Focus group discussions on employability in economics degrees

We held two focus group discussions. The first was at UCL on 10th June 2019 and was attended by 10 academics from 9 universities alongside 6 employers from mix of private and public sector and 5 students, including one who was on placement. The second was at Aston University on 8th July 2019 and was attended by 8 academics from 3 universities alongside 3 employers from private sector and 4 students from different year groups.

The purpose of the focus groups was to discuss what economics degrees are doing to help students develop employability skills and to consider what improvements could be made to economics degrees in this area.

What do we mean by employability?

London discussion (plenary)
Main ideas broadly agreed by attendees:

- Preparing students to get good graduate-level first job
- Developing skills to enable them to succeed at work
- Broader than skills for work, so that educating people for wider life
- Not necessarily job as an economist and certainly not as an academic economist

Agreed that wider advice on CV writing, interviews and similar are needed to help get the first job but separate from broader employability skills that could be in economics degree.

Aston discussion (plenary)
Focus group attendees agreed it was difficult to define the concept. Definitions provided included:

- Attractiveness to employers in terms of productive and efficient output without the need of undue supervision
- Developing the necessary skills for employment and being able to signal these to employers
- Skills, competencies and knowledge that enable/facilitate doing the 'day job'
- Skills that allow you to find a job
- Generating skills that are useful/valuable to employers
- Increases the ease with which employers can train graduates
- Transferable skills and the ability to apply subject knowledge to organisation's problems
- Having the right skills, knowledge and aptitude for today's businesses
- Suggestion was made that 'fit' of match between what graduate works at and what they want to work at is also important; preparing them to understand how to match what they are looking for with what is available
- Skills and knowledge that improve productivity in the workplace
- Attractiveness to world of work and ability to add value in some specific or general way

- The ability to capture an employer's attention with the combination of skills and qualification student possesses

Focus was on how students understood how to show employers what skills and potential they had. Many definitions from Aston focused on students being employable.

What are degrees doing?

London discussion (plenary)
High level summary of survey results was presented. Main points made in discussion were:

- Changes happening in many economics departments; mainly happening because staff who want to refresh degrees pushing for, and delivering on, change.
- At 'piloting' stage in some departments and others reviewing what to do. Those reviewing degrees, or who have reviewed recently, have included employability as part of their considerations. Some degrees have focused on building in employability skills in all modules (but not many), whereas others have identified specific modules to do this in.
- Suggestion to build on economies of scale, and specialist expertise, by developing initiatives with other programmes (particularly joint degrees) and careers services.
- Recognition that some initiatives are piecemeal – e.g. one-off Python Hackathon.
- Business Economics degrees/degrees in Business Schools more focused on employability skills.
- Sense of progress but still early in journey.

Aston discussion (plenary)
Gave same presentation as in London. Emphasised that those who responded are more likely to be engaging with the employability agenda (sample bias). Also risk of some over-playing what they are doing in the survey. General sense in the room that not enough going on in traditional degrees and that difficult to change given incentives on academics to focus on research.

General question discussed of what makes economics different to other disciplines. Noted that spectrum of pathways that economics graduates go into is one of the issues. Need to show students spectrum of opportunities and identify generic skills and job-specific skills relevant for them. How to design the curriculum – target the economics end?

What skills should economics departments focus on in undergraduate degrees?

London discussion (plenary and Group 1)
This question was discussed by Group 1 who fed back their ideas to all participants. Discussions in other groups also picked up ideas relevant to this question and those ideas are captured here.

- Be realistic about what can be done and about what employers expect; they are not looking for fully formed employee.

- Demand for programming skills is on the rise. Not necessarily one specific programming package but ability to work with one package (at least) and knowledge of other programmes that are out there. Don't underestimate importance of basic Excel and don't assume students have the skills coming into university. Won't know all the programmes that employers are using now or in the future but need to have some experience 'playing' with programmes, confidence to try things and motivation to learn for themselves on the job. Know where to find and navigate information about programmes and online resources. Skills in self-learning are important.

- Data handling skills are important. Need to be comfortable with big data, to know what data to find to evidence an answer to a question and have some idea of where to find it. Need to understand how to manipulate data, clean it and format it. Have a perspective on the potential of big data/data science and ability to work with a range of disciplines/specialists to carry out what is needed. Understand how to ask the right questions about the data and how to interpret what it tells us. Be able to find the data and understand the power of data. Hoping (young) graduates coming in will bring new insights. Data science students annotate code line-by-line to ensure they understand how each line contributes.

