UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS

LAIDLAW SCHOLARS

Research and Reflection Report

Curriculum to Career: Evaluating the impact of programme-level skills mapping on student employability through self-awareness and articulation

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Research

1. Introduction

Higher education is increasingly under pressure to demonstrate value through graduate outcomes. The HEPI Student Academic Experience Survey 2024 (Neves et al. 2024) shows that 24% of students who feel their degree is poor value attribute this to a lack of career prospects, raising the question of whether universities are fostering employable individuals. Programme-level skills mapping is a display of the transferable skills that students are developing in their degrees, and one tool used to highlight the embedded employability value. This research explores the impact of programme-level skills maps on student employability outcomes through the lens of self-awareness and skill articulation. The report begins with a review of existing literature, followed by findings from a mixed-methods study comprising a quantitative survey and qualitative focus groups. It concludes with practical recommendations for improving the programme's use of the skills map.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Defining Employability and the Skills Gap

Employability is commonly defined as "the ability to gain and maintain employment" (Hillage & Pollard, 1998), but contemporary literature emphasises that it involves mobilising, demonstrating and communicating skills in labour market contexts (Tomlinson, 2017). As employer expectations evolve, skills articulation and self awareness have become increasingly important (Winter, 2023).

Skills are both the “dominant language and currency” of the labour market (Pretti and Fannon, 2018). While higher education develops a wide range of skills, confident articulation is often underdeveloped, contributing to what is better understood as a skills-articulation gap. The ISE Student Development Survey (cited in Daubney, 2022) highlights graduates’ limited awareness of their own skills profiles, suggesting that students struggle to recognise and articulate the skills they gain throughout university.

To address this, scholars emphasise the need for clearer language and structured support for recognising and communicating skills (Pretti & Fannon, 2018; Daubney, 2021). Mapping transferable skills within programmes can help students understand how subject learning connects to employability, reframing the gap as one of articulation rather than skill possession.

2.2 Theoretical Frameworks for Employability Development

Yorke and Knight’s (2004) USEM model positions metacognition and self-awareness as central to employability, arguing that students must reflect on what they are learning and why, with the development requiring time, practice, and repetition. Kolb’s (1984) experiential learning theory reinforces this, showing that capability develops by cycling through experience, reflection, conceptualisation and experimentation – an iterative process that cannot be achieved through broad interventions. As skills differ in importance across disciplines, an institution-wide approach dilutes relevance and may risk being too generic to be meaningful (Winter,

2023). Therefore, a programme-specific mapping is favoured, ensuring skills are contextualised within a discipline that students identify with.

Tomlinson's (2017) theory of graduate identity further highlights the importance of identity capital – students' self-perceptions and narratives about their professional selves. From this perspective, employability requires students to develop a coherent sense of their professional selves and have expectations of what they bring to a role. This aligns with the similar views of Hillage and Pollard (1998) and Bridgstock (2009) which argue that effective employability depends on a career identity aligning with values, interests and goals. Programme-level skills mapping therefore plays a dual role: it surfaces the skills inherent in disciplinary learning and provides a structure through which students can build identity capital by understanding how their attributes connect to future roles.

Kensington-Miller et al.'s (2018) SEEN framework extends skills-mapping and focuses more heavily on self-awareness and articulation by focusing on 'invisible attributes' such as resilience and curiosity, emphasising the need for students to specify, explain and evidence their skills. This process builds students' understanding and application of their skills in a logical format and prepares them to transfer attributes beyond the university environment, to professional settings. While developed within a psychology degree of study and thus caution should be taken when generalising the effectiveness of this to a business school, it illustrates how structured reflection can support articulation.

2.3 Skills Mapping as a Mechanism

Programme-level skills mapping is an example of added employability (Daubney, 2022), requiring deliberate inclusion within curricula. Winter (2023) argues that embedded employability enhances subject learning through real-world application and ensures equitable access, particularly for students unable to engage with extracurricular employability opportunities. However, embedding requires pedagogical changes and potentially staff retraining, and some academics resist employability initiatives, viewing them as threats to academic rigour, particularly in research-led universities (Daubney, 2022). Bridgstock (2009) suspects that this resistance is due to academics seeing employability as political, not pedagogical. While these concerns are understandable – stemming from academic integrity and scepticism of policy – an embedded approach remains necessary to ensure equitable access for all students to develop awareness, language, and confidence, while still honouring academic priorities.

