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Growing (up) at work: Industrial placements and soft skill development among business students

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Abstract

This paper offers an analysis of soft skill acquisition and development in the context of work placements, using a series of semi-structured interviews to offer a qualitative exploration of the placement experiences of business students. The paper chooses as its focus five key soft skills sought by graduate employers: 1) communication, 2) teamwork, 3) problem-solving, 4) time management and 5) creativity, and examines their development in the placement context. It highlights the benefits of work placements while acknowledging limitations and impediments. Recommendations for students, universities and placement employers are offered.

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Introduction

Britain's Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), while formally independent charitable organisations, are nonetheless beholden to a complex of agencies and regulatory bodies. In recent years, this regulating patchwork has obliged universities to develop policies, processes and structures designed to foster social goods such as employability and 'impact'. To ensure that these goods are pursued with the necessary vigour, universities are now ranked by a variety of bodies (including the news media) according to their research performance, their 'graduate outcomes', and the extent to which they offer enriching curricula (Peretomode, 2021; Vernon et al., 2018), including rankings such as the Teaching Excellence Framework (SI-UK, n.d.), The Research Excellence Framework (n.d.), as well as the rankings created by The Complete University Guide (2025) and *The Times* (2025). In addition, Britain's universities are expected to widen access to higher education opportunities and are, consequently, expected to participate in social engineering initiatives, offering for example 'contextual offers' to students from those postcodes that are said to be under-represented in higher education (see Burrell et al., 2024; Christie, 2016). Taking this context into account, this paper will offer reflections on the development of employability among undergraduate business students. Our central focus is the acquisition and development of 'soft skills' within (and beyond) the curriculum. These skills constitute our central focus because they are, as we shall see, routinely reported by graduate employers as the key characteristics sought of recruits. To explore these soft skills in a fashion that might allow students, employers and indeed institutions of higher learning a) to reflect upon their character and b) to foster their acquisition and development, we offer a study of the experiences of business students who have recently undertaken a period of work placement.

It is important to note that graduate skills exist and are exercised within contexts marked by dynamism. For example, the World Economic Forum (2025) usefully reminds us that constant changes within technology; the growing use of artificial intelligence, economic uncertainty and greater focus on environmental issues all pose significant challenges, which current and future graduates will be obliged to address. Or perhaps more plainly, graduates within this setting will have to be flexible and adaptable. They will need to think creatively, communicate clearly and work as part of a team even as they commit to a process of life-long learning. Building upon this, Fadhil (2023) adds that to flourish within the workplace, employees require a dynamic-grit mindset. This mindset, they observe, condenses to being engaged and finding meaning in work, regularly upskilling and developing competencies, being resilient, maintaining positive professional relationships, as well as being emotionally intelligent and a good problem-solver. Whilst Fadhil's study focuses on older workers, he does suggest that this mindset is crucial for workers of all ages and cultures, allowing them to flourish and preparing them to tackle new challenges effectively. Vriend et al. (2025) highlight the mental health challenges that workers face in these dynamic contexts. Indeed, they observe that more than 10% of the working-age people have reported poor mental health. They also observe that the issue is

particularly prevalent among those aged between 16 to 34. Interestingly, the World Health Organization (2024) highlights that poor mental in the workplace occurs, often as a result of discrimination, poor work conditions or heavy workloads, but also may also impact those who are either under- or over-skilled for their jobs.

It is important to concede, however, that while many now highlight the importance of soft/ graduate skills in employment, it is often difficult to secure a detailed consensus on the precise nature and categorisation of 'soft skills' in this context. Within this journal, for example, Clough et al. (2020), while acknowledging the centrality of leadership and teamwork, would argue for the inclusion of reflexivity and cultural awareness as key graduate attributes. Similarly, Damasevicius (2024), while discussing the educational implications associated with the development of generative AI, would tend to argue for the inclusion of resilience and ethical judgement as key graduate skills. Likewise, Ng et al. (2024) choose to highlight resilience *as well as* learning agility and social adaptability as the keys to both employability and productivity. Meanwhile, Rudolph et al. (2023), while endorsing much of the foregoing analysis, usefully remind us that notions of employability tend to vary with our understanding of the very nature of work and indeed its intrinsic worth and merit. Sketching a range of possible futures consequent upon the ongoing development of large language computer models, Rudolph and his colleagues suggest that the use of generative AI in the workplace may call for heightened social and interpersonal skills for a knowledge elite while rendering others surplus to the needs of the commercial economy.

This paper, while acknowledging this debate as to the essential nature of soft skills, will focus attention upon five key attributes that are consistently highlighted as being central to graduate employability. These are communication, teamwork, time management, problem-solving and creativity (see Carroll, 2013; Menon, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2016; Zety, 2022).

