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RESEARCH ARTICLE



# Students' and graduates' perspectives on skill development in higher education

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## ABSTRACT

The transition from higher education to employment is increasingly competitive, requiring graduates to possess more than academic qualifications. This study explores UK students' and graduates' perspectives on skill development within higher education institutions. Through semi-structured interviews with 10 students and 7 employed graduates, thematic analysis identified key themes regarding skill acquisition, employability challenges, and institutional support. Students highlighted difficulties in recognising and transferring soft skills such as communication and time management, often citing a lack of explicit teaching methods and practical application opportunities. Work placements and extracurricular activities emerged as vital for developing workplace readiness, yet accessibility and engagement varied. Graduates reflected on the disconnect between university education and workplace expectations, emphasising the importance of independent learning and industry-specific training. Career services, networking opportunities, and employer engagement were perceived as beneficial but underutilised. The study underscores the necessity for higher education institutions to enhance skill integration within curricula, increase awareness of employability resources, and foster stronger links between academia and industry. By addressing these gaps, institutions can better prepare students for the evolving demands of the labour market.

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Skills development;  
graduates; higher education;  
student; employability

## Introduction

With recent figures suggesting the number of students far exceeding available jobs in the market (James et al. 2013), job searching has become increasingly difficult over time (Thirunavukarasu et al. 2020; Yong and Ling 2022). It is therefore essential, now more than ever, that applicants possess more than a qualification to stand out against the competition. Therefore, the aim of this study is to explore students' and graduates' perspectives

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on skill development in UK higher education to assess whether institutions are effectively preparing students for the workforce.

To provide conceptual grounding, this study draws on established employability frameworks, most notably Yorke's (2006) definition of employability as 'a set of achievements, skills, understandings and personal attributes that make graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations' and the CareerEDGE model (Pool and Sewell 2007). The CareerEDGE framework conceptualises employability as a combination of career development learning, work experience, degree subject knowledge, generic skills, and emotional intelligence, underpinned by self-efficacy, self-confidence, and reflection. By adopting this framework, the present study evaluates whether these components are sufficiently developed in higher education and how they translate into workplace readiness.

In particular, there is an increasing value put on transferable and soft skills due to the high level of skills shortages related to this area (Stewart, Wall, and Marciniak 2016). A majority of childhood into early adulthood is spent within the education system, and there is an expectation that graduates are equipped with efficient knowledge to thrive in the workplace. Despite this, studies have shown that graduates significantly lack the necessary skills needed in the professional world and are therefore not 'work ready' (Jackling and Natoli 2015; Phan, Yapa, and Nguyen 2020). This may be because what is expected of them in education is substantially different from workplace requirements (Wang and Tsai 2014). The CareerEDGE model offers a useful lens to interrogate this misalignment, particularly in identifying which dimensions of employability are underdeveloped and why. As such, there are emerging questions as to whether higher education providers are giving students the right opportunities to foster their professional skills and provide a seamless transition into the workforce. While higher education institutions traditionally focus on subject-specific knowledge, employers increasingly prioritise graduates who demonstrate communication skills, critical thinking, problem-solving abilities, and adaptability (Jackling and Natoli 2015; Pang et al. 2019). Despite efforts by universities to embed employability skills into curricula through placements, career services, and work-integrated learning (Kornelakis and Petrakaki 2020), graduates often report a disconnect between their educational experiences and workplace expectations (Rothman 2017; Wang and Tsai 2014).

Although academic attainment reflects a certain level of skill and capability, it is evident that this does not solely dictate workplace success. De Lange et al. (2022) found that students who studied at post-graduate level had just as much difficulty accessing the accounting labour market as those who had studied at undergraduate level. Results showed a commonality between all levels of graduates where a lack of social and cultural capital was present. Education providers must expand their focus beyond technical knowledge and create opportunities whereby students can cultivate a wider range of skills. In another study, a training provider identified a need for students to develop skills related to business acculturation, handling unfamiliar problems and communication skills (Jackling and Natoli 2015); these themes are present across the literature (e.g. Clokie and Fourie 2016; Soundararajan, Ravikumar, and Aro-Gordon 2020). There is an apparent need for students to be introduced to skills to help navigate the professional world and this is on a global level. A key challenge in skill development is students' own awareness and perception of

employability skills. McManus and Rook (2019) found that students often undervalue the importance of work-ready skills in their education, whereas academics and employers consider them critical for career success. This misalignment highlights the need for higher education institutions to not only offer employability-focused initiatives but also actively encourage student engagement with these opportunities (Gonzales 2017).

Providing opportunities for students to observe and learn the rules and conduct of the workplace is a preferred approach to developing these essential soft skills (Herbert et al. 2020; Rothman 2017). Employers emphasise the importance of students engaging in placement years as it provides opportunity for them to 'assimilate practice with theory' (Pang et al. 2019, 64), exposing them to workplace challenges and preparing them accordingly. Some believe that universities do not necessarily provide adequate preparation for employment (Rothman 2017). Although academic records and skills are important, employers want to hire those who display the ability to critically think and handle difficult situations appropriately (Eldeen et al. 2018; Okeke-Uzodike and Naude 2018; Soundararajan, Ravikumar, and Aro-Gordon 2020). Considering graduates with some form of work experience are typically favoured by employers and are more likely to survive and succeed in the job market (Eldeen et al. 2018). Therefore, education providers have started to promote placement opportunities as a part of their course structure. In particular, there is an increasing incorporation of work-integrated learning and small-group activities, which can help bridge the gap between graduates' skills and labour market needs (König, Juric, and Koprivnjak 2016; Kornelakis and Petrakaki 2020). Additionally, disparities exist in how skills are developed across different educational environments. While universities provide structured learning experiences, students often attribute much of their soft skill development to extracurricular activities, part-time work, and placements (Maran and Shekar 2015; Nghia 2018).

Okeke-Uzodike and Naude (2018) suggested that although graduates may appear work-ready, there is often an additional need for employers to further develop their skills. Specifically, graduates tend to present all the technical skills needed within the profession, with little confidence in their ability to critically analyse and think, and problem solve (Otermans et al., 2023; Overton and Rayner 2016; Sarkar et al. 2016). That said, Maran and Shekar's (2015) study found that university students do possess better self-management, higher order thinking, and problem-solving skills compared to students at engineering college, suggesting that to an extent, universities do have the competency to enable more than technical skills in students. However, the way in which they do this may not be reflective of professional expectations. Universities tend to develop skills in a highly classroom-focused way, meaning there is a lack of opportunity for students to apply this to the workplace. The disconnect between the aims of education providers and the industry needs perhaps stems from education being founded on acquiring set knowledge, whereas the realities of employment require the application of knowledge and flexibility in doing so. Therefore, even if employability skills are learned within the classroom, they may not be readily transferable to the workplace (Rothman 2017). It is therefore important that stronger communication is facilitated between employers and education providers so industry values are reflected in the curriculum and implemented within teaching methods (Hesketh 2000; Soundararajan, Ravikumar, and Aro-Gordon

2020). By doing so, students will become more acquainted with workplace skills, requirements and professional acumen (Abdullah-Al-Mamun 2012; Nghia 2018).

