



Extracting employability: Closing the widening participation gap in politics teaching through model summits?

Politics

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DOI: 10.1177/02633957251384444

journals.sagepub.com/home/pol**Gregory Stiles^{ID} and Scarlett Vickers**

University of Sheffield, UK

Abstract

Teaching politics and international relations in higher education (HE) has shifted in recent years towards a focus on soft skills, with employability as a core output. The need to improve graduate outcomes has driven sector-wide responses that focus on additional support for students to gain experience and soft skills that can be translated into statements of employability. Yet, degree programmes are still often based on assumptions of students' pre-existing skill sets, or an expectation that students will learn academic and professional skills as a byproduct of their degree. This article argues that this is problematic as it avoids focusing on the skills gap present in students from widening participation (WP) backgrounds. It establishes that the 'soft skills' increasingly sought by employers, such as complex problem-solving, leadership, public speaking, resilience, and active critical thinking, are core outputs of participation in model summits that focus on fast-paced interactive learning. Embracing model summits as a teaching tool presents opportunities for the enhancement of learning by focusing on skills training through the adoption of model summits *within* and *alongside* core content, providing students with the opportunity to extract key soft skills *during* their degree studies, potentially bridging the wider attainment gap for WP students.

Keywords

employability, model summits, soft skills, widening participation

Received: 12 May 2025; Revised version received: 29 August 2025; Accepted: 13 September 2025

Introduction

This article is based on the experiences of both authors as an undergraduate student participating in a model summit, and of an academic lead observing and learning from student participation in model summits between 2023 and 2025. This article highlights the importance of diversifying the opportunities provided to students to engage in skills

Corresponding author:

Gregory Stiles, School of Sociological Studies, Politics and International Relations, University of Sheffield, Sheffield S10 2TN, UK.

Email: g.r.stiles@sheffield.ac.uk

development throughout their degrees, with a particular focus on the barriers and opportunities faced by WP students.

Engaging with literature on employability and pedagogy of model summits, it argues that by integrating or ‘embedding’ (Lowe, 2023) the teaching and experience of model summits *within* the curriculums of Politics and International Relations (POLIR) degrees offers the potential to go further in supporting and enabling WP students to bridge the gap in developing vital employability skills.

The need for this support, and the development of transferable skills alongside degree programmes, is not a new phenomenon. For the United Kingdom in particular, the sector-wide Dearing Report in the late 1990s highlighted the employer drive for skills development alongside extra resources to support WP students in succeeding through the development of transferable skills (National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE), 1997: 110). Following the subsequent introduction of tuition fees as a financing model for the UK HE sector, emerging from this review, the UK government has increasingly urged the sector to demonstrate the value of degrees through career outcomes (Hora et al., 2018; Wyman et al., 2012). In turn, this has led to continued criticism of a regulation-driven ‘employability’ agenda that has been regarded by many within the sector as running counter to the perceived holistic benefits of a traditional University degree (Washer, 2007).

Latterly, The Higher Education Act (2017) has compelled universities to prioritise employability, shifting metrics from the National Student Survey (NSS) to a combination of the NSS, Higher Education Statistics Agency, and the Destination of Leavers from Higher Education survey. This has led to careers service and WP staff aligning to deliver support activities at pre-entry stage and during academic studies with a specific focus on providing employability guidance (Bridge Group, 2017).

Combined with the Office for Students (OfS) Access and Participation Plan (APP) frameworks, these initiatives have driven a sector-wide shift to supporting WP students with a regulatory focus on student outcomes and equality of opportunity. This is tied to ‘value for money’ through increasing employability opportunities via support and skills development, reigniting debates surrounding ‘low’ versus ‘high’ value indicators (Dunbar-Morris and Lowe, 2023) and raising question marks about the measurement of how effective these APP frameworks are (Moores et al., 2023).

