Putting the Action into Politics: embedding employability in the academic curriculum

If you were to ask your students why they are studying politics, public administration or international relations, a wide range of answers are likely to ensue. There will be those students who aspire to elected office. Others see careers in the diplomatic service or in the EU or UN. Others again envisage working as researchers for pressure or lobby groups. Regardless as to the potential career, there will be those students who are focused and driven, having a clear goal and how their time at university will aid them in achieving it. For the most part, student aspirations are rather vague, with only a broad-brush idea as to a potential career. There are also those students who have no idea as to any sort of preferred destiny. Regardless as to what career aspirations may be present, very few students appear aware of the actual skills needed to achieve them. While 'a good degree' is widely acknowledged as being important, there is a distinct lack of awareness as to the basic skills needed in employment. What may complicate matters, at least for some students, is their understanding that in coming to university they will be acquiring 'knowledge'. That is sometimes their sole focus. There does not appear to be an awareness of the skills development - implicit or explicit - that is undertaken within tertiary study, or how these skills may enhance any future career development. There is also a lack of appreciation of the 'academic' skills needed while at university, or how these feed into future careers.

Thus, employability is seen as a key part of education. There is often an issue as to what is meant by the term 'employability', as well as how the concept could - or possibly should - be embedded in the academic curriculum. A succinct definition is as follows: "Advance HE views embedding employability as providing the opportunities to develop knowledge, skills, experiences, behaviours, attributes, achievements and attitudes to enable graduates to make successful transitions and contributions, benefitting them, the economy and their communities" (Advance HE, n/d, online).

Added to this, UK employers have often complained about graduates not having the appropriate skills for entering the workplace, although confidence in finding the appropriately skilled people had risen to almost 75 % in 2018 (CBI, 2019, 8). This paper will focus upon how employability is embedded in various undergraduate degree programmes at De Montfort University, Leicester in the UK, via a single module - "Politics in Action". There will also be an exploration as to why the module is included in these degree programmes. Underpinning this module is a belief in the importance of including such studies within a university degree. Such a belief comes from the teaching team and the university. It is also deemed as being important by employers.

David & Maurer (2021), for example, decry the move to highlighting and prioritising employability in tertiary study. They argue it may be at the expense of more traditional academic skills. In our experiences, those traditional academic skills are valued and are complemented by many other relevant skills that are developed in higher education. Sometimes there is a need to approach a problem from a different perspective in order to achieve better results. Students may need some directing in order to appreciate those skills they need to develop, and to have the opportunity to develop those skills in a way that is appropriate for their learning preference. Otherwise, as Jones (2021) alludes, we are merely pushing the students through a meat grinder in order to get our graduates.

Background to 'Politics in Action'
The underpinning of the module is to develop a means by which students can make a clear link between their studies and potential future employment. Sometimes, this can be done through a year-long placement. Yet many students are reluctant to spend an entire year, in effect, away from their studies. The 'Politics in Action' module enables students to experience life in the workplace over a much shorter period of time. The assessment around the module included aspects of self-reflection on their time in the workplace, as well as linking that to the Subject Benchmarks (QAA, 2019) that underpin UK academic teaching in politics and international relations. This is very much about seeing employability and academic ability being intertwined rather than prioritising one over the other.

In the development of the module, it must be clear that we are not putting all of our eggs in one basket. The idea of 'employability' features in most modules. The difference is the feature of employability is far more overt. In just the same way that another module - Political Research in Action - introduces the students to both qualitative and quantitative forms of research, so this module does the same in terms of employability. Research methods are not taught exclusively in one module, nor is employability. The difference is the prioritisation.

When teaching 'Politics in Action', it is useful to examine the Learning Outcomes for the module. This gives a clear steer upon where the module is trying to go:
1. Develop critical skills and perspectives in politics and public administration through various approaches of learning
2. Develop intellectual ability and management skills by integrating and synthesizing the knowledge and skills acquired from other parts of the course
3. Demonstrate group work and teamwork skills through extended and structured exercises
4. Develop excellent communication skills
5. Reflect critically on their personal employability (DMU (n/d) *Politics in Action*)

Thus, there are a number of important features to the module, most notably the team building aspects and the critical reflection. The students are also encouraged to draw upon their experiences in other modules (or other parts of their university experiences) and to relate them to their studies in this module. The exploration of the actual delivery of the module will be detailed later.