There are signs of further disconnect between academics and students. Even with attempts to integrate more work-based methods into their teaching, educators may fail to convey the importance of developing transferable skills to their students. McManus and Rook (2019) found that students did not view work-ready skills as overly important to their progression in their learning. They found disparity as academics rated employability and skills and self-management as the most important skills to prepare students for the workplace; however, students rated these significantly less important. Employers note that graduates tend to enter the market with unrealistic expectations (Succi and Canovi 2020), which may be explained by the fact that education providers are not effectively highlighting to their students what is needed in the professional world. Collaboration between employers and education providers will therefore become ineffective if there is not successful communication between educators and their students. Employability frameworks are therefore not only useful for diagnosing these gaps but also for shaping institutional strategies and policy responses. By situating students' and graduates' perspectives within such theoretical models, this study contributes to understanding how existing frameworks align with lived experiences and where they may require adaptation. This theoretical grounding also informs the study's discussion and implications, offering insights for both practice (curriculum design, employer engagement) and theory (refinement of employability constructs). This paper aims to understand the perception university students and recent graduates have on their transferable skills, particularly where they feel these have been developed. In this study we focus on the UK market and education system as that is the one the authors are most familiar with. In this paper we explore three main ideas:

- (1) What skills do students and graduates feel they developed whilst in university?
- (2) What is the difference in skill development between university and the workplace?
- (3) Have universities adequately prepared graduates for their career?

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

A total of 10 UK students and 7 employed graduates who had graduated in the UK were interviewed for the study. Students consisted of those who were completing their first undergraduate degree, or postgraduate degree within a year of completing their undergraduate. Employed graduates were those who had graduated from a UK university within the last 3 years and had obtained permanent employment. Participant demographics and areas of studies are detailed in Table 1 (students) and Table 2 (graduates). Two participants had only graduated in the month of the interview, therefore were included in the student cohort. One participant was completing a part-time master's degree alongside their full-time employment, so was added to the graduate cohort. Recruitment took place via social media advertisement, mainly through LinkedIn between July 2022 and February 2023. Participants could indicate their interest to take part in the

**Table 1.** Demographic information of students.

Number	Duration	Gender	University	Programme of study	Level of study
1	00:34:21	Female	Brunel University London	Music	Year 2
2	00:51:39	Female	Brunel University London	Psychology	Year 4
3	00:56:04	Female	Brunel University London	Psychology	Year 4
4	00:55:11	Female	Kings College London	History and international relations	Year 2
5	00:54:47	Male	Brunel University London	Business computing	Year 4
6	00:55:40	Female	University College London	History	Year 3
7	00:43:53	Female	University College London	Maths with Economics	Year 3
8	00:57:10	Female	University College London	Education and Technology	Masters – Year 1
9	00:26:43	Female	University of Surrey	Accounting and Finance	Foundation year
10	00:56:11	Female	Goldsmiths University	Clinical and cognitive neuroscience	Masters – year 1

**Table 2.** Demographic information about graduates.

Number	Duration	Gender	University	Programme of study	Industry of work
1	01:03:01	Male	University of Warwick	Computer science	Technology graduate Developer
2	00:29:48	Female	Brunel University London	Psychology	Assistant therapist
3	01:15:48	Female	Brunel University London	Psychology	Accountancy and Outsourcing Recruitment Consultant
4	01:02:41	Female	University of Bristol	Sociology	Civil service
5	01:05:00	Female	Brunel University London	Psychology	Learning support assistant
6	00:36:33	Female	Arden University	Criminology & Psychology	Probation Service Officer
7	00:49:56	Female	Brunel University London (BSc); Queen Mary (MSc)	BSc Psychology Ms Psychological	Technical instructor

study through LinkedIn posts and were subsequently contacted by the research team to schedule the online interview at a mutually convenient time.

## Data collection method

Data was collected using one-to-one semi-structured interviews to encourage a free flow of thoughts and expression of views. The interviews were conducted over Microsoft Teams or Zoom. Different interview schedules were used for student and graduate participants to reflect the difference in experiences of education and employment. The student interview consisted of four topics: General information, university experience, experience outside of university, and confidence. Interviews with graduates had a similar approach, however included an additional topic related to employment which came before the final topic (confidence). Some example questions are provided in [Table 3](#) (students) and [Table 4](#) (graduates). The core

**Table 3.** Example questions for students.

Question Topic	Question Example
General Information	What course are you enrolled in?
University	What methods of teaching does your course use (for example, lectures, workshops, seminars, practical's)?
Experience outside of university	Have you been involved in any extracurricular activities?
Confidence in skills	How successfully do you think you are able to transfer the skills you have across different workplace environments?

**Table 4.** Example questions for graduates.

Question Topic	Question Example
General Information	How long ago did you graduate?
University	What methods of assessment did your course use?
Experience outside of university	How well do you feel you knew the technical skills needed for your chosen industry prior to starting university?
Job search	How long after completing university did you start looking for jobs?
Confidence in skills	How successfully do you think you are able to transfer the skills you have across different workplace environments?

focus of the interview was the understanding of the awareness of skills development of these students and graduates, how they perceived their higher education to develop these skillsets, and how effectively their institutions prepared them for the workforce.

### Data analysis

Interviews were transcribed verbatim and analysed using thematic analysis following the steps of (Braun and Clarke 2006). The transcripts were read and open coding was used – this was done by one member of the team. These codes were discussed by the wider research team and themes were generated. The team discussed the themes and finalised them together. Two themes were generated for the student participants and three themes were generated for the graduate participants.

### Procedure and ethics

Ethics approval to conduct the study was received from the authors' educational institution (Ref: 30,297-LR-Mar/2021- 31,786–1). Prior to the interview, participants were emailed a participant sheet fully informing them of the purpose and process of the study. Participants were informed they could withdraw their participation at any point without penalty. Participants were given the opportunity to ask questions about the study and their participation before they signed the consent form. At the end of the interview, participants were given a debrief form.

