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Embedding Employability in Higher Education: Virtual Internships, Experiential Learning and Curriculum Governance

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ABSTRACT Graduate employability increasingly requires higher education institutions to provide students not only with opportunities to develop professional capabilities but also with mechanisms through which these capabilities can be recognised and articulated. This study examines how students interpret employability development following participation in a virtual internship by integrating Daubney's Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience (KASE) framework with Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The study draws on reflective commentaries from 100 second-year undergraduate Business School students who completed a virtual internship. Using a hybrid inductive–deductive qualitative analysis, 629 initial codes were refined to 436 and subsequently organised through the KASE framework and interpreted across the experiential-learning processes of Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation. The findings show that students articulated employability through recognition of new and existing knowledge, personal attributes, transferable skills and the professional significance of their experiences. Reflection was particularly important in enabling students to move beyond descriptions of task participation towards recognising what they had learned, what they could do and how their learning might be transferred to future professional contexts. The study contributes to employability scholarship by distinguishing between employability development and employability articulation and by demonstrating how KASE and experiential learning can be integrated to explain this relationship. The findings also suggest that higher education institutions should move beyond simply providing experiential opportunities towards designing and governing the curricular structures, reflection and feedback through which such experiences become meaningful and articulable employability.

Keywords: educational strategy, governance in higher education, experiential learning, digital learning, curriculum governance

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INTRODUCTION

Graduate employability has become an increasingly important strategic priority for higher education institutions as universities face growing expectations to prepare students for complex and rapidly changing labour markets (Winterton and Turner, 2019). Employability extends beyond the acquisition of disciplinary knowledge to encompass the ability to mobilise knowledge, skills, attributes and experience in different professional contexts. The OECD Learning Compass 2030 similarly conceptualises competence through the integration of cognitive and metacognitive skills, social and emotional capabilities, and practical skills, emphasising learners' capacity to apply these resources to complex situations (OECD, 2019). Yet a persistent challenge remains, students may develop valuable capabilities during their university education without necessarily recognising them as employability or being able to articulate their relevance to prospective employers (De Blaquière et al., 2019; Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019; Winterton & Turner, 2019). This distinction between possessing capabilities and being able to recognise, interpret and communicate them represents an important challenge for the design of employability education.

Experiential learning provides one means of addressing this challenge because it enables students to apply academic learning within contexts that approximate professional practice (De Blaquière et al., 2019). Work experience can strengthen graduate employability by allowing students to connect theoretical knowledge with workplace expectations and develop capabilities through application rather than through classroom learning alone (Helyer & Lee, 2014; Trought, 2017). However, access to conventional work experience is uneven, and opportunities may be constrained by geographical location, financial resources, professional networks and the availability of placements. Digital and virtual forms of work-integrated learning have consequently become increasingly important mechanisms for expanding access to experiential opportunities. Virtual internships and job simulations allow students to undertake professionally oriented tasks in digitally mediated environments while developing capabilities relevant to increasingly technology-dependent workplaces (Ore et al., 2022; Carabregu-Vokshi et al., 2024). Such experiences may therefore offer universities a scalable means of embedding experiential employability development within the curriculum.

Participation in an experiential activity, however, does not in itself ensure that students recognise what they have learned or can translate that learning into an employability narrative (Charles, 2025). This distinction is particularly important because employability is not simply a collection of generic skills acquired independently of context. Daubney's KASE framework conceptualises employability through four interconnected dimensions - Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience - and emphasises the importance of surfacing the employability already embedded within academic curricula (Daubney, 2022). From this perspective, students may already possess or develop considerable employability through disciplinary and experiential learning, while remaining unable to identify and articulate its value. Structured reflection therefore becomes important in enabling students to recognise connections between what they know, what they can do, the personal attributes they demonstrate and the experiences through which these capabilities have developed (De Blaquière et al., 2019; Daubney, 2021).

Experiential learning theory provides a complementary process perspective on this problem. Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle conceptualises learning as the transformation of experience through four interconnected processes: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Rather than viewing experience itself as equivalent to learning, the framework emphasises the processes through which individuals reflect on experience, construct meaning from it and subsequently apply emerging understanding. Reflection is therefore particularly significant because it provides a bridge between participation in an activity and the learner's interpretation of what that activity has contributed to their development (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Although the sequential representation of Kolb's cycle has been criticised for potentially oversimplifying the recursive and context-dependent character of learning (Bergsteiner et al., 2010),

its emphasis on the transformation of experience provides a useful analytical framework for examining how students make sense of virtual work experiences.

Despite their complementary strengths, employability and experiential-learning frameworks address different aspects of the learning process. KASE primarily identifies what dimensions of employability may be embedded within educational experiences (Daubney, 2020), whereas Kolb provides a framework for understanding how experience can be transformed through reflection, conceptualisation and subsequent application (Kolb & Kolb, 2009). Considered separately, neither fully explains how students move from participating in an experiential activity to recognising and articulating the employability embedded within that experience. This represents an important conceptual gap, particularly in digitally mediated work-integrated learning where students may complete authentic or simulated professional tasks without automatically recognising their broader developmental significance. Integrating KASE and Kolb therefore provides an opportunity to connect the components of employability with the experiential processes through which those components become visible, interpretable and transferable.

This study develops this integration by positioning reflective and cognitive mediation as the process through which experiential learning becomes articulated employability. Cognitive processes such as reflection, metacognition and self-regulation influence how students evaluate their learning, identify gaps and interpret the significance of their experiences (Ning & Downing, 2015; Garrett et al., 2013; Mohammed and Obida, 2024). Social Cognitive Career Theory (SCCT) provides an additional interpretive perspective by emphasising the importance of learning experiences, self-efficacy, outcome expectations and contextual conditions in shaping career-related beliefs and behaviours (Lent et al., 1994). In the present study, SCCT is not employed as a predictive model, nor are its constructs directly measured. Rather, it provides a supporting theoretical lens for interpreting how experiences that students perceive as successful, challenging or transferable may contribute to confidence and future-oriented understandings of professional capability. This distinction enables the study to retain the explanatory value of SCCT without treating perceived employability development as equivalent to objectively measured career outcomes.