In developing the ethos of the module, we have been influenced by the requirements of the Quality Assurance Agency's Benchmarks for Politics and International Relations (QAA, 2019). Students, in their reflective assignment, must engage with the graduate skills and knowledge they have gained on the module and whilst working on their project, linking this with their personal SWOT analysis (realigned to strengths, challenges, opportunities, barriers). The location of the module in the second year of their studies ensures that students who are applying for placements, internships and study abroad programmes have a narrative to their application. We are aware of so many personal stories and evidence of impact from students about this co-created approach to learning, teaching and assessment. The module does focus on the experiential learning, but there are plenty of places that students can gain academic knowledge elsewhere on their programmes. This module gives students, who may or may not be struggling elsewhere on their programme an opportunity to shine, to develop confidence and enhance their strengths. The foundation of the module is about giving students the opportunity to gain experiences of working on projects in a place where it is

alright for the project to 'fail'. Students complete one small individual reflective piece of work at the end of the year for summative assessment. The key is that students are able to draw on that tangible experience to give them real-world experience which can be included in the Higher Education Achievement Record and attracts academic credits (see DMU HEAR, n/d).

Where does politics fit? Firstly, students in the early weeks have to engage with and debate about the merits of the UN SDGs (see UN SD Goals, n/d). Surprisingly many students had not heard of the UN SDGs before starting the module. Students must consider and explore the concept of what local politics in action means to them (20% of the assignment mark). Their assignments, irrespective of their chosen format type (text, presentation, podcast, video or poster) should demonstrate reading, research and where relevant draw on concepts from other areas of the curriculum. Ten percent of the assignment mark is for the demonstration of good academic practice. Additionally, the students are exposed to theory and practice of project management, leadership and team development, which they might not otherwise encounter on the public administration, politics and IR programmes. Students have created projects which have raised awareness and acted on waste reduction, period poverty, food poverty and food banks, paper reduction, gender equality and homelessness. Their projects have involved a number of external stakeholders such as an environmental campaign group, a homeless charity and a zero-waste entrepreneur. Students have commented how proud they are of their achievements and recognise the impact that they have had in doing the projects and working with others on the module.

The 'Politics in Action' module does offer a model where skills development and employability take priority. But this is within a framework of academic integrity and personalised learning, linked with the concepts of education for sustainable development and political activism for a highly diverse group of students.

This is not new
The thinking behind embedding aspects of employability in modules is not new. Where there are issues, is over how such employability is embedded. For professional courses, such as nursing, there is a clear link between studies and the professional career (see, for example, Humphreys (2013), who examines embedding simulation exercises in nursing education). In Human Resource Management education, there is an acknowledgement of the need for students to develop some of the 'soft' skills that are essential in the workplace. (see Mansoor and Dean, 2016). They ask how these skills can be developed, and be translatable, into the workplace.

This begs the question as to how 'employability' can be defined. It is a wide-ranging concept, and may have different interpretations or understandings to different audiences, which is why the definition from Advance HE (n/d), as offered in the introduction, is so broad. An alternative starting point is from Hillage and Pollard (1998). Their opening key finding may appear, at first, a little unhelpful: "Employability is about having the capability to gain initial employment, maintain employment and obtain new employment if required" (Hillage and Pollard, 1998, 1). It is very broad brush. Yet, it encapsulates so much about what students need: the "capability" to "gain initial employment". For students coming straight out of university and into the workplace, this may be rather daunting.

Hillage and Pollard (1998) then unpack what could be included in this "employability": the assets of the student and how they may be deployed or presented. There needs also to be an

awareness of what the employers may view as being essential assets – and different employers will have different priorities, be it public versus private sector employers, large versus small or micro-employers. There is a lot for students to unpack. The question becomes about how to equip the students to adapt their 'employability' portfolio of skills to the demands of different potential employers.

