



Skills in Action: Recognised and accessible work experience

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One size does not fit all.

A recent [HEPI report](#) (Wright et al, 2025) discussed the number of students undertaking part-time work alongside their studies and the impact that this can have on their university life. For many this is a necessity rather than a choice and can hamper the time they have to undertake other (co-) curricular activities such as placements and internships. Bath Spa University's (BSU's) award-winning Employability Strategy has work experience as one of its key components, helping students to gain industry experience and achieve positive graduate outcomes. It also forms a key part of the Education Strategy, aiming to embed employability and real-world skills in the curriculum. Often, placement/sandwich years are seen as the 'gold standard' for employability and are prioritised for the benefits they provide. Whilst this might be true, there is a

slight decline in interest in long term placements and of those who join on a four-year placement degree only 1 in 4 go on to secure a role.

When dissecting why the other 75% of the cohort do not go on a placement year, there are several reasons to consider. BSU is not your typical university – it has a diverse range of courses from Business and Science through to Performance and Design. Opportunities in Business & Management are mostly paid and easy to find, but this is not true for sectors relating to Fashion, Psychology or Art, for example. Of the year-long roles secured by our students, nearly two thirds are unpaid. The option to undertake a placement year may be open to everyone, but accessibility is not equitable.

Overcoming barriers

To tackle this, BSU introduced an [innovative bursary](#) for all students on a placement year. Described as 'sector-leading', the bursary offers every student £500-£1500 depending on their Widening Participation markers and is funded from their tuition fees for the year. It is hoped that this will help with some associated costs such as travel, accommodation, workwear or food, but still feels more like treatment than a cure to the pandemic of unpaid placements.

Other barriers affecting students included housing commitments, being away from friends, getting multiple rejections and a lack of confidence. This led to many students preferring to do shorter experiences and opting out. The Work Placement Open Module is an option which exists in level 5 and allows students from any course to self-source a period of work experience and has run successfully for well over a decade. Additionally, our Placements & Work-Based Learning (PWBL) team runs a series of initiatives to encourage participation in work-related learning, including paid internships, bursaries for low or unpaid work experience, funded international opportunities and micro internships.

Seemingly, most angles are covered, yet discussions with colleagues showed that more could be done. Knowing that so many students are working whilst studying, volunteering, developing side hustles or are part of societies demonstrates that students are developing skills in ways that they are not aware of or are being recognised. Our role as a Higher





Education institution is to prepare graduates for their future and employability is key to that. Engagement in employability-related activity is tricky across the sector, so one of our team's key objectives is to embed as much as possible... Enter the Skills in Action Open Module.

Embedded skills recognition

This September will see the launch of this 20-credit level 6 module, led by the Careers & Employability team. The focus is on helping students to identify their professional journey to date, teaching them about reflective practice and articulating their skills to employers. The module has been designed to be flexible, innovative, impactful and authentic, allowing students to reflect on the wide range of activities mentioned earlier. Four core sessions will investigate the art of reflection and articulation and will then be followed by a series of 'bolt on' sessions which students must attend at least two of. The additional sessions will provide tailored content, allowing students to choose what they feel will be the most beneficial to them and their future, covering topics such as enterprise, further study, creative and digital sectors, working internationally, building and showcasing their professional profile, assessment centres and AI.

The module also includes the option to undertake a live brief set by an employer, providing the perfect opportunity for someone with little-to-no work experience to have something tangible to add to their CV or boost their applications. This gives us a model that could ensure every student at BSU leaves having undertaken some form of credited work experience.

The first assignment is a reflection of the student's professional journey in one of three formats: a written article, professional discussion or poster/infographic, allowing students the freedom to choose what suits them best. The second assignment is a series of employability-related tasks where students must submit an application for a suitable graduate role, complete a skills audit and undertake a simulated online interview, all designed to prepare them for their future.

I am proud to be part of a university that was named as the [best for social inclusion](#) in 2024. This module has been created based on those core values of inclusion and accessibility, recognising that not every student can access long-term placements or other initiatives like summer internships. Instead, it rewards students for all the other good things they do alongside their degree but might not realise it and gives academic credit for it.



References

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