This study examines reflective accounts from 100 second-year undergraduate Business School students who participated in a virtual internship. It addresses two research questions:

> ***Research Question 1.*** *How do students recognise and articulate Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience across the stages of experiential learning following participation in a virtual internship?*
>
> ***Research Question 2.*** *How can the integration of KASE and Kolb's experiential learning cycle explain the process through which virtual internship experiences become articulated as employability?*

By analysing students' reflections across the KASE dimensions and stages of experiential learning, the study distinguishes between the development of employability through experience and the articulation of employability through reflection. The study makes three related contributions. First, theoretically, it connects a component-oriented employability framework with a process-oriented theory of experiential learning, showing how Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience can be recognised across experiential learning processes. Second, it conceptualises reflection as a mechanism through which otherwise embedded employability becomes visible and communicable, shifting attention from whether students simply possess employability capabilities towards how they recognise and articulate those capabilities. Third, the study contributes to curriculum design and governance by demonstrating that providing experiential opportunities alone may be insufficient. Higher education institutions also need to design the learning architecture surrounding those experiences - including structured reflection, feedback and curricular integration - if experiential activities are to support students in recognising and communicating their

employability. In this way, the study positions employability not as a fixed inventory of graduate skills, but as a developmental and interpretive process through which experience is transformed into recognised and articulated professional capability.

LITERATURE REVIEW and THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Embedded employability and curriculum responsibility

Graduate employability has increasingly shifted from being understood primarily as an individual responsibility towards being recognised as an important dimension of higher education curriculum design. Earlier conceptualisations commonly associated employability with the possession of knowledge, skills and attributes that enable graduates to obtain and sustain employment (Yorke, 2006). More recent approaches, however, emphasise that employability development occurs through multiple interconnected educational experiences and that students need opportunities not only to develop capabilities but also to recognise their relevance beyond the immediate academic context (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022). This places greater responsibility on higher education institutions to make employability visible within curricula rather than treating it as a supplementary activity located primarily within careers services or extracurricular provision.

A central challenge is that employability may already be embedded within disciplinary learning without being explicitly recognised by students. Students routinely undertake activities requiring problem-solving, communication, critical thinking, collaboration and application of disciplinary knowledge, yet they may struggle to translate these experiences into language that communicates professional capability (De Blaquière et al., 2019; Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019). The issue is therefore not simply whether employability is present within the curriculum, but whether students can identify and articulate the employability value of their learning. Daubney (2022) describes this challenge through the concept of extracted employability, arguing that educators can help students surface the transferable value already embedded within disciplinary curricula rather than introducing employability as a separate body of generic skills.

This perspective has important implications for curriculum design. If employability is embedded within academic learning, institutions need mechanisms that enable students to connect disciplinary knowledge and educational experiences with professional contexts. Such an approach requires employability to be integrated into learning activities, assessment and reflection rather than positioned as an additional intervention (Helyer and Lee, 2014). Institutional approaches to employability should therefore focus not only on creating opportunities for capability development but also on enabling students to recognise, interpret and communicate what those opportunities have developed.

Virtual internships as digital work-integrated learning

Work experience provides an important context in which students can connect academic knowledge with professional practice (Trought, 2017). Experiential opportunities enable students to apply what they have learned, encounter unfamiliar problems and develop an understanding of workplace expectations that cannot be obtained through theoretical instruction alone (Helyer & Lee, 2014). Work-related experiences can also contribute to employability by enabling students to develop evidence of their capabilities and understand how disciplinary learning can be transferred to professional environments (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022).

Access to conventional internships and placements, however, is not evenly distributed. Opportunities may depend upon geographical location, financial circumstances, professional networks and the availability of suitable placements. The disruption associated with the COVID-19 pandemic further demonstrated the vulnerability of conventional work-experience provision and accelerated interest in digitally mediated alternatives (Hooley, 2021). Virtual internships and job simulations consequently provide an alternative means through which students can encounter workplace-oriented tasks without physically entering an organisation (Harte et al., 2024).

Digital work experiences may be particularly relevant as employment itself becomes increasingly technologically mediated. Digital capabilities are important components of contemporary graduate readiness, requiring higher education to provide opportunities for students to engage with technology within applied contexts (Ore et al., 2022; Carabregu-Vokshi et al., 2024). Virtual internship platforms can provide such opportunities through simulated professional tasks that require students to analyse information, solve problems, make decisions and produce outputs resembling those encountered in professional settings. Their digital format also creates possibilities for embedding work-related learning across larger student cohorts where conventional placements may be difficult to provide at scale (Ore et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, virtual participation should not be equated automatically with either authentic employment experience or employability development. Simulated tasks cannot fully reproduce the social, organisational and relational complexity of participation in an actual workplace. More importantly for the present study, completing a professionally oriented task does not necessarily mean that a student recognises what has been learned from it. The educational value of virtual internships therefore depends partly on the mechanisms through which students interpret their experiences, connect them with previous learning and identify their relevance to future professional contexts. This makes structured reflection particularly important in transforming participation in digital work-integrated learning into recognised employability development.

KASE and the articulation of employability

Daubney's KASE framework provides a useful basis for examining the employability embedded within educational experiences by distinguishing four interconnected dimensions: Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience (Daubney, 2020; 2021). Knowledge refers to disciplinary and other forms of understanding that students acquire and apply. Skills concern the capabilities through which knowledge is enacted, including practical, cognitive, interpersonal and transferable capabilities. Attributes encompass personal qualities and dispositions that influence how individuals approach learning and professional situations. Experience provides the context through which knowledge, attributes and skills are applied, developed and demonstrated (Daubney, 2024).

The value of KASE lies partly in moving employability beyond an exclusive emphasis on generic skills. Employability cannot be reduced to a checklist of capabilities detached from disciplinary and experiential contexts. Knowledge, attributes, skills and experience interact, and their professional relevance may only become apparent when students are encouraged to examine how they have been mobilised within particular activities. This is consistent with the argument that employability should be surfaced from within academic curricula rather than added externally to them (Daubney, 2022).

The framework is particularly useful for supporting employability articulation. Students may readily identify visible technical skills while overlooking disciplinary knowledge, personal attributes or accumulated experience that contributed to successful performance. Structured use of KASE can encourage a broader interpretation by asking students to consider not simply what they did but what they knew, what capabilities they applied, which personal qualities influenced their responses and what experience they gained. This makes previously implicit aspects of employability more visible and provides students with a vocabulary through which those aspects can be communicated (Daubney, 2020; Karadzhov et al., 2024).

KASE nevertheless remains primarily a framework for identifying and articulating employability components. It provides less explanation of the learning process through which students move from encountering an experience to interpreting its significance and applying that learning elsewhere. Understanding that process requires an additional perspective concerned explicitly with how experience is transformed into learning.

Kolb's experiential learning cycle: from experience to application

Kolb's (1984) experiential learning theory conceptualises learning as a process through which experience is transformed into knowledge. The model identifies four interconnected modes: Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation. Concrete Experience involves engagement with an activity or situation; Reflective Observation involves examining and interpreting what occurred; Abstract Conceptualisation concerns the development or modification of ideas and understanding arising from that reflection; and Active Experimentation involves applying emerging understanding to subsequent situations (Kolb, 2014).