### Analysis and discussion: students

This section will describe the results of the thematic analysis. For each theme, the analytic narrative will be provided followed by a discussion of the findings of that theme with the literature. Two themes were identified in the thematic analysis from the students' interviews: *Challenges faced* and *Developing skills*. *Challenges faced* refers to the students' perception about university, barriers they faced, and how their soft skills allowed them to overcome these difficulties. It includes three subthemes: *Transferring skills*, *Communication*, and *Time management*. *Developing skills* relates to how various environments have allowed students to acquire soft skills and whether that has differed between environments. This theme includes four subthemes: *School*, *University*, *Workplace*, and *Responsibility*.

## Theme: challenges faced

This theme explores the journey and struggles of students' transferring their soft skills to professional surroundings. A prominent recurrence was the lack of understanding as to what soft skills are and its importance for their future careers:

'I don't know how to demonstrate my soft skills, or I struggle understanding which soft skill I'm I need or I'm developing'. (PS7, l.421–422)

Student 7 expressed not feeling adequately prepared in displaying, or identifying, the skills they have. The lack of confidence alludes to the fact there has been little guidance from educators as to what skills are needed or how it is being developed within the curriculum. Despite the students acknowledging the variety of learning and assessment methods used, such as weekly readings, seminars, discussion, and dissertation, they have implied this has added little to their skillset:

'rest of the work seems a very passive and very Just quite long with very little outcome'. (PS4, l.133)

This information could be interpreted in two ways. It could signify that education providers are not using teaching methods to allow the acquisition of transferable skills. However, as Student 7 suggested, it may be that when soft skills are not being taught explicitly, students often do not recognise when it is being developed. Students had repeatedly suggested that placements and extracurricular activities were valuable experiences to acquire soft skills useful for the workplace. Questions therefore arise as to whether students would benefit from integrated methods to naturally develop their skills with the learning environment, or whether more explicit methods, such as placements, should be used so the process to developing the skills are identifiable.

The quality of teaching was another factor barring students from developing these skills. It is evident in the responses that the quality of skill development was dependent on the expertise of the lecturer and the approach they took:

'I think the thing is with problem solving classes were really useful, but the fact that they were PhD students and not the professor itself uhm was not as useful because the tutor had a complete, maybe completely different, approach'. (PS7, l.126–128)

Being that university lecturers have extensive experience within their field, they are able to provide industry-specific context to the teaching of soft skills compared to PhD students. This renders initiatives, such as the implementation of problem-solving classes, ineffective if it is not skilfully taught. Students also mentioned the teaching environment, specifically size of the cohort, can make the development of skills more difficult. Having large cohorts has its challenges such as lack of student discussions or reluctance to ask questions:

'I feel like people are shy or people including myself like it's difficult to gauge or gain that kind of exciting, productive conversation'. (PS4, l.201–203)

Smaller class sizes will not only counter the problem of participation reluctance but could also help facilitate more group-based activities to develop their team working skills, which students do not feel they are able to do. Participants believe that lecturers need to

encourage an environment where students can feel free to have 'productive conversations' without hesitance:

'I think the lecturers do need to try quite hard to encourage that kind of environment'. (PS4, I.204)

Some universities have tried to counter this through the addition of smaller sized seminars to supplement students' knowledge and hone in on skills that cannot be developed within lectures. But as previously Student 7 implied, the aim of these classes is sometimes unsuccessful if not taught by a professional.

### ***Subtheme: transferring skills***

This sub theme describes how soft skills were used in different environments and enabled the students' growth. Many of the responses indicate a struggle in transferring soft skills, mainly due to the distinctiveness between the university and workplace environment:

'when I came into the organisation, I was like ohh this is how these moving pieces like move together but um I didn't really know how a business was run'. (PS5, I.118–119)

Being in the workplace environment provides real opportunities for students to practise their skills, which cannot be as effectively replicated within the classroom. Including work experience opportunities in the degree programme allowed the students to understand the requirements of the business place and practice skills they lacked confidence in:

'I think there's been growth, but the progress has just been very slow'. (PS5, I.552–553)

Student 4 also expressed difficulty in knowing how to demonstrate their skills in new situations:

'I do get a bit stuck with transferring my skills and I have to recentre myself'. (PS4, I.792–793)

It is probable that this is due to students not being exposed to situations outside of their comfort zone, therefore, not allowing them to experience new situations. As they are kept within their comfort at university, there is an apparent lack of self-confidence in the students being able to navigate the professional environment:

'it was my first experience, so I was very nervous I didn't have any confidence, to be honest'. (PS2, I.116–117)

Not only did they feel they did not have adequate experience, but it also appears the university provided little preparation to inform students what to expect. However, this has also allowed students to build autonomy and become self-starters. Student 8 admitted that the little one-to-one input from their lecturers allowed them to become pro-active in their learning, stating:

'I guess like being a lot more resourceful and being a lot more independent'. (PS8, I.153–154)

As discussed previously, some students perceived the lack of personal focus university gave as a hindrance to their progression, however some have also stated that this has

been useful in building their independence. Unintentionally, university can naturally build autonomy within its students, which is valued by employers (Henri et al., 2018).

Regarding successful transition in employment, literature suggests increased academic supervision, teamwork opportunities, and chances to develop project management skills could be implemented. Some graduates have expressed appreciating a mentor to support in activities and discussions (Crebert et al., 2004). Gilpin-Jackson & Bushe's (2007) findings revealed that the transfer of skills is dependent on the environment. Trainees had begun to transfer their skills when they observed other people doing so. This means the transference of skills may not be a natural process but is helped through seeing other people demonstrate the skills in practice.

### ***Subtheme: confidence***

The willingness of students to push themselves to engage in unfamiliar situations has contributed to them developing confidence in their skills which is the second subtheme. Placements not only gave students' knowledge of the workplace and consolidation of their soft skills, but it also provided valuable opportunities for students to interact with different people:

'I experienced a lot of different I knew how to approach different people'. (PS2, l.343–344)

Student 2 further states that:

'I'm interacting with individuals that I've never interacted with before, so I had to be able to speak clearly articulate myself clearly get my support across as well' (PS2, l.435–436)

... owing her increased confidence in communication to her exposure to various people whilst on her placement.

