

# Theory of Change for University of Suffolk employability intervention: Micro-Placements

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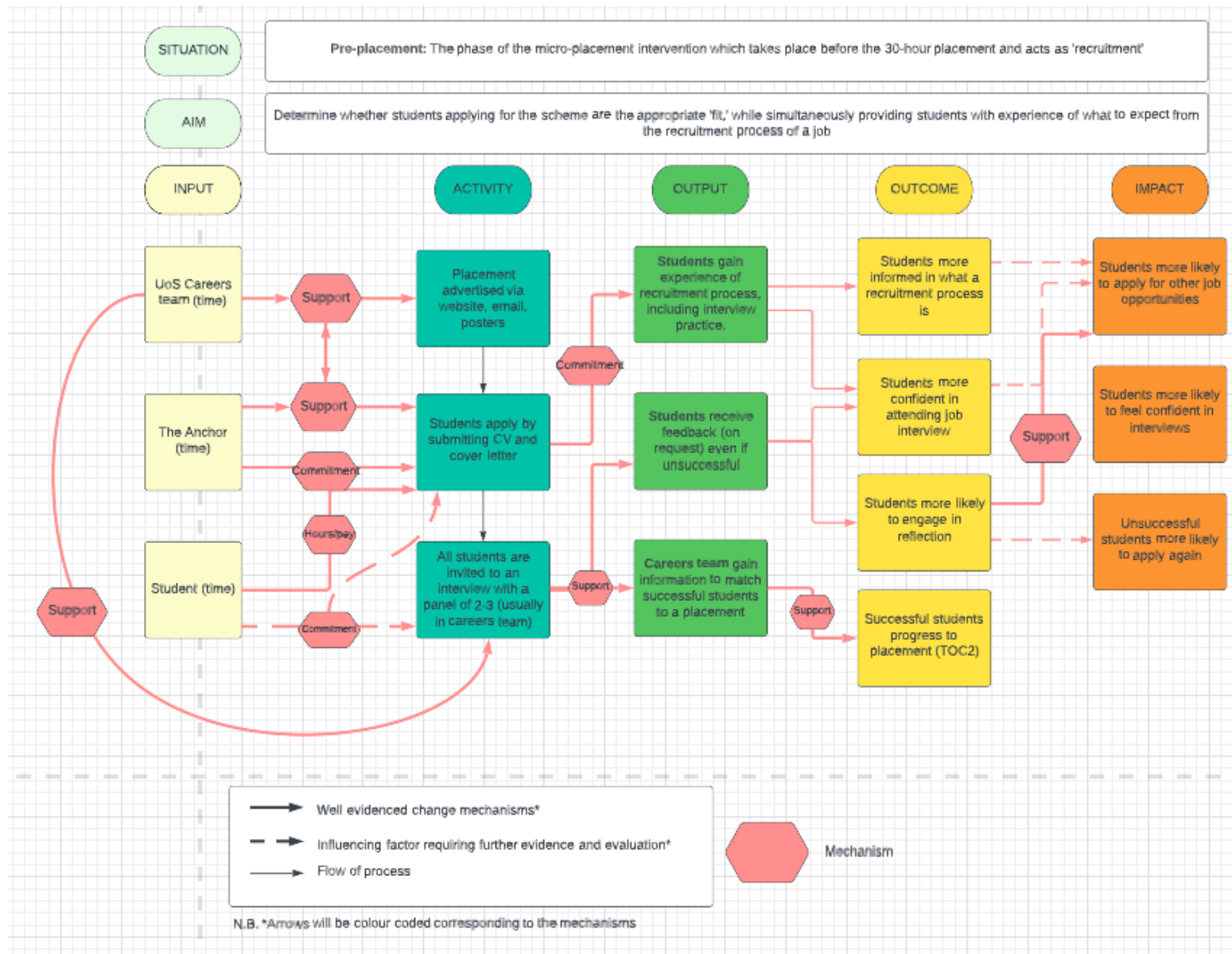
Professor Clare Rigg

Dr Laura Reeves

Amy Carpenter

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# Pre-placement Theory of Change



Pre-placement is the phase of the micro-placement intervention which takes place before the 30-hour placement and acts as the recruitment stage. The aim of this phase is to determine whether a student is appropriate for the placement role, while simultaneously providing students with experience what to expect from the recruitment process of a job.