What is sometimes missed, however, when examining employability, is the bigger picture. This could include what may be termed the market conditions: how big is the jobs market, or how has the jobs market changed or evolved over time? (see Harvey, 2001). Harvey (2001) is highly critical as to how the UK Government views "employability", with the emphasis being placed upon the type of job and salary as a benchmark for a graduate job. He is critical of this very narrow interpretation of 'employability' and how that is used as a tool in the ranking of universities in league tables. Disconcertingly, many graduate jobs in the public sector, for example in nursing and teaching, do not have starting salaries which meet the government's criteria for a graduate job.

Bacon (2018) has also been critical of the way in which universities have prioritised employability. He has described it as the "imposition of neo-liberal values on universities", and the "commodification of higher education" (p. 98). This is in line with the criticisms raised by Harvey (2001) and may be more about the way in which universities interpret government decrees of embedding employability in the curriculum. There is not a one-size fits all approach to employability, even though the UK government might think otherwise. In this respect, it should be about the universities trusting their staff to deliver high quality education to enable students to enter the workplace – in whatever form – with the appropriate skills.

While accepting Harvey's (2001) criticisms, there still remains the issue as to how students can develop the skills that are needed to enter the workplace. One way in which this may be done is through practical experiences in the workplace. The most common of these is the year-long placement, where students – as part of their studies – work for a year. Such work is assessed. A report, for example, may be written reflecting on their experiences in the workplace, and how that relates to their studies. There are many advantages for students in undertaking such experience (Blair et al, 2008). Yet, as previously noted, taking an entire year away from academic study may not seem attractive to many students, even though a placement is integrating the academic theory with the practical workplace experiences. Thus, short-term placements may seem more attractive (Curtis et al, 2009), where they are integrated into a single module. This was the approach undertaken in 'Politics in Action'. Sometimes, such short-term placements may lead to longer ones or to future internships.

Bacon (2018, 95) argues "when it comes to discussion of syllabi that include practical politics, placements, and other modes of experiential learning, the rationale behind such approaches centres on employability". This is to place a more modern interpretation on the role of the practical experiences in higher education. Placements have been a part of higher education practice in politics and public administration courses for decades; long before the buzzword of 'employability' came to the fore. That such placements may now be contorted to fit a particular interpretation of what is trying to be achieved, undermines many of the valuable skills that students develop through such experiences.

Yet this 'placement' may not be simply about the workplace. Van Assendelft (2008) has examined the idea of service learning and how students may benefit from such an approach.

She sees it very much around getting students involved in their local community, and to reflect upon these experiences. We will return to the self-reflection shortly.

Van Assendelft (2008) explores how students can benefit from that engagement with society. The skills that may be developed through community interaction are very important. This has been tried in the UK, but not with much success, in the development of the old A/S and A-level subject of Citizenship (see Jones, 2007). More recently, Blair (2017) has considered the lack of civic and political engagement in society in the UK. He notes the rather limited debate on this matter in the UK. It could be linked back to the Thatcherite idea of society no longer existing, and the individualism of modern-day UK, but such a debate goes far beyond the remit of this paper. Suffice it to say that such 'placements' in the community can be of great importance in developing potential skills for the workplace.

A key part of this approach is the idea of self-reflection or reflective practice (see Harvey et al, 2020). It is not just about the 'doing' of a placement, but also the consideration of the 'why'. In business practice, the idea of SWOT analyses is common place - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. At the individual level, workplace appraisals are the norm. In this, consideration is given to goals or objectives over a given period of time, the support needed to achieve them, and the barriers that need to be removed. Such appraisals will be revisited mid-year and at the end of the year, to evaluate the degree of success. Through self-reflection and reflective practices, the students are being introduced to these management tools. The one key difference is they are undertaking this personal development planning as part of achieving credits towards their degree. They are also able to start to explore how such tools can be wielded – either by management to compel workers to adopt particular practices, or by workers to place demands upon management in terms of training and other skills that the workers deem essential to do their jobs better. Linked to this is the justification of that personal development plan (PDP) Such a justification brings in those more academic parts of the syllabus: drawing together arguments and defending them.

Some of what is undertaken in the 'Politics in Action' module may link to other academic disciplines, most notably Project Management. In this, the module considers three key features in a given project: outputs, outcomes and benefits. What has been produced by the project? What are the consequences? Within the 'Politics in Action' module, the aim is to get students to start thinking around those features. Again, these are transferable skills that are often undervalued from a conventional academic perspective (DMU UDL, n/d).