Confidence is the foundation of all soft skills and can be compared to a chain of effect. If you're not confident, often you will find that you are unable to communicate in a clear manner which is an essential skill for all employments. Participants are bound to feel nervous and sometimes even not confident in themselves during interviews. Student 2 compared their experience of having an interview for their first placement at short notice. They mention having been notified in short notice implying that there was a lack of preparation on their side therefore affecting their confidence overall:

'it was my first experience, so I was very nervous I didn't have any confidence to be honest'. (PS2, l.116–117)

Having been put in different situations and doing different roles within placements encourages and gives students the opportunity to reflect and think of ways on how to improve. They state:

'I definitely developed my confidence'. (PS2, l.118)

Research by Beaumont, Gedye, and Richardson (2016) has shown that students' confidence in gaining employment decreased in confidence in their ability to gain employment due to competition, experience, degree quality, location, economy and confidence in themselves. Scott et al. (2019) noted that confidence is a key factor in empowering

students in gaining employment post-graduation. Part of this is giving students the opportunity to practice their time management skills (Pool and Sewell 2007).

### ***Subtheme: time management skills***

Given the fast-paced nature of the working environment, employees must be able to prioritise tasks to meet deadlines which is the next subtheme. Students are often given various tasks throughout their studies (i.e. essays, lab work, projects) with the expectation of timely completion. This makes them aware of the importance in staying organised:

'saying oh what am I doing this week kind of prepares you for the week beforehand and I think it's extremely extremely worthwhile for a lot of people'. (PS2, I.658–660)

Due to the increase of time-bound work, final year students, specifically, get to develop their ability to tactfully organise their time:

"I think that was very key in my final year I feel like em planning ahead. (PS2, I.618–619)

In addition to handling deadlines, students must deal with the challenges of carrying out independent research to fill in the gaps of their incomplete knowledge, only adding to their pressure. This is useful as employers appreciate those who are able to work under pressure and handle new challenges as it is expected that employees know how to cope with stress and react when pressured.

Employers' expectations have changed drastically over time. Where demonstrating competent hard skills were crucial in job success and soft skills were a 'nice to have' decades ago, soft skills are now the main predictor in job advancements and promotions (Schulz, 2021). Without proper guidance from universities, graduates are left unprepared to enter the workforce. The student responses show a clear insight into the fact some had little knowledge of what transferable skills and soft skills looked like within the work context. This view is supported by McManus and Rook's (2019) study which found students had not placed much importance on the development of their soft skills. However, those who did recognise its importance had acquired more work-ready skills upon graduation. Universities are failing to bridge the gap between education and employment when they do not emphasise the need for employability skills to their students. Having large lecture groups was a concern in some of the student responses as they felt this halted the pace of their development. In addition, some academics lack understanding as to what integration of transferable and soft skills within the curriculum looks like.

Teaching soft skills does not require the creation of a new syllabus, but rather incorporating opportunities for development within classroom tasks and assignments (Ngang et al., 2015). For example, Moore and Pearson (2017) suggested that the use of challenge questions can help develop several soft skills: problem-solving, analysis, and evaluation. This is enabled through presenting a question to real-life problems alongside a description of the situation and data they need to help solve the problem. The students are tasked with providing solutions to the question through research. In doing this, their comprehension, knowledge application and evaluation are challenged. This can also be facilitated within groups to encourage team working, which will enable more 'productive

conversations' between students, as one student mentioned there was a lack of these within lectures.

More meaningful training and opportunities should be given to improve skill development, especially considering students identified training as well as reduced confidence, shyness and nervousness as a barrier to their skills (Majid et al., 2019). Providing students with knowledge of transferring skills to varied environments will enable them to successfully venture out and become ready to face potential challenges in the corporate world (Rani & Mangala, 2010). However, teaching students these skills does not guarantee successful transference to employment situations as it was found that students find it challenging to use the valuable skills learned during education during mock interviews (Hirsch, 2017). Some also struggle to identify skills that have been developed outside of an academic or professional environment; those who did, however, did not know how to communicate these during mock interviews. The transference of skills therefore poses as much of a problem as the actual acquisition of skills.

### **Theme: developing skills**

This theme refers to students developing skills in different environments from schools, university, placements, and the workplace.

#### ***Subtheme: school***

This subtheme of schools explores the skills students had developed and their views on skills development during school before entering university. Students were taught skills like communication, time management and organisation vaguely during secondary school, but they were inattentive about learning these soft skills as it was not a priority:

'I think until you go somewhere and have to do that stuff, you know you don't you don't really know what it really involves and how to do it'. (PS10, l.616–618)

Their outlook towards life had drastically changed during their education due to entering the next phase in their life. After secondary school, most students choose to continue with education, therefore workplace skills are not deemed important. However, after university, students will be transitioning to the professional world and, therefore, start to reflect on their readiness to enter the market:

'general mindset has grown'. (PS3, l.157)

Although secondary schools provided some career support, students' responses indicate they were not pushed enough to seek professional opportunities. Some schools made use of career advisors, however this sometimes resulted in negative results:

'the meetings that they'd have were not at all useful or motivating whatsoever'. (PS3, l.360)

It appears the initiatives offered by schools were short-term as meetings with career advisors were often one-off, and placement opportunities only lasted a week. There is a lack of continuity with the attempts made by secondary schools to upskill their students, leaving little room for meaningful development. There is research that suggests that high schools or secondary schools could do better in terms of teaching students employability

skills (Jessiman et al. 2022; Robson, Randhawa, and Keep 2022). This is particularly true when considering socio-economic disadvantages as some of these students might be first generation going into higher education (Riordan 2022).

### ***Subtheme: university***

University was an unfamiliar environment for students and was often nerve-wracking. This subtheme explores the skills students develop during their time at university. They had to self-manage their time, build relationships with their flatmates, and show social awareness whilst interacting with people from various backgrounds. Student 3 states:

'I wasn't comfortable. I was kind of on my toes'. (PS3, l.69)

University allowed students to strengthen the skills they had acquired during secondary school, mainly due to them having to navigate the new environment alone, both socially and academically:

'I think being independent, communicating and then being more proactive, all of that stuff, I think was way more like enhanced'. (PS3, l.238–239)

The encouragement of placement years also proved invaluable with providing students insight into what they must possess for workplace success. Students who engaged in placement years were satisfied with the experience and knowledge they had acquired:

'I feel like placement was such a good way for me to get the skills understand . . . what's useful and kind of basically develop them and strengthen my own skills'. (PS2, l.592–595)

Even students who had not opted for or were not offered placements recognised its importance for their professional development and it is therefore important for universities to highlight the benefits of making use of these opportunities. Students who received guidance from their universities felt they were well prepared for what they needed to demonstrate to employers:

'I feel quite happy with how my university has prepared me in terms of gaining all these skills'. (PS3, l.409–410)

Lecturers had also emphasised the importance of students demonstrating their professional experience through stressing that:

'actions speak louder than words'. (PS3, l.157)

Professional development centres had provided a place whereby students felt they were able to seek additional help. Specifically, these departments helped with CV writing and personal statements, tailored to the individual and the job role:

'very helpful getting erm as in like for my CV I didn't know I could ask for support like that'. (PS2, l.487–488)

Responses indicate that the university provided informal skill development, due to the nature of the university environment, but also included purposeful initiatives to encourage their skills. In other research, it was also found that students had reported that

universities had improved their knowledge around CV writing and their professionalism (Gonzales 2017).