Our study, as we shall see, builds upon current studies concerned with graduate employability and soft skill development (see Brooks & Youngson, 2014; Hossain et al., 2020; Jackson, 2014; Jackson & Wilton, 2016; Mainga et al., 2022; Succi & Canovi, 2020). These studies inform our analysis, of course, yet they are largely quantitative in approach and emphasis. We depart from this quantitative tradition. We offer instead a qualitative analysis of the acquisition and development of soft skills. This qualitative approach is distinctive and, we suggest, useful because it allows us to generate insights around growing (up) at work, which we hope will assist students, universities and graduate employers in their efforts to improve employability.

Accordingly, the remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section two will review recent literature on graduate employability and soft skill development. Acknowledging that skill development (for employability) is experiential in nature, we will preface our reflections on the development and acquisition of soft skills in the workplace by acknowledging the contribution of Kolb (2015). Section three will offer an outline of the methodology underpinning

our study, while section four will present core findings. These findings, as we shall see, build upon our earlier discussion of Kolb and in so doing offer brief reflections on the way participants located their placements and pursued their learning. Having secured this understanding, we will then turn to offer a more detailed account of the acquisition and development of those soft skills, highlighted above. Finally, the paper will conclude with recommendations designed to maximise the opportunities for students and universities that are (too often) latent in work placements.

Literature review

An overview of graduate employability

The concept of employability self-evidently implies that those who are in employment possess and exercise the skills and capabilities necessary to secure and to retain their positions. It will be helpful in this context, however, to unpack this concept. Indeed, it may be useful to observe that those deemed 'employable' possess and exercise a mixture of a) technical (or hard skills), b) non-technical competencies (or soft skills), c) demonstrable academic performance and d) labour market awareness (Mainga et al., 2022; Hossain et al., 2020; Kornelakis and Petrakaki, 2020). In combination, this collection of knowledge and skills is important for employability because they allow individuals to enter and to move successfully within the labour market (Clarke, 2017; Jackson, 2013; Tentama & Merdiaty, 2020). Commenting upon this marketplace, Clarke (2017) observes that employers expect graduates to be work-ready and capable of making an immediate contribution when they first enter employment. This understanding, of course, implies that graduates must be ready – on entry to the workplace – to utilise technical knowledge, work-related competencies and relevant soft skills. Soft skills are increasingly recognised as being paramount in this context. Indeed, over half of senior leaders recently surveyed are said to value these above role-specific and/or industry-related theoretical knowledge or 'hard skills' (Petrone, 2018; Salas-Velasco, 2021).

Soft skills can be developed within the university curriculum, for example, through group work and project work. We should acknowledge, too, that sporting endeavours may also foster soft skills (De Prada et al., 2022). Nonetheless, there are barriers to soft skill acquisition and development in classroom settings. These limitations include (but are not limited to) simple disengagement, poor motivation, social anxiety and, of course, the extent to which university curricula build and depend upon formal, theoretic and/or more esoteric forms of knowledge (Gratton, 2020; Hassall et al., 2005; Srenivasulu & Kumar Jha, 2020).

Elaborating upon this issue, Bunga Noah and Aziz (2020) suggest that student resistance to soft skill acquisition and development within their formal studies is a key impediment to the development of employability. Indeed, the authors report that students often choose to focus upon the acquisition of academic knowledge and the pursuit of good grades, on the assumption that these will be sufficient to secure well-paid, graduate positions. Mallard (2012; see also the High Fliers Research, 2019), however, reminds us

that soft skills and hard skills must be acquired concurrently and not consecutively if students are to secure positions that genuinely reflect their educational attainment and future potential. Indeed, Mallard (2012) observes that while recruiters recognise the very clear virtues of a degree education, they are increasingly reluctant to hire candidates who lack prior work experience. Brooks and Youngson (2014) add to this discussion. They remind us that graduates are now expected to possess relevant skills and experience in addition to their academic qualifications and observe that these supplementary elements differentiate graduates in a congested labour market. Building upon this, Jackson (2014) argues that the additional year in education associated with an extended work placement must be recognised, not as an additional cost, but as an investment in soft skill formation, which will launch and advance genuine graduate careers.

Echoing this, Vecchi et al. (2021; see also Salas-Velasco, 2021) note that a lack of work experience often prevents graduates from obtaining positions appropriate to their level of education, encouraging them to accept lower positions as they attempt to gain the skills which employers expect of their graduate employees on entry. It will be useful now to reflect further upon these soft skills.

