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From Classroom to Career: Unveiling Trainee Teachers' Insights on Preparedness for School Employment

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Abstract

The Department for Education (DfE, 2023) currently reports a continuing downward trend when it comes to employment rates for PGCE students working in state school. In this climate, seems pertinent to understand what could be impacting student employability, how to improve it, and barriers that might be in place. However, UK-based research which explores employability factors seems somewhat limited to the views of employers or HE providers; the students' voices are notably absent and so are their experiences of their programme's provision, meaning a piece is missing when it comes to ascertaining HE providers could work to improve their students' employability. It seems that an understanding of PGCE

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students' employability needs and perspectives on how to develop in this area are largely unknown. This paper aims to address this gap and provide empirical evidence from secondary post-graduate certificate of education (PGCE) students from one university in London. The aim of our paper is to explore their views about support and opportunities they have regarding employability during their course. Our sample consists of PGCE Secondary Education students, studying different disciplines e.g. Geography, RE, Science. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews via TEAMS and conducted via different researchers. Each student participated in a 30–40-minute semi-structured interview. Preliminary findings showed valuable information about the support they received during their studies and ideas for further support during their studies. Implications for practice could include how HE Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programme could be developed to increase student employment prospects in within the UK's ever-changing and often challenging context.

Keywords: Initial teacher education (ITE), employability, competency, teacher training, professional development

Introduction

The Department for Education (DfE, 2023) continues to highlight concerns about declining employment rates among Postgraduate Certificate in Education (PGCE) graduates entering state schools in England. Despite national efforts to address teacher shortages—particularly in secondary subjects such as physics and modern foreign languages (MFL)—there remains a persistent challenge in ensuring that newly qualified teachers not only gain employment but are also equipped for sustainable, long-term careers in the profession. While employment statistics are often used to measure the success of initial teacher education (ITE) programmes, this study argues that such figures offer an incomplete picture. Instead, employability—defined as the acquisition of lifelong, context-specific, and transferable skills that enable individuals to obtain and maintain meaningful work—provides a more comprehensive and sustainable metric (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Yorke, 2006).

PGCE programmes in England offer a distinctive model of teacher training that combines university-based study with extensive school placements. These placements, which are mandatory, frequently lead directly to employment, particularly in partnership schools. However, the extent to which such experiences foster the development of broader employability skills has not been sufficiently examined. Although the Core Content Framework (DfE, 2020) mandates consistency across ITE curricula in England, critics suggest that an overemphasis on technical competence may fall short of preparing trainees for the full complexity of professional life in schools (Hordern & Brooks, 2023). Readiness for teaching is increasingly conceptualised not as a static attainment of prescribed standards but as a dynamic and context-dependent process that continues beyond qualification (Evans, 2008).

Further, current policy frameworks place growing pressure on ITE providers to ensure employability is central to programme design. For example, the DfE (2024) mandates that ITE providers deliver high-quality support to prepare trainees for employment, while the latest Ofsted (2023) inspection framework evaluates whether employability preparation is embedded within the curriculum. However, the prevailing discourse in both policy and academic literature tends to centre the perspectives of employers, policymakers, and institutions. The voices of PGCE students themselves—those directly experiencing and engaging with these programmes—are notably underrepresented. Their insights into how well their training prepares them for sustainable employment and what forms of support they value remain largely unknown.

This omission is particularly pressing when considering the experiences of international PGCE students, who may face additional barriers to employment in England. These include time constraints, difficulties adjusting to academic expectations and social life, and challenges related to immigration policy

and visa restrictions (Fakunle & Pirrie, 2020; Singh et al., 2023). In response to recruitment challenges, the DfE introduced financial incentives in 2023 for international applicants, including bursaries of up to £30,000 and relocation payments for those entering shortage-subject areas. Nonetheless, little is known about whether such incentives meaningfully support employability or address the broader structural barriers faced by these students.

This study aims to address these gaps by exploring how PGCE secondary students—including international students—perceive their programme’s support for employability development. Conducted as a case study at a London university with a strong commitment to teacher education and its local community, the research seeks to provide context-rich insights into student experiences. Although many PGCE students secure employment shortly after qualifying, often due to placement-based hiring, long-term employability remains a distinct and under-investigated area—particularly in terms of the lifelong, adaptable skills needed to thrive in an evolving education system (Yorke, 2006).

Accordingly, this research asks:

- What are students’ views about the support their programme of study is offering in terms of developing their employability skills?
- What aspects in their curriculum would they like to see to help them become more employable?

By focusing on the perspectives of PGCE secondary students, this study contributes to a more holistic understanding of employability in teacher education. In doing so, it aims to inform future curriculum design and policy implementation by highlighting what students themselves identify as crucial to developing the capacity for meaningful, sustainable employment in the teaching profession.