The significance of the model for employability lies in its distinction between having an experience and learning from it. Experience alone does not necessarily produce learning. Learners need opportunities to reflect on what occurred, interpret its significance and consider how emerging understanding can inform subsequent action. Kolb and Kolb (2009) further emphasise the metacognitive dimensions of experiential learning, highlighting the role of learners' awareness of their own learning processes. This is particularly relevant to employability because students must be capable of moving beyond task completion towards recognising what their performance demonstrates about their professional capabilities.

Reflection therefore occupies a particularly important position in the transformation of experience. Through reflection, learners can identify what they found difficult, recognise gaps in existing knowledge, evaluate their performance and reconsider assumptions. Abstract conceptualisation can subsequently enable students to connect these observations with broader disciplinary or professional understanding, while active experimentation provides opportunities to transfer learning to subsequent contexts. In employability terms, this process can potentially transform an isolated activity into evidence of transferable capability.

Kolb's framework should nevertheless not be interpreted as requiring learners to progress through four stages in an invariant linear sequence. The model has been criticised for simplifying the complexity of experiential learning and for imposing a structured cycle on processes that may in practice be recursive, overlapping and context dependent (Bergsteiner et al., 2010; Seaman et al., 2017). For the purposes of the present study, the four stages are therefore treated as analytical modes of experiential learning rather than a rigid developmental sequence. This distinction is important because student reflections may contain evidence of multiple processes simultaneously.

Integrating KASE and experiential learning: towards articulated employability

KASE and Kolb address complementary dimensions of employability development. KASE provides a framework for identifying what students may develop and articulate through educational experiences (Daubney, 2020), whereas Kolb provides a process-oriented account of how experience may be transformed through reflection, conceptualisation and subsequent application (Kolb, 2014). Bringing these perspectives together therefore enables employability to be examined simultaneously as a set of interconnected capabilities and as a process through which those capabilities become recognised through experience.

At the Concrete Experience level, students encounter situations in which knowledge, attributes and skills are mobilised through participation. Reflective Observation provides opportunities to evaluate these encounters, recognise capability or knowledge gaps and reconsider initial responses. Through Abstract Conceptualisation, students can organise these observations into broader understanding about themselves, their disciplinary knowledge and professional practice. Active Experimentation then directs attention towards the transfer and application of that emerging understanding to subsequent situations. Importantly, Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience are not assigned exclusively to particular stages; each KASE dimension may be recognised across different modes of experiential learning. The detailed mapping used in this study therefore treats KASE and Kolb as intersecting rather than sequential taxonomies.

This integration leads to an important distinction between employability development and employability articulation. Participation in an experiential activity may contribute to the development or application of capabilities without the learner necessarily recognising those capabilities as evidence of employability. Articulation requires an additional interpretive process through which students identify what they have learned, connect it to broader capabilities and communicate its relevance to future professional situations. Structured reflection can therefore function as a mechanism for making embedded employability visible.

Cognitive mediation provides a useful way of conceptualising this interpretive process. In this study, cognitive mediation refers to the reflective processes through which students recognise, organise, evaluate and assign meaning to experiential learning. Research on self-regulated learning demonstrates that metacognition, motivation and self-regulation influence how university students interpret learning experiences and adapt subsequent behaviour (Ning & Downing, 2012). Rather than treating these processes as independently measured psychological constructs in the present study, they provide an interpretive basis for understanding how students move from task participation towards recognition and articulation of learning.

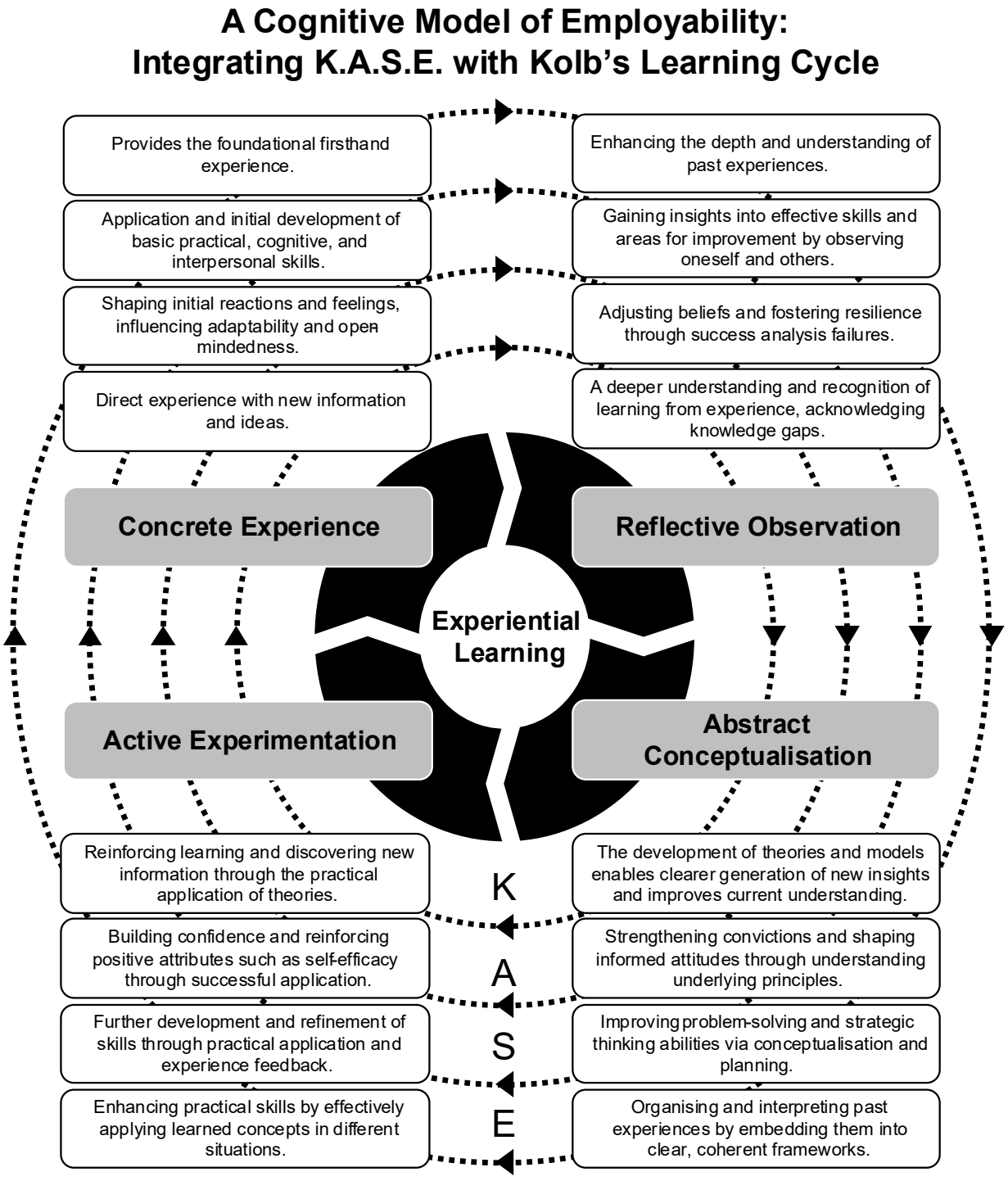
Table 1: Mapping Kolb's Experiential Learning Processes to Daubney's KASE Framework