- Communication is crucial. Confidently presenting answer to questions. Able to explain to a non-economist/non-expert. Able to explain the intuition behind models/results of theory. Intuitive thinkers who are able to express their ideas clearly to mixed audiences. Know how to reference others properly. Need to be safe pair of hands in front of client/senior management; confidence and adaptable and able to think on their feet. Need to be able to explain the technical material they know to non-experts. In every job you have to be able to talk to people about what you are doing.

- Openness to learning how to learn by themselves and being flexible is important. Employers are realistic that graduates are not going to be fully formed employees and there is much they can learn on the job. For example, they can attend presentation/Excel/Python training sessions at work. What is needed, and tested in interviews/assessment centres, is confidence learning how to learn and willingness to be flexible and learn. Need to be adaptable and willing to try new things. Prepare them to be ready to learn rather than being ready to do a job.

- Awareness of how to apply economics to real world problems and develop evidenced-based answers is important for economist roles in particular but probably more widely. Need to be able to formulate a question, think about the best way to answer the question (logical framework for analysis), intuitive understanding of issues, identify what evidence is needed and ideas on how to get the evidence (even if don't know how to do it themselves), develop an answer, critically analyse the emerging answer and ideas of others, justification/defence of point of view and ability to share ideas with others in less technical way. Should be happy to play around with ideas and data to explore issues. This is an area where economics graduates should stand out from other disciplines (notably logical structure to approach question and ability to use data to evidence). Teach a way of thinking. Teach ability to be critical. Economists bring logical structure.

- Know how to sift information. Know how to find information for themselves. Not about memorising facts. What's a good quality resource and what is not? Something around teaching basic 'googling skills' and ability to curate sources on the internet and know what is reliable. How do a literature search? How find good quality information? How to condense and use the information? Opens the door for 24-hour exams or similar assessment methods where the emphasis is on careful selection of information.

- One suggestion that economics departments should think ahead to what the future of work is. For example, analytics is the future. Push back from room that it is hard to predict the future and also impossible to include every outcome. Maybe better to focus on learning to learn, adaptability and flexibility so students are resilient to changes.

- Looking for graduates with genuine interest in the job they have applied to/are doing. Show knowledge of sector, evidence of passion for applying economics.

- Ability to work with other (related disciplines) and to work professionally, recognising that in world of work people with mixed backgrounds/specialism work together on big questions. Team-working is important. When employers ask about team-work it is hard for them to know what the student did and what impact they had. At work you develop a reputation for contributing. How can students build this reputation in courses? Learn how to socially interact in professional way, including via email or on social media. Better to be able to do economics and talk to people. But priority is being able to do economics. Most interactions in the workplace are 3-10 people in a room discussing ideas, plans and strategies. Can learn how to do this in work but good to practice. Difficult to mimic workplace collaboration without interdisciplinary activities as everyone will be an economist. Could also help spark a debate around big issues such as climate change – make students more aware when they graduate.

- Discussion around extent to which technical content of courses is needed for work, even as professional economist. How much is actually used? How are skills needed for a PhD any different to job as a non-economist (e.g. in tech sector)? How to cater for a mix of destinations? Sense that the most important thing is economics graduates having really good knowledge of core concepts/tools/models but maybe less emphasis needed on advanced material for all. Learn some skills on the job – presentation, Excel – but employers never going to teach the models so that core content needs to be there. Don't sacrifice core knowledge. Important that graduates have a genuine and intuitive understanding of the core concepts of the subject. But important question of what core content is necessary – difference between what academics think they need to cover and what graduates actually need to know to work, even as professional economists. Employer input would be appreciated.