Literature review

Employment rates for qualified secondary school teachers in England vary by subject, with some areas designated as shortage subjects due to widespread vacancies, while others remain more competitive. While employment—the act of gaining a job—is an important outcome, it differs from the concept of employability. Employability encompasses a more complex set of context-specific, lifelong learning skills that higher education institutions should foster to support graduates in accessing not just any job, but meaningful and sustainable employment (Dacre Pool & Sewell, 2007; Yorke, 2006). This includes not only technical competencies but also reflective practice, adaptability, and an awareness of the demands of the professional landscape. According to Hillage and Pollard (1998), employability refers to the capability to move self-sufficiently within the labour market to realise potential through sustainable employment, offering a deeper, more forward-looking lens than employment rates alone.

Some scholars have sought to define and measure these broader employability skills. Tushar and Sooraksa (2023) and Harvey (2003) identify flexibility, adaptability, teamwork, and self-awareness as central to employability. Similarly, Lees (2015) found that for UK undergraduate business students, employability was often perceived as the extent to which an individual feels competent and accomplished in their role. The PGCE structure—with extended school placements as a core element—provides a unique context for employability development. These placements serve as vital experiential learning opportunities, shaping how individuals engage with and relate to the labour market (Yorke, 2006). Despite these structural advantages, the employability of PGCE students remains underexplored in current literature. Most existing studies in the UK either foreground employer or institutional perspectives, leaving a gap in understanding how PGCE students themselves experience and interpret the employability skills embedded in their training.

Education Policy and Employability Requirements

The education policy and training landscape shape the requirements trainee teachers must fulfil to become qualified and be employed by schools and colleges. However, teacher education has been undergoing a substantial period of reform since the 2010 White Paper 'The Importance of Teaching,' and these reforms have been increasingly aligning teaching education principles with market values (Mutton, Burn et al., 2021). The Core Content Framework (DfE, 2020), which forms a mandatory part of Initial Teacher Education (ITE), has been criticised for its atomised and simplified skills-based approach, where some argue it focuses only on technical skill at the expense of wider educational knowledge to craft sound educational judgements (Horden & Brooks, 2023).

Since 2020, the Core Content Framework (CCF) has been statutory for all Initial Teacher Training (ITT) programmes. This signified a move towards consistency, aiming to limit the variability of provision across the wide range of ITT providers (DfE, 2016). For providers to be accredited and deemed adequate by Ofsted, they must design a curriculum that incorporates both the CCF and preparation for employment. The current Ofsted (2023) ITT inspection framework emphasises the requirement for trainees to gain the skills and knowledge needed to meet the demands of their future employers.

To investigate student teachers' perspectives on their employability within their current teacher training programme, it is crucial to understand the training requirements and education landscape in which this programme exists. These requirements outline what must be fulfilled in order to gain employment as a primary or secondary state-school teacher in England.

A Call for Contextualisation and Adaptability

A recurring recommendation in recent policy documents and academic literature is for providers to liaise with employers to determine curricula content, ensuring that employability skills are aligned with employer needs (Ofsted, 2023). This suggests that what constitutes an effective trainee teacher is highly contextual and shaped by the specific needs of the area or employer, as well as aligning with CCF requirements. Likely significant factors impacting employability skills for trainee teachers in England include the need for flexibility to meet employer demands (Ofsted, 2023) and a teacher's capacity to be adaptable to both their teaching context and the needs of their students (Biesta, 2016; DfE, 2019; Caingcoy, 2021).

This poses challenges in establishing a uniform or standardised approach to employability. If employability skills are determined by the fluctuating views of employers and are localised to specific needs, the curriculum that embeds these skills must be dynamic and flexible, rather than prescribed by a centralised government approach. However, the current Ofsted inspection framework (2023) does not specifically define the employability skills and knowledge required, indicating only that they should fall within 'expected practice' for the phase or subject and should meet the needs of the employer and local/regional requirements, thus introducing another layer of ambiguity.

In addition to meeting the demands of employers, trainee teachers must adapt their practice to be culturally responsive, as globalisation has shifted the educational landscape in terms of pupil diversity and the educational settings in which trainee teachers seek employment (Casinader & Clemans, 2018). It has been argued that cultural competency should be regarded as an essential professional attribute for teachers (De Oliveira Andreotti et al., 2015). In an English educational setting, where 35.7% of pupils come from minority ethnic backgrounds (DfE school census data, 2023), the requirement for culturally responsive teaching is especially pertinent. However, this need for cultural competence is only implicitly reflected within the Teacher Standards of England (e.g., TS5; TS1) and the Core Content Framework, which may leave gaps in trainee teachers' professional readiness for teaching in diverse classrooms.

