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The Role of Employability Development Opportunities in Closing the Social Gap in the Finance Sector: A Case Study of a Post-1992 UK Business School

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ABSTRACT

Amid growing concerns about social mobility in Britain's higher education system, our study delves into universities' role in addressing the social gap within the financial and professional services sectors. The social reproduction theory underscores how upper-class students often benefit from greater exposure to dominant cultural and educational practices, providing them with a competitive advantage in navigating the higher education landscape. To combat these challenges, Higher Education Institutions (HEI) have invested heavily in Employability Development Opportunities (EDOs). Drawing on primary data from finance and accounting students and employability officers at one of these HEIs, our research aims to investigate which EDOs are perceived as most relevant for students to succeed in the financial and professional services industry. First, we confirm that both work experience and real-life activities are most valuable and unavoidable, prompting business schools to include compulsory exposure to the finance industry as part of the curriculum. Second, we find that career development activities are useful as a starting point but not enough for students to secure an internship. Finally, while previous literature shows that extra-curricular activities do not significantly impact student employability, we argue that some of these activities, for example, the Finance Society, are as valuable as real-world exposure. Indeed, the Finance Society was found to be the most helpful source of information, advice and networking for finance students.

1 | Introduction

Social mobility in higher education and into Britain's elite occupations¹ is key on the government agenda, as there is still a clear social gap at university entry level, and consequently on the graduate job market (Croll and Attwood 2013). A social gap can be defined as the disparity in opportunities for people from different socioeconomic backgrounds and can exist at various stages of life, from primary education to adult life (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Demack, Drew, and Grimsley 2000). In this paper, we are interested in the disparity in employment

opportunities for graduate students, that is, we define social gap as the difference in socioeconomic accessibility to prestigious jobs in Finance. The representation of students from lower socioeconomic status (SES) in higher education in England is still very low, as 18-year-old entry rates vary from 15% for the most disadvantaged to 60% for the most advantaged (UCAS 2023).² This can be explained by the theory of social reproduction (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977). Students from higher SES have greater exposure to the dominant culture and educational practices of universities, giving them an advantage in entering, navigating and surviving the higher education (HE) system (Chetty, Deming,

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and Friedman 2023; HESA 2023). Unfortunately, cultural capital continues to be a significant factor in academic achievement in higher education, as it is associated with increased university enrolment and completion rates (Dumais and Ward 2010; Gaddis 2013). For instance, Witteveen and Attewell (2017) examine the function of family background in higher education, determining that students with more affluent families are more likely to excel academically and subsequently outearn their lower SES peers. Recently, the Social Mobility Commission has been focusing on analysing social barriers into elite professional services firms, which are known for offering the most generous salaries in the UK graduate market (HFR 2023). Indeed, the most prestigious professional services firms (in accounting, finance and law) continue to be heavily dominated at entry level by graduates from high SES (Ashley et al. 2015; Rivera 2015; Kelly 2014). Social reproduction is not the only reason for this, as students from lower SES may develop lower aspirations for the most prestigious jobs (Wigfield and Eccles 2000). Also, employers are partly to blame as hiring practices at prestigious firms reveal how cultural capital and SES significantly influence recruitment (Rivera 2015). On one side, these firms often prioritise candidates who display high cultural capital, indicated by their involvement in elite sports and other activities typically accessible only to those from affluent backgrounds. On the other side, they frequently rely on referrals and connections to shortlist candidates, which tend to favour graduates from top institutions and wealthy backgrounds (Rivera 2015). Similar evidence has been found in the United Kingdom, where elite professional service firms—mostly London-based—tend to privilege candidates with higher SES (Ashley and Empson 2017).

Hence, the government needs to work with both employers and universities if they want to achieve their social mobility goal. In 2020, the UK government published a ‘diversity employers’ toolkit’ specifically targeted at financial and professional services firms with a clear aim of ensuring that ‘staff in the financial and professional services sector aren’t left behind due to their socioeconomic background’.³ Universities are developing an array of employability development opportunities (EDOs) to help their graduates be ‘work ready’ by developing their skills, knowledge and attributes that make them attractive to potential employers (Pitan 2016; Pitan and Muller 2020). These EDOs include career development activities, extra-curricular activities and most importantly work experience. EDOs are crucial in facilitating students’ successful transition from higher education to the world of work, especially in the context of an increasingly competitive and demanding labour market (Sultana and Watts 2006). Relevant work experience, through industrial placements or internships, is now more important than academic achievement in securing a graduate job (CBI 2021). When UK employers are asked about the key factors they consider when recruiting university graduates, 58% consider relevant work experience whereas 45% value a degree subject relevant to the job and only 23% regard academic results as being a key factor (CBI 2021). This was confirmed in a recent field experiment showing that employers (in IT and accounting) prioritise subject-specific skills in the recruitment process (Mihut 2022). Unfortunately, the social gap persists when it comes to internships and work placements. Even though the government has long recognised that ‘fair access to internships is vital for social mobility’ (Milburn 2009),⁴ upper-middle-class students still have

a social and cultural advantage in their awareness of, access to and participation in internships (McCafferty 2022; Wright and Mulvey 2021). The story is similar for other EDOs like career development and extra-curricular activities, as students who have better resources in the first place are more able to benefit from these opportunities (Bathmaker 2021; Wong and Hoskins 2022; Wright and Mulvey 2021).

In this context, the current study aims to explore the role of UK universities in closing the social gap in the financial and professional services sector. The UK Higher Education system is split into two categories of universities, namely pre- and post-1992 universities (Armstrong 2008). Pre-1992 institutions are old universities known for the quality of their research, the oldest and most prestigious ones being Oxford and Cambridge. Within these pre-1992 universities, there is a group of 20 universities—called Russell Group—with the best research reputation and who receive a large proportion of the government’s research funding. In contrast, post-1992 universities are former polytechnics or colleges that were given university status through the Further and Higher Education Act 1992, or new institutions created since 1992 (Armstrong 2008). These post-1992 institutions generally focus more on teaching than research and tend to be regarded as of lower status (Chung 2018). By collecting primary data from both students and employability officers at a post-1992 business school in London, we provide new insights on whether and how such business schools can raise awareness and access to high-quality finance and accounting job opportunities for disadvantaged students. The rest of the paper is structured as follows. The literature review builds on the theory of social capital and the expectancy-value theory of motivation to develop our research questions in the context of financial and professional services job opportunities. In the methodology and data section, we carefully explain our research methods, sample selection, data collection and analysis process. The results section discusses our findings based on key themes identified through our critical analysis. In the conclusion, we suggest insightful and practical recommendations for business schools in helping social mobility into elite professional service firms.

