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Explorations of the behavioural determinants that impact undergraduate student engagement with placement experiences

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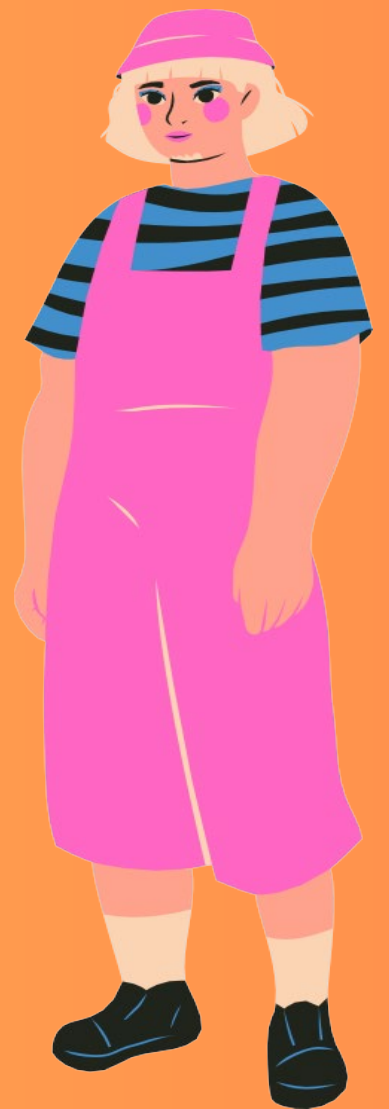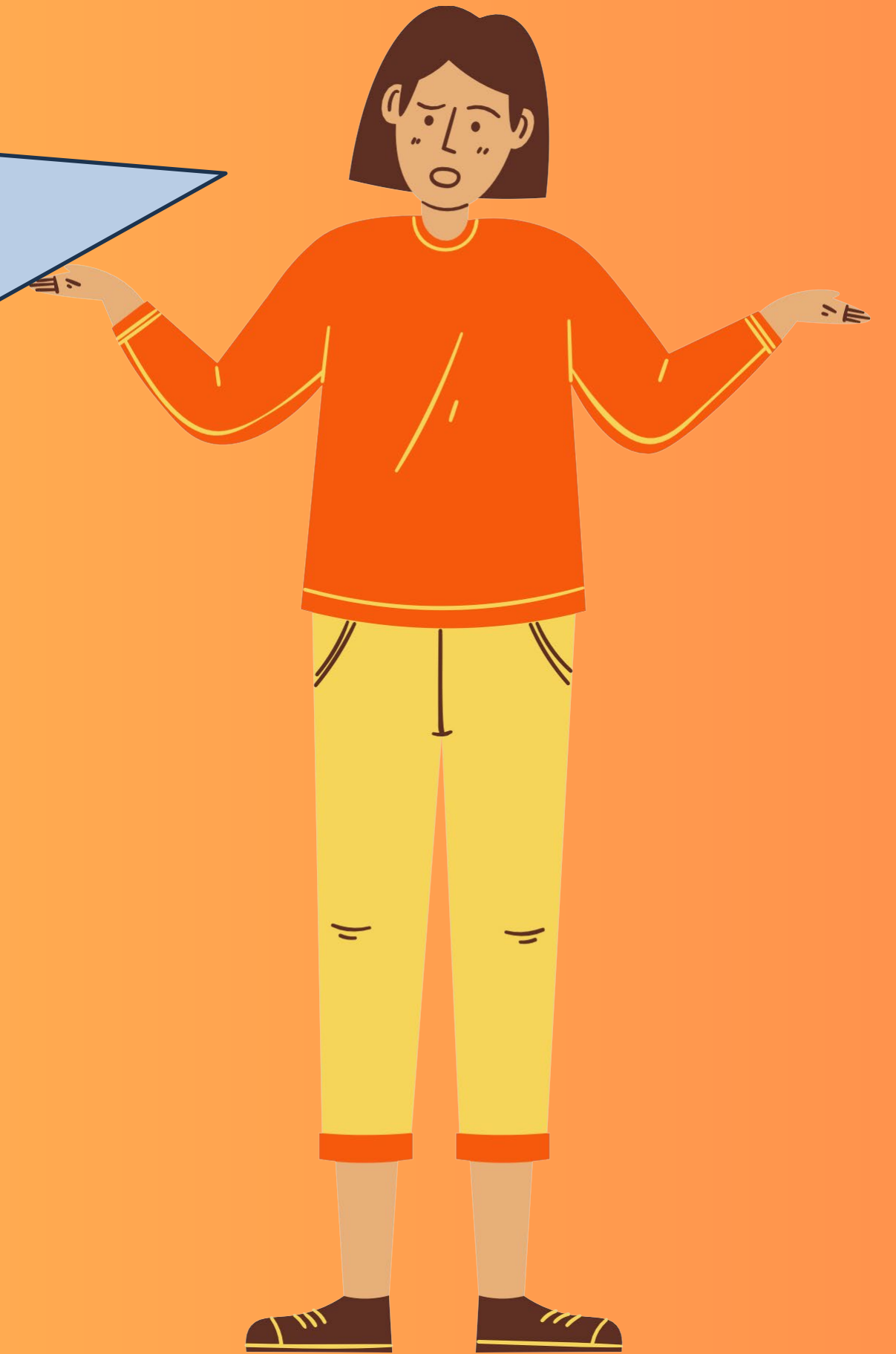
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Context