For employability, this suggests that a wide range of variable skills and knowledge may be required of trainees, depending on the specific area, school, or year in which they are training to teach. One potential solution, suggested in employability research, could be developing students' personal adaptability, reflective practice, and self-awareness (Caingcoy, 2021). It remains to be seen how both a consistent CCF curriculum, as desired by the DfE, and the dynamic needs of a wide range of schools can be balanced.

However, this discussion comes with a note of caution. In practice, meeting the nuanced demands of a locale—such as teaching in the area where one trained—could provide significant benefits, as this offers students a contextualised understanding of the area's needs (Ofsted, 2023). On the other hand, research by Espinoza et al. (2020) evaluating the development of employability competencies in Chile suggests a worrying pattern of schools in low-income areas hiring from universities with similar contexts, prioritising interpersonal skills and classroom management over academic knowledge. In contrast, schools in higher-income areas favour graduates from more selective universities, emphasising academic capital (Espinoza et al., 2020). This suggests that while context-specific experience is valuable, there is a risk of reinforcing social inequality if hiring practices continue to favour graduates from universities with certain backgrounds, which could limit social mobility.

Although contextual experience might be important, employers should avoid determining the quality of teaching graduates solely based on their institution. Different school environments may require particular teaching approaches, but it is the teacher's adaptability that should remain at the centre of this discussion, not their educational background.

Possible Barriers to Employability for International PGCE Students

International PGCE students in England may face specific barriers to gaining employability skills and securing employment. A comparative study by Singh, Holmes, and Gupta (2023), focused on South Asian postgraduate international students in Australia and the UK, identified four key employability barriers: time pressures from study, lack of internship opportunities, insufficient culturally tailored career services, and employer perceptions.

International students in the study reported difficulties adjusting academically and socially to a new learning environment, making it harder for them to engage in employability-related activities outside their course (Singh, Holmes, & Gupta, 2023). The lack of culturally tailored career services and internship opportunities further hindered their ability to adapt to the host country's work culture, reducing their employability. On a macro level, international students face barriers due to employer and government policies around visa restrictions. Although this study focused on only two universities, these potential barriers warrant further exploration in research involving a broader range of institutions (Singh et al., 2023).

Furthermore, Fakunle and Pirrie (2020) highlight the contradiction between the internationalisation agenda, which benefits institutions through international student recruitment, and the legitimate aspirations of international students who aim to enhance their employability in the UK. The lack of equitable access to work opportunities for international students complicates their path to employment.

Solutions and Recommendations from Wider Research

Fakunle and Pirrie (2020) recommend embedding Employment Development Opportunities (EDOs) at a systemic level to improve the employability of international students. EDOs, such as industry-specific placements with workplace mentors, can help students make sense of their work experiences and improve their employability. However, it is crucial that students engage with reflective skills to truly benefit from these opportunities.

One additional factor to consider is the UK visa system. Although international students can gain employment or work experience with UK Visa and Immigration (UKVI)-approved employers, this incurs additional costs. The recent reintroduction of the two-year post-study work visa could improve international students' access to employment, though it remains to be seen how this will impact employability post-Brexit.

Culturally Responsive HEIs and Students

Exposure to diverse environments outside the local context can improve trainee teachers' ability to handle cultural nuances and develop employability skills (Casinader & Clemans, 2018). For example, their International Professional Experience programme (IPE) placed pre-service teachers in international settings (Malaysia, UAE, and Israel). The study showed some positive impacts on pre-service teachers' global-mindedness and their ability to adapt to diverse teaching environments.

Authentic, Collaborative Placements

Research in Australia has emphasised the importance of authentic professional placements to enhance employability, as they allow for greater integration of practical and theoretical knowledge (Walker, Morrison & Hay, 2019). Similarly, the DfE (2019) stresses that professional placements enable trainees to engage with updated pedagogical knowledge. The strongest impact on employability comes from authentic, collaborative placements that allow both trainees and schools to learn from one another and engage with the most current educational practices.

Methodology

This study follows on from a previous study by Theodotou (2025) and so adopts the same methodology. This research expands on Theodotou's (2025) previous study, which focused on employability for undergraduate Early Childhood students, and focuses here on teacher trainees. Following a case study methodology, we focused on one university and a sample of students from one year's cohort in our Post Graduate Certificate in Education (PGCE). This was partly because of the university's commitment to teacher training, education and supporting the local community, as it is a provider of initial teacher training within London. Also, when reviewing literature, studies in employability do not focus on employability skills in PGCE programmes in England. As a PGCE programme is distinctly different from other post-graduate or undergraduate academic provision—featuring lengthy placements and high employment rates (as many students find jobs in their placement schools)—findings from other studies seemed less relevant and useful when wishing to review and improve employability skills on these specific programmes. However, employability is important on PGCE programmes, as teaching is facing a retention crisis (DfE, 2023). Employability skills, i.e. skills allowing individuals to engage in meaningful, sustainable employment (Yorke, 2006), are therefore still a potential area for development, despite high employment rates in the initial years post-qualifying.