The term 'soft skills' refers to a wide group of social skills, attributes and behaviours used across personal, academic and professional life (De Prada et al., 2022). Hard skills are often defined as industry-specific knowledge and are acquired largely through formalised systems of education and training (Singh & Kumar, 2010). These hard skills are emphasised within educational contexts because they are used (most obviously) to pass knowledge and competence-based tests (Armstrong Melser, 2022). De Prada et al. (2022), however, insist that soft skills must be regarded as, at least, complementary to hard skills when employment opportunities are considered. Indeed, Petrone (2018), amongst others (see, for example, Clough, 2020; Waring, 2024), suggests that the ongoing development of AI places an additional premium on soft skills since these are, presently, difficult for computer systems to mimic. Adding to this discussion, Rudolph et al. (2023) remind us that developing large language computing models raises educational and ethical issues for educators. They observe, for example, that future users of generative AI will need to learn what and how to ask these models in order to ensure that they genuinely contribute to knowledge and understanding.

Turning to the barriers that may impede the acquisition and development of soft skills, we should concede that these include outdated curricula and resistance among students and faculty alike (Srenivasulu & Kumar Jha, 2020). Social anxiety, language barriers, discrimination and a tendency to stereotype are also acknowledged as barriers to soft skill acquisition and development (Hassall et al., 2005; Rani Kumbakonam, 2016). Gratton (2020), however, argues that the contemporary, research-driven curriculum is a significant, if overlooked issue in this debate. This focus upon research, he suggests, crowds out other learning opportunities within the curriculum and leaves little room for activities supporting soft skill development.

Inviting further reflection on the nature of these soft skills, Zety (2022; see also Carroll, 2013; Menon, 2018; World Economic Forum, 2016) argues that teamwork, communication, time management, problem-solving and creativity constitute the core skills now sought by graduate recruiters. Furthermore, we should acknowledge that these skills are crucial not only to business graduates but also within other fields, such as healthcare (Sancho-Cantus et al., 2023; Efthymiou, 2024; Ofori-Manteaw et al., 2025), education (Karras, 2022; Tang, 2018), social work (Rusanova, 2025), design (Jung & Suh, 2024; Ibrahim & Abiddin, 2024) or even engineering (de Campos et al., 2020; Munir, 2021).

Acknowledging the tension between the curricular focus upon research and the development of soft skills, Succi and Canovi (2020) and Nghia (2019) suggest that placements and internships must now be viewed as the key engines for the development of those skills which graduate recruiters truly value. Accepting this point, Vorreyer and Miller (2015; see also Jackson, 2014) nonetheless issue a warning. Successful soft skill acquisition and development within placement contexts, they argue, will require students to actively participate in practice, feedback and reflection. This understanding suggests that we might usefully pause to reflect upon Kolb's (2015) account of experiential learning.

Experiential learning

Kolb (2015, p. 13) defined experiential learning in the context of education as "a particular form of learning from life experience". This approach he contrasts with "lecture and classroom learning". Experiential learning can occur both within and outside the classroom, including internships, work placements, apprenticeships, student exchanges and research projects (Jackson, 2013). Chan (2022, p. 6) expands on this and in so doing chooses to highlight group work, case studies, presentations, role plays and debates. These activities, she reveals, constitute "pedagogies for active learning", which actively promote soft skill development.

Kolb's (2015) account of experiential learning (ELT) consists of four stages (see Figure 1). Indeed, he suggests that useful learning processes are cyclical. In this context, effective learning is taken to build upon concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation and active experimentation. Initially, Kolb suggested that each individual will have a preferred way of learning and presents four, broad learning styles, which may be summarised as diverging (feeling and watching), assimilating (watching and thinking), converging (doing and thinking) and accommodating (doing and feeling) (see Johns, 2001; Kolb & Kolb, 2009).

Kolb's ELT is one of the most widely accepted theories on experiential learning and has been applied by many researchers (Johns, 2001; Long & Gummelt, 2019). However, it has also been subject to criticism. Truluck and Courtenay (1999), for example, suggest that learning styles vary with age and suggest that individuals move from practical to reflective learning styles as they mature. Responding to this criticism, Kolb (2015), as we hinted above, has conducted further research, which highlights flexibility in learning with individuals adopting different styles depending on the context. Pursuing an alternative line of critique, Reynolds (1999) suggests that greater emphasis should be placed on critical theory and reflexivity in the context of learning. This critique challenges the importance which Kolb (2015) places on reflective observation. Indeed, Reynolds (1999) suggests that critical reflection has greater value than reflective observation. The former, he argues, is important because it encourages the learner to recognise those societal influences that tend to normalise hegemonic, limiting assumptions.