2 | Literature Review

It has long been noted that there is limited social mobility in elite professions such as finance or law. The issue has come under attention by policymakers in the United Kingdom over the last two decades in particular due to a perceived decline in social mobility, resulting in initiatives such as ‘Breaking Barriers’ in 2011 (Cabinet Office 2011), while the question of how social mobility varies among elite financial institutions remains (Friedman, Laurison, and Miles 2015). The finance sector offers a strong case study for examining social mobility, since typically the sector is made up of those who attended the most exclusive universities. These elite universities funnel students into high-paying prestigious internships and jobs, effectively limiting entry to those who lack the socioeconomic habitus to attend these institutions (Binder, Davis, and Bloom 2016). Race, gender and class intersect to further establish these barriers. The disadvantage to those that face race and gender biases, along with being from a lower socioeconomic background, lead to further biases, making it even

more difficult. For example, black women tend to face significant biases when it comes to applying for elite financial professions, due to both their gender and skin colour. Even though diversity has been shown to lead to higher corporate profits, companies within the financial sector remain predominantly homogeneous (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007).

The importance of primary and secondary education in shaping social inequality and long-term career outcomes has been well documented (Dearden, Ferri, and Meghir 2002; Green, Henseke, and Vignoles 2017). Bourdieu's theory of social capital states that an individual's social position is determined by their accumulation of different forms of capital, such as economic, social and cultural capital that students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to possess, enabling them to gain advantages in their education and career path (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977; Bourdieu 1986). Economic capital refers to financial resources students have throughout their childhood and that will benefit their education. For instance, academics point to the UK's private schooling as a factor in heightening the levels of inequality between those from different socioeconomic backgrounds (Green, Henseke, and Vignoles 2017). This advantage persists throughout higher education, where wealthier students often have greater economic capital allowing them to access greater resources and opportunities (Bourdieu 1986; Callender and Jackson 2008; Devlin 2013; Devlin and McKay 2018; Donaldson et al. 2000; Pfeffer and Hällsten 2012). Another factor that leads to inequality in educational opportunities and career outcomes is social capital, which represents the number of social networks that higher SES individuals possess and can be associated with private school attendance in the United Kingdom (Green, Henseke, and Vignoles 2017). Through these networks, higher SES students can access elite institutions and insight programs such as spring weeks (Macmillan, Tyler, and Vignoles 2015), consequently enabling them to land positions in highly competitive fields such as the banking sector (Rivera 2015).

Finally, cultural capital highlights the importance of cultural assets in determining educational success (Bourdieu 1986). These assets can encompass language proficiency, cultural leisure activities and familiarity with dominant cultural norms, which may be more accessible to students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds (Lareau and Weininger 2003). According to the social reproduction theory (Bourdieu and Passeron 1977), universities have traditionally favoured students from a particular socioeconomic background, hence reinforcing social inequalities, by encouraging a certain 'culture' more familiar to high-SES students (Bowles and Gintis 2002). This is particularly true for more prestigious institutions such as Ivy League universities in the United States, disproportionately admitting students from affluent backgrounds (Chetty, Deming, and Friedman 2023). Similarly, UK education research shows that private school students are significantly more likely to attend Russell Group universities than state-school students (Hemsley-Brown 2015). In both the United States and the United Kingdom, graduates from these top selective institutions hold a disproportionate share of top-income positions, despite those enrolling a small fraction of the population (Chetty, Deming, and Friedman 2023; HESA 2023). Unfortunately, cultural capital continues to be a significant factor in academic achievement in higher education, as it is associated with increased university enrolment and completion

rates (Dumais and Ward 2010; Gaddis 2013), although the evidence is mixed (Chetty, Deming, and Friedman 2023; Hoare and Johnston 2011). For instance, Witteveen and Attewell (2017) examine the function of family background in higher education, determining that students with more affluent families are more likely to excel academically and subsequently outearn their lower SES peers. This finding is in line with previous research that highlights the value of cultural capital in affecting educational outcomes (Bradley and Corwyn 2002; Coleman 1988).

As more and more students from lower SES started to access higher education, their limited representation reinforced their lack of belonging and lack of motivation. Indeed, motivation was found very early to be a moderator in the relationship between social capital—or lack of—and educational outcomes. On one side, the relative deprivation theory suggests that individuals who perceive themselves as relatively deprived of resources, opportunities or social status compared to their peers may experience adverse psychological and motivational effects, which can hinder their educational attainment (Stouffer et al. 1949). This implies that students from lower SES face challenges in higher education due to a sense of relative deprivation, undermining their motivation and academic performance (Sirin 2005; Wong and Chiu 2019). On the other side, the expectancy-value theory of motivation (Wigfield and Eccles 2000) is particularly relevant when examining the impact of socioeconomic status on students' career aspirations, such as pursuing high-income careers in banking and finance. This theory highlights that an individual's motivation for a task depends on their belief of how well they perform in the task, and the value they assign to the outcome. The theory can explain why low-SES students' access to high-quality internships/work placements is influenced by their negative beliefs in the process and outcomes, when entering the recruitment cycle. Studies show low-SES students tend to lack the belief that these experiences will have a positive impact on their career leading to an overall lack of motivation (Gutman and Akerman 2008; Hoskins and Barker 2017; Wigfield and Eccles 2000). Consequently, they may assign lower value in pursuing high-income careers in banking, perceiving these options as less attainable or relevant (Hoskins and Barker 2017; Wright and Mulvey 2021). For example, they might lack exposure to the banking sector or access to networks needed to secure a competitive position (Rivera 2015). Recently, Hu et al. (2022) investigate how early life experiences, as assessed by perceived childhood family SES, shape the way young people allocate resources when seeking employment. The findings reveal that lower SES students are more likely to perceive resource scarcity leading to less investment in career exploration and goal persistence activities, which in turn affects their perceived person-job fit upon graduation; conversely, higher SES students, perceiving fewer resource limitations, tend to invest more in career-oriented activities and are more likely to perceive a better job fit.

This is one of the reasons why work experience through internships and placements is so important, particularly for disadvantaged students. These students often apply more effort than their peers in seeking work and internship opportunities and live more precariously, as they lack social, cultural and economic capital (McCafferty 2022). These opportunities help develop skills and boost employability, potentially mitigating some of the disadvantages these students encounter in higher

education (Blázquez, Herrarte, and Llorente-Heras 2018; Knouse and Fontenot 2008). Also, with increased access to higher education, there is now a consensus that work experience has become the norm and a key asset for graduates to differentiate themselves on the job market. There is clear evidence that work experience has a positive impact on both securing a graduate job and receiving a higher starting salary (Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009; Milburn 2009; Taylor and Hooley 2014; Tzanakou et al. 2021), particularly in the financial services industry (Browne 2010; Wang and Crawford 2019). Regarding the influence of socioeconomic background on gaining work experience, the evidence is mixed. On one side, social class still plays a significant role in shaping access to the best internship opportunities (Smith et al. 2019; Tzanakou et al. 2021), particularly through family resources (Wright and Mulvey 2021). Indeed upper-middle-class students can secure internships through family connections, where positions are usually unadvertised, and more likely to be with elite employers (Rivera 2015). Also, their family resources can support them financially to secure unpaid and/or geographically distant internships (Wright and Mulvey 2021). On the other side, Wang and Crawford (2019) find that prestigious placements in elite professional firms are not filled by socially privileged students but the academically brightest students from a variety of social backgrounds. It is worth noting that the study focuses on work placements alone, that is, facilitated by the university, at one British institution, hence does not reflect work experience outside of university.

