview*. Wageningen UR Centre for Development Innovation. https://library.wur.nl/WebQuery/wurpubs/fulltext/173918

Appendix 1. Summaries of funded projects

GradTalent Development Agency

Lead partner: *Bath Spa University*

In partnership with: *University of Bath, Bath College, Swindon and Wiltshire Local Enterprise Partnership*

The GradTalent Development Agency (GTDA) aimed to provide specialist graduate employment services to graduates and SMEs in the South-West region. A specific aim of the project was to set up a regional graduate scheme offering 18-month graduate placements with local SMEs. Graduates registering with the agency were offered support with their CV, application and interview guidance through an online portal, and strengths profiling delivered by a member of the project team. Local employers, specifically SMEs, were supported to recruit, train and retain graduates through the provision of online materials including job description and person specification templates, vacancy details and graduate appraisal form templates, and top tips for recruitment. Some financial awards were offered to graduates and employers at the point of recruitment to assist with costs of starting employment. Post-placement support was also available to employers and graduates for the first eighteen months. Finally, the project contained a research strand, aiming to generate research evidence into the challenges to SMEs of recruiting graduates, and the economic impacts of supporting the SME workforce.

Graduate Re-Tune

Lead partner: *Birmingham City University*

In partnership with: *Aston University, Department for Work and Pensions, Jobcentre Plus Birmingham and Solihull District, Greater Birmingham & Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership*

Graduate Re-Tune was a project that sought to identify and provide additional support to unemployed graduates in the Birmingham City region. The first stage of the project involved holding Open Design workshops where partners explored the existing support structures for unemployed graduates and identified systems gaps. Partners then jointly developed and piloted a tailored package of employability and skills support for unemployed graduates. Initially support took the form of intervention and referral, with graduates newly registered for Universal Credit offered additional support. Graduates from Birmingham City or Aston were referred to a Graduate Re-Tune consultant, and graduates from other universities were supported by DWP work coaches and by their previous universities. Graduates completed an initial 'skills and labour market barriers' assessment and were provided with additional employability and skills support where appropriate. Graduates were supported with job search support, and then once entering the workplace were offered in-work support. Resources were developed through the project to support both work coaches and graduates, this included The GRAD (Graduate Re-Tune Advice Directory), a catalogue of online provision and resources, and a regular newsletter publicising local graduate level opportunities. The project also contributed to national initiatives

such as Kickstart[45] and Restart[46] bringing a focus on graduates to these projects, including management of the Graduate Opportunities Kickstart Gateway.

Transformation West Midlands

Lead partner: *University of Birmingham*

In partnership with: *University College Birmingham, Newman University, LifeStart from Virgin, Greater Birmingham and Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership, BPS Birmingham, UpRising*

Transformation West Midlands sought to support the graduate skills pipeline into regional growth sectors. The project sought to identify and target students most in need of support and provide them with a personalised programme to support them with transition up to two years post graduation. Graduates within two years of graduation were also targeted. Students were provided with progression coaching to raise aspirations, increase motivation and empower action. Coaches assisted graduates to develop individual action plans and targets and helped to steer progress and clarify goals. Graduates were also offered support from university alumni mentors. The project initially targeted, but did not aim to exclusively focus on, key growth sectors. During the project this focus developed to be more inclusive of employers in different sectors. Supporting the growth sectors, graduate/student participants provided reverse mentoring to businesses to inform and facilitate leadership and skill development and challenge barriers to inclusivity within organisations. Work experiences and other engagement activities relevant to the growth sectors were also provided. Financial assistance was available to help students access opportunities.

Graduate Workforce Bradford

Lead partner: *University of Bradford*

In partnership with: *University of Bradford Students' Union, Bradford Council Skills House, Bradford Council Integrated Communities Programme, Education Development Trust (LEP Career Hub), DWP, Bradford Chamber of Commerce, Bradford Health and Social Care Economic Partnership, West Yorkshire Police, QED, Khidmat Centre, Bradford Trident Opportunity Area*

Graduate Workforce Bradford aimed to address the unemployment and underemployment of black, Asian and minority ethnic graduates in the local area. The project comprised four different workstreams. The first was focused on business development, supporting businesses with tools and information in order to help them access graduate talent. Secondly the project aimed to support unemployed and underemployed graduates with an ethnic minority background to access employment through enhanced one-to-one career, job and enterprise coaching, and the development of a graduate employability and enterprise programme. The third key strand

---

[45] The Kickstart Scheme provided funding to employers to create jobs for 16 to 24 year olds on Universal Credit. For further information visit https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/kickstart-scheme.

[46] The Restart Scheme provides Universal Credit claimants who have been out of work for at least nine months enhanced support to find jobs in their local area. For further information see https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/restart-scheme.

focused on community engagement with sector, career and employment events delivered in local community centres and businesses. Finally, the project involved an action research element, which aimed to identify the extent of place- and culture-based decision-making in ethnic minority student and graduate career choices.

Gradforce

Lead partner: *Canterbury Christ Church University*

In partnership with: *London and South East Colleges, Mid Kent College, Hadlow Group, East Kent College, North Kent College, Kent Invicta Chamber of Commerce, Grit: breakthrough programmes, SMEs in Kent and Medway, Canterbury Christ Church Students' Union*

The GradForce project involved preparing graduates for working in SMEs in the Kent and Medway region. Final year students and recent graduates were recruited and offered a structured development programme (Get Hired!) in partnership with *Grit: breakthrough programmes*. Participants accessed a three-day personal development workshop, as well as being offered coaching, peer support and pre-interview support. Staff from the Careers Service were also provided with Belbin Accreditation for facilitators, allowing them to deliver this part of the student development programme. Working with employers, the GradForce project targeted SMEs and offered a fully-managed recruitment service. Employers were engaged via a conference, networking activities, GradForce events (in person and webinars), email campaigns, internal referrals and working with the Chambers of Commerce. Post-employment support was also offered to both employers and graduates through regular follow-up calls.

Leicester's Future Leaders

Lead partner: *De Montfort University*

In partnership with: *Freeths LLP, Brewin Dolphin Ltd, Eileen Richards Recruitment, Elevation Networks Trust, The Prince's Trust, Access Generation CIC*

The Leicester's Future Leaders project aimed to catalyse sustained graduate employment locally with a particular focus on enhancing ethnic minority graduates' outcomes and employment. The project comprised three main strands. Firstly the project aimed to engage and upskill employers so that they could recruit more inclusively, through the creation of an online inclusive recruitment toolkit and business consultancy services. Secondly an internships accelerator programme was developed, building on De Montfort's existing six-week internships programme but providing increased wraparound support to ethnic minority students to increase their impact. Lastly the project involved designing and running an in-work mentoring programme supporting ethnic minority graduates who were already in the workplace. As part of delivery, the project also held a 'Make Diversity Your Business' conference with two days of professional preparation for the students (only), followed by two days of co-learning and discussion with local businesses. Throughout, the project utilised principles of co-creation, employing a student lead to be the voice of the project and engage their peers, as well as maintaining a wider group of 30 ethnic minority student leaders to support the project.

Gateways to Growth: Unlocking Talent in Norfolk

Lead partner: *University of East Anglia (UEA)*

In partnership with: *UEA Enterprise Centre, New Anglia LEP, Chamber of Commerce, Norfolk County Council, Norwich City Council, South Norfolk Council, UEA Students' Union, Hethel Innovation Centre (Business Incubator), Kings Lynn Innovation Centre, Cambridge Norwich Tech Corridor, St Georges Works (Our Place)*

The Gateways to Growth project focused on supporting the transition of graduates into local SMEs. There were three key components to the project. Firstly, an SME recruitment service provided support to SMEs with graduate recruitment processes. Secondly, an internship scheme was developed for graduates, which offered year-long internships hosted by UEA to develop their skills, with the intention that local businesses could engage the interns on a flexible cost-effective basis to respond to short-term opportunities and/or address immediate needs, particularly around innovation. Lastly, all Norfolk-based graduates were offered enhanced professional support services from the UEA Careers Service, including a web-portal, career guidance and support with CVs, applications and interviews, mentoring and peer support from other graduates, training and development workshops, a recruitment fair and employer visits.

WRIPA-PLUS (PLaces+Universities=Success)

Lead partner: *University of Hull*

In partnership with: *University of York, University of Sheffield, University of Leeds, University of Nottingham, BetaChain, Humber LEP, Rofin-Sinar, Jesmond Engineering, Lampada/Evoco DS, Institute of Physics & Engineering in Medicine, Women into Manufacturing & Engineering*

The WRIPA-PLUS project aimed to improve connections between the five partner universities and SMEs in the region, with a focus on supporting physics students. The project involved supporting curriculum developments in the five universities, including embedding inclusive modes of work-based learning, professional skills development and employer delivery into the physics curriculum. The development of the WRIPA website, together with digital career tools and resources, provided information and tools to help students to make better informed career decisions and improve their connections with employers. The project also developed employer networks and student engagement activities which included some activities specifically designed to support under-represented students.

Graduate Skills Builder: Embedding a high-skilled workforce in Greater Lincolnshire

Lead partner: *University of Lincoln*

In partnership with: *Bishop Grosseteste University, North Lincolnshire, West Lindsay District and East Lindsay District Councils, Siemens Plc, Tulip Ltd, Bourne Leisure Ltd (Butlins), Micronclean Ltd, Lindum Group Ltd*

The Graduate Skills Builder project focused on enabling students from both universities (Lincoln and Bishop Grosseteste to work on consultancy type projects designed by local businesses. The aim was to increase student–employer engagement and improve connections between both universities and medium- to large-sized businesses in the Greater Lincolnshire area. A series of business challenge competitions were developed to run alongside undergraduate students' degree courses. They were team-based projects, with students from different disciplines working together to address a specific issue and write up a report with recommendations. At the end of the project the students presented their findings back to the employer. In addition, the project developed a strand focusing on shorter business challenges (equating roughly to one day of project work between a business and a student) focused on SMEs.

Digital Grad Accelerator

Lead partner: *University of Liverpool*

In partnership with: *Agent Academy CIC, Sci-Tech Daresbury, Liverpool City Region Local Enterprise Partnership (LEP), Unilever, Baabar, LAB by Capacity, MSB Solicitors*

The Digital Grad Accelerator project involved recruiting 18 local commuter students each year for two years for a 'digital skills internship' which took place over the summer break. This internship was run by a delivery partner (Agent Academy), and involved a mix of training sessions, employer visits, mentoring and a work placement. The students also worked on a research project with employers to identify and explore digital skills gaps in the region. After the internship each student worked as a 'digital coach' at the university providing workshops to other students focused on the skills gaps identified during the research project. A digital summit was also held on an annual basis to engage further students and regional stakeholders in the project.

Graduates for a Greater Manchester

Lead partner: *Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU)*

In partnership with: *University of Manchester (UoM), Manchester Digital, Greater Manchester Combined Authority, Greater Manchester LEP / Skills Hub, Manchester City Council, Sharp Futures, both Students' Unions, Higher Education Careers Service Unit*

Graduates for a Greater Manchester delivered bespoke, accredited and immersive interventions to targeted students to raise aspirations and develop insights and skills to enable successful transition into the creative and digital sectors. The project incorporated two discrete strands: one at Manchester Metropolitan and one at Manchester. At the former, the curriculum development was part of the 'Third Term' programme (later rebranded as "RISE"), an optional programme delivered to first- and second- year students during the summer break and particularly popular with local students. Project funding allowed a specific strand of this programme to be developed which was targeted at the technical and digital creative sector. At Manchester, the curriculum development was part of the BSc Psychology programme and comprised a taught module and short work-placement or confidence workshop.

Stay and Succeed North East

Lead partner: *Newcastle College University Centre*

In partnership with: *North East Automotive Alliance, Dynamo, Engineering Employers Federation, Digital Catapult*

The Stay and Succeed North East project sought to facilitate connections between employers and the curriculum in the fields of engineering and digital technology in order to address regional skills gaps. Eighteen twelve-month graduate internships were created for graduates on specific programmes (BEng (Hons) Electrical Electronic Engineering, BEng (Hons) Mechanical Manufacturing, and BSc Applied Computing (Networking and Cyber Security)). Through these internships the project sought spin-off benefits in the form of curriculum improvement, enhanced careers resources and a programme of events. This included three engineering showcase events. The project also sought to create two collaborative networks connecting Newcastle College University Centre with regional employers and industry partners in the fields of engineering and digital technology. Through engaging with students and employers the project aimed to secure a better understanding of the needs of employers and the needs of students and support connections between the two.

Creative Pathways

Lead partner: *University of Nottingham*

In partnership with: *Dance4, Nottingham Playhouse, Nottingham Contemporary, Nonsuch Theatre, City Arts, UNESCO City of Literature, SCP Partners, UoN/NLA*

The Creative Pathways project encouraged University of Nottingham students and graduates to engage with careers in the creative and cultural sectors. The project had two main elements. Firstly, an internship programme was developed which placed seven interns each year with local cultural employers for a seven-month placement. Secondly, the project established a 'Creative Academy' which developed a programme of three careers events per year which were focused on the creative and cultural sector and featured engagement with a range of local and national employers.

Recruitment Solution

Lead partner: *University Centre Peterborough*

In partnership with: *Cambridgeshire Chambers of Commerce, The Skills Service, Opportunity Peterborough.*

The Recruitment Solution project aimed to support the transition of graduates into local businesses, especially SMEs. An 'Employer Hub' was created to provide support for SMEs and large businesses to assist with graduate and student recruitment. Students were supported to develop their employability skills through the creation of an online Career- and Employer-Ready course, individualised careers support, and through employability modules created and embedded into disciplinary course provision. Student ambassadors worked with the university and businesses to undertake research into the needs of SMEs.

Improving Graduate Outcomes in Health and Social Care on the North Yorkshire Coast

Lead partner: *Coventry University (Scarborough)*

In partnership with: *York Teaching Hospital NHS Foundation Trust, North Yorkshire County Council, NHS Scarborough and Ryedale Clinical Commissioning Group, Independent Care Group (York and North Yorkshire), Scarborough VI Form College, Scarborough Tec (including North Yorkshire Care Academy), Saint Cecilia's Care Services, Coventry University Students' Union*

The Improving Graduate Outcomes project aimed to address shortages of health and social care workers in the North Yorkshire coastal region. The project aimed to increase the number of students recruited onto specific courses, including three new undergraduate degrees which started in 2020, and to increase the numbers of local graduates going into the health and social care sector in the North Yorkshire coastal region. The project involved three main strands of activity. Firstly, outreach work with pre-HE populations aimed to encourage entry onto health and social care courses such as Adult Nursing as well as the three new degrees (BSc Applied Psychology, BSc Learning Disabilities Nursing, BSc Mental Health Nursing). Secondly, preparing students for transition was supported through increased careers and employability support, including employer engagement and employability events. Finally, support for graduates was offered through employer interventions, such as the guaranteed interview scheme offered by NYCC for those who met the minimum criteria for vacancies.

Advantage Tees Valley

Lead partner: *Teesside University*

In partnership with: *Tees Valley Combined Authority, North East England Chamber of Commerce, Teesside University College Partners – Darlington, Hartlepool, Redcar and Cleveland and Stockton Riverside, a range of strategic employer partners, including Fujifilm Diosynth, CPI, BMI Healthcare, Double 11 Games, Cleveland and Durham Fire and Police Services*

This project took a multi-faceted approach to raising student aspirations. Within the university, employability activities were supported for students including: workshops, mentoring, internships, alumni events, and leadership training. Employers were engaged to support and deliver co- and extra-curricular employability activities and graduate internships were developed for recent graduates. The project also extended to working with prospective students, teachers and parents to increase awareness of the graduate job market. This included running careers events, summer school activities, employability events and open day sessions. A series of Labour Market Information resources were also developed to provide information about opportunities within the region.