Closing the Gap
The Benefits and Challenges of Embedding Work-Related Learning in the University Curriculum

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Structure of presentation

1. What are UK employers looking for?

2. The Real WoRLD study at Glasgow Caledonian University

3. Research findings

4. Conclusion

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What are employers looking for?

(CBI, 2010)

Employability skills	**77%**
Positive attitude	68%
Relevant work experience/ placement	61%
Degree subject	53%
Degree result	25%
University attended	8%

What is employability?

" A modern, competitive economy needs workers who possess *skills, knowledge* and *attitudes* they can take to any work situation and have the ability and willingness to *continually adapt* and prosper in a changing world." (CBI, 2009)

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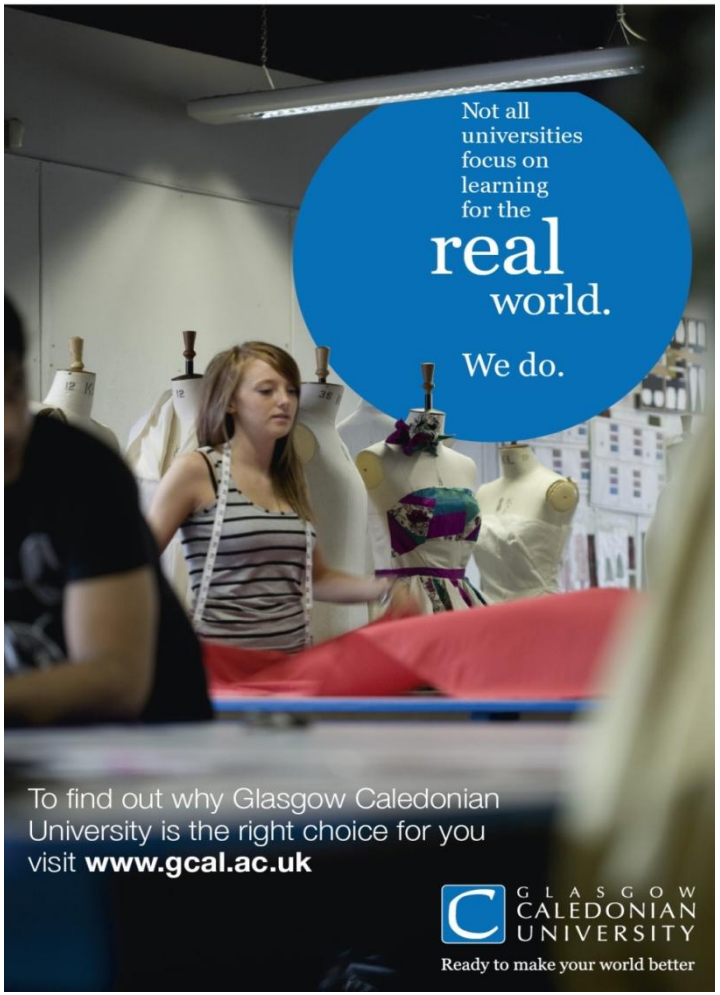
Employability at GCU: The Real WORLD Project
"Learning for the Real World"



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Real WoRLD's principles of work-related learning (2009)

http://www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/realworld/documents/Principlesofwrl180909.pdf
http://escalate.ac.uk/6439

Work-related learning activities should be designed so that they:

1. provide students with learning opportunities to integrate theory and practice
2. achieve learning outcomes that state what students will be able to do in the workplace
3. encourage and support students' interest in a wide variety of careers
4. require students to take an active rather than a passive role in the learning process
5. accommodate cultural diversity

Reflective questions break down the components of each principle.

Good practice examples illustrate them.