Aston discussion (plenary and Group 1)
In the discussion on how to define employability many attendees provided lists of skills that students should be able to 'sell' to employers. These included:

- Disciplined
- Knowledgeable
- Creative
- Imaginative
- Skilled
- Problem-solving
- Sociable
- Socialised
- Generous with time
- Loyal
- Risk-taking
- Questioning
- Accepting of structure
- Leaders
- Good followers
- Listeners
- Actively hopeful
- Confident that problems can be solved
- Good timekeepers
- Willing to work hard
- Practical skills
- Interpersonal skills
- Drive/tenacity
- Working in a team to achieve a common goal
- Ability to condense ideas into short written work (employer view)
- Ability to write succinctly (employer view)

Group 1 discussed this question and identified several skills that were important:

- Ability to communicate ideas succinctly
- Data analysis
- Using Excel
- Resilience and risk taking

There was a discussion on whether some of the skills 'lacking' reflected a generational shift (e.g. resilience) and were as much about increased mental health issues amongst young people. Solutions may be about school/wider society/employer support as much as what happens in the degree.

- Communication skills need to be improved through consistent opportunities – a single 10-min presentation once a year is not improving anyone's abilities. Could have students giving a three-minute presentation weekly or bi-weekly on a topic of their choosing (the presentation skills are far more important than the content). Could also use self-selection based on confidence into groups who perhaps need to work on

confidence and presentation, although possibility that this self-selection process could cause embarrassment and alienation for those who lack confidence.
- Should be more of a drive to create a university community feel in response to the mental health problems facing the current generation of students.
- Students need to be developing skills at university – the old mentality of university being a good place for young people to 'waste time usefully' no longer applies.
- Massive pressure on students to attain a 2:1. Number of extenuating circumstances has increased hugely – anecdotally agreed upon by all the academic staff at the focus group.
- Students are strategic in selecting modules which offer the highest marks for the minimum amount of perceived effort.
- Lack of community feel in universities due to competition in the graduate labour market.

Group 2 noted that biggest feedback from placement students was difficulty writing/communicating ideas, whatever the workplace. Need to be able to summarise information in succinct written piece/presentation. Key skill that is not tested in economics degrees. But could give an exercise like this in class – give something to read in exam and ask them to summarise succinctly. The group also noted the value of learning how to reflect on experiences and identify how to improve.

How to develop skills in an economics undergraduate degree?

London discussion (plenary and Groups 2 and 3)
Sub-questions relevant to this question were discussed primarily by Group 2 and Group 3 who fed back their ideas to the whole session. Discussions in other groups also picked up ideas relevant to this question and those ideas are captured here.

- Make a conscious choice about how much your degree will focus on employability skills. Be clear on what the purpose of degree is and how important employability skills are as part of this. Will vary by programme/institution but whatever is decided should be transparent and should guide design of modules within programme. Needs senior team buy-in/push/organisation. Don't make degree a giant assessment centre. Don't try to replicate 'on the job learning'. Don't design for what employers want. Design for enjoyment and intellectual satisfaction of subject. But along the way can also develop skills. Has to be meaningful in the context of the degree. Don't lose learning of concepts/knowledge. Don't ignore technical specialist skills needed to do MSc/PhD. They are skills that economics graduates can do that others can't. Focus/priority of whole curriculum matters. Policy to incorporate skills across modules helps.

- There were mixed views on whether skill development should happen across economics modules or in specific skills-focused modules. Some thought skills modules are better. Others thought skills specific modules may be useful but also need to be in economics modules themselves, but not all modules necessarily. Suggested that in economics modules they did not need to label topics/activities as employability skills. If have skills-focused modules, need to consider how to get connections between

economics modules and skills modules so that students see as holistic. There could be a role for academic advisors/personal tutors working with students here. If early year skills module, students won't really see how it fits with life after degree or other modules. Students 'write off' and don't connect to economics degree if in separate skills module. Skills module using narrow definition of employability skills. Some thought every module must be developing skills of some sort – challenge which skills are being developed. Suggestion to make known what is available to students across university (e.g. programming training) and direct them to resources/opportunities rather than replicating/duplicating.

- There were also mixed views on whether skills development should be across all economics modules or confined to a selection of more 'applied' modules. Suggestion to have some technical/theory modules and focus on wider skills in more applied modules.
    - End up with a mix of applied modules and more technical modules. One university has specialist unit on data handling skills, programming skills and similar as can't cover all of that in core quantitative module. Accept some modules more quantitative/technical.
    - Students and alumni emphasised that it was important to make it clear to students how the technical material is used at least; explain why they're learning the theory/models/quantitative methods. Can still do presentation on the content in that module or ask students how to apply the model as well as including a question on being able to derive the model. If a student selects more theoretical modules, will they be less well prepared for some careers?
    - If going for an approach where most skill development happens in more applied modules, don't leave them to final year. Develop over time by having built in across levels/years. Layer across the degree.
    - Many thought it was important to build skills into core modules so students are exposed to them/can't avoid them. Students don't have perfect foresight and need to level the playing field of skills development. Don't make optional but then recognise that you may be forcing some out of their comfort zone (e.g. presentations/group work).
    - Remember students are always developing skills in a module (higher order learning): assess, evaluate, analysis, research, critical thinking. Need to make explicit so that students recognise.