### ***Subtheme: workplace***

Workplace is the third subtheme and relates to workplace experience students have or gain during their studies. Empathy is important in almost any part of life. Within employment, it allows an individual to connect with colleagues and clients and is an important part of handling sensitive situations and becoming a balanced communicator so that kind of skill of being, putting them first and communicating. This was shown by Student 2 who said:

'I became very empathetic and understanding and I realised how I present myself, how I say things, how I come across'. (PS2, I.736–738)

Both verbal and non-verbal communication contributed to the impression made and was an indicator of a students' readiness for the work environment:

'because I think communication is not a face value thing ... the way you present yourself I think that is a form of communication'. (PS2, I.08, 715–716)

Being exposed to everyday work situations during their placements helped them build the skills to handle difficult situations and adapt:

'a lot of them tend to mask which is it's very hard to recognize, but it's something that you need like you need to slowly get used to, which is it still taking me time'. (PS3, I.290–291)

This student was specifically discussing their placement working with neurodiverse students, which allowed them to become more emotionally supportive and gave them an idea of what skills they needed for future employment in that specific industry.

This further emphasises why students benefit from industry-specific workplace experience prior to graduating. Insights like this is what 'sells' the graduate to the employer as they can demonstrate that their experience aligns with the values of an organisation. Students, therefore, feel motivated during their placement as they believe it will improve their academic performance (Duignan, 2005) and future career prospects. Students are fairly sheltered from the working world during their academic journey, which is why getting real-life experience was a main reason students opted for placements. The importance of undertaking a placement has been evident in the literature too. Shury et al. (2017) found that 96% of graduates will still undertake a placement if they were to repeat their degree, reinforcing its use in giving accurate insight into the workforce and, as such, preparing students. Whilst skills can be developed in different contexts, such as work and educational institutes, the extent to which they can be developed can vary and engaging in work experience provides more well-rounded development (Shury et al., 2017).

**Subtheme: responsibility**

In order to start upskilling students, identifying who should be responsible for these needs to first be determined which is what is explored in this final subtheme. Students must use the tools they have been provided to take initiative for their own success:

'I can't develop your soft skills I can tell you that if you do this will most likely develop but it's your responsibility to find out'. (PS2, l.782–785)

The students found it necessary to step out of their comfort zone and challenge themselves in order to realise their capabilities:

'every opportunity that came out the way I had to grab it and um that also elevated my growth um also helped me a lot'. (PS5, l.139–140)

Some also highlighted the difficulty for students to know what exactly they needed for the workplace if they have never experienced it, putting the onus on university and employers to impart that knowledge':

'I think the uni should have a responsibility promoting things that would help them much better in a way that's more tailored to young adults'. (PS3, l.771–773)

Students repeatedly mention that university embeds soft skills a lot more in the curriculum compared to sixth form. Both education institutions attempt to include soft skills in the curriculum, but university does it more efficiently. At university group work is encouraged during lectures and seminars and there are a lot of opportunities for students to collaborate whilst sixth form makes group work optional. Student 3 states:

'It was very much like oh you guys can work together if you want like it, was an option. It was never like no. You need to do it'. (PS3, l. 618–619)

University aims to provide students with knowledge and awareness of what transferable skills are by including a compulsory module all about professional development. In contrast, students feel that schools do not play a role in students' skill development. Student 5 mentioned lack of support from schools which they hoped to have received:

'I think it would be really good if schools helped you develop your soft skills'. (PS5, l.561–562)

This may be due to students being young to understand skill development.

To conclude, you can get support from various places from your parents, universities, even from the employers but it is you who must make the effort to reach out for support. From using career services to challenging yourself to practise skills you are struggling with. Student 5 states:

"the reality of life is like you've gotta want it yourself. you gotta make those opportunities for yourself. You have to learn and put yourself out of your comfort zone". (PS5, l.558–560)

Possessing and using soft skills within the workplace is now becoming a standard expectation from employers compared to previous years (Succi and Canovi 2020). Students are now showing awareness of the value these skills have on their employment prospects and a lot believe their communication is the most developed, which is useful as this is an 'imperative skill professional must have' (Vera & Tejada, 2020).

In the present study, students had expressed how communication, particularly whilst displaying emotional sensitivity, had been greatly developed during their work experience and was a skill which was important to the success of their job role. Graduates are therefore entering the market with increased awareness of what the industry requires. Employers have suggested that graduates enter the field unaware of the business culture, due to having little experience in that environment (Succi and Canovi 2020; Qizi, 2020). Being able to practise skills within a work environment helps students make sense of the skills they have learned within the classroom. For example, Martin et al., (2010) found that even though graduates had understood the importance of teamwork, there was a lack of confidence working in a team during the commencement of their employment. There was a difference between working as a team during university and within the professional environment.

Other than encouraging students to engage in placement years, universities also need to implement opportunities for transferable and soft skill development within their course. Some students suggested that explicit links should be made between content and how that could be applied to different working situations. Tang et al., (2005) suggested that educators must first have awareness of the importance of skills and must possess these themselves in order to effectively teach students. Results showed that educators having good communication, critical thinking, problem solving, and leadership made them more effective in their teaching practices. Students in the present study had vocalised how their lecturer's skills had a significant impact on how they internalised content during employability skill classes. As such, it is important that educators are also receiving appropriate guidance as to how to skilfully embed opportunities for students to develop soft skills by reflecting on their approach to teaching.

Due to the vast content needed to be covered in modules, dedicating individual lecturers to the teaching of soft skills may be unattainable, which is why Walker & Finney (1999) suggested this to be embedded in a more purposeful way. For example, getting students to carry out research on a topic and present to a class covers both the development of their technical knowledge (i.e. learning through research) whilst building on important transferable skills (such as presenting, public speaking and communication). Although there have been conflicting ideas as to how explicitly skills should be taught, some students have expressed their preference for wanting skills integrated within the curriculum instead of having separate skill development sessions (Walker & Finney, 1999). This is likely due to students wanting to understand how to use specific skills within the professional context, but also due to being discouraged to attend additional, non-essential sessions when dealing with their high workload (Majid et al., 2019).