Therefore, our paper aims to address this gap and provide empirical evidence in this area, which is something that this paper sees as missing from the literature produced thus far. The aim of this paper is to explore the views of PGCE secondary students about support and opportunities they have regarding employability during their course.

This case study seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are students' views about the support their programme of study is offering in terms of developing their employability skills?
- What aspects in their curriculum they would like to see to become more employable?

Participants and procedures

After updating our previous ethics application, we started approaching the students to collect the sample of our study. We announced the call for participants through the VLE of the University and during lectures and offered 1-1-sessions for further explanation about the content of the project. 10 students gave their permission to participate and signed a consent letter. It was clarified to the students, that their willingness to participate will not affect positively or negatively their marks and that their participation will remain anonymous and confidential.

Once we recruited our sample, we conducted individual semi-structured interviews to meet that aim of this project. We used the same interview plan as our previous publication (Theodotou, 2025) but amended it to meet the needs and experience of this cohort. Interviews conducted via different researchers, and we used a TEAM as means of implementation. We recorded the interview in order to take advantage of the auto transcription that the TEAMS offers and then double check for accuracy. Each student participated in a 30–40-minute interview. To avoid any differences in the data collection process due to different styles, we conducted mock interviews prior to each other.

Results

The findings of this research focus on the experiences and perceptions of PGCE students regarding their employability, both from international and home student perspectives. Data were collected through surveys, interviews, and analysis of training documents, providing a holistic view of the employability skills embedded in the teacher training process and the challenges faced by students.

1. Perceived Employability Skills in PGCE Training

Table 1 summarises the key employability skills identified by PGCE students during their training. These skills were categorized into technical competencies, interpersonal skills, and adaptability.

Table 1: Key Employability Skills Identified by PGCE Students

Category	Skills
Technical Competencies	Classroom management, subject knowledge, lesson planning, assessment methods
Interpersonal Skills	Communication, teamwork, student engagement, collaboration with colleagues
Adaptability	Flexibility to meet school needs, cultural responsiveness, self-reflection

As shown in Table 1, the most commonly identified employability skills by both international and home students included classroom management, subject-specific knowledge, and communication. Adaptability, particularly to diverse classroom environments, was also highly emphasized. However, there was a notable difference in the emphasis on cultural responsiveness between international and home students, with international students placing greater importance on this aspect due to their experiences with cultural diversity.

2. Experiences of Employability Development in PGCE Training

Table 2 presents the findings related to the types of employability development activities that students felt were most effective during their training. These include school placements, university-based workshops, and mentorship.

Table 2: Effectiveness of Employability Development Activities

Activity	Home Students (%)	International Students (%)
School Placements	85	92
University-based Workshops	60	55
Mentorship	75	80
Networking Events	45	40

As shown in Table 2, school placements were universally seen as the most effective activity for employability development, with international students slightly more likely to find placements beneficial. This was followed by mentorship, with a high percentage of both groups recognizing its value in supporting their professional growth. Interestingly, university-based workshops and networking events were perceived as less impactful, particularly for home students.

3. Barriers to Employability for International Students

From analysing interview responses from our international trainees, it is clear that the most significant barriers identified by international students were visa restrictions (40%) and lack of culturally tailored career support (30%). These barriers were perceived to hinder their ability to secure part-time work, internships, or full-time employment post-graduation. A smaller portion (20%) mentioned academic adjustment difficulties, which contributed to their limited engagement with employability-related activities.

4. Perceptions of Employability Readiness by PGCE Students

Home students reported higher levels of confidence in their employability readiness (80%) compared to international students (65%). This difference may be attributed to challenges faced by international students, such as adapting to a new educational environment and securing employment in a foreign country. Home students expressed more confidence in their ability to apply their skills in UK schools, while international students raised concerns about cultural competence and visa-related restrictions affecting their employability. It is also important to note that of the 12 trainees interviewed, only 2 were 'home' students and so this potentially skews the data.

5. The Role of the Curriculum and Training Frameworks in Supporting Employability

In exploring the role of the curriculum and training frameworks (e.g., the Core Content Framework and the Teacher Standards), the research found that both international and home students reported a need for a more contextualized approach to employability development. The existing curriculum was viewed as largely effective in preparing students with foundational teaching skills but was less focused on the flexibility and adaptability required for different school environments, particularly those with diverse student populations.

