



Developing a toolkit to enable students from unrepresented backgrounds to develop confidence and competencies

Project lead: London Metropolitan University

Project partners: University of West London, University of Westminster, University of Hertfordshire, Kingston University, University of Roehampton and University of Greenwich

The Project Steering Group would like to acknowledge the support provided by Dr Kerr Castle, Quality Enhancement & Standards Specialist, Quality Assurance Agency

Introduction

This report presents the findings and outcomes of the Inclusive Futures Project, a collaborative initiative undertaken by seven widening participation universities (London Met, Hertfordshire, Kingston, Roehampton, West London, Westminster, and Greenwich) in partnership with GTI. The project was a direct response to the challenges posed by the Covid pandemic and aimed to enhance the annual Inclusive Futures (IFF) Virtual Careers Fair, building upon previous collaborations from 2019 to 2021.

The Inclusive Futures Project sought to address the evolving needs of our diverse student population, with university demographics across the participating institutions collectively averaging 69.9% Black, Asian, Minority and Ethnic students, 60.14% mature students, and 14% disabled students. Expanding upon the established partnership among project university collaborators, the Inclusive Futures Careers Fair served as a platform for students to connect with employers and explore career opportunities.

This report provides an overview of the project's objectives, activities, and key outcomes. It highlights the strategies implemented to address the identified challenges and presents the results achieved through collaborative efforts. At the time of writing (June 2023), the Project has been shortlisted for two Awards to be announced this summer; Institute of Student Employers (Outstanding University Partnership with an Employer and/or Supplier 2023) and Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (Building Effective Partnerships 2023) which [included creating a short video about the Project](#)

The Inclusive Futures Project represents a significant step forward in promoting equity and diversity within the career development landscape. By recognising the unique needs and aspirations of our student body, the Project Team have strived to create an environment that fosters meaningful connections and opens doors to graduate opportunities.

Objectives of the Project

Addressing preparation for virtual fairs, the Project aimed to create a Toolkit to support students from underrepresented groups to engage fully and effectively with graduate employers, enhancing their student learning for the purpose of:



- aiding career decision making and creating opportunity
- supporting students to improve graduate skills, including self-awareness, self-promotion, networking and interpersonal and commercial awareness.
- developing confident students who have reflected on their strengths
- improving understanding of how to articulate these at online careers employer events

Why did we try to make a change?

Expanding upon the established partnership among project university collaborators, collation of feedback from previous Inclusive Futures Fairs and supporting research suggested that post-Covid, students were not confident in utilising and optimising connections at virtual employer events, and employers faced challenges in effectively connecting with students from diverse demographic groups.

Key themes that emerged from feedback from students about their challenges in successful participation in online employability events were in four areas:

- self-awareness of one's own strengths and motivation
- guidance on how to ask the "right" questions when speaking with employers online;
- understanding how to present themselves in a professional manner online;
- input on how to make good use of the camera and chat facilities.

What changes did we hope to make?

With a recognition of these challenges, the Inclusive Futures Project sought to amplify the influence of the fair. The toolkit was designed to empower students from underrepresented backgrounds, equipping them with the confidence and skills required to access and participate effectively in virtual events for graduate-level employment. The changes that were anticipated were:

Short term:

- improved levels and quality of preparation completed by students from underrepresented groups for the November 2022 Inclusive Futures Fair
- Increasing the number of employer interactions at the fair
- Improving the quality of conversations which students have with employers

Longer term

- Increasing the number of applications made by students
- Improving the quality of applications made by students
- Increasing the number of students who secure employment with employers they meet at this fair

What activities were completed?

1. The Toolkit and Fair

The seven universities collaborated expertise across different roles and skills, providing a more diverse, enriching experience for our students and making it easier for employers; effectively,



utilising innovative partnerships to provide students with essential skills and knowledge to succeed in the job market. The project had clear vision with goals overseen by a Steering Group and was split into two stages co-designed with students:

- Stage One: developing an online toolkit for students, which would help them to present themselves professionally at online events, ask relevant questions to employers, and reflect on their strengths and motivations.
- Stage Two: hosting Inclusive Futures Virtual Careers Fair (November 2022) aimed to encourage diversity and inclusion by creating a flexible and inclusive environment for students to engage with graduate employers. It also aimed to provide employers with access to a large and diverse pool of candidates and create opportunities for graduate employment through direct networking.