Module Delivery
In trying to deliver a module which has an emphasis upon 'employability', there are a number of issues. The first of which is how to deliver such a module. An unconventional module sometimes needs unconventional delivery. It is not always about the lecturer standing at the front of the class and imparting knowledge; although, sometimes that is appropriate. There is a need to link the academic subject matter with the practical experiences.

In getting the students to think about self-reflection, as an example, it is sometimes about trying to prick their curiosity. Rather than explaining what is involved, we get the students to think about how they might try to teach such a subject. From there, diverse academic literature can be drawn in – in this case Aronson (2011). Although a medical article, the transferability of reflective practices across academic disciplines is important. The students are asked to consider this article, and the approaches proposed in the teaching of self-reflection. Aronson's tip 10 is to assess the reflection (2011, 203). This is a contentious

perspective, and there is an extensive literature that explores both the pros and cons of such assessment (see Jones and Lishman, 2021, for an exploration of that literature).

An important backdrop is the use of United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as previously mentioned. Again, it is about enabling the students to draw links between the SDGs, their studies, and how the SDGs may impact upon organisations and communities. That academic grounding is important through the exploration of the SDGs. The application is the aspect of employability: what is actually being done? how is it being implemented? and, what are the consequences?

Student Feedback
As has already been noted, at the outset of this module students appear unaware as to the aims and objectives. 'Politics in Action' does not appear a conventional module, and there is a level of nervousness over something that appears very different to previous experiences. Most students have undertaken 'A'-levels at school or college, and the step up to tertiary education is often difficult. In particular, there is the volume of self-directed study, which is much more hands-off than their previous experiences. 'Politics in Action' is somewhat different again.

Not only is it the differences to conventional modules that causes concerns among many students but also as to what the module is trying to achieve. As was noted in the introductory paragraph, one student had the belief that coming to university was about acquiring knowledge. This is not unusual. There is often an expectation that a lecturer will stand up and deliver knowledge which students will soak up and then regurgitate in their assessments. While this may seem a little naive in outlook, it is not an unusual perspective. Knowledge acquisition, however, is one aspect to university education. Yet, as with the broad definition of employability, there is so much more to it. Much of the 'Politics in Action' module is about getting over that (partial) misapprehension.

There is also a lack of awareness in relation to the skills being developed. While 'criticality' may have been explained in other modules, 'self-criticality' is something new. This also applies to so many other things - mapping out a plan for a project, keeping minutes of a meeting, considering the importance of other roles undertaken e.g. volunteering, and how all of this can be interlinked. Added to this is the need to explain the importance of all of these skills. Going into the intricacies of a Gantt Chart is probably going too far, but the awareness of mapping out the different roles, and linking that to a timeline and a target date, is important.

What has also become apparent in the different groups is the need for effective leadership, but also to balance that alongside a successful team dynamic: there is a potential opportunity to shine but there may also be the self-realisation that a student is not an effective leader and becomes more aware of some of their limitations. This was also expressed by one of the students (as can be seen in the comments below) in relation to their background and the potential rivals in a future career.

Drawing upon the reflective aspects of their assignments, the student feedback presents a number of interesting comments. The reflections below were captured in 2021, through an ethically-approved project, examining aspects of self-reflection and the link to employability. Each comment is from a different student. The comments may be about the module, about their own role in the module, or about the functioning of their group project within the

module.

Politics in action to me is seen as a breath of fresh air compared to other modules on the course. The main reasons why is [sic] first because I feel like I personally can have an impact on something which is much bigger than myself. This module allows us the freedom to do as much as we would like in terms of helping build the project and the fact that we can have an impact on people sets the module apart from others. Politics in action also means that I have the opportunity to work with people I usually wouldn't which is exciting, with the prospect of working with other people in the workshop being a significant change compared to other university modules, therefore meaning a lot to me and making the module a lot more exciting and being something to look forward to

