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Five relevant transferable skills

uniting employers and educators with a common skills language to assess students more objectively in higher education

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Five relevant transferable skills: uniting employers and educators with a common skills language to assess students more objectively in higher education

By

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Five relevant transferable skills: uniting employers and educators with a common skills language to assess students more objectively in higher education

By

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Abstract

The period 1963-2022, which is the focus of this research, saw six key policy developments in higher education that significantly affected English universities. These include the 1960s expansion of higher education without a fiscal plan and the 1980s state takeover of higher education. By the 1990s, enforced learning outcomes and tuition fees had been introduced into UK higher education. These, in turn, led to the 2015 legal protection of students as consumers of higher education. By 2018, the state-sponsored Office for Students brought England under centralised regulatory control and, by 2022, introduced the regulatory directive of progression rate targets and educating students with industry-relevant transferable skills.

This research builds on this four-decade backdrop. It aims to identify a unified set of industry-transferable skills derived from a corpus of 100 employer skills surveys commissioned by the UK government and CBI between 1999 and 2020. Additionally, it explores the potential to meet policy and researchers' demands for a common skills language that aligns with multiple stakeholders' interests. This exploration is motivated by the challenges posed by the stringent Office for Students' regulations. English universities' survival now depends on providing graduates with industry-relevant transferable skills, ensuring value for money, and achieving positive student outcomes. However, there is no consensus on defining and describing these skills. The lack of consensus complicates assessing universities' compliance with regulations. With no unified skillset, educators cannot know what industry-relevant transferable skills employers value. This absence risks a disconnect between higher education outcomes and workforce needs and exposes English universities to regulatory sanctions for failing to deliver the industry-relevant transferable skills employers value and students need.

This qualitative study adopts a dialectical critical realist stance. It utilises a blend of corpus linguistics analysis, thematic analysis, and focus group research to extract and describe the most called-for transferable skills from an employer skills corpus. The study's findings have identified five key transferable skills. The study shows how a common skills language between employers and educators exists through detailed thematic mapping of the focus group transcripts. Policymakers, educators, and employers can use this map to advance a common skills language further, addressing a crucial void in the discourse on transferable skills in higher education. Combined with a critical examination of the broad skills literature, the study sheds light on the complex relationship between higher education regulations, students' higher education and employment expectations, and the consistent industry demand for transferable skills. In its contribution to knowledge, this thesis pioneers a process for developing a unified skills lexicon between employers and educators, marking a significant advancement in education policy and its implementation.

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This study is dedicated to my family, supervisors and friends whose constancy, support, love and encouragement have made my doctoral journey possible.

To my Director of Studies, Katherine and my supervisors, Siân and Luca. I give you my heartfelt thanks for your endless support, encouragement and wisdom. When I began my PhD journey, like many students, I was unaware of, and naïve to, the herculean challenges ahead. Your unique blend of expertise spanning philosophical framing, research process and construction, corpus linguistics, academic writing and social and political tensions, were invaluable to me. Your relentless encouragement for me to find a way through Bhaskar's dense dialectical critical realist philosophy helped me through some dark and despairing days that finding a route through would even be possible. I am indebted to you for your patience, compassion, constant encouragement and humour throughout my six year journey.

To my daughter, Rachel, for your love, your patience and your critical proof reading eye. For helping me to see what I could not. For pushing me when I needed it, which was often, and for much needed decompression G&T's. To my husband, John, for your infinite wisdom, love, and support through seemingly endless spreadsheets of data and my unfolding philosophical and practical arguments. For your patience and tolerance of the long study days, weeks, months, and years as I worked through my research journey. To my focus group participants for your willingness to participate in this research, the candour of your dialogue, and the time you gave to this study. I hope I have honoured and represented your expectations of the five skills. To my dear friends near and far for tolerating my long periods of absence. I thank you for your understanding, love and concern for me and for my study.

My late father's words echoed throughout my doctoral journey – "you must want passionately to reach your goal or you will never survive the boredom of the preparation". I wanted passionately to reach my goal, and I did.

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Chapter 1 Introduction and Background

1.1   **Introduction**

A shared language where higher education stakeholders understand the meanings of commonly used transferable[1] skills labels is essential to minimise misunderstandings and create a sense of mutual understanding. However, there is limited research on the shared meanings behind the terms used to describe the multitude of transferable skills graduates need to succeed in the workplace and enable fair regulatory judgement of English universities' ability to develop such skills in their students.

This research is timely due to the changes in higher education regulation since 2018, which now require English universities to develop relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, pp. 90-133). Additionally, the perennial need for transferable skills, the persistent ambiguity in their meanings, and the importance for stakeholders to understand and articulate a unified set of transferable skills in a common language all underscore the importance of this study. This chapter introduces the study, identifies what is known about the topic, and the gaps in knowledge to provide a rationale for the need for this research. The research aims and objectives, including the research questions, are outlined, and the philosophical framing of dialectical critical realism (DCR) is briefly described. The contribution to knowledge and my combined higher education and professional background are also discussed to underscore how the research topic and questions were identified. Finally, the thesis structure is explained.

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[1] The term transferable skills is used throughout this study as it is the term used regularly by the Office for Students, and in research commissioned by the UK government and the CBI (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; CBI, 2019a, p. 21; Dickerson et al., 2023, p. 12). It refers to non-technical skills which are needed and thus are transferable across industries and contexts. Industry-specific technical skills and professional competences requiring specialised training, are not included as these are referred to as hard skills intended for specific job roles (DfE, 2019b, p. 28). Furthermore, although the concept of "skill" is a debated subject in the broad literature, debating its concept, for example is it attitude, aptitude, capability, competence, behaviour or other defined concept, is out of scope of this study. This is because the definitional concept of a skill is subjective and varies across different contexts and industries and thus focusing on its definition risks diluting this study's aims, objectives and research questions.

1.2 Background to the topic and research focus

The UK government oversees qualifications and quality standards for its four nations; however, education policy and regulation are devolved in the UK. This devolution means that the UK government has legally enforceable regulatory power only over higher education providers in England, including universities, specialist institutions, private companies, and further education colleges that offer foundation degrees and industry-tailored vocational courses (HoL, 2023, p. 9). In Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland, the higher education sector is respectively regulated by the Scottish Funding Council, the Higher Education Funding Council for Wales, and the Northern Ireland Department for the Economy (HoL, 2023, p. 9). This study refers to English universities as a subset of higher education providers in England. However, the research findings, and recommendations are relevant for all education providers, educators and employers[2] who assess people's transferable skills performance in the UK and beyond.

Six pivotal higher education policy milestones

The English higher education landscape has fundamentally changed due to six milestones:

1) The 1963 Robbins expansion of universities and focus on labour market skills.
2) The 1980s political move from university autonomy to State control.
3) The 1997 Dearing Report, which introduced learning outcomes and tuition fees (Dearing, 1997).
4) The 2015 legally protected student status.
5) The 2018 introduction of the Office for Students as England's higher education regulator and,
6) The OfS 2022 amended conditions of registration and prescriptive progression rates.

With their legally defined status as consumers (Bunce et al., 2017, p. 197), students have been recast as purchasers of higher education. They expect to graduate and gain

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[2] For the purpose of this study educators are defined as any person who teaches in a higher education environment unless otherwise stated. Employers are defined as any person or organisation who employ people whether in a voluntary or paid capacity. Furthermore, the term "educators" is used throughout the thesis in preference to "academics' for reasons of consistency.

employment due to their purchase. UK employers and the UK government also hold high expectations that students are "work-ready" upon graduation (CBI, 2019a, p. 6; Dearing, 1997, p. 156; GoS, 2017, p. 50) and that their higher education will drive economic productivity (Lauder, 2020, pp. 192-193). The combined effects of milestones one to four, gave birth to the Office for Students (OfS) as England's principal higher education regulator, to complete the six milestones. The role of the OfS is to regulate English higher education to ensure it delivers positive outcomes for past, present, and future students (OfS, 2022a, p. 13). Thus, these six milestone events have had a forceful effect on higher education, transforming it from a small grant-based system to one focused on tuition fees, market demands, employment outcomes, and regulatory standards.

Although English universities were subject to a vast and complex web of core and co-regulators (Brown & Bekhradnia, 2013, pp. 4-5) before 2018, the OfS brought UK higher education regulation under centralised control. Sponsored by the Department for Education under the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) legal framework, the OfS has a range of statutory duties (HERA, 2017, p. 93; HoL, 2023, pp. 9, 13). Its duties include administering a Register of Higher Education Providers. English higher education providers wishing to access public funding, recruit international students, and have the option to apply for degree awarding powers must register with the OfS and obey all 24 conditions of registration (OfS, 2023a, p. 1) listed in the Register of Providers framework. The OfS remaining duties include imposing monetary penalties on non-compliant institutions, protecting institutional autonomy, promoting academic quality, enabling fair access, ensuring value for money, increasing the higher education market, and encouraging competition (HERA, 2017, p. 2; HoL, 2023, p. 9; OfS, 2022a, pp. 13-14). Thus, the OfS is a powerful, centralised regulator of English higher education.

Whilst the OfS is legally empowered with a range of duties, it lacks a principal statutory objective, setting it apart from Acts of Parliament, which have defined statutory obligations. The absence of a principal legal objective poses a significant risk to OfS-registered universities as it means that the OfS has the legal power and flexibility to prioritise its statutory duties (HoL, 2023, p. 9). As a result, the OfS strongly emphasises student outcomes, with the aim of ensuring students can "access, succeed in, and progress from,

higher education; receive a high-quality academic experience; and value for money" (OfS, 2022a, p. 13). This flexibility has reinforced a consumer and political bias in English higher education policy, representing a significant shift from the autonomous, self-regulated system of the 1960s to a highly centralised and formalised accountability structure.