### *Inputs*

There are three main inputs that allow the pre-placement phase to function and run to provide students with accessible and supported work experience. These inputs vary in significance and contribute in different ways to the scheme:

<b>Input</b>	<b>Function to the pre-placement</b>
UoS Careers Team (time)	<p>The UoS Careers Team commit time to ensuring the scheme is prepared and advertised to students, through the UoS website, email circulation and posters. Members of the team also are able to provide <i>support</i> to students by providing advice on CV's and cover letters.</p> <p>The Careers Team are able to provide <i>active support</i> to students in writing CV's and cover letters. This contributes to providing students with the confidence to apply for the scheme. Without the available support this could impact/hinder the functioning of the scheme because less students may apply (this perhaps acts as an influencing factor which requires further evidence to substantiate further).</p>
The Anchor (time)	<p>The Anchor is an individual who provides consistent support for students who take part in the scheme. This includes from beginning to end. Perhaps this is because the UoS Anchor has provided stability for the scheme since 2016, being the person who created and designed the initial scheme. The Anchor is arguably, the most essential input that is required in the intervention to enable it to function while ensuring students acquire desired outcomes as they move through the scheme.</p> <p>Within the pre-placement phase the anchor is an individual who appears to dedicate significant time and <i>commitment</i> in ensuring students are aware of the scheme, supported in applying and providing students with self-belief in their own capabilities to apply for the scheme. At UoS the Anchor provided personal support to students. At the pre-placement phase this consisted of individually emailing students letting them know about the scheme, and how they can apply.</p>
Student (time)	<p>The student is pivotal to the pre-placement phase of the micro-placement scheme. Without students applying it would not function and/or be required.</p>

### *Activity*

The activity consisted of four parts, two of which enabled the pre-placement phase to function (i and ii), and one (iii) which provides the connection (and successful student progression) to TOC2: The placement.

Activities consisted of:

- i) Advertising the placement via the UoS website, emailing students, using posters, and the Anchor sending out more personable invites to students to encourage them to apply (*support and building trusting relationships*).
- ii) Students then decide to apply (*commitment*), seeking support (if needed) in drafting a CV and cover letter (*support*). Two influencing mechanisms that contributed to students deciding to apply were the *length of the placement*, and the attraction of being *paid*.
- iii) All students who apply are invited to an interview with a panel of 2-3 (usually from within the careers team). The interviews are adapted, in the sense they are more relaxed than a job interview, with the interviewees displaying *additional support* to students.

### *Outputs*

The outputs emerge as a result of students undertaking experience of a typical recruitment process. The *commitment* students dedicate in applying for the scheme, acts as a mechanism in the early stages of the micro-placement scheme and also underpins the functioning of latter stages of the scheme too. Thereby, *commitment* appears to be a well evidenced mechanism required to enable the scheme to function. However, the level of commitment needed for optimal functioning of the scheme would require further evidence and evaluation, however, without students being committed to initially apply to take part in the scheme, the scheme would not run.

The outputs can be grouped in two ways. First, there are outputs that directly relate to the students experience of the recruitment process. Students explained that they felt more informed in what the recruitment process, placing particular emphasis on what they learned from the actual interview itself, which provided them with practise, and space to reflect on how to prepare for future interview opportunities. Moreover, the style of the interview was adapted (in friendliness, questions and prompts provided by interviewers to help if students were faced with questions, they were unsure of) which was interpreted as further supporting students (particularly those who may not have undergone an interview before) and contributed to the knowledge and skills they gained during the recruitment process. In addition, students also were provided with feedback on their interview performance (even if they were unsuccessful in the interview), which provided them with another layer of support to improve their skills. Some students referred to this and explained that: 'I have given more thought [in] how I would prepare for another interview' (S3). This suggests that the scheme also acts as a reflective practice for students to engage with (which is further developed in TOC3: Post-placement).

Second an output was also directed towards the careers team who used the information collected from the interview with students as 'a process of matching' where interviews were also used to elicit from the candidates what types of experiences they might be looking for. The recruitment process reverts back to common workplace practice by the issuing of an employment contract, paid work with holiday pay, which positions them as paid employees of the University. This facet of the scheme helps build student confidence as a valued member of staff, adding meaning to the work-placement and providing students with experience into the HR related processes that are involved with pre-employment checks.