What I've found when looking at potential jobs is the need to be very good at certain skills, skills in which I have developed over the past year in Politics in Action. The most important of which I feel is my skills in working with teams of people. Similarly to politics in action, in the workplace, you can be assigned to work with anyone, no matter how similar you are or if you even get on, but by developing my team skills in the module, I am much better prepared for what awaits me

I was really unsure on the whole project thing, I didn't really understand it to be honest. I couldn't see how it was going to work, I couldn't see how you could make a project like this and have it actually impact at a local level at all. But after working I really became attached and I was passionate about it, I really thought I would be a disaster, but I then saw the potential and I think everyone else did to... I'm very happy with the module I think it's fantastic and I couldn't recommend it enough. It's got me thinking about real political action and business skills as well because being able to manage a group of students is not easy, and it has made me appreciate a lot more the importance of this module and how it has enhanced employability and leadership skills

Initially, we had a poor leader that didn't understand how to interact with other members of the group often causing conflict and discomfort within and for other members of the group placing the project at risk... This type of individual typically works well individually not as a leader setting a smaller task which they could complete would likely prove more effective as well as allow them to work without causing distress to other members of the group... As such a change in leadership was decided by the group as a whole placing the other in which we elected a functional leader that was able to properly communicate with the rest of the group and drove the decisions and changes that occurred.

Our project failed for many reasons many of which were our fault often due to rookie mistakes and poor decision making. To say that we do not understand the limitation of our group was an understatement... There was not a project roadmap laid out for how we actually wanted to proceed. We knew what we wanted to do, but not how to get there or how to execute such. Due to such our choice of project was fairly unreasonable as we had not considered what could go wrong or our limitation

I have fears that I'll be in essence swallowed by it. This is not to say that I don't have hope, but just like how the stars out drowned out by the light pollution on earth, I

believe that I'm at risk of being drowned out when I finish university, I contemplated to myself wondering how I can possibly compete with someone who's Cambridge and Eton educated and has been trained their entire life to function as a high-level HR manager. These fears and threats combined with what I have learned on this project led me to draw back up plans alternative roots [sic] to achieve my life goal. It led me to understand that you can't just get a university education and walk into a job, there are other factors that prepare you for the workplace as well as the value of experience. Because of this module, I decided to sign up to volunteer in the local community and gain some experience actually supporting people in need and helping them get out poverty and examine the steps which cause poverty.

Personally, I think that this module is very important for many reasons. Mainly, I believe that it allows students to explore how they interact with people and projects, and work towards improving themselves in these areas. As a result of this, I have learnt a lot about myself through this module e.g. my high levels of independence, my ability to lead a team and areas that I need to improve within myself to function better in other areas of my life... Also, the module allows students to explore direct forms of political engagement that, unless they are already involved with a charity or other organisation, they would have not experienced yet, opening their eyes to new experiences and teaching new skills. Finally, the skills gained from project planning and self-reflection will also benefit students in future study and in future employment.

I work in a hospital in my hometown. During the pandemic, this hospital became the COVID19 center [sic] – working under pressure and diligence was always part of the job but it is especially so now. This is a skill I have realized that will ensure I am able to handle the pressure of my final year at university – this module has helped me to regain the confidence that I needed to reassure myself that I am able to handle the challenges of University life and grasp the skills I should be graduating with. Furthermore, my parents have noticed my confidence in this second year which will undoubtedly aid me in my future career.

Not all of the comments have been positive. It is important to be aware of some of the negative reflections raised by students:

To begin with, I have attended very few politics in action workshops and the ones that I have attended were all at the start of this academic year. Furthermore, I have not cooperated with any of the projects that have resided in this politics in action module. I hope that this self-assessment essay will convey the reasons as to why I did not participate in said group projects. Reasons for this include the lack of potential employability with the political sector that I believe this module provides.

I am now realising that employability... is defined by exam grades which are achieved solely through revision and the undertaking of exams by one's self and not through teamwork. Also, University level teamwork is likely to aid team building skills more than lower level education systems due to universities having more application in the real world than with lower level education systems. However, the university course I chose was History and politics and I expect to gain more employability with the political sector rather than the public sector that I feel this particular module is aimed at

This final comment highlights a particular concern about the role of tertiary education. As has been noted previously, there are different perceptions. At one end, it is about knowledge assimilation. At the other, it is about preparing for the workplace. The idea about employability should be somewhere in the middle. The UK Government's perspectives, as based on the metrics they use, criticised by Bacon (2018), is very much about gearing students for the workplace. This is to undermine that need for academic exploration; to enable students to follow their hearts in exploring subjects that matter to them.

