

Reflective Report

Designing Educational Experiences to Support the Future Employability of Gen Z and Gen Alpha

Laidlaw Undergraduate Research Programme

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1. Introduction & Aims:

Background

Young people entering the UK labour-market today are confronting very different conditions from a decade ago. Overall employment has risen in this time, yet youth share of employment has fallen; entry routes have narrowed, qualifications no longer distinguish candidates as they once did, and the experiences that build employability are distributed unevenly.

This project examines how educational experiences might be better designed to support the future employability of Gen Z and Gen Alpha; whilst treating inequality of access as a central thread as opposed to a secondary concern.

Aim and objectives

The aim of this project was three-fold and sequential. Firstly, establishing what these generations need - and secondly how this combines with what the current market demands. Only then can we consider how education might best respond.

Three objectives followed:

1. To identify the skills and experiences that will matter for employability toward 2030 and how these compare with what education currently supplies.

2. To examine how access to employability-building experiences varies by socioeconomic background, geography and institution type in the UK.
3. To understand the mechanisms through which the unequal access is produced and sustained.

Existing Evidence

To see where my primary research should best fit, I first reviewed the existing evidence across three connected strands.

The first strand looked at who these generations are, and found:

The assumed digital fluency of these generations is largely a myth: Kirschner and De Bruyckere (2017) show that growing up around technology does not itself produce functional digital ability, which must be taught rather than assumed. Schroth (2019) - using US data - reports a fall in the share of teenagers with any recent work experience - with corresponding associated gaps in workplace confidence and communication. Evidence on Gen Alpha remains thin and hard to separate from ordinary childhood development, so findings on the younger cohort are treated here as provisional (Höfrová et al., 2024).

The second strand is where the findings get more in depth and relevant; they concern the market these generations are entering.

A recent government review of young people and work (GOV.UK, 2026), framed around the NEET population specifically, reports that the labour market has structurally slowed in absorbing young people - overall employment has grown by 7 million whilst the youth share has fallen from 1-in-7 to now 1-in-9 - representing a demand-side shift rather than a deficiency in young people themselves. Across this and the wider literature, qualifications emerge as necessary but no longer sufficient: Herbert et al. (2020) argue that credential ubiquity means a degree alone no longer differentiates candidates, with employers instead selecting on the projected ability to perform - demonstrated by confidence, workplace exposure and interpersonal capacity. What the market increasingly rewards is meta-skills: the WEF Future of Jobs report (2025) placed analytical thinking, resilience and adaptability at the top of employer demand - yet Scheuring and Thompson (2024) find graduates' self-reported skill models miss these entirely.

The third strand, and the project's central thread, concerns who can access the experiences that build these employable attributes.

Work experience and internships have become near-essential - with Wright and Mulvey (2021) describing internships as "the new degree"; and reporting that two-fifths of the largest UK graduate employers are "not at all likely" to recruit applicants without any work experience. However, access to internships is heavily stratified by social class: they find upper-middle-class

students are 7x more likely to complete multiple internships than working-class peers, a gap that persists even within the same elite institutions, and is heightened through the compounding of early advantages into further advantages "opportunity stacking" (Wright and Mulvey, 2021, p.349). The underlying mechanism is generally traced to Bourdieu's forms of capital: **economic** (affording unpaid internships rather than needing term-time paid work), **social** (family networks that surface opportunities) and **cultural** (graduate parents passing on insider knowledge of how the market works), (cited in Wright and Mulvey, 2021), which McCafferty et al. (2024) and Bathmaker (2021) show the gap compounding across a student's university trajectory.

Discrimination in recruitment is also seen and operates through two distinct mechanisms amongst others. First, the overt form; with Byrne (2022) finding that altering only a candidate's ethnicity on an otherwise identical profile significantly lowers their perceived employability. The second form is quieter and structural class bias. Burke and Scurry (2024) state recruiters screen for resilience and similar attributes yet find that such traits are only recognised when it is signaled in a familiar register, therefore candidates who have overcome comparable adversity in an unfamiliar register may be read as underprepared rather than resilient.