- Placement year opens up opportunities to enhance employability skills. 50% of institutions offer placements. But not necessarily all students taking up opportunity at those institutions. Placement year is important for students but also for employers (long interview). It can also be useful information source for academics. Get ideas from placement students when they return about what skills and activities would be useful to have in degree. Get them to explain to lecturers and other students what was important at work. Those who do placement with GES or similar are more likely to end up in policy interviews later and shine.

- It should not be about delivering training courses but about creating teaching and learning strategies/activities that develop skills alongside learning content. We don't

teach skills; students learn skills. Give genuine opportunities for students to try things out. Don't 'train' on things like presentations. Just ask them to do them and give feedback. Coach rather than teach; this may be difficult for lecturer. How explicit to be about what we expect them to learn for themselves? Make clear for modules what skills we expect students to have coming into the class (as well as pre-requisite knowledge). Provide opportunities to practice the skill and they learn from doing. Opportunities to develop different to 'skill training'.

- Activities can be in student independent learning time but then need to have support available if they are struggling. Need support structure alongside independent activities/expectations. For example, extra support classes or office hours for students struggling with applied quants project (requires resource). Students could do some activities in small group tutorials to get an idea of what is involved and the rest outside of contact hours. Need to provide clear guidance of what is expected. How to equip PGTAs to run tutorials focused on activities?

- Many ideas came up in discussions about how activities could be designed to help students develop employability skills.
    a) Applying economics to the real world and learning to learn: Activities to work on big picture questions that students need to analyse themselves, using their economics know-how and evidence. Make use of assessment style questions used by employers looking for economics graduates to work as professional economists – e.g. Ofcom scenario-based questions. This may also be a way to motivate students to engage, saying this is the type of question you could be asked at interview. How do academics become familiar with what interview questions are like?
    b) Build on teaching and learning pedagogy: Problem based learning provides useful base for activities. Flipping lectures – e.g. recording technical material – opens up opportunities.
    c) Applying economics, learning to learn and working with others: Create broad inter-disciplinary module where students get taught by people from different disciplines on issues that matter to wider society (e.g. climate change). Big idea inter-disciplinary module should be early on so students get an idea of different perspectives and the need to build connections from the outset. Led to discussion of value of four-year degrees with broad first year. Make more of having joint degree students in the room if applies to a module.
    d) Do more group work: it should reflect real world team-working where people have different roles, skills and backgrounds. How can a group agree roles – not all doing same task/collaboration more obvious in workplace where roles are defined (established hierarchy and expertise/comparative advantage). Give list of tasks to assign in group. Mimic moderated discussion in assessment centre. Give topics to discuss (non-economics). Testing how students listen, put forward their case, adapt to what they hear, follow-on from what someone else says and see how resilient they are. About having a general conversation. Small group opportunity. Discussing with small group needs more traditional tutorials (Oxbridge). Need to be small. How to monitor/moderate in a tutorial?

Will need to design assessment to ensure all students in a group participate equally.