Learning Cycle Stage	**KASE**	**Cognitive mediating factor descriptor**
Concrete Experience (CE)	Knowledge	First-hand engagement with new information and ideas.
	Attributes	Shaping initial reactions and feelings
	Skills	Application and initial development of basic practical, cognitive, and interpersonal skills.
	Experience	Provides the foundational firsthand experience.
Reflective Observation (RO)	Knowledge	A deeper understanding and recognition of learning from the experience, acknowledging knowledge gaps.
	Attributes	Adjusting beliefs and developing resilience
	Skills	Gaining insights into effective skills and areas for improvement through observation of self and/or others.
	Experience	Deepening the meaning and understanding of past experiences.
Abstract Conceptualisation (AC)	Knowledge	Clear creation of new insights and adjustment of current understanding by developing existing knowledge.
	Attributes	Strengthening convictions and shaping informed attitudes
	Skills	Enhancing problem-solving and strategic thinking skills.
	Experience	Organising and making sense of past experiences.
Active Experimentation (AE)	Knowledge	Reinforcing learning and discovering new information.
	Attributes	Building confidence and reinforcing positive qualities
	Skills	Further development and refinement of skills through practical application.
	Experience	Expanding practical competence through successful application of past experiences in new situations.

Social Cognitive Career Theory offers a complementary perspective on the potential career significance of this process. SCCT proposes that learning experiences interact with self-efficacy, outcome expectations and contextual conditions to influence career-related interests, goals and

actions (Lent et al., 1994). Experiential activities that students interpret as successful or developmental may therefore contribute to perceptions of capability and expectations concerning future professional performance. Similarly, contextual opportunities and barriers influence whether individuals perceive particular career pathways as attainable. In the present study, SCCT is used as a supporting interpretive lens rather than as an empirically tested model: self-efficacy and outcome expectations are not directly measured, and the analysis therefore does not claim to establish causal relationships between virtual internship participation and subsequent career behaviour.

Figure 1: A Cognitive Model of Employability: Integrating KASE with Kolb's Learning Cycle



Adapted from Daubney (2020) and Kolb (1984)

The resulting theoretical framework conceptualises virtual work-integrated learning as providing an experiential context within which KASE dimensions can be activated and subsequently surfaced through reflective interpretation. The central proposition is therefore not that participation in virtual internships automatically produces employability, but that structured reflection can enable students to transform experiential learning into recognised and articulated employability. This integrated perspective provides the analytical foundation for examining how students describe Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience across experiential learning processes and, subsequently, for considering how higher education institutions can design and govern curricular environments that support this transformation.

The resulting theoretical framework integrates KASE with Kolb's experiential learning cycle to conceptualise how different dimensions of employability may become visible through experiential learning and reflective interpretation. As illustrated in Figure 1, Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience are considered across the four experiential-learning processes, providing the analytical framework subsequently applied to students' reflective accounts.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Context

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine how undergraduate students recognise and articulate employability following participation in a virtual internship. The analysis focused on students' reflective accounts of their learning rather than on objectively measured changes in employability. This approach was appropriate to the research questions because the study sought to understand how students interpreted their experiences and connected them with Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience across different modes of experiential learning.

The empirical context was a virtual internship undertaken by second-year undergraduate Business School students through the Forage platform (BHEF, 2024). Students represented five disciplinary areas: Accounting and Finance, Law, Management, Marketing, and Tourism, Hospitality and Events. The virtual internship exposed students to digitally mediated professional tasks and scenarios designed to approximate aspects of workplace activity. Following completion of the internship, students produced reflective commentaries in which they considered their experiences and learning. These reflections were submitted through Turnitin and subsequently formed the qualitative dataset analysed in this study.

The study did not treat completion of the virtual internship as direct evidence that employability had improved. Instead, students' reflections were examined as accounts through which they recognised, interpreted and articulated learning arising from the experience. This distinction was important because the study was concerned with perceived and articulated employability rather than objectively measured employment readiness or subsequent labour-market outcomes.

Sample and Data

The initial population consisted of 452 second-year undergraduate Business School students. From this population, 100 reflective commentaries were included in the qualitative analysis. The purpose of the sample was not statistical generalisation but to provide sufficiently rich qualitative material for examining how students articulated learning across different disciplinary contexts.

The analysed sample comprised 9 Accounting and Finance students, 26 Law students, 41 Management students, 14 Marketing students, and 10 Tourism, Hospitality and Events students. Table 2 compares the disciplinary composition of the qualitative sample with that of the overall cohort. Before inclusion, submissions were screened for originality and completeness. The resulting dataset therefore consisted of complete reflective accounts considered suitable for qualitative analysis.

The disciplinary distribution was retained within NVivo as classification information, allowing

Table 2: Sample Profile by Disciplinary Group

Subject/discipline	Sample		Population	
Accounting and finance (A&F)	9	9.0%	37	8.2%
Law	26	26.0%	86	19.0%
Management	41	41.0%	197	43.6%
Marketing	14	14.0%	67	14.8%
Tourism, Hospitality and Events	10	10.0%	65	14.4%
Total	100	100.0%	452	100.0%

reflections to be associated with students' disciplinary areas during analysis. The intention was not to conduct statistical comparisons between disciplines but to preserve disciplinary context when interpreting students' accounts, recognising that employability experiences and perceptions may vary across fields of study (Jackson & Tomlinson, 2022).

Ethical Considerations

The dataset consisted of students' reflective commentaries originally submitted through Turnitin following completion of the virtual internship. Because these materials originated within an educational context and contain students' accounts of their learning experiences, ethical safeguards concerning consent, confidentiality, secondary use of student work and the relationship between assessment and research are particularly important.