Taking a different tack, Cuevas (2015) complains that there is little empirical evidence to support the validity of experiential learning. Countering this, however, Manolis et al. (2013) observe that many educators have, in fact, used Kolb's ELT to design courses and activities. Indeed, Manolis et al. (2013) protest that these ELT-informed programmes plainly meet the needs and preferences of learners (see also Kolb, 2015; McCarthy & McCarthy, 2006). Furthermore, they suggest that Kolb's model improves learning and develops feelings of empowerment because it provides the encouragement critical in enabling learners to identify and to apply their preferred style (see also Healey & Jenkins, 2000). Howard (2020) situates this learning process. He argues that Kolb's model is powerful in the context of employability initiatives because it encourages the learner to put theoretical knowledge into practice, highlighting the importance of reflection.

In short, the theoretical approach developed and advanced by Kolb (2015) has both merit and utility for our discussion of placements, soft skills and employability, because it makes a clear link between knowing and doing. Yet if we are to secure this rationale (and our findings), we must first offer an account of the methodological choices that underpin our analysis and our broader recommendations.

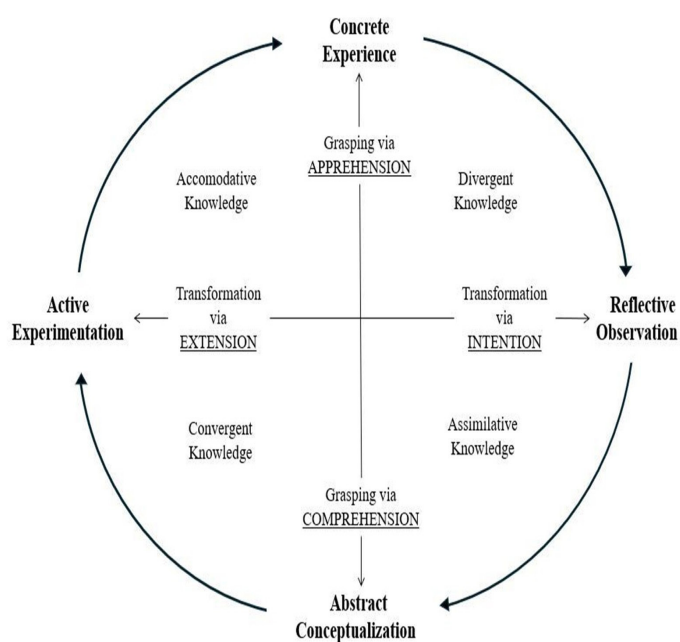


Figure 1. Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle. Adapted from Kolb (2015, p. 59).

Methodology

Qualitative primary data was collected using semi-structured interviews to understand the impact of industrial placements on soft skill development among business students. This approach, as we noted earlier, contrasts with the extant literature, which is predominantly quantitative in nature. Participants were drawn from a range of degree courses, including Human Resource Management, Logistics and Supply Chain Management, and Tourism and Events Management, and had completed their placements in a variety of organisational settings, including HR, Sales, Marketing, Events Management and Finance, both within the public and the private sector.

The research was conducted in line with the approach expected for ethical research practices. Prior to the commencement of the research, ethical approval was obtained from the University's ethics committee. Participants were provided with a detailed outline of the project, and written consent for participation and subsequent dissemination was sought and secured from each participant. In total, 12 face-to-face interviews were conducted. Initially, these interviews focused on how participants secured their placements before considering their soft skill acquisition and development. Each participant had completed or was currently completing their placement when the interview was conducted. All participants were students at the same Higher Education Institution, located in the north of England. The interviews took place in Autumn 2023 and lasted on average around an hour, with the shortest being 42 minutes and the longest 94 minutes. The outline interview schedule was shared with the participants before the interview to enable preparation and reflection, although each was also made aware that additional, follow-up questions would be asked during the encounter.

The interviews were audio-recorded and auto-transcribed, with each transcript being checked for accuracy following the interview. This approach allowed the researchers to become familiar with the data. It facilitated the development of initial manual coding, which was informed by the thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006). Each soft skill discussed previously was recognised as a theme (alongside other themes such as previous work experience or learning preferences) and then divided according to the codes assigned. In keeping with the guidance of Spiers et al. (2018), the authors discussed their initial reflections on the themes and codes assigned. Following this discussion, a further round of coding was undertaken to ensure that the codes were plausible and properly reflective of the ideas and orientations shared by the participants.

