

Small 'n' Evaluation Micro- Placements A Realist Evaluation

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Executive Summary

This Realist Evaluation was conducted as part of a TASO programme to pilot the use of a series of small *n* methodologies within widening participation (WP). It was applied to evaluate the University of Suffolk (UoS) micro-placement scheme.

Programme overview

The University of Suffolk (UoS) micro-placement scheme has been run by the university's Careers Team since 2016, providing a 30-hour micro-placement to students. The overall aim of the scheme is to give students who may struggle to find opportunities or be successful in finding an internship or graduate opportunity a chance to gain experience in a supportive environment. The scheme was designed to provide a flexible opportunity for those that cannot access traditional placement or internship opportunities, for example, those with caring responsibilities or those that cannot give up an existing job due to the financial implications.

Context

The University of Suffolk is a young higher education (HE) provider with small cohorts of students and a high proportion in the student population for whom APP interventions are intended (e.g. first in family, disabled students, care leaver). In part this is attributable to the high proportion of mature students, who are known to be more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than younger students (from lower socio-economic groups, Black, Asian and minority ethnic, disabled and/or being carers). In 2020/21 75.6% of UoS students were aged 25 and above, which is over double the UK national average of 33.8%. As a result students tend not to have high levels of social capital, connections and confidence to facilitate their transition into graduate employment.

Research questions

- i. How does the UoS micro-placement scheme enhance employability of student in the context of their backgrounds?
- ii. What are the mechanisms by which the UoS micro-placement scheme achieves the employability outcomes it does given the context of students who use the scheme?
- iii. What are the lessons for other evaluators of small 'n' employability interventions using realist evaluation?

Initial Theory of Change

In the absence of explicit theories of change in the academic and grey literature on student work placements explaining the efficacy, this study developed an initial ToC through semi-structured interviews with key informant interviews who were involved in the design, commissioning and implementation of the micro-placement initiative at UoS (n=9) and from documentation on the intervention.

Theory of Change resulting from the evaluation

Key mechanisms at different stages that were essential for achieving the above outcomes were:

- **Support** - from the placement organiser (the Anchor), Careers Team, placement supervisors and mentors.
- **Commitment** – engagement from the students themselves.
- **Payment** – the fact the placement was paid.

- **Length and duration hours** – Though some students would have welcomed a longer placement, overall 30 hours was attractive and particularly because they could be spread over several weeks.
- **Flexibility** of when the placement could be taken and hours worked facilitated students to participate who either had other commitments like children, or who had mental or physical health issues to work around.
- **Matching** – when placements fitted the student’s degree subject and career interests.

Outcomes

- Confidence
- Self-esteem
- Networking skills
- Communication skills
- Enhanced CVs
- Changed and clarified career plans
- Greater likelihood of getting interviews and subsequent job offers
- Knowledge of creating a CV/ writing a cover letter
- Better knowledge of the recruitment process
- Professionalism
- Improved initiative
- Experience of teamwork
- Better time management
- Self-awareness

Evaluation outcomes

In the context described, the intervention of a 30-hour micro-placement scheme is highly effective at almost doubling participating students’ self-reported employability skills, and at increasing their knowledge of how to apply for graduate jobs; their chances of gaining an interview, and the subsequent likelihood of them securing a job, compared to if they had not had this experience.

Also, given the context, the 30-hours experience alone is not sufficient. The intervention should be understood as 3-stage: pre-placement, placement and post-placement, with only the latter being optional. Activities within the pre-placement stage, along with significant support from an Anchor, Careers Team members, placement supervisors, and for students with particular needs, a mentor, are also key mechanisms in achieving the outcomes reported.

Conclusions for the use of realist evaluation to evaluate a small ‘n’ student employability intervention

1. When carrying out a realist evaluation, time is well spent understanding the role of the mechanism within the TOC.
2. Where possible, plan to use realist evaluation alongside implementation of an intervention, so that pre- and post- outcome measures can be most validly collected.

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1. Introduction and Purpose

1.1 Purpose of Report

This report presents the findings from a study that employed the method Realist Evaluation (RE) to evaluate the University of Suffolk's (UoS) micro-placement intervention. This is a 30-hour work placement scheme aimed at increasing employability amongst students that may otherwise find gaining internships and graduate jobs difficult.

The study was undertaken for TASO as part of their project to pilot various methods for evaluating what works with small/targeted cohorts in Access and Participation Plan (APP) variations or future APPs.

The purpose of this report is to present both an evaluation of the UoS intervention and to draw conclusions about the potential of RE to address the challenge facing small or specialist HE providers when attempting to generate causal impact evidence.

1.2 Evaluation Study Research Questions

Three research questions were investigated:

- i. How does the UoS micro-placement scheme enhance employability of student in the context of their backgrounds?
- ii. What are the mechanisms by which the UoS micro-placement scheme achieves the employability outcomes it does given the context of students who use the scheme?
- iii. What are the lessons for other evaluators of small 'n' employability interventions using realist evaluation?

When developing the research questions care has been taken to ensure the aims of a realist evaluation are reflected in how the questions have been phrased. Pawson and Tilley (1997) explain that the aim of a realist evaluation is to focus on understanding what a program does to change behaviours and offers a way to address how, when why and where interventions work (or in some cases do not work). For instance, the research questions are phrased around explore how the micro-placement scheme enhances employability. In addition, realist evaluations explore context-mechanism-outcome configurations, which aim to explain the interrelationship between given contexts, the mechanisms that impact changes in behaviour and the resulting outcomes. Hence, our research questions are constructed to focus on identifying the mechanisms which allow the micro-placement scheme to function in the way that it has and produce the outcomes it does.

1.3 Report Structure

The next section (2) provides details of the micro-placement scheme, its context, the intended participants and the intervention design. This is followed by an account to the evaluation design (Section 3) and approach to data analysis (Section 4). Section 5 presents the findings outcomes and mechanisms we found to be key, whilst Section 6 discusses these and the revised theories of change. Section 7 draws conclusions about the effectiveness of the UoS micro-placement scheme, and Section 8 offers final conclusions and recommendations on the use of realist evaluation for the conduct of small 'n' evaluations.

2. Details of the intervention: Micro-placement scheme

2.1 Context

The University of Suffolk (UoS) is a young HE provider with small cohorts of students and a high proportion in the student population for whom APP interventions are intended (e.g. first in family, disabled students, care leaver). In part this is attributable to the high proportion of mature students, who are known to be more likely to come from disadvantaged backgrounds than younger students (from lower socio-economic groups, Black, Asian and minority ethnic, disabled and/or being carers). In 2020/21 75.6% of UoS students were aged 25 or above (University of Suffolk, 2021), which is over double the UK national average of 33.8% (HESA, 2023).

The University of Suffolk student body are largely drawn from East Anglian postcodes (particularly Ipswich, north Essex and south Norfolk); predominantly over the age of 21 (with the greatest portion being over 25) and identifying as female. When looking at POLAR4 data, the most prominent group is Quintile 1; with Q1 indicating a home location where participation in higher education is least likely. They typically are less likely than average graduates to have significant work experience or to have existing social networks that can facilitate access to graduate level internships and jobs. In other words, the participants of the micro-placement employability intervention generally do not have high social capital, and a high proportion of students require targeted support to meet their diverse needs.

2.2 Participants

The UoS micro-placement scheme has been run by the university's Careers Team since 2016, providing a 30-hour micro-placement to students. The overall aim of the scheme is to give students who may struggle to find opportunities or be successful in finding an internship or graduate opportunity a chance to gain experience in a supportive environment. In its early years, the scheme prioritised those who performed poorly in employability assessment by the Careers Service, but with increased funding this has widened to be open to any undergraduate or post-graduate applicants.

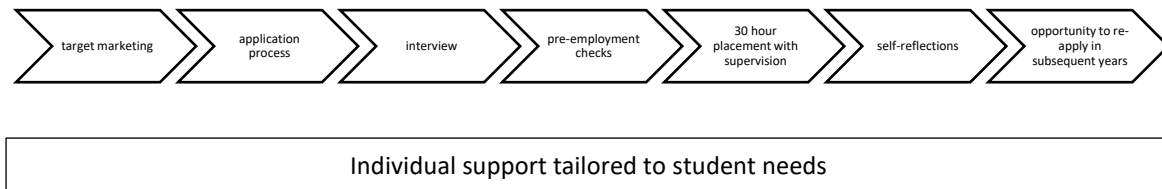
The scheme was designed to provide a flexible opportunity for those who cannot access traditional placement or internship opportunities, for example, those with caring responsibilities or those that cannot give up an existing job due to the financial implications.

By 2021/22 74 learners had participated, including 25 in the academic year 2021/22.

2.3 Scheme Design

The micro-placement scheme is illustrated in the flowchart below (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Flow diagram of Micro-placement scheme design



The stages include:

- **Targeted marketing** including a designated website containing information and cases studies of past students, plus promotion via the Careers Team at UoS. Students who are considering applying can seek advice from the Careers Team, and also receive advice on their CV and cover letter before they apply for the scheme. Usually, the micro-placement runs from September each academic year, with one intake, however, beginning in 2022/23 three intakes are being made, so as to improve accessibility of the scheme.
- An **application process** which requires students to submit a cover letter and CV, following which they are guaranteed an interview with a panel of 2-3 people.
- The **interview** is considered more supportive than a typical employment interview, with questions tailored to help prompt students in providing an answer. The students' answers are graded using a 3-point scale and this is then used to determine who is offered a position on the scheme and where. From September 2022 the interview panel also take into consideration the submitted CV in their decision. Feedback on the interview (and from this year the CV) is offered to all students who have applied for the scheme, whether they are offered a place on the micro-placement scheme or not.
- Successful candidates have to **complete all pre-employment forms** that are required when any new member of staff joins the university, and students are allocated to a department within the University who have agreed to host a micro-placement. Students can also opt for a mentor who can support them throughout their enrolment on the scheme. The Careers Team may also allocate a mentor if they feel additional help is needed for the student to complete the scheme. Decisions regarding further support, in part, are determined by The Careers Team using student responses from the interview process.

- Start dates for placements vary throughout the academic year and are dependent on student needs, availability, and the completion of the pre-employment checks. The placement consists of **up to 30-hours paid employment within the University**. These 30 hours could be taken in a single week block, but typically they are spread across several weeks or months. Students were given full flexibility to manage when they were able to complete the hours. The only stipulation was that hours had to be completed by the end of July each year (UoS financial year).
- Usually, students will report to a **placement supervisor** while on their placement. Currently this process and the level of support provided by the placement supervisor is dependent on a number of factors: the department hosting the placement; the individual placement supervisor, and the competencies of the student. Students are monitored via continual communication with the Careers Team. Students log hours worked in order for payment to be processed.
- Once the placement has been completed students are encouraged to **reflect on their time on the scheme**. They are invited to fill in an exit interview questionnaire provided by the Careers Team and to have a 1-1 debrief with a careers advisor which will include guidance and consideration of what might come next. They are also encouraged to enrol in **FutureMe**, the university's online portal that provides a range of self-assessment tools and information on job search opportunities, and complete a self-awareness module. Completion of these three elements entitles the placement experience to be added to a student's Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR).
- Throughout the process students are supported by an **Anchor**, who plays a central role from communicating the scheme to students, to providing advice on applications, as well as during and after the placement.
- Students are welcome to **re-apply for the scheme** in a subsequent academic year.

