

# Employability for all: how focusing on pre-professional identity formation can boost inclusivity

**Dr Clare Forder**

[LinkedIn](#)

[Twitter](#)

**Julie Fowlie**

[LinkedIn](#)

[Twitter](#)



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# Overview

- Well-documented gap in differential outcomes between White and Black & Minority Ethnic students (BME), including attainment and employability – locally and nationally (UUK/NUS, 2019).
- Employability calls for students to take responsibility for their ‘work readiness’ (Tymon, 2013) but assumes students realise and know how to do this.
- An assumption that there is equality of access to the contexts in which this development typically takes place (Barbarà-i-Molinero et al, 2017).



## Pre-professional identity formation

Typical approaches to employability encourage focus on skills and achievements to showcase “work-readiness” (Archer and Davison, 2008; Mason et al, 2009).

However, it can be argued this overlooks the complexity of ‘graduateness’ and could do more to include concepts of identity (Hinchliffe and Jolly, 2011, p564).

- + Jackson (2016) echoes Hinchliffe and Jolly (2011) by calling for a **redefining** of employability to include **pre-professional identity formation**.
- + This allows students to develop an ***“understanding of and connection with the skills, qualities, conduct, culture and ideology of [their] intended profession”*** (Jackson, 2016, p926).



# Our research: BME students' perceived barriers to career development

*What might be promoting the differences in White and BME students' employability outcomes locally?*

All Level 5 BME students in our School invited to participate (low response rate)

Included:

- Focus group series to collect baseline data
- 12 participant-informed events (masterclasses, LinkedIn photoshoot, alumni networking)
- Follow up focus groups to discuss impact



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*Feel like white students have many more connections and that they know what to do.*

*I want to feel more involved but lack confidence.*

*Feel like employers just seeing name on application might not give that person a chance.*

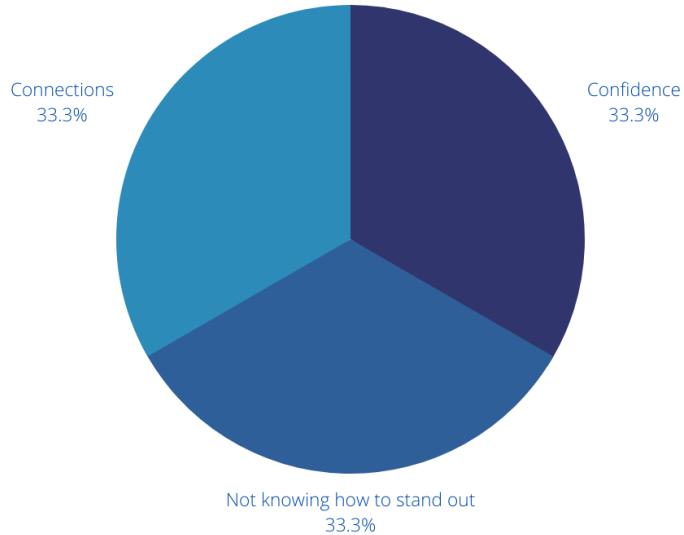
*Speaking Arabic has been a disadvantage.*

*I feel nervous and not sure how to stand out.*



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## Key themes



Students perceptions highlighted that, in comparison to their white counterparts, they:

- + Did not feel as confident in developing their employability
- + Did not know how to stand out
- + Felt as though they had fewer connections



# Focusing on pre-professional identity development to boost BME graduate outcomes

Used concept of pre-professional identity development as a framework, also incorporating Tomlinson's (2017) graduate capitals model and Wenger's (2011) ideas of communities of practice to help provide:

- Networking events
- Discussions around professional development and how to stand out (in person and online)
- Confidence-building opportunities including LinkedIn masterclasses and meeting employers