Findings and discussions

Employability among students

Tentama and Merdiaty (2020) argue that employability is important for effective career management and should be addressed by educators. Our findings show that the students' university does aim to develop employability and soft skills within the curriculum through activities like group

work, presentation tasks and consultancy projects often brokered with the assistance of a range of external clients. However, the participants observed that theory and hard-skills development continued dominating their programmes and suggested that this focus had done little to boost their employability, which supports Mainga et al.'s (2022) findings. That said, a minority of our participants did observe that some of the hard skills acquired had proved helpful in the context of their placements:

But there are certain modules that I think were a lot more useful like we did an HR law module. And that I actually used, and I knew things going into my placement, that was useful for that, especially when like, we give advice to managers and stuff. (P7)

De Prada et al. (2022) highlight the importance of extracurricular activities in developing employability and soft skills among students. Our findings confirm this and show that participants who undertook extracurricular activities found these useful as a means of a) developing soft skills like teamwork, communication, and creativity and b) demonstrating this to placement recruiters. Those who had not participated in extra-curricular activities suggested that they had found it difficult to find pastimes that matched their interests and/or inclinations. Others, perhaps more honestly, simply acknowledged that they had little real inclination to participate in extra-curricular activity. That said, it may be useful to observe that we have been unable to ascertain the extent to which this non-participation amounts to a genuine choice or is, in fact, a product of social exclusion and/or larger social anxieties.

For most participants, the placement constituted their first experience working in an office setting or a role related to their degree. Mallard (2012) suggests that work placements related to study periods are useful in the context of Higher Education because they utilise theory through practice, improving hard and soft skills in tandem. Not all participants, however, shared this viewpoint. That said, we should note that those who struggled to utilise theory through practice conceded that this outcome arose partly because they had accepted placements which had only a tangential relation to their studies.

Mallard (2012) also reminds us that placements may help individuals to decide on a career path. Our interviews suggest that, through their placement experience(s), participants had indeed formed a better idea of their desired career path. It may be useful to observe, however, that this understanding was sometimes couched in the negative since a proportion of our interviewees acknowledged that they now knew which paths they would definitely not follow post-graduation. Those who had had more positive placement experiences, however, often stayed on in part-time roles post-placement or were offered the promise of a return to a graduate position on completion of their studies.

Developing soft skills through on-the-job learning

Our study identified benefits and barriers to developing soft skills within a university setting. Most participants agreed that seminars and group projects had helped them learn how to collaborate with others; to resolve problems and to work towards shared goals, reflecting the examples and benefits of classroom-based experiential learning outlined by Chan (2022). However, applying those skills at university differed from on placement, where greater levels of formality and professionalism were required. Commenting upon the limitations of their university experience, one participant, for example, captured the essence of the problem, observing that:

No one was really much interested in them (group projects). Everyone's just interested in getting a grade from them. So, though I think in theory they develop those soft skills, I think if you actually look at it in practice, they don't do much because people barely talk. You put the PowerPoint presentation together the night before and then try and pretend like y'all know each other and present it. (P2)

Participants typically reported that their confidence had improved thanks to their placement experience. Commenting upon this, Singh and Kumar (2010) and Salas-Velasco (2021) remind us that soft skills are especially significant for graduates because so many find themselves working in fields where the hard skills that were central to their curricula simply do not apply to any meaningful extent. Some participants rationalised this outcome by offering a comparison to the technical systems they had used on placement, noting that while such systems are dynamic and are of course subject to periodic revisions, the application of soft skills would remain consistent throughout their careers.

On-the-job learning is, of course, a form of experiential learning, which can be explored through the stages and learning styles presented in Kolb's (2015) ELT. In our study, all participants agreed that they learn best by doing, although most did concede that prior exposure to 'theory' could offer a useful basis for practice. The preferred practice methods, however, differed across participants. Some, for example, were keen to practise their skills from the outset, whereas others preferred to observe and then replicate. Interestingly, one participant advocated periodic blocks of segmented training because they found initial attempts to train them on all aspects of the role to be both ineffective and overwhelming:

And then obviously, trying to initially do the whole job role at once you feel shaky and then it's harder and a slower process rather than... And that's something I did tell them because I was, especially, I think bad at picking it up and they changed the process. So, when they trained the next intern, they did do it in block training. (P10)

As we noted earlier, Truluck and Courtenay (1999) have criticised ELT for its failure to recognise that learning styles may change over time. Kolb (2015), however, has

subsequently addressed this criticism, undertaking further research, which concedes that individuals may indeed adapt their learning styles based on the learning context. In our study, changes in learning styles were apparent. Interestingly, some noted a tendency to switch learning styles as they moved between the university and the workplace.