### *Outcomes and impact*

The pre-placement phase of the micro-placement scheme enables students to become more informed in what a recruitment process is, increase in confidence in attending job interviews and enabling reflection on their own skills. Those that are successful in their interview progress onto their placement with support of the careers team. Hence, the pre-placement appears to be an influencing factor which contributes to the functioning of the entire scheme. Simultaneously the pre-placement phase also provides outcomes for unsuccessful students who applied, as they are given feedback and have the opportunity to learn from the process. As students are able to re-apply for the micro-placement scheme, this learning outcome could be an influencing factor which enables unsuccessful students to be more likely to re-apply to the scheme.

#### *Summary of mechanisms important to this phase*

‘**Support**’ is important to the pre-placement, recruitment process. The level of support was identified by both the key informants and the students during the interviews. Support is provided by:

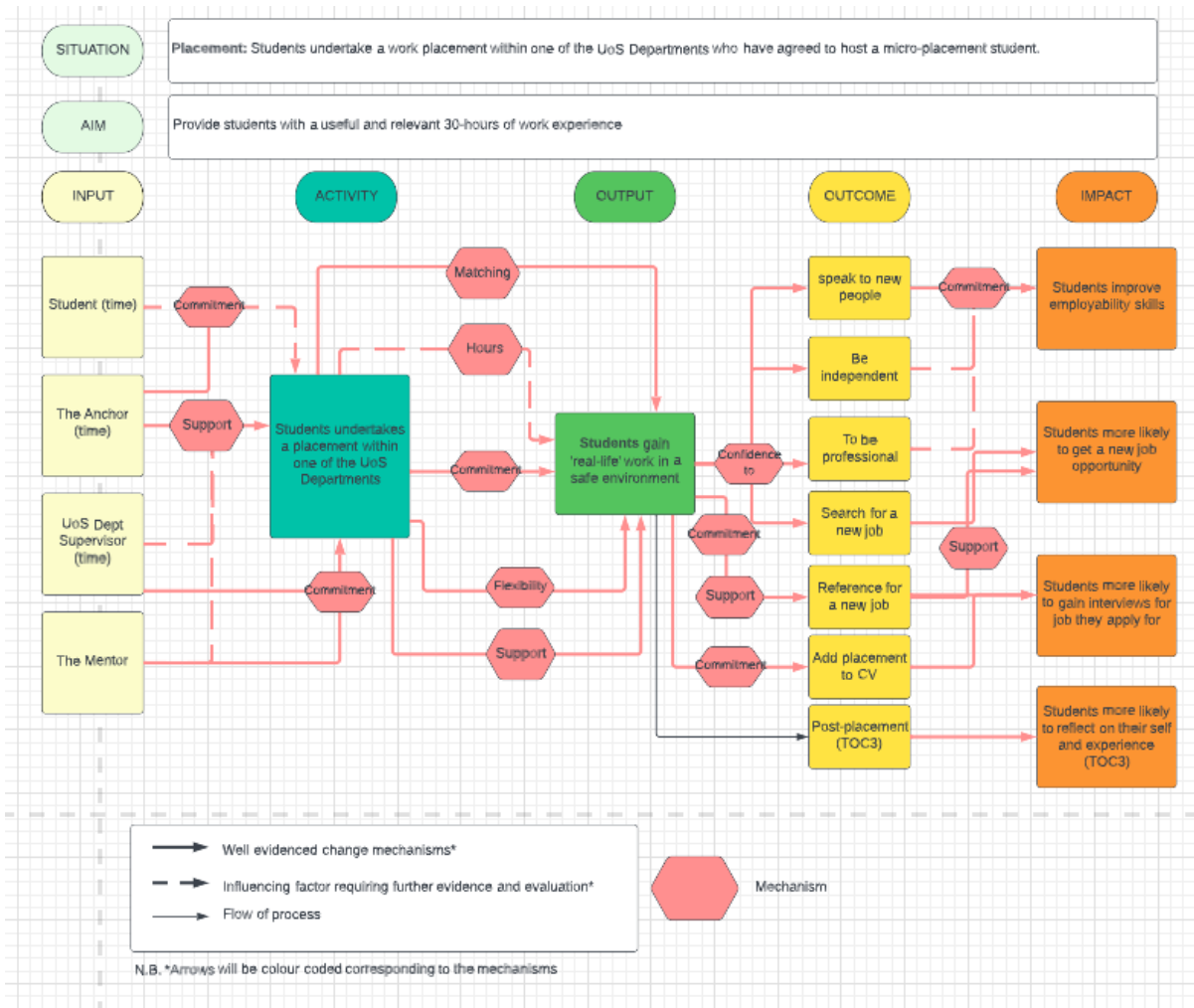
- The Anchor with personal invites to students by encouraging them to apply for the scheme. Early on in this scheme, the Anchor was building trusting relationships with students, which contributed to the support mechanism.
- The Careers Team provide advice on creating a CV and cover letter (if students asked for help) and also adapted the interview to make the experience less formal and friendly to those who may not have had any experience before. This was recognised by students who confirmed this with: ‘I don’t think it was as formal as a normal interview, which made me feel at ease, but it was an interview nonetheless’ (S6).
- Feedback, is provided on an ad-hoc basis, helping both successful and unsuccessful students give ‘more thought [to] how I would prepare for another interview’ (S3).