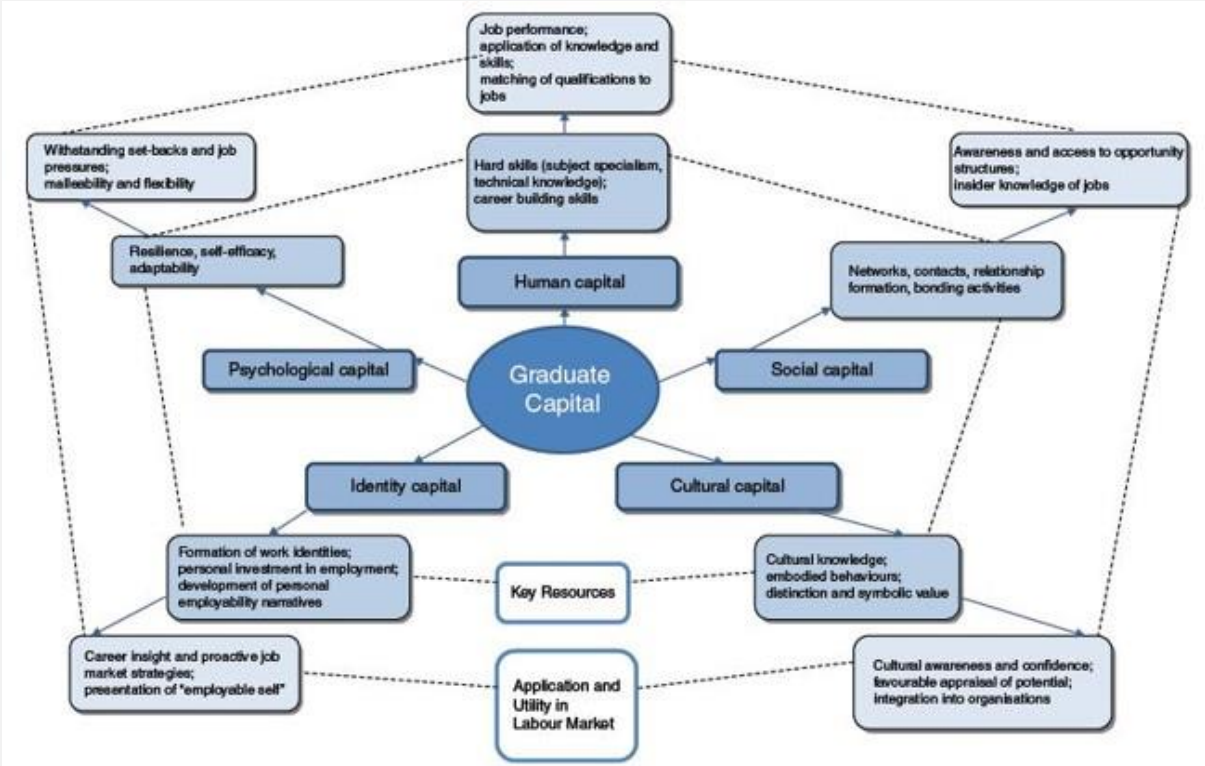
Allowed for **critical element of agency** rather than fitting students into institutionally defined concepts of “work readiness” (Daniels and Brooker, 2014).



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# Tomlinson's capitals model



Tomlinson  
(2017, p340)



# Pre-professional identity development in action: engaging with alumni and using LinkedIn

**Alumni** were a key part of our networking events:

Communities of practice (Wenger, 2011) – in person and via LinkedIn

Role models

Accessible

Based on previous research, we found **preparing** participants for networking (whether in person or online) was a critical step.