Daubney (2021) agrees with the necessity of skills mapping, putting forward that none of the skills called for by employers can be realised by the learner "without infrastructures in curriculum to make that learning clear and obvious and to enable them to recognise and articulate it". This implies that constant reflection is the mechanism that transforms skills maps from static lists into tools for building self-awareness. Bridgstock (2009) emphasises that employability involves "reflective, evaluative and decision-making processes", meaning students must actively interpret how their developing attributes relate to future work. Therefore, only when students are encouraged to revisit, interpret and evidence their skills development, will programme-level mapping support the self-awareness and articulation required to convert subject learning into employability value.

This reflective dimension is evident in institutions that have adopted programme-level skills mapping, where it is paired with structured opportunities for articulation. A strong example is Queen Mary University's mySkills initiative (Revell and Naeem, 2025) which integrates progress assessors into the skills map to practice articulation, such as reflection exercises and showcase videos, enabling students to revisit and evidence their developing attributes. This approach also places significant emphasis on consistent, employer-aligned language, echoing the recommendations of Pretti and Fannon (2018) and Daubney (2022) that students require clearer terminology before they can confidently articulate their skills. Another reason for the effectiveness of this initiative is its accessibility: the map is readily available online and broken down into explicit links, ensuring students can locate and engage with it. As Schweinsberg et al. (2021) argue, mapping learning outcomes in a place known to students allows them to regularly see the skills they are developing at the moment of learning, supporting deeper understanding of the purpose of academic tasks. This demonstrates how programme-level skills mapping, when paired with reflection and professional language, can meaningfully support the development of self-awareness and articulation – key outcomes that underpin employability.

3. Methodology

A mixed-methods explanatory sequential design was used, combining a quantitative survey with qualitative focus groups. The survey captures the breadth of student awareness, understanding and perceived relevance of the programme skills map, while the focus groups provide greater depth on how students experience and use it.

The survey included responses from 54 students in the Faculty of Business – 17 undergraduates and 37 postgraduates. The first section of the survey assessed awareness and access, with a binary aware/unaware question, and a follow-up of how they became aware. The following section about understanding and relevance included a 5-point Likert scale from Strongly Disagree to Strongly Agree, on whether the map shows transferable skills, reflects employer-valued skills, and helps see how modules contribute to overall skill development. Similarly, the reflection and articulation section of the survey used the same Likert scale, on whether the map encourages reflection, builds confidence for employer communication, and helps identify examples for applications.

The quantitative data was cleaned to address two discrepancies; 7 students reported awareness of the skills map and later contradicted these claims, and 4 others were aware but could not understand it and, as a result, access it. The awareness figures were therefore adjusted to reflect what the research team believe to be more accurate proportions, yet these discrepancies do suggest that some responses may reflect social desirability bias or misunderstanding of the question. To minimise subjective interpretation, all adjustments were agreed with the research team and documented transparently, prioritising consistency and inter-rater agreement.

Five focus groups were conducted with 26 students. Sessions followed a semi-structured format to gain better explanation of the survey responses, covering awareness, understanding, uses, barriers, improvements, articulation, and employability connection. A manual thematic analysis was conducted with themes

reported by frequency. Following this, the transcripts were coded with the software NVivo, where 16 codes were identified: Accessible, Articulation, Awareness, Common Language, Confusion, Employability, Examples, Guidance, Hyperlink, Informing Choice, Introduced, Marketed, Reflection, Surface Level, Transferable, Visualisation.

This study was conducted using data collected as part of a wider research study led by Marianne Savory at Leeds University Business School, with ethics approval granted by BESS and FREC (2025 3260-4979). Ethical considerations centred on confidentiality, data protection, and informed consent. Potential risks, such as inadvertent participant identification or misuse of sensitive information, were mitigated through data anonymisation, secure storage procedures, and compliance with institutional data governance protocols.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1 Awareness and Introduction

79% of surveyed students reported being aware of the skills map (85% postgraduates; 65% undergraduates). With only 17 undergraduate responses, this proportion is unlikely to be representative of the cohort and may even be skewed towards more engaged students, so could potentially be lower. Postgraduates' higher awareness may reflect greater professional experience, giving them more reference points for interpreting the map (Bridgstock, 2009). Focus group data corroborated this, with 73% of participants having prior awareness.