The level of support provided at this point of the micro-placement scheme acts as a mechanism which is fundamental to how the scheme functions during the pre-placement phase. We describe this mechanism as ‘enabling’ because it is a characteristic implemented within the UoS scheme, which is well evidenced throughout the data, and *enables* the functioning of the scheme. Without this level of support, we believe widening participation would be hindered reducing the accessibility of the scheme.

Other mechanisms that emerge include **commitment from students**, which underpins the functioning of the scheme. If students do not apply for the scheme, the scheme would not run or be required as an employability intervention. Also, the **length of the placement and flexibility of the scheme**, along with the fact that the 30-hours is **paid work** appear to be deciding factors for students in deciding to apply for the scheme. Hence all three appear significant mechanisms which contribute to the functioning of the scheme. Predominantly students felt the length of the placement could be longer than the 30-hours advertised, whereas other students felt more than 30-hours would not be doable. When asked what the optimal length would be responses ranged from 30-80 hours in length. Therefore, establishing an optimal length of the scheme presents an opportunity for future evaluation. Similarly, the flexibility of the scheme was crucial to students, with some saying this is a deciding factor when considering applying for the scheme. Without the flexibility, particularly for students with disabilities, or those with other caring responsibilities, flexibility enabled students to gain experience. This mechanism contributed to widening participation of the scheme. Moreover,

the majority of students felt that the placement being paid was essential in their decision making to participate in the scheme, which added value to the role and motivated them to not only apply but be committed to their placement.

## During placement Theory of Change



### Supplementary description – TOC2 - Placement

The placement consists of students undertaking a work placement within one of the UoS Departments who have agreed to host a micro-placement student. The aim of the placement phase of the micro-placement scheme is to provide students with a useful 30-hour work placement, relevant to their degree subject and/or career aspirations.

#### *Inputs*

There are four main inputs that allow the placement to function and run providing students with ‘a bit of a steppingstone into getting into work’ (S11). These inputs vary in significance and contribute in different ways to the placement:

<b>Input</b>	<b>Function to the placement</b>
Student (time)	<p>Similar to TOC1, the student is pivotal to the placement phase and TOC2. The degree to which the placement is successful and provides students with ‘real-life work experience’ will depend on the time and <i>commitment</i> the student puts into the placement. The student represents an influencing factor who underpins the success and impact of the placement, particularly in terms of the level of commitment they are willing (or can) put into the 30-hour placement.</p> <p>Further evidence is required to determine or evaluate the levels of commitment a student needs/is willing to provide for optimal success on the scheme.</p>
“Anchor” (time)	<p>The <i>commitment</i> demonstrated by the Anchor who leads the micro-placement scheme is a support mechanism which enabled students to feel there was a continual source of encouragement and support while they undertook the placement.</p> <p>During the placement the Anchor actively stayed in contact with placement students with weekly emails and supportive conversations. The Anchor was the point of contact, but also developed trusting relationships with students, where ‘the door was always open.’ This approach from the Anchor is well evidenced, and acts as an example of an enabling mechanism which is fundamental and would require replication if the scheme was to be implemented in another institution.</p>
UoS host Department supervisor	<p>The supervisor is assigned by the department that hosts the micro-placement student. The <i>level of support</i> provided by supervisors was enabling in some cases, but this varied depending on the individual supervisor and student.</p> <p>Further evidence is required to determine how effective supervisory support is while students undertake the placement, particularly the level of <i>commitment</i> required from the supervisor to ensure the student is supported effectively through their placement. This is in addition to other <i>sources of support</i> which appears to be the bedrock of the overall functioning of the scheme.</p>
The Mentor	<p>Mentors are <i>another source of support</i> for students who undertake a placement. They are assigned where needed though not necessarily to all students. The <i>commitment</i> of the mentor can be an influencing factor in similar ways to the department supervisor.</p> <p>At this point in the development of the scheme, the mentor scheme requires further embedding into the UoS micro-placement scheme, and thus would require further evidence and evaluation as an influencing factor.</p>

*Activity and corresponding output*



The activity consists of students undertaking a placement within one of the UoS Departments agreed with the Careers Team. In order for the student to achieve the output, *students acquiring 'real-life work experience'*, the following mechanisms influence the way students developed through the placement were present:

**1. The flexibility and length (hours) of the work placement**

*Flexibility* enabled students to participate in the scheme. The benefit to this flexibility is that it widened participation of the scheme and encouraged students who have other commitments (including students managing disabilities) to take part in the scheme.

The initial expectation was that students would undertake a 30-hour placement, flexibly completed around their studies and other commitments. However, in reality some students fell short of that 30-hours, and others extended the duration, which highlights that flexibility works as a change mechanism (see below). Overall, students felt that the placement could be longer in hours, with varying suggestions from 30-80 hours. However, others felt that 60 hours would be 'pushing it' (S13). Hence flexibility is essential for the accessibility of the scheme to all students who may wish to participate irrespective of their other commitments and responsibilities. In this instance, flexibility should be replicable if the intervention is implemented in other institutions or contexts.

**2. Matching**

As identified in TOC1, the careers team use the pre-placement phase of the scheme to 'match' students to placements that are offered by UoS Departments. This match influences the experience students gain from undertaking the placement, thus represents a mechanism that is an influencing factor which connects the placement undertaken and the scheme. Students who experience a good match appear to gain more valuable experience than those where there is less fit to the type of placement offered.

**3. Support provided.**

Similar to TOC1, *support* is crucial to students completing their placement. In the first instance this is because the Anchor acted as a constant support for students, sending weekly emails to ensure they were happy on the scheme. In the second instance, the Anchor also used this support as a way to ensure students were managing with the hours they were working and logging those hours to ensure they were paid for their time.

Hence, this reinforces the position that the Anchor is significant to the functioning of the placement, and the overall micro-placement scheme.

**4. Student commitment to their placement**

Students need to be *committed* to carrying out their placement and gaining the outcomes they said they wanted from the experience. Their level of commitment influences the experience they gain. This in itself is influenced by other factors such as the placement being paid, and the flexibility in when and how they complete their 30-hours.

**Table summarising the mechanism and how they function in relation to the micro-placement scheme**

Characteristic	Function of the mechanism
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<u>Hours worked</u>	<p>The hours worked varied from student to student. This translated to flexibility which encouraged students to complete hours when (and if) they can manage them.</p> <p>The hours worked is a mechanism which could be evaluated further because it appears students had varying views on what the optimal length of time should be.</p>
<u>Matching</u>	<p>Matching the placement provided and the experience student gained is an important factor when determining what students got out of the scheme. Hence, the matching process acts as a mechanism which influences the outcomes of the placement phase of the micro-placement scheme.</p>
<u>Flexibility of the scheme</u>	<p>Flexibility enabled continued participation in the scheme.</p> <p>Flexibility enabled widening participation and provided students with other commitments the room to manage their time and hours in ways which best suited their circumstances.</p>
<u>Underlying support</u>	<p>Support enabled students to complete the placement with reassurance and confidence to rely on support from the Anchor and their supervisor if they needed to.</p> <p>The role of the Anchor is crucial to ensuring students are completing their placement and also not struggling to do so.</p>
<u>Student commitment</u>	<p>The commitment from students equally enables student to gain experience. The commitment shown by students is essential to the placement phase, however, the level of commitment required for optimal experience gained requires further evidence and evaluation.</p>