By 2022, the OfS conditions of registration included mandatory participation in the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for all English universities with more than 500 students and that students are equipped with the relevant transferable skills employers value (OfS, 2022a, pp. 90- 133). However, nowhere in the TEF or the conditions of registration are relevant transferable skills defined, nor are their expected performance behaviours described. Nevertheless, universities that fail to meet these newer conditions face several sanctions ranging from enhanced monitoring to, in extreme cases, complete deregistration of the institution (OfS, 2021, p. 2). As of the writing of this thesis, an institution has yet to be deregistered. However, the fact that the OfS has sanctionable powers poses a significant risk to English universities. If the OfS deems a university has not met its regulatory objectives, it could face serious consequences.

The OfS focus on student outcomes is laudable, given that students now pay tuition fees of up to £9,250 per year (Bolton, 2023a, p. 9). However, the OfS statutory duties also include the need to protect institutional autonomy which means, in practical terms, not interfering in the content of a course of study (HERA, 2017, p. 2). The contradictions between protecting institutional autonomy and demanding that universities teach relevant transferable skills and adhere to strict progression criteria are of interest to this study. The poorly defined outcome measures and opaque language in the OfS conditions of university registration - B1, B3, and B4 - concerning relevant transferable skills and their link to the prescriptive numerical continuation and completion progression thresholds in condition B6 (OfS, 2022b, p. 1; 2023b, p. 44) suggests universities have lost their autonomy. These four conditions, introduced by the OfS in 2022 (OfS, 2022a, pp. 92, 121, 189; OfS, 2022b, p.1 OfS, 2023b, p. 44), require higher education institutions to:

- (Condition B1): Design high-quality courses, including the development of relevant transferable skills,

- (Condition B3): Deliver positive outcomes for students, which are recognised and valued by employers and enable progression into managerial or professional employment or further studying (B3),
- (Condition B4): Reliably assess students,
- (Condition B6): Participate in the Teaching Excellence Framework and show that 75% of students have completed their course of study.

Assessing universities against such vague metrics introduces several hidden tensions. The regulatory directive for relevant transferable skills valued by employers lacks a unified set of transferable skills with granular descriptions. With no defined skillset, educators cannot know what relevant transferable skills employers value. This absence makes it impossible to determine whether universities are effectively preparing students for economic and personal prosperity. Equally, there is a risk of misalignment between what is taught and what employers expect. This misalignment could, thus, lead to a disconnect between education outcomes and workforce demands.

The absence of a standardised set of transferable skills also hinders academic efforts to tailor curricula to meet the OfS conditions of registration, reducing their capacity to provide relevant transferable skills. Universities are, therefore, left uncertain about what relevant transferable skills they are being measured against, which puts them at risk of sanctions for failing to deliver relevant transferable skills. Graduates and other job seekers are also left uncertain about what skills and behaviours employers want and, thus, may not know how best to market themselves to employers.

The UK government and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the UK's largest business lobby group (CBI, 2023), have consistently sought to identify the transferable skills employers need through their respective large-scale and long-running annual Employer Skills Surveys (Bosworth et al., 1999, p. 17; Winterbotham et al., 2020a) and Education and Skills Surveys (CBI, 2019a). However, the transferable skills employers want are neither presented as a unified set nor are the transferable skills listed in the surveys described. These absences mean that educators and students cannot know specifically what

behaviours employers expect to enable graduate preparedness for employment or compliance with OfS regulations. Despite the long-standing reliance on skills surveys to shape an employer-driven skills agenda (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 17-18), and more recent regulations directing English universities to deliver relevant transferable skills, there is no publicly available unified transferable skillset with a shared language against which to measure these universities or their students. This lack of clarity has ramifications beyond semantics. A lack of clarity affects curriculum design, teaching methodologies, and metrics for student success, thereby posing risks of setting universities up to fail by not delivering the relevant transferable skills employers value and students need.

1.3   **Research aim, and objectives**

<u>Research Aim</u>

The main research aim of the study was:

> "To examine if a common language for a defined set of transferable skills can be established to enable educators, employers, and universities to assess graduates more objectively within a heavily regulated higher education landscape".

A central contention of this thesis is the paradoxical nature of the UK's higher education policy and regulation. It is both vague and directive. English universities must comply with regulations which require them to craft specific learning outcomes to articulate the skills and knowledge students will acquire from degree programs. They are also expected to offer students a value-for-money experience (OfS, 2019, p. 6), equip them with industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) and ensure students' smooth transition from their courses into managerial or professional employment, or further study (OfS, 2022a, p. 51; DfE, 2017, p. 34). However, English universities' compliance and delivery of relevant transferable skills must all happen amid the absence of a standard transferable skillset with a shared language to describe what the transferable skills mean for educators, employers,

and students. Therefore, the measures against which English universities are assessed are vague, subjective, and highly contestable.

Objectives

To address the study's aim, the following objectives were identified:

- To critique how successive UK governments have steered English higher education regulations towards a skills-drive agenda
- To critique how UK-based employers, educators and the wider academic community have described the transferable skills they consider graduates need for successful employment
- To explore how transferable skills represented in the UK government and Confederation of British Industry commissioned employer skills surveys might offer a common set of skills with coherent articulation of their meanings
- To examine if UK educators and employers can describe their expectations of graduate performance related to a set of transferable skills

Framed by a dialectical critical realist stance and with a *M.E.L.D.* approach (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. xiii), this thesis critically reviews the UK higher education skills policy discourse, excluding Scottish universities[3], and the transferable skills graduates need for employment. The critical policy and skills literature review juxtaposes an empirical exploration of how UK-based employers and university educators describe the transferable skills graduates need for successful employment. It should be noted that this study does not seek to establish a definitive common skills language. Such a defined language would fall into the trap of a bounded framework open to rejection if the language is restricted to a set of defined statements. The purpose is to explore the existence of a standardised set of transferable skills and the potential for establishing commonly agreed language between employers and

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[3] Scottish university higher education policy is not included as Scotland is unaffected by the full force of UK higher education regulation due to its devolved status (Keating, 2005).

educators to describe the skills in the context of a heavily regulated higher education landscape and government-driven skills agenda.

If, from the findings of this research, a process of establishing a set of transferable skills can be curated and the skills presented in a manner capable of establishing a common language, it could provide a policy mechanism to develop specific criteria to describe and measure industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121). Graduate preparedness for employment can be enhanced, curricula design in higher education can be better informed, and a constructive dialogue between educators and employers can be enabled. If a common language cannot be found, the unreasonableness of English universities being held solely accountable for graduate outcomes linked to the provision of relevant transferable skills and successful employment, through the OfS regulations (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121), can be evidenced and argued.

1.4   **Research Questions**

In constructing the research questions, consideration has been given to ensuring they meet five critical elements set out by Trowler (2015). They must be answerable, specific, analytical, operational, and significant (Trowler, 2015, p.8). An overarching research question has been established on which to base three sub-research questions:

- Overarching Research Question:
  In response to the UK's higher education policy, how can a common language for a defined set of transferable skills be established to enable educators, employers, and universities to assess graduates more objectively within a heavily regulated higher education landscape?

  - Sub-Research Question One:
    How have successive UK governments steered English higher education regulations towards a skills-driven agenda, and how have academia and employers reacted?

- Sub-Research Question Two:

  How are transferable skills represented in the UK Government and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) commissioned skills surveys, and to what degree is there a convergence on a unified set of skills with explicit and coherent articulation of their meanings across these surveys?

- Sub-Research Question Three:

  How can asking educators and employers to describe their expectations of graduate performance as related to a set of transferable skills (identified in sub-research questions one and two) contribute to the process of establishing a common skills language as part of graduate preparedness for employability?

I acknowledge that students and graduates are important stakeholders in higher education, and their interests are represented in the regulatory obligations of English universities. However, they are outside the scope of this research, which is focused on the formation of higher education skills policies and regulation and their impact on the delivery of higher education. Furthermore, although the concept of "skill" is a debated subject in the broad literature, debating its concept, for example, is it attitude, aptitude, capability, competence, behaviour or other defined concept, is out of scope of this study. This is because the definitional concept of a skill is subjective and varies across different contexts and industries and thus focusing on its definition risks diluting this study's aims, objectives and research questions. Similarly, the conceptual definitions of "student", "graduate", and "graduate identity" are also not debated due to the same dilution risks.

To respond to the main research question in this study, which posits the existence of a policy gap in higher education regulation and to answer the research sub-questions, it is necessary to understand how higher education policies have evolved and influenced the UK's educational landscape. Thus, this study is philosophically framed on Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR). Focussing on dialectics is particularly important. It goes beyond a critical realist perspective of acknowledging that objective reality is shaped by social, cultural, and perceptual factors. Dialectics provides a deeper understanding of reality by understanding,

analysing, and explaining how opposing forces create tensions, conflicts, and contradictions through their interactions and interdependencies (Bhaskar, 2015, p. 12). The goal of dialectics is, thus, to find potential resolutions to these complex dynamics. In the context of this study, the opposing forces and complex dynamics are the higher education regulatory policy directives requiring English universities to deliver relevant transferable skills that employers need. The following section introduces the philosophical framing of (DCR), its foundations in critical realism, and DCR's application in this research.