The map is most commonly introduced during programme induction. This was noted as problematic as many students do not attend induction, limiting reach and potentially explaining the lack of awareness. For this reason, it is recommended to introduce the map in formal lectures and seminars, and revisit it throughout modules, especially during learning activities where skills are particularly relevant, to ensure it is a constant consideration for students. This need for frequent, embedded introduction reflects literature emphasising that employability development requires repeated, contextualised engagement (Kolb, 1984; Yorke & Knight, 2004; Daubney, 2021; Winter, 2023).

4.2 Accessibility and Understanding

Students viewed accessibility in two ways: physical access and ease of understanding. Many described the map as “confusing”, “overwhelming”, “difficult to interpret” and “complex to find”, suggesting that a lack of engagement could be due to inaccessibility in each of its definitions. Proposed improvements included placing the map prominently on Minerva, embedding it in lecture slides, providing clearer explanations of its use, and altering it visually.

The visual design also hindered engagement. Students described the map as “lots of words” and “boring”, discouraging use and limiting interpretation. They unanimously recommended more visual appeal – colour, shapes, images – and suggested an infographic. The title ‘map’ also misled students, as the layout did not match their expectations, resulting in confusion about whether they were accessing the correct resource.

Design matters for employability development; students build self-awareness and articulation only when employability cues are clear and interpretable (Winter, 2023; Daubney, 2021). Visually dense or ambiguous tools remain surface-level prompts, hindering the development of employability narratives (Pretti & Fannon, 2018).

4.3 Perceived Uses and Value

Despite these barriers, students widely reported that the map aids employability by highlighting skills developed in the programme, supporting job applications, and providing a common language for articulating their abilities. Some used it for broader developmental purposes, such as informing module choice, motivating engagement with their degree, and tracking progression.

These patterns align with literature suggesting that students with greater experiential backgrounds or more developed graduate capital (Bridgstock, 2009; Daubney, 2022; Tomlinson, 2017) are better positioned to recognise the value of employability tools. Students further along the self-awareness journey may therefore engage more meaningfully with the map due to seeing the practical utility of the skills map more readily than peers with less capital or fewer reference points. This reflects Daubney's (2022) argument that articulation is contingent on both awareness and the ability to contextualise skills within lived experience.

4.4 Self-Awareness and Articulation

Awareness alone does not guarantee self-awareness. Although the survey shows generally positive responses on reflection and articulation, the focus group data reveals otherwise. Some students used the map as a checklist, but many struggled to connect skills to learning activities, limiting articulation. To rectify this, they requested examples of how skills link to modules and how to articulate them.

Language also posed challenges: the map provides a vocabulary but lacks elaboration, leading students to "recognise but not articulate". The survey and focus group data therefore suggests that the skills map succeeds in making students aware of what skills exist but falls short of developing the deeper self-awareness needed to connect those skills to personal experience and future employment, supporting Daubney's (2022) argument that the perceived skills gap is really an articulation gap. Without contextual examples and structured practice, recognition does not become self-awareness, and self-awareness does not facilitate articulation.

5. Conclusion

While the map highlights employer-demanded skills and provides a starting point for articulation, both self-awareness and articulation outcomes – and therefore employability – could be significantly improved. Awareness is high (79%), but access often reflects simply locating the map rather than understanding and using it meaningfully. Recognition alone does not lead to employability development; students must interpret, evidence and articulate their skills if these are to translate

into professional value (Daubney, 2022; Pretti and Fannon, 2018). The findings therefore reinforce the central theoretical claim that the key barrier is the gap between recognition and articulation: without explicit examples, contextualised guidance, and opportunities for reflection, the map remains "just words" rather than a mechanism for building identity capital or confident employability narratives (Tomlinson, 2017; Bridgstock, 2009).

6. Recommendations

- Embed the skills map consistently across modules and on Minerva. Introduce and revisit the map within lectures and seminars throughout the programme to ensure repeated, contextualised engagement rather than one-off exposure.
- Improve visual design and clarity. Replace dense text with a more intuitive, visually appealing layout – for example, an infographic or pathway-style map – to make interpretation easier and increase student engagement.
- Provide hyperlinks to definitions, real-world examples, and brief explanations of each skill to help students understand what the skills mean and how they develop them.
- Integrate structured reflection and articulation exercises so students can practice recognising, evidencing and communicating their skills in employability contexts.

With these adjustments, the map could move beyond simple recognition and more effectively support the development of self-awareness and articulation, underpinning employability.