Students should also make use of experiences outside of academics to build on their transferable skills. Partaking in extracurricular activities and hobbies are tools that can be used to support students in developing skills as it is not only important in their ability to socialise and communicate, but it also allows for personal development. Fakhretdinova et al.'s (2021) study rethinks the contribution non-academic activity has on students' ability to adapt to the workplace. Particularly volunteering (even if it is unrelated to the student's future career) helps develop individual, collective and managerial skills. Students will therefore have as much to gain through engaging in volunteering opportunities as they would through placement years. Another study revealed how students' volunteers showed strong concern for their future careers. The purpose of volunteering was to gain experience in the intended

professional field and expand their knowledge. The study also shows that volunteering allows students to acquire different types of skills, including transversal skills, more effectively than through academic study, as these skills are developed through practice (Khasanzyanova, 2017).

## **Analysis and discussion: employed graduates**

A thematic analysis was conducted, and three themes were identified: *Skill development*, *Career services*, and *Challenges*. *Skill development* refers to the skills students develop when at university in order to become successful graduates. It includes three subthemes: *Placements*, *teaching methods*, and *responsibility to develop skills*. *Career services* relates to the services provided at university to support students with their professional development. It includes one subtheme: *Networking*. *Challenges* refers to the challenges graduates were facing whilst at university to navigate the new environment and to make most of the opportunities offered. It includes one subtheme: *Independence*.

### **Theme: skill development**

This theme explores the skills students develop at university to not only navigate university life and obtain a degree, but also to become successful graduates. There are a variety of ways students can develop skills, and these are outlined in the different subthemes.

#### ***Subtheme: placements***

Before enrolling at university, most students will have had the opportunity to choose between doing a placement and not doing one. Students have emphasised that placements are a good environment for them to further develop skills required at the workplace and this subtheme explores graduates' views on placement opportunities. One reason why most students were interested in doing placements was to get practical experience. Furthermore, placements are the foundation needed for students to confirm their interest in their chosen career. Whilst doing placements, students also found that it helped them come out of their comfort zone:

'I always was a bit like shy, but those placements helped me come out of my show more'.  
(PG2, L237–238)

However, students who did not enrol in any placement believed that their degree itself helps them acquire relevant skills as they were already equipped with enough experience and did not want to waste time. Graduate 6 states:

'I had done a (short pause) summer internship um which was for around 10 weeks long".  
(PG6, L36-58)

Research has shown that students who have experience on placements are more likely to get a job following graduation (Mahmood et al. 2014).

### ***Subtheme: teaching methods***

Lectures and seminars are the common teaching methods used at university and this subtheme explores graduates' views on how teaching methods relate to their skills development. Students have repeatedly said that group work is encouraged during university. This is an important soft skill therefore implying that higher education institutions are attempting to embed soft skills into their curriculum. Independent learning was the norm during seminars and lectures based on weekly readings. However, staff would be more than willing to help students clear any doubts or questions they may have regarding content:

'With the undergrad you, you can get you can ask more questions, than they were willing to help you with'. (PG6, l.247–249)

However, a minority of students believe that teaching methods, i.e. lectures, do not improve skill development:

'No everything was just basically them standing there reading of their PowerPoint'. (PG6, l.76)

Seminars encourage students to voice out their views and share ideas with one another. Students found it daunting at first but this learning method helped them get out of their comfort zone in a good way:

'My seminars were often debates um that everyone had very big opinions and very different types of views um and it was really important to express how like what you thought well'. (PG4, l.117–119)

It also teaches awareness as students learn how to interact in a group, problem solving skills, codes and ethics they want to follow as a group – which are general expectations of employers. There are a number of recommendations around teaching soft skills (see Otermans et al., 2023).

### **Theme: responsibility to develop skills**

It is not just a certain individual or group of people who are responsible for skill development. It varies from parents at an early age to education institutions and this theme explores who is responsible for the development of skills. Students believe that it is the university's responsibility to encourage students to complete a placement, join extracurricular activities and societies among other things. Higher education institutions use different teaching methods to aid students to develop skills. Students are encouraged to do group work within lectures and seminars. However, it is agreed that it is ultimately up to the individual to reach their end goal:

'The student themselves will always have ultimate responsibility in the sense that it's ultimately at the end of the day, it's your life'. (PG1, L923-926)

There is a saying that you do not get results without trying and this is reflected in what Graduate 2 mentioned:

'Even if higher education institutions and workplaces do help you in finding placements, it is the student's responsibility to make use of the resources and opportunities available to make the effort to reach their full potential'. (PG2, L930-931)

Work experiences or placements help you monitor your progress in a practical sense. In addition, no one knows yourself better than you. You can tell if you are struggling or doing well in skills. It is essential for the workplace to include training to monitor whether trainees are prepared to start working. More importantly to support students on industry-specific skills. Graduate 5 states:

'It is industry specific training um they do train you on um things like autism'. (PG5, I.549)

Parents also need to encourage their children to take part in sports and extracurricular activities. Studying is not the only way students gain soft skills:

'Through extracurricular activities we may learn time management'. (PG1, I.950–951)

A study looked at students developing skills via their accounting degree. The sandwich model intended to combine academic studying with practical experience. However, the ability for higher education institutions to successfully embed the development of transferable skills within the curriculum has been questioned (Herbert et al. 2021). The benefits of students partaking in a placement are that they feel motivated during observation at the workplace therefore allowing themselves to value what they learn at work making them better equipped when returning to the university to learn more effectively. Work experience also is the time students are out of university reflecting and having their 'time out' about their future aspirations. It simultaneously benefits employers as well as it creates a learning culture within organisations. It is also cost effective in a way as students do certain tasks. Amin & Adiansyah, (2023) findings revealed that 64% ranked the opportunity to do a placement as very important. It also implies students chose to do their current degree due to the availability of a placement. Students' main reason for doing a placement was to get a 'real life experience' and the opportunity to earn money was the least reason why students joined placements.

Even though seminars may be encouraged, 60.49% agreed that they lacked self-confidence and the courage to get actively involved in the classroom discussions. As a suggestion, lecturers should improve students' self-efficiency and encourage them.