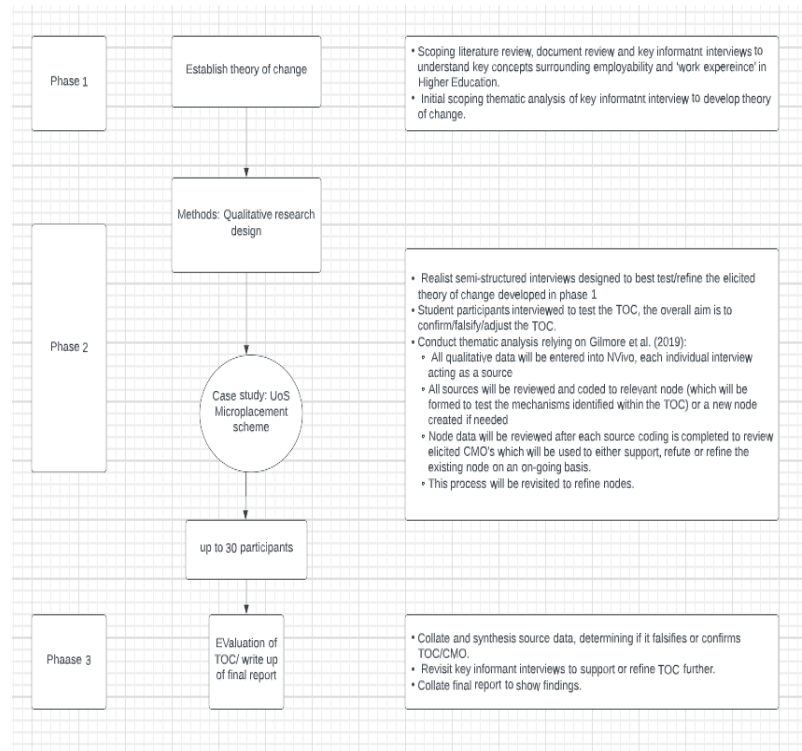
2 Evaluation design

3.1 Realist Evaluation

Following Pawson and Tilley (1997) we conducted a realist evaluation of the UoS micro-placement scheme utilising a qualitative research design. This was structured around three phases (see Figure 2):

- **Phase 1: Development of an initial theory of change (TOC)**. Pawson and Tilley (1997) suggest that realist evaluation involves developing an initial programme theory (a theory of change (TOC)) that explains how outcomes (O) are achieved by the effects of intervention mechanisms (M) in the particular context (C). The TOC is therefore an explanation of context-mechanism-outcome configurations (CMO). Thus, the first phase of our research design set about developing a TOC which could be applicable to work placements in HE, and particularly in contexts with student profiles similar to that at the University of Suffolk, as described above. The following sources were consulted to identify potential theories of change behind the efficacy of micro-placements:
 - Review of academic literature on micro-placements and student work placements more broadly;

Figure 2. Research Phases



- Review of grey literature on micro-placements and student work placements more broadly.

We found that although both academic and grey literature reported outcomes from student placements, neither articulated theories of change behind the mechanisms that might have worked to achieve them in the particular contexts. We therefore developed our initial TOC ([Appendix 1](#)) from:

- An analysis of UoS documents on the micro-placement scheme aims, design and outcomes to identify initial programme theories;
- In-depth semi-structured interviews with key informants to elicit their theories of change – people who were involved in the design, commissioning and implementation of the micro-placement initiative at UoS (n=9). (See [Appendix 2](#) for interview questions).
- **Phase 2: Extended in-depth realist interviews with students** who had been participants in the intervention (n=23). The aim of these was to prompt students to confirm, falsify and refine our initial TOC, using questions based on the TOC (see [Appendix 3](#)). The choice of extended semi-structured interviews (up to two hours) was to allow time for 'assisted sense-making' and is the suggested starting point to conduct realist interviews (Manzano, 2016).

Pawson and Tilley (1997) suggest that realist evaluators require a 'new craft' of interviewing to be able to conduct a realist interview. While there is not extensive literature which helps guide on how to conduct realist interviews, Manzano (2016) has

attempted to explain how such interviews are distinguished from qualitative interviews. In our evaluation, this entailed placing the initial TOC before micro-placement students with a view for the students to confirm, refine or falsify the developing understanding of the mechanisms underpinning the efficacy of the micro-placement scheme. In contrast to a typical qualitative interviewer, the interview is more structured, with questions intended to lead the students, not towards a specific answer, but to ensure effective testing of the TOC. Manzano (2016) argues that what also distinguishes the realist interview from other types of qualitative interview is a teacher-learner cycle. For our study this involved us, as evaluators, teaching the students the theory of change and, reciprocally, the students teaching us the evaluators whether our initial TOC captured the functioning of the micro-placement scheme accurately. This involved probing individual contexts, choices, outcomes and explanations, enabling us to test interviewees' own CMO configurations.

Phase 3: Revision of the TOC. Thematic analysis of student interview data, aided by Atlas software, enabled us to review and modify the original TOC. The analysis adopted a realist approach by closely following the work of Gilmore et al (2019) (Figure 3). The outcome of the analysis was three TOCs, one for each of the pre-placement, the placement and the post-placement stages. The three TOC's derive from the original TOC which is illustrated in [Appendix 1](#) and the process of developing them is reflected on towards the end of this report.

With added guidance from Gilmore et al. (2019) we took a pragmatic approach which is an underlying principle of realist evaluation. In similar ways, the research design and analysis was also inspired by the comprehensive process adopted by Gilmore et al. (2019). However, whereas Gilmore et al. (2019) adopted an evaluation of three cases, we adapted the approach to focus on a the micro-placement scheme as a single unit of analysis.

The overall approach to the evaluation relied on the assumption that “realist evaluation begins with theory and ends with further theory” (Pawson & Tilley, 1998: 89-90). Hence, we started by developing an original theory of how the micro-placement worked to achieve outcomes in the context of the particular kinds of students involved, and we continued to adjust and alter this aided by the realist interview data from them. The TOC, thereby, is and became an essential part of the realist evaluation and is used to direct the way the evaluation is undertaken and develops.

3.2 Sample selection

The study setting was the University of Suffolk Ipswich Campus where the micro-placements are undertaken by students. Interview data was collected either in-person, on campus, or online via Teams and recorded electronically.

Student participants were identified from the database of those who had taken part in the micro-placement programme at the University of Suffolk, that is held by the Careers Team. The study prioritised students from a disadvantaged background, and from as diverse a range of backgrounds as possible. Demographic data could be related to students being the first in their family to attend university, a carer, managing disability or mental health issues, as well as gender, age and ethnic origin.

To encourage students to enrol and participate in the study, they were provided with a financial incentive of £30 to cover cost and travel time.

Key informants were those who had/have significant involvement in commissioning, designing and implementing the intervention. This included the project champion, designers, implementers and placement hosts. Nine key informants took part in the semi-structured interviews.

3.3 Ethical considerations

Ethics approval was obtained via the UoS Ethics Committee – RETH(S)21/055. In addition, we shared the appropriate TASO data protection and privacy notices with participants when they decided to take part in the study.

4. Analytical strategy

Following the guidance provided in Gilmore et al. (2019) a ‘retroductive approach’ to data analysis was taken, which focused on the ‘identification of hidden causal forces that lie behind identified patterns or changes in those patterns.’¹ In effect this meant using inductive and deductive reasoning to understand generative causation by exploring the underlying mechanisms influencing the micro-placement programme outcomes.

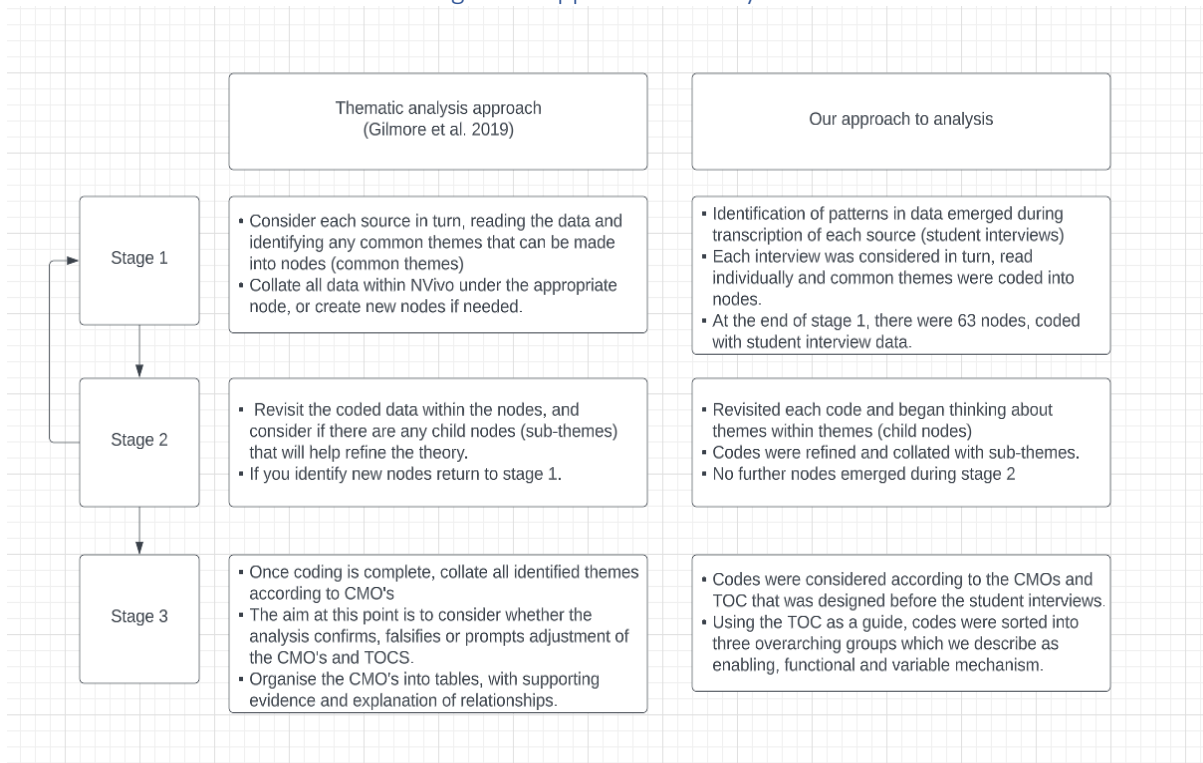
Using Atlas software we organised the data into:

- *Sources*: each piece of data (student interview) as an individual source
- *Nodes*: common themes where data can be gathered. We coded information from our data sources into nodes and continue to create new nodes where appropriate. Context-mechanism-outcome configuration (CMOC’s) was central to the nodes, and analysis at this point because it steered the identification of common themes within the data sources. This enabled us to code CMO’s found in the data.
- *Child nodes*: these nodes will occur if a new node is created within an existing node i.e., a theme within a theme (commonly these are sub-themes). Gilmore et al. (2019) argue that child nodes, or sub-themes become important for transparency when refining throughout the analysis.

See [Appendix 4](#) for coding table.

The approach to analysis (Figure 3) followed Gilmore et al, (2019) throughout, differing only in stage 1, where additional identification of patterns in the data emerged as the student interviews were transcribed. The researcher was able to begin to see patterns before carrying out a comprehensive thematic analysis of the collated data. This helped support the identification of mechanisms and enabled us to begin to map the mechanisms to potential behaviour changes and outcomes, before coding took place.

Figure 3. Approach to Analysis



5. Findings

From our analysis it became clear that the micro-placement intervention was much broader than simply the 30 hours of work experience. Mechanisms were triggered and outcomes began right from the initial advertising and communication about the placement opportunities and continued beyond completion of the placement itself. Our evaluation suggested that the initial micro-placement flow chart (Figure 1 above) could most usefully be presented as a three stage intervention comprising pre-placement, placement and post-placement. These are illustrated in Figure 4 and Figure 5 below and TOCs for each are elaborated in section 6.

Detailed findings from the student interviews, illustrated by student quotes, are presented in [Appendix 5](#). A summary of the outcomes attributed to the micro-placement intervention and the mechanisms that produce them is provided here.

5.1 Outcomes

I think for someone that has never worked before it is life changing. (S6)

Given the particular context of the UoS, with a high proportion of students for whom APP interventions are intended, this quote reflected the views of many.

All students said the micro-placement scheme had improved their employability skills; had strengthened their CV and had enhanced their chances of getting an interview and ultimately finding a graduate job. For some of the earlier students, these outcomes have already been achieved.

Because this was a retrospective study, we did not have before and after metrics of employability skills, which would have been preferable to evaluate the impact of the micro-placement intervention. In place of this, students were asked to rate their employability skills on a scale from 1 to 10 (with 10 being the highest) before and after their placement experience. The results are shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Student perceptions of the impact on their employability skills

Employability skill	Before placement		After placement	
	Average	Range	Average	Range
Confidence	4.3	2.5 - 7	7.7	4.5 - 10
Self-esteem	4.4	1 - 8	7.4	5.5 - 10
Networking skills	4	0 - 7	7.4	5 - 10
Communication skills	4.1	2.5 - 7	7.2	5.5 - 9

The figures show that all students indicated that each of the four employability skills had significantly increased as a result of the placement, on average from 4.2 to 7.4.

Other outcomes included:

- Enhanced CVs
- Changed and clarified career plans
- Greater likelihood of getting interviews and subsequent job offers
- Knowledge of creating a CV/ writing a cover letter
- Better knowledge of the recruitment process
- Professionalism
- Improved initiative
- Experience of teamwork
- Better time management
- Self-awareness

For students who do not have English as their first language, the micro-placement scheme also helped to improve their English-speaking skills.

5.2 Key Mechanisms

Key mechanisms at different stages that were essential for achieving the above outcomes were:

Support - from the placement organiser (hereafter the Anchor), the Careers Team, placement supervisors and mentors;

Commitment – engagement from the students themselves;

Payment – the fact the placement was paid;

Length and duration hours – Though some students would have welcomed a longer placement, overall, 30 hours was attractive and particularly because they could be spread over several weeks.

Flexibility of when the placement could be taken and hours worked facilitated students to participate who either had other commitments like children, or who had mental or physical health issues to work around;

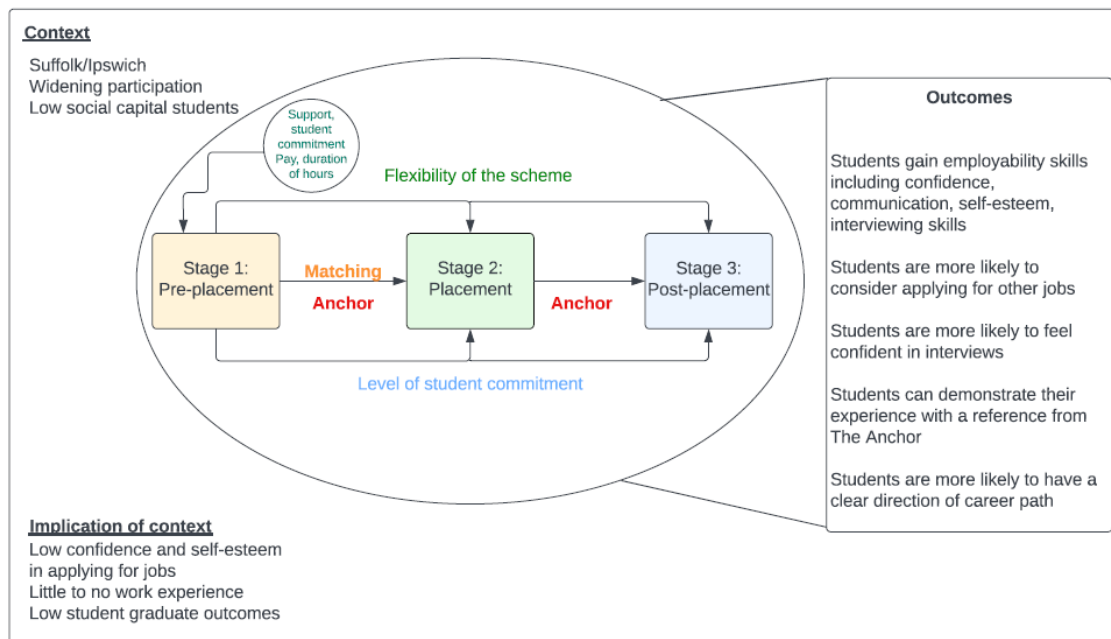
Matching – when placements fitted the student’s degree subject and career interests.

5.3 CMO Configuration

The mechanisms listed above contribute to the CMO configuration (Figure 4) to explain how the micro-placement scheme functions in the way it does, and how the mechanisms work together as an employability intervention to achieve the outcomes produced, in the given context. As detailed in Section 2, the overarching context of the micro-placement scheme is widening participation students with low social capital, and often with additional support needs.

Overall, mechanisms work individually within each stage and inter-dependently across the intervention, to ensure students decide to apply for the scheme, complete the micro-placement and experience the outcomes post placement.

Figure 4. CMO configuration



The preplacement stage of the scheme (stage 1) is triggered by several key mechanisms listed above. For instance, the overall success of the scheme, and the extent to which individual students achieve the scheme's outcome is triggered by the individualised support available, the fact the placement is paid, and flexibility of the 30-hours placement that enables students to commit to around their studies and other personal circumstances. In essence, these mechanisms trigger student behaviours and decisions to apply for the scheme, and then to show commitment to completing the 30-hour placement.

This implies that these initial mechanisms (support, pay, and the hours) contribute to the level of commitment students show to the micro-placement scheme. At the same time, student commitment itself becomes a mechanism that underpins the success of the scheme. Similarly, the level of commitment displayed by students is also impacted by the matching that occurs between stage 1 interviews and stage 2 placements. Matching is the process in which the careers team fit student degrees and career aspirations to the placements available. Hence, if a student is matched appropriately, it is likely that students will benefit more with relevant and useful work experience. Matching, thereby, is an important trigger for enabling the intervention's mechanisms to effect the best outcomes.

Similarly, another fundamental mechanism is support which ensure students to make decisions to apply for the scheme and understand the recruitment process (stage 1); to engage with the 30-hour work placement, and successfully complete it (stage 2), and to reflect on the micro placement (stage 3). Support potentially comes from various sources: the careers team, placement supervisors, and access to university specific platforms such as FutureMe which enables students to self-teach on areas such as how to write a CV and interviewing skills. However, all these support functions are layered by an additional resource, 'The Anchor', a member of the careers team who provides a coherent thread through the stages of the micro-placement scheme with individual levels of support to students. In some ways 'The Anchor' triggers the support mechanisms and ensures the appropriate level of support is provided to students on an individual basis. The level of support depends on the needs of the student, which is of particular importance for widening participation students.

Support as a mechanism throughout the entire micro-placement scheme contributes to students gaining employability skills such as confidence, communication, self-esteem and interview capability. Other outcomes prompted by the mechanism of support are that students appear more likely to consider applying for other jobs, can demonstrate their experience with a reference from The Anchor and are more likely to have a clear direction of career path.

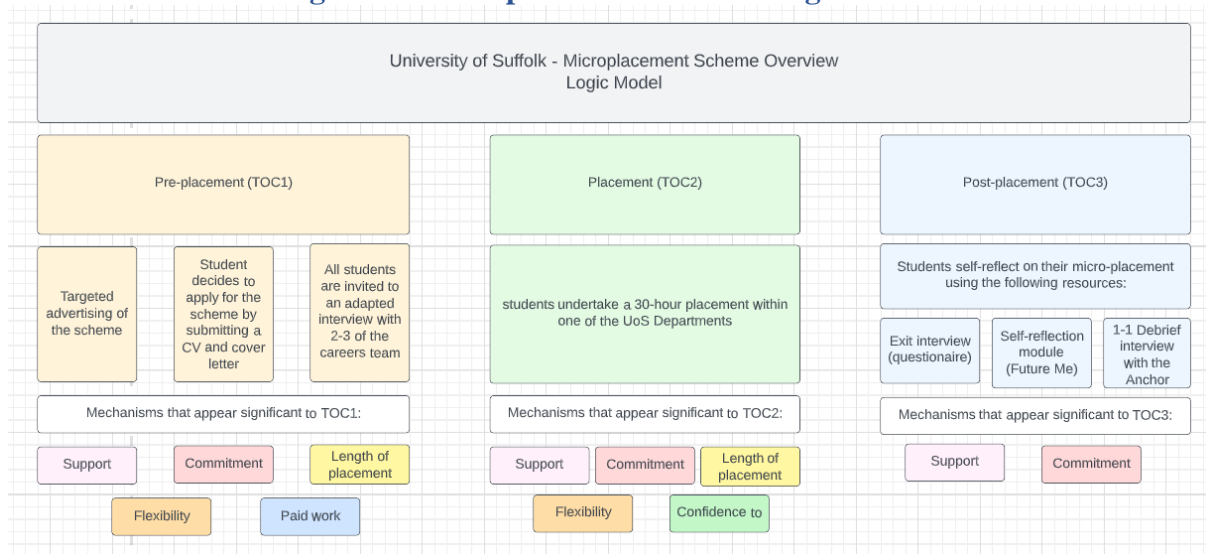
Flexibility is another mechanism, enabling students to navigate through the scheme regulating their commitment and involvement depending on their own individual needs and contexts. Flexibility also acts as a trigger which can contribute to students making the initial decision to apply for the scheme.

6. Discussion

6.1 Logic Model of the Micro-Placement Scheme

Overall, the success of the micro-placement scheme depends on it being understood as a 3-stage intervention, comprising pre-placement, placement and post-placement, as shown in Figure 5.

Figure 5. Micro-placement Scheme Logic Model



Our evaluation suggests that outcomes are greatest when students engage in all three stages, although the third (post-placement) stage can be optional. Further research would be needed to evaluate the extent to which addition of the post-placement stage enhances the outcomes achievable from the first and second stages alone.

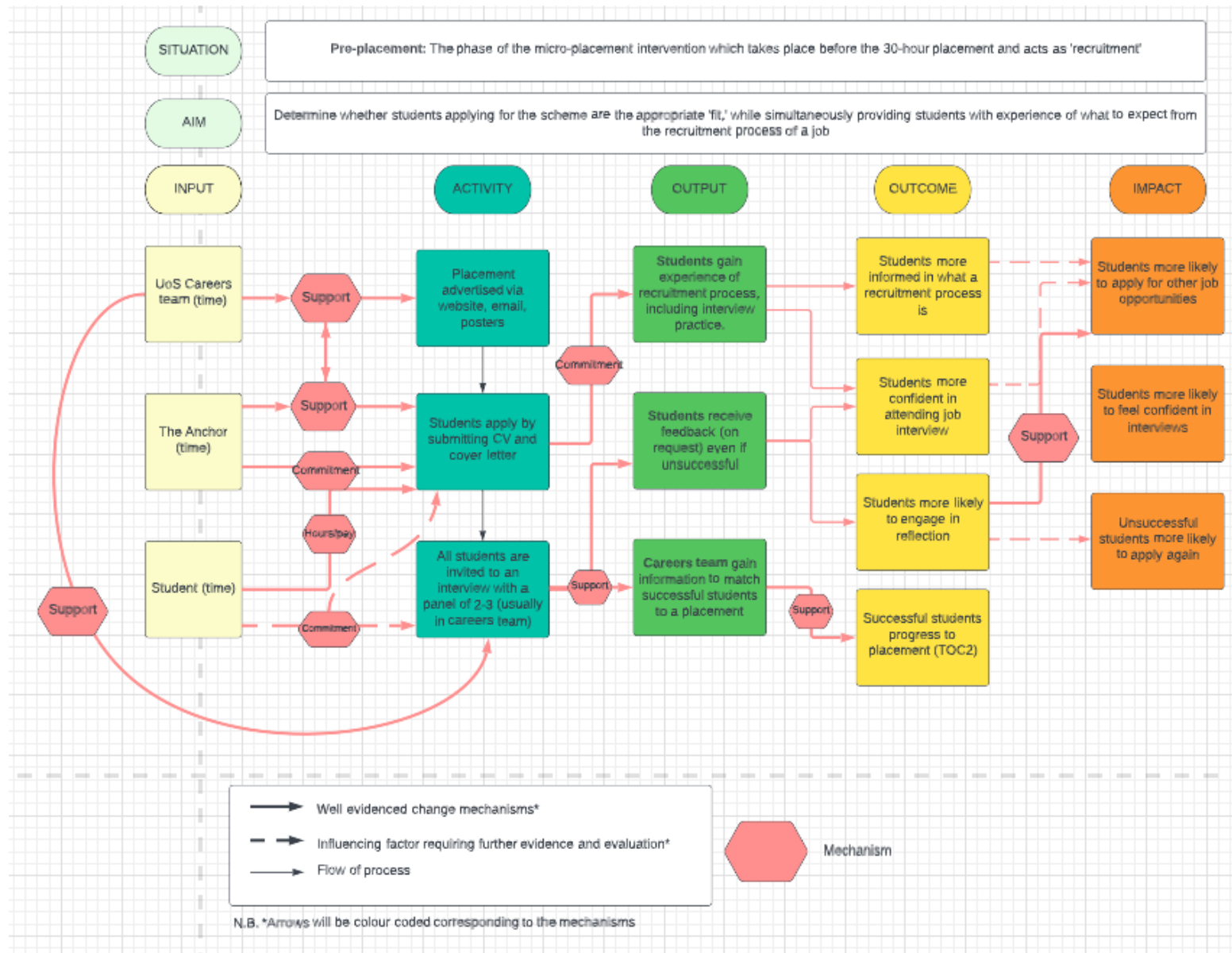
6.2 Theories of Change

Due to the complexity of the intervention, and in order to be able to represent the underlying theory of change and CMO in a way that could be useable by others, we have chosen to present a TOC for each of the pre-placement, the placement, and the post-placement stages. These are illustrated and narrated below.

6.2.1 Pre-placement

Pre-placement is the stage of the micro-placement intervention which takes place before the 30-hour placement and acts as the recruitment stage. The aim of this stage 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. Figure 6 illustrates the theory of change for pre-placement.

Figure 6. TOC 1: Pre-placement Stage



Inputs

There are three main inputs that allow the pre-placement stage 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:

Input	Function to the pre-placement
UoS Careers Team (time)	<p>The UoS Careers Team commit time to ensuring the scheme is prepared and advertised to students. This includes multiple sources of advertising including a designated website with information about the micro-placement scheme and case studies from studies who have already completed a micro-placement, email circulation and posters. However, word of mouth also acted as a way students found out and considered applying for the micro-placement scheme. Members of the team also can 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 stage the anchor is an individual who appears to dedicate significant time and <i>commitment</i> in ensuring students are aware of the scheme. In the first instance, the Anchor sends personalised emails to students raising awareness of the scheme, encouraging them to apply for the scheme. Hence students are provided with <i>support</i> long before they apply for the scheme. This support is then followed when the students apply. The Anchor provides a level of support when students apply and this provides 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 stage 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 stage of the micro-placement scheme. Without students applying it would not function and/or be required.</p>

Activity Activity consisted of four parts, two of which enabled the pre-placement stage 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 stage 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 stage 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 stage

‘**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).

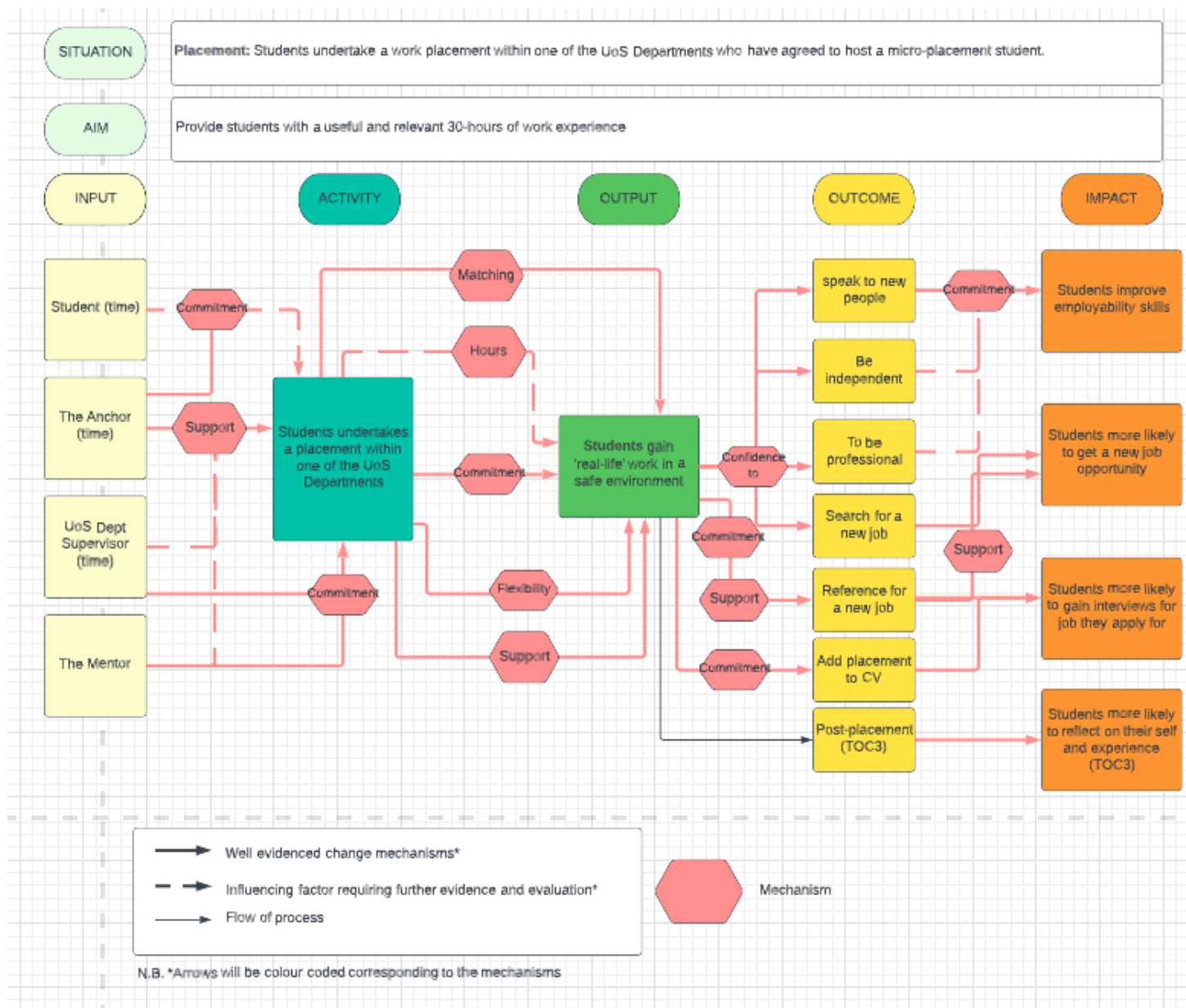
The level of support provided at this point of the micro-placement scheme acts as a mechanism which is fundamental to how the scheme functions during the pre-placement stage. We describe this mechanism as ‘enabling’ because it is a characteristic implemented within the UoS scheme, which is well evidenced 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 include **commitment from students**, which underpins the functioning of the scheme. 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, although some felt more than 30-hours would not be do-able. 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.

6.4.2 Placement Stage

The placement consists of students being placed to work within one of the UoS Departments who have agreed to host a micro-placement student. The aim is to provide students with a useful 30-hour work experience, relevant to their degree subject and/or career aspirations. See Figure 7 for illustration of the TOC.

Figure 7. TOC 2: Placement Stage



Inputs

Four main inputs allow the placement to function 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:

Input	Function to the placement
Student (time)	<p>Similar to TOC1, the student is pivotal to the placement stage 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 stage 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.

Characteristic	Function of the mechanism
<u>Hours worked</u>	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.

	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.
<u>Matching</u>	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 stage of the micro-placement scheme.
<u>Flexibility of the scheme</u>	Flexibility enabled continued participation in the scheme. 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.
<u>Underlying support</u>	Support from the Anchor is crucial to ensuring students complete their placement with confidence and also do not struggle to do so.
<u>Student commitment</u>	The student's commitment enables them to gain experience and is essential to the placement stage, however, the level of commitment required for optimal experience gained requires further evidence and evaluation.

Outcomes and impact

The outcomes are influenced by a number of mechanisms. One is *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 work independently.
- Search for new jobs
- Be professional in a working environment.

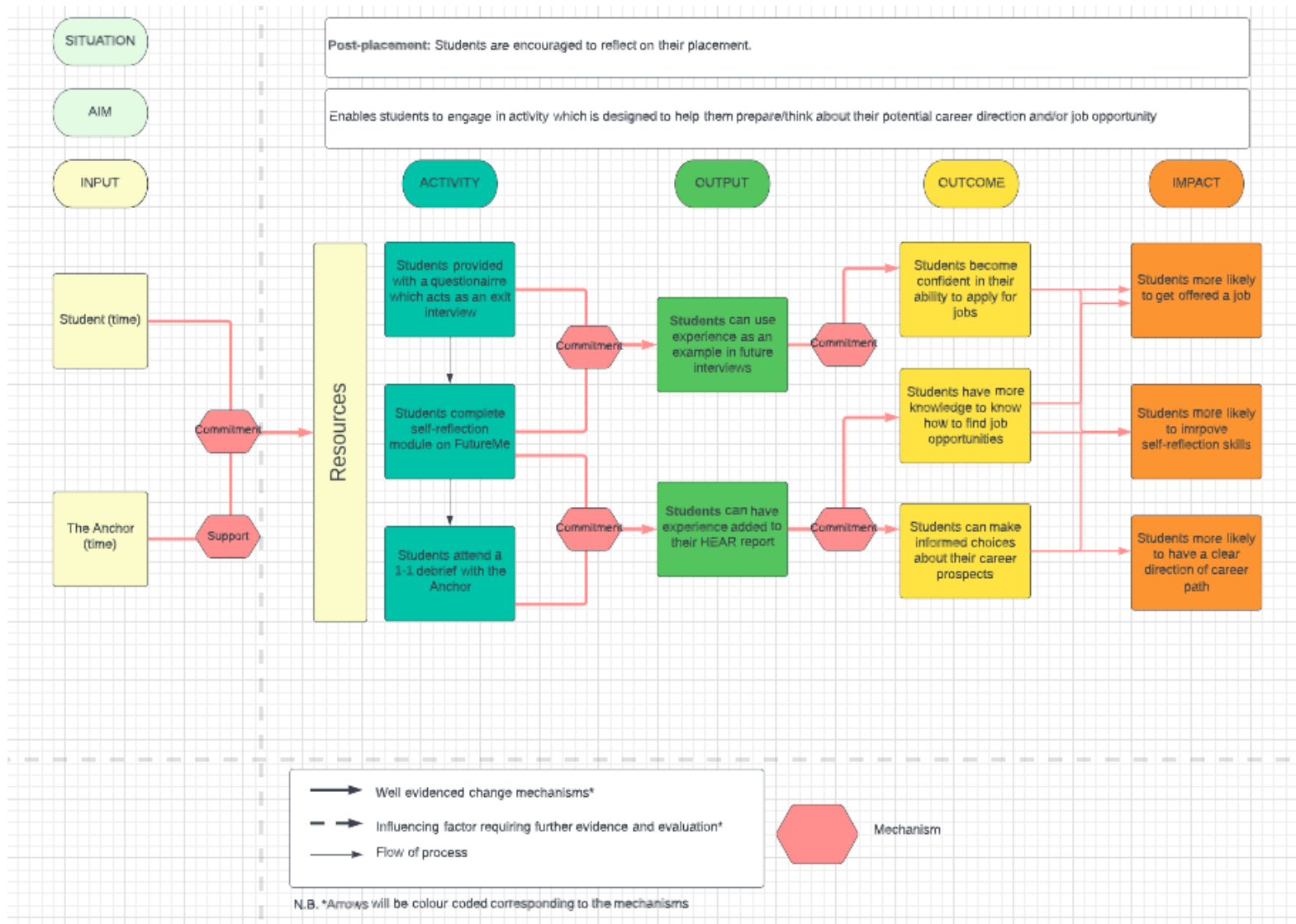
These outcomes are likely to also be impacted by the *level of commitment* shown by students during their placement (as detailed above), along with the *possible support* students received from the Anchor, UoS department supervisor and their allocated mentor (if applicable). In so doing, the impact of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

Further outcomes are that students are able to use the experience to enhance their CV, as well as to source a reference for future jobs. The reference depends on the *support and commitment* from the Anchor, who invariably was approached by students to write one. 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.

6.4.3. Post-Placement Stage

Post-placement occurs after students complete their 30-hour placement within one of the departments at UoS. The final stage 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. See Figure 8 for TOC.

Figure 8. TOC 3: Post-Placement Stage



Inputs

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

Input	Function to the placement
Student (time)	<p>Similar to TOC1 and TOC2, the student is pivotal to the post-placement stage of the micro-placement scheme. Arguably, the student and their <i>commitment</i> to engaging with the post-placement stage 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 stage 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

When students engage in reflection in the latter stage of the scheme this enables them to think about how they can draw from their experiences 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.

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 is a way students acquire more knowledge of how to find job opportunities and of those 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, this entitles them to have their placement experience to be added to their Higher Education Achievement Record (HEAR).

These added activities within stage 3 also depend on the commitment shown by the Anchor, who invests time to ensure students can have a debrief interview. As with the previous two TOC's, commitment from both the student and Anchor are clear well-evidenced mechanisms. However, further evidence could evaluate what level of commitment provides optimal outcomes and resultant impact.

Impact

Engaging in the post-placement stage of the scheme is more likely to improve student self-reflection skills, which highlights how the micro-placement intervention enables skills acquisition beyond the experience of simply completing the 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 graduate 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.

7. Conclusions: Evaluation of Micro-Placement Scheme

In the context of the University of Suffolk, where a high proportion of learners are from backgrounds for whom APP interventions are intended (e.g. first in family, disabled students, care leaver), the intervention of a 30-hour micro-placement scheme is highly effective at almost doubling participating students' self-reported employability skills, and at increasing their knowledge of how to apply for graduate jobs; their chances of gaining an interview, and the subsequent likelihood of them securing a job, compared to if they had not had this experience.

Also, given the context, the 30-hours experience alone is not sufficient. Activities within the pre- and post-placement stages, along with significant support from an Anchor, Careers Team members, placement supervisors, and for students with particular needs, a mentor, are also key mechanisms in achieving the outcomes reported (see [Figure 5](#) earlier).

7.1 Potential improvements to the intervention

The following recommendations are offered to improve the intervention as it currently runs:

- i. More structure around the scheme so that placement supervisors and departments are briefed and given guidance from the Careers Team before the student begins their placement. This could include: completion of development plans, training/briefing for departments who host micro-placement students so they are aware and clear about the expectations and level of support required.
- ii. Greater structure may also be placed around how students are monitored so that there is a formal track of the work undertaken by the students, the hours they work, and the experiences/outcomes being gained by being on the scheme, but without compromising the flexibility that is provided for students to decide on when hours can be completed.

- iii. Development of the mentor mechanism to embed it into the scheme, encouraging students to opt for further support if required by having a mentor to support them through the process.
- iv. Consider an increase to the number of hours available for students while they are undertaking their placement up to 60/80.
- v. Expand the scheme so that placements could be offered with organisations outside of the University. This could potentially be offered to students who have already undertaken a micro-placement within UoS and re-apply for the scheme. External placements could allow students to begin to implement and further practice the skills they gain from taking part in the micro-placement scheme.

8 Reflections on the Use of Realist Evaluation for Conducting a Small ‘n’ Evaluation

8.1 Developing the theory of change and the challenges faced

8.1.1 *Lack of theories of change in the literature*

The original TOC ([Appendix 1](#)) was developed from the key informant interviews, after a minor challenge began with the attempt to identify any TOCs established within existing academic and grey literature on student placements as employability interventions. Since there was very little in the literature which made explicit the assumptions that underlay the design of such interventions, or that discussed theories that might explain their outcomes, we had to rely on the theories (and rationale) of key informants involved in the design and operationalisation of the intervention, to develop ideas for a preliminary TOC that could be hypothesised and tested through interviews with students.

8.1.2 *Determining what constituted a ‘mechanism’*

The original TOC consisted of the mechanisms and outcomes we understood to explain the functioning of the micro-placement scheme. However, upon guidance and reflection our interpretation of ‘mechanism’ within the context of realist evaluation was confused with the stages of the micro-placement scheme and the activities that were undertaken within the functioning of the scheme. Thereby, a second challenge lay in determining what constituted a mechanism within the initial TOC and in the wider context of conducting realist evaluation. This difficulty arose because of the complexity of the intervention, with its many activities and multiple actors involved. In some ways, refining the mechanisms began when student interview data was being analysed and coded. The development of the final three TOC’s thereby began to occur when we were able to begin mapping mechanisms to the outcomes which both key informants and students identified in the interviews. Mapping these outcomes within the three developing TOCs helped to re-evaluate the meaning of mechanism not as a function or ‘input’ but as something that enabled something else to occur or that constituted an influence over behavioural change in some way.

8.1.3 *Impossibility of capturing the scheme’s complexity within one TOC*

Through spending time adjusting the meaning of ‘mechanism’ as used in realist evaluation, it became apparent that one TOC to illustrate the functioning of the micro-placement scheme became more challenging to produce. We recognised that the intervention overall involved

three distinct though interlapping stages: pre-placement, the placement itself, and post-placement. By distinguishing between the stages, it was possible to show the individual outcomes and which mechanism impacted which outcome in a more comprehensive and detailed way. For instance, the interview data showed even students who were not successful in their interview to get a micro-placement still acquired some outcomes including skills and knowledge of the interview process. Having just one TOC meant it was difficult to illustrate the full extent of the outcomes emerging in the data. Hence, it was subsequently more feasible and useful to draw up a TOC for each detailing how the mechanisms flowed through the scheme through a CMO configuration (Figure 4), and the individual outcomes, some unique to each stage of the scheme.

8.2 Limitations

8.2.1 *Retrospective evaluation*

In an ideal world an intervention is designed with the evaluation planned from the beginning. This would mean that the TOC was made explicit from the outset and data requirements to enable evaluation would be identified before the intervention began. Ideally pre- and post-outcome measures could be taken, using validated metrics, for example of confidence, self-efficacy or similar. This study was *retrospective* rather than one that was contemporaneous to the initiative. This meant we could not get such robust comparative pre- and post- data.

8.2.2 *Self-reporting.*

Instead, this study had to rely on student self-reported pre- and post-placement comparisons. This approach relied on students remembering how they may have felt before undertaking a micro placement.

8.2.3 *Absence of standards to report realist evaluation*

The conducting of realist evaluation comes with an element of flexibility, and an acknowledgement that every intervention is contextually different. Hence, there is a lack of standardisation in the literature which helps direct the conduct of a realist evaluation. This is apparent in both understanding how to conduct realist interviews, and how a realist evaluation might best be reported on. This is particularly relevant in the context of small ‘n’ HE experiences where systematic evaluation methods have been less utilised.

8.3 Recommendations

As a result of our experience of undertaking this realist evaluation we offer the following recommendations:

- i. When carrying out a realist evaluation, time is well spent understanding the role of the mechanism within the TOC, how they map to outcomes and in what ways. Mechanisms are not necessarily the steps in the process that are being evaluated, rather they can be understood as certain aspects of the intervention which allow it to function in the way that it does. In the early stages of identifying mechanisms in each TOC, it can be useful to think about what enables something else to occur. Without attempting to oversimplify the role of a mechanism, this approach to exploring the mechanisms enables further evaluation and articulation of what makes an intervention function in the way that it does.

- ii. Where possible, plan to use realist evaluation alongside implementation of an intervention, so that pre- and post- outcome measures can be most validly collected.
- iii. Suggested outcome measures:
 - Self-reported self-belief / self-esteem
 - Self-reported growth in confidence
 - Communication skills
 - Self-reflection skills
 - Interview skills
 - Self-reported awareness of professional work practices
 - Knowledge of how to find job opportunities
 - Interview offers
 - Job offers.
- iv. Whilst there should be acknowledgement that all interventions are different in both context and nature, standardising aspects of how to conduct a realist evaluation could help encourage more HE institutions to utilise evaluation methods to evaluate systems and interventions. Further guidance on how to conduct realist evaluations could help evaluators understand the key features of the interview, and a structured guide to reporting on realist evaluations could help highlight the impact and effectiveness evaluation methods can have in HE institutions.

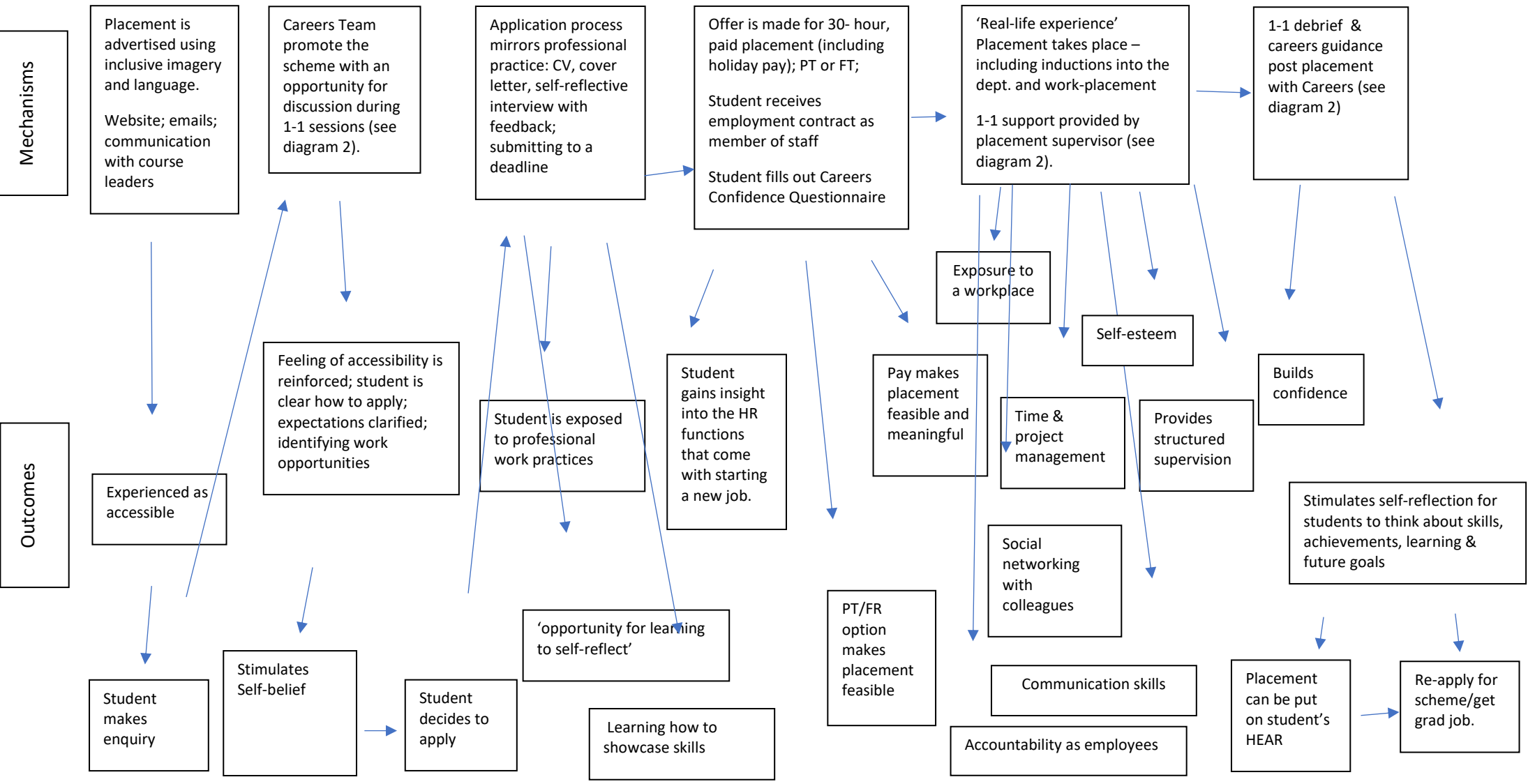
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APPENDICES

- Appendix 1. Original TOC
- Appendix 2. [Interview Schedule – Key Informants](#)
- Appendix 3. [Student Interview Questions](#)
- Appendix 4. [Coding Table](#)
- Appendix 5. [Findings](#)

Appendix 1. Original TOC



Appendix 2. Interview Schedule – Key Informants

	Interview questions
Preliminary introductions	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you confirm you have been provided with all the necessary information needed for you to decide to take part in the study, and that you have signed a consent form? 2. Can you introduce who you are, your position in University of Suffolk, and the role you have had within the micro-placement scheme? 3. (If applicable) can you tell me about the micro-placement scheme? How was it created? And how you got involved with the scheme?
Aims and objectives of the scheme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What do you think the fundamental objective of the micro-placement scheme is? 2. Can you talk me through the elements of the micro-placement scheme that you are involved in? 3. Which part of the scheme do you think is most crucial in making it work?
Employability	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. In what ways do you think specific parts of the micro-placement scheme increase employability for students? If so, what skills or other attributes/knowledge/capabilities do you think are increased? Do you have any specific examples?
Taking part in the scheme	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What attracted you to want to be involved in the micro-placement scheme? 2. What effect did your tasks/participation in the scheme have on the student's experience, do you think?
The work experiences	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Can you think of any specific employability attributes you believe have increased for students who took part in the scheme? If so, can you think of any examples that you can share? 2. What effect did the length of the placement have on those who participated in the scheme? 3. Which (if any) tasks or activities have students participated in within their placements that you think are key to student experience or employability outcomes?
Support provided	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. What kind of support is provided to students who enrol on the scheme? 2. How does the support provided through the micro-placement scheme differ from general careers advice provided by the university of Suffolk? What effect do you think the level of support had on students who took part?
Reflection	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Would you change anything about the micro-placement scheme? If so, what do you think could be done to make those changes?

Appendix 3. Student Interview Questions

Communications

- How did you find out about the micro-placement scheme?
- What attracted you to take part in the micro-placement scheme?
 - Was there anything particular about the communications about the scheme that particularly made you feel it was something for you?

Recruitment process

- Can you describe your experience of the recruitment process that enabled you to take part in the micro-placement scheme?
 - How did it contribute to your experience on the scheme?
 - What did you learn from the recruitment process?
 - What skills did it help you develop?

Placement experience/employability

- Can you describe your experience of the micro-placement?
 - Can you tell me more about anything you found particularly surprising?
- How would you describe the type of experience you have received from taking part in the micro-placement scheme?
- Can you describe what you understand by the term employability, and what it means to you??
- Can you think of any specific employability skills you believe have increased by taking part in the micro-placement scheme?
 - If so, can you think of examples during your placement which helped increase that skill?
- What have you found most useful about the micro-placement scheme in contributing to improving your skills?
- In what ways do you think your employability has increased as a result of taking part in the micro-placement scheme?
- What effect did your mentor/supervisory team have on your experience?
- What effect did your tasks have on your experience/confidence?

Post-placement

1. Do you think your experience has changed your job/career plans? If so, please tell us more.
2. Can you explain what you feel you got out of the scheme?
3. Do you think the scheme provided you with the level of support you needed?
 1. If yes, can you explain what support you received and how it helped you?
 2. If no, do you have any suggestions on where support can be improved?
4. Would you change anything about the scheme?
5. Did you complete any of the additional activities related to the Micro-Placement Scheme e.g., Self-Assessment programme on the FutureMe Award/a careers guidance interview?

1. If not, why not?
2. If yes, what impact, if any, did you think these have had on your employability?
6. *If someone graduated 1+ years ago: Has the micro placement scheme impacted your current day to day activity/career choices?*

Reflections

1. What if the advertising images didn't include you, would you still have applied for the scheme?
2. What if there weren't case studies on the website, would you still have applied for the scheme?
3. What if there wasn't the facility to ask questions before committing, would this have changed your experience?
4. What if the micro-placement wasn't paid, would this have changed your decision to enrol?
5. What if it all had to be completed within one week, would you have still applied?
6. What if the placement was longer (or shorter) than 30-hours, would this have affected your decision to take part in the scheme?

Questions to ask if students do not pick up on mechanisms – confidence, self-esteem, networking

If 0 were not at all and 10 was significantly improved:

- If you think about your level of self-confidence in applying for jobs on a scale of 1-10, could you tell me where you would have put yourself before the micro-placement and after it?
- If you think about your level of self-esteem on a scale of 1-10, could you tell me where you would have put yourself before the micro-placement and after it?
- If you think about your networking skills on a scale of 1-10, could you tell me where you would have put yourself before the micro-placement and after it?
- If you think about your communication skills on a scale of 1-10, could you tell me where you would have put yourself before the micro-placement and after it?

Appendix 4. Coding Table

Code	Corresponding sub-code	Description of sub-code	Illustrative examples
Employability	Definition	How students defined employability	<p>The whole process of... looking for [a] job up to finding the right job and find[ing] the right place [...] I mean so it's this whole pathway (S5)</p> <p>Understanding what employers want and being able to apply the skills you have to what they need (S1)</p>
	Skills acquired from micro-placement scheme	The skills students felt they had acquired having completed a micro-placement	<p>Included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Building my <i>confidence</i> (S3) • Good practice to <i>write cover letters</i> (S3) and preparing for interviews (S16) • How to appear in a <i>professional</i> manner (S8) • working with other people (S8) and <i>teamwork</i> (S15) • developing <i>experience</i> (S2) • Improve[d] my <i>communication skills</i> (S6)
Flexibility of the scheme	Flexibility	The benefits of the scheme being flexible	<p>I think in one word the flexibility was much better because the fact I could choose when to do it (S2)</p> <p>I think it was flexible and cause at the time I was on maternity leave with my son and also doing my MBA. So, I thought it would be nice to kind of fit in with those things (S3)</p>
	Balance between flexibility and structure	The tensions between flexibility and students wanting a bit more structure	I did like the flexibility, but I think with hindsight if I was to get the most out of it, I would have preferred more of a rigid structure (S10)
Support	Connections	The ways students described the connections they made with people by taking part in the scheme.	<p>I was able to create real connections with some people (S2)</p> <p>I was meeting people as well as open[ing] doors to me (S5)</p>

	Kind of support		Every question has been answered, every need has been met, so not much more i can ask for (S22)
	Who?	Individual's students identified as being important to the support they received.	<p>I was in contact with [KI2] so regularly I didn't feel like I had to get in touch again (S1)</p> <p>[KI2]'s always been really really proactive and helpful and always getting in touch. And just like reminding me that they're there for help (S4)</p> <p>[KI2] was really supportive, like throughout the whole process (S10)</p> <p>So [KI2] was good cause she was good through the whole process (S11)</p> <p>[KI2] was just an email away or a phone call away (S9)</p>
	Contradictions	Instances where students highlighted perceived lack of support while on taking part in the scheme.	<p>I couldn't ask the Careers Team for help because it was in the Careers Team, so I had to do it myself (S1)</p> <p>I don't think it provided me with the support I needed. I think I needed someone who knew what I was trying to bring to the table (S12).</p>
Confidence to...	No sub-codes were formed.	Enabling factors which gave the students the confidence to do/achieve something else.	<p>Confidence to talk to people in a professional environment (S1)</p> <p>I gained confidence about being employed (S5)</p> <p>I've definitely got the confidence that I can do better in my job searching (S14)</p>

Knowledge of the scheme	Case study/website	The ways in which students heard about the scheme	I think the case studies would be more of an argument to sort of influence me, mainly because it's more people's experience (S13)
	Email		It's kind of like Google reviews (S13)
	Leaflet/poster		The website (s16)
	Word of mouth		Through like emails from the Infozone (s10)
Paid work	As an incentive	The 30-hour placement being paid acted as an incentive for students to apply for the position.	I got an email from my head of department (S12)
	As value		I saw a leaflet outside of university (S1)
	Would take part without pay		It was on leaflets (S14)
			In the end it was with the word of mouth because they [my friend] suggested it to me and some friends of mine (S7)
			I think it [pay] is a good incentive (S11)
			I like the payment as well [it] motivated me (S12)
			I think it being paid was definitely very helpful (S4)
			If it was not paid there would be less people applying (S11)
			It [pay] makes you feel part of the team and you know like everyone else. For example, like most all the staff there gets paid. So, if you're doing anything free, it kind of makes it being inclusive of the team. As one, you're the university (S2)
			I would have been part even if there was no payment (S1)
			I was ready to do it 100%, even if it was going to not paid (S15)
			It's not about the money for me, just experience and what they learn from it (S9)

	Wouldn't take part without pay	Students explained that they would not have taken part in the micro-placement scheme without the pay.	<p>If it was also done for free, it would have been difficult to decide whether I should study or I should work (S6)</p> <p>Probably not [wouldn't have taken part]. I think the money was a huge incentive for me (S12)</p> <p>In the current situation [wouldn't take part without pay] because of the cost-of-living crisis and every bit helps (S20).</p>
Outcomes	CV	Students described being able to put the experience on their CV as a positive outcome of the scheme.	<p>Just being able to add that extra experience to my CV because I feel like that actually helped me get more interviews (S6)</p> <p>It was a booster for me in work experience and putting something on my CV (S8)</p> <p>I needed to get something on my CV to kind of progress I guess (S10)</p>
	Career plans	Students described instances where the micro-placement experience either affirmed or changed their career plans	<p>[Undertaking the micro-placement] definitely has cause I'm now working in the role that I did the micro-placement in (S11)</p> <p>I don't think it necessarily changed my career goals. I think it may have made me more aware of how many different possibilities there are within a sustainability job field (S16)</p>
	Job opportunities	Students describe how the placement prepared them for employment and provided them with job opportunities	<p>It prepared me for the employer to employ me (S15)</p> <p>It gives you a really good base to get into places (S19)</p> <p>I feel like I would have gotten a lot less offers if I didn't go through that [the micro-placement] (S6)</p>
	Obtaining reference	Students describe how they were able to obtain a reference for future jobs	<p>I got a reference to put on my CV which is always a good thing (S8)</p> <p>I have physical proof of something that I've done (S20)</p>

	Skills	Students describe how they gained skills from undertaking a micro-placement	[the] micro-placement enhanced the skills (S16) And I've gained a lot of skills from there that is still used today and I can put down on my CV (S6)
Experience	Incentive to participate	Students describe how gaining experience was an incentive for them to apply for the micro-placement	Mainly experience, that the key thing to me (S2) Just thinking I can get experience within the university. That would be great to have on my CV (S3) To get more experience into my CV basically (S5)
	Standing out to employers	Students felt that the micro-placement experience made them stand out from other graduates applying for jobs	Just to make myself stand out and put maybe on [my] CV that I've done this (S14) Obviously, the experience would stand out more than the three years [on a degree] because everyone would do three years at university (S2)
	Gaining experience	Students describe the experience they had during their micro-placement	A good learning experience because it showed me an insight into professional lifestyle (S1)
Length of the scheme	Overall impression	The overall impression students had of the placement being 30-hours.	The scheme is <i>a taster session</i> to work (S2) I would have enjoyed it to be a bit longer (S1) It might be too much to ask of a student to complete 25 hours as well as everything else (S16)
	Ideal length	The ideal length the placement should be from the perspective of the students	It's not too long and it's not too short its long enough for you to say I've been here long enough (S2)
	Intensity	Student reflections on whether they would prefer the 30-hours being in one intense week	I was studying full time; 30 hours is way too much for me to take in a week (S8)

Appendix 5. Findings

Student understandings of employability

Students had varying interpretations of the term ‘employability’.

For some it was the whole process of becoming employed:

The whole process of... looking for [a] job up to finding the right job and find[ing] the right place [...] I mean so it's this whole pathway, I would say (S5)

Employability means the act of becoming employed by a recruiter (S16).

For others it meant becoming prepared for work:

Helping students to create themselves in terms of, to prepare themselves at some point being employed. It's the path that hopefully ends with having an employer (S1).

I learned how to promote myself out, how to sell myself (S7)

A third view understood employability from the perspective of the employer:

Understanding what the employer wants, and being able to apply the skills you have to what they need (S1)

When employers look at you, they look at your employability, they look at your experience, they look at your qualifications and they try and see if you're a good candidate. So, making sure that you have those skills that they're looking for makes you more employable and constantly as it continuously improving process (S6).

In other words, what are they looking for me as an employee, you are a potential employee (S15).

Students associated employability with being a good, an attractive or suitably skilled employee:

Descriptors	Sample quotes
The good employee	<i>the tropes which make you a good employee (S10).</i> <i>The kind of person you are to someone that is hiring saying that is that person good enough to work for me? (S2)</i>
The attractive employee	<i>your attractiveness to an employer for your skills, your qualifications, your experience and how you portray them (S3)</i>

	<i>In terms of employability you are more attractive and there are more changes to get a job (S7)</i>
<i>Suitability</i>	<i>Am I 'suitable for the job essentially' (S2)</i>
	<i>How well-suited and fitted you are for this job (S12)</i>
<i>Skills</i>	<i>How much your skills can be translated into a job environment (S8).</i>
	<i>Having the skills and characteristics and kind of attributes of a person who kind of thrives in a work-based setting (S10).</i>
	<i>Having the skills that you need to like work in a certain field (S13).</i>

A slightly different perspective of employability emerged from a student with a disability:

That phrase changed quite a lot over the last few years. ...I think starting out at uni and stuff when I was younger employability was like how good you're able to professionally get in touch with people, write your CV, how you're able to identify your skills, strengths, weaknesses, that kind of thing, and how you're able to prepare for an interview, or how you can use your previous experiences or gain new experiences or volunteering to sort of make you a round[ed] person so that when you do go to an employer to look for an interview or a job or something, and you have more knowledge, skills and experience to make you more so capable of the role they are applying for...

But like quite recently, I've kind of been diagnosed with like learning difficulties and ADHD and like autism and stuff. So, for me, employability has become so much more about how I as a person can contribute to a department in a way that's going to promote having more divers[ity] in the workplace and ensuring that every person is like fully supported and stuff while at work. So, I guess employability has become more about... My awareness of all the people that I'm working with, as well as how good I am [at] a job (S4).

This understanding places less understand on how good a student is, and more towards a balance between student awareness of others, and how 'good I am [at] a job.'

Outcomes: Employability skills and capabilities

I think for someone that has never worked before it is life changing. (S6)

If I wasn't in the micro-placement scheme. I wouldn't be in this ... position where I [am now] (S9)

Outcomes – what the students gained from taking part in the micro-placement scheme?

Adding experience to CV

I've gained a lot of skills from there that is still used today and I can put down on my CV (S6)

I was able to talk about this experience and put this role on my CV (S6)

It was a booster for me in work experience and putting something on my CV (S8)

I needed to get something put on my CV (S10)

I'll definitely say it's another job to put on a CV (S11)

Career plans

I can definitely see the domino effect from there to where I am now (S8)

I don't think it necessarily changed my career goals. I think it may have made me more aware of how many different possibilities there are' (S16)

'I think it has [changed my plans] because doing the role, I kind of like being, I like working in the university' (S11)

'I'm now working in the role that I did during the micro-placement just sort of more of an advanced level' (S11)

Job opportunities

'I feel like I would have gotten a lot less offers if I didn't go through that' (S6)

'Compared to other graduates, I feel like... my chances definitely increase' (S6)

'I don't think I would have necessarily gotten my second job[...] if I didn't have the micro-placement experience' (S8)

'it's helped me a lot for when I've applied for other jobs afterwards' (S12)

'it prepared me for the employer to employ me' (S15)

Skills

'increased in like my personal employability skills, especially my confidence' (S8)

'I just kind of learned what a like proper office workspace was like' (S10)

'communication. Both in-person and written, and practical skills' (S16)

References

'I got a reference to put on my CV' (S8).

Students identified a range of skills and capabilities which they felt they acquired from taking part in the micro-placement scheme:

communication skills, good planning, more planning and management skills, problem solving skills, knowing exactly when to say yes, and say no, and respecting each other and working very well in a team (S15)

helped me to sort of find myself and gain confidence, self-esteem. Sort of self-awareness. Definitely make me feel that I can find something better. Experience. Different work ethics, work structure, different people (S14)

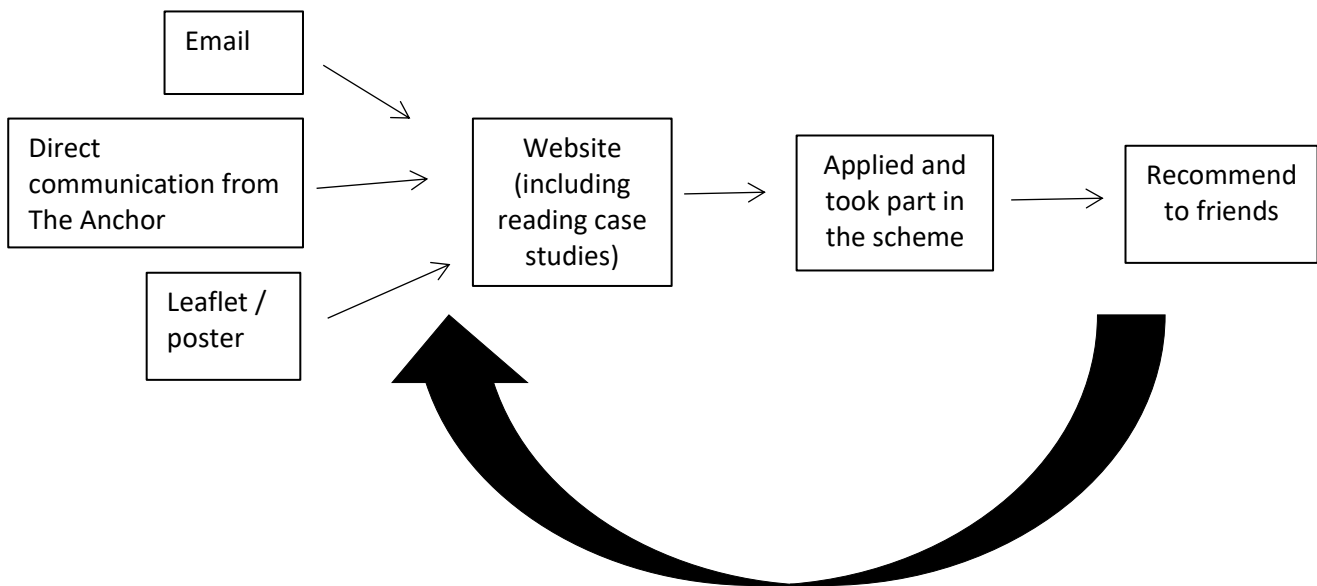
Most repeatedly mentioned were:

Confidence	<p><i>Confidence to talk in a professional environment (S1)</i></p> <p><i>Confidence on things like Excel and word (S4)</i></p> <p><i>Being more confident to speak to the senior people (S5)</i></p>
Writing a CV/cover letter/application	<p><i>It was good practice to write a cover letter and to make sure that my CV was up to date. (S3)</i></p> <p><i>I learned tips of how to write an even better CV and an even better cover letter (S16)</i></p>
Professionalism	<p><i>It showed me how professional people dress, what they do at work, how they present themselves, how they talk (S1)</i></p> <p><i>how to present myself in front of someone and how to appear in a professional manner compared to a student manner (S8)</i></p> <p><i>Awareness of the workplace (S16)</i></p>
Networking and relationships	<p><i>Connections... I met so many people and they inspired me (S1)</i></p> <p><i>Working with other people (S8)</i></p>
Experience	<p><i>The real-life environment (S2)</i></p> <p><i>The thing that I was developing that experience and I feel they [employers] find that quite impressive</i></p>
Interview practice/recruitment process	<p><i>I think just general practice overall with the... like recruitment process (S3)</i></p> <p><i>I have given more thought how I would prepare for another interview (S3)</i></p> <p><i>I learned quite a lot about how to prepare for interviews, how to come across in interviews, that type of thing and how to structure your answers (S16)</i></p>
Communication	<p><i>I think probably my communication (S3)</i></p> <p><i>Improve[d] my communication skills and all those sorts of things that you wouldn't normally be able to say as a student (S6)</i></p> <p><i>interacting with co-workers (S13)</i></p> <p><i>social communication skills, written communication skills (S16)</i></p>

Initiative	<i>Definitely taking my own initiative on things (S4)</i>
Teamwork	<i>Teamwork and attention to detail (S5) being in a team and having to coordinate with others and work with others (S8) working together as a team in that particular situation was so helpful (S15)</i>
Time management	<i>I had a short period of time to do my tasks (S8)</i>
Realising capabilities and potential	<i>An increased awareness of my capability; realise my sort of...let's say potential (S4) to prove that I could kind [of] do a job ... Just kind of knowing that was a possibility because I think in my head it wasn't at that point like I didn't feel comfortable of like mainly due to anxiety and kind of just mental health stuff. I felt that I wouldn't be able to work in that let alone thrive within it (S10)</i>

For students who do not have English as their first language, the micro-placement scheme also helped to improve their English-speaking skills (e.g., S7).

How did students find out about the micro-placement scheme?



Payment – functional mechanism to incentivise students to participate and feel valued as part of the team.

Payment on the micro-placement was an enabling mechanism that acted as an incentive for and supported students to take part.

In general, students indicated that they would have been unlikely to take part if the placement had not been paid, as they would have to have prioritised their studies or other paid work:

If it was not paid there would be less people applying. People do want to get paid. Even if it is just minimum wage (S11)

I think it being paid was definitely very helpful for me because it was on days I wasn't coming into uni, I'd have to like drive in and pay for parking (S4)

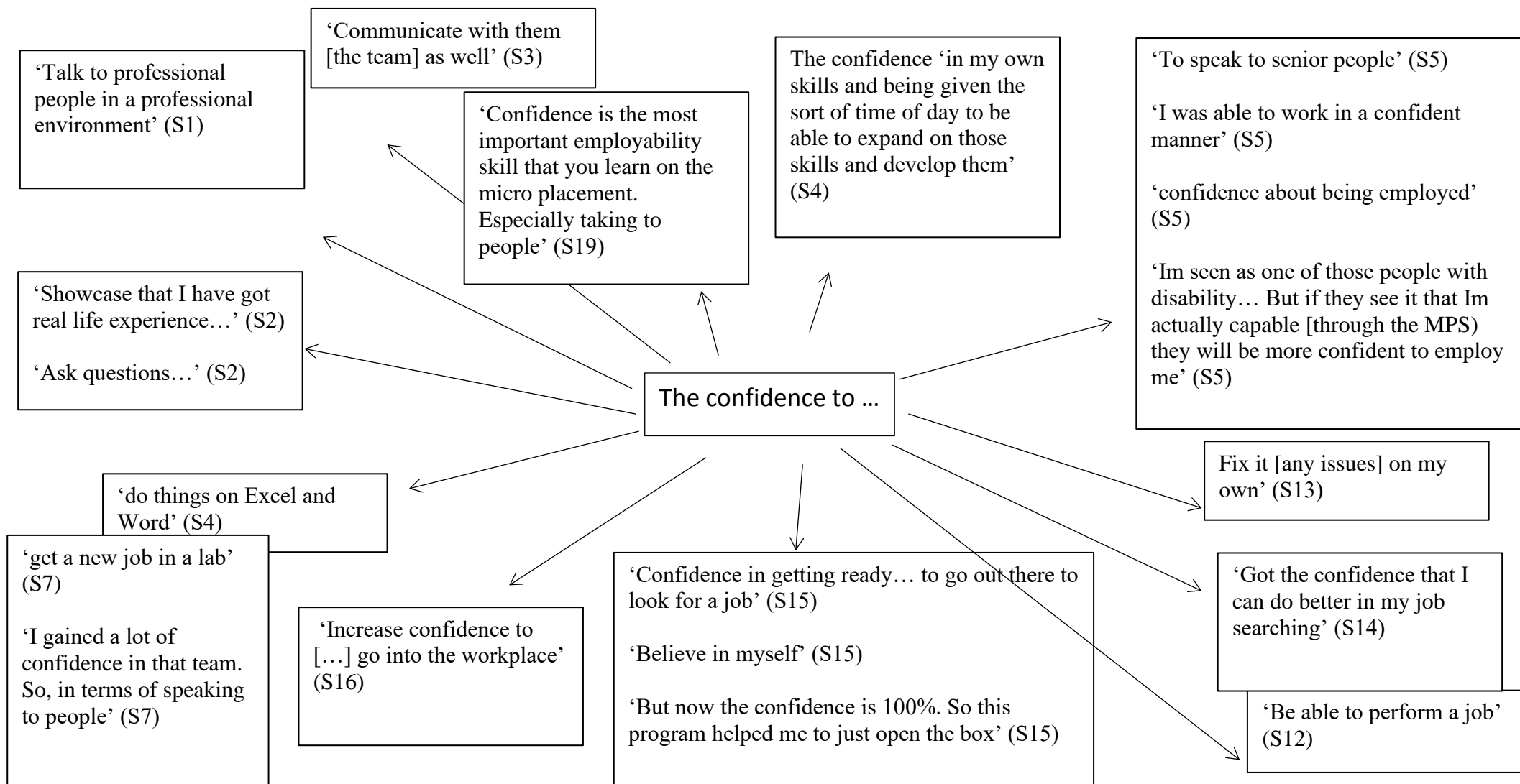
At that time I was quite focused on surviving, so I don't think I would have had any time to volunteer...It was really about making money. And being able to pay for my rent and stuff because times were quite rough back then' (S6); 'there are bills and I do have bills that I need to pay, so I cannot contribute some of my time for something that's not gonna pay bills (S14)

If it was also done for free, it would have been difficult to decide whether I should study or I should work... maybe this is a bad thing but I would have put my assignments first if I had to volunteer for the micro-placement (S6)

Payment also provided them with feelings of being valued.

it [pay] makes you feel like part of the team and you know, like everyone else (S2)

The confidence to... Confidence enabled something else to occur (hence confidence can be described as an enabling mechanism).



Length of the scheme

Thirty hours

The length of the micro-placement scheme (30 hours spread flexibly over several weeks) attracted mixed reviews from students.

Some found 30 hours too short to give more than a taster:

I think I would have enjoyed it a bit longer maybe, yeh I would have liked that (S1).

the scheme was quite short and just the time to get familiar with the tasks, it was already time to end that experience (S7)

Others said that although they had originally thought 30-hours sounded too short, on reflection the amount of time, and flexibility was a good balance:

I thought at the beginning 30 hours was quite a little, because I was like this is confusing because a full-time week is like 32 hours and I'm working only 30. And that's spread out. So, it was just... It felt like a little, a little bit, but it took three months, which was a great amount of time (S6)

I think overall just a really great experience and something so well micro to be able to add that such a large impact and it is crazy how much you learn in such a short and small amount of time (S17)

However, some students felt that anything longer would have been hard to manage alongside other commitments, for example, one student with a learning difficulty said:

I feel that it might be too much to ask of a student to complete 25 hours as well as everything else. I don't know. I found it very challenging and consequently I didn't do all of it. (S16).

Duration and Intensity

Students have the choice of how many weeks to spread their 30-hour placement over. This flexibility was an enabling mechanism.

When asked if they would still have applied for the scheme, if it had had to be completed intensely within one week, most students would have been less inclined to participate. The main issue was balancing time spent on course work or in other paid part-time work.

I was studying full time. So, 30 hours is way too much for me to take in a week (S8)

It would have been impossible. Yeh, absolutely impossible and not helped (S16)

I would have found it very overwhelming as it is a lot of information to take in as a student going into a professional body. I don't think I would have had the courage to apply (S1)

However, students also said they liked the fact that the longer duration of the placement, spread over several weeks looked better on their CV:

This has been over like you know, such a long period of time that four months it's brilliant because you know it shows that I'm still committed to my job and not going to leave the next month or whatever (S2)

Optimal length – from the student perspective

The predominant view was that more hours would be preferable, with varying suggestions from 30-80 hours. Whereas others felt that 60 hours would be pushing it (S13).

There was no support for the placement being shorter than 30 hours:

If it was just like 10 hours maybe wouldn't have done it, but if it was 15-20, somewhere around there, then I would still have done it. If it was more than yes, I would still go for it (S8)

I think if it was shorter, would affect it. If it was like say 20 hours or like 10, I think what are you gonna learn in that time. A normal work day is 8 hours so you are only really going to do 2 days. ... So definitely the longer hours is better (S11)

Flexibility – an enabling mechanism

The scheme offers substantial flexibility over when students do their micro-placement hours and how they choose to spread them over a number of weeks. For many this was significant in enabling them to undertake the placement:

The flexible hours were really great because you know, when you're university you might have exams, you might be busy. So, it worked I guess really well with my university schedule (S6)

I think it was flexible and cause at the time I was on maternity leave with my son and also doing my MBA. And so, I thought it would be nice to kind of fit in with those things and get me more experience (S3)

However, others reflected that maybe great structure would provide a more realistic experience of working life:

I think I did like the flexibility, but I think in hindsight, if I was to get the most out of it, I would have preferred to have more of a rigid structure (S10)

Support as an enabling mechanism

We describe support as an enabling mechanism because it was central to the functioning of the scheme and the students' experience.

Supportive people and processes were repeatedly mentioned as significant throughout the micro-placement process.

you had like support all throughout the whole process of meeting like interview and prep and stuff you could do for that (S4).

everything is available if you need it (S4)

I think it is just the support and how I saw the people treating me and the kind of help they gave me (S1)

People

The dedicated, patient and attentive availability of the Placement Coordinator was most frequently mentioned, as providing students with reassurance that there was always someone to go to, both during the placement and afterwards:

Everything that I have job wise I got to [the Anchor] because she's pushing me ever since I reached out to her. And then you know she still is (S2)

I think she had definitely had a positive impact because when I said, I don't know if I can continue, she found a way to get me to complete it, which is what I wanted to do really. (S3)

Approachability from the Careers Team was also considered to be invaluable:

They definitely helped me like boost my confidence.. Pretty much from day one, they just said that if there are any issues, you know where to find us. Don't hesitate to contact us, things like that. So, the like the approachability that they had (S13)

when I had a question I was able to reach out to like... this is my question, there was always someone to help me (S8)

Similarly, support from placement supervisors and colleagues was also key:

The people were not judgmental (S1)

For me it was the fact that because I was able to ask questions and was able to get the support, that kind of pushed me in the right way (S2)

They were able to provide me with that level of detail that you don't usually get from a job (S6)

They didn't treat me like an outsider, it was yes, you're coming into the team (S8)

Specific stages

Specific forms of support were valued at specific stages of pre-, during and post- internship:

<p>Recruitment process</p>	<p><i>So, then there was an interview, there were three examiners and I really panicked because I had never done that before but I used the situation ... and all the feedback I got that I learned through my first year and I was really pleased when I got it. (S1)</i></p> <p><i>I think that it was such a good programme... I think it went into so much depth and it had so many different tips, even just like interview tips of like body language and how to prepare for like an online interview (S3).</i></p> <p><i>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)</i></p> <p><i>After I finished my interview, I was told that I was actually like well suited or professional. Like I had no baseline for any of my skills yet. So being told afterwards, the interview went really well with like my confidence boosting (S12).</i></p> <p><i>the recruitment process was... well done, and also helpful and supportive (S16)</i></p> <p><i>It was like the I think it was the friendliness as well because it didn't really feel like an interview. It felt like an informal, like an informal conversation that I was having (S13)</i></p>
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Recommended modifications to support

Over the course of the entire micro-placement scheme, in its current design students encounter numerous different university staff: interviewers, placement co-ordinator, Careers Team, placement supervisor. For a minority of students this was a weakness of the scheme, for example:

I would probably just have like[d] a mentor, but that might just be a case of going to a scheme that's more well suited for someone like me who needs single point[s] of contact to help those through a piece of work that they are not familiar with (S12)

I was passed around to people, which I think made it really confusing (S12)

I think I would have preferred if I had one singular point of contact would have helped me through it because that would be more consistent (S12)

Post internship reflections

Many, though not all students, made use of the University's Careers Team's service FutureMe as a way to reflect on their learning and development needs after completing the placement. As part of the vision for the micro-placement scheme, this is intended to complement and reinforce the learning, but it is not compulsory. Those that used it valued the activities:

I found it really useful. There were a few subjects, by that time I had gone through the programme and the ambassadors, so there were, it sort of made sense to me. So, I went quickly through them, like the videos and reflections. There were some bits that were really useful. (S1)

Going through the FutureMe website [I] actually learn[t] a lot myself on how to increase your employability, how to show like the best portrayal of yourself when applying to jobs. So, I think that's specifically made me reflect on my skills and experience (S3)

Like loads and loads of different categories... videos you can watch. Long web pages. I think there's blogs as well. It just goes into so many different categories of like careers and how to like even, just basic things like writing a CV, writing a good cover letter. But yeah, it covers the whole thing of like looking for jobs, going to interviews, like catching up with the interviewers afterwards. (S3)

However, not all students complete the FutureMe award, citing reasons such as being busy with other jobs.

The central ingredient: gaining experience

A majority of students who engage with the micro-placement scheme have little or no previous work experience, and come from working class backgrounds which afford fewer opportunities for accessing professional networks and jobs.

In this context, the opportunity to gain a range of experiences on the scheme was a motivator for students to participate:

- At a minimum to gain interview experience: *I felt like that was quite professional [an] interview, so actually I thought, well, if that doesn't go anywhere that's actually good experience to have to practice if nothing else (S3)*
- Overall gaining of experience: *I had limited experience like working and I felt like I needed to get some more (S10); I hadn't got much experience, and it has given me a bit of a stepping stone into getting into work and to the working environment and stuff (S11); gain new experiences. (S16)*
- Safety of a familiar environment: *I hadn't had any work experience. I had never had a job. So, I thought something within the university was close and familiar (S12)*
- Accessibility: *almost every other job kind of asks for relevant experience in that field, whereas this was kind of no experience required (S13); the fact that they said they were looking for people that had little work experience or had little to none or no work experience. And I was like kind of almost a very good candidate to that (S11).*

Something to show to employers

Completion of the micro-placement scheme was valued because it enabled students to display the experience to future prospective employers:

- Adding the experience to their CV: *to get more experience into my CV basically (S5); to get the opportunity to get that experience on my CV, especially early on in my career, is something that is quite difficult to get. So I decided to apply to just get that extra experience (S6); it is quite useful on the CV because you, just gain a two or three months of experience so that without the placement I would never have the possibility to do so (S7) Look good on your CV and interviews (S16)*
- Standing out from other candidates: *I would say it's the way that it makes you stand out from other candidates in certain jobs (S2); obviously the experience would stand out more than the three years because everyone would do three years at university (S2); just to make myself stand out and put maybe on CV that I've done this (S14)*
- Opening doors: *It was an opportunity which opened doors ... which I appreciated afterwards (S5)*
- Getting more interviews: *Being able to add that extra experience to my CV because I feel like that actually helped me get more interviews. I will score more interviews when*

I was applying so I increased my success rate (S6); If I did not have this program would have been hard for me to go in for an interview and get a job. So this is one of the good effect[s] of having this program (S15).

- Using the micro-placement experience examples in interviews: *At that point, I didn't have any work experience. So it was impossible for me to say "in a previous job I did this this way. (S8); I could point to a work experience that was an indication of my work skills (S8)*
- Showing commitment to an employer through experience: *employees look at like when you started and when you end to make sure that you're like kind of committed. So, I think having that work experience was definitely able to sort of secure me in more positions (S13)*
- Legitimising skills: *I think overall it just gave me the ability to point to a work experience.*