Work experience is not the only employability opportunity that students can engage with at university. There are other components of employability, or employability development opportunities (EDOs) put in place by universities and designed to enhance student readiness for the labour market (Pitan 2016; Pitan and Muller 2020). These include structured and supported personal development planning (PDP), career development activities (CV preparation, job-search, communications skills, interview preparation, etc.), real-world activities (e.g., company visits, careers fairs, formal recruitment training, guest lectures) and extra-curricular activities such as volunteering, student union and other societies. Empirically, these EDOs don't all have the same impact on employability. Student ambassador schemes seem to have a positive impact on accessing the job market (Ylonen 2012), whereas other extra-curricular activities were found to have no significant relationship with employability (Pitan 2016). The teaching of employability skills, for example, through a dedicated module or career development workshops/training, has little effectiveness on graduate labour market prospects (Cranmer 2006; Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009). The EDO with the most significant impact includes real-world activities such as employment-based training and experience, as well as employer involvement in course design and delivery (Cranmer 2006; Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009; Pitan 2016). But again, disadvantaged students face more challenges than their peers in engaging with such EDOs (Wong and Hoskins 2022). Indeed, high-SES students who have better resources in the first place are more able to benefit from these EDOs (Macmillan, Tyler, and Vignoles 2015; Paull et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2019; Wright and Mulvey 2021).

In this context, the current study aims to explore the role of universities in closing the social gap in the financial and professional

services sector. In particular, we want to check which EDOs—in addition to work experience—are most relevant for finance students, whether career development activities, real-world activities or extra-curricular activities. We acknowledge that the efforts by universities to engage their students with EDOs must be combined with a tight collaboration with both government and industry (Pitan 2016; Winterton and Turner 2019). Similarly, both students and institutions shall contribute to making the necessary changes to ensure success and achievement for low-SES students (Devlin 2013). With this intention, we are trying to answer the following research questions:

- What is the perception of different SES students regarding the effectiveness of Employability Development Opportunities (EDOs) in promoting awareness of and access to elite Finance firms?
- What is their perception of the most relevant EDOs in helping them secure a graduate job in the finance industry?

3 | Methods

Our study employs a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative and qualitative data collection methods. Quantitative and qualitative methods have both strengths and limitations. The researchers, most being finance specialists, they value the objectivity and reliability of quantitative analysis, but also realise the need for in-depth inquiry in such a complex environment filled with subjectivity. Similar studies on EDOs have used either quantitative methods (Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009; Pitan 2016; Pitan and Muller 2020) or qualitative methods (Cranmer 2006; Ylonen 2012). We believe that quantitative and qualitative approaches complement each other in our particular study, and we were able to integrate both via the phenomenological method, as suggested by Fisher and Stenner (2011) and applied by Ozer (2022) in the context of education research.

The target population for this research consists of current undergraduate students in finance and accounting at a post-1992 (former polytechnic) university, regardless of their socioeconomic background. We used a purposive sampling technique, combined with snowball sampling, to select participants who could provide rich insights into their experiences with internships and employability development opportunities. The selected university is a perfect case study for our research question as it is a post-1992 institution at the heart of London with a clear aim of helping students from a variety of backgrounds realise their full potential. Out of about 400 finance and accounting undergraduate students, the majority come from disadvantaged backgrounds, as measured by parental education.⁵

3.1 | EDOs Offered at Our Chosen Business School

Most London-based business schools seem to offer similar EDOs in terms of one-to-one career advice, employability fairs and workshops, volunteering, extra-curricular activities, real-life activities and work opportunities. Some schools go one step further by offering a dedicated PDP tool and/or an employability award, which is the case of our chosen post-1992

university. The university has an online platform for all careers, employability and enterprise resources, where students can find job opportunities and book a variety of EDOs. For instance, over the 2022/2023 academic year, the business school advertised more than 50 events, whether online or on campus, potentially relevant to finance and accounting students. These events include generic employability skills workshops (e.g., public speaking, networking, and LinkedIn), information sessions about specific employability programmes (e.g., investment banking mentoring programme and employability award), career fairs (whether industry-specific or not) and insight sessions where industry professionals are invited to address a particular topic (e.g., Fintech, CIMA and women into finance).

The careers office also runs two flagship programmes relevant to our study, that is, offering real-life exposure through insight weeks and overseas trips. One programme in particular, the 'Inclusive Futures', is specifically targeted at low-SES students, and eligible first- and second-year students receive an email about this opportunity at the start of the year. This is a paid programme (minimum wage) which is not specific to finance students but welcomes students from all disciplines. About 90–100 students apply to the programme every year, for 30 spaces available. Last year 12 participants were from the business school, including 6 from finance and accounting. At the end of the programme, students are asked to rate their confidence in various attributes related to the acquisition of soft skills. The attribute with the highest increase in confidence is 'networking skills', followed by 'knowledge in your career industry'.

3.2 | Quantitative Methods

The quantitative data were collected through an online questionnaire distributed to participants via email. The questionnaire consists of both closed- and open-ended questions, designed to capture demographic information, socioeconomic background, educational experiences and perceptions of internship accessibility and effectiveness. Following recent research in the field (Goldstone 2022; Liu, Peng, and Luo 2020; Rodriguez-Hernandez, Cascallar, and Kyndt 2020), we measure socioeconomic background with two key variables. First, parental education reflects the human capital and educational attainment within a family. Higher levels of parental education often correlate with greater awareness and understanding of the importance of education and career development. We capture parental education by whether both, one or neither parent/guardian graduated from a higher education institution. Second, household income serves as an indicator of the financial resources available to the participants. Higher-income levels typically correlate with better access to resources and opportunities, which can influence employability development. Respondents could choose between five income ranges from 'under £30,000' to 'over £100,000'. Reviewing the great disparity in the operationalisation of SES used in extant literature (Rodriguez-Hernandez, Cascallar, and Kyndt 2020), we chose a pragmatic approach to deciding the thresholds for low-SES students. This approach was driven by our personal experience with social mobility charities,⁶ as well as official UK data.⁷ As a result, students were classified as low-SES

when their family income was less than £30,000 and when neither or only one parent completed a higher education qualification.⁸

For the next set of questions, we use EDOs as a framework to evaluate the effectiveness of business schools in promoting access to work experiences for students from different SES (Pitan and Muller 2020). We closely follow Pitan (2016) and Pitan and Muller (2020) in designing our instruments. Both studies used the Cronbach's α method to confirm the reliability of their questionnaire, as well as exploratory factor analysis using principal component analysis and varimax rotation method to evaluate the construct validity, that is, to group their questions into seven distinct EDOs. Hence, our analysis relies on their validated classification. By focusing on key EDOs—Work Experience, Career Development Learning, Real-Life Activities and Extra-Curricular Activities—we aim to assess how these opportunities are distributed among students and how they are perceived in terms of equal access for all, regardless of SES (Reay 2006). Work experience encompasses internships, placements and other practical experiences that provide students with opportunities to apply their knowledge and skills in real-world settings (Pitan and Muller 2020). Career development learning involves activities and support services that facilitate students' exploration of career options, enhancement of employability skills and engagement in work-related experiences (Sultana and Watts 2006). Real-life activities represent all kinds of partnerships with employers, student field trips to corporate headquarters, and visits by alumni to schools for delivering lectures (Mason, Williams, and Cranmer 2009). Extra-curricular activities are activities students can get involved in outside of the normal curriculum. They include academic clubs (e.g., Finance Society), cultural and language clubs (e.g., Italian Society), sports clubs (e.g., badminton), religious clubs (e.g., Jewish Society), community activities such as volunteering and other special interest clubs (e.g., chess club).