University context: The University of Sunderland has a commitment to be student focused, professional facing and society shaping. In order to thrive in the workplace there is recognition that students need to leave Higher Education with professional facing skills to complement their subject specialism. A key aspect of this has traditionally been a placement.

Personal interest: I have been involved in a research methods module with a placement option for the last three years. We have currently been going through the revalidation process of the degree course and this raised issues around our placement offer for students.

I felt as though the (considerable) logistical issues with arranging placements was dominating our discourse, and the students' experiences and were getting a little lost. My role is not to tackle the logistics, but could I offer insight into the student perspective?

The current study

The aim of the study is to explore what factors influence students' engagement with placements – choosing whether to do a placement and how involved with it they are once on a placement.

Research question: To what extent do behavioural determinants act as facilitators or barriers for undergraduate students when engaging with placements?

What is beyond the scope of the current research: The systems in place currently at the university to support placements.

Theoretical context

- Gathering feedback from students about the factors that they felt contributing to a successful placement or acted as a barrier, is useful at a module level.

- However, even at this level the factors students cite can be complex and plentiful, leading to a long list that is difficult to action. Many of the factors are beyond our control or contradictory.

- In order to be able to make sense of this complexity, it's useful to employ a theoretical framework to the question at hand.

- If we consider engagement with placement as a behaviour we would like to encourage and support, then we can look to theories of behaviour and behaviour change.

COM-B model of behaviour and behaviour change
Michie et al. (2011)
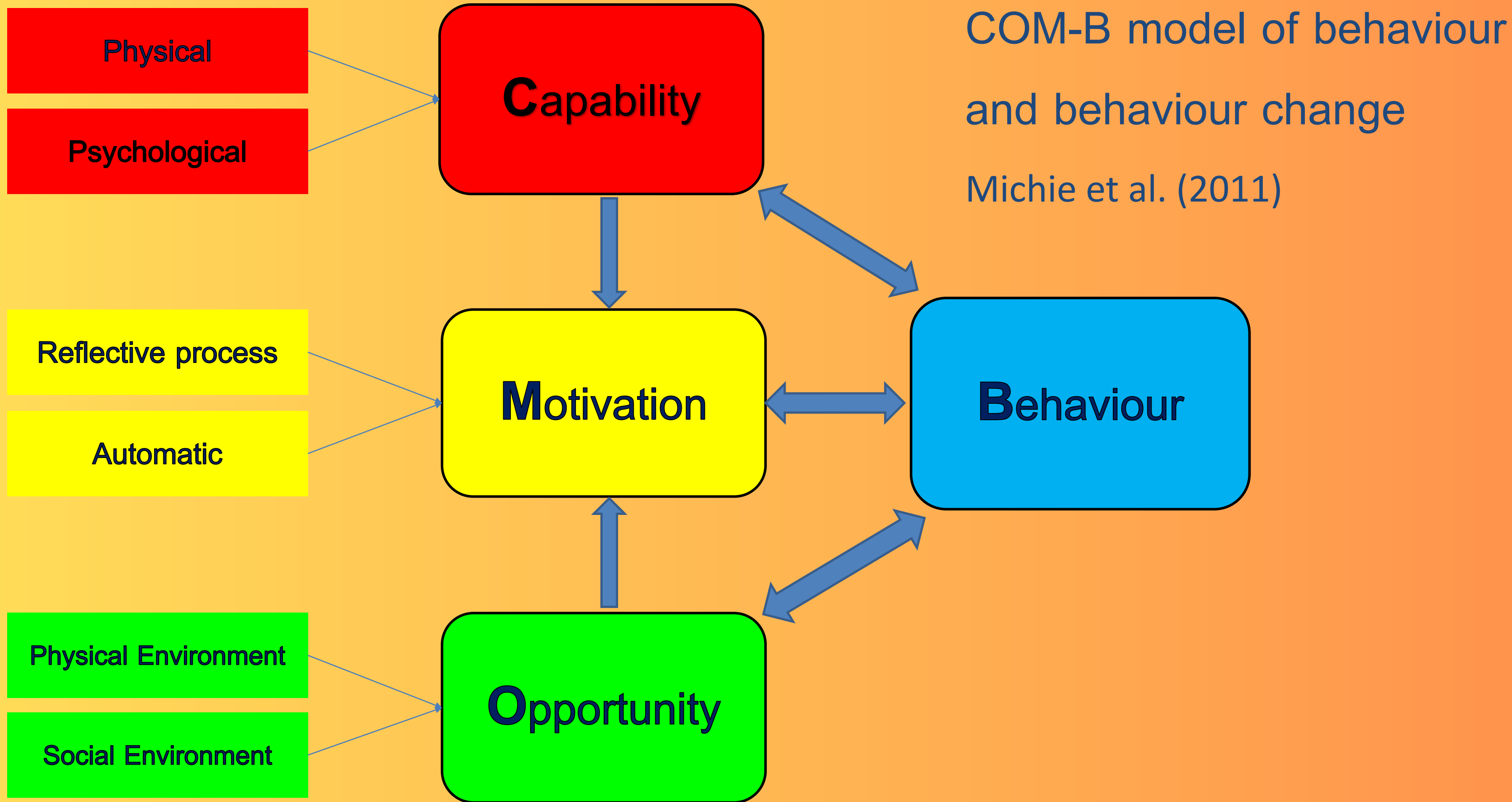
Survey development