Finally, stratification begins well before higher education: analysis of adult skills from OECD (2025) finds socioeconomic background the strongest and most compounding predictor of the very meta-skills the market rewards.

The gap

A methodological gap surfaced which directly shaped the project's primary phase. In a systematic review of 87 employability studies, Scandurra et al. (2024) identify how rarely employer, student and institutional perspectives are all examined together - only four of the 87 studies did so - leaving demand-side and multi-stakeholder evidence comparatively thin. To respond to this, the project designed a small primary survey to supplement the literature review, gathering direct evidence from employer perspectives.

2. Methodology:

The project was built around a dual-phase design. First a structured literature review to establish the evidentiary foundation - then a primary survey of UK employers to address the demand-side gap the review had identified.

Literature review

For each of the three strands, a keyword table was created paired with core concepts and search terms, which then were combined systematically. The searches were run primarily through ERIC and Scopus with Google Scholar reserved for a final targeted sweep. The inclusion criteria was UK-focused, 2022–2026, and peer-reviewed for academic sources or from recognised institutions for grey literature; exemptions from any of these (older or non-UK sources) were retained at times for conceptual value.

Reference lists of the strongest sources were snowball-searched; and every source kept a log with page-level citations and an evidence-basis note flagging projective, extrapolated or contradictory claims. Lastly population-specificity discipline was maintained throughout: evidence drawn from NEET, graduate or general-adult populations were kept distinct.

Primary survey

The survey was a short anonymous questionnaire (Microsoft Forms) to employers asking three open-text questions; where young people most often fall short; what a genuinely work-ready young person looks like; and what education providers should do differently, including how employers and educators might widen access.

Respondents were UK-based graduate recruiters, recruited primarily through targeted LinkedIn outreach (64 approached, 14 responding - a 22% response rate) with a further seven through personal contacts, giving 21 respondents. The survey ran from 22nd June - 25th August 2026. Respondents were briefed before participating and told their responses would be kept anonymous; the survey was also ethically approved by the University of Leeds (reference 1920). Analysis was done thematically: with the themes noted anytime a respondent brought one up - counting by respondent rather than by mention, so that no single long answer could inflate a theme. Complete-sentence quotations were preserved verbatim to ensure quotes were not misused.