Whilst university careers teams already offer activities to assist students, the Project gave an opportunity to develop scalable support across all universities addressing student and employer feedback. Two inter-university 'Working Groups' were established, one for each 'Stage'. Toolkit resources were researched, written, and proofread amongst careers staff and students across member universities. Three smaller inter-university 'Task Groups' were established to create knowledge exchange and allocate content between members relating to the student journey 'Before', 'During', and 'After' attending a virtual careers fair. Resources covered the countdown to the fair, during the careers fair and applying for jobs, building a network, staying resilient and securing employment.

Technology Partner

The Project Team had an existing partnership with [GroupGTI](#) to facilitate the Inclusive Futures Fair. Existing GTI technology supports universities' careers work providing access to work experience, placements, and graduate-level jobs and GTI provided regular data which was used to inform reach, value, and impact. GTI hosted the Fair on their online platform and eased interactions ('student-employer', 'student-careers services', and 'peer-to-peer').

Student partnerships

Throughout the Project, there was co-design, co-creation, and delivery with students: promotional and introductory videos were filmed and edited by students from consortium HEIs, and students contributed to the creation of the toolkit resources (e.g. their practical tips for graduate employability). Staff and students collaborated by creating shared resources, e.g. communication templates for engagement with students and employers. These included clear timelines and a targeted outreach strategy that focused on using student peer to peer marketing to highlight the toolkit and guidance on the delivery of preparatory workshops for students.

Preparatory workshops for employers were organised to provide guidance on proactive approaches to utilise chat/meeting features in reaching out to students, instead of waiting for students to initiate contact. This represented a significant shift towards more proactive and engaged employer-student interactions. A panel of students also kickstarted the Inclusive Futures Fair on the day.



Employers

Project funding enabled the Project Team to promote the Inclusive Futures Fair with the Institute of Student Employers which significantly improved reach, enabling new employers to join the event.

QAA

Our collaboration with QAA meant that the Toolkit was able to be hosted on the QAA website. QAA liaised with developers to design a format/template for the online toolkit and this collaboration resulted in maximum usage for the toolkit across the HEI sector including access, promotion, quality, and credibility. The toolkit of online resources is available for all higher education providers.

2. Reciprocal Flash Mentoring

Before and after the Inclusive Futures Fair, the Project Group reached out for students and employers to take part in a Pilot Reciprocal Flash Mentoring programme. The programme was designed to support understanding the lived experiences of each other, to connect and create trust for a solid foundation working as partners towards change. Initially, the intention was to have longer sustained mentoring relationships, but the Project Team were keen to avoid demanding time commitments for students and employers.

Reciprocal flash mentoring is peer to peer and beneficial to both employer and student. The mentor and mentee, by having fewer meetings, have more time to explore the specific topic under discussion and the process can support changes at organisation and individual level through the perspectives gained. This pilot supported 10 students and employers to learn from each other as equal partners. The goals for the session were created to improve understanding of students' lived experiences so that employers can seek insight and feedback to support their recruitment development, and for the students to learn from employer insights into recruitment and selection that can help them with future graduate applications.

3. Creation of Good Practice Guides

The Project Team created three Good Practice Guides which were designed by a recent graduate. These guides were based on learning from the Project to support students, employers and universities and were published towards the end of the Project and hosted on the QAA Website within the Toolkit. For example, the Good Practice Guide for employers highlights the types of challenges underrepresented students might face, then suggest ways in which employers can create inclusive virtual events and build relationships with students at these events, giving practical recommendations on engagement strategies that can continue after the events have concluded.

Outcomes of the Project

Our aim was to boost engagement between both parties at the Fair by at least 50%, which was exceeded using the online platform and [Virtual Careers Fair Toolkit](#). This engagement between students and employers improved access to career opportunities and highlighted the value of collaboration of partners in enhancing student outcomes. The toolkit for virtual careers fairs is



hosted on the QAA website ensuring greater access and quality to the toolkit. QAA’s Director of Membership, Quality Enhancement and Standards (2022) recognised the ‘tangible difference’ the toolkit can make in supporting these cohorts to ‘convert virtual conversations into successful applications.’

Partnering with GTI's platform also enabled us to reach a greater number of diverse students and employers than individual HEIs could have achieved. Student involvement in creating the toolkit and editing promotional/introductory videos hosted on the GTI platform, allowed students to explain how the toolkit can help peers when engaging in virtual careers fairs.