- The current study was survey based and designed to capture data around students position within their studies and additional experiences that could impact on their decision making.

- A central part of the survey was a measure developed to explore the behavioural determinants that impacted their engagement with placements.

- The behavioural determinants identified needed to be detailed enough to capture some nuance, but not create a measure that was over demanding on the time and attention of the respondents. In addition, it was important that the factors be embedded in theory and not arbitrary.

Development of behavioural determinants measure
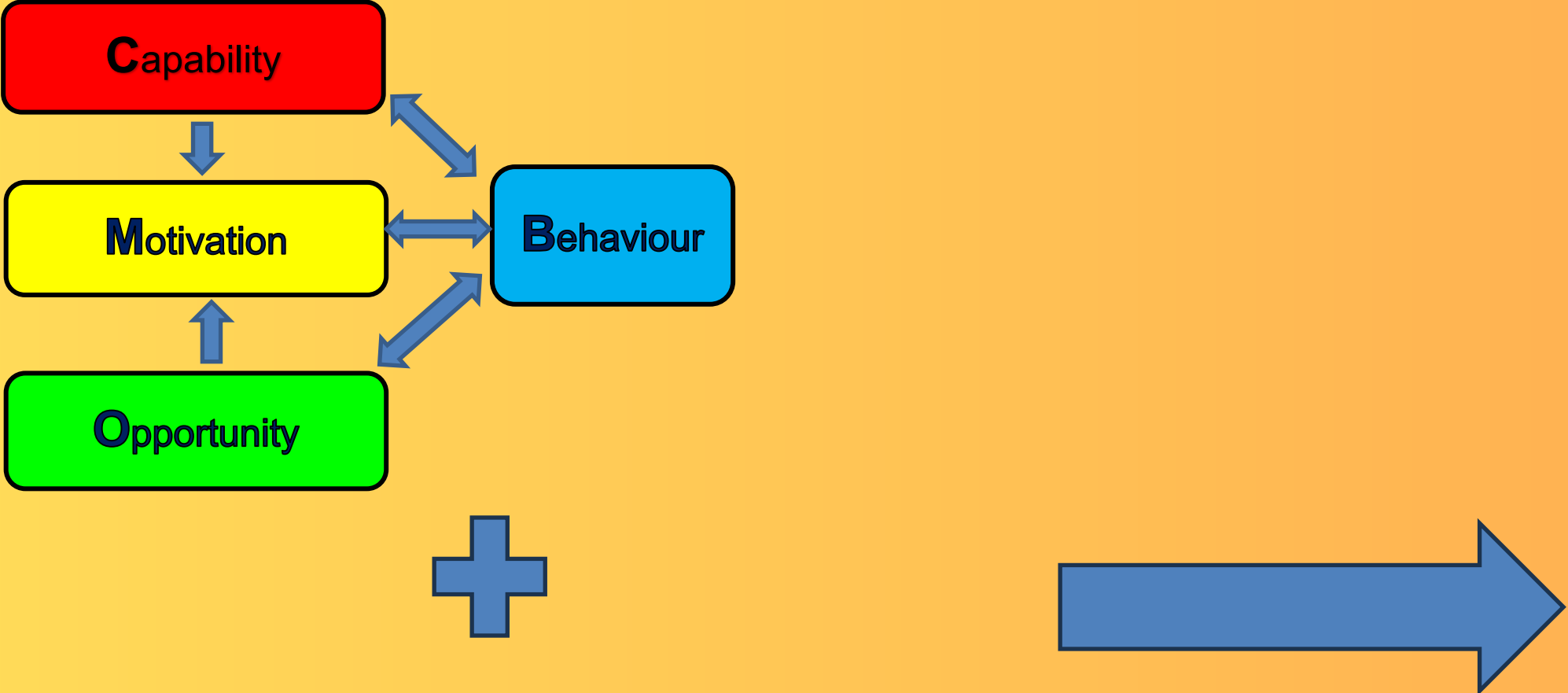
Cane et al. (2012) Theoretical Domains Framework (TDF). An integrative theoretical framework. They identified 84 theoretical constructs and distilled this into 14 theoretical domains. Focus on health-related behaviours