We collected offline alumni profiles (32, of which 22 were BME):

Could be taken away

Participants could reach out on LinkedIn if they felt comfortable

Familiarisation before meeting in person



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# Examples of alumni profiles



Pooja – Accounting & Finance 2012-15



Vincent – Business with Economics 2013-16



Henuja – Business with Economics 2013-17



Vels – Accounting & Finance 2014-18



Elise – Business Management 2014-18



Nimesh – Accounting & Finance 2013-16



Paige – Bus. Mgmt with HRM 2014-18



Michael – Business Management 2012-16



# Pre-professional identity development in action: engaging with alumni and using LinkedIn

Participants were encouraged to use **LinkedIn** to **build capital** in terms of:

- Networking

- Standing out (pre-professional to professional identity)

- Career exploration

- Job/placement search

- Receiving endorsements and recommendations

At the end of the project:

- 38% increase in those who had a LinkedIn profile**

- Over 50% had established alumni connections**



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# Pre-professional identity development in action: building student capital and measuring outcomes

Focused on **more inclusive approaches** by understanding where our BME students felt gaps existed in their own capital.

Provided means to build student capital in different forms as highlighted by Tomlinson (2017), particularly **social, cultural and identity elements**.

Opened up a **new community** to support participants' career exploration – including alumni, participants, tutors.

Provided necessary element of **agency** in the process of identity development.



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*Meeting the alumni allowed me to understand that I can't just limit myself to one job role, in one department. I have the ability to use my degree in a variety of industries and job roles.*

*Being part of this group gave me access to so many amazing opportunities and useful resources, and helped build my confidence.*

*The project has...helped me develop key areas within the recruiting process where I have struggled before...and helped me develop a [LinkedIn] profile which I'm now not afraid to share with potential employers.*

*The project has helped me open my eyes. Seeing other students exactly like me going through the same struggle has made me...not lose heart with just a few failed or rejected outcomes.*

*I would recommend [more students] being taught how to reach out privately to alumni for opportunities and to show independence and out-of-the-box  thinking.*



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# Conclusion: redefining a pedagogy of employability

Standard view:

- + Focuses on developing graduate **skills** and **attributes** (e.g. Archer & Davison 2008; Mason et al 2009)
- + Is viewed by some as **restrictive** (Jackson, 2016; Rowe & Zegwaard, 2017)
- + **Lacks capacity** for building student/graduate capital (Tomlinson, 2017)

Pre-professional identity approach:

- + Allows employability to become more **inclusive** as helps students to transform attributes into **personal capital** and increases **agentic** behaviour (Fowlie and Forder, 2020)
- + Reframes employability as **processual** endeavour rather than one relying on position or possession of skills (Hinchliffe & Jolly 2011)



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## End word: where are they now?

We caught up with our student participants to find out if the project had impacted their new careers:

The project helped me understand the importance of leveraging LinkedIn to aid my career development. I have been able to connect with many people within industries that I am interested in and create mutually beneficial professional relationships.

The nature of LinkedIn as a professional network platform, helped me connect with alumni and understand what experience/internships they have done to help them get to where they are today.

LinkedIn has widened my connections. I can easily reach out to alumni and ask for advice or connect to the interviewer after an interview. This has given me a better understanding of the working culture of the company. I am also lucky enough to be coaching a few interns .



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## End word: where are they now?

We caught up with some of our student participants to find out if the project had impacted their new careers:

I remember the project very well. It was very valuable as it allowed me to begin building a professional profile which would make finding a job a lot easier. I thought the idea behind the BME project was very important for taking the route to a graduate role.

I was able to find mentors through LinkedIn, who advised me on career development and helped me to prepare for interviews and my assessment centre. The opportunity to join the committee for The Black Economist Network was shared with me through my LinkedIn feed.

I was able to develop my employability skills which have helped me to become more confident when meeting new people and forming connections on LinkedIn.



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## End word: where are we now?

Further research:

Can a focus on inclusivity as demonstrated here be extended to those who have been significantly affected by Covid-19 (e.g. digital poverty)?

Are there any other groups who might also benefit from further opportunities to build capital and improve employability outcomes?

Using LinkedIn in the curriculum: how pre-professional identity development and celebrating success can enhance students' work-readiness (presenting next month at CABS)



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