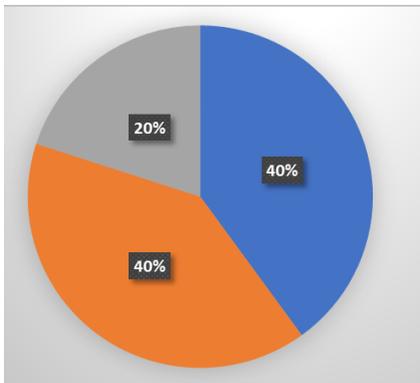
"This online delivery allowed us to reach those students most negatively impacted by lockdowns and the pandemic. It was unique in that it involved a consortium of 7 diverse widening participation universities, and was focused not just on employability, but on diversity and inclusion" Group GTI

Toolkit and Inclusive Futures Fair

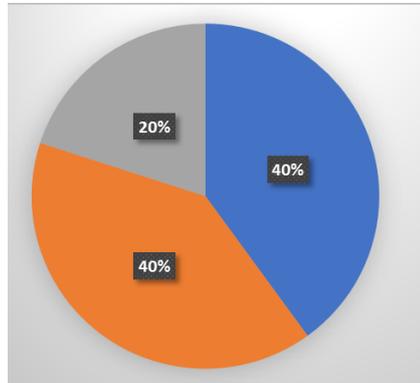
- **Improved levels and quality of preparation completed by students from underrepresented groups for this fair**

The employer feedback displayed below suggests adequate levels of preparation, compared to unsatisfactory in the past. There was a positive change.

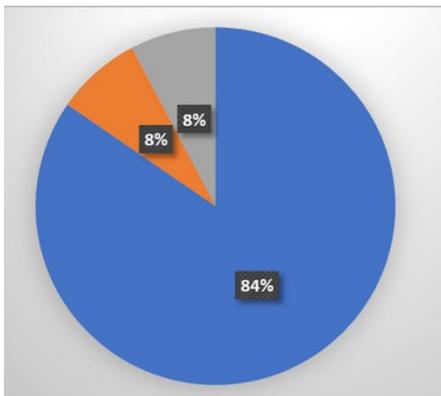
Organisational knowledge



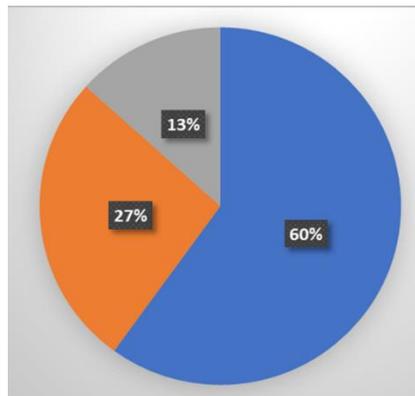
Preparation and research



Professionalism



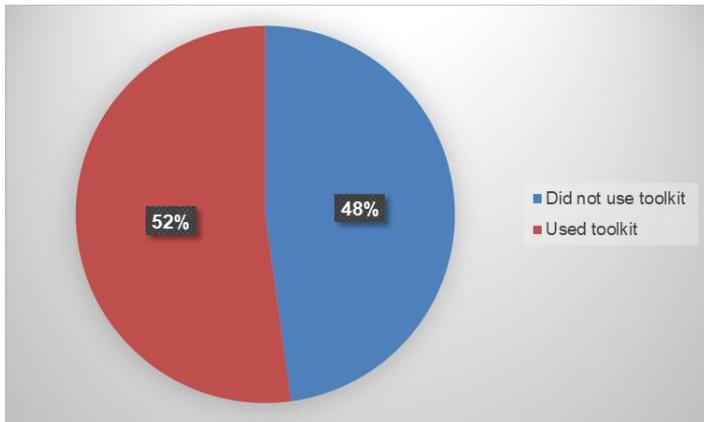
Questions asked



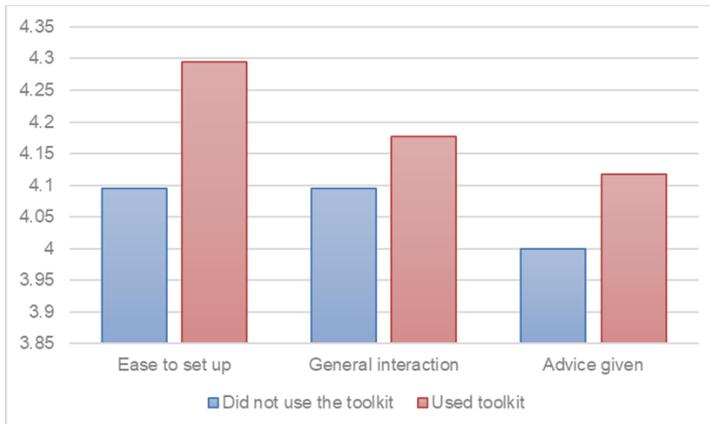


Out of the students who gave feedback, 52% used the toolkit. Those who used the toolkit were rated their fair experience significantly higher than those who did not.

