

# Real-World Employer Led Projects: Creating Professional Experience Through Alumni-Led Assessment

## Abstract

This case study demonstrates how a zoology program transformed a final year module by connecting current students with alumni to work on real-world wildlife conservation and scientific projects. By implementing structured group work around authentic workplace scenarios, supported by regular employer tutorials and professional skills assessment, the program creates meaningful career engagement while developing crucial teamwork capabilities. The success of this approach is evidenced by strong employer participation and enhanced student understanding of career pathways, despite the logistical challenges of coordinating large cohorts with employers across international time zones.

Students: 90 X Level 6 students

## Keywords

Employer-led assessment, Alumni engagement, Professional skills, Group work, Real-world projects, Career development, International collaboration, Authentic assessment

## Overview

Dr. Chrysanthi Fergani, working with Programme Leader Dr Penny Oakland, has developed an innovative assessment approach in a final-year zoology module that connects current students with LJMU graduates now working in diverse areas, ranging from ecological consultancy, veterinary-related roles, wildlife conservation organisations, to environmental consultancy and big pharmaceutical industries. The approach transforms traditional hypothetical case studies into real-world projects that develop both subject knowledge and professional skills. An unexpected benefit of the assessment approach has been the professional development opportunity for

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

academic staff. Through working closely with alumni employers, staff gain current industry insights across multiple sectors. "I'm learning a lot of things... the employers, they want to know more about how education works or what kind of tools they need in order to increase student understanding and engagement. I think some of them are treating this as valuable experience for them as well," explains Chrys. The regular dialogue about real workplace challenges helps shape not just this assessment but influences broader curriculum discussions about preparing students for diverse career pathways.

## The Challenge

Several key challenges needed addressing:

- Limited placement opportunities
- Poor visibility of diverse career pathways
- Current programme employment statistics not reflecting actual career success
- Need to develop teamwork skills prioritised by employers
- Requirement to include more employer-led opportunities within curriculum

## The Innovation

### **Assessment Project Structure:**

- Groups of 5-10 students work with LJMU alumni graduates on real workplace scenarios
- Alumni from diverse sectors including wildlife conservation organisations, genetics, veterinary physiotherapy/nursing, pharmaceutical industry and environmental consultancy
- Four structured 'tutorials' between student groups and employers to support their project, ask questions and gain feedback.
- Staff facilitators support all tutorials and ensure smooth progression.
- Projects reflect real workplace challenges from employers' organisations.

"We take some time in the tutorials for students to ask about the employers career path, how they started off and what steps they took to get to where they are now... I feel like that is something that's quite elusive in the students' brains and it slowly morphs into a reality - it becomes a step-by-step action plan," explains Chrys.

### **Assessment Design:**

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

The assessment combines a group work component with individual professional development:

- Group report (80%): Professional-style report addressing the employer's scenario
- Professionalism report (20%): Individual assessment combining:
  - Tutorial attendance and punctuality
  - Engagement in tutorial discussions including how they support of other team members
  - Peer assessment through Buddycheck

**Professionalism report:** The assessment deliberately rewards professional behaviours which include peer support during tutorials, accounting for 20% of the final grade through the professionalism report. Staff facilitators note and grade specific behaviours, including professionalism towards the employer, through observation during the tutorials: "Whenever a student contributes a question or comment, or asks others to participate or encourages others to participate" explains Chrys. Students are awarded marks per tutorial for their engagement, with emphasis placed not just on speaking but on supporting group dynamics. This actively discourages tutorial monopolisation - "if you monopolise the discussion, that's considered disruptive behaviour during a meeting." The approach recognizes different confidence levels while encouraging growth: "Some students find switch on their camera's a challenge... some others will take on the role of coordinator... ' They ask their questions but will then check if anyone else has something to contribute '." This assessment component is validated through peer review via BuddyCheck, with facilitator and peer feedback typically aligning, suggesting consistent understanding of what constitutes effective professional engagement. "If you encourage somebody else to talk, then that's a good thing... you want to always push students to do just a little bit better, to improve no matter what level they are at in the beginning of the assessment," notes Chrysanthi.

## Support Structure

### Staff Facilitation:

- Academic staff attend all employer tutorials to:
  - Support professional discussions
  - Monitor student engagement
  - Ensure inclusive participation
  - Guide scenario development

### **Employer Engagement:**

- Early contact with alumni to develop scenarios
- Collaborative refinement of projects to ensure appropriate difficulty
- Staff review to maintain consistency across different projects
- Regular communication to coordinate international participants

### **Student Support:**

- Initial workshop on professional behaviours in tutorial meetings
- Clear guidance on engagement expectations
- Flexible participation options for different confidence levels
- Support for peer learning and group dynamics
- Clear marking criteria and professional report structure

## **Feedback Design**

The assessment incorporates multiple feedback channels:

### **During Tutorials:**

- Real-time feedback from employers on approaches
- Staff observation of professional behaviours
- Peer discussion and group problem-solving
- Development of presentation skills through informal sharing

### **Assessment Feedback:**

- Individual professionalism scores from staff and peers
- Group report feedback focused on technical and professional elements
- Periodic group progress reviews
- BuddyCheck peer feedback on individual contributions

**Informal sharing:** While formal presentations were initially planned, feedback highlighted the need for a more balanced approach to sharing project outcomes across the cohort. Rather than requiring multiple formal presentations, which could overburden students, alternative sharing approaches are being explored. As Penny suggests, "it seems a real wasted opportunity to not let everybody else in the class know about the other projects and employers." Initially, the team tried an informal sharing session where students received participation marks for attending and briefly

discussing their project approach and solutions. Current discussions are exploring innovative alternatives like student-created podcasts that could share project insights without the pressure of formal presentation. The goal is to maximize peer learning about different career pathways and workplace scenarios while maintaining engagement.

## Impact and Outcomes

The approach has achieved several positive outcomes:

- Enhanced student understanding of diverse career pathways
- Development of professional teamwork skills
- Strong employer engagement and enthusiasm to participate
- Authentic workplace scenarios spanning multiple sectors
- Improved student awareness of career progression routes

## Challenges and Solutions

### Key Challenges:

1. Coordination & Timetabling:
  - Managing tutorials across international time zones
  - Coordinating employer, staff and student availability
  - Finding backup employers when needed
2. Student Preferences:
  - Managing expectations about project allocation. "Some students might miss out on dolphins and they might have to do a project on wind turbines instead... that doesn't sit well with them," notes Chrys
3. Group Dynamics:
  - Managing different participation levels
  - Accommodating individual working preferences while maintaining employability focus

### Solutions:

- Flexible tutorial timing to accommodate international employers
- Clear communication about professional skill development

- Staff facilitation to support group dynamics
- Individual professionalism assessment to recognize different participation styles

## Transferability

While developed for zoology, the core principles could be adapted for other programs:

- Alumni engagement through structured projects
- Professional skills development through authentic scenarios
- Combined group/individual assessment approach
- Staff facilitation model
- International employer involvement
- Focus on career pathway understanding

The success of this approach, managing 90 final-year students across multiple employer projects, suggests it could serve as a model for other programs seeking to enhance employer engagement while developing professional skills.