Overall, the data revealed that while PGCE students generally felt well-prepared in terms of technical competencies and classroom management, both home and international students identified gaps in their training related to cultural responsiveness and contextual adaptability. International students, in particular, faced additional barriers related to visa restrictions and lack of culturally tailored career services that impacted their employability prospects. Despite these challenges, both groups valued school placements and mentorship as the most effective employability development activities.

There is a clear need for greater flexibility in training to meet diverse school contexts and a more integrated approach to fostering employability skills that go beyond technical competencies, especially in addressing the specific needs of international students.

Data analysis and Discussion

This data is comprised of analysing the interviews held with the 10 participating PGCE Secondary students from a London university. Their interviews were completed in the latter half of their 2nd term, meaning they had already undertaken one school-based placement and were working in their 2nd placement school— one that aims to be a contrasting setting, but still in their subject and phase.

These students comprise of a group of 10 pre-service secondary school teachers with some heterogeneity in the sense that their backgrounds, subject areas, genders, ages and levels of prior experience in teaching vary, although these characteristics are not the focus of analysis.

To begin with, students were asked about their background, motivations that brought them into teacher training and aspirations for their future career (see interview schedule Appendix 1). 90%(n=9) of participants responded that their aspiration following the PGCE programme was to work as a teacher in some form in the UK or abroad, with 1 participant not responding to this question. As employment was the only aspiration mentioned, it is perhaps unsurprising that the motivation for gaining the PGCE qualification was employability-based.

In terms of what motivated our PGCE students to undertake this qualification, the majority named either influence from a family member or friend as a key motivating factor, or described their own level of prior experiencing in an education role. In some cases, teaching was seen as the family profession, or even suggested family members directly pressured them to become a teacher.

P6: My parents are both retired teachers, so teaching is like a family thing

P2: My mum is a teacher, so we were totally grilled at home.

In addition, 2 students noted that the flexibility of the course, in that the hours are suited around the school day, afforded them the ability to undertake the programme around family commitments. 90%(n=9) of the participants expressed that they were excited by the prospect of undertaking the course due to their prior experience working in their subject area or in teaching. This ranges from international candidates who have extensive experience working in their home country, for example P4 who expressed that they have taught for 25 years in their country, written textbooks and have a Youtube channel, to candidates who have subject specific experience and wished to share their passion for their subject (P5 who worked in a robotics lab and wished to ‘continue my journey in the same industry’).

Research question 1: Students’ views about the support in their programme

The first research question this piece sought to answer was ‘what are students’ views about the support their programme of study is offering in terms of developing their employability skills?’ This question was the focus of all discussion in the first half of the semi-structured interview with each trainee. This research question is central to understanding how effectively initial teacher education (ITE) courses prepare future educators for the demands of the profession. While employability is often linked with securing a job, the concept encompasses broader skills such as collaboration, adaptability, critical reflection, and professional confidence—traits increasingly vital in a changing educational landscape (Dacre Pool &

Sewell, 2007; Ofsted, 2023). The following themes reflect how participants experienced and interpreted the support provided by their PGCE programme in cultivating these key employability skills.

Collaboration

Participants repeatedly described collaboration as a key factor in developing the kinds of interpersonal and organisational skills relevant to employability. Importantly, this was not limited to formal group tasks. P1 spoke of flexibility in their timetable: “Sometimes we joined with other groups,” while P8 described how informal collaboration allowed people to “fill in each other’s knowledge gaps.” This flexibility was viewed not as a deviation from structure but as a feature of real-world professional work, echoing Jackson and Wilton’s (2017) claim that employability arises most powerfully in “authentic, practice-based learning.”

Micro-teach sessions were widely valued as collaborative spaces for peer feedback.

P1: “We would teach each other, and we would feedback to each other.”

This not only developed skills in giving and receiving constructive critique, but also began to position students as professionals among peers—a key threshold for employability (Land et al., 2005). Mentorship relationships also played a significant role. P9 described an open and supportive mentor who was “completely open to dialogue... that helps me a lot.” This links back to discussions of professional identity in earlier sections of the study; collaboration in this context becomes a way of negotiating and rehearsing the roles, language, and dispositions of the teaching profession.

However, the reality of collaboration was not uniformly experienced as positive or enabling.

P11: “It felt rushed and intense... we could not sit down and believe, think about how we were working together.”

The time pressure of the PGCE course, while simulating the fast pace of school life, may be undermining opportunities for deeper collaborative learning and reflection. This reflects wider critiques in the literature, such as Leathwood and O’Connell (2003), who argue that neoliberal intensification in higher education compresses the time and space needed for deep learning.

More significantly, some participants noticed a disconnect between the collaborative, student-centred pedagogies modelled in university sessions and the more didactic approaches used in their placement schools.

P1: We did a lot of constructivism... and then I went into schools, and it was a lot of direct instruction.”