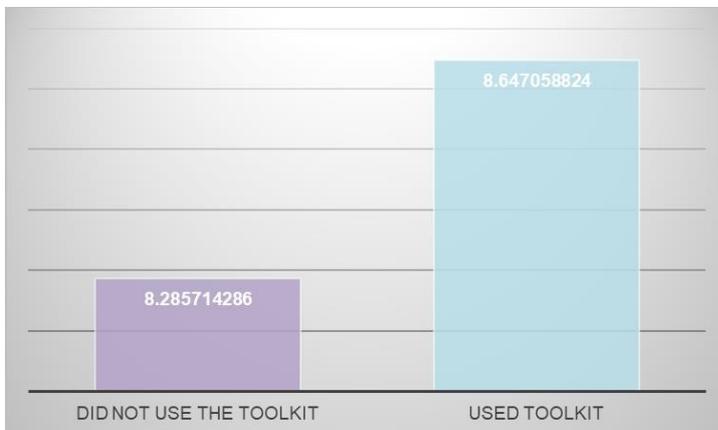
Toolkit use



Fair experience, split by toolkit use



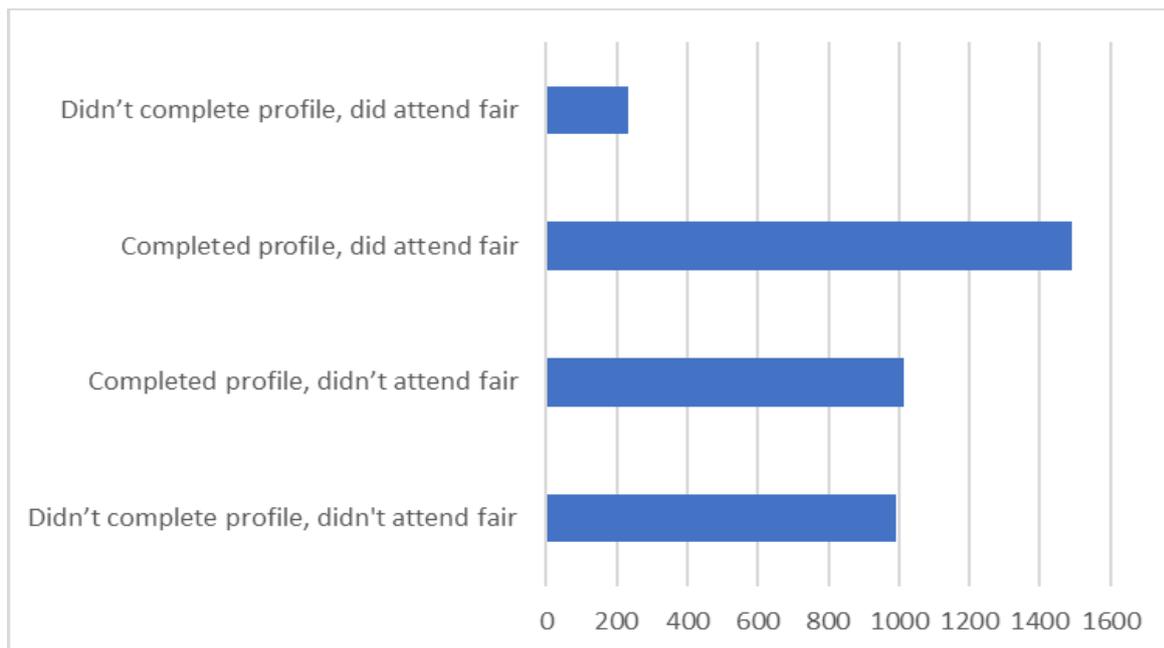
How likely are you to recommend the fair? (Score out of 10)





- Profile completion**

Completion of profile is a good indicator of attendance. Success for the toolkit as it prompted students to complete their profile and supported them to make pre-fair actions.