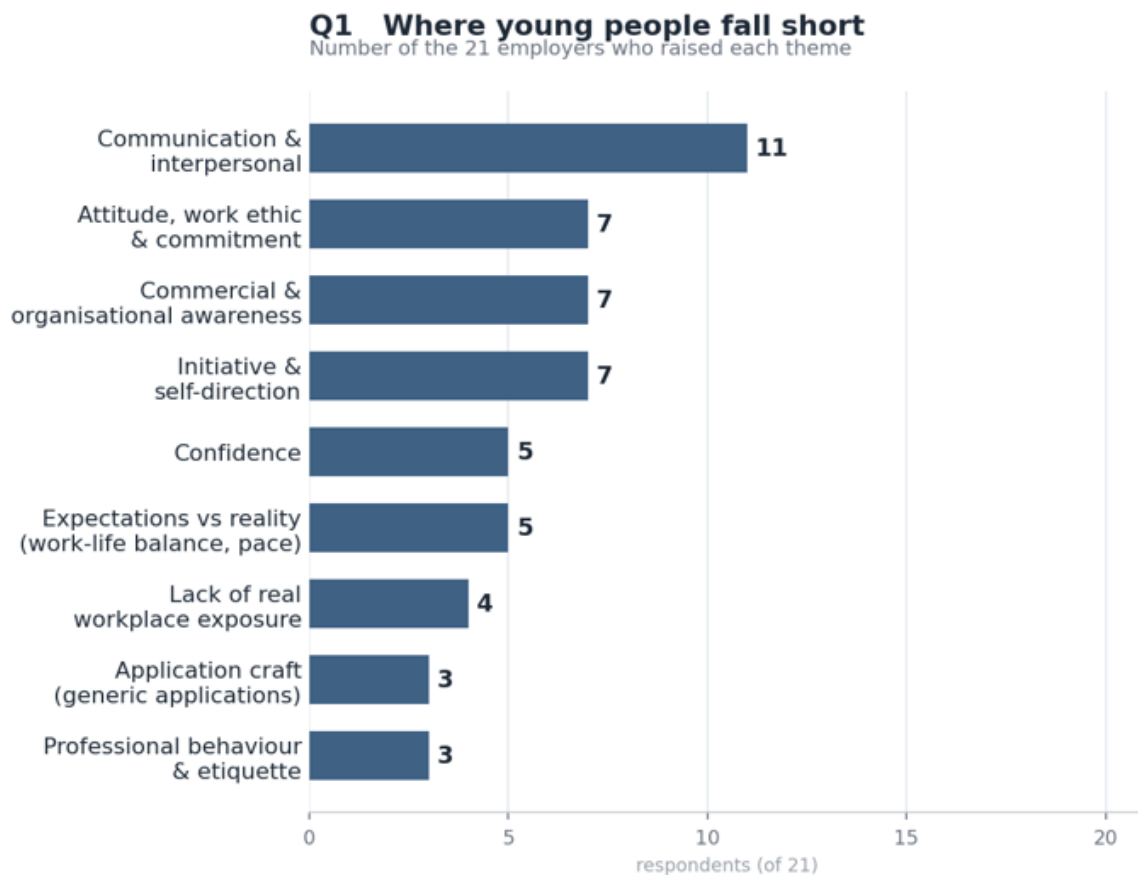
Limitations

The survey is small, self-selected and exploratory (N=21); it supports illustrative and corroborating claims, not representativeness, prevalence or sector comparison. Each question invited a different specific lens, and so a theme's prevalence across the whole survey is partly reflective of how viable of an answer they were to each question - most visibly, widening access could surface only in Q3 whereas communication could surface across all 3. Therefore counts were only read within a question, never aggregated across them, and cross-question comparisons are treated with caution.

3. Findings:

The clearest pattern across the survey is that the same three ideas recur through all three questions: communication, workplace exposure, and attitude or willingness to learn. Employers named these as what young people most often lack, as the markers of someone genuinely ready, and as what they most want education to build. That recurrence is the same spine viewed from three angles. The three questions are best read as a story of the graduate market as a whole; yet analysed thoroughly separately.

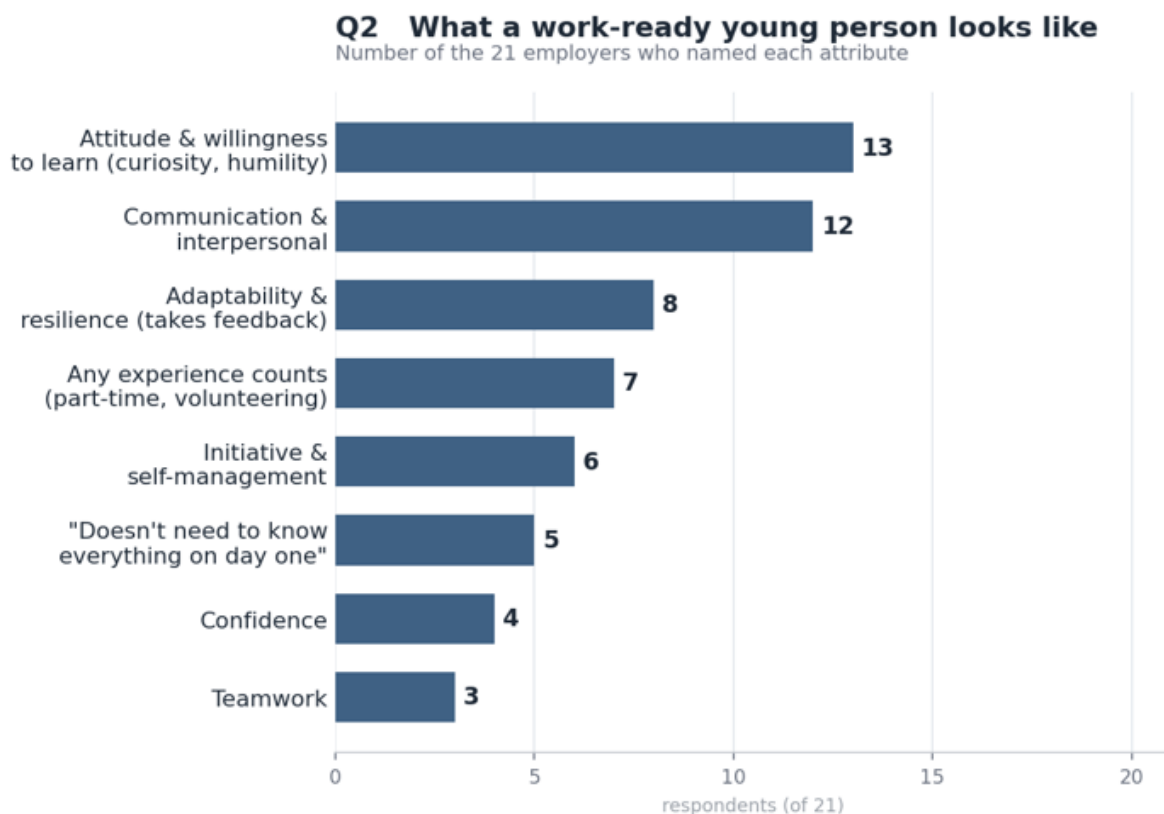
Question 1: Where do young people fall short?