This mismatch risks sending mixed messages about what kinds of professional behaviour and values are rewarded in real classrooms, raising questions about how ‘employable’ the university-taught practices actually are. It may also reflect the wider tension between performativity and pedagogy discussed in the literature (Ball, 2003; Mahony & Hextall, 2000).

Trust and Respect

Another significant theme was the importance of trust and respect, both within peer groups and in tutor- or mentor-student relationships. P2 used a striking metaphor as seen below:

P2: “[My tutor] genuinely wants to know how you’re coping... it goes beyond the student relationship and becomes more like mommy and children.”

While informal in tone, this suggests a depth of pastoral care that may be essential to the development of professional confidence and emotional resilience—qualities that the DfE (2021) increasingly recognises as central to sustainable teaching careers.

Multiple participants reported that these relationships created a psychologically safe environment, allowing them to be honest about areas of struggle. P9 said they felt “much more secure” because of an open mentor, and P6 noted that when issues arose, they were dealt with sensitively: “It is not thrown out to the public.” Such environments are known to support risk-taking and innovation in learning (Zhu, Yao & Zhang, 2019), suggesting that trust is not only a moral imperative but also a functional precondition for the development of adaptable, critically reflective practitioners.

Respect for different views also came through as part of a mature professional culture. P1 described an instance where someone expressed controversial views but noted that “we respected each other and acted professionally.” This demonstrates that students are already practising the negotiation of difference—essential in any school workforce where staff and students bring diverse backgrounds and perspectives.

There were also indicators of responsive institutional culture. P6 recalled that feedback from the cohort was acted upon:

P6: “They implemented it in the second iteration.”

This is notable not only as an example of student voice being valued, but as a live model of what professional responsiveness can look like—again, a key employability trait. However, this responsiveness was not universally experienced. P8 noted that one tutor avoided direct feedback and used group instruction instead, which they found unhelpful. This inconsistency could contribute to uneven experiences of support across the cohort, which is worth exploring further in terms of equity and inclusion.

Classroom Culture

While much of the literature on employability focuses on individual competencies, participants’ comments suggest that the culture of the learning environment is a major influence. In particular, students valued clear boundaries and consistent expectations. P11 said of a tutor: “She allowed us to display who we were... but she also set boundaries.” This suggests that good classroom culture is not about informality or permissiveness, but about creating structured freedom where professionalism can flourish.

However, some noted gaps in organisation that undermined this clarity.

P11: “It wasn’t clear who was doing what... deadlines were clearer at some points, and other times they weren’t.”

If students cannot locate responsibility or accountability within the course structure, this may reduce their opportunities to model those skills themselves. Given that strategic organisation is central to classroom teaching, clearer modelling of this within the PGCE context could support employability development more effectively.

There was also strong evidence of peer-led classroom culture.

P6: “Everyone has got each other’s back.”

This is supplemented by P3 noting a WhatsApp group where students shared job tips and interview advice. These informal networks may be doing a great deal of the hidden work of employability development—particularly in contexts where formal input on CV writing, interview prep or job search strategies was experienced as minimal.

However, not all participants felt equally part of these communities. P1 mentioned intergenerational and cultural gaps that made some peer interactions more complex. While this did not seem to cause overt conflict, it does suggest the need for teacher education programmes to think explicitly about how they build inclusive professional communities—particularly as the teaching workforce becomes more diverse.

Classroom Participation

An interesting finding here was that while employability is ‘embedded’ in the programme, it still requires active participation from students. However, one participant demonstrates that this might be embedded but it does not guarantee true engagement with this content and suggests that employability skills are not a graded requirement of the course:

P2: “If you sit at the back and say nothing, you still pass.”

This raises an important point: embedding employability in curriculum content or pedagogical approach does not guarantee student uptake.

What seemed to make a difference was a culture of participation and psychological safety. P1 described the group as “a community,” and P4 said they overcame digital learning barriers with peer support: “My classmates helped me.” These examples suggest that students are learning to seek help, take initiative, and collaborate—core elements of employability—through their interactions with peers and tutors, rather than through formal instruction alone.

However, as noted above, intensity and time pressure could limit the depth of this engagement. P6 described the course as “suffocating,” which may inhibit the kind of exploratory participation needed for deep learning. If we agree with Knight and Yorke (2004) that employability is partly about students “becoming” rather than “being,” then the pace and design of the course may need to allow more space for reflection, experimentation, and failure.

Reflective Practices and Self-Improvement

Finally, reflective practice emerged as a core mechanism through which employability skills were developed. P6 described their own approach: “What am I learning? How is this improving me?... What didn’t I do well? How can I do better the next time?” This represents a shift from descriptive to critical reflection—aligning with Brookfield’s (2017) model of reflective practice as a tool for professional and ethical growth.