### **Theme: career services**

Having an insight into what you want to do in the future is really important. Most students believe that university provides required support in creating awareness of different job roles, responsibilities and experiences. There are professional development centres also known as career services in most universities helping students in various ways and this theme explores graduates' views on the career services offered by the university. From checking students' CV, interview preparation to doing mock tests with a careers consultant to career centres organising schemes to support students' university experience. Graduate 2 states:

'schemes also helped so we had a lot of professional development workshops'. (PG2, I.567–568)

Most graduates agreed that this support from the university was really helpful. They state:

'You could go to kinda like a careers team um to discuss things like I said in more in more specific details to yourself like cv um like advertising yourself that kind of stuff' (PG1, I.173–176)

However, some graduates said their services could improve by giving more specific advice and feedback:

'maybe if they were a bit more concise and clearer rather than being vague about what um what it is that you should change from your CV'. (PG5, I.486–487)

Graduates find having one-to-one discussions with employers useful as it is usually a personal interaction where students are assigned to a career team member to keep in regular contact for guidance and receive support if they struggle.

Students agreed that it was a good system that career services would extend their support after they've graduated until 3 years:

'So they have a really supportive like careers team there and it lasts until after three years you've graduated'. (PG3, I.480)

### ***Subtheme: networking***

Some graduates revealed that they developed good networking skills with the support of careers services and this subtheme explores that. University holding careers fairs is an event graduates found particularly encouraging to attempt networking as there would be many employers. Having great connection makes a big difference as they will support you:

'With the like the network, you have, I think that makes a big difference, so if the network's not great people great, yet we hard, but in general you're going to find someone that's going to be able to support you'. (PG2, I.1360–1363)

Guest speakers are another aspect which guides students towards their future aspirations. They are normally organised by the career team for students to receive guidance and understanding of different job roles and different pathways to reach their career goals. This gave students insight of the role they may wish to pursue in their future and reflecting whether this was something they really wanted to do.

A study labelled guest speakers as one of the four exploration strategies. It described the benefits of meeting with professionals via guest speakers. These wonderful opportunities give the students to understand their role within the work placement, salary and what skills in particular soft skills are required and expected of by employers (Walker et al., 2022). This also helped students in building connections which would be a good opportunity for students who struggle to interact with new people. The aim of guest speakers is engagement with industry and is an effective way of motivating student commitment to learning more about applying skills into the workplace. Guest speakers should be chosen on behalf of their enthusiasm and personality not based on their scripted answers. Students expect guest speakers to be interesting, able to share insight into the real

world and be effective at communicating. Graduates agreed that guest speakers did enhance their understanding of skills. Findings from this study reveal that guest speakers can act as a bridge between higher education and the workplace by enabling students to determine which employability skills are important for success. To achieve a positive student experience choosing presenters carefully is needed. They should have good presentation skills and know how to interact in the classroom to 'bring the real world into the classroom'. Other important things to consider is that staff implementing guest speakers should have a purpose and requirements. Also, the student cohort learning style should be aligned (Riebe et al., 2013).

### **Theme: challenges**

Students struggled to make friends and socialise at university due to a new environment which is different from school. This theme explores the challenges graduates had faced whilst at university. They had to break free from their comfort zone and be confident to approach new people' with university. Graduate 7 talks about how living far from university was a challenge for them in the development of their skills:

'cause it's 2 hrs away, and not everyone came same university I did I feel like it forced me but forced me in a good way to develop my social skills'. (PG7, l.270–272)

Graduates found it challenging to take the various opportunities available at university and be proactive with them. Graduates mentioned that they were not guided and were expected to be independent in finding resources related to their job role:

"I was actually given quite a lot of resources on, blackboard learn, which is what we use for for any course relate like where and all of our course content and information was um given "(PG5, l.311–312).

It was a big transition from university to working in a professional working environment and graduates were not prepared for that move especially in terms of work life balance. As graduates they were expected to work in a set time which was an adjustment and different to university. Graduate 3 states:

'Work was a bit of a big transition and I think for me personally the biggest ... switch that wasn't as prepared to is just again time management'. (PG3, l.619–621)

Incorporating the training given by your workplace into your job role is important but some students have said training is theoretical. Graduate 7 states:

'it's very theoretical, and I don't know if it will actually work in practice but most of the time it is useful information'. (PG7, l.551–552)

In the workplace, communicating especially getting your point across in the right way is important as people will challenge your idea:

'a bit those particular two individuals who also much older than me and had been the children long ago I was thinking I think I'm trying to voice my ideas'. (PG2, l.499–501)

Having many responsibilities is another challenge. Graduates need to find the right work life balance. With more experience comes more responsibility. There are much more challenges that students face including mental health, personal circumstances that impact their performance (Ryan, Baik, and Larcombe 2022).

### ***Subtheme: independence***

Independence was a skill university cultivated more for students in education compared to sixth form or college. University promoted students to be independent, especially during seminars and this was mentioned by Graduate 1:

*"pace to kind of listen to pupils ideas um kind of expand my own way of thinking by looking at how other people approach different problems"* (PG1, l.83–85).

Graduates mentioned that being independent was really helpful in developing skills but challenging at the same time as students would have not been given resources or materials to learn instead would be asked to do their own research outside of the classroom. Students would need to select relevant information and discard the rest, which is also an important skills organisation:

*'even though they gave us like one particular book, one particular chapter, you'd always hear them say loud. OK, but you go out and research yourself, look at different studies'*. (PG3, l.126–128)

Graduates have said they develop a mindset for being motivated that what effort you put in the same you get out of it which they have transferred this mindset to the workplace as well:

*'kind of like having the mindset of what you put in is what you get out with uni'*. (PG3, l.221–222)

It is well known that students are required to be more independent in higher education. This is paramount for success (Aina et al. 2022).

### **Linking findings to theoretical framework**

The findings of this study can be meaningfully interpreted through the lens of employability frameworks such as the CareerEDGE model (Pool and Sewell 2007) and Yorke's (2006) conceptualisation of employability. The CareerEDGE model positions employability as a composite of degree knowledge, generic skills, emotional intelligence, career development learning, and work experience, underpinned by self-efficacy and reflection. Our results highlight significant variation across these domains: while students reported gains in subject knowledge and some transferable skills (e.g. communication, time management), they frequently struggled to reflect on these competencies or transfer them to professional contexts which are two central components of CareerEDGE. Moreover, emotional intelligence, resilience, and self-efficacy emerged as underdeveloped, aligning with employer critiques of graduate preparedness (Succi and Canovi 2020). This suggests that higher education institutions are partially cultivating employability,

but gaps remain in fostering the reflective and affective capacities emphasised by the framework.