To analyse the impact of these EDOs, we collected data on students' participation in internships/work placements, their satisfaction with the support provided by their institutions, and their perceptions of the role of their school in facilitating access to these opportunities (Tomlinson 2008). These questions were inspired by the FutureTrack longitudinal survey conducted by the Warwick Institute for Employment Research. Several studies in UK higher education use the FutureTrack data in their analysis, whether academic (Behle 2017; Purcell et al. 2013; Taylor and Hooley 2014) or government reports (McCulloch 2014). We then compared the experiences and outcomes of students from different SES and explored the factors that may contribute to any disparities observed. The online survey was open from the end of May until the end of July 2023. Our total sample of 40 respondents is representative of the student population, as seen in the descriptive statistics presented in Table 1. The sample is dominated by British students (60%), final year (60%), from Asian ethnicity (60%), and the majority are low-SES (58%). In Table 2, we can see that most students had some kind of work experience, independently of their socioeconomic background. Similarly, most students, both low- and high-SES, expect to graduate with first-class honours, although more disadvantaged students tended to answer 2:1 or 'I don't know'. Finally, the majority of students have already secured or intend to apply for a full-time job, whereas a minority will continue onto a postgraduate degree.

TABLE 1 | Descriptive statistics ($n=40$).

Gender		Socioeconomic background	
Female	21	High SES	17
Male	19	Low SES	23
Ethnicity		Year of study	
Asian	24	1st year student	8
White	14	2nd year student	8
Other	2	Final year	24
Nationality		Work experience	
British	24	No	14
EU national	10	Yes	26
Other	6		

TABLE 2 | Statistics by socioeconomic background.

	Low SES ($n=23$)	High SES ($n=17$)
Work experience while at university		
No	9	5
Yes	14	12
Degree class expected		
First class	8	12
Upper second class	8	5
I don't know	7	0
Expectation upon graduation		
Full-time job	12	12
Part-time job	2	0
Postgraduate degree	3	2
I don't know	6	3

We acknowledge the small sample size which is due to a very tight schedule. Indeed, this research originated as a disciplinary research collaboration between staff members and two students (co-authors of this paper). The project had to be completed and submitted within a limited time frame so we had a very short window (about 3 months) to collect and analyse all the data, which explains the snowball sampling technique. Also, the bad timing didn't help, as we started collecting data at the end of May when students were already on summer break and mostly disengaged with all university matters.

These data were analysed by giving numerical values to quantitative answers and applying both the chi-square (χ^2 -test) and the t -test (controlling for differences in variances) to compare the results between high- and low-SES students. For each EDO score, we also performed a one-sample t -test (with one-tail distribution) to assess its perceived effectiveness.

3.3 | Qualitative Methods

In addition to the questionnaire, we conducted structured interviews with a subset of 12 respondents who expressed an interest in the survey. As such, participants were self-selected from the survey sample. Table 3 presents descriptive statistics for our 12 interviewees, for which pseudonyms were generated based on ethnolinguistic backgrounds (Wang et al. 2024). The interviews were conducted between mid-June and mid-August; they lasted between 30 and 50 min each and focused on students' personal experiences with internships and the role of the university in facilitating access to these opportunities. The interviews were conducted by three of the authors, one was staff and two were project students. The latter did so under supervision at first and subsequently on their own. The questions were organised in themes covering our four key EDOs and were designed from the survey, that is, tailored to the specific profile of each respondent. The themes were (i) socioeconomic background, (ii) plans after graduation and awareness of the importance of various graduate skills, (iii) real-world activities, (iv) extra-curricular activities, (v) career development opportunities and (vi) work experience. Some questions were different depending on the SES, the study level, previous work experience and answers given to specific questions either from the survey or earlier in the interview. For instance, for students who recognised that work experience is important (beyond a good degree classification) to get a graduate job in accounting or finance, we asked them when and how they became aware of the importance of those. This is to understand whether and how students developed their awareness while at university. About extra-curricular activities offered at university, we asked them to expand on why these activities, and which one(s) in particular, will help them (first-year students) or have helped them (final-year students) find a graduate job. Finally, for students with work experience, we asked them a series of questions about the perceived quality of each job and how they found it. Of the 12 interviewees, 5 are considered low-SES students. We also conducted structured interviews with two staff members of the careers and employability team; the information was used to gain insights to the programmes offered by the business school as discussed on page 7. All interviews were electronically recorded and transcribed, and all data were collected and treated confidentially.

For our qualitative analysis, we combine two methods which are often employed to discern patterns within data (Braun and Clarke 2006; Gebreiter 2020). The first method, recognised as the inductive or 'bottom-up' approach, revolves around extracting themes that have a strong foundation in the data itself (Patton 1990). This method can be likened to grounded theory in certain aspects. When data are collected specifically for research, say through interviews, the emergent themes may not necessarily align with the initial questions posed to participants. The inductive method prioritises themes emerging organically from the data, without being constricted by any preconceived theoretical frameworks or the researcher's preliminary hypotheses. Therefore, it can be deemed as a data-driven technique. However, it is imperative to acknowledge that researchers are not entirely devoid of their theoretical and epistemological orientations, implying that data are not coded in an isolated epistemological environment. In our research, this involved

TABLE 3 | Statistics of our qualitative participants ($n = 12$).

Pseudonym	Interview date	SES	Study level	Gender	Ethnicity	Nationality	Work experience
Mohamed	June 23	Low	First year	Male	Asian	British	No
Henry	June 23	Low	Final year	Male	White	EU	Yes
Adnane	June 23	High	First year	Male	Asian	British	Yes
Leila	July 23	High	First year	Female	Asian	British	Yes
Declan	July 23	High	First year	Male	Asian	South African	No
Patrick	July 23	High	Final year	Male	White	EU	Yes
Daniella	July 23	High	Final year	Female	Mixed	British	Yes
Houda	July 23	Low	Second year	Female	Asian	British	Yes
Sabrina	July 23	Low	Final year	Female	White	EU	No
Uma	August 23	High	Final year	Female	Asian	Pakistan	Yes
Brian	August 23	Low	Final year	Male	White	EU	Yes
Frank	August 23	High	Final year	Male	White	British	Yes

looking at the data we had collected through interviews and questionnaires and sought any emerging patterns and themes. On the other hand, we also employed the theoretical or ‘top-down’ method of thematic analysis predominantly steered by the researcher’s pre-existing theoretical inclinations or their specific interest in a particular area (Boyatzis 1998). Unlike the inductive method which offers a comprehensive overview of the data, the theoretical approach zooms in on facets for a more in-depth analysis. The direction of coding can also be influenced by whether the research question is predetermined, aligning more with the theoretical strategy, or if it emerges as the coding progresses, reflecting the inductive method. Our analysis involved identifying the themes based on those by Pitan (2016) and those by Pitan and Muller (2020) including (i) awareness (with timing), (ii) self-esteem and (iii) engagement with EDOs (Pitan 2016; Pitan and Muller 2020). In addition, we also analysed the role of the business school in raising awareness, including any good practice identified in other higher education institutions. It consisted of multiple readings and discussions between the authors of the interview transcripts as well as the open questions on the survey to identify the most common and/or important issues. This analysis helped understand the perception of different SES students of the effectiveness of the EDOs offered by the university.