### *Outcomes and impact*

The outcomes are influenced by a number of mechanisms. One is labelled as '*the confidence to...*' students who experienced real-life work through the placement had the confidence to:

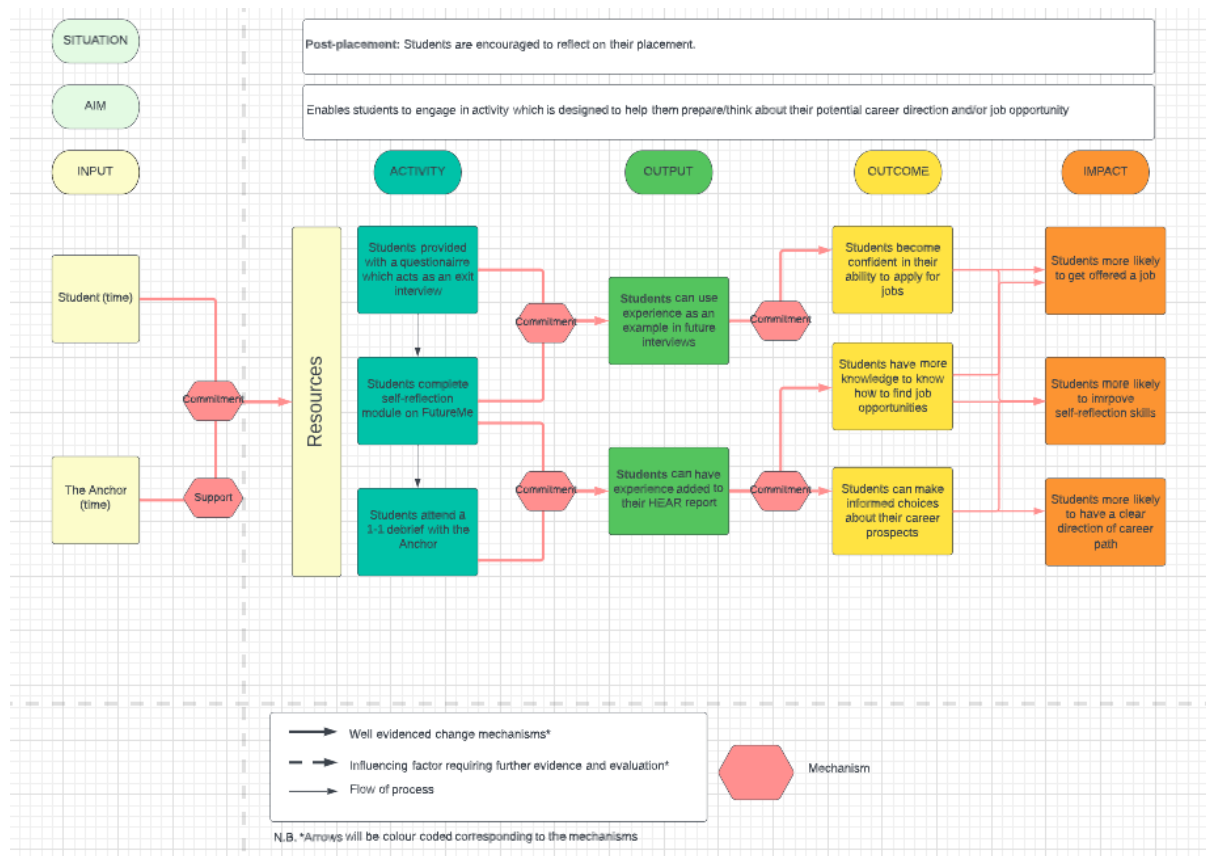
- Communicate through speaking to new people
- Have self-belief to independently work.
- Search for new jobs (with *support* from careers if students needed/requested it)
- Be professional in a working environment

These outcomes are likely to also be impacted by the *level of commitment* shown by students during their placement (as detailed above), along with the *possible support* students received from the Anchor, UoS department supervisor and their allocated mentor (if applicable). In so doing, the impact of the placement phase of the scheme shows improved employability skills acquired by the students. This appears to be the main outcome (and impact) of the 30-hour placement experience.