e) Use case studies for policy courses: Need to combine with theory as it is really the ability to apply theory to real world cases that matters for those looking for economics graduates specifically. Way to explain how the theories/models are used. Could also be project appraisal activities of consultancy type projects – commercial or policy (e.g. appraise congestion charge, night tube). Can incorporate in applied modules but how to do in maths/stats type course?
f) Data skills should be in quants modules – data handling; how use techniques to solve business problems. Include Stata/data management into problem set but if not in exam students may not engage with it. Need formative and summative assessment.
g) Change nature of problem sets: Assess mechanics of model less; what kind of model to use to analyse an issue? Write a one-page note for a minister to explain why a technique is, or is not, useful for looking at a question. Move away from just 'solve'. Do you then need to do this application in lecture/formative homework/tutorials/etc and hence sacrifice time for content?
h) Broaden idea of what can be done in an exam: Give IFS report four weeks before exam. Tell them you will be asking questions on it in exam. Can bring one-page cheat sheet into exam. Allow them to review and discuss with others. Can ask questions like 'what is aim of paper', 'how did they assess the issue'. Has to be in assessment for them to be motivated to do it. 24-hour exams also a possibility.
i) Employability week: Module leads design activity/lecture that week that explicitly links to employability. Ended up being mainly guest speakers from, for example, GES. Course leader had to co-ordinate to limit overlap. Timetabled during normal lecture slots but still need to boost uptake. Would likely need to make mandatory to ensure student engagement. Emphasis on local employers for less prestigious universities based outside of London.
j) How teach finding information for themselves: Give them opportunities to do; go find something to read on a topic rather than giving reading list (prescribed/required); create your own reading list. You won't get a reading list at work – asking colleagues is one answer/know who the experts are in the field.
k) Dissertations: weekend away to write/discuss. Get students to defend why they said what they said.
l) Research based learning more of a comfort zone for academics but will get a number of skills covered in the same way. But maybe not those targeted at non-academic audience.
m) Develop more interactive ways of assessing and giving feedback that develop resilience.

- Assessment questions/tasks should relate to the skills trying to develop.
    a) Need some formative (e.g. formative presentation to feed into summative report). Raises questions about how to give feedback and how to assess (criteria/marking rubric).

b) If looking for intuitive thinking and ability to explain, then should have more focus on discuss/evaluate questions in exams/problem sets. Not just 10% part at the end of a 'solve' maths question.
c) All assessment at end of year does not help. Need to be working on things all year long and assessment during term motivates engagement. Less convenient for staff, however.
d) Closed book exams are not reflective of real world where you ask people and Google for help but need to recognise a place for closed book exams to ensure knowledge of core economics concepts are well understood. Also does help prepare for working to time pressure. Can design exam questions better to assess and develop critical thinking/applied skills. Maybe give something to analyse or evidence to use to answer a question. Should not be only closed book exams though.
e) Design questions that are targeted at specific audience and part of grading criteria is linked to clarity of explanation for non-expert.
f) Ask open-ended questions. Look for them to impose a structure and identify evidence for ideas. No right answer necessarily. At least somewhere in the curriculum.
g) Perception that it's harder to get high marks with skills modules. Careful to design assessment so that it's not harder. Some US universities have pass/fail or ranking. Would that help with assessment of skills? Give 1st to top quartile? Employers are still looking for predicted 2:1 or higher so they do care about marks. Should assessing skills make it less likely?

- Strong push for universities to get employers involved.
    - Get students, staff and employers involved with design of degree. What is needed? How to incorporate these elements whilst still maintaining academic rigour?
    - Employers coming in to show students why what they are learning matters. Motivate them to see connection between what they're learning and later work (applying economics, communicating clearly, interpreting evidence). Tends to be individual lecturers using their own network of contacts. Easier to do in London/South East?
    - Communication with non-economists requires assessment to be specifically targeted and assessed by non-economists. For example, have defence of dissertation to panel that includes non-economist (or some equivalent for presentation). Are there academic regulations/restrictions on this?
    - Talk to employers about how they assess potential? Can something similar be done in courses? Important for designing assessment criteria to have a good understanding of what to expect for top end.
    - Bring employers into the classroom, co-teaching on modules with applied/real world context. Get the employers to talk about skills so students see the value of how what they are learning will help later. Make use of local employers – small businesses. Use alumni network for this. Can get employers to help design activities and assessments as well. Do academic regulations prevent them from being involved with doing the assessment?

- We have things to learn from more applied degrees (e.g. energy economics) who do make use of employers/contacts.
- Do assessment standards need to change to allow for skills to be given credit? For example, can you downgrade an essay for non-academic audience if it is excellent economics but very technical?

Aston discussion (plenary and Group 2)
Group 2 made the following points when feeding back to the wider group.