Employers pointed overwhelmingly to how young people operate in a workplace rather than to what they know. Technical and academic ability was rarely named as a problem; several respondents said this explicitly. Communication was the single most-raised gap (11 of 21), and it was described less as a fixed trait, more as a situational difficulty. Meaning the ability to shift

register between peers, managers, clients and customers, and absorbing the tacit conventions of professional life. Behind this sat a cluster of similar dispositional themes of fairly equal weight: attitude/work-ethic, commercial and organisational awareness, and initiative, followed by confidence and mismatched expectations about progression and work-life balance. Another distinct, concrete complaint that recurred was applicants failing to research or tailor their applications, which employers read as a signal of effort rather than a skills gap.

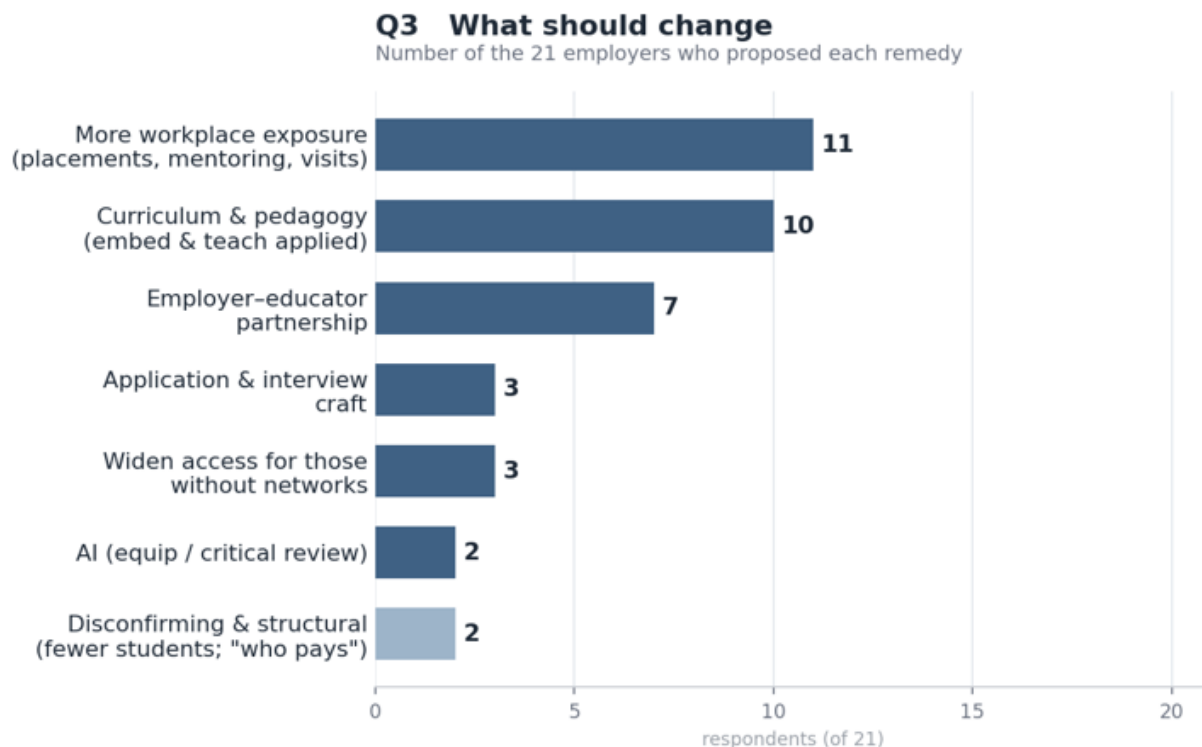
Question 2: What does a work-ready young person looks like?