These employability skills, such as social, attitudinal and self-regulatory skills that enhance job performance and career prospects are increasingly sought after by employers alongside hard skills (Hora et al., 2018; Matsouka and Mihail, 2016). For instance, the World Economic Forum (WEF) 2025 Future of Jobs Report found analytical thinking, resilience, leadership and creative thinking among the top ten skills desired. This aligns with other research indicating that employers prioritise work attitude and aptitude (Noah and Abdul, 2020) as well as critical thinking, teamwork, and communication (Biswas and Haufler, 2018; Gruzdev et al., 2018); all integral to achieving the traditional metrics of success in HE qualifications (Banerjee et al., 2023).

Yet, significant evidence suggests a disparity between the skills sought by employers and those effectively developed and communicated by graduates (Matsouka and Mihail, 2016; Moulton, 2023; Okolie et al., 2019; Succi and Canovi, 2019; Zartner et al., 2018). This highlights that the development of ‘soft skills’ within HE should not simply be a response to regulatory targets but be seen as an integral part of a wider ethos of supporting students to succeed in their academic and professional lives.

Mind the gap: Widening participation and employability

The presence of this soft skills gap is particularly significant for WP students who score lower in leadership, communication, teamwork, problem-solving, creativity, career knowledge, professionalism, as well as application and interview skills, which can begin to account for their proportionally poor post-graduate prospects (Craven and Lieber, 2019; OfS, 2022; Thomas and Jones, 2007). The OfS (2023) indicates that only 60.9% of those in the most deprived quintile, as opposed to 82.7% of those from the least deprived quintile, had progressed to full-time managerial or professional employment, or further study. This gap persists even for those who secure suitable graduate-level employment or pursue further study, with 46% of graduates from private schools earning in the top quintile, compared to 22% of those eligible for Free School Meals (FSM) (The Sutton Trust, 2021).

The cause of this skills gap can be partially attributed to the higher levels of social and cultural capital graduates from professional/middle-class backgrounds enjoy, giving them access to employment opportunities which eases their assimilation into workplace behavioural expectations, or what Bourdieu would call the 'habitus' (Friedman and Laurison, 2019). This 'habitus' instils a set of dispositions that organise how children understand and relate to the world, including accent, inflections, gestures and dress styles, etiquette and manners, which are consistently assigned as signals of cultural distinction significant in reproducing class privilege because the inheritance of cultural capital is more veiled than the transmission of social and economic capital (Friedman and Laurison, 2019).

These cultural and social factors affect soft skills development, with disadvantaged communities being less likely to see higher education and the associated soft skills as necessary or attainable (Banerjee et al., 2023; Redmond, 2006).

These disparities are traced back to several underlying factors, including engagement with extracurricular activities essential in developing soft (mainly social) skills which are primarily associated with developing confidence and teamwork experience, because of high costs or difficulties in access for low-income households (Donnelly et al., 2019).

These gaps in participation continue through extracurricular activities in HE with working-class students less likely to join student societies (52% vs 64%), often due to lack of confidence, cost, or paid work commitments; while working-class students also had lower participation in work experience placements (36% vs 46%) and study abroad programmes (9% vs 13%) (Montacute et al., 2021). Issues of low confidence, affordability, and living at home all reduced access to these opportunities to develop skills (Cullinane and Montacute, 2018; De Freitas, 2021).

Falling short: Employability teaching approaches

Approaches to solving this problem involve HE providers including skills and employability teaching as part of a student's academic journey, with mixed results because students can resist overtly explicit content framed as employability; while staff can also resist teaching employability content due to concerns surrounding academic rigour and workload pressures (Moulton, 2023) creating a paradoxical relationship where universities must ensure graduates have good employability prospects but face resistance to its teaching (Calma and Dickinson-Deane, 2020).

The solution, argues Daubney (2022), lies in ‘extracting employability’ by helping students to identify and develop the skills already present in their learning and teaching, rather than relying on additional content that may be resisted (Biswas and Haufler, 2018). By identifying the key parts of the pre-existing curriculum that already provide space for the natural development of these skills, this nullifies the need for additional content that academics fear will add to workload or dilute the academic rigour of their subjects (Moulton, 2023; Wyman et al., 2012).

However, proposals to either enhance engagement between students and academics for discussing future employment options (Chaturvedi and Guerrero, 2022) or to revamp existing programmes to incorporate a more professionalised POLIR curriculum do not directly address the lack of focused teaching directed towards those students from a WP background who would benefit the most from specific skills extraction.

This has led to a challenge within the discipline in successfully embedding the language and understanding required by students to recognise and convey the development of their skills to employers (Biswas and Haufler, 2018; Johnson, 2016; Zartner et al., 2018). For WP students, this inability to both articulate, or gain experience of, key transferable skills and experience-driven learning creates a further barrier to employability and bridging the attainment gap.

Model summits bridging the gap? *The student experience*

Model Summits allow students to simulate complex POLIR scenarios by role-playing as countries, NGOs, and other actors. This enables students to enhance their understanding through practical learning experiences as they apply what they have learnt, from theory to policy making, to decision-making situations where they are active participants (Blair et al., 2018; Enterline and Jepsen, 2009; Gulmez, 2025), also improving students’ own understanding of their skills development (Hammond and Albert, 2020).

In December 2023, I participated in the BISA Model Climate Summit, representing Algeria alongside a fellow student, winning the Most Distinguished Delegates prize. This experience was crucial in developing my soft skills and making me aware of the abilities I had gained during my POLIR degree.

The summit included formal moderated sessions with public speaking and unmoderated sessions for informal discussions, both of which required differing skillsets to successfully navigate. In preparation for the summit, I researched Algeria’s historical and current stance on key political and diplomatic issues, which required critical thinking skills to analyse this material and formulate possible solutions.

Representing a country that I knew little about and that differed from my own experiences allowed me to develop my cognitive flexibility by testing and developing my resilience skills, especially when negotiating with delegates who posed challenges to the negotiation process. The summit encouraged me to be creative with solutions, at one point leveraging my prior research to persuade France to allocate carbon credits to us, as they were the primary purchasers of the fossil fuels we produced. This success, and experience, allowed me to develop leadership and negotiation skills, in turn giving me examples to articulate to future employers.

Working with my partner, taking turns representing our country in the moderated sessions, and co-developing strategies that allowed us to work independently while persuading countries to support our ideas significantly improved my teamwork skills. This active learning experience helped me rapidly improve my complex problem-solving skills,

Table 1. Model summit skills development.

Stage one	Stage two
1. Analytical Thinking	1. Active Learning
2. Critical Thinking	2. Complex Problem Solving
	3. Creativity
	4. Leadership
	5. Resilience
	6. Empathy and Intelligence
	7. Persuasion and Negotiation

while also making me realise how much I enjoyed and gained from active learning teaching, finding it had a longer-lasting effectiveness in developing my skills than traditional teaching methods and supporting the argument that ‘workplace learning’ develops a range of students’ skills which are key to articulating their use and practice to employers who place a heightened value on past experience (Johnson, 2016; Pare and Le Maistre, 2006; Power, 2012).

The summit considerably developed my confidence. As an FSM student with limited access to professional networks and fewer opportunities to develop social and cultural skills expected in the workplace, upon leaving the Summit I felt much more comfortable in formal settings. I have a better understanding of what is expected of me to succeed, and I have immersed myself in extracurricular activities, like networking events, due to the confidence I gained.

While some have criticised model summits usefulness (Raymond, 2010), the literature demonstrates the pedagogical value simulations hold in improving students’ long-term knowledge retention through active learning (Engel et al., 2017; Scapple, 1999; Wunische, 2018; Youde, 2008). Similar studies also establish that interactive pedagogical approaches assist with improving student engagement by captivating student interest through practice-driven activities (Crossley-Frolick, 2010; Enterline and Jepsen, 2009; Frederking, 2006; Rivera and Simons, 2008), reinforcing a deeper understanding of core concepts and theories (Meibauer and Nohr, 2018) as well as an awareness of skills development (Cottichia et al., 2020; Hammond and Albert, 2020).

Such simulations offer two crucial points of experiential learning: first, the preparation required to represent their assigned body; second, during the conference itself. In stage one, students research the complex problem they aim to resolve, such as climate change, and the body they are to represent, including their past policies, positions and alignments. During the second stage, students develop skills, such as persuasion and negotiation to solve problems, public speaking and empathetic communication (see Table 1). The WEF 2025 Future of Jobs Report, an in-depth global survey of what employers believe they will need, directly links with the soft skills developed in model summits *through* active research and complex decision-making. These skills, laid out in Table 1, are vital in the modern workplace, with Tripathy (2020) and Song et al. (2024) arguing that the demand for rapid and accurate analytical decision-making has increased due to globalisation.

Similarly, complex problem-solving and creativity are key to employers (Ederer et al., 2015), which are integral elements to model summits (see Lantis, 1996; McIntosh, 2001) as students are pushed to solve intractable and difficult issues within a limited time frame

with an expectation that they will be creative and innovate in their decision-making (Asal and Blake, 2006).

The leadership, resilience, and persuasion and negotiation skills exhibited by students participating in model summits are also seen as key skills by employers (Blair et al., 2018; Dunn, 2019; Shellman and Turan, 2006; Taylor, 2013). Participants in model summits also often experience an enhancement in their emotional intelligence, which is theorised to contribute to greater chances of promotion and improved work relationships (Desti and Shanthi, 2015); in part through developing an understanding of the nuances of face-to-face negotiation, helping understand how body language and tone impact the negotiation process, presenting WP students with the opportunity to learn and engage with the 'habitus' that other students take for granted.

Conclusion

By including the opportunity for students to participate in such active learning activities *within* their degree, integrating experiential learning into taught content, this may provide an opportunity to bridge some of the WP skills gap identified in this article. However, any inclusion of active learning teaching of this nature will mean that accessibility for *all* students will be circumscribed by class sizes, teaching capacity, and issues with student engagement and attendance (see Strong, 2022 and Hanretty, 2023). These limitations on access are present in the activities described above, with competitive application processes used to select students for the small number of model summit slots available in each initiative, facilitated by the academic author. Similarly, any assessment focused on experiential learning will also provide structural barriers to participation from students lacking in pre-existing skillsets or from concerns over group work negatively impacting on degree marks (Davies, 2009).

Yet, our experience of participating in and observing student learning through model summits has reinforced to us the vital role that these activities can play in 'extracting' employability *by* students rather than *for* students. These simulations make the skills learnt in a POLIR degree more tangible and understandable to graduates, educators, and employers while improving deep learning and engagement with difficult concepts and theories, in turn reinforcing to students the importance of what they have been studying and how it translates into real-world practice.

This article has identified a gap in support for WP students studying POLIR degrees. Providing the opportunity for WP students to engage with practice-oriented elements as part of their pre-existing teaching has the potential to provide an additional element of employability support. Creating a framework through which students can better articulate their skills achievements is important, but without the attendant skills development opportunities embedded *within* the curriculum then the structural disadvantage suffered by WP students will continue to be an educational chasm.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank the reviewers for their constructive and helpful comments as well as the editors of the *Politics* symposium for their support and guidance. The authors would also like to thank the Sheffield Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE) programme for the funding that supported the initial stages of the development of this article.

Funding

The authors disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The authors received seed funding for the original literature review stage of this research from the Sheffield Undergraduate Research Experience (SURE) programme in the Summer of 2024.

ORCID iD

Gregory Stiles  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1814-3061>

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Author biographies

Gregory Stiles is a University Teacher and the Programme Lead for BA POLIR in the School of Sociological Studies, Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield. He was the editor of the early-career-focused journal *Global Policy: Next Generation* from 2018 to 2025 and is a member of the editorial board of the journal *Global Policy*. His current teaching-led research focuses on integrating academic skills within politics and international relations curricula through the use of political scandals and public policy failure.

Scarlett Vickers is a final-year undergraduate in Politics and International Relations at the University of Sheffield, having recently completed a year abroad at the University of Copenhagen. She is also an Associate Student Essays Editor at E-International Relations. Her developing research interests focus on feminist and queer approaches to international security, which she has explored as a policy analyst for *Global Policy* at the 2024 G20 Summit, where she examined the AI policies of G20 countries through a feminist lens. These interests are also informed by her feminist activism. She has additionally contributed to work on inclusive International Relations pedagogy.