- Placement degrees are good but don't hide behind them. Need to support student through whole cycle from seeking placement to returning to university and getting the degree. There should also be more focus on getting placement students to engage with the wider cohort to share their experience – both useful for those who have not done a placement and helps develop communication skills for placement students.
- Note that there is a 'black economy' of group work behind the scenes, with students working together. Capitalise on this; develop skills through communities.
- Suggestion made that there may be a role for personal tutors to work with students on their personal development (e.g. audit of skills developed in programme).
- Variety of reasons why a student may choose to study economics aged 18. These reasons can change significantly over the three years of an economics degree. Are many students still interested in pursuing an economics degree after three years studying it at UG level? Is this a failure of employability?
- Getting students to engage with skills development that is neither assessed nor clearly linked to improving chances of getting job/succeeding in a job is going to be difficult.
- Academics are keen to experiment with new assessment methods such as open book or oral exams. Could also use peer assessment with lecturer moderation to ensure fairness and rigour.
- Employability in economics is vital due to economics being sat on the boundary between quantitative and qualitative work/research.
- Embedding skills in modules and moving away from calling the skills employability may help students engage.

What are the challenges and how to overcome them?

London discussion (plenary and Group 4)
Sub-questions relating to engaging students were discussed primarily by Group 4 who fed their ideas back to the other participants. Discussions in other groups also picked up ideas relevant to this question and those ideas are captured here.

- The purpose of degree needs to be decided; employability not the only (or main) purpose in many departments.
- Perception that academics need to cover a lot of core/theory material to ensure students are prepared for graduate study. But how advanced does it need to be? Given % that end up with PhD or MSc Economics, does the advanced material need to be in compulsory modules? Could that be reserved for advanced options that potential candidates directed to rather than in core courses that all do? Or have

different core options, with a technical and less technical stream. Allow for the fact that for many careers technical skills do matter. But do we really know what the technical skills are that graduates need? Is academic snobbery affecting choices?

- Engage students by being clearer about what skills they are developing and how they are valued by employers. They need to see the value. If it is on the exam motivates them – make use of it by assessing. Ensure modules that are seen as more applied/skills-heavy are not associated with lower marks (more risk of not getting top mark). Give them good marks so they are confident in the skills they are developing; willing to give it a go. They will also choose modules with higher marks. Show them that the skills they are developing are valuable for degree – get immediate pay off as well as value in later life. Make clear to students that employers are open to examples from personal life, university and work experience. Can employers make that clearer too? Use it all to demonstrate skills and passion/interest. For less motivated/disengaged, need to make it count for marks. Get students to explore the labour market so they get to understand what skills are required. Incentives need to be there. Students motivated by peers; hearing from others the value of particular activities. Students link skills with getting the job (e.g. case study practice for interview) and get support from careers service. Need to change students' attitudes so they move away from what content to learn based on what will be in exam. Focus on learning generally. How do this? See employers coming in who are enthusiastic. But the students care about what grade they get and if 80% is about solving/prove rather than explaining, then that is what they focus on. Concern about weighting other areas too highly if they end up with very low marks. Students may be learning sub-consciously but need to see use later in degree. It needs to be made explicit to them and not a promise of something they will use in the (distant) future.
- Need to make the activities count. Suggestions that skills modules should have credit attached to them but that takes contact hours from somewhere else in the degree. However, without credit, only those students already actively engaged with their employability are likely to take advantage of the opportunity.
- For large cohorts, make the most of technology to develop skills. For example, writing for non-experts could be through discussion forum. Use online resources like simulation games (Globus?); online lectures/flipped lectures; peer feedback/peer review (anonymised); and group work. Need to motivate students to do themselves – all students not just the best/most engaged. General sense of there being T&L strategies and resources out there to be used. But need people to know where to find them and how to use them.
- Students will only learn skills if they engage with the activities. Motivate by giving options or by making compulsory? What is best? Former relies on students' intrinsic motivation; latter creates discontent with some students potentially; particularly if don't see value. Need mix of both. Need to embed across modules and not just in specialist skills modules.
- Work with other programmes – cross faculty/university – to leverage expertise and economies of scale. Interdisciplinary activities will also develop collaborative skills of students from across departments.
- How persuade academics to move away from closed book exams when convenient and have tradition of being best way to assess? No real answer to that one. Partly about being very clear what is being tested and whether that is the best way to test

the learning outcomes. If not, then look at alternatives (maybe). Balance must be made since closed book exams still have some merit, especially in mathematical modules.