4 | Results and Discussion

4.1 | Student Engagement in University EDOs

Table 4 shows the perceived quality of the student experience in terms of various EDOs offered at the university. To compare across EDOs and across SES, we used the five-point Likert scale ranging from ‘Strongly disagree’ (1) to ‘Strongly agree’ (5) to calculate a mean score for each question and separately for low and high SES students. The t -statistics and significance levels reported in the table are for the one-sample t -test assessing which scores are significantly higher or lower than neutral (3).⁹

The first two statements relate to PDP and the curriculum. Looking at the experience of all 40 respondents, it is clear that these EDOs are perceived positively as their mean scores are significantly higher than 3 (3.45 and 3.44, respectively), with a median score of 4 for PDP. This result is driven by low-SES students who significantly agree that the university is doing a good job in terms of curriculum and even more on the PDP. Although not all students were aware of what to expect from the course or the sector before university, they soon caught up after starting: ‘I would say more because at the beginning when I started university, I had like 0 idea about the possibilities of like for example grad schemes, summer internships. So I kind of developed the appetite or ambition throughout University’ (Henry). However, the curriculum did not always meet their expectations of developing skills needed in the finance sector: ‘I believe that there could be more modules that are directly correlated to the finance industry. For e.g. I believe that the new computational module addition in the 2nd year is very good for the course. More modules like this need to be added to improve the overall level of the finance course’ (Declan) and ‘...employability of my course I’d say is quite low, especially in first year, the modules aren’t that great, so you have to kind of rely on extracurricular activities’ (Adnane).

In terms of extra-curricular activities (ECAs), students were generally happy with the opportunities on offer, with an average score of 3.53, the highest score across all EDOs. Similarly to the first two EDOs, the result is driven by low-SES students who strongly value these opportunities. Looking at their engagement in some of those ECAs, Table 5 clearly shows a divide between low- and high-SES students. Here, we assigned a score to each possible answer to test whether low-SES students were significantly less aware of existing ECA opportunities (leaning towards 1) and whether high-SES students participated more in these activities (higher score up to 3). All averages are very close to the middle 2 ‘aware but didn’t participate’, and there is not much difference between low- and high-SES students—the only exception being for the student ambassador scheme, which seemed

TABLE 4 | Experience at university.

	Strongly disagree (=1)	Disagree (=2)	Neutral (=3)	Agree (=4)	Strongly agree (=5)	Mean (t-stat)	Median	Standard deviation	Mean Low SES (t-stat)	Mean High SES (t-stat)
Since I started university, I have a much clearer idea of what I want to do and what I need to do to achieve my career plans (PDP)	2	9	8	11	10	3.45** (2.30)	4	1.24	3.61*** (2.61)	3.24 (0.70)
My course is helping me to develop the skills I believe I will need to get a job (Curriculum)	0	8	12	13	6	3.44*** (2.74)	3	0.99	3.48** (2.42)	3.38* (1.38)
There are excellent opportunities for extra-curricular activities on or around campus, for example, student union and societies/clubs etc. (Extra-curricular activities)	0	7	10	18	5	3.53*** (3.56)	4	0.93	3.65*** (4.04)	3.35 (1.31)
I benefited in many ways from the careers office, for example, through career fairs and training, workshops, one-to-one career advice etc. (Career development learning)	3	15	12	8	2	2.78* (1.39)	3	1.03	2.91 (0.44)	2.59* (1.51)
There are excellent opportunities to connect with the real world, for example, company visits, guest lectures, etc. (Real-life activities)	4	9	16	9	2	2.90 (0.61)	3	1.03	3.04 (0.24)	2.71 (1.00)
Jobs advertised through the intranet are of high quality, paid, and relevant for my subject or career plans (Work experience)	5	11	10	12	2	2.88 (0.70)	3	1.14	3.09 (0.36)	2.59* (1.60)

TABLE 5 | Extra-curricular activities.

	Not aware (=1)	Aware but didn't participate (=2)	Participated (=3)	Mean	Z-test diff mean	Median	Standard deviation	F-test diff variance
Student Union								
Low SES	7	4	9	2.10		2	0.912	
High SES	1	11	5	2.24	0.55	2	0.562	0.38**
Student ambassador								
Low SES	5	7	6	2.06		2	0.802	
High SES	0	11	6	2.35	1.33*	2	0.493	0.38**
Finance society								
Low SES	6	2	13	2.33		3	0.913	
High SES	2	8	7	2.29	0.15	2	0.686	0.56
Other societies								
Low SES	6	4	8	2.03		2	0.807	
High SES	2	8	7	2.12	0.39	2	0.574	0.50*
Volunteering								
Low SES	8	3	6	1.88		2	0.928	
High SES	3	9	4	2.06	0.64	2	0.680	0.54

Note: For both the Z-test difference in mean and the F-test difference in variance, ** and * indicate significance at the 5% and 10% respectively.

to be known by all high-SES students. On the contrary, standard deviations are significantly different between the two groups of students, with low-SES students having a much larger variance in their responses than their high-SES counterparts. On one side, socially advantaged students seem to cluster around the 2.2 average, meaning that the vast majority of them are aware of the various ECAs on offer, but most of them chose not to engage in these activities. The survey revealed potential reasons as ‘many societies were not very active’ or ‘the finance society didn’t really do much to help the students’. On the other side, disadvantaged students are spread across all three answers, with the majority being either unaware of the opportunity, or being aware and participating. To summarise, the majority of disadvantaged students participated (actively or passively) in various clubs—the most popular being the Finance Society—or didn’t know about these opportunities. Whereas high-SES students mostly knew about these ECAs but chose not to participate.

The interviews shed some light on the reasons why the Finance Society was so popular with low-SES students but not always for high-SES. For instance, final-year student Henry told us: *In the first year, the Finance Society definitely helped the most because they were kind of the first that introduced me to how these things actually work. You know, applying to summer internship graduate jobs, even when I didn't even have a proper CV.* So, then I also did a 1-on-1 with careers advice, but that was not really helping me apply to any of the roles, but it was more about seeing what I can do to better my skills. The finance society was the most helpful out of everything.’ Whereas Daniella, also a final-year student but high-SES, observed: ‘Like it [ECAs] doesn’t necessarily make me stand out unless it’s something that’s like super unique. They are more likely to look at statistics oh wow, she did XY and Z but not many people have that. So like, yeah, it’s kind of just standard stuff’.