1.5   Locating the study in the philosophy of Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR)

The UK government formulates higher education policies, allocates funding, and guides the course of the education system in alignment with a specific political vision of an economically sustainable society. This study adopts a dialectically critical realist (DCR) approach to understand the intricate interplay among state higher education regulations, student employment expectations of higher education, and the enduring demand for transferable skills. Dialectics is the practice of exploring tensions, conflicts, and contradictions of opposing forces and finding potential resolutions to such tensions. In the context of this study, DCR explores the dialectic tensions, contradictions and conflicts between higher education policy, regulations, employers' transferable skills requirements, and their constraints in teaching transferable skills. The approach is introduced here, with a brief comment on critical realism before expanding into DCR, to set the philosophical context for Chapters 2 and 3. A more in-depth critique of DCR, its application in educational research and a diagrammatic illustration of the principles of Bhaskar's DCR relevant to this study is presented in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.

Critical realism is a philosophical approach that provides a framework for understanding the interplay between reality, knowledge, and perception (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 193). Ontologically, critical realism asserts the existence of an objective reality independent of human perception, yet our understanding of reality is *(empirically)* shaped and influenced by the events we experience and our interpretations of them (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 18). Critical

realism finds its foundation in the works of philosophers such as Karl Marx, Georg Hegel, Emile Durkheim, and Anthony Giddens. Their philosophies coalesced on the idea that human agency produces and transforms society. Thus, society cycles through the human agentic actions of production, reproduction, and transformation (Archer et al., 1998, pp. xvi-xx). However, British Philosopher Roy Bhaskar (1944-2014) synthesised their ideas of socially constructed reality into a dialectical critical realist domain. He did this by introducing three key ideas:

1) that society is *pre-structured* for individuals who never created it and therefore they act in a world of constraints and structures not of their making (Archer et al., 1998, p. xvi),

2) that reality is multi-layered within which are unseen forces that act on events or phenomena, leading to inherent tensions and contradictions (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 72: 2017, p74; Norrie, 2009, p. 17; Roberts, 2014, p. 3).

3) within these forces, Bhaskar encourages the critical, conscious, and recursive awareness of absence as a determinate force rather than a gap or nothingness as the key to driving change (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 6).

Bhaskar's emphasis on the tangibility of absence as critical to identifying forces of absence to remove or remedy their constraints moves his ideas of critical realism into the dialectic. However, absence, which Bhaskar also densely refers to as "real negation" (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 6), is not absolute because something absent in one phenomenon can be present in another. Bhaskar calls this conundrum the "duality of absence" (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 5). To illustrate this duality concept, the meaning one person ascribes to a transferable skill will be present to them but may be absent in another person's meaning. Thus, meaning can be dually present and absent at the same time. Surfacing this duality of absence makes the visibility of its force and power possible, or as Bhaskar posits, absence becomes determinate (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 5). When the absence: presence paradigm is realised, the potential for removing the constraining power of absence by coming to a shared understanding of

meaning is manifested. Social scientist and philosopher Laske (2008) reinforces Bhaskar's idea of absence, emphasising that exploring and exposing the underlying tensions, interdependencies, and absences at play in our perception and construction of reality is essential (Laske, 2008, p. 457; 2015, pp. 73-75) to come to a shared understanding.

To discern underlying causal events and the absences they incur, Bhaskar encourages a dialectical distinction between and exploration of reality through three stratified domains:

- the *real* domain of social structures and mechanisms that cause events to occur,
- the *(actual)* domain in which events are manifested by the (*real)* domain, and
- our (*empirical)* experiences of the (*real)* and *(actual)* domains

(Bhaskar, 2008b, p. 13; 2015, p. 12)

The *(real)* social structures and mechanisms of interest in this research are the UK government, the OfS, higher education, and employers. Each has complexities, contradictions, and tensions that create *(actual)* events causally impacting graduates', educators', and employers' experiences *(empirical)* of graduates' acquisition of the transferable skills employers need. For instance, the OfS, itself a product of government, has a range of regulatory mechanisms intended to improve the quality and delivery of higher education in England. These mechanisms include, but are not limited to, value for money and positive outcomes for students, as well as the development of transferable skills that align with the needs of employers (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121). Such intentions raise a number of questions, including:

- **Underlying structures**: what underlying structures and mechanisms have mediated the need for a highly regulated education landscape?
- **Regulatory mechanisms**: what specific mechanisms behove universities to comply with improving value for money?
- **Definition of value:** how does the OfS define value?
- **Influences on mechanisms:** how are compliance mechanisms influenced and driven by the social structures of government, employers, and students?
- **Transferable skills:** what transferable skills are being measured?

- **Impact on higher education:** how do compliance mechanisms influence and impact the design and delivery of higher education?
- **Skills acquisition and employment:** how do the OfS regulatory mechanisms enable or hinder a graduate's acquisition of the transferable skills required for successful employment?

For Bhaskar, the central tenet of DCR is a process that involves identifying and eliminating, or absenting, problematic axiological constraints (Bhaskar, 2008a, pp. 75-76) affecting society. In other words, the axiological problem is that something good for one entity can be bad for another. For instance, the government values higher education as a mechanism for a sustainable economic society. However, its higher education policy, enacted through the Office for Students, requires English universities to adhere to strict regulations. Universities face sanctions if they fail to produce graduates with relevant transferable skills. Yet, the OfS does not specify what these skills are. This absence of specification suggests that the UK government and the OfS have not addressed the tensions they have created among universities, employers, and students, evidenced by employers' dissatisfaction with graduates' transferable skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 8; GoS, 2017, p. 48). Instead, the UK government appears to impose its will on universities, leveraging its authority without resolving underlying issues.

Unlike the common practice of relying purely on observations and practical experiences to determine reality, Bhaskar argues that a dialectical exploration of social structures and mechanisms through the layers of the (*real), (actual),* and (*empirical)* domains can reveal complex contradictions, tensions, and absences within them. Understanding the unique dynamics, power relationships, and constraints in which the four social structures operate can help to identify their inherent tensions and conflicting interests and better inform higher education policies and regulations.

Furthermore, Bhaskar suggests that the concept of meaning is shaped by social structures, historical events, and political ideologies in the (*real*) domain and by subjective interpretations in the (*empirical)* domain (Bhaskar, 2015, p. 146). The dual nature of where meaning resides, both in the (*real)* and *(empirical)* domains, creates a paradox, especially

when considering the nature and interpretation of transferable skills. Addressing this paradox requires examining how events in the (*real)* domains*,* such as government policies, employer demands and university curricula, and personal experiences in the (*empirical)* domain have shaped and influenced an understanding of transferable skills. This approach requires a detailed exploration of how transferable skills are identified, interpreted, and described in both domains to reveal the complexities and varied meanings attached to transferable skills.

To reach a desired state, for example, the growing pursuit for a common skills language between employers and educators (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; CBI, 2019a, p. 8; CG, 2021, p. 32; EC, 2020, p. 1; SPB, 2022, p. 5; WEF, 2021, pp. 2-6) the constraints that act as barriers to this pursuit must be identified and removed (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 38). Thus, taking an evidence-based approach to examine the social structures of government, the OfS, higher education, and employers, identify and critique policy decisions and explore the meaning of transferable skills offers a route to attain a deeper understanding of how the higher education world is influenced and *(empirically)* experienced by *(real)* unseen forces and (*actual*) events (Bhaskar, 1998, p. 54; Bhaskar, 2015, p. 12). Such an approach enables rigorous conclusions to be drawn towards identifying a unified set of transferable skills, fostering their common language, and influencing policy discussions towards a fairer regulatory system and shared understandings between these higher education stakeholders.

In summary, DCR seeks to combine critical realism with dialectical reasoning by acknowledging and exploring the dialogic complexity of opposing forces within the three layers of reality. This dialogic process is accessed by engaging in discourse on the social realities of higher education, employment, and policymaking and illustrating the tensions and power dynamics between policymakers, employers, and educators.

1.5.1   The *M.E.L.D.* Process Model of Enquiry

To understand how the four social structures and mechanisms of government, the OfS, higher education, and employers interact and investigate their unforeseen consequences, absences, tensions, and contradictions, Bhaskar's act of dialectic requires a process for "absenting of constraints on the absenting of absences, or ills" (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 373). Or, more straightforwardly phrased, a process of enquiry to identify and remove the constraints that restrict the potential or actuality of something to be achieved and subsequently to enable change to occur. To understand absence and its causal impact on society, Bhaskar offers a dialectical and logical way of thinking about problems, their causation, and their impact through four dialectical moments of thought presented as the mnemonic, *M.E.L.D.* (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. xiii). These four sequential moments use the domains of the *(real), (actual),* and *(empirical)* layers of reality (Bhaskar, 2017, pp. 57-87) to explore events that have already occurred, understand their manifestations through visible and unseen forces at play, and realise the potential for change to mitigate their effects.

The first dialectical step is *(1M)*, the first "Moment" of recognition that something has happened in the past which has left behind visible and unseen causal impacts and tensions. The unseen is a critical dialectic as it requires thinking about what is absent insofar as what cannot be seen in a happening but which has a causal impact on what can be seen. The second thought moment *(2E),* which Bhaskar calls the "Second Edge" as it represents the transitioning edge between absence, contradiction, and critique (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 368), requires understanding the causal impacts and tensions of the event. The presence of the past is a critical component in *(2E)* because past events influence current phenomena, hence Bhaskar's notion that "we live, quite literally, in the past" (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 50). The outcomes of the first *(1M)* and second *(2E)* are brought together at the third "Level" of thinking *(3L)* to reveal the totality of a happening and its causal effects. The third level of dialectics thus offers the axiological moment for change to occur by recognising the existence of a problem *(1M)* and its impact *(2E),* which brings about the need to resolve it *(3L)*. A critical pivot in resolving any problem is the intentionality of agentic action. Bhaskar refers to this pivot as the fourth dialectic dimension *(4D)*. This final moment is thus concerned with the human motivation to absent the constraining forces on a problem to

make change possible (Bhaskar, 2008a, pp. xiii, 355). By moving through the four moments of dialectics, *M.E.L.D.* offers a process of identifying a happening, understanding its cause and effect, and bringing this new knowledge together to deepen our understanding of reality and enable the potential for change to occur.