Reflection, as Kolb (2015; Howard, 2020) makes clear, is vital for the learning process. Whilst the participants recognised the value of reflection, most undertook this activity only because it was expected and assessed by the university and/or their placement employer. Additionally, most participants agreed that they rarely reflect on their own initiative and would only address this important element of the learning cycle if they lacked motivation or encountered an especially challenging situation. However, a minority of our participants stated that they had, themselves, chosen to engage in reflective activities albeit in less formal and/or rigorous ways than advocated by Kolb (2015; Kolb & Kolb, 2009):

I think if I wasn't at university then like the need for reflection, I probably wouldn't think about it too much and stuff. I think everyone naturally reflects on their experiences anyways, though, when thinking back to something, and especially when you need to use examples and scenarios and for interviews and stuff. (P4)

Reynolds (1999), as we have seen, has criticised Kolb's use of reflective observation. Advocating a more critically reflexive account of learning, Reynolds (1999) argues that individuals (especially those from more disadvantaged groups) must work hard to understand societal stratifications and hierarchies. In our interviews, we encountered elements of this critically reflexive activity, especially when discussing culture and hierarchy. This finding is interesting because it suggests that our participants employed learning strategies in a fashion that was genuinely mindful of what Collins (2021) terms "the profane realities of the workplace".

Communication

Prior to their placements, our participants had all either secured some employment experience; had participated in sporting activities; had volunteered to some degree and/or had engaged in group projects associated with their studies, all of which promote soft skill development, as discussed by De Prada et al. (2022). All noted, however, that their placements had obliged them to rethink and to develop further their communication skills and strategies:

I did struggle a bit at the beginning, especially with talking with managers, you know, they are people who have more power than you within the organisation. So, I was easily getting stressed, whether it was talking with them on Teams or responding to their emails. (...) But, as I progressed through the placement, as I had more experience with it, I was doing it daily, so a lot of experience... So, in the later stages of my placement, I was more comfortable talking with those people. (P9)

Most participants confided that as they commenced their placements, they often felt wary about asking for help and guidance from colleagues. This is, we suggest, especially problematic because, by their own admission, most participants doubted their ability to complete routine tasks to a professional standard. For example, most doubted their ability to compose suitable email communications. In addition, one participant struggled initially due to more fundamental language barriers. All of our participants, however, reported improvements in their communication practices, partly due to building relationships with their co-workers.

Those who worked remotely (due to COVID restrictions in the main) initially struggled with online communication and reported frequent misunderstandings and miscommunications. However, these problems eased as the participants developed working relationships or, as lockdowns eased, could work in the office setting. Post-placement, the participants reported that they felt more confident with the different types of communication and reported that they had developed a range of communication strategies, which they were able to deploy depending upon context. Our participants found feedback very motivating and used this feedback as a useful guide for further improvement. That said, many also expressed a desire for more feedback and more networking opportunities between different departments or levels of staff.

Teamwork

Most participants had some prior experience of teamwork, developed through previous employment or team sports. Throughout the placement, the participants found teamwork to be crucial to the successful execution of their roles. Asked to explain how this skill had developed, our participants typically reported that they had developed their teamworking skills by learning to ask for help when resolving issues; by helping colleagues to complete tasks and – of course – by participating in team-building exercises. Even those engaged in tasks marked, apparently, by independent responsibilities, found teamwork to be an important component of their roles and chose to draw attention to situations when/where they had been given opportunities to work with others to generate new ideas and approaches:

I do prefer doing my tasks individually as it allows me to focus more on the task and what needs to be done. But I think the brainstorming part, discussing new ideas, discussing how the project is going, asking for support. I think that part of teamworking, I really enjoy. (P9)

One participant, however, suggested that such meetings should be programmed more regularly, and indeed suggested that these might be scheduled after each event or project to improve group reflection and team building:

So, I believe there should be kinda like a meeting, for example, after every single event where we discuss "this went wrong, this went amazing" and, for example, based on the things that went wrong, maybe draw some conclusions. (P3)

Problem-solving

Pre-placement, most participants felt that in their lives, they had had few serious problems to address and therefore reported that their problem-solving skills were limited. Throughout the placement, however, the participants developed their problem-solving skills, although largely by trial and error, for example, by identifying and resolving queries or system errors on an ad hoc basis. Most also acknowledged that they depended upon the support of their colleagues as they worked to develop their own problem-solving skills. Although the participants initially felt nervous when confronted with problems, each reported that they had gained confidence with practice and, what is more, felt a significant sense of achievement whenever they successfully solved a problem.