Q2 was largely Q1 read in the positive frame; a ready candidate is one without the gaps typical candidates show. There was a distinct shift however: the candidates who stand out do so again via disposition but specifically, curiosity, openness, self-direction and a readiness to go beyond

the minimum. Communication ran a close second, with adaptability and resilience following. Two features are worth drawing out. First, readiness was repeatedly defined as not already knowing everything: with several respondents stressing that willingness to learn mattered more than accumulated knowledge or experience, and that a day-one entrant is not expected to be the finished article. Second, where experience was valued, it was defined broadly - part-time work, volunteering, sport, societies and projects were all named as legitimate evidence, not just formal placements.

Question 3: What should change?



Q3 was directly relevant to the designing educational experiences part of the research, and here employers moved from diagnosis to concrete proposals - which converged on exposure. The clear front-runner (11 of 21) was more real workplace experience before entry: placements, work experience, shadowing, insight days, employer talks and mentoring. Close behind (10 of 21) was changing what and how education teaches: embedding employability and workplace behaviours throughout learning rather than as a bolt-on, and teaching applied rather than abstract skills. Third (7 of 21) was genuine two-way partnership between employers and

educators, though several respondents acknowledged this is hard in practice, naming the cost question and cultural barriers.

On widening access, only 3 of 21 respondents engaged with this section of Q3 substantively; all three made the same point: that opportunity currently flows through personal connections and structured employer outreach could level it. This is a thin base, however, and should be treated as suggestive only. Finally, employers largely framed exposure as something education should supply, with few naming their own organisation's role despite Q3 asking about both.

4. Discussion:

The project set out to establish what these generations need and what the market demands before asking how education should respond. Two conclusions are drawn.

Firstly, the survey corroborates the review's central demand-side finding: employers locate young people's gaps in communication, exposure and disposition rather than in academic ability, confirming that qualifications are necessary but no longer sufficient.

This holds within limits however, as the survey has an N=21 and so evidences what employers value, not the representativeness of these views. It also does not touch on the distribution of access - that rests in the literature alone, where it is well evidenced. Second, reading the two together surfaces the project's core tension. Employers converge on workplace exposure as the fix - yet the literature exposes that these experiences are precisely the opportunities most unequally distributed by social class. Notably, this remedy is the one disadvantaged students are least able to obtain, so provision that simply increases these experiences without addressing who can reach it simply risks widening this gap. This reframes the design from "how do we provide more exposure?" to "how do we provide it in a way that reaches those currently squeezed out?" Another survey observation enhances this point: almost all employers framed exposure as the educators' job, rarely naming their own role as gatekeepers to it. Finally, interventions that increase exposure whilst measurably widening access point to the best route for further research.