COM-B component		TDF Domain
Capability	Psychological	Knowledge
		Skills
		Memory, Attention and Decision Processes
		Behavioural Regulation
	Physical	Skills
Opportunity	Social	Social Influences
	Physical	Environmental Context and Resources
Motivation	Reflective	Social/Professional Role & Identity
		Beliefs about Capabilities
		Optimism
		Beliefs about Consequences
		Intentions
		Goals
	Automatic	Social/Professional Role & Identity
		Optimism
		Reinforcement
		Emotion

The current behavioural determinants measure

- This use of the TDF mapped onto the COM-B has been used in a range of contexts when exploring health-related behaviour. However, the application beyond this context has been proposed as a useful development (e.g., Atkins et al., 2017)

- The current research explores if the factors impacting engagement with health-related behaviour can be applied in an educational context in a meaningful way.

- The study takes the TDF as mapped onto the COM-B and identifies the theoretical constructs most relevant to the current context.

- Of the 84 constructs identified by Cane et al. (2012) 40 were identified as most relevant for student engagement with a placement.

- Survey items were then developed to correspond to these constructs. Each of the items were mapped back onto the TDF and the COM-B components and subcomponents.

| Com B component	Sub component (Com B)	TDF domain	TDF construct	Survey item
Capability *Individual capacity to engage in activity*	Psychological	Knowledge	Knowledge (including knowledge of condition / scientific rationale)	16.1 How much I knew about the placement opportunities open to me
			Procedural knowledge	16.2 How clear I was on the process of how placements would work in practice
			Knowledge of task environment	16.3 Knowledge about the kinds of places I would be spending time in on my placement
		Skills	Skills	16.4 The skills I need to complete a placement
			Ability	16.5 How able I am to cope with the psychological demands of a placement
			Interpersonal skills	16.6 How confident I am that I have the interpersonal skills to undertake a placement
		Memory, Attention and decision processes	Attention?	16.7 My ability to focus and pay attention
			Cognitive overload / tiredness	16.8 How tiring I would find a placement.
		Behavioural Regulation	Self-monitoring	16.9 How capable I am to monitor and regulate my own behaviour
			Action Planning	16.10 How good I am at planning and organising my time
	Physical	Skills	Skills	16.11 The physical skills I feel I need to complete a placement
			Ability	16.12 How physically able I am to undertake placement activities.

Example of item development relating to the capability component of the COM-B

Survey

Participants were recruited via an announcement on CANVAS spaces and dissemination of the link to programme leaders in the school of social sciences to enable sharing with students.

The survey was administered using Qualtrics and took students around 10-15 minutes. As well as providing participant information and requiring consent, the survey gathered the following information from respondents:

- Demographic information
- Information related to their studies and placement experience
- A Forty item measure relating to the behavioural determinants that they felt had, or would, impact their engagement with placement. These were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale
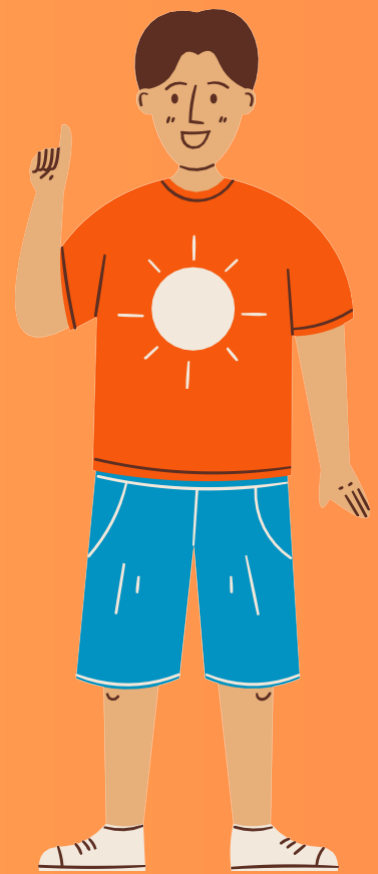
Initial findings

The participants (N = 25) were aged between 19 and 59 (Mean age = 31.39) all from IFY and undergraduate courses within the School of Social Sciences here at UoS.