To explain how the *M.E.L.D.* model of enquiry can be applied to this study, the following example is offered. The example is also diagrammatically presented in a novel and original illustration inspired by Bhaskar's DCR framing (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. xiii) – see Illustration 1 at the end of this section. At the first moment of dialectic *(1M),* the social structures of the government and OfS, as the UK's higher education regulator, create policy mechanisms to ensure universities meet specific performance standards or face the possibility of sanctions for sub-par performance. At the second moment *(2E),* universities design teaching and learning mechanisms to comply with regulatory directives. However, when the policy mechanisms of learning outcomes, progression rates, and the need to deliver industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) interact with teaching and learning mechanisms, it is possible to identify unforeseen consequences, tensions, and contradictions. For instance, compulsory learning outcome statements enable progression rate targets (OfS, 2022b, p. 1) through ambiguous language, irrespective of whether students have the relevant transferable skills employers want.

When (*1M*) and *(2E)* are combined, they expose the third dialectic level *(3L)* where students progress through their studies regardless of their levels of competence in transferable skills. Consequently, the effect of prescriptive learning outcome statements and progression target risks causally inflating grades (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002, p. 7) and increasing employers' dissatisfaction with graduates' transferable skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 8). Such tensions illustrate the unintended consequences of higher education policy and regulation. Identifying and understanding these tensions catalyses the fourth moment of dialectic *(4D),* in which the potential for change manifests and from which solutions to mitigate the causal impact of *(1M), (2E)*, and (*3D*) can be considered.

Illustration 1: *M.E.L.D.* tensions example
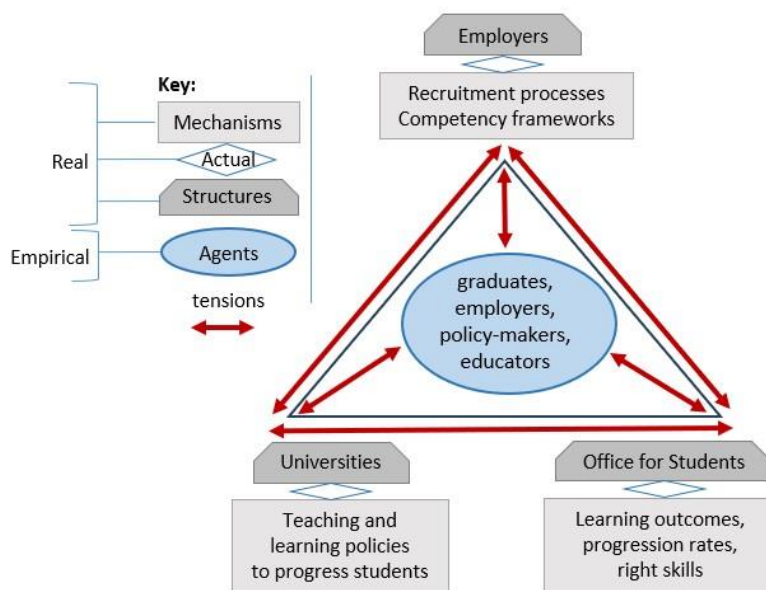
Exposing and addressing the tensions illustrated in this example requires deeply exploring the past and present forces on higher education policy development in the *(real)* domain towards the manifestation in the *(actual)* domain of a value for money and skills agenda and how graduates, employers, policymakers, and educators have responded, evidenced through the *(empirical)* domain, and thus, what impact their responses have had on education policy regulation.

1.5.2   Applying Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR) to this study

Coming to a position of knowing in service of the research questions in this study requires a nuanced exploration of what exists and what is absent in UK higher education policy in the context of transferable skills development and the requirement that its English universities deliver value for money, positive outcomes and employer-demanded transferable skills. I have, therefore, developed an original *M.E.L.D.* model of enquiry based on Bhaskar's *M.E.L.D.* conceptual dialectical thinking process (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 59) and inspired by Otto Laske and Ingrid Schudel's social science scholarly research. Schudel used the *M.E.L.D.* process to systematically explore the interplay between policy and the environmental structures and mechanisms influencing primary school teaching in South Africa, resulting in

an informative two-step dialectical cycle of learning-led change (Schudel, 2017, pp. 164-171). Similarly, Laske (2015) developed a dialectical thought framework using the *M.E.L.D.* process to expose the tensions in how people construct reality (Laske, 2015, pp. 73-75). A critique of Schudel's and Laske's respective approaches is offered in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.1.

The adapted *M.E.L.D.* model, which moves through the four moments of dialectics, is described below and also diagrammatically presented in Illustration 2. Throughout this thesis, the model is presented in italics as the whole mnemonic – *M.E.L.D.* and its constituent individual letters are italicised and bracketed at each dialectical moment of *(1M)*, *(2E)*, *(3L)*, and *(4D)*.

- *(1M)* Knowledge: Critically and integratively reviewing what is present and absent in the social structures and mechanisms of government, the OfS, universities and employers. Dialectically identifying their connections, patterns, relationships, methodologies, and limitations to uncover the causal interactions, tensions, and absences that impact English universities' ability to deliver relevant transferable skills.
- *(2E)* Tensions: Exposing the visible and unseen tensions between higher education policy ideologies, regulation, employers' transferable skills demands and the published skills literature.
- *(3L)* Connections: connecting the now visible tensions to expose what is missing (absent) with the potential of what could be established for change to occur.
- *(4D)* Transformation: How political and regulatory agency impacts higher education policies and regulation and how employer and educator agentic actions can potentially remove the tensions and constraints at *(1M)*, *(2E)*, and (*3L*) towards transformative change.

Illustration 2: Adapted *M.E.L.D.* model of enquiry
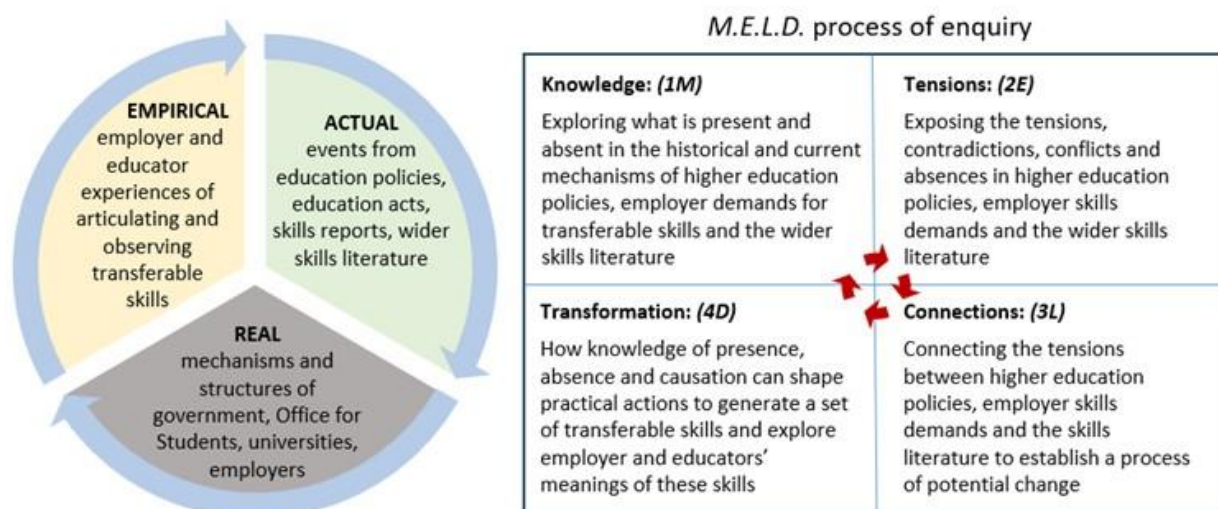
In my adaptation of the four dialectical moments of *M.E.L.D.*, I am locating "mechanisms" at the first moment *(1M)* to illustrate how coming to a position of knowing requires a nuanced exploration of what exists and what is absent in skills literature and the UK higher education's regulatory policies that require its English universities to deliver value for money, positive outcomes and employer-demanded skills. Regarding "exposing", at the second edge *(2E)*, I seek to expose the tensions and contradictions in policy, skill demands and skills literature to identify what could be done differently. Connecting the tensions within and between the UK higher education's regulatory policies and broader skills literature *(3L)* focuses on how policy and the chaotic skills landscape cause confusion for educators, employers, and students. The purpose is to identify what could be done to reduce or remove the confusion, with "transformation" located at *(4D)* to illustrate how practical actions can shape the domains of the *(real)* government and regulatory policies, the *(actual)* OfS, employers, and universities, and *(empirical)* offering solutions to mitigate their causal effects.

When it comes to current higher education policy, the goal of the OfS is clear: equip graduates with industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) and deliver value for money for the taxpayer and students (OfS, 2019, p. 2). Nevertheless, there is an overarching uncertainty and ambiguity about the relevant transferable skills and what they

mean at a practical level of performance. Thus, although the UK government has rolled out many higher education policies over the past 60 years, as will be elaborated in Chapters 1 and 2, the goal of aligning graduates' transferable skills with industry needs remains unfulfilled. This goal suggests a policy gap in the current landscape of UK higher education: the absence of a universally accepted set of transferable skills with a unified language to articulate them.