- Is the idea of a vocational degree still a 'dirty word'? If so, how can this be changed?
- Recognise that much of what is happening is driven by people who volunteer time to develop courses in this way. Reward and recognise innovation in this area in promotion criteria (university approach). Maybe don't force on everyone. Let those who can, and want to, teach and grow them rather than expect engagement from all. Let people lean to their comparative advantage. How to incentivise academics to take it on? Not unique to economics. Need enough of the keen people in a department. Need a coordinated approach from senior leadership team in a department if want cross-curriculum approach.
- Talking about adding stuff on top of what already doing? Where to fit it in?
- Turn around. What do academics do? How can we develop those skills in students?
- There were mixed views on whether doing more on employability skills necessarily means doing less content. Some thought that you have to lose some time on material to give space for student activities. Others thought that students learning concepts/knowledge/analysis through activity so complementary rather than substitutes. May reflect differences in nature of modules being taught; more applied modules may have more natural complementarity between skills activities and content compared to technical/quantitative modules. Can you teach same content in a different way to do both content and skill development in parallel? Expect students to teach themselves something like Excel to be able to do the exercise/activity.
- Economist academics not famous for being able to explain ideas in non-technical way to wide audience. How then can they teach it to students? Don't know what should and should not be included in a non-technical piece. Role for inter-disciplinary degrees/mixed student base. Also, role for employers to advise or can they be included in activities/assessment without actually 'teaching' how to present/how to write.
- Don't have resources to deliver skills modules to large cohorts. Do for part of cohort (e.g. specialist degrees).
- Limit % on group work to appease students. Not just group work to ensure student can't get pass on module by free-riding on others. Possibly improving assessment design such that free-riding is not an option.
- Academics feel they don't have the knowledge/skills as they have not had time in industry/policy-making. Bring in outsiders. Makes it difficult to motivate students/convince them that it is difficult.
- Don't overestimate extent to which students know what they want to do/be. Increase exposure to range of professions. Get students and employers together.
- Economics is the best money-making social science. Some motivated by job at end and not so interested in applying economics/careers in economics. Cater to them? Although students choosing economics due to potential career, perhaps more likely to engage with employability and less engaged with the degree content itself?

Aston discussion (plenary and group 2)

Group 3 discussed how to incentivise students to engage with skills-focused module or skills-activities within economics modules. They also discussed, briefly, how to incentivise academics to build employability into their modules.

- Students are strategic and choose to invest time where it matters most, where it interests them most and where they get most reward from putting in effort. Identify modules where going to aim to do well and others where can get away with doing less well. Tend to be focused on surviving/short-term/current priorities. Recognise that post global financial crisis, it is a very tough labour market and looking for tactics that get them the job and good salary. Need to explain why engaging is of value to them.
- Those that are already proactive/engaged/switched on to what they need to do to be employable, are more likely to engage with a separate employability skills module. Those certain of what they want to do more likely to take opportunities that might help them get there. But how get the others to engage, those who are less sure about what to do and even what they want to do.
- Does label 'Employability Skills for Economists' modules have negative connotations for students? Engaged student will choose if they see value but average student not likely to engage. Not sure employers would value this either. Don't look that closely at modules in a degree unless student can really sell what they learned from it. Students find that they talk about course generally. If student flags something on CV/covering letter, then may ask more detailed questions on how activities helped them develop skills.
- Use economics as the delivery vehicle but skills are transferable. Skills delivery through economics programme. Do students perceive that if 'economics module' then only relevant for economics jobs whereas most are transferable across all jobs?
- If separate 'Employability Skills for Economists' module, students would expect it to include advice/help on CV, cover letters, interview prep (how to communicate to employers what they have to offer). Work through concrete examples for different skills – e.g. how coped with mishap – in modules. Some aspects on maintaining a job but less on economics (e.g. develop good rapport with managers, understand HR requirements). Only include economics content where it clearly connects to work. Good to connect knowledge learning to skills that helpful generally, not just economics jobs. Helps students make themselves attractive to employers. Sign of what students think of as employability. If seems to be just for people looking for 'economics' job, students will be turned off if not thinking of that career pathway. Many students don't become professional economists so don't make a skills module look like it is preparation for academic or professional economics jobs.
- Better to have skills developed across modules rather than in one bespoke module. Students balance their effort across modules and should develop skills even if tactically they do less work in some modules relative to others. Even if arbitrage across modules will develop skills somewhere on average. Less likely to invest in bespoke module, even if counts, if difficult to do well (relative to other modules).
- Other reason to embed skill development across degrees is that students need to get lots of opportunities to practice skills. Not something they can develop with one activity in one module. Learn from doing and from reflective practice. Don't expect students to see big change after one module. They also won't explicitly remember what they did in previous years but may be there in sub-conscious.