There were 42 initial responses, but some had missing items that were excluded (imputation not appropriate on a small sample).

91% UK based students

22% identified as having a disability

35% have additional caring responsibilities

Paid work per week (additional to university) was from 0 to 46hrs per week

With over **60%** in paid employment

74% said placement was an option (9% compulsory, 17% not available)

65% said availability of a placement was **not** a consideration in choosing their course

34% had done 1 or more placement

52% plan on doing a placement during their studies with a further 30% unsure

Behavioural determinants

Cronbach's alpha (α) for whole BD scale = 0.962 indicating high indicating an excellent level of internal consistency (no higher than 0.96 if any item were deleted).

Behavioural determinants subscales

Component	$\bar{x}$	SD	α
Capability	4.83	1.21	.90
Opportunity	4.14	.98	.77
Motivation	4.78	1.01	.92
Total Behavioural determinants scale	4.64	.96	.96

N ote. Maximum scale value = 7

Respondent rated to what extent the behavioural determinant impacted their engagement with a placement. The Likert scale was 1-7 (Strongly disagree to strongly agree).

Average item scores were between 2.87 and 5.67

Lowest scores: *(h a d   l e a s t   i m p a c t)*

How pressured I felt by other people to do a placement	2.87
The physical environment of a placement for example noise, heat, crowding	3.54
The fact that people typically complete placements on my course/subject	3.75
Physical barriers such as access or distance	3.91

All the scores that fell below a mean of 4 were factors that related to **opportunity.** This included social influence and environmental context and resources

Highest scores: *(h a d   m o s t   i m p a c t)*

|	
How confident I am I have the interpersonal skills needed to undertake a placement	5.33
My ability to focus and pay attention	5.46
How good I am at planning and organising my time	5.67

All the scores that fell above a mean of 5.3 were factors that related to **capability**, specifically psychological capability

Potential implications

Understanding potential barriers and facilitators could support:

- **Policy**: Enabling or supporting appropriate placements provision

- **Programme and module development** of including delivery of placement provision that address multiple aspects of behaviour

- **Strategy and intervention development** aligned with Teaching and Learning strategies (e.g., Assessment for Learning) and Universal Design