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Reflection

1. Introduction

First and foremost, I am grateful to my supervisor, Marianne Savory, and to the Laidlaw Foundation, for the opportunity and the support throughout, as it is because of this that I am proud to have conducted meaningful research that will benefit both current and future students of the faculty of business. Being a member of this faculty myself – one previously unaware of the skills map with little confidence in my own employability – I understand the significant impact this research could have on the students of Leeds, during their studies, and beyond into their professional lives.

With my research centring on self-awareness and articulation, it feels particularly apt that I do so, demonstrating how I have evolved academically, professionally, and personally.

2. Personal Development

Having no prior knowledge of the skills map that I was researching, getting started was a daunting task, exacerbated by observing participants who seemed to be more familiar with the topic than myself. Yet, with the support of my supervisor, I embraced the newness of it and soon found my rhythm, realising that my complete lack of prior awareness was actually favourable. It allowed me to approach the project without assumptions, offering fresh insights into existing avenues and

identifying new ones that others closer to the topic may have overlooked. This initial discomfort became an early lesson in curiosity and growth – leaning into uncertainty rather than resisting it.

To overcome my apprehension, I logically started by conducting a literature review to gain a grounding. The words that had initially jumped out at me from the research statement had been “skills mapping”, and thus my literature review focused significantly on this topic. After my first week and a half of researching curriculum reflection models, I felt I knew the ins and outs.

My next step, starting the quantitative excel analysis, was delayed by a residential to the Yorkshire Dales National Park with my Leeds 2026 cohort. Spending the three days caving, climbing and hiking was exhilarating, while each one brought its challenges – climbing the rock faces and through the caves slower than some of my peers, testing my perseverance to reach the peak of Ingleborough. What stood out most, however, was how our cohort worked together: supporting each other through difficult sections, sharing advice, and adjusting our pace so no one was left behind. The intense, physical environment gave way to collaboration, encouragement and quick-decision making, and more personally, resilience.

Although the residential was unrelated to my research topic, the skills that I developed there became unexpectedly valuable in the five weeks that followed. The perseverance I relied on during the climbs translated directly into the patience needed for quantitative analysis, especially when datasets were messy or when initial attempts at coding did not work. The teamwork and communication required

in the Dales helped me feel more confident reaching out to peers and my supervisor when I needed clarification, and made me more comfortable discussing uncertainties rather than trying to solve everything alone. The experience also strengthened my ability to stay calm under pressure and adapt quickly when plans changed – qualities that proved crucial when navigating unexpected discrepancies in the survey data and rethinking my analytical approach.

Thus, I began my quantitative analysis with a newfound confidence, after getting a firm footing in my literature review and feeling accomplished after the residential, I thought I had overcome the initial doubt that I had been warned I would experience. However, I soon realised that this doubt would reoccur with each new method and route I took, and was a natural part of research and learning. Contradictions began to appear in the quantitative data, but I flagged them, cleaned them, and headed to the footage of the focus groups with the motivation of gaining some clarity. The qualitative data was enlightening, corroborating much of the survey data, but ultimately raising resounding thoughts that urged me to change my focus more to the employability aspect of the research statement, realising that the map is just a mechanism – self-awareness and articulation are the key tools for the broader area of interest. It was the changes in my understanding that enabled me to explore different perspectives and draw the findings and recommendations that I did.

Some moments stand out clearly. One example was the process of cleaning the survey data: discovering contradictory responses, debating whether they reflected misunderstanding or error, and working with the research team to agree on our approach. Another was during thematic analysis, where I experienced frustration

trying to code particularly ambiguous focus groups where participants rarely answered questions, while learning a new software. I eventually realised that ambiguity was actually meaningful – it reflected students' uncertainty about the map. Recognising this helped me refine my coding and strengthened my confidence in interpreting qualitative data.

Each new stage of the research process introduced another task or method that I was unfamiliar with. By the time I had become competent in one task, the next arrived, keeping me on my toes, developing my resilience alongside my research skills. As an economics student, I had some experience with the variety of methods I undertook – skimming large texts, basic excel, exploratory maths – but the project pushed me beyond these foundations. Through problem-solving prompted by serious trial-and-error, I strengthened these existing skills while gaining experience with new software, new analytical techniques, and new ways of thinking. This iterative learning, much like that in my research itself, built my critical thinking and design thinking capacities, teaching me to adapt quickly and remain solution-focused when things didn't work the first time. At several points, when early analyses did not make sense or the data felt overwhelming, I had to rethink my approach, learning to pause and redefine the problem rather than forcing a method that was not working.