Our approach to employability is very much premised on this academic exploration, but also its' application. Follow your heart in developing a particular project, and reflect fully upon what you have done and the consequences.

Conclusions
It is sometimes rather difficult to draw conclusions from such a wide-ranging paper. There is so much to 'tell' about this module, and from a range of different perspectives.
An important caveat, however, remains. We believe this module to be appropriate for our students. The module aims to equip them better with the skills needed in their future careers. This is not as an alternative to the academic skills and rigour that is expected in any university education. Rather, it is a complement to it, developing some of the skills that are essential in the workplace. We believe this to be imperative, and this position is supported by the university, which has given us the flexibility to deliver the module as we see fit, as opposed to government diktat.

When examining the module, what is arguably of greatest importance is the student experience. At the beginning of each academic year, there are endless questions from students in regard to why they are undertaking this module - especially for those who have it as a compulsory module. By the end of each academic year, most students 'get it' - they understand why they have undertaken the module AND how it is likely to benefit them in a future career. There are a range of essential skills, to which the students tend not to be exposed, such as interviewing techniques or basic project management skills. This module presents such opportunities, but it is up to the students to make the connections. As could be seen in the feedback, most of them appear to do so.

Yet it can be difficult to measure the impact of the module. Student feedback on the module may come too early - at the end of the academic year of study. Anecdotally, we have received feedback from final year students who have noted how their behaviour has changed as a result of the module, such as having more awareness of what they are doing and why. Linked to the SDGs and sustainability, one group of students focused on reducing energy consumption – and this was long before the current energy crisis. There has been other feedback in relation to, for example, their time management and planning of a dissertation, but also in how they present themselves in job application forms and in interviews. It links back to the perspective developed by Hillage and Pollard (1998) about the deployment of those employability assets the students have amassed. We get our students to reflect on their learning through different approaches. For example, working with both the careers team and the placement team has enabled students to appreciate how their 'assets' may be deployed in different contexts.

The students are also able to develop reflective practitioner skills. These are sometimes taken for granted, or taken as read in that students ought to be able to do them. Yet students are very poor at recording or measuring their achievements. They do not appreciate the

importance of doing so in, for example, an annual appraisal.

The module, however, is very resource intensive. It needs a dedicated team to lead and manage the whole process. Added to this, the departmental, faculty and university management teams need to understand why the module is so important. Evaluation of the success, or otherwise, of this module cannot necessarily been seen in the grades achieved. Far too often, senior management may look at the grade being achieved by students on a given module, and question why the module is being run. Poor grades may suggest a module is too difficult and may impact badly upon university league tables.

As was noted in the student comments, not all projects succeed. In fact, it can be a useful learning experience for the students should their project fail. The problem, however, is to balance this with some of the partners within the university, who are involved in the module. They expect every project in which they are involved to succeed. There is a difficulty here in balancing this. One way forward, which we are currently exploring, is to develop readymade projects with some of the research centres, as well as from the wider department.

Finally, every year is something of a rollercoaster ride. The module can be very taxing on the students and on the staff - the latter being due to the unpredictability within the module. Often staff have to get involved in problem solving of disputes between student groups. Sometimes there is a need for micromanagement of the students and their projects.
It may also be about taking a more agile approach to the development of the curriculum in response to gaps that are identified in knowledge and/or skills. Yet, drawing in the importance of context (Harvey, 2001), it may also be in response to changes in the areas of interest for students. Subjects covered have changed over the years, often in response to topical big challenges e.g. climate change, zero waste, food poverty, responding to the Covid pandemic, etc.

The ultimate aim of this module is for students to have some awareness of the skills they may need beyond university. It is not, and has never been, about replacing academic skills with employability. The two should complement each other. Rather, it is about creating a better awareness of some of those skills, a realisation of how these are developed during academic study, and their application in academia and beyond.

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