- **Individuals**: Development of support informed by individual behavioural determinants
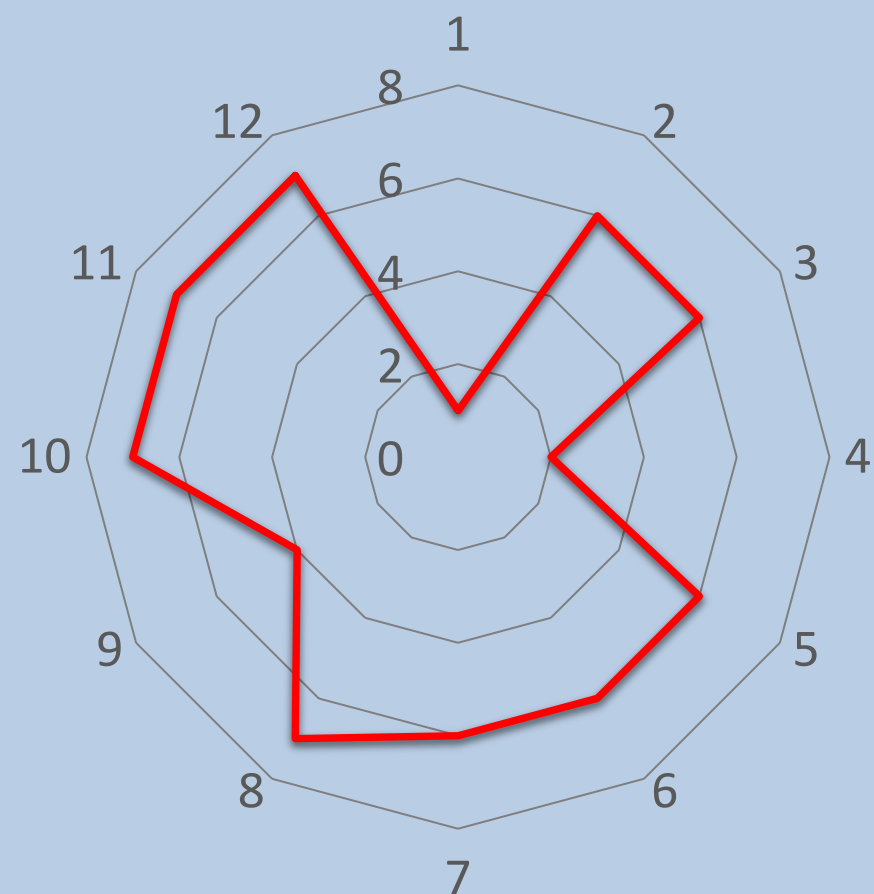
So how does this help me?
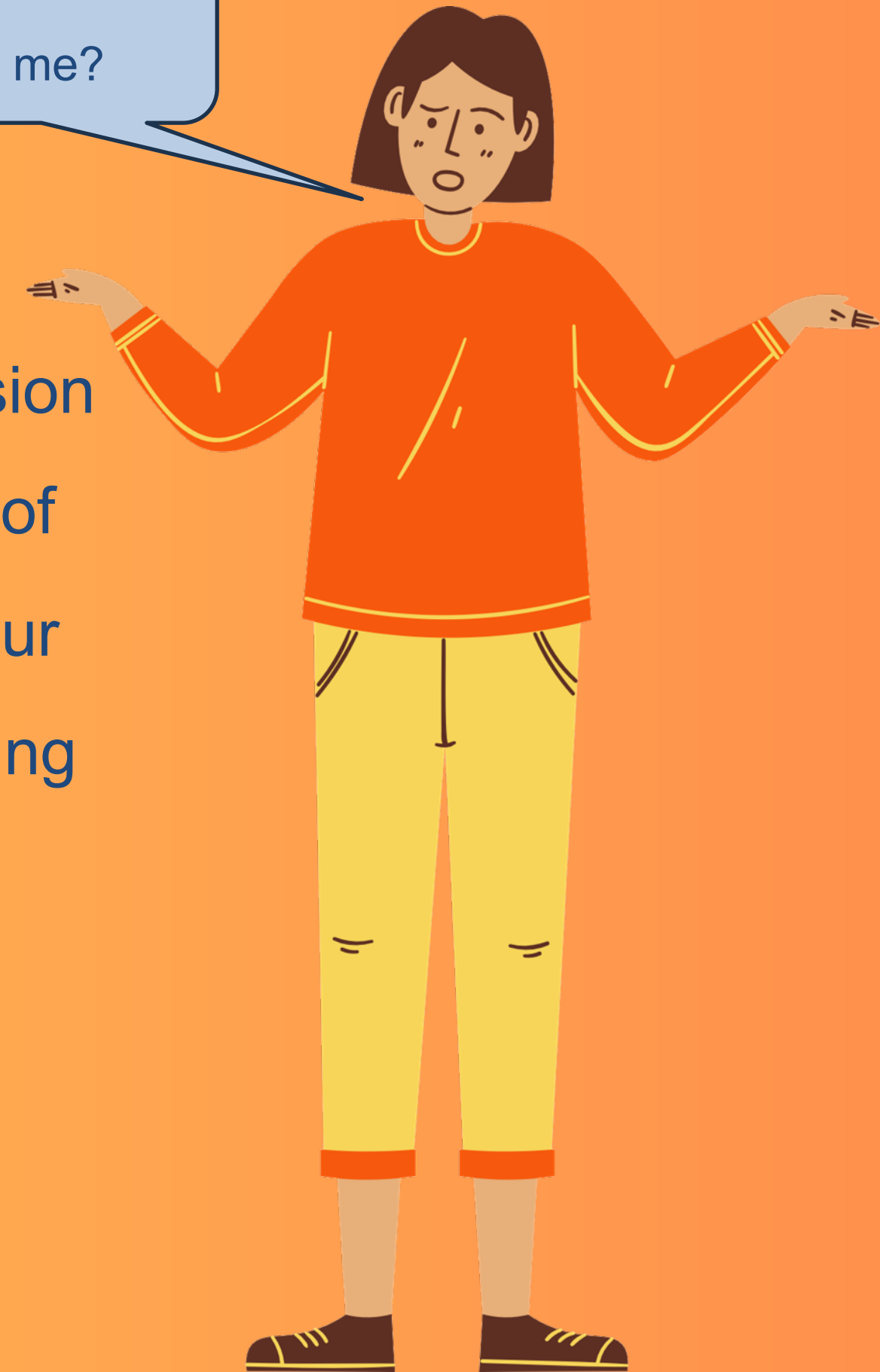
We have a clear idea of desired outcome and targeted behaviour goals: We want Jo to have positive/improved engagement with placement.