Social structures and mechanisms are shaped by agents whose actions and motivations significantly influence their current and future environments (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 18, 92). Given the pivotal role of agents' intentions in developing, implementing, and executing higher education skills policies that direct higher education to equip graduates with employer-valued industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121), this study conducts focus groups with employers and educators. These discussions aim to explore their perspectives on transferable skills to uncover nuances, variations, and contradictions in how these skills are understood and described. Whilst students and graduates are also key agents in demonstrating skills acquisition, this research captures the views of employers and educators to explore what is present and absent in their perceptions of transferable skills. This approach seeks to foster a transformative understanding that may lead to a shared skills language between educators and employers or expose the impossibility of such a goal. Introducing students and graduates as agents would be a consequential output of this research; thus, they are important in future research. The concept of agentic action also raises questions concerning my intentions and interests in conducting this study. Therefore, my positionality and motivation for conducting this study are addressed in Section 1.6.

In summary, a DCR approach questions whose interests are served by the dual mechanisms of higher education policy directives and a common skills language and how each might empower or marginalise different groups within higher education. The dialectic between structure and agency is particularly relevant. Higher education policies are continuously shaped, interpreted, and sometimes resisted or contested by educational practitioners, researchers, students, and employers. For instance, employers' persistent resistance to owning the skills agenda (Hesketh, 2000, p. 246; Keep, 2015, p. 29), educators' and researchers' contestation of the Teaching Excellence Framework and compulsory learning

outcomes (Rammell, 2016, p. 10; Wild & Berger, 2016, p. 42), and students' expectations of employment in return for paid-for degrees (OfS, 2023b, p. 7). Under such circumstances, it becomes essential to understand the dynamic interaction between the structures of government and universities, between the mechanisms of policy directives and the agents they affect, to provide a richer and more nuanced understanding of the UK's higher education landscape.

Through this *M.E.L.D.* model, a story of the history and impact of higher education policies that place employers and students front and centre will emerge. The agentic views of employers and educators through focus group discussions will demonstrate how the transformation of policy towards a fairer regulatory environment for English universities can occur *(4D)*. It is important to recognise that completion of the enquiry at *(4D)* does not mean the enquiry process stops. It means that a point has been reached which has the potential to establish a new reality (Archer et al., 1998, p. 683). Therefore, the *M.E.L.D.* cycle can be repeated in the same or subsequent research to establish a constant loop of knowing, reflecting, and acting towards reviewing and potentially changing policies related to a skills-driven agenda. This research study offers a novel approach to applying the philosophy of DCR and *M.E.L.D.* process of enquiry to the challenge that English universities face in complying with higher education regulations and the potential for a unified transferable skillset with a common skills language. Future research could apply the same or an adapted M.E.L.D approach to deepen the societal understanding of the challenges universities face in complying with their conditions of registration and the skills employers need.

Thus, Bhaskar's DCR philosophy and my adapted *M.E.L.D.* model provide a holistic, multidimensional philosophical framework to identify the unintended causal effects between the social structures of government, higher education and industry and their respective mechanisms. This approach provides an alternative perspective to the current discourse on higher education policy and the employer-demanded skills narrative. By emphasising the dialectic process, I aim to examine and present how a clearer understanding of the impact of higher education policies might be enabled (Bhaskar, 2017,

pp. 50-80) and to position this study's significance and immediacy in today's higher educational discourse.

1.6   **My positionality**

With extensive experience in higher education over 30 years and prior public and private sector industry experience, I am deeply interested in the challenges employers and educators face when considering the skills graduates need in the workplace. As a master practitioner in Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and a qualified Mediator, I am keenly interested in exploring the nuances of language, uncovering meaning in people's words through dialogue, and identifying what may be missing in what they say. Mediation and NLP practices underscore the importance of bracketing one's emotions and thoughts (Strasser & Randolph, 2006, pp. 34-49) to avoid interpolating one's thoughts and feelings onto a person's thought process. With my combined experiences, the practice of bracketing my emotions during the research process and fieldwork is an important consideration, made possible through my years of training and practice in NLP and mediation.

My master's thesis on higher education in 2003 sparked a profound interest in the UK government's higher education skills agenda. Subsequently, after transitioning to full-time academic teaching in 2008, I focused on helping students develop their employability skills through experiential learning. I also founded an employability skills training company conducting experiential learning workshops during this period. These workshops catered to a diverse audience, including students, businesspeople, and educators tasked with creating employability courses within their respective universities. Educator participants were a direct consequence of a policy drive for a student employment outcomes focus in the higher education system.

In 2010, I joined Coventry University London, where my role combines various skills-related activities and teaching. I continue to focus on experiential learning. When leading working groups on curriculum design for all undergraduate and postgraduate degrees in the

university's portfolio, I encountered my fellow educators' difficulties articulating transferable skills in their modules and course outlines. Their difficulties prompted me to take an institution-wide mediated approach to identify what knowledge, skills and behaviours were expressed through each course's learning outcome. I then asked each course leader what, how and where, questions to help them describe the skills and behaviours that would help students progress through and graduate from their degree course. I combined and presented their contributions through a discipline-agnostic and level-sensitive transferable skills taxonomy across curricula. The university adopted this skills taxonomy as a best practice tool to help course leaders check that the transferable skills that would enable students to progress successfully through their courses were taught, practised, and assessed in a scaffolded manner.

During my scholarly journey, two academic conferences left a lasting impact on me. One was held in 2005 in Birmingham, sponsored by The Centre for Recording Achievement and the Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC). Scholars Grant and Scrivens (2005) at this conference emphasised the need to break down skills until they achieve consensus. They believed such a consensus would facilitate learners' transitions between universities and jobs by ensuring that educators and employers universally recognise the meanings of the transferable skills (Grant & Scrivens, 2005, p. 12) students acquired through their higher education. Seven years later, at the 2012 Manchester Metropolitan University Employability and Citizenship Conference (MMU, 2012), the academic audience expressed their collective frustrations. They were concerned by a growing policy requirement to produce employable graduates in the absence of a defined set of skills employers want or a shared understanding of what such skills mean at an assessable level of performance. Having witnessed the challenges in preparing graduates for employment due to the lack of a common set of skills and language, the novelty of my thesis is exploring and identifying transferable skills and establishing a process for a common skills language between employers and educators.

My experiences as an academic, business owner and employee have inspired this research. However, I recognise my insider-outsider roles as an employer and academic, and my policy knowledge of the expectations for graduate skills influences what I think and believe. Thus, I

recognise the need to be transparent about my research positionality and my use of reflexivity. Maintaining an objective perspective is important as a researcher, NLP practitioner and mediator. In Chapter 4, I explain how I maintained objectivity in the context of my ontological and epistemological perspectives.

1.7   Thesis structure

Chapter One introduces the research aim, the questions driving this study, and my positionality. It also explains the anticipated contribution to academic knowledge, the philosophical approach, and the overarching structure of the thesis.

Chapters Two and Three address sub-research question one and set the stage for addressing sub-research questions two and three of this study. Chapter two critically reviews 60 years of UK higher education policy through a DCR lens and *M.E.L.D.* framing, beginning with the seminal 1963 Robbins Report (Robbins, 1963a). This historical lens is an essential first step in the dialectical critical realist realm. It sets the foundation for the research by uncovering the hidden elements, connections, and tensions between the mechanisms of education acts, funding strategies, regulations, and employer-centric skill policies. The government's 1997 Dearing Report recommendations 21, 22, and 72 (Dearing, 1997, pp. 141, 156, 297) are emphasised to highlight the overt and covert consequences for higher education of their political acceptance.

Chapter Three critically reviews the literature regarding the transferable skills desired by employers. Gaps in the literature are exposed by surfacing and connecting the contradictions, tensions and absences in published skills surveys, scholarly and commercially sponsored studies, and published papers relevant to transferable skills. The chapter concludes with a concise review of how the tensions and constraints in higher education policy have led to the mounting demand for a unified transferable skills language, the increasing political preference for comprehensive big-data skills taxonomies as a policy

instrument to establish such a language and why such taxonomies cannot provide the common skills language they promise.

Chapter Four articulates the philosophical and methodological underpinnings of DCR and my adaptation of *M.E.L.D.* approaches for the study. It adds complementary detail to what has already been provided in this chapter and provides comprehensive details on the data generation and collection techniques employed to address the three sub-research questions. The chapter explains how two corpora were built: one large corpora of 2,935,525 million words, rounded to 3 million, to answer sub-research question two and one small corpus of 31,748 words for sub-research question three. It also sets out a detailed explanation of the data analysis methods adopted in this study.

Chapter Five reports the detailed corpus analysis of 100 UK Government and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) skills surveys between 1999 and 2019. Here, the focus shifts to the mechanisms of the UK government's employer skills surveys and the CBI-commissioned education and employer skills surveys, framed by the government's vision of a sustainable economic society (Browne, 2010, p. 14; Keep et al., 2022, p. 8; Williams, 2016, pp. 132-133). These bi-annual and long-standing surveys, rich with data, offer insights into the skills ecosystem, informing policies and initiatives that address skills development and workforce requirements. This twenty-year exploration reveals five specific transferable skills recurrently emphasised by employers. The output from sub-research question two is taken into sub-research question three to explore employer and educators' views on these five transferable skills.

Chapter Six reports the findings of the two focus groups in this study, comprising employers and educators. These groups articulate their expectations of graduate performance in the context of the five transferable skills identified from sub-research question two. The chapter is divided into two parts. Extensive extracts from the two focus groups are given in Part A and their narratives are brought together in Part B to illustrate the importance of the findings in the development of a common skills language.

Chapter Seven provides an overall discussion of the thesis argument and its findings. Its focus and key arguments are revisited and built upon from the policy analysis and literature chapters. Exemplars from the employer and educator focus group findings are used to illustrate their importance to the policy and skills narrative. Reflections on the study design and its contributions to knowledge and research practice are presented. Future directions and next steps are outlined, offering ways in which this research can be practically applied in the higher education system and policy development.