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Part 2: My Reflections:

1.The Impacts from Conducting Research:

Before the project began, I was honestly apprehensive. This was the first professional research I have been involved in and led myself. Although I was comfortable with economics and to some extent literature reviews (from university essays), the project pulled me into less familiar ground: the sociology of education, intricate structural inequality, and a qualitative framing I had not worked on before. On top of all this my main concern was ensuring I could produce something genuinely original rather than just a summary of what others had already argued.

Initially, I had planned to anchor the project on artificial intelligence as the force for redefining the graduate labour market; a framing I was drawn to out of personal interest as much as anything else. Although this plan did not survive my first supervision meeting: Karen challenged it directly, and in doing so taught me my first real lesson as a researcher: an interesting hypothesis is not the same as an honest, defensible one. Therefore we settled instead on an open-discovery framing, ensuring I understand the labour market as it currently operates before reaching for any solutions. Accepting that early meant getting my first failure out of the way quickly, and the willingness to see how wrong my starting idea was really helped me to be flexible and open throughout the project.

Interestingly, that willingness was instantly rewarded in my first literature review when AI appeared naturally; the evidence turned out to be contested and uneven rather than the clean, decisive picture I previously assumed. Had I built the whole project on it, I would have anchored weeks of work to unstable ground and crowded out the more defensible - and more important - story about who can actually access the opportunities the market rewards. Leading with an open framing proved far more effective, and made my eventual argument much stronger.

Another concern I had was simply the scale of what I aimed to get done - in only six weeks. I really wanted to achieve a thorough literature review, one that genuinely understood every element of the market before I went anywhere near solutions. That meant getting to grips with several broad themes at once: current employability across two distinct generations; how they differ in learning and work; how the market is projected to change; and the differing forms of inequality that sit underneath it all. I wanted to do all of this whilst also running primary research alongside it - which, as I go on to explain, proved a real struggle of its own.

I found what made it possible in the end was not through working faster but working calmer: breaking the project down systematically into weekly plans with achievable goals and defined outputs, and - most crucially for me - learning to move on when the time for a task was up rather than getting bogged down in it.

If I was to start this project again the biggest change I would make is my mindset going in. I would come into it knowing I am going to make mistakes, not worrying about having to know everything, and actively seeking support straight away rather than floundering first. Lastly I would also know that it is acceptable to fail to complete everything originally envisioned - pivoting is crucial. These represented real shifts in me over the six weeks: I definitely ended the project a more careful, and a more settled, researcher than I began it.

2. Leadership Skills:

Looking at the Laidlaw leadership capacities, four really stood out to me as ones I genuinely developed rather than merely encountered.

Critical thinking and reflection

This was the capacity the project demanded most consistently. I have already described how I first encountered this during my pivot away from AI, but a further version came later when using my primary survey. After collection I had twenty-one responses which could honestly only support one half of my argument - the demand side, what employers say they value - the structural inequality-of-access claim was practically untouched from employers with only 3 out of 21 mentioning it at all. Holding that line, and resisting the temptation to stretch the data across the whole thesis, was almost as hard as collecting it. The same discipline and reflection I had applied to AI, when I kept it as a genuinely contested pressure rather than promoting it to a driver the evidence could not support. Learning to want a defensible claim more than a striking one was a significant and honest research trait I developed.

Design thinking and problem-solving

Unexpectedly, I developed this via the survey recruitment process. The original plan was to run two surveys: a dual process asking both graduates and employers their perspectives. So I set out - very enthusiastically and somewhat naively - with a plan to get significant responses on the graduate survey. The plan consisted of an engaging LinkedIn post promoting the survey. You can see the image I created below:



I waited a week and yet received zero responses. I quickly realised the criteria to complete the survey was too strict: people who have already graduated, in the labour market, from the University of Leeds (as this was the ethical approval). My supervisor and I brainstormed several ideas and tried many but still only managed three responses. As we were short of time we made the practical decision to shift all efforts to the employer survey; which was more important in terms of what the current literature lacked - and had a broader criteria for who could complete it.