All student identities presented in the study should be anonymised, and quotations should contain no information that would enable individual students to be identified. The disciplinary area may be retained where this does not compromise anonymity because it provides useful contextual information for interpreting the reflections.

Development of the Analytical Framework

The analytical framework was developed through conceptual integration of Daubney's KASE framework and Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Rather than treating this process as a systematic literature review or Systematic Theory Mapping exercise, the two frameworks were brought together because they address complementary aspects of the phenomenon under investigation. KASE identifies four dimensions through which employability can be recognised - Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience - whereas Kolb conceptualises experiential learning through Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation (Weaver et al., 2025).

The integration produced a 4 × 4 analytical matrixes in which each KASE dimension could be considered across the four experiential-learning modes. Importantly, the matrix was used as an analytical scaffold rather than as a rigid coding template. The analysis did not assume that students necessarily progressed sequentially through all four Kolb stages or that each KASE dimension belonged exclusively to a particular stage. Instead, the framework provided a structured means of examining how different aspects of employability appeared within students' interpretations of experiential learning.

For example, Knowledge at the Concrete Experience level concerned engagement with new information or ideas, whereas Knowledge associated with Reflective Observation concerned recognition of what had been learned or identification of knowledge gaps. At the level of Abstract Conceptualisation, attention shifted towards the development or reorganisation of understanding, while Active Experimentation concerned the perceived application or extension of learning to subsequent situations. Comparable analytical descriptors were developed for Attributes, Skills and Experience.

The resulting framework therefore enabled the analysis to address two complementary questions: which dimensions of employability students recognised in their reflections and how those dimensions were articulated through different experiential-learning processes.

Qualitative Data Analysis

The reflective commentaries were analysed using NVivo 14. The analysis combined inductive engagement with students' accounts with subsequent theoretically informed organisation of the resulting codes. This is therefore more accurately characterised as a hybrid inductive–deductive thematic analysis than as a purely inductive analysis.

The first stage involved close engagement with the reflective commentaries and open coding of material relevant to students' descriptions of learning, capability development, challenges, reflection and potential future application. This initial process generated 629 raw codes. The purpose of the initial coding was to remain sufficiently close to students' own accounts rather than immediately imposing an external employability taxonomy on the data.

During the second stage, the initial codes were reviewed, compared and refined. Duplicate and ambiguous codes were removed or merged, reducing the coding structure from 629 raw codes to 436 refined codes. The refined codes were subsequently organised using Daubney's KASE framework, enabling relevant material to be classified in relation to Knowledge, Attributes, Skills or Experience.

During the third stage, the KASE-organised material was interpreted through the analytical descriptors derived from Kolb's experiential learning cycle. Evidence relating to engagement with tasks was considered in relation to Concrete Experience; retrospective recognition and evaluation of learning were examined through Reflective Observation; the development and reorganisation of understanding were considered through Abstract Conceptualisation; and references to subsequent or future application were examined through Active Experimentation. This stage enabled the analysis to examine each KASE dimension across experiential-learning processes rather than treating employability characteristics as static categories.

The final stage involved comparison and interpretation across the resulting KASE–Kolb matrix. Particular attention was given to how students moved in their accounts from describing activities towards recognising what those activities revealed about their knowledge, attributes, skills and experience. Illustrative quotations were then selected to demonstrate the principal analytical patterns.

Reflection and Cognitive Mediation in the Analysis

Reflection was treated as analytically important because the research questions concern not simply what students experienced but how they interpreted and articulated those experiences. Cognitive mediation is therefore used in this study as an interpretive concept referring to the processes through which students recognised, evaluated, organised and assigned meaning to their experiential learning.

Evidence of such mediation included, for example, students recognising previously unidentified knowledge gaps, evaluating their performance, reconsidering their initial responses to unfamiliar tasks, connecting disciplinary knowledge with professional situations, identifying transferable capabilities, or considering how learning could be applied in future contexts. Research on self-regulated learning supports the importance of reflection, metacognition and self-regulation in students' interpretation and management of learning experiences (Ning & Downing, 2012).

These processes were interpreted from students' reflective accounts rather than measured as independent psychological constructs. Similarly, although SCCT informed interpretation of statements concerning confidence, perceived capability and future-oriented career thinking (Lent et al., 1994), self-efficacy and outcome expectations were not directly measured. Consequently, the analysis does not treat the qualitative reflections as evidence of causal changes in SCCT constructs.

Analytical Rigour and Interpretive Boundaries

Several steps within the analytical process supported consistency and transparency. Initial coding remained close to students' reflective language before the data were organised through the theoretical framework. The reduction from 629 initial codes to 436 refined codes involved comparison, removal of duplication and clarification of ambiguous categories. The KASE–Kolb matrix subsequently provided a common analytical scaffold for interpreting extracts across the dataset while preserving the original student reflections as the primary empirical evidence.

The analysis also maintained an important distinction between reported experience, interpretation of learning, and researcher inference. Statements concerning students' knowledge, attributes, skills and experience were grounded in their reflective accounts. Claims concerning psychological constructs or future career outcomes were treated more cautiously because these were not directly measured. Accordingly, the study examines how students perceived, recognised and articulated employability development rather than claiming to demonstrate objective improvements in employability or subsequent employment outcomes.

FINDINGS

From virtual internship participation to articulated employability

Analysis of the 100 reflective accounts showed that students did not describe employability as a single outcome of completing the virtual internship. Instead, their reflections revealed different ways of recognising and articulating changes in Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience. Across these four dimensions, students moved beyond descriptions of task completion towards identifying what they had learned, where their existing capabilities were insufficient, how their responses had changed, and how aspects of the experience might be transferred to future academic or professional situations.

The findings did not indicate a uniform or strictly sequential progression through the four stages of experiential learning. Rather, Concrete Experience, Reflective Observation, Abstract Conceptualisation and Active Experimentation provided overlapping modes through which students interpreted different dimensions of their employability. A single reflection could simultaneously contain evidence of encountering something unfamiliar, evaluating existing capability, developing a broader understanding and considering future application. The KASE–Kolb matrix is therefore used as an analytical framework for interpreting these patterns rather than as evidence that every student followed an identical developmental sequence.

Four substantive patterns were identified. First, students described knowledge development through exposure to unfamiliar professional content, recognition of knowledge gaps and application of emerging understanding. Second, attributes were articulated through responses to difficulty, changing attitudes, adaptability and confidence. Third, skills became increasingly visible when students moved from simply completing tasks towards evaluating and identifying the transferability of their capabilities. Fourth, experience acquired meaning when individual tasks were connected to previous academic learning, professional contexts and possible future careers. Across these patterns, reflection emerged as particularly important in enabling students to convert participation in a virtual activity into an articulated account of employability.