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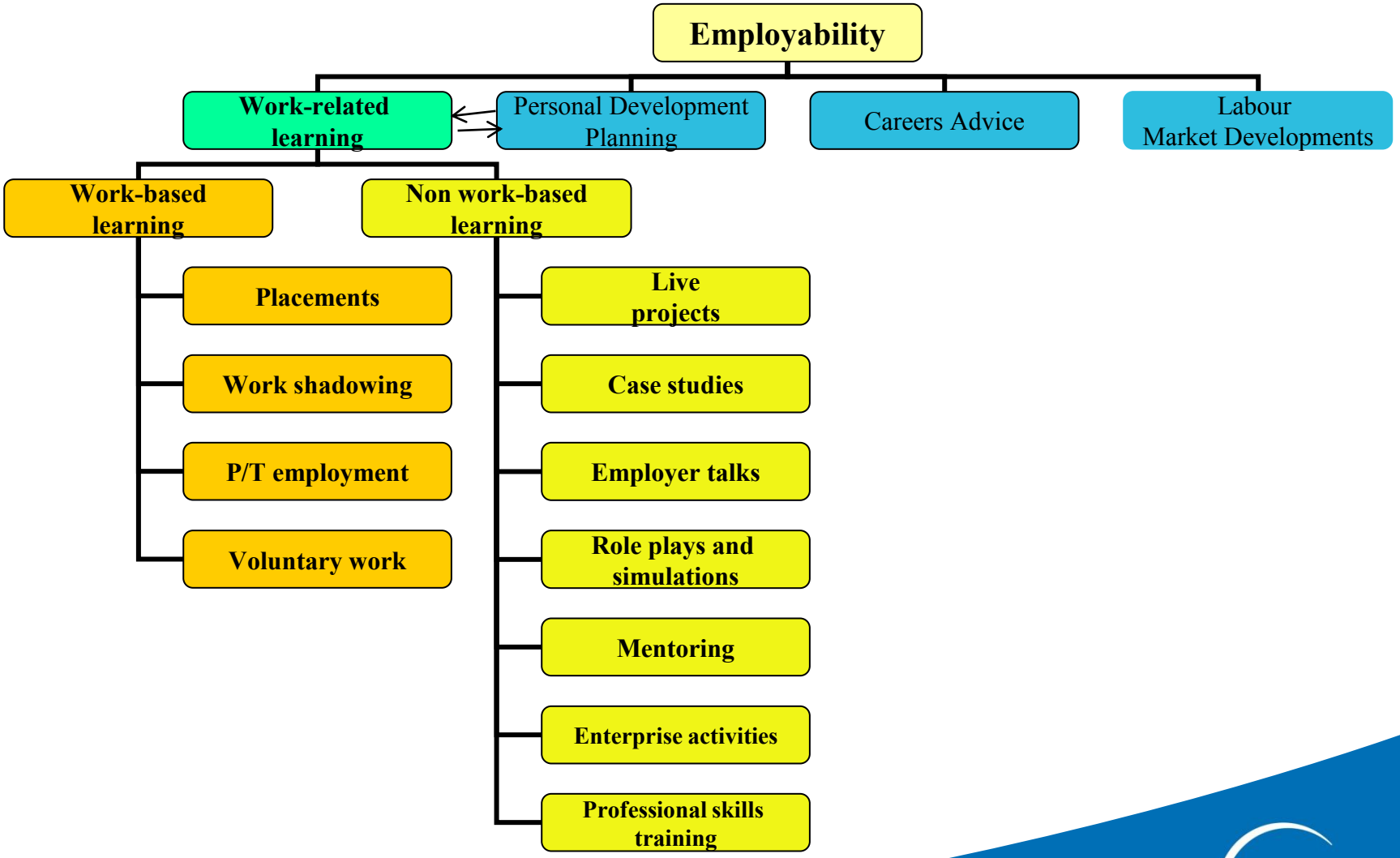
How can work-related learning be embedded?