- Fair participation data**

There were huge increases in participation from those that attended, particularly given that there was a decrease in attendance (in line with sector trends) of virtual events.

Inclusive Futures Careers Fair	2021	2022	Change	Learnings
Employer booths	75	84	13% increase	Virtual and inclusivity focused fairs still have a role to play for employers
Student attendance numbers	1893	1723	9% decrease	On-campus events mean that virtual are not the "go-to"



Booth views	12755	23317	82% increase	Extra work to prepare students and employers contributed towards greatly increased activity
1:1 meeting	292	775	75% increase	
Messages exchanged	12,780	22,309	74% increase	
Toolkit page views	n/a	4441 (unique views)		Good usage
Action planner downloads	n/a	452		

Employer Feedback

- “This was the first virtual event we have ran with an inclusive DE&I focus. This was a great event and we have had a few graduates who have applied for current positions.” (Wiley Edge)
- “This was well organised and publicised, I had so much interest” (10,000 Black Interns)

Student Feedback

- “IFF is working towards bringing inclusive employers to the demographic.”
- “The tool kit ... was very educative.”
- “It’s a really good platform for students ...to build their career and become a professional of their own sector.”

Reciprocal Flash Mentoring

The findings from the pilot show that the reciprocal mentoring program between students and employers has been highly valuable. Employers have gained important insights and made positive changes to their processes and approaches based on their interactions with students.

Some of the key takeaways include:

Students

- Employers were highly professional, approachable, punctual, and prepared. They were well updated about current trends and the needs of students, which showed their commitment to staying informed and relevant.
- Employers effectively communicated through various channels such as email and LinkedIn. They were quick to reply to emails and even took the initiative to call students to ensure smooth communication, considering network issues. This responsiveness and adaptability fostered effective engagement.



- Employers had a strong understanding of different sectors and had a wide network of skilled professionals. They provided valuable insights and advice based on their expertise, making the mentoring sessions informative and beneficial for the students.
- Employers actively engaged in conversations, showing attentiveness, and taking notes. They showed a clear understanding of the topics discussed and answered questions in a detailed and thoughtful manner.

Employers

- Employers gained valuable feedback on company websites and insights into the type of opportunities graduates are looking for. This information has been used to improve the website and enhance understanding of student preferences.
- Employers appreciated the positive attitude and networking efforts demonstrated by students. Examples of going above and beyond in networking have been shared as positive examples by employers.
- The program has increased awareness of the challenges students face, such as conflicts with part-time work and busy schedules. To address this, employers plan to provide recorded sessions for students that can be watched on-demand.
- Employers have gained valuable insights into how students research prospective employers through social media profiles. Suggestions for improving the company website based on student advice have been noted.
- Hearing directly from students has provided valuable perspective on what they look for in employers and the challenges they face in the recruitment process. The importance of scheduling sessions in advance to avoid conflicts and ensuring sufficient time for exploration of topics has been highlighted.
- Discussions with students have touched on important issues such as negotiable salaries, supporting candidates from BAME backgrounds, and the preferences of London-based students for work opportunities within the city.

Employers felt that structured sessions with possible themes were the best approach. Overall, the reciprocal flash mentoring program has eased meaningful mentorship and support for students while providing employers with valuable insights and prompting positive changes in their interactions and processes.

Summary

In conclusion, our project evaluation highlights several positive outcomes that have resulted from the QAA Collaborative Enhancement Project. Some of the outcomes will only come to light in 2023/24 once employer recruitment cycles have been completed.

Whilst virtual careers fairs will not be the main method that most students will meet employers in the coming years, they present a strong opportunity to support students from underrepresented groups to meet inclusive employers, framing them as an opportunity to provide equality of outcomes. For this to happen successfully, students need to be supported using guidance and material featured in the toolkit. The toolkit's key features will help prepare students for early recruitment experiences. It includes useful resources and tips to untangle some of the complexities



around applying for graduate jobs, communicating with employers, and following up with applications. The toolkit can be used before any online recruitment fair regardless of which university a student attends.

The Project successfully influenced the intended changes, as evidenced by the improved levels and quality of preparation among students from underrepresented groups attending the fair. Additionally, we have had a notable increase in the number of employer interactions and saw enhanced quality of conversations between students and employers and remain optimistic about the potential positive impact in these areas. Overall, this evaluation emphasizes the successes achieved in terms of student preparation, employer engagement, and the quality of conversations, paving the way for continued progress and further improvements in the future.