Knowledge: from encountering new information to applied understanding

Knowledge was initially articulated through students' encounters with disciplinary or professional information outside their previous academic experience. For some participants, the virtual internship introduced unfamiliar areas within their existing discipline. One of the Law programme students described how the experience broadened her exposure to a previously unexplored area: *"It was also interesting to gain a perspective on this new area of law regarding human rights, which I had not yet researched."*

The significance of such experiences was not simply that new information was encountered. Students' reflections also demonstrated increasing awareness of the boundaries of their existing knowledge. This was particularly visible when unfamiliar professional tasks exposed gaps that had not previously been apparent. The other student from Tourism, Hospitality and Events programme recognised the difference between her existing university experience and the demands of professional written communication: *"I struggled with this task because I had never written a formal letter like this before. Though very different and new to what I do in university, this task was very beneficial, as it improved, once again, my practical skills, critical thinking and drafting formal letters."* The reflection is significant because the initial difficulty becomes part of the student's account of learning. Rather than presenting lack of knowledge solely as a deficit, the student identifies what was unfamiliar and subsequently articulates capabilities developed through responding to that unfamiliarity.

At a more developed interpretive level, students connected new information with existing disciplinary understanding. The reflection of another student of the Law programme on providing pre-interview advice illustrates this movement: *"I feel like this task did not only develop my knowledge about the legal requirements surrounding providing pre-interview advice to clients charged with criminal offences, but I also discovered the ethical limits of what I can ask a client, and what I can offer to do for the client prior to their interview."* Here, learning is articulated beyond factual acquisition. The task enabled the student to connect legal requirements with ethical boundaries in professional practice, producing a more applied interpretation of disciplinary knowledge.

Students also described the application of newly acquired knowledge as requiring higher-order capabilities. The management programme student, reflecting on a cybersecurity-related task, distinguished between acquiring information and using it: *"Answering questions whilst analysing recent attacks required more than learning; it required critical thinking and the practical application of the new-found knowledge."*

Not every experience, however, produced new knowledge. The student of the Law programme explicitly stated: *"I didn't learn anything new from this task; it was all prior knowledge I already possessed. Despite this, the task certainly helped reinforce the knowledge I already had, which is always valuable."* This counter-example is important. The value attributed to the virtual internship did not depend exclusively on knowledge acquisition. For some students, its contribution was reinforcement or contextualisation of existing knowledge. Across these accounts, therefore, knowledge development ranged from encountering unfamiliar material and recognising gaps to consolidating existing understanding and applying knowledge within professionally oriented tasks.

Attributes: from initial responses to adaptability and confidence

The second pattern concerned students' recognition of personal attributes. These were often most visible when students described their reactions to unfamiliar or demanding tasks. Rather than identifying attributes abstractly, participants frequently recognised them through challenges that required adaptation. One of the Law programme student's reflections provides a clear example: *"I struggled with this task at first as I felt overwhelmed with the original set of instructions, I found it a lot to process. However, by breaking it down into smaller sections I was able to find it much more manageable."* The initial response was one of being overwhelmed, but the subsequent adjustment demonstrates how the student changed his approach to make the task manageable. What becomes visible through reflection is therefore not simply successful task completion but the student's capacity to adapt his behaviour in response to difficulty.

For other students, reflection prompted reconsideration of professional assumptions and aspirations. He described the internship as broadening his understanding of possible career trajectories: *"I feel that I have gained invaluable lessons, be it new skills and knowledge, plus an added openness to looking outside of solely law firms in future."* Here, the significant change is attitudinal rather than technical. Exposure to a different professional context encouraged greater openness regarding future employment possibilities. This suggests that the virtual experience could enable students to

reconsider how their existing disciplinary background might operate across a wider range of professional environments.

Attributes were also articulated in relation to personal and professional development. The other student from Tourism, Hospitality and Events programme described the cumulative significance of the tasks as extending beyond technical learning: "*From analysing client performance to employing effective sales techniques, each task has been a stepping stone in my personal and professional development. As I move forward, I carry with me not only the technical knowledge gained from the internship but also the lessons in resilience, adaptability, and empathy that will shape my future endeavours.*" This account explicitly names resilience, adaptability and empathy, demonstrating a transition from experiencing individual tasks towards constructing a broader narrative of professional development.

Future-oriented reflection was particularly evident when students considered how they would behave differently if encountering similar situations again. One of the students explained: "*Given the chance to revisit these scenarios, I would approach them with a more refined and proactive mindset. Implementing a comprehensive pre-call preparation strategy, such as anticipating potential questions and concerns, would enable me to respond more confidently.*" Confidence here should not be interpreted as a directly measured change in self-efficacy. Rather, the reflection demonstrates that the student could identify a specific behavioural strategy through which future performance might be improved. Across the attribute dimension, therefore, employability articulation involved recognising how students responded to challenge, how their attitudes changed and how they intended to approach future professional situations.

Skills: from task performance to transferable capability

Skills constituted one of the most explicit dimensions of employability within the reflections. Students identified technical, digital, cognitive and transferable skills, but the analysis showed an important distinction between using a skill and recognising its broader employability value.

Initial skill development was often triggered by tasks outside students' disciplinary comfort zones. The Marketing prorgamme student, reflected on being required to use Excel: "*Since I specialise in marketing at university, I found this task extremely difficult as they wanted me to do calculations on Excel, which was a great way of contributing to my knowledge and making me try something new. It provided me with new skills in which I can replenish in my every day working environment.*" Although the task was initially experienced as difficult, she subsequently interpreted the capability as relevant beyond the immediate exercise. The reflection therefore makes the transferability of the skill visible.

Students also articulated skills through reflection on the process of learning itself. One of the Management programme students explained: "*This experience has taught me some very useful skills that can be used both in a future job and for my studies. I have learnt more about teaching myself new things and learning by doing, which has been proven to be quite effective in this instance.*" This account moves beyond identifying an individual occupational skill. She recognises both transferability across academic and professional contexts and a developing capability for independent learning.

Other reflections demonstrated how students connected existing capabilities with new professional applications. One of the Law programme student described the internship as an opportunity both to extend prior problem-solving capability and develop more specialised skills: "*I believe that the experience allowed me to both build upon pre-existing problem solving skills and allowed me to gain new skills that are involved in fraud investigation which could potentially be transferable into other fields.*" Transferability is particularly important in this account. The value of the skill is not confined to successful performance of the internship task; the student explicitly considers its relevance across other professional contexts.