(Adapted from Hills et al, 2003)



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Real WoRLD pilots in 2009-2010

Subject	Module/ programme	WRL activity
Computing	*"Integrated Project "* *(year 1)*	Student work in teams to produce a website or database based on a practical scenario
Marketing	*"Personal Development and Self-Presentation"* *(year 1)*	Client-based group project: students organise fund raising event
Law	*"Innocence Project"* *(year 3)*	Students work as professionals with live cases of potentially wrongful convictions
Business	*"International Business Strategy "* *(year 4)*	Student teams are assessed on client based project; employer involvement in assessment
Design	*MA Design Practice and Management (PG)*	Students work as interns in two assessed placement modules

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How feasible are the ‘principles’?

Research question:

What are the benefits and challenges of embedding work-related learning in the taught curriculum?

- Two student surveys (pre- and post-) per pilot: 386 responses
- 81 students in 15 focus groups
- Semi-structured interviews with 5 academics and 5 employers

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Self assessment of employability skills in student surveys

Commercial skills	Identifying commercial opportunities Presenting and implementing project plans …
Learning skills	Evaluating own strengths and weaknesses Acting on feedback Working without guidance …
Transferable professional skills	Written and oral communication Formal presentation Time management …
Team-working skills	Listen to the view of others Acting assertively Take the lead in group discussions …

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Research findings

- The student view
- The employer view
- The academic view

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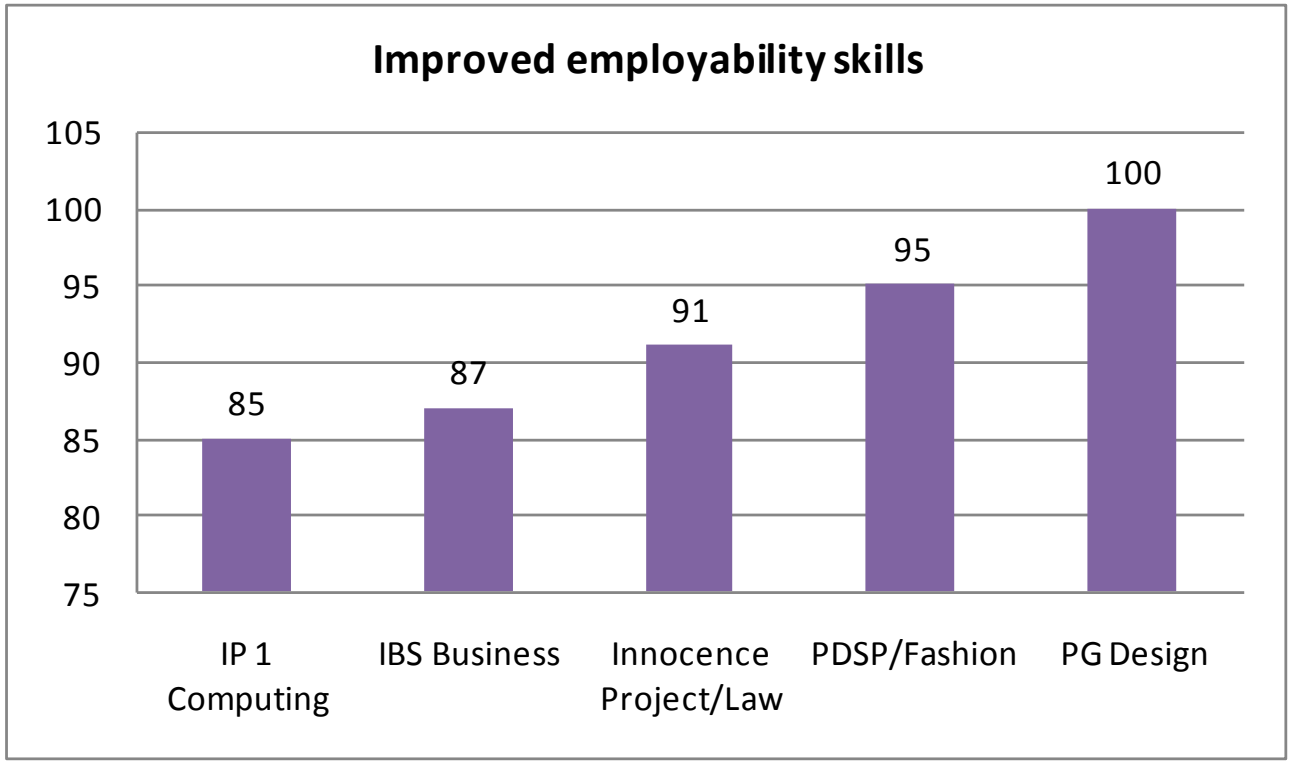
Research findings: the student view

89% of students reported improved employability skills



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The first year '*Integrated Project 1*' pilot

(McKinnon and McCrae, 2011)

- Two student surveys (pre- and post-) : 159 responses

- Survey 1: 85 responses = 71% of cohort
- Survey 2: 74 responses= 62% of cohort

- 29 students in focus groups

- 74% aged 18 -19
- 52% had no prior work experience

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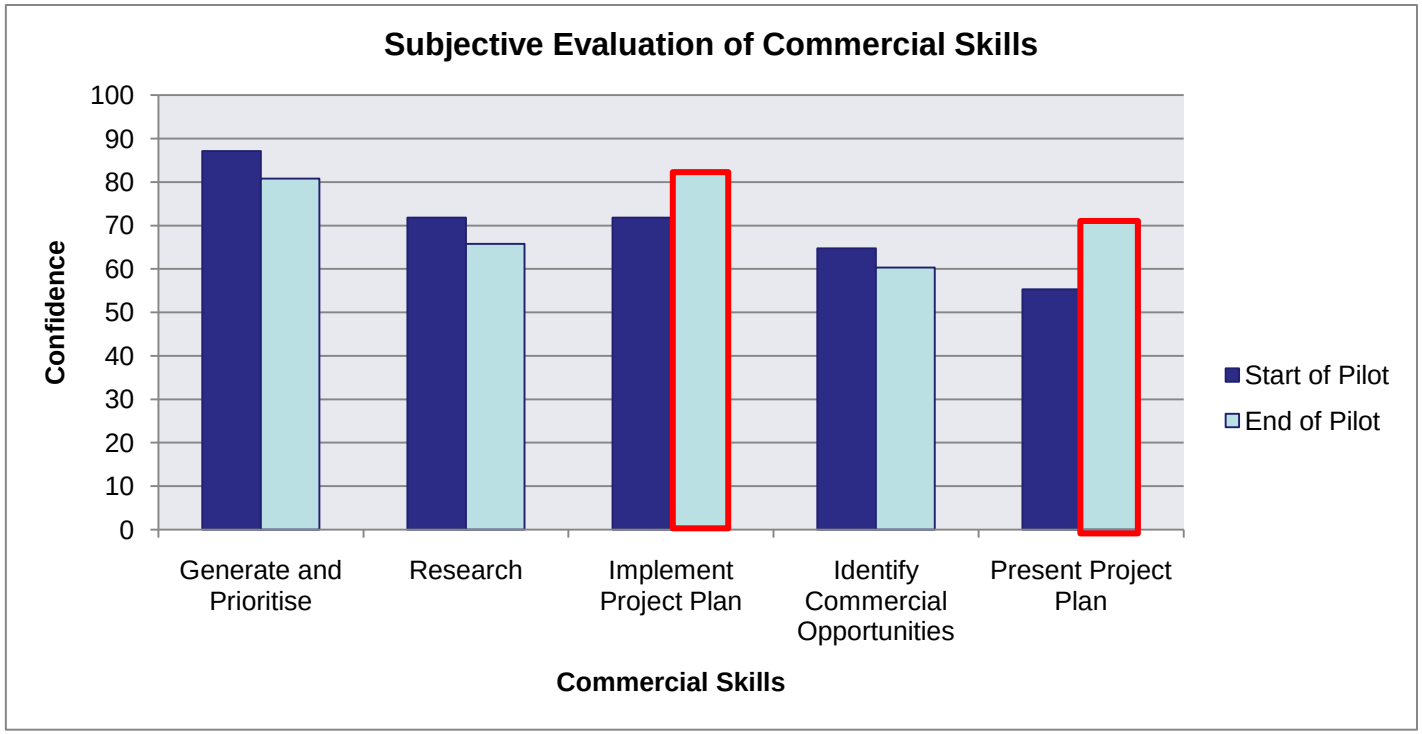
The case of first year computing students



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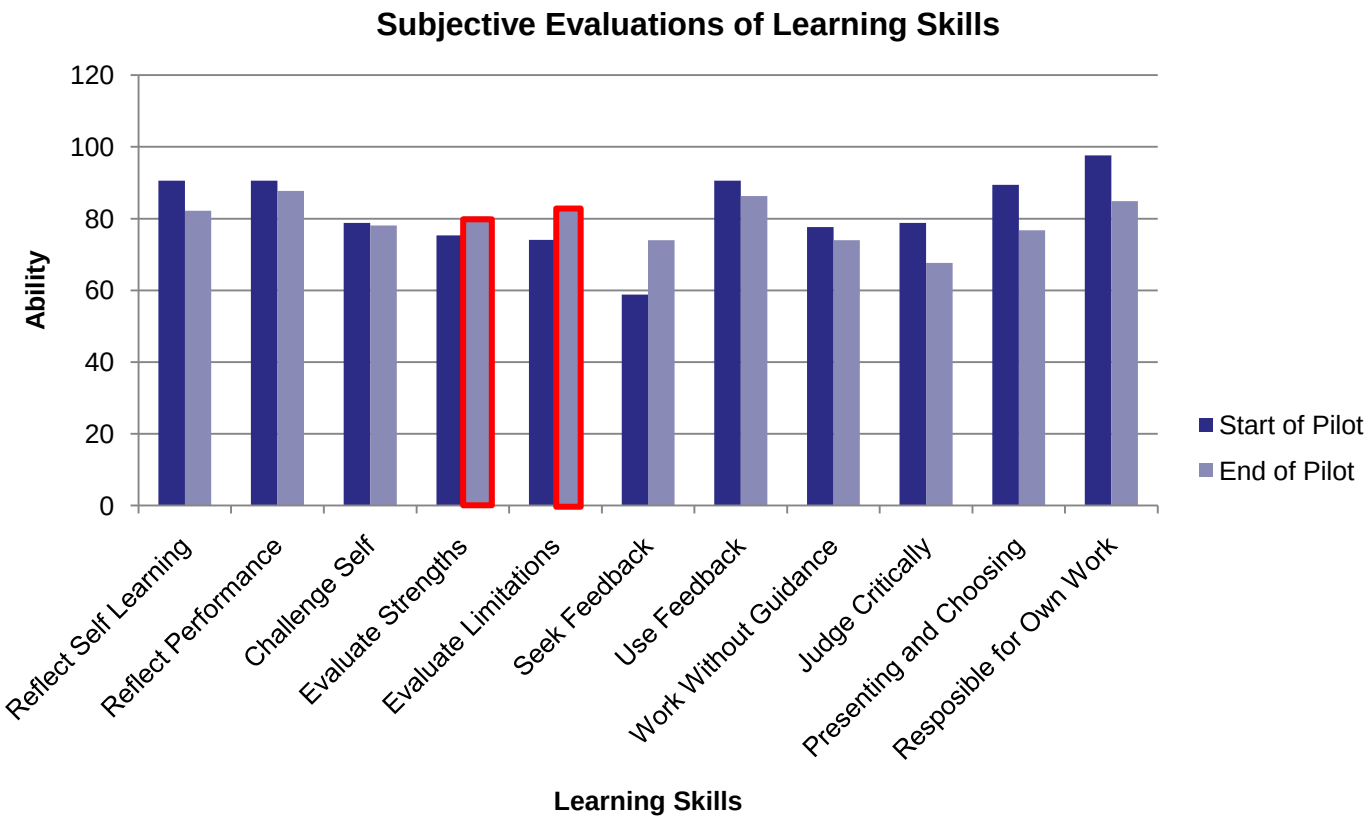
Evaluation of learning skills



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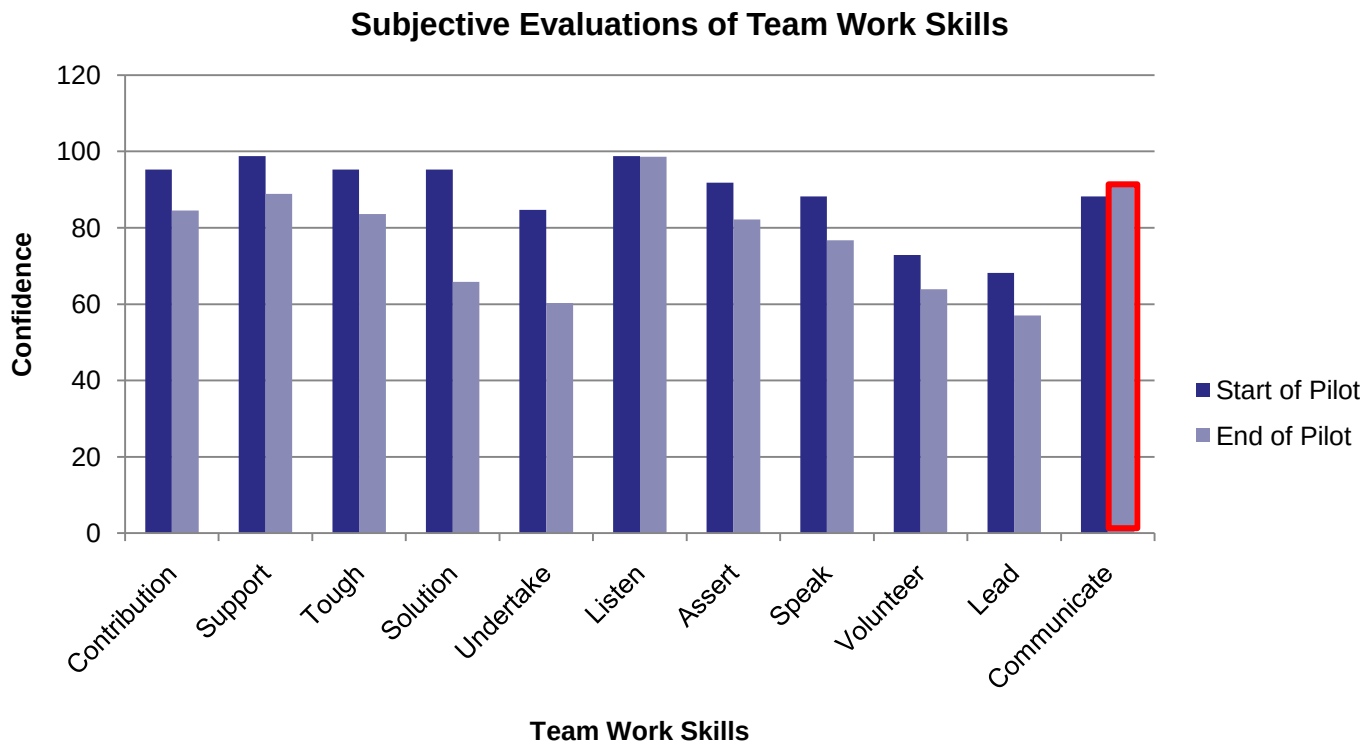
Evaluation of team-working skills



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The value of embedding work-related learning in first year modules

Exposing students to the demands of the graduate workplace through *simulating professional learning practices* in the taught curriculum can help them plan their own learning at university and beyond.

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Early awareness of the skills gap can be a starting point for better learning at university

"Well, I think it (the module) sort of prepared the groundwork. Obviously there's a lot further to go, at least two years to go, but ***you're starting to learn some things that you can't do****. Like you can't leave things to the last minute, like you could maybe do in school."*

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Improved awareness of the need for independent learning skills

" I liked the practical aspect of 'there is the project, go and do it'. I think that ***was good …from the point of view of teaching you independent learning.*** *I think the only way you're ever going to learn that is by being basically thrown in at the deep end and I particularly enjoyed the independence of being able to just go and do rather than just being told…just being spoon fed."*

"… in other modules you kind of get taught and you get tested. In this one you were just given a wee tiny bit of stuff and thrown into doing ***it…you were not actually given the answers*** *if you know what I mean. In other classes you were given the answers somewhere and you just had to learn them. In this one you were not really given that."*

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The employer view

Students lacked the required "desire to succeed" and "hunger for knowledge" .

"It's just that sense of urgency, just a desire, it's not just a project, you know, this is real life, guys."

*"I think you need somebody who is going to take the initiative, somebody who's got the confidence in their thought, the confidence to get things wrong and not be scared of getting something wrong…**It's a whole series of little jumps into the unknown**… a project is just purely down to them. There is no key, there is no secret… unless you trust your own thoughts you'll never get beyond the starting point."*

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The academic view

There is some **resistance from students** to engage with real world tasks that put them out of their comfort zones.

" … they need that, the ability to be pro-active, the ability to get off their chair, the ability to think, do something, take a knock, get back up, do it again, learn from that and move on."

"...from the students I have seen, some of them have got it naturally, too many of them don't have it and are scared of it, bored by it, nervous of it…"

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What are the challenges?

- Work-related learning approach is still the odd one out at GCU

"…at first we were all a bit unsure of where we were heading and what we were doing … when you start looking into the information we do think this is overwhelming, how are we ever going to get the right information, know where to look and ***it's completely different from anything we've ever done before****."(4th year Business student)*

"…it's a little disturbing because by the time they come to the wind tunnel I would have expected them to have been tested a bit… and so students get a little anxious, they don't feel at all comfortable…" (Academic)

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What are the challenges?

- Higher anxiety levels amongst students
- Lack of consistency in defining academic standards and expectations
- Lack of departmental support
- Added responsibility for academics because the stakes are higher

"It's got additional pressures because it reflects on the university, it reflects on the department, it reflects on the school, it reflects on me as an academic; there is more at stake."

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Conclusion

- Employability is a learning and teaching issue.

- The skills debate might distract HE from producing graduates that are, above all, "*hungry for knowledge".*

- From first year onwards students need to be exposed to 'messy' real-life problems that do not have one textbook-answer.

- They should expect to be challenged and not be surprised or stressed when they are.

- WRL should be recognisable and spread evenly across *all* programmes because it can help students become better learners at university and in the workplace.

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References

CBI (Confederation of British Industry) and Universities UK (2009) *Future Fit: Preparing Graduates for the World of Work.* London: CBI

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McKinnon, S. and McCrae, J. (2011) *Preparing Students for Employment through Embedding Work-Related Learning in the Taught Curriculum in the Disciplines of Computing, Computer Games and Networking*; in proceedings of: "Enhancing Employability of Computing Students", Higher Education Academy, Subject Centre for Information and Computer Sciences conference, The University of Derby, 16 February 2011
http://www.ics.heacademy.ac.uk/events/displayevent.php?id=250#presentations

The Real WoRLD Project at Glasgow Caledonian University

http://www.academy.gcal.ac.uk/realworld/index.html

Real WoRLD's Principles of Work-Related Learning

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