Another outcome relates to students being able to use the experience as a possible reference for future jobs and placing the experience on their CV. The reference depends on the *support and commitment* from the Anchor, who invariably was approached by students to write the reference. Evaluation suggests that the impact is that students are more likely to apply and

receive an interview from prospective employers, and potentially get new job opportunities having completed the micro-placement.

## Post-placement Theory of Change



### Supplementary description – TOC3 – Post-placement

Post-placement occurs after students complete their 30-hour placement within one of the departments at UoS. The final phase of the micro-placement scheme encourages students to reflect on their placement, and the outputs, outcomes and impacts heavily rely on the commitment students make to engaging with the reflective activities provided by the UoS careers team. The aim is to help students prepare/think about their potential career direction and/or job opportunities.

#### *Inputs*

There are two main inputs that allow the post-placement activities to function:

Input	Function to the placement
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Student (time)	<p>Similar to TOC1 and TOC2, the student is pivotal to the post-placement phase of the micro-placement scheme. Arguably, the student and their <i>commitment</i> to engaging with the post-placement phase of the scheme determines how successful the reflective stage is.</p> <p>Participation in these post-placement activities is not a compulsory part of the placement, and as such many students do not follow them through.</p>
“Anchor” (time and commitment)	<p>The <i>commitment</i> demonstrated by the Anchor continues into the final stage of the scheme, providing <i>continual support</i> for students who do undertake the reflection activities. In addition, the role of the Anchor at UoS spans beyond the micro-placement scheme itself, where the individual continues in communication with students and sharing job opportunities with them. This perhaps can be explained as being due to the Anchor being the initial designer and implementer of the scheme, and</p>

### *Activity*

The post-placement phase is designed to encourage students to reflect on their time on the micro-placement scheme. This includes:

1. Completing an online exit interview questionnaire provided by the careers team
2. Completing the self-reflection module provided by UoS on their FutureMe platform
3. Having a 1-1 debrief with a careers advisor which includes guidance and consideration of what might come next.

### *Outputs and outcomes*

Engaging in reflection in the latter phase of the scheme allows students to think about how they can use their experiences going forward in their job applications and interviews. Hence one output students emphasised when reflecting on their micro-placement is that they are able to use specific experiences as examples when applying for jobs and attending interviews. Like engagement with the specific activities, this output depends on *student commitment*. The level of commitment from students varied, with some fully completing the activities, whereas others did not complete any of the post-placement tasks. Thereby, the level of student commitment is an influencing factor on the function of the scheme and will impact the corresponding outcomes. For instance, students who are able to reflect on their experience, drawing out examples they can use in job applications (and interviews), are able to make more informed choices about their career prospects. Closely related to this, the committed students also can become more confident in their ability to apply for jobs. In particular, the 1-1 debrief could result in students acquiring more knowledge to know how to find job opportunities and becoming aware of current job opportunities they may wish to apply for.

Moreover, if students commit to completing the UoS FutureMe self-reflection module and have a 1-1 debrief interview with the Anchor, another output is that students can have their experience added to their HEAR.

These added activities that students can participate in, also depend on the commitment shown by the Anchor, who invests time to ensure students can have a debrief interview. Similar to the discussion in the previous two TOC's, commitment from both the student and Anchor are clear mechanisms which are well evidenced. However, further evidence could evaluate what level of commitment provides optimal outcomes (and then impact).

### *Impact*

Engaging in the post-placement phase of the scheme, in itself, is more likely to improve student self-reflection skills, which highlights the acquiring of skills beyond the experience they receive by actually completing their 30-hour placement. Moreover, there are indications that those students who appeared to display full commitment to the post-placement activities (i.e., those who completed a questionnaire, completed the self-reflection module, and attended a 1-1 debrief) are more likely to have a clear direction for their career path, which can also mean they are more likely to get a job having completed the scheme. By contrast, it is less clear the comparative impact on students who do not engage with these post-placement activities. Further evidence could evaluate casual connections between students who complete the micro-placement and the jobs they get.