Feedback also contributed to students' recognition and refinement of skills. She described comparing her completed tasks with professionally prepared model answers: "*I felt a little stressed during the internship as I wanted to do well. After each task that I completed, I got a model answer so I could compare my work with a professional accountant's work, which I found particularly helpful.*" The comparison enabled the student to evaluate her own performance against a professional reference

point. This illustrates how virtual internship design can provide more than task exposure: feedback can create an opportunity for students to examine the quality of their performance and identify areas for further development.

Across the skills dimension, therefore, the reflections suggest a movement from performing particular tasks towards recognising capabilities as transferable resources. Skills became employability-relevant not simply because they were exercised, but because students could identify, evaluate and connect them with future academic or professional contexts.

Experience: from discrete tasks to professional meaning

The Experience dimension differed from Knowledge, Attributes and Skills because students increasingly interpreted the internship not simply as a collection of activities but as a context through which other capabilities could be integrated. The reflections showed variation in how students attributed professional meaning to these experiences.

For some participants, the value of experience lay in applying capabilities already acquired through university study. This was evident in student's recognition that an activity reinforced existing knowledge rather than generating entirely new learning. Experience therefore provided a context in which previous learning could be revisited and tested. Other students explicitly distinguished virtual internship activities from conventional academic exercises. One of the Management programme students described the significance of the hands-on nature of the tasks: *"The hands-on tasks were not only academic exercises; they were also practical lessons that both fortified my analytical skills and instilled a new appreciation for the ever-evolving landscape of cybersecurity."*

The importance of the task in this reflection comes from the connection established between academic capability and a broader professional context. The activity is interpreted as contributing simultaneously to analytical capability and understanding of a changing occupational environment. Students also described integrating learning accumulated through their degree with the virtual internship. One of them reflected: *"Each task provided me with a new challenge where I had to apply multiple different skills. Each skill was learned based on the last two years at university. I enjoyed using my marketing knowledge of brand awareness and brand advertising."* This account demonstrates that the internship did not operate independently from the curriculum. Instead, it created a setting in which previously developed disciplinary knowledge and skills could be brought together and interpreted in relation to professionally oriented tasks.

The future significance attributed to experience was particularly visible when students considered what they would carry beyond the internship. One of the students stated: *"Taking part in this online internship learning experience with forage [sic] has given me the opportunity to learn new skills and has provided me with the knowledge and guidance for future life."* Although broad, this reflection illustrates a shift from describing the immediate activity towards assigning future value to the experience. Similar future-oriented interpretations appeared in reflections concerning career options, transferable capabilities and intended changes in approaches to subsequent tasks.

The Experience dimension therefore functioned as an integrating element within students' employability narratives. Knowledge, attributes and skills acquired or developed elsewhere became professionally meaningful when students could connect them with the situations in which they had been applied. However, these reflections should not be interpreted as evidence that virtual simulations were equivalent to actual employment. Rather, they show how students assigned professional meaning to digitally mediated experiential activities.

Reflection as the process through which employability became visible

Across all four KASE dimensions, the most consistent analytical pattern was the distinction between participating in an experience and being able to articulate what that experience represented. Students' accounts frequently began with particular tasks, difficulties or reactions but subsequently moved towards identifying knowledge, attributes, skills, professional implications or possible future applications.

This pattern was particularly evident when students recognised deficits. The unfamiliarity with professional letter writing, the difficulty with Excel and the initial sense of being overwhelmed all became meaningful because the students subsequently interpreted what those experiences revealed about their capabilities and development. In these cases, difficulty itself became a resource for articulation: students could identify what they had not previously known or been able to do and explain how they responded.

A second form of articulation involved recognising existing capabilities. The reflection demonstrates that experiential learning did not necessarily require acquiring something new. Applying existing knowledge within a different context enabled him to recognise its continuing value. Similarly, the connected capabilities developed during two years of university study with their application to professionally oriented marketing tasks. Reflection therefore surfaced employability that may already have existed within the curriculum but had not necessarily been interpreted through a professional lens.

A third pattern concerned transfer. One of the students identified skills relevant to both future employment and academic study; another considered the transferability of problem-solving capabilities beyond fraud investigation; the third one identified a more proactive strategy for future scenarios; and the fourth one connected the internship with future learning and life. Such accounts demonstrate that articulation extended beyond retrospective description towards consideration of how learning might be mobilised elsewhere.

Taken together, these findings support a distinction between employability development and employability articulation. The virtual internship provided opportunities for students to encounter, apply, reinforce or extend Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience. The reflective activity then provided an opportunity to recognise and communicate the significance of those experiences. The data do not establish that reflection caused objective improvements in employability, nor that all students progressed through Kolb's stages sequentially. They do, however, show how reflective interpretation enabled students to move from statements about what they did towards statements about what they learned, what they could do, how they had changed, and how that learning might matter in future contexts.

The findings therefore answer the first research question by demonstrating that KASE dimensions were articulated across overlapping experiential-learning processes rather than as isolated employability categories. They also provide the empirical foundation for the second research question: the integration of KASE and Kolb helps distinguish the experience through which capabilities are encountered or exercised from the reflective processes through which those capabilities become recognised and articulated as employability.

DISCUSSION

This study examined how students recognise and articulate Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience across experiential-learning processes following participation in a virtual internship. The findings show that students moved beyond descriptions of task completion to recognise knowledge gaps, reconsider personal attributes, identify transferable skills, connect academic learning with professional contexts, and consider future applications. However, this development was neither uniform nor necessarily sequential. Some activities generated new learning, while others reinforced existing capabilities. The value of virtual work-integrated learning therefore lies not simply in participation, but also in students' capacity to interpret what an experience reveals about their employability.

From employability development to employability articulation

The primary theoretical contribution is the distinction between employability development and employability articulation. Previous research shows that students can struggle to recognise and communicate capabilities developed through university education (De Blaquière et al., 2019; Tomasson Goodwin et al., 2019; Winterton & Turner, 2019). The present findings extend this

argument by showing that participation in experiential activities does not automatically resolve this problem. Students may apply disciplinary knowledge, exercise skills or demonstrate professional attributes without immediately recognising these as evidence of employability.

Daubney's KASE framework is valuable because it conceptualises employability through Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience rather than reducing it to generic skills (Daubney, 2020). The findings support this broader conceptualisation: students identified disciplinary knowledge and knowledge gaps, adaptability and resilience, technical and transferable skills, and the professional relevance of accumulated experience. Importantly, experiential activities did not always produce something new. In some cases, their value involved reinforcing existing knowledge or making previously developed capabilities professionally meaningful. This supports the idea of extracted employability, whereby employability already embedded within academic learning becomes more visible to students (Daubney, 2021).