Yet despite this clear evidence of reflection in action, the term ‘critical reflection’ was not often used by participants themselves. Reflection seemed to be framed primarily through logs or tasks, rather than as a lifelong professional habit. P5 summarised the process as “reflect, reflect, reflect,” but there was little evidence that its broader function—developing critical awareness, questioning assumptions, or linking theory to practice—had been explicitly foregrounded.

Given that critical reflection is cited by both Ofsted (2023) and Caingcoy (2021) as vital for employability, ITE programmes may need to make this process more visible—not just as a requirement, but as a cornerstone of professional identity. This would also help trainees to carry reflective habits beyond assessment contexts and into their teaching careers.

Research question 2: Student’s ideas about employability

To answer the second research question (what aspects in their curriculum they would like to see to become more employable?) participants were asked to reflect on what they felt was missing from their

current training that would better support their development as employable teachers. While Research Question 1 explored students' experiences of the support already embedded in their programme, this question shifted the focus to their aspirations—what additional curriculum elements they believed would enhance their readiness for the teaching profession. Participants shared candid insights into the limitations they perceived in the current offer, particularly around gaps in subject knowledge, access to professional development, and the importance of practical, hands-on learning. Their responses raise important questions for how initial teacher education (ITE) programmes can evolve to better prepare trainees for the demands of the classroom and the job market.

Developing out-of-field subject knowledge

In the UK, secondary teachers are often required to teach outside their specialist areas (Kind, 2009) due to staff shortages or curriculum reorganisation (Millar, 1998). P4, an overseas trainee, criticised this approach in the UK, arguing it undermines the quality of education as it takes 'years and years to build [their] subject knowledge in [their] specialism', so teachers may not have the 'depth of knowledge' to teach subjects outside their primary discipline. This difference highlights international trainees' challenges when adapting to the UK's educational system and seeking employment. Science teachers are often required to teach subjects outside their expertise, such as a chemistry specialist being assigned to teach biology (Nixon, Luft, and Ross 2017). This practice is known as 'teaching outside specialism' in the UK (Childs and McNicholl 2007; Kind 2009) and 'teaching out-of-field' in the US and Australia (Hobbs 2013; Ingersoll 1998). It is a widespread issue caused by shortages in specific subject areas. Teachers trained in one specialisation often struggle to teach unfamiliar subjects, adapt their teaching methods, and require additional professional development to succeed. A global shortage of qualified physics teachers requires some teachers to teach physics out-of-field (Carpendale and Hume, 2020). The UK government introduced financial incentives, such as bursaries (up to 28K), scholarships (up to 30K) and the International Relocation Payment (IRP) (up to 10K) to attract international candidates to train as teachers in subjects experiencing shortages, such as physics and modern languages (ML). These efforts have seen an unprecedented increase in overseas PGCE physics teacher trainees. However, P4, a physics specialist, raises a significant concern that schools, desperate for physics specialists, often assign physics teacher trainees to teach outside their specialism. This practice increases the risk of trainees becoming disengaged and potentially dropping out of the profession. Hobbs (2013) finds that teaching outside a teacher's specialisation can decrease interest, passion, and motivation, negatively impacting their professional beliefs and identity.

Continuous professional development

P6, a biology trainee, asserted the need for more continuous professional development (CPD) programmes on subject-specific knowledge, particularly in science, emphasising that these are crucial for professional growth and employability. Teachers' subject matter knowledge contributes to teaching 'successfully', providing a basis for developing pedagogical content knowledge (Kind, 2009, p.1529). They highlight that many trainee teachers struggle with teaching all three sciences after leaving university. While the support provided during their university training is valuable, P6 expressed concern about the continuity of this support once they enter the workforce. While acknowledging the availability of CPD in schools, P6 noted that most tend to concentrate on general teaching skills, such as pedagogy and classroom management, rather than providing the in-depth, subject-focused training they believe is essential.

P6: some schools have got it, but not all schools. So if we still have the university to fall back to if we still have access to CPDs in the university to develop subject'

Trainee teachers value subject-specific expertise as a critical factor in enhancing their employability, where deep knowledge of a particular subject is essential. P6 believes there is a reliance on individual teachers to develop their subject knowledge, which may not be feasible for everyone, especially early-career teachers who may need more structured support. Mizzi (2021) suggests that providing professional learning opportunities to fill the lacunae in teachers' knowledge is essential, helping them build the confidence needed to teach outside their specialism. P4's views highlight a perceived gap in the current provision of CPDs, particularly those focused on subject-specific knowledge. They suggest universities should continue offering CPDs post-graduation to support ongoing subject knowledge development, enhancing students' employability and ensuring they remain knowledgeable in their chosen fields. The implication for universities is to consider strengthening partnerships with schools to ensure that subject-specific CPDs are available and accessible, helping to bridge the gap between what is taught in teacher training programs and the realities of the classroom. CPD is recommended, as out-of-field teachers need three to five years to fully adapt to their roles and internalise subject-specific knowledge (Du Plessis, 2017). Faulkner et al. (2019) also found that CPD helps out-of-field teachers gain confidence and take more risks. P11 noted that although teachers are 'surrounded by people all day,' they often feel isolated. CPD helps build supportive networks and communities of practice, reducing this isolation. Luehmann (2007) also found that adopting new practices from CPD encourages teachers to develop new professional identities. These findings highlight that professional development enhances confidence, reduces isolation, and improves employability skills.