### **Extension or refinement of theory**

Interestingly, the findings suggest that experiential learning opportunities such as placements and extracurricular activities play a disproportionately large role in developing these competencies compared to classroom-based learning. While CareerEDGE acknowledges the value of work experience, our results underscore the need to reweight its significance relative to other components. Additionally, Yorke's (2006) framing of employability as a set of achievements may need to be complemented by a developmental perspective that captures the iterative growth of confidence and identity during and after higher education. These insights provide grounds for refining existing models to better reflect the transition between academic and professional contexts.

### **Implications**

This study contributes to the existing literature on graduate employability by providing in-depth insights into students' and graduates' perspectives on skill development within UK higher education institutions. While previous research has examined employer expectations and institutional strategies for employability (Jackling and Natoli 2015; Kornelakis and Petrakaki 2020), this study focuses on the lived experiences of students and recent graduates, shedding light on the challenges they face in acquiring and applying transferable skills. The findings of this study have significant implications for higher education institutions, students, and employers in improving graduate employability. For higher education institutions, the study highlights the need to integrate employability skills more explicitly into curricula. While students acknowledged the value of placements and extracurricular activities, many struggled to recognise how their university experiences contributed to their skill development. Universities should embed practical, skills-based learning within academic modules, ensuring that students understand the relevance of soft skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Additionally, institutions should strengthen industry collaborations to offer more work-integrated learning opportunities, mentorship programs, and employer-led workshops. This would enhance students' exposure to workplace expectations and facilitate a smoother transition into employment.

For students, the study underscores the importance of proactively engaging with employability resources and opportunities available at university. Many graduates reflected on underutilising career services or failing to take advantage of placement opportunities. Raising awareness about the long-term benefits of developing soft skills and participating in career-oriented activities could encourage greater student involvement. Universities should also foster a culture that emphasises skill reflection, helping students identify and articulate their competencies to future employers.

For employers, the findings suggest that stronger partnerships with universities could help bridge the gap between education and workforce expectations. Employers can contribute by offering structured internships, guest lectures, and networking events

that expose students to real-world challenges. Additionally, businesses should communicate the specific competencies they seek in graduates, allowing universities to tailor skill development initiatives accordingly.

By linking findings to employability theory, universities can more systematically audit curricula against frameworks such as CareerEDGE to identify underdeveloped domains (e.g. reflective practice, career development learning). Embedding structured opportunities for reflection and self-efficacy building alongside placements and skills-based modules could address gaps highlighted by this study. Moreover, fostering stronger partnerships with employers to co-design work-integrated learning would operationalise theoretical constructs (e.g. workplace learning, resilience) in authentic settings. Finally, recognising the role of non-curricular experiences, universities should promote and accredit volunteering, part-time work, and extracurricular leadership as vital components of employability development.

Overall, improving graduate employability requires a more coordinated effort between universities, students, and employers. By embedding skill development into curricula, increasing student engagement in employability initiatives, and fostering industry partnerships, higher education institutions can better equip graduates with the competencies necessary for career success.

## Limitations

While this study provides valuable insights into students' and graduates' perspectives on skill development in higher education, several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the sample size was relatively small, consisting of 10 students and 7 employed graduates from UK universities. While thematic analysis allowed for an in-depth exploration of participants' experiences, the findings may not be generalisable to the broader student population or applicable to other higher education systems outside the UK. A larger, more diverse sample could provide a more comprehensive understanding of skill development across different disciplines and institutions.

Second, the study relied on self-reported data from semi-structured interviews, which may introduce biases such as social desirability bias or recall bias. Participants may have overemphasised or underreported certain experiences based on their personal perceptions, making it challenging to objectively assess the effectiveness of university-led skill development initiatives. Future research could incorporate quantitative methods, such as surveys or longitudinal studies, to triangulate findings and provide a more robust assessment of employability skills development.

Third, the study focused primarily on students' and graduates' perspectives, without directly including input from educators, university administrators, or employers. Given that skill development is a shared responsibility among students, institutions, and industry stakeholders, future research should explore these perspectives to gain a more holistic view of the challenges and potential solutions for improving employability outcomes.

Finally, the study did not account for variations in skill development across different academic disciplines. Employability skills may be emphasised differently depending on the subject area, with some disciplines incorporating more work-integrated learning opportunities than others. Future studies could compare skill development across fields to determine whether certain disciplines are more effective in preparing graduates for the workforce.

## Future research

Future research should build upon the findings of this study by addressing its limitations and exploring additional dimensions of skill development in higher education. A larger and more diverse sample across multiple universities and academic disciplines would provide a broader understanding of how employability skills are cultivated in different contexts. Longitudinal studies tracking students from university into their early careers could offer deeper insights into how effectively higher education prepares graduates for employment and how skills evolve over time. Additionally, incorporating perspectives from educators, university administrators, and employers would help bridge the gap between institutional training and workforce expectations, identifying best practices for skill integration within curricula. Future studies could also explore the role of technology and digital learning in employability skill development, particularly in response to the growing demand for remote and hybrid work skills. Lastly, cross-cultural comparisons could reveal how skill development strategies vary across different higher education systems, providing valuable insights into best practices that can be adapted globally.

## Conclusion

As the job market continues to evolve, the development of employability skills is increasingly essential for graduates to transition successfully from higher education to the workplace. This study explored the perspectives of UK students and graduates regarding their skill development and the role of universities in preparing them for employment. The findings suggest that while higher education institutions provide various initiatives to support skill acquisition – including placements, career services, and work-integrated learning – students often struggle to recognise and transfer these skills to professional settings.

A key concern raised by students was the lack of explicit emphasis on soft skills within university curricula. Many reported feeling unprepared for the workforce, particularly in applying skills such as communication, problem-solving, and time management. While placements and extracurricular activities were widely acknowledged as beneficial, engagement levels varied, often due to limited awareness or accessibility of these opportunities. Graduates reflected on their transition to the workplace, noting a gap between academic learning and industry expectations, particularly regarding the application of theoretical knowledge in real-world scenarios.

Despite the availability of career services, many students and graduates felt these resources were underutilised or insufficiently tailored to their needs. The study highlights the need for universities to better integrate employability skills within teaching practices, foster stronger connections with industry, and actively encourage student engagement in career development initiatives. Additionally, clearer communication from educators regarding the importance of transferable skills could help bridge the gap between university education and employment readiness.

Ultimately, while higher education institutions are taking steps to enhance graduate employability, there remains significant room for improvement. A more structured approach to embedding soft skills within the curriculum, greater promotion of placement opportunities, and stronger employer-university collaboration could better equip students for the demands of the modern workforce.

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