This being my first experience of truly independent work was challenging yet rewarding. Unlike a group project or an essay that I could discuss with course mates completing the same assignment, I had to trust and test my own capabilities, resisting the temptation to rely too heavily on my supervisor who was only one email away. This independence strengthened my project management and time

management skills, as I had to structure my own workflow and hold myself accountable. Consequently, I have learnt to value the hurdles and learning curves that led to my end product, and using self-reflection as a tool to get me there.

What I did not expect was how much leadership development would emerge from working alone. I had always associated leadership with guiding a team, but in my independent journey, I have built the necessary qualities to be able to do this, while being able to lead myself. This project has enabled me to make decisions without external reassurance, manage competing demands, and stay committed to the direction I had chosen.

Through navigating uncertainty, reworking analyses, and learning from mistakes, I developed leadership skills rooted in the Laidlaw character qualities of purpose and growth. I became more comfortable acknowledging when I did not know something, more willing to ask for help at the right moments, and more confident in trusting my own judgement. In doing so, I realised that, to be a leader, I must be able to overcome complexities with patience, reflection, and resilience.

3. What I Would Do Differently

If I were to undertake a similar project again, I would approach the early stages with more structure. Even though I worked on one specific task at a time, in hindsight, I separated the tasks almost too much, failing to look ahead to the bigger picture. At the beginning, I spent too long trying to understand the skills map in isolation before

seeing how students interacted with it. Reading ahead slightly to give myself an overview beyond just literature, or even conducting a small pilot interview early on if the project was solely my own, would have grounded my understanding sooner and made the initial analysis more efficient.

I would also keep a more consistent reflective log. Although I reflected regularly, I often did so retrospectively. Recording my thoughts during and after each task – especially moments of confusion or realisation – would have enabled me to track my development more clearly and make the final reflection richer.

Finally, I would be more proactive in seeking feedback. It has always been something I have been slightly reluctant to do, and especially at the start of this project, I tended to wait until I felt stuck before reaching out. Going forwards, I will make more of an effort in this, as discussing my progress (or lack thereof) at more regular intervals beyond the weekly meetings could have helped me refine my approach earlier and given me greater confidence in my decisions.

4. Further Opportunities

I intend to continue collaborating with my supervisor in disseminating this research to other universities, as I hope to contribute to the movement towards embedding employability more meaningfully within degree education. Sharing this work beyond Leeds feels both exciting and outside my comfort zone, but that challenge is part of what motivates me. Dissemination will allow me to develop new skills in

communication and influencing, particularly in presenting findings clearly, responding to questions, and engaging with academics who may have different perspectives on employability. It will also strengthen my confidence in speaking about my work publicly – something this project has already begun to build.

I look forward to discussing my research, alongside that of other scholars, at the 2026 Annual Laidlaw Conference. Preparing for this will require me to refine my ability to translate findings into accessible insights for a non-specialist audience, a skill that will be invaluable in any future role. Beyond the conference, I am eager to further develop my leadership capacities through the Oxford Character Project and the Scholars into Schools education outreach programme, both of which I will complete in the upcoming academic year. These opportunities will allow me to practice leadership in new contexts, applying the resilience, critical thinking and empathy I developed during my research while preparing for my Leadership in Action next summer.

Prior to the Laidlaw programme, I had no fixed career plans or even a clear sense of what I wanted to do after university. While I am still exploring possibilities, this research has shown me that my skills are transferable across disciplines and that I can articulate my strengths in ways that open multiple pathways. Whether I choose to pursue economics in a directly related field or pivot towards research, policy, or something entirely different, I now feel equipped to demonstrate my employability with confidence. The process of conducting (and soon disseminating) this project has given me a renewed belief in my ability to adapt, learn quickly, and contribute

meaningfully to unfamiliar areas – qualities that make the idea of choosing a career far less daunting than it once was.

Alongside my pride in the research I have contributed to, I am thankful for the clarity it has given me, not necessarily in deciding a specific career, but in recognising that I have the skills, confidence and leadership foundations to find the right fit. The Laidlaw Programme has shifted my perspective from being apprehensive towards uncertainty to seeing it as an opportunity for growth – something that I will carry with me over the next year of my Laidlaw journey and long after this project ends.