After the placement, the participants expressed greater confidence in their problem-solving abilities. Indeed, most noted that their approach had become more analytical and less dependent upon intuition:

So, it's definitely developed how I prepare to problem solve and how I walk into something and go, "Okay, what do I already know that I can apply to solving this problem?". It's not like just flapping my arms around and being stressed. It's more of going, "What do I already know? What can I apply to this? What's the best way of solving it?". (P11)

To develop these problem-solving skills further, some participants suggested that it would have been desirable to gain experience across business areas, and argued that it would be helpful in this context to participate in cross-departmental work and/or simulation exercises. Interestingly, some suggested that they would have appreciated what might be termed a stepped approach to learning, designed to increase their exposure to more challenging issues as their placement developed over time:

Maybe more challenging projects, by the end of the placement, because in the beginning, it was really challenging, but then when I learned all of that stuff, it really didn't go beyond that level of challenging. (P9)

Time management

Before the placement, most participants suggested their time management skills were somewhat limited. One participant, for example, confided that their time management capabilities had developed largely as a result of playing for a football team. This commitment, she observed, had taught her how to structure her time around the obligations associated with her training sessions and matches.

The core time management issues that participants faced on placement included a) distractions when working remotely and b) receiving considerably higher workloads than previously experienced or anticipated. These new expectations were reported as being stressful initially, although this feeling reduced as time management strategies were developed and applied. In this context,

participants reported the adoption of various tools and techniques, including using their calendar, making to-do lists or 'timeboxing'. Our participants demonstrated a level of maturity in this regard, observing that time management was crucial because it allowed them the necessary flexibility to accommodate those unexpected tasks which tend to arise throughout the course of the normal working day. Interestingly, one participant chose to enlist the help of a more experienced colleague to understand how tasks should be prioritised:

Well, I got someone who was more efficient than me doing the tasks to make a list of the order they do them and because it turned out there was things that I was prioritising, which didn't need to be done then. But there were things that needed to be done, and they'd get pushed back because there's ones that didn't actually need prioritising. (P10)

Following the placement, most stated they had a more structured approach to managing time and assignments, as compared to their previous years at university. It is almost unnecessary to add that improved time management reduced stress.

Creativity

Only some participants considered themselves creative. Indeed, those reporting this skill tended to be that small minority of our participants who enjoyed pastimes, such as photography or the performing arts. For most participants, creativity was not considered to be a crucial part of their role. The exception was limited to those working in Marketing, who voiced the belief they had more opportunities to be creative as compared to those in HR or Finance:

I was developing a reward programme, where they went "It's unlimited reign," and I went "Brilliant. Let's be creative". And then I promptly got told "We didn't mean unlimited reign. We meant unlimited reign in the bureaucratic sense of "it can be that or that but you get to choose which". And I was like, "Right, okay, this isn't the same as what I mean as creative". (P2)

One participant who had worked as a data analyst, however, suggested that they had developed creativity skills by learning how to present data and by being allowed to develop solutions to client problems:

So, I think it was creativity more in the sense of coming up with original solutions to a problem, you know, so every request, every project, it was different. It was a different data set, or at least different parts of the data set were needed, you know, so, understanding what you need, understanding how you approach it, there was creativity in that. And there is also the visualisation part in data analysis, where you have to basically choose what type of graph you use, what colours you use. (P9)

Those who had only very limited opportunities to develop and exercise creativity lamented this outcome and suggested the need to offer additional projects or simulations to allow some greater freedom of choice and action in their placement tasks.

In our concluding comments, we will offer a summary of our paper, and we will tease out practice and policy implications, which we suggest flow from our analysis.

Concluding comments

This study contributes to developing the literature on learning and employability in the context of Higher Education in the UK. Our study is distinctive because, where most studies are quantitative, we have employed qualitative methods to explore, in some detail, the placement experiences of students.

We have chosen to focus upon acquiring and developing a set of soft skills, generally accepted as being crucial to employability. These soft skills, we have argued, matter because recruiters recognise *and* value them in the context of graduate employment and because few graduates find themselves in forms of employment that build squarely and directly upon the hard skills developed in their studies. Furthermore, we have observed that these soft skills are important to imminent graduates because their absence reduces employment opportunities, obliging job searchers to accept forms of employment that do not fully reflect their educational attainment. This latter outcome is, of course, sub-optimal for the graduate and indeed counter-productive for universities, who are, amongst other metrics, now ranked according to their graduate employment outcomes.

To generate insights on the acquisition and development of soft skills among placement students that might usefully guide practice and policy, we have examined the experiences of a sample of business students. Our analysis confirms that from the students' perspective, abstract theorisation and 'hard skills' continue to dominate the business studies curriculum. Our research also suggests that students feel that this focus limits the opportunity to acquire and to exercise the complementary, soft skills necessary to enhance employability. It would be trite, however, simply, to suggest that those charged with teaching and with curriculum development should now work to enable students to develop their soft skills because it is clear that the skills necessary to secure this outcome may not be properly present across the existing faculty body. In addition, we should concede that faculty members are now accountable for a range of metrics beyond employability and so may feel conflicted by any simplistic call for change in the curriculum. Indeed, it is important to acknowledge that those faculty members who feel themselves (for a variety of reasons) to be primarily accountable for their research outputs and who may themselves fear for their future employability within the HE sector may simply lack the commitment required to revise the curriculum and their practices to ensure appropriate levels of soft skill development among the student body.