- Suggestion made to learn from degrees like engineering where there is professional accreditation. For example, in an engineering degree safety is a priority area for any graduate to be on top of and hence it is incorporated across modules. Build priority areas across all modules. No professional body in economics, and not all graduates become economists, making this more difficult to tailor/design. **What are the professional standards that all economics graduates need to meet?** Extra challenge of diversity of what economics students do or at least focus on non-core economics roles.
- Students primarily focused on 'marks' from a module, not what skills they develop or how they are developing as a person. Don't recognise that they are developing skills or even thinking about it. Element of them trusting that those responsible for degree have designed it to ensure they graduate in a position to get and do job. **Find ways to make students more self-aware about what skills they are acquiring and help them understand how to show employers that they have the skill.** Students want to understand how to make themselves look attractive on their CV. What can they use from the course to make them look different? Don't appreciate when the skill development is happening and don't read back to what syllabus claims. Need to change the way students think. They need to recognise that what matters is academic qualification but also range of examples of how they have skills/competencies. Careers service advisor won't know what they are learning in programme. Maybe role for alumni mentoring. Make clear from outset in a module what they're doing and what skills they're developing and what students need to do in process (like being transparent about how feedback is given and how use it). Just writing it down somewhere is not enough. Suggestion to build in explicit reflective exercise, with credit attached, that requires them to think about how activity/learning has led to development of employability skills and where gap is. Needs to happen across significant number of modules. Discussion raised questions about how to assess reflection like that as judgemental. Maybe pass/fail but must pass to pass overall. Some experience marking reflective blogs on placements. Again, about doing things for those who don't engage without credit/value made clear. Still very focused on how to get the job/demonstrate skills upfront rather than how to do the job.
- Recognise that students hear a lot from other students. Use the 'word of mouth' to spread information about skill development in a degree. **Build on activities of student societies and alumni (student communities). More generally, being part of a community matters and helps develop wider employability skills.** Don't think about doing something 'to' students, make it something done 'with' students. Example given of Scottish Economic Conference organised by group of students from across six universities. Organising large events with some degree of risk and becoming a community including with recent graduates.
- **Need to assess to get students to engage. How assess matters to skill development and to student engagement.** Pen and paper exercises don't work. Maybe have individual presentation or interview process about an exercise they had to do. Recognise that limited opportunities that count in degree (e.g. written academic away from exam). Less incentive to invest effort if they don't count. Small amount of credit can make a difference. Need to do more practical stuff and recognise that only small proportion end up going on to graduate level economics.

- Academics are incentivised by REF/promotion criteria linked to publishing. How persuade them to do more on employability. Can strong/firm Head of Department require this as part of education strategy/policy? Need Head of Department/Director of UG Programme to be responsible for design and to push out to lecturers. Centralised design rather than lecturer led. Too much may be lecturer led with individuals choosing what to do, or not to do. Too much dependent on a few willing individuals.
- Resource issue with written coursework is huge. Can only mark end of year exam. Very different to Oxbridge experience where get weekly opportunities to practice writing. How many extended opportunities to write outside of exams outside of Oxbridge? One university uses 600-word essays (e.g. 6 pieces during term and 3,000-word written work at end of term). Bring to tutorial; tutorial discussion focused on same topic. They are marked but huge burden to mark and return feedback quickly to inform next piece of work.
- Academics often have not worked outside of academia. They are not confident providing advice on careers outside academia/professional economics (maybe). Not sure how they would add value. Can they design activities and communicate to students what is happening? Wide group of academics working with placement students, for example going on placement visits, can learn a lot about employability. Get insight from the employers. Don't pretend to know more about world of work than do but being involved with placement programme has spill over benefit of lecturers being more aware.
- The messenger matters to students. Hearing things from employers/alumni/returning placement students seen as valuable by them. Don't lay it all on lecturer who does not have comparative advantage in this area. Get the 'experts' on employability to help lecturers with design of activities/curriculum. But then how organise across modules? How to connect lecturers with wider community and help them design link between employer involvement, curriculum and assessment? Need to make it quick/limited effort if want academics to do something.