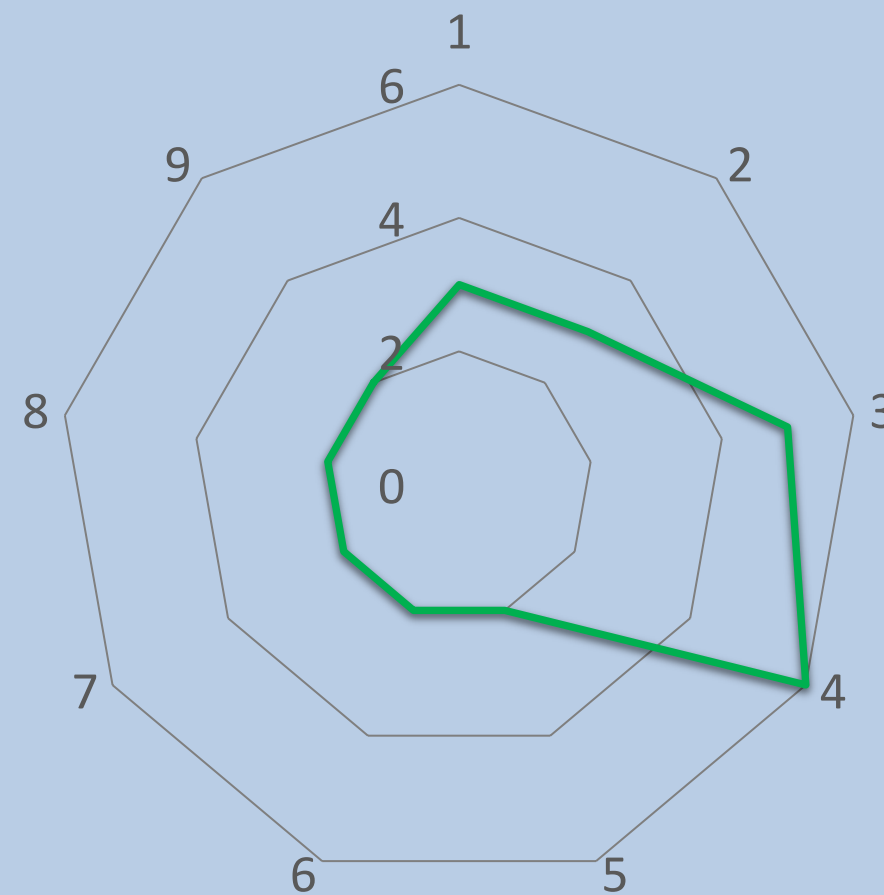
We could work together with Jo using her survey results to elicit a conversation and provide individualised feedback.
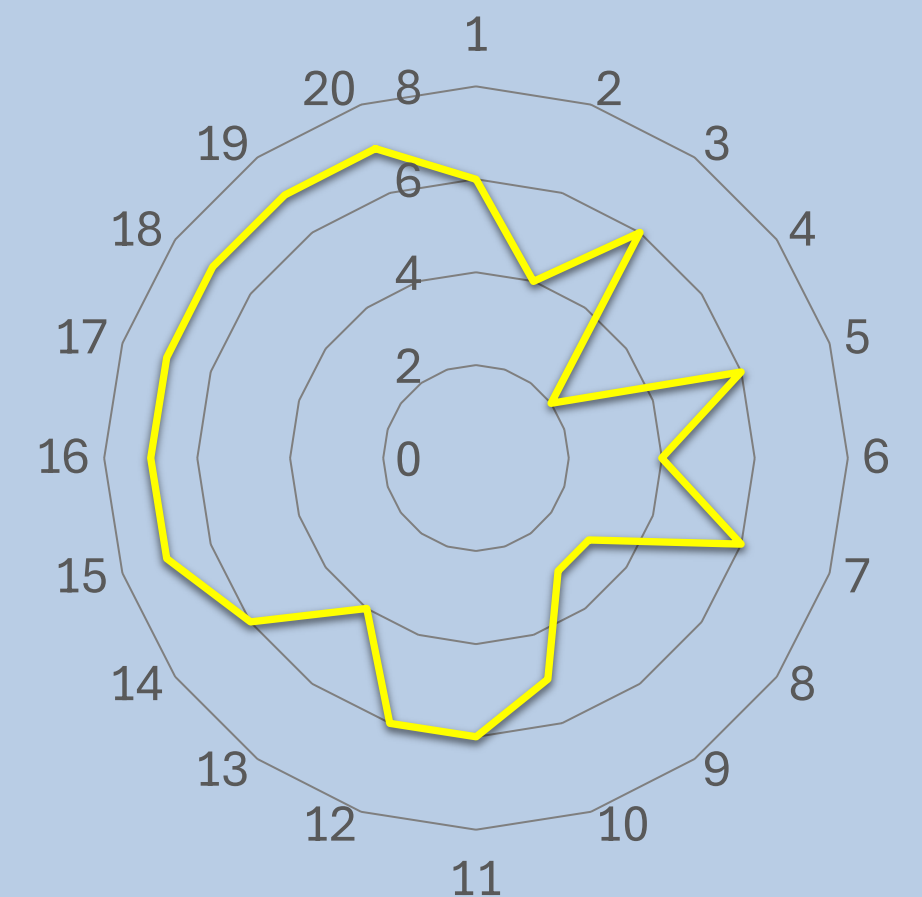
As well as asking students to think more deeply about their behaviour in relation to placements, this process could help identify student centred support for Jo.

We could use her response to the survey to identify actual or potential barriers to her engaging with a placement. We can map these back onto the subcomponents and components of the COM-B model.

Jo has concerns about her physical capabilities, the physical environment of the placement and her emotional motivation to engage with a placement.

For example, the behaviour change wheel links components of the COM-B to enablement as an appropriate forms of intervention to support Jo's concerns about her emotional motivation.
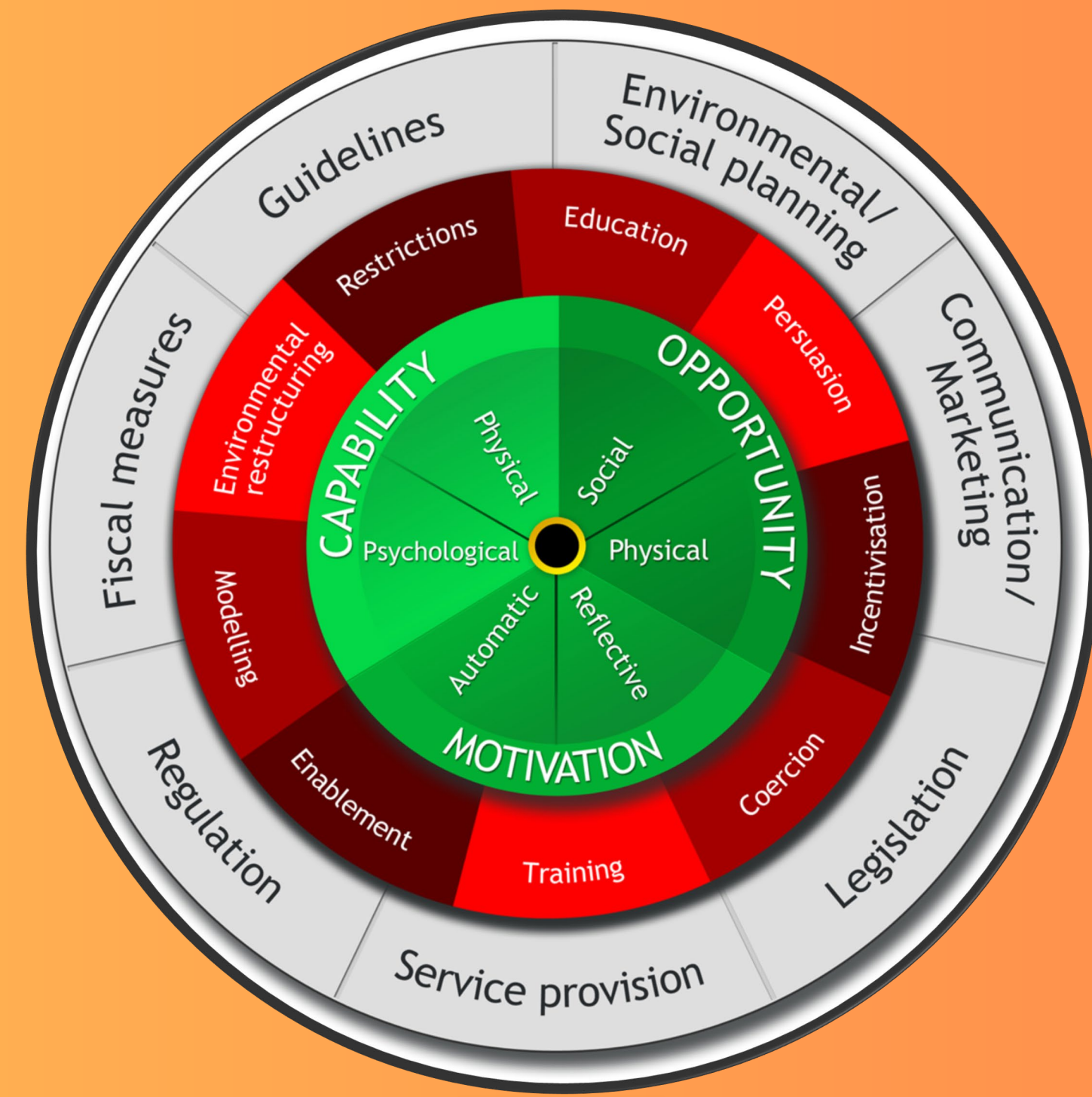
What's next?

Potential next steps for the research:

- Extend data collection beyond the school of social sciences to increase sample size and explore application to a range of placement types.

- Further research exploring impressions and experiences of additional stakeholders in light of the findings of the current study e.g., placement providers, module leaders on modules containing placement elements.

Thanks, for your time and interest.

I welcome comments and questions and please feel

free to contact me:

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