Putting this, perhaps more plainly, we suggest that in the absence of broader change and support, the soft skill development of students (which most would accept is vital) may remain patchy and somewhat half-hearted if existing faculty members are obliged to fall back upon their own resources. This limitation, however, should not be read as suggesting that nothing may be done to improve graduate employability in this context. For example, those faculty members who (for a variety of reasons) question their capability to develop soft skills within the student body may choose to partner with others beyond the university and in so doing may assure some level of soft skill development by inviting private, public and third sector organisations to provide consulting projects and/or 'live briefs' for students. Yet, while voicing this (fairly obvious) suggestion, we will add another important caveat. Thus, we should concede that the management of activities designed to elevate and enhance soft skill development may need to become more hands-on within universities to ensure student engagement. In this context, it would be interesting to understand just how many 'enhancement' events University staff have organised and later cancelled due to a lack of student interest?

Recognising widespread and persistent problems associated with student engagement, we suggest that universities may wish to consider expanding their 'student success' teams and may wish to consider funding coaches and mentors to work in tandem with academic tutors to cement student engagement in those activities designed to develop soft skills.

Turning to consider the placement experience itself: Our research highlights feelings of stress, low confidence and, more generally, a sense of unpreparedness among placement students. While recognising persistent issues associated with student engagement, we suggest that universities should make greater efforts to prepare those going on placement for the challenges associated with the roles that they will fulfil. In this context, we suggest that universities may wish to consider investing in coaching qualifications for a proportion of students returning to their studies from placement. This investment, we suggest, would help to develop an improved understanding of soft skills within the student body and would create a vanguard of student activists who might encourage their contemporaries to understand a) the legitimacy and limitations of their preferred learning styles and b) the immediate and long-term benefits associated with an investment in soft skill development.

While advocating that more should be done to prepare (business) students for the culture shock of professional employment, we also suggest that, within the placement itself, employers should work to offer (stepped) opportunities for growth and development, designed to allow students to rise to new challenges and opportunities. In this respect, it may be timely to remind employers that the placement is, in essence, a much-extended interview which allows students to grow (up) at work. In other words, placement providers need to recognise that properly planned periods of work experience will reward those employers who are prepared to nurture the very obvious, if latent, talents of our youth.

Our study of course has limitations. Whilst our study focuses on the importance of soft skills among business students, we recognise that soft skills are equally important within industries such as healthcare, education, hospitality, social work or the creative industries. Accordingly, we encourage future studies within these contexts.

We acknowledge too, that the research we have undertaken is firmly located within the UK context. Further cross-national comparison and analysis, therefore, is indicated and would certainly be useful. Furthermore, we concede that our study is based on a small sample of students drawn from a university that is recognised as being fully engaged in widening participation activities. Recognising that placement opportunities often vary with and depend upon those social and family connections that tend to be reduced to the shorthand expression, 'cultural capital', it may be instructive to repeat our research with a larger sample and with students drawn from a similar, widening participation institution. Equally, we suggest that there would be merit in repeating our research with students drawn from backgrounds that may be richer in cultural capital and/or with students from different faculties, where placements are also common, such as engineering or nursing.

In addition, we should also acknowledge that while our focus upon five key soft skills is both reasonable and grounded in the extant literature, our preferred soft skill set is far from being either comprehensive or exhaustive. Given this it may be helpful to examine, through further research, the extent to which skills associated with, say, resilience, adaptability and cultural awareness (see Clough et al., 2020; Ng et al., 2024; Rudolph et al., 2023; Waring, 2024) are a) priorities for graduate recruiters and b) reported by placement participants as significant elements of their experience, learning and practice.

It is also important to note that our respondents had little meaningful exposure to AI in their placements. Consequently, issues associated with AI use are peripheral to our study. Yet, given the increasing centrality of this tool and its pace of development, it is surely obvious that future research on graduate skill development should work to consider the ways AI use impacts the acquisition, articulation and development of soft skills.

Finally, we suggest that there may be scope for further research utilising alternative qualitative methods designed to explore the lived experience of work placement activity more fully. To this end, we suggest that work placement tutors (and others) might work to support their students in developing accounts of their employment experiences that utilise the methods associated with ethnography, autoethnography, and participant observation. Such approaches, we suggest, would be particularly illuminating because they might enable the exploration of critical reflexivity in the learning cycle and in so doing might surface issues related to stereotyping and discrimination that are, we suggest, under-developed within current debates on learning and employability in higher education.

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