The contribution of integrating KASE with Kolb's experiential learning cycle is therefore not simply the combination of two frameworks. KASE identifies what dimensions of employability can be surfaced, whereas experiential learning helps explain how students move from participation towards reflection, interpretation and potential application. The findings do not support a rigid progression through Kolb's four stages; instead, experience, reflection, conceptualisation and anticipated application frequently overlap. Table 2 and Figure 1 should consequently be understood as an analytical and pedagogical framework rather than a causal or universally sequential model.

Reflection as a mechanism for making employability visible

Reflection emerged as an important link between experience and employability articulation. Students frequently began by describing a task, difficulty or reaction and subsequently identified what the experience revealed about their knowledge, attributes or skills. This is consistent with research emphasising the role of metacognition and self-regulation in interpreting learning experiences (Ning & Downing, 2015). Reflection therefore enables students to move from describing what they did towards explaining what they learned, what they can do and how that learning may be transferred.

SCCT provides a supporting interpretation of the future-oriented elements of this process. Some students described greater confidence, openness towards alternative careers or intentions to approach similar situations differently. Such accounts are consistent with SCCT's emphasis on learning experiences, self-efficacy and outcome expectations in career development (Lent et al., 1994). However, the study did not directly measure these constructs and therefore cannot establish that virtual internship participation increased self-efficacy or changed career behaviour. SCCT is consequently best understood as a complementary interpretive lens rather than a model tested by the present data.

Practical implications for employability education

The findings suggest that universities should not assume that providing access to internships, simulations or other experiential activities is sufficient for employability development. Experience should be accompanied by structured opportunities for reflection and articulation.

The KASE–Kolb framework can provide educators with a practical structure for this process. Rather than asking students simply what they learned, reflective activities can prompt them to consider what Knowledge they applied or acquired, which Attributes influenced their responses, which Skills they exercised or developed, and what professional meaning they attach to the Experience. Students can then consider what occurred, what they recognised through reflection, what broader understanding emerged and how that learning could be applied elsewhere.

Feedback is also important. The findings show that comparison with professionally prepared model answers helped students evaluate their performance. Virtual internship activities should therefore incorporate opportunities for students to compare their responses with professional practice and identify areas for improvement.

Finally, reflection should lead towards articulation. Students could translate their learning into CV evidence, professional portfolios, competency-based interview examples or other accounts of transferable capability. This shifts employability education from accumulating experiences towards helping students communicate what those experiences demonstrate.

Implications for curriculum governance

The findings also suggest a shift from the provision of employability activities towards the governance of employability learning. Virtual internships should not operate as isolated extracurricular or digital activities. They should be connected with programme learning outcomes, disciplinary curricula, structured reflection and appropriate feedback.

At programme level, institutions can map where Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience are developed and applied across the curriculum. This can help identify gaps and duplication while avoiding the reduction of employability to a generic skills checklist. Programme leaders should therefore consider not simply whether students have access to experiential opportunities, but how those experiences are prepared, integrated, reflected upon and connected across modules.

Virtual internships also offer potential advantages in accessibility and scalability (Ore et al., 2022; Carabregu-Vokshi et al., 2024), but digital provision should not automatically be assumed to be inclusive. Differences in digital access, prior experience and confidence may influence students' ability to benefit from these opportunities. Institutions should therefore monitor participation and provide appropriate support.

Governance should also distinguish participation from educational outcomes. The number of students completing virtual internships indicates activity, but does not demonstrate whether students recognise or can articulate what they have learned. Evaluation should therefore consider the quality of reflection, recognition of KASE dimensions and perceived transferability of learning alongside participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that employability is not produced simply through exposure to professional experiences. Its educational value depends partly on the structures through which students interpret and articulate those experiences. The KASE–Kolb integration therefore provides both an analytical framework for understanding this process and a practical framework through which universities can more systematically design and govern experiential employability learning.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

This study has several limitations that define the boundaries of its contribution and provide opportunities for future research. First, the analysis is based on reflective accounts from 100 second-year undergraduate students within one Business School. Although the sample includes students from five disciplinary areas, the findings should not be assumed to represent students across different institutions, educational systems or stages of study. Future research should examine the KASE–Kolb framework across universities, disciplines and national contexts.

Second, the study analyses students' self-reported reflections rather than objective changes in employability. The findings therefore demonstrate how students recognised and articulated employability-related learning, but they do not establish that virtual internship participation improved employability or subsequent employment outcomes. Longitudinal research could examine whether articulated learning translates into changes in career confidence, job-search behaviour, internship attainment or graduate employment.

Third, the study did not employ pre- and post-intervention measures or directly measure the SCCT constructs used as a supporting interpretive lens. Claims concerning self-efficacy, outcome expectations and future career behaviour should therefore remain interpretive. Future studies could combine qualitative reflection with validated measures of career self-efficacy and related constructs to examine these relationships more directly.

Finally, the KASE–Kolb integration provides an analytical framework rather than a validated causal model. The four experiential-learning processes may overlap and recur rather than operate

sequentially, while Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience are themselves interdependent. Future research could test and refine the framework using longitudinal, mixed-method and comparative designs, including employer or educator assessments alongside student reflections.

CONCLUSION

This study examined how undergraduate students recognise and articulate employability following participation in a virtual internship by integrating Daubney's KASE framework with Kolb's experiential learning cycle. The findings demonstrate that Knowledge, Attributes, Skills and Experience became visible across different experiential-learning processes as students encountered professional tasks, reflected on their responses, developed broader interpretations of their learning and considered future applications.

The study's central contribution is the distinction between employability development and employability articulation. Participation in experiential learning may enable students to acquire, apply or reinforce capabilities, but this does not necessarily mean that they recognise those capabilities as employability. Structured reflection provides an important mechanism through which students can identify what they know, what they can do, how they respond to professional challenges and how their experiences may be transferred to future contexts. Integrating KASE and Kolb therefore connects the content of employability with the experiential processes through which that employability can become visible and communicable.

For higher education institutions, this distinction has important implications. Providing access to virtual internships or other work-integrated experiences is not sufficient on its own. Institutions need to design and govern the learning architecture surrounding these opportunities through curricular integration, structured reflection, feedback and opportunities for employability articulation. The challenge is therefore to move from simply providing employability activities towards governing employability learning. In doing so, universities can help students transform educational and experiential opportunities into recognised, meaningful and articulable professional capability.

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