Although this time I was not starting from scratch; I had practical knowledge of what definitely did not work! Therefore, knowing public posts are too easy to avoid/ignore, I shifted my efforts to

directly contacting people. I used a free trial of LinkedIn Premium to reach graduate employers/recruiters directly, and drew on warm referrals to reach others I could never have found cold. Following the initial connections, I sent a concise message explaining my role, the survey, its aims, and how helpful they could be. In total I contacted 64 eligible people (in some cases twice - apologetically explaining I was close to my goal and how much they could help), with 14 completing the survey from this strategy alone.

Where one approach misfired, I learnt and followed up determinedly to put it right. The sample still stayed modest at 21, but the responses I did get allowed me to make some crucial insights and all came from problem solving.

Communication and influencing

These skills ran through the whole recruitment effort, in a subtler way than the problem-solving did. Reaching busy graduate recruiters meant every message had to earn a reply: I learnt which messages worked better than others, and constantly changed my approach to have a better chance at success. I eventually landed on leading with who I was and why it mattered to them - I think getting this across early stopped them from immediately thinking I was selling something - I also learnt to keep the 'ask' small and specific, and make completing the survey feel worthwhile rather than a favour. Warm referrals taught me the value of borrowed trust and I came to rely on that far more than I expected. Persistence and an acceptance - to the very real likelihood - of being ignored mattered too. This was especially true when I began following up a second time if I had seen they had read the message, which at first felt quite uncomfortable. It also meant judging the line between being professionally determined and pestering, and I found an honest, slightly apologetic tone - that acknowledging my slight pestering - landed better than anything more polished.

Creative ideation

Creative ideation showed up in an output nobody specifically asked me to produce. Nothing in the brief necessarily discussed a graduate-facing recommendations document; I created it because the research had concrete implications for the very people it described, and leaving those implicit would have wasted them. Originating it - deciding what it should contain and who it was for - was mine, and later on it developed further with Karen's input [including a jargon-buster table, and practical next step links]. It taught me two things: that the research is not finished when the original analysis is, and that generating the best creative outputs also involve collaboration after the original idea.

3. Dissemination of Your Research:

The main dissemination opportunity ahead is the Global Scholars Conference. I plan to make the most of this opportunity: I am submitting an abstract to be considered for a slot to present my poster there - and if selected, it would be my first time presenting research to a real audience.

The poster I have created uses a road/pathway metaphor to carry the central argument surrounding the access issues that are prevalent within employability building experiences; my research clearly demonstrates that some students clearly get a 'head start', and I hope this framing gets it across in a gripping way; whilst also remaining fully evidenced and professional.

Furthermore, selection for possible publication of this poster is also available through the Laidlaw Scholars Gateway via Taylor & Francis / F1000Research, and I am hoping mine may get this opportunity.

Finally, my supervisor has also proposed staying in touch and involved beyond the formal project, including the possibility of my presenting the research to her colleagues working within a similar area of research. Nothing is fixed yet, but it suggests the work has a life beyond the six weeks, and this is the kind of continuation I really want to pursue.

4. My Future Plans Now:

Of everything the project changed, my future education plans have shifted the most, and there is something very fitting in that: a study of employability has ended up significantly reshaping my own. The research has essentially handed me something close to a roadmap; a clear, evidenced picture of what the graduate market actually rewards and how to build toward it, and it has already begun to have an impact on me.

The most visible change is that I now intend to take a year in industry. Before this project it was not something I had seriously considered; the research made the case for structured, real-world exposure so plainly that I could not ignore it for myself, and I hope I can encourage my peers to weigh it too - or, where a full placement isn't an option, other experience-building routes that do such similar work. It has also changed how I approach recruitment itself: understanding what employers are genuinely looking for, rather than guessing, I hope will give me real confidence going into applications and interviews, and a clearer sense of how to evidence what I have to offer.

Furthermore, it has shaped my Laidlaw Leadership-in-Action plans. I really want to use those six weeks to continue this line of research - in some way or another - carrying the same questions into a policy and systems-change setting rather than leaving them at the end of the summer.

Most unexpectedly, it has opened a career route I had never considered; one of policy or change-making at its centre: having seen how it feels to work on something aimed at genuine, positive change.