Adnane, a very active first-year high-SES student, felt that this scheme had been very helpful in finding a position for himself and others: *‘some of the qualities we look at are how have you contributed to your university community, any sort of extracurriculars you’ve done like student ambassador ...I haven’t been able to talk much about my course in interviews. I pretty much always talk about extracurricular activities such as the student ambassador roles and my passion to help students achieve’.*

Some of the quantitative studies found that ECAs do not make any significant contribution to university students’ employability (Pitan 2016) or that students are unaware of the benefits of engaging in ECAs as undergraduates (Pitan and Muller 2020). However, King, McQuarrie, and Brigham (2021) found that ECAs can have a positive effect on the success of students willing and able to take up the ECAs, helping them to develop their relationships, networks, skills, sense of well-being and belonging, and overall potential. In our study, we see an awareness of ECAs among high-SES students and that ECAs can be a way to build confidence in low-SES students, especially at the start of their studies. The confidence then can help low-SES students better prepare for positions in elite finance firms, as mentioned by Adnane. When asked whether and why ‘these extracurricular activities have helped you/will help you/would have helped you find a graduate job’, 19 students said yes against 7 who said no. The cited benefits were exposure, connections,

advice and gaining hard and soft skills. This is consistent with Ylonen (2012) who shows that students taking part in the ambassador scheme not only gain complex transferable skills while earning money, but also engage in something that they perceive to be a highly rewarding and valuable experience, raising aspiration and attainment of young people from more disadvantaged backgrounds. That being said, few students mentioned that ‘many societies were not very active’ and ‘didn’t really do much to help the students’, even the Finance Society. Or that ‘there’s nothing that makes these activities stand out on a CV compared to other applicants’. These criticisms may come from the fact that, in the 3 years up to 2023, the Finance Society lost momentum during lockdown and most importantly did not receive any support, whether financial or managerial, from the university.

Students were less optimistic about other EDOs, as the mean scores for career development learning, real-life activities and work experience are all below 3, equal to 2.78, 2.90 and 2.88, respectively. When asked if they ‘benefited in many ways from the careers office’ or if ‘there are excellent opportunities to connect with the real world’, a minority agreed (less than 30%). When asked whether ‘jobs advertised through the intranet are of high quality, paid, and relevant for my subject or career plans’, only 14 students agreed, whereas 16 students disagreed (10 students didn’t have any opinion). These answers were further investigated in the interviews, and our findings are summarised below.

Regarding the careers office, their employability workshops and 1-to-1 advice sessions are useful as a starting point, that is, for students who don’t have a CV yet and don’t know where else to go. Several respondents benefited greatly from such early-stage support. For instance, Frank remembers ‘talking to a university counsellor about employment and he was actually quite helpful when starting out and understanding some careers available because I didn’t even know what the difference between a job and a graduate scheme was, and what any of these terms really meant. He helped at the start just to understand at a very basic level what might need to be done’. Houda agrees: ‘they [careers office] actually tell you like why you should include this, why you should include that like what makes you seem more attractive when employer and they also help you with like your interview skills’. Beyond this, many students were not impressed by the employability team as they apparently lack the knowledge and experience of the finance industry. For instance, when Adnane ‘approached the employability office, asking them if they could review my CV, I was given one of the worst CVs possible, I got some of the worst feedback from it’, ‘they told me to get rid of these technical words and the formatting of the CV they gave was just really horrible’. Similarly, Patrick shares that ‘they gave me pointers in the wrong direction like it was okay to have two pages, but it wasn’t very applicable to finance. I think finance in general is very heavy on formatting, you can’t go over one page on your CV otherwise you end up in the trash’. Daniella concludes ‘but where they were basically trying to teach us how to make our CVs, they were telling us that from a completely wrong perspective of finance students’, which was supported by an answer on the survey ‘Advisors in the career centre should have corporate experience and understand the milkround process of recruitment and the importance of timing when looking for internships or full-time roles. This should be communicated

to the students'. Interestingly, some students had filled in the questionnaire about the careers office negatively, because of the lack of knowledge of the finance area, but the interviews showed that for the start of their studies, students—especially low-SES—found the office very helpful to increase awareness and building interview skills. This then can help those students with their confidence (Hoskins and Barker 2017). What also had an impact on the students' overall perception was how the careers office continued their services: 'they don't check up on you after. It's like you have to reach out every single time and it's always by emails like they will advertise everything. It's by emails and I don't really check my emails that much so' (Houda).

About connections with the real world, again most interviewees were not satisfied with the opportunities offered at university or course level, particularly when compared with Russell Group universities. They mention a couple of guest lectures and/or company visits over their 3-year studies, and students engaged with the Finance Society complained about a total absence of funding to organise events with industry professionals.

Similarly, respondents complained that the job opportunities advertised through the intranet were not particularly relevant for them, unless you want to 'work in the accounting department of the NHS'. Firstly, 'I was looking for entry-level roles for a finance student. And to be honest there wasn't much stuff' (Mohamed), 'I think the closest one to finance was like accountants' (Declan). Then, 'when it comes to the placement year and the sandwich year, your only option pretty much is the NHS, which not everybody wants to work for' (Adnane). Finally, 'there were no internships that I was interested in or just in general internships that were THE average known finance companies or working within the financial department of a large corporation or like a FTSE100 company. A lot of them were just like small accounting firms' (Brian). And when students with work experience were asked 'How did you obtain such work?', only 3 out of 26 replied 'job advertised by the university'. Obviously, our sample is rather small, but there is clearly a perceived gap in terms of relevant job opportunities in finance advertised through the university's intranet. This is concerning as Crawford and Wang (2019) emphasise the positive effect of work experience (through yearlong placements in elite accounting and banking firms) for the social mobility of working class students.

On average, across all EDOs, low-SES students scored higher than high-SES students, emphasising the role of the university in developing these EDOs for lower-class students. It is worth noting, though, that these differences are not statistically significant.¹⁰

Pitan and Muller (2020) mention that PDP is important for developing self-awareness, self-efficacy, self-confidence and self-esteem; therefore, the results of Table 4 are indeed good news for the business school, as it was able to raise awareness and self-confidence for those needing it most (3.61 average for low-SES students). On the contrary, there is scope for improvement regarding career development learning in the curriculum, real-life activities and work experience through the university.

4.2 | Student Awareness and Engagement in External Opportunities

Table 6 shows how students are using various sources of careers information or advice, whether through the university or elsewhere. The most used source of information is not the Careers office (2/3 of respondents used it) but friends and family (used by 89%) shortly followed by teaching staff (82%). The university—through the careers office or teaching staff—is considered the least helpful source where about 1/3 of students who used these found them not helpful—36% and 32%, respectively. The most helpful source, used by low- and high-SES students alike, is family or friends, which includes fellow students met through the Finance Society. Interviews revealed different levels of proactivity in seeking EDOs, from reactive students, for example, 'my friends were applying to placements and then that's when I started applying' (Houda), to proactive students, for example, 'I was on this online forum where a lot of people that work in finance communicate with each other' (Brian).

Delving deeper, we find that student SES and level of proactivity (i.e., engagement) do not seem to be related, but they are mainly linked through the power of awareness. Previous literature found that high-SES students are usually more aware of the importance of work experience and hence are more able to engage with and benefit from various EDOs (Paull et al. 2019; Smith et al. 2019; Wong and Hoskins 2022; Wright and Mulvey 2021). Our interviews reveal that SES is not necessarily correlated with awareness and that awareness has a greater impact than SES on engagement. For instance, Brian is a low-SES (non-UK) student who started researching about investment banking while at college (abroad) and proactively applied to London-based universities because 'I knew that I wouldn't be making it into the industry if I don't go to a large financial hub' and 'you want to be where the people are who are going to influence your career'. Brian started university with a very high level of awareness which led to proactivity and engagement in a variety of EDOs. As suggested above, he chose to engage in EDOs outside of university—like SEO London—as he felt they were much more

TABLE 6 | Sources of careers information or advice.

	Helpful	Not helpful	Not used
University careers advisory service	16 (42%)	9 (24%)	13 (34%)
Private careers advice/employment agency	15 (41%)	4 (11%)	18 (49%)
Teaching staff in your department	21 (55%)	10 (26%)	7 (18%)
Professional bodies	16 (44%)	7 (19%)	13 (36%)
Family or friends	27 (71%)	7 (18%)	4 (11%)

helpful. In his own words: ‘I didn’t engage much with [the careers office], I didn’t because I was spending a lot of time with external organisations’.

Frank is a high-SES home student coming from a rural background ‘where you don’t really hear about many people joining banking or things like that, then I never knew these jobs really existed’. He started university with very little awareness ‘because I wasn’t really into finance before uni’ and ‘I only went to [this university] because my friend went here, really’. As such, he ‘never knew these [elite] jobs really existed’. Then, the tide turned when he joined the Finance Society and met new friends (like Brian) who could give him valuable careers advice and information: ‘as soon as I joined university, I put banking on a pedestal and was like okay, I can’t achieve that because I’m not really clever or from a target school, and then just through joining the finance society and organisations like SEO London, I realised it was possible to get these jobs. You just have to work a lot harder than those that are in a target school’. From then onwards, Frank actively engaged in many EDOs, both at the university and outside. Here again university-led EDOs were useful as a starting point. For instance, talking about the mentoring service, Frank says ‘I found that quite helpful. I didn’t know what I wanted to do, and she helped guide me a little bit to just applying for general finance positions and giving me advice on what would be best’. But ‘once you know as much as you know, the employability team aren’t going to help you anymore’ because they don’t know enough about the finance industry.

Both Brian and Frank are final-year students and managed to undertake relevant work experience (i.e., internships) while at university. This experience helped them secure a graduate job in elite financial services firms—both with a starting salary higher than £50k (base salary). Work experience is the last but not least EDO we now focus on.

4.3 | Work Experience While at University

As seen in Tables 1 and 2, most students (65%) had some kind of work experience, independent of their socioeconomic background. The majority of students undertook paid part-time work or short placements (e.g., 3 months) and the key motive was ‘to gain work experience or develop particular skills on the job’, shortly followed by ‘to help pay my essential living costs’. To the question ‘Do you think your work experience has helped you/will help you find a graduate job and why?’ more than 70% recognise the importance of developing hard and soft skills through relevant work experience over and beyond what they learn in their degree. For instance, one student writes in the survey that ‘employers only care about experience. Having a degree and good grades is just a hygiene factor’. Some students partly agree as one mentions that ‘the economy in terms of hiring is in a freeze and employers want candidates from top universities with at least a years’ worth of experience for entry-level roles in corporations that pay the London living wage’. In terms of developing particular skills, Frank for instance argues that ‘many skills gained during work experience are more relevant than my course, e.g., customer/stakeholder interaction, presentation skills, using PowerPoint and Excel in different ways’. Other

students also mention ‘how to be part of a team, follow orders, time management’.

For students who don’t have any work experience, the main reasons provided across social backgrounds are (i) to concentrate on their studies and/or (ii) being unsuccessful at finding a job, even unpaid and further for low-SES students lack of time due to family commitments. When asked to expand further, several respondents mentioned the lack of previous work experience in securing even an internship. For instance, when ‘...applying for part-time jobs, I was always getting rejected for not having previous work experience’ (Sabrina). One low-SES final-year student even wrote in the survey ‘I felt like I had no knowledge on what is needed to have a successful application for graduate schemes and was unaware on what to do to improve on it’. This is concerning, particularly given that this student took advantage of several EDOs offered by the school, including visiting the careers website, attending one-to-one careers advice and completing a module to develop her employability skills. In addition, as mentioned before, work experience can help develop skills and boost employability, potentially mitigating some of the disadvantages these students encounter in higher education (Blázquez, Herrarte, and Llorente-Heras 2018; Knouse and Fontenot 2008).

In terms of securing a job, we have already mentioned that a very small proportion of respondents used the university’s intranet. Most students—both low- and high-SES—secured a job through direct online applications, either applying for a job advertised by the employer, or through a speculative application. Sometimes, it was as easy as ‘the majority of help was from SEO London, just because I knew one of the organisers there and he actually gave me the link to apply’ (Frank). Sometimes, it was more like ‘I just applied to numerous roles online and that just happened to be the one that got back to me. Then I had an interview with the firm. I did the assessment online. I guess I did good, that was how I got the job, but there was more to it, you know doing the preparation first having to work 2 years part-time, then doing a summer internship’ (Henry). Also, few of them had a return offer, that is, they had worked for the employer before (internship or placement) and were offered a full-time job after they graduated. This happened to both Brian and Frank, but not only to them. Uma said, ‘working in the NHS has helped me get a full-time job with them’. About the quality of the work experience, the little data we have tend to suggest that both low- and high-SES students were able to secure high-quality—paid and relevant—jobs at elite firms, including Barings, Blackstone and S&P.

To sum up, the university seems to offer a wide variety of EDOs, in particular on career development learning and real-world activities, through their intranet. As was found by Pitan and Muller (2020), the majority of the finance students in our UK business school are not aware of these opportunities, and more crucially, these EDOs are not the main drivers of employability. Many respondents complained about the number of emails they receive when they first join university and the fact that they are overwhelmed and probably missing crucial information. From our conversations with members of the careers and employability team, we know that our low-SES interviewees were presumably invited by email to attend the ‘Inclusive Futures’

programme but, for example, Brian confessed to know nothing about it, Houda confessed not to check her emails very often and Sabrina claimed not to have received the email. Instead, finance students became aware of key events, programmes and deadlines by talking to other students in their year group or joining the Finance Society.

5 | Conclusion and Recommendations

Using a sample of undergraduate students in finance and accounting, we collected and analysed quantitative and qualitative data through surveys and interviews. As suggested by extant literature (both academic and professional), we first confirm the fact that relevant work experience is the single most important factor for securing a graduate job, especially in elite financial firms (Crawford and Wang 2019). We then assess the importance of other EDOs—extra-curricular activities, career development activities and real-world activities—in raising awareness and confidence among less engaged students. Our main result is that extra-curricular activities, in particular engaging with the Finance Society, are a key driver to employability. The Finance Society helped raise both awareness and confidence of students who needed those, leading to more proactive students who could secure relevant work experience. This result extends previous seemingly contradicting findings that extra-curricular activities have no significant relationship with employability (Pitan 2016) or that students are actually engaged in ECAs and have more successful outcomes (King, McQuarrie, and Brigham 2021). We find that students perceive career development activities and ECAs to be very useful especially at the start of their studies to help them build the confidence to research and apply for positions in elite financial firms, but these are insufficient to help them beyond building awareness and confidence. Importantly, there is a need for more finance focused EDOs and practical skills development in the curriculum. Regarding students not properly informed (Pitan and Muller 2020), this was expanded in our study by the perception that too much university information was sent by email, which left students overwhelmed in some cases.

We further found that the expectancy-value theory of motivation (Wigfield and Eccles 2000) was particularly relevant in understanding the perception of different SES students regarding the effectiveness of EDOs in promoting awareness of and access to elite Finance firms. We found that students believed that many of the EDOs helped them build the confidence to motivate them when pursuing high-income careers in banking and finance. Not only low-SES students felt more motivated, however, those with no background in finance were positively motivated by the different early engagement in EDOs as well.

Based on our analysis, our key recommendation is the need to significantly raise student awareness about key EDOs—mostly the importance of work experience—as soon as they arrive on campus. This is particularly relevant for post-1992 universities where most students come from disadvantaged backgrounds and hence lack crucial social capital. All but one of our interviewees coming from a low SES admitted not knowing the importance of

internships until their first year (even second year) of university, whereas high-SES students already knew from their family or personal connections. On a positive note, several low-SES students started engaging with various EDOs such as ECAs as soon as they became aware of their importance so they could benefit greatly from these opportunities. But this is not enough. As low-SES students were found to lack motivation and self-esteem (Wright and Mulvey 2021), they need to be told that they can indeed aim for top financial positions in elite firms.

We suggest that the best way to raise both awareness and self-confidence (Pitan and Muller 2020)—which is already done in more prestigious universities—is to invite recent alumni from different sectors within finance and accounting to come and share their own experience, talk about Spring weeks and the importance of networking with first-year students. In our chosen business school, where financial and managerial resources might be lacking, we realised that the Finance Society (run by students) is the best way to organise those events. Students who are aware and proactive—regardless of their SES—have already engaged with various EDOs (mostly external from the University) and are happy to share their knowledge with other, less aware, students.

Once we've raised awareness and self-esteem, students need to be exposed to the real world as early and frequently as possible, in a variety of ways. These include company visits, guest speakers, finance-specific networking events, as well as better advertising existing employability opportunities on offer (e.g., Inclusive Futures). Networking events should also be organised in collaboration with the Finance Society, which has been the main (and most helpful) source of careers advice and information for our (most aware) respondents. We also recommend organising cross-industry panels for both networking and exposure. Last but not least, modern, post-1992 business schools should focus on providing high-quality job opportunities in accounting and finance. Students at our chosen business school are disappointed in the quantity and quality of jobs on offer, and all turned to external sources when searching and applying for relevant internships. One valuable option would be to include a compulsory work placement within the curriculum. This would force lagging business schools to reinforce their ties with industry professionals and up their game in terms of student experience through increased real-world exposure. As Crawford and Wang (2019) point out, the quality of the work placement is crucial, since low-SES graduates can significantly improve their chance of being employed by elite firms in investment banking and accounting if they have already completed elite placements in the same profession.

Finally, employability officers should work—more and better—with teaching staff and student societies, both of which have better access to the majority of students, particularly those less aware or engaged with EDOs. An alternative to the amount of emails mentioned above could be to advertise employability events that are relevant to finance and accounting students should be advertised via the Finance Society and/or teaching staff. Teaching staff should also work with student societies, the Finance Society in our case, to help organise and promote employability events tailored to a variety of students across year groups and SES.

These recommendations are not particularly targeted at low-SES students. Instead, they target all students who lack awareness and self-confidence when starting university. Indeed, we found that raising awareness and self-esteem has a significant impact on student engagement in various EDOs, leading to greater employability outcomes. Since there is a correlation, although not perfect, between awareness and self-confidence on one side and socioeconomic background on the other side, our recommendations should indirectly help social mobility in higher education by raising career outcomes for the less advantaged students.

This paper is not without limitations. Most importantly, we acknowledge the small size of our sample but this study serves as a steppingstone for a larger project on the topic. In particular, some findings should not be generalised to other higher education institutions due to its small size and due to the fact that employability efforts in terms of EDOs might be different. As such, it would be interesting to compare EDOs offered at various institutions in England, both post-1992 and Russell Group universities, and identify the most important drivers of employability across low-SES and high-SES students. On the measurement of SES, our small sample size forced us to a binary classification of SES, treating as high-SES any students who didn't fall into the low-SES category. The reality is obviously more nuanced and further research might allow for a more detailed classification and analysis across various social classes. Factors such as race and gender are equally important in education outcomes (Mahmud and Gagnon 2023) and employability (Goldthorpe and Jackson 2007); however, due to the small sample, we could not assess these biases, although we did collect demographics on them for validity purposes. Future studies with larger samples could evaluate the association of these factors with employability and untangle intersectionality as well. Another drawback due to our small sample is that, as suggested in our discussion, we were not able to assess the importance of real-world activities on employability outcomes. Nonetheless, these have been largely investigated in the literature and we expect that, as business schools increase and strengthen their industry connections, students will be more and more exposed to the real world and socioeconomic background will not be a barrier anymore.

Author Contributions

Julie Ayton: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, project administration, supervision, validation, visualization, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.
Daniel Belcher: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.
Gerasim Hristov: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, writing – review and editing.
Sylvia Snijders: formal analysis, validation, writing – review and editing.

Ethics Statement

The authors have nothing to report.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

- ¹ In this paper, we follow Friedman, Laurison, and Miles (2015) and Rivera (2015) in using the term 'elite' occupations (or professions) as largely recruiting elite students, that is, those who have been privately educated or come from privileged class backgrounds (Binder et al. 2016). These high-wealth, high-status occupations traditionally include medicine, engineering, accountancy, finance and law.
- ² <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-7857/CBP-7857.pdf>.
- ³ <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/diversity-for-a-financial-services-workforce-employers-toolkit>.
- ⁴ <http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/pdfs/2009-milburn-report-fair-access.pdf>.
- ⁵ To the question: 'Do any of your parents have any higher education qualifications?' only 23% of students answered 'yes', 41% answered 'no' and 36% answered 'don't know'. Source: University's student records system, 2022/2023.
- ⁶ Parental education and income are commonly used across UK charities for graduate programmes, such as SEO London, with which one of the student authors has personal experience. Filling out their eligibility questionnaires, the requirement for being a person who needs help with social mobility is to have family income below £30,000 and neither or only one parent graduating from tertiary education.
- ⁷ Our £30,000 threshold sits between the 2023 minimum acceptable standard of living of £29,500 (Padley and Stone 2023) and the 2023 median UK household income of £32,500 (DWP 2024).
- ⁸ We also collected data about the occupation of each parent and whether their family was eligible for free school meals. This data only helped corroborate our classification.
- ⁹ ***, ** and * indicate significance at the 1%, 5% and 10%, respectively.
- ¹⁰ We performed both *t*-test and *z*-test for differences in means between low- and high-SES students and results are available upon request.

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