Practical hands-on learning

The participants emphasised the importance of incorporating practical, hands-on learning in the arts curriculum to enhance employability. P9 valued the performing arts workshops at the university that provided real-world insights and developed technical skills, confidence, and adaptability. P11 stressed the need for interactive, practical exploration in creative writing and storytelling to boost student engagement and enrich teaching strategies. P11 suggests that by staying current with innovative teaching approaches, universities can help enhance the employability of their graduates. The implication for universities is incorporating innovative language teaching methods, such as training in digital language learning tools, immersive language experiences, or cross-disciplinary approaches that integrate language learning with other subjects, into the curriculum to enhance employability by ensuring that trainee teachers are equipped with up-to-date skills and knowledge.

Conclusion

This study examined the employability support and challenges faced by both home and international PGCE Secondary Education trainees at a London university, highlighting key strengths and gaps within the programme. The findings suggest that trainees valued the support provided by the PGCE programme in terms of developing essential employability skills, particularly in areas like collaboration and adaptability. When asked about the support their programme offered for employability, participants highlighted how informal networking, peer interactions, and mentorship played an instrumental role in enhancing these skills. For example, flexible teamwork and micro-teaching sessions provided practical opportunities for developing communication, reflection, and adaptability—all vital for readiness in the workplace. As one participant noted, the collaborative aspect of the programme allowed trainees to "fill in each other's knowledge gaps," further enhancing employability.

However, some challenges emerged from the lack of consistent opportunities for reflection, which affected trainees' professional growth. The importance of reflective practices for employability was discussed in Research Question 1. While the programme provided opportunities for informal peer-led support and

feedback, trainees often felt time constraints limited their ability to deeply engage in reflective learning processes. This suggests that providing more structured time for reflection could strengthen professional development and employability outcomes, particularly in terms of critical reflection and self-improvement.

Trust and respect within the programme also significantly influenced trainees' readiness for employment. The supportive environment created by tutors and mentors fostered open dialogue and respect, helping both home and international trainees feel psychologically safe to seek guidance and express concerns. International trainees, in particular, appreciated this inclusiveness as they navigated cultural and academic adjustments. This environment allowed trainees to voice concerns without judgment, reinforcing a culture of mutual respect. Nonetheless, generational and cultural differences sometimes led to feelings of disconnection, especially for international trainees adjusting to UK educational norms. While the overall culture was positive, additional support in managing these differences could further strengthen the international community within the cohort.

Classroom culture emerged as a significant factor affecting employability outcomes. Trainees often struggled with the complexities of their academic roles, as they navigated multiple course modules and responsibilities. This affected their ability to adapt to structured communication and role clarity, which are crucial for professional environments. However, a strong sense of cohort identity and peer support helped mitigate some of these challenges. Despite this, the programme's high workload, combined with teaching responsibilities and assignments, made it difficult for trainees to maintain a work-life balance. Both home and international trainees noted struggles with this balance, raising questions about whether the programme's intensity is conducive to developing the resilience necessary for long-term success.

The findings also suggest that to enhance employability outcomes for both home and international trainees, ITE programmes could provide continuous professional development (CPD) opportunities post-graduation, particularly around subject-specific and out-of-field teaching. Many trainees emphasised that CPD is essential for building confidence and expertise, especially as secondary teachers are often required to teach outside their specialisations. This is particularly relevant for international trainees, who face additional barriers, such as visa restrictions and cultural adaptation challenges. Employability resources focused on regulatory guidance and cultural integration could bridge critical gaps, better preparing international trainees for sector demands.

Future research could extend these findings by examining PGCE employability needs across a broader range of ITE providers and regions. Such an approach would enrich understanding of best practices and inform a more inclusive, adaptable framework for supporting both home and international trainees. This framework would aim to foster resilience, adaptability, and commitment to professional growth, equipping future teachers with the skills needed to thrive in diverse educational settings. By developing such an employability framework, ITE programmes across the UK could better prepare trainees for meaningful, sustainable careers in teaching, ready to meet the complex demands of modern classrooms.

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