Chapter 2 Policy analysis and impact: UK's higher education journey 1963-2023

2.1   Introduction

This chapter explores how higher education policy has shaped English universities spanning 60 years, from 1963 to 2023. The purpose is to address sub-research question one by examining the components of England's higher education policy to understand how successive UK governments have steered English higher education towards a skills-driven agenda. The chapter is set out chronologically. It begins with a brief overview of which components of higher education policy are centralised and which are devolved and describes the policy analysis methodology. The chapter is then divided into two substantial parts: Part A examines the English higher education policy decisions, and Part B exposes the implications of policy and regulatory decisions for English universities. Although the literature on higher education policy is extensive, no previous body of work has brought together 60 years of higher education policy, practice, and implications viewed through the lens of dialectical critical realism. This chapter is, therefore, extensive in its structure, content, and arguments in addressing the study's aims and objectives.

The philosophical framing of DCR and the *M.E.L.D.* process of enquiry has guided the critical review by examining the visible and hidden forces in higher education policy and regulation mechanisms. This approach helps to reveal the tensions, contradictions and absences within the policy landscape, which constrains an understanding of what relevant transferable skills employers want and universities must deliver to satisfy their regulatory obligations.

2.2   UK's higher education policy – intricacies and breadth

The UK education and skills policy environment spans an extensive central and local government platform with multiple interwoven components. In England alone, a plethora of Whitehall departments manage approximately 50 different national employment and skills-related schemes and services (Hughes, 2023, p. 1; LGA, 2022, p. 2). The UK government maintains oversight of the qualifications and quality standards frameworks for all four nations. However, university regulations and skills policies are devolved. Each home nation legislates on its own higher education affairs, albeit unified by common themes. Such themes include improving skills development, better career advice (Gatsby, 2018; Green & Hogarth, 2016, p. 6) and university regulation. As part of the devolved and centralised system, Section 25 of the Higher Education and Research Act (HERA) 2017 authorises the OfS, as the English regulator, to rate the quality and standards of universities in Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland (HERA, 2017, p. 19). However, the devolved status means that the OfS can only enforce regulation on English universities.

For clarity, this study refers only to the specifics of legislated regulation affecting English higher education institutions. UK government-commissioned initiatives such as the Gatsby Career Guidance framework (Gatsby, 2018) and the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfA, 2017) are recognised as important contributions in the education landscape, however, they are out of scope of this research. Nevertheless, considering the OfS authorised power to rate quality and standards in higher education across all four nations (HERA, 2017, p. 81), the research rationale, findings, and recommendations are applicable to all four nations and across the vista of UK government skills-driven initiatives aimed at economic and social prosperity.

2.3   Policy analysis methodology

The history of UK higher education policy is a complicated and messy journey through multiple education acts, white papers, consultation documents and commissioned reports.

An integrative critical review of the policy literature, adopting a DCR lens and *M.E.L.D.* approach, was conducted for this study to provide insight into the historical and evolving policy trends that have influenced UK higher education over decades. The *(1M)* dialectic explores the complexity and evolution of higher education policy. Following this, the *(2E)* dialectic identifies and critiques how gaps (absences) in the evolution of higher education policy and regulation affect their overall effectiveness and fairness within the social structures of government, universities, and employers. The active presence of the past is a critical component in *(2E)* because current phenomena are influenced by past events (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 50). With a deeper understanding of the complexities, evolution, and gaps in policy, the *(3L)* dialectic considers how the policies are influenced by other aspects of society, including labour markets, social norms, and global trends. The *(4D)* dialectic explores the UK government's policy-driven actions, their impact on higher education and whether they have addressed the absences found in the *(2E)* dialectic. Charting and connecting the historical and current higher education policy journey exposes and connects the tensions, contradictions and absences in higher education policies and employer skills needs to create opportunities for transformative practical action.

The literature search focused on UK higher education policy texts from 1960 to 2023. This 60-year period has seen policy shifts and reforms, including changes in funding models, tuition fees, quality assurance, regulation, and an increasing emphasis on graduate employability. A string of search terms closely related to the purpose of the literature review was used to find rich literature relevant to this research. In particular, the following search terms, listed in alphabetical order, were used:

> Brown report; changing nature of higher education in the UK; Dearing Report; employability skills, English university regulation; future of higher education in the UK; higher education white paper; higher education policy, history of higher education in the UK; impact of higher education policies; Leitch report; Robbins report; UK skills agenda; university regulation in the UK.

The search terms generated a vast data store of UK government-sponsored publications. Thus, to ensure the deepest level of search, each search term was also preceded by the

Google search term "site: gov.uk" and "site: CBI.org". For example "site:gov.uk report". This search strategy confined the search to within the Government and CBI official websites. The literature search strategy generated a rich source of articles, books and papers cited throughout this study. In addition to the specific word-search strategy, literature relevant to higher education policy was also drawn by following up on citations found in relevant texts.

From the above search terms, the websites and journals listed in Table 1 below were found to offer particularly rich sources of information:

Table 1: Rich sources for Higher education policy websites and Journals

Websites	Journals
https://www.employment-studies.co.uk/	HE Policy
https://www.hepi.ac.uk/	HE Quarterly
https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/	Institute of Employment Studies
https://www.gov.uk/search/all	Journal of Education and Work
https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/	Oxford Review of Education
https://www.data.gov.uk/	Policy Press
https://www.instituteforgovernment.org.uk/	Studies in HE
http://www.educationengland.org.uk/documents/acts/index.html - a privately owned but freely available web repository containing the full texts of hundreds of published documents, education acts, and papers on education in England.	Work, employment, and society

The critical and integrative review of higher education policy literature sought to understand the main tenets of higher education policy from the perspective of delivering the skills employers say they want. From this critical review, it was possible to identify and expose the literature's knowledge absences (gaps), tensions, and contradictions, establish themes for exploration, and generate research questions relevant to this study.

2.4   Part A: Policy landscape and context

This section describes the UK higher education policy journey from autonomy to state governance. It begins in the (*real)* domain of government, in which the mechanism of the 1963 Robbins report catalysed the expansion of higher education. The section travels through the manifested events meted on the social structures of universities caused by this expansion and briefly acknowledges the broader impact on society. It concludes with a summary of their impact on universities, employers, and students of higher education regulation today. Therefore, this Part A policy review offers a crucial historically situated first moment *(1M)* view of the market and economic forces English universities operate within today.

2.4.1   Introduction

Societal factors and political imperatives in the 1960s drove the need to expand the number of university places. Universities were unable to keep pace with the number of young people who had the qualifications and desire to progress to university (Robbins, 1963a, p. 2). The competing political parties all adopted university expansion as a key campaign initiative to win the 1964 general election (LSE, 2014, pp. 3, 69). Despite their campaign, the conservative party lost the election, but not before accepting all 178 Robbins Report recommendations which the incoming Labour government then enacted (Shattock, 2014, pp. 110, 117, 120). This pan-governmental approach indicates that, despite their political differences, both parties recognised the importance of the Robbins report's findings and recommendations and reflects their joint willingness to prioritise significant reforms to the UK's higher education system.

Expansion in real terms meant establishing a binary system of universities and 32 new Colleges of Advanced Technology with equivalent university status (Watson & Taylor, 1998, p. 9). This expansion necessitated increasing the number of university buildings, equipping them with university-level research and library facilities, and paying staff salaries at the same level as existing universities (Annan, 1982, pp. 1-5). All of which added a financial

burden on the public purse. Although UK higher education expansion was already underway before the Robbins report, for example, through standardising tuition and maintenance grants for all students with a minimum of two A-levels (Hillman, 2013, p. 253), it was the event of the Robbins report that introduced critical tensions in higher education. Robbins' 1963 expansion goal was based on two key political objectives: 1) the need to increase the number of university places available to qualifying students[4], and 2) the need for a more skilled labour force to improve the UK's economic performance (Robbins, 1963a, p. 5). This second objective established the principle that UK higher education must provide skills for the labour market on a mass level (Shattock, 2014, pp. 117-123). This principle, viewed in its historical context, was to have significant implications for the UK education sector, reshaping its priorities and narrowly focusing on labour market skills at the expense of the broader objectives of education.

Robbins argued passionately for university expansion on the basis that "if investment in higher education were seriously contracted, there would be a danger of a loss to the economy" and that university education should be "taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind… including rigorous analysis and observation" (Robbins, 1963a, pp. 6, 51, 205). However, although the Chief Secretary to the Treasury recognised that the expansion plan would create a heavy burden on the public purse (Robbins, 1963b), neither Robbins nor the Treasury formulated a funding plan to accompany the expansion of universities (Shattock, 2014, p119). The lack of funding in the face of expansion and more students demanding a place at university caused significant financial tensions for the UK's 47 UK universities (Tight, 2011, p. 652) when the economy was stagnating. Thus, by 1979, when the universities were plunged into a funding crisis, the (*real)* domain of the State took control of the UK universities (Shattock, 2014, pp. 112-117). In so doing, the State progressed a range of policy mechanisms, visible in the *(actual)* domain, including white papers and education acts to manage the rapidly expanding higher education market. Thus, the manifestation of the Robbins report opened the door for successive Conservative, Labour, and Coalition governments to reorient the purpose of UK higher education towards

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[4] In 1962, only 3,273 UK-domiciled students gained a first degree (Bolton, 2012, p. 20) from the 32 universities in the UK to 162 (Tight, 2011, p. 657). By 2023, this number had risen to 413, including universities, colleges and other higher education providers registered with the Office for Students (OfS, 2023a, p. 1).

delivering an employer-skills and economic sustainability agenda. The remaining Part A sections below review the dialectical tensions caused by the Robbins Report and subsequent UK government higher education policy directives.

The timeline of the UK government's higher education policy initiatives from 1997-2022 is documented in Table 2 below[5]. This timeline is not intended to be exhaustive[6]. However, the listed documents set out the UK's higher education policy journey in relation to the mechanisms of tuition fees, students as consumers, and higher education regulation and are referred to throughout this study.

Table 2: Timeline of UK government higher education policy initiatives 1997-2022

Timeline of UK government higher education white papers, reports and policies 1973-2022		
Year	Summary Title	Consequence for UK HEI's
1963	The Robbins Report	Set the expansion of higher education to provide skills for the labour market (Robbins, 1963a)
1988	Education Reform Act 1988	Abolition of UGC. University autonomy is ceded to state control. Funding model changed from state-subsidy to universities contractually supplying education services to the state (ERA, 1988, p. 127)
1990	Education (Student Loans) Act 1990	Non-means tested tuition fee loans heralding policy-driven administrative burdens on UK higher education providers (Harris, 1991, p. 264).
1992	Further and Higher Education Act (1992)	Binary divide between Universities and Polytechnics was removed, giving Polytechnics university status and degree awarding powers (Watson & Taylor, 1998, p. 9).
1997	The Dearing Report	Recommended tuition fees and compulsory learning outcomes (Dearing, 1997, pp156, 297)
1998	Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998	Tuition fees limited to £1,000 per annum putting higher education providers under funding pressure (THEA, 1998, p. 20)
2002	The Roberts review: SET for success:	Universities to improve the UK's productivity and performance (Roberts, 2002)
2003	Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration	Universities again forced to respond to employers' needs without knowing precisely what employers' needs are (Lambert, 2003, p. 128)

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[5] This table is also available in Appendix A, with external links to each listed document.
[6] Higher education policy is a messy and scattered area of research. Scholars Keep, Richmond, and Silver (2022) offer an informative 30-year summary of white and green papers, reports and reviews commissioned by the UK government and detail the significant changes to education legislation (Keep et al., 2022, p. 13).

2004	The Higher Education Act 2004	Office for Independent Adjudication set up to handle student complaints. Introduced concept of student consumers (HEA, 2004, p. 1)
2006	Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the Global Economy - World Class Skills	Created the UK Commission for Employment and Skills to drive an employer skills-led agenda higher education (Leitch, 2006, pp. 27-41) but which did not result in defining what transferable skills employers want, nor described their performance standards.
2009	Higher Ambitions 2009	Higher Education Strategy for England requiring its universities to produce explicit statements of employability describing how students are prepared for employment (Belt et al., 2010, p. 27)
2010	Browne Review: Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education	Set the regulatory need for universities to provide students with high quality information to close gap between skills taught in the higher education system and employers skills needs (Browne, 2010, p. 28).
2011	White Paper: Students at the Heart of the System	Formalised the Student Charter, contractually binding UK universities to be service providers of higher education (DBIS, 2011, p. 6)
2012	Wilson Review: A Review of Business-University Collaboration	Set out regulatory requirements for business and university collaboration (Wilson, 2012).
2015	Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice	UK Government manifesto to introduce the Teaching Excellence Framework to deliver better value for money for students, employers, and taxpayers (DBIS, 2015)
2016	White Paper: Success as a Knowledge Economy	Opened UK higher education market to new entrants. Increased market-driven competitive landscape. Led to the Higher Education and Research Act, 2017 (DBIS, 2016) requiring UK universities to deliver value for money
2017	Higher Education and Research Act, 2017	Creation of the OfS as higher education regulator. New Teaching Excellence Framework to measure university excellence through three subjective metrics: student satisfaction, continuation rates and graduate outcomes (Woodfield & McIntosh, 2022).
2017	Taylor Review	The Taylor Review of modern working practices (Taylor, 2017)
2019	Augar Review: Independent Review of post-18 Education and Funding	Capped tuition fee rises until 2025 and sanctioned wiping outstanding loans after 40 years (Augar, 2019). Increased pressure on universities to recruit more students without equal increased funding
2022	Skills and Post-16 Education Bill 2022	Technical education qualifications and apprenticeships (SPEB, 2022)

2.4.2   A seismic shift from self to state governance

When the Robbins report was published in 1963, UK Universities were autonomous, self-governed, and self-regulated structures independent of State control. Government policies for higher education did not exist, although UK Universities drew 85% of their funding from the State (Robbins, 1963a, p. 217). Instead, the 1919 politically independent University Grants Committee (UGC) distributed the Treasury funding to support academic enquiry, research, and teaching provision based on five-year (quinquennial) plans (Shattock & Berdahl, 1984, pp. 472-487). The funding arrangements meant that higher education was free to all UK students as their tuition fees and maintenance grants if needed, were paid for by the State (Anderson, 2016, p. 1). Autonomy allowed universities to control their curriculum, policies, and research, which meant that they were free from political interference. This freedom was characterised by the ability of universities to self-govern, have the independence to make decisions related to curricula, academic standards, student progression and attainment, and institutional policies.

However, a critical first moment *(1M)* of understanding is the historically situated dependency of UK Universities on the state funding mechanism. This dependence raises several contradictions and tensions *(2E)* between the ideology and purpose of higher education and university autonomy. These include the potential for compromised university independence, conflicts of decision-making interest to avoid jeopardising their funding source, lack of public trust that university actions are free from state interference, alignment of education missions with political priorities, and sustainability challenges for universities if public funding is withdrawn. As will be shown in Part B, Section 2.5, these contradictions and tensions came to fruition.

An ideology of education reform

The autonomy of UK universities and the UGC's role in distributing treasury funds was secure until 1979 (Hillman, 2013, p. 250), when the Thatcher Conservative government came into power (Keating, 2005). The government distrusted the UGC's ability to self-govern (Irving, 2021, p. 3) and resented UK universities' freedom to pursue academic enquiry and research at the expense of the State (Evans, 2019, p. 43). Three days after

taking office on 4th May 1979, the Thatcher government cut UGC funding by £100m (Shattock, 2008, pp. 183-187) and brought the UGC under State control (Evans, 2019, p. 43; Mullard & Swaray, 2006, p. 498). Ironically, the UGC's growing debt was caused by the political motive to expand student numbers in the absence of a funding agenda (Salter & Tapper, 2013, pp. 48-49) to manage the expansion.

Pursuing an ideology of education reform and control, the 1988 Great Education Reform Bill was enacted a decade after bringing the UGC under state control. This Act empowered the government to finally abolish the UGC and replace it in 1989, by the University Funding Council, later known as the Higher Education Funding Council (HEFCE) (Evans, 2019, pp. 43-44). Abolishing the UGC freed the government from its unconditional state subsidy of higher education. Instead of quinquennial plans, UK Universities began to receive conditional funding based on the mechanisms of student numbers, types of students, and research standards (Williams, 2017, p. 74). The UK government now had a funding mechanism through which it managed university behaviours (Johnes, 2018, p. 3) by requiring them to deliver economic growth targets and labour market skills in exchange for State funding (Salter & Tapper, 2013, pp. 39-67). In turn, this funding mechanism helped the UK government to further influence the higher education landscape and align it with national policy objectives.

However, as more students took advantage of Robbins' axiom of higher education for all who qualified, the financial pressures of maintaining a State-financed higher education system continued. To generate income for the Treasury, by 1990, the UK government introduced the Education (Student) Loans Act (Harris, 1991, p. 264). This Act meant that students could borrow and repay State money through monthly instalments. Also notable in the 1990s was an intensified political trend in England to use higher education as a vehicle for economic sustainability. This trend is evident through the Blair government's target rate that 50% of the English population should experience higher education by the age of 30. A target that Universities had until 2010 to reach (Mayhew et al., 2004, p. 73; O'Leary, 2009, p. 474). The political rationale was one of worker empowerment predicated on higher education being the route to higher-paid and more rewarding jobs (Keep & Mayhew, 2010, p. 569). Notably, the 50% student population target ignored the historically situated Robbins

report observation that "the increase in productivity arising from an increase in educational expenditure does not lend itself to easy measurement" (Robbins, 1963a, p. 204). The causal impact of the increased pressures on UK universities to deliver the politically motivated target of higher education expansion whilst maintaining sufficiently low-cost thresholds for students to access courses (Hoskins, 2022, p. 3) inevitably led, again, to another funding crisis (Watson & Taylor, 1998). From the funding crisis a series of tensions emerged.

Vice-chancellors threats and consequences

Fuelled by their loss of autonomy and lacking funds to accommodate the explosion in student numbers, in 1996, the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals (now Universities UK) threatened to charge top-up tuition fees in the 1997/8 academic year (Wilson, 1997, p. 45). Fearful of university funding becoming an election campaign issue, evident at the fourth dialectical moment of *(4D)* is the Conservative, Labour, and Liberal Democrat parties' agreement to set up the National Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education (NCIHE). Its brief was to transform the purpose, shape, structure, size, and funding of higher education to meet the needs of the UK over the following 20 years (Dearing, 1997, pp. 3-4).

The Dearing Report

The NCIHE was chaired by Sir Ron Dearing (later Lord) and a committee comprised of 11 senior academics, four employers, and one government representative (Dearing, 1997, Report 4). Additionally, nine groups, also dominated by senior academics, were staffed by 54 personnel, including members of the main steering group (Dearing, 1997 Annex B). Colloquially known as The Dearing Report, this weighty tome of 1,500 pages and nine volumes identified 93 recommendations on teaching quality, fair access, and funding. All recommendations were adopted under Blair's incoming Labour Government in 1997, and work began immediately to put them into practice through the Teaching and Higher Education Act of 1998.

To inform their research and develop its recommendations, the NCIHE used surveys to draw on the experiences of 1,270 students, 110 employers and 809 higher education academic staff. The NCIHE also drew on formal oral evidence from 37 organisations and seminars with

employers from small to medium enterprises (Dearing, 1997, p. 15). The influential Confederation of British Industry (CBI) dominated the oral evidence. Claiming, on its website, to be "the largest policy unit outside of Whitehall" (CBI, 2023), this membership-based industry body has a long history of influencing government policy.

The NCIHE committee found that students were generally content with their higher education experiences (Dearing, 1997, p. 156). However, employers' dissatisfaction with graduate skills led the NCIHE to conclude that "learning should be increasingly responsive to employment needs and include the development of general skills, widely valued in employment" (Dearing, 1997, p. 130). At the same time, despite no evidence to support their assumption, the NCIHE determined that if students saw the value of their degree, it would motivate them to contribute to their tuition costs and be more demanding of their institutions (Dearing, 1997, p. 323). The NCIHE assumption led to the introduction of tuition fees which would have far-reaching consequences on UK higher education.

Dearing's recommendations

Predicated on employers' needs and recognising the funding crisis, the NCIHE committee of employers and educators made three specific recommendations of interest to this research, and which remain in force today (HoC, 2018, p. 40; QAA, 2014, p. 7):

- Integrate key skills into the curriculum – Recommendation 21 (Dearing, 1997, p. 141)
- Make learning outcomes compulsory – Recommendation 22 (Dearing, 1997, p. 156)
- Introduce tuition fees – Recommendation 72 (Dearing, 1997, p. 297)

These three recommendations catalysed significant changes in the objectives of UK higher education and signalled a further shift in reducing university autonomy to set its direction. Each recommendation is critiqued before examining how a policy-driven employer voice has shaped higher education and led to increased regulation.

2.4.3   Integrating skills into the curriculum

The NCIHE surveyed 173 non-randomised companies (Dearing Report, 1997 Appendix 4, Employer Consultation method, p. 1) to identify the skills employers most needed in the workplace. Employers were sent a questionnaire set with a pre-determined list of questions about higher education qualifications (Dearing, 1997, Appendix 4, Annex A, p. 3). From their research, the NCIHE found 11 skills all employers need, which they refer to as "key skills":

> flexibility, adaptability, ability to work in teams, and self-management (Dearing, 1997, p. 74), communication, numeracy, information technology, learning how to learn, cognitive skills to include understanding methodologies, and an ability to critically analyse (Dearing, 1997, p. 133)

At *no* point in the report were the skills defined. Thus, their meanings were entirely absent. Furthermore, although the NCIHE explicitly referred to the above list of skills in the Dearing Report, they acknowledge that *no* consensus was found among employers on what skills were deficient (Dearing, 1997, p. 133). Nor were the skills statistically representative due to the non-randomised nature of the participating companies. Nevertheless, despite the lack of consensus or clear meanings for the 11 key skills, the Dearing Report (1997) stated that "all [UK] institutions of higher education should aim for student achievement in [the] key skills … to become an outcome for all programmes" (Dearing, 1997, p. 135). The directive yet non-committal reference to "key skills" in the Dearing report hid a range of tensions and contradictions which continue to haunt higher education today.

Skills integration and their dialectical tensions

The Dearing Report directive (Dearing, 1997, p. 135) ignores several dialectical tensions. The top-down approach in setting out the skills ignores the need for collaborative consensus-building among educators, employers, and policymakers. It thus risks the effectiveness and acceptance of the directive. The absence of clear, agreed-upon meanings also invites disagreements, varied interpretations, and implementations of the 11 skills across universities, leading to potentially inconsistent educational outcomes. These tensions

highlight the complexities in aligning policies with labour market demands without a foundational understanding of the required skills.

Despite such complexities, there is little evidence in the literature that universities pushed back on either the directive for key skills or learning outcomes. However, the lack of evidence does not imply that there were no concerns. Since the Dearing Report's implementation, scholars have become critical of the ambiguity of the term key skills and using learning outcomes as compliance mechanisms. Their criticisms are discussed in Sections 2.4.4 and 2.4.5.

2.4.4   Inclusion of compulsory learning outcomes in the curriculum

Learning outcomes as measures of competence gained prominence in the UK in the 1980s. Their prominence was due to the conservative UK government's intention to improve workplace performance standards and employment rates for young people (Melton, 1996, p. 410). To this end, in 1986, the government set up the National Council for Vocational Qualifications (NCVQ). The NCVQ was mandated to work closely with the government's training agency, the Manpower Services Commission, to develop policy for vocational qualifications. This remit included setting performance standards across industries based partly on the assumption that a precise language can be established to describe competence and attainment (Oates, 2004, p. 56). The Manpower Services Commission had already decided that the UK education system needed to align more with the workplace (Debling, 1989, pp. 67-9) despite critics arguing that employers' needs were ambiguous, confusing, and contradictory (Hyland, 1996, p. 356). Nevertheless, from the policy position on setting competency standards for vocational qualifications, it was a short journey to enforcing formal learning outcomes in UK higher education (Jessup, 1991, p. 82) whilst failing to recognise the need for a shared language to describe the skills required.

Although learning outcomes were already a feature of education prior to 1997, for example through National Vocational Qualifications (Jessup, 1991, p. 32), the pressure to make them compulsory in higher education came largely from the CBI (Dearing, 1997, p. 156). Indeed,

since 1989, the CBI has a long history of calling for learning outcomes (CBI, 1990, p. 13). However, the act of making learning outcomes compulsory was borne from the CBI's demands in the Dearing Report (1997, p156) from which the following statement was extracted:

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(Verbatim extract taken from The Dearing Report, 1997 p. 156.)

The demand that university funding should be dependent on transparent learning outcomes capable of expressing "key skills and knowledge/technical skills to an appropriately high standard" (Dearing, 1997, p. 156) was determinate but ambiguous. The CBI **_did not_** explain the terms "key skills" or "appropriately high standards" **_nor_** what performance levels were expected of graduates when in possession of the "key skills". Nevertheless, the UK government accepted the CBI's demands and the Dearing Report's recommendation for compulsory learning outcomes. Consequently, the government mandated that all English universities must publish course and module learning outcomes, qualification descriptors and subject benchmark statements (Dearing, 1997, p. 141; HoC, 2018, p. 40; QAA, 2014, pp. 10-22) to help learners understand what learning they will gain from higher education.

Furthermore, although recommendations 21 and 22 – key skills and compulsory learning outcomes - (Dearing, 1997, pp. 141, 156) were likely to significantly impact higher education, including reducing institutional autonomy and increasing focus on employer needs, the NCIHE did not advise reviewing them after implementation, despite encouragement by the House of Commons Education Committee (HoC, 1997, p. 130). In contrast, linked to recommendation 72 – tuition fees - the NCIHE advised that the

government should review higher education in 2002 and every ten years thereafter, focusing heavily on funding, as detailed in recommendation 88 (Dearing, 1997, p. 356). This selective approach to reviewing policy changes, focusing on funding while neglecting the broader impact of skills integration and compulsory learning outcomes, suggests a potential oversight in the policymaking process. Furthermore, the oversight highlights a need for the UK government to conduct an immanent critique (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016, p. 44) – a deeper, internal evaluation – of how such policies are formulated and implemented to ensure they meet educational and societal goals.

By 1999, Education Ministers in all 29 European countries endorsed and adopted the same practice of explicating learning outcomes under the 1999 Bologna agreement. Their intention was to align with each other's national qualification frameworks and ensure the transfer of learning credits between institutions (Cedefop, 2009, p. 69; Ure, 2019, p. 180). The Bologna agreement remains in place (Kushnir & Brooks, 2022, p. 4) despite the UK leaving the European Union in 2020. Its continuation indicates the importance Education Ministers place on academic mobility, international cooperation, and recognition of higher education qualifications.

Although learning outcomes as a concept are not new, their mandatory use in higher education signals several dialectical tensions between historical influences and modern educational needs. The UK's adherence to the Bologna agreement post-Brexit underscores the tension between national autonomy and the need for global educational alignment. Moreover, the emphasis on explanatory learning outcomes linked to learners paying for their education marks a shift in the power dynamic between the societal structures of the State, universities, and students. On the one hand, the political aim of empowering students with knowledge of their education outcomes underscores the importance governments place on university accountability and standards. However, connecting such empowerment with tuition fees introduces the potential for disparities in their implementation, which could lead to variations in the quality and clarity of information. Furthermore, the UK government mandates that universities publish transparent learning outcomes juxtaposes the demands for institutional clarity with potential limitations on pedagogical freedom and

innovation. The pedagogic and regulatory tensions caused by compulsory learning outcomes are discussed in the next section.

2.4.5   The practice of using learning outcomes to express skills

To explain the significance of the compulsory learning outcomes recommendation and their paradoxical shortcomings as a tool to indicate competency, a short digression on learning outcomes is necessary. Using learning outcomes as a mechanism to express the skills graduates gain during their degree courses (Dearing, 1997, p. 156; HoC, 2018, p. 40; QAA, 2014, p. 7) is not new. In 1949, American scholar and curriculum theorist Ralph Tyler pioneered a systematised rationale to curriculum design and evaluation composed of four sequential strands: establishing educational objectives capable of changing behaviour through learning; knowing what experiences will support learning attainment; identifying how the experiences should be organised; and assessed (Tyler, 1949, p. 51). By highlighting the need for educational objectives, Tyler introduced the idea of institutions explaining what students can expect to learn during their studies. Tyler did not, however, set out a language capable of expressing learning objectives and assessment.

Nevertheless, Tyler's structured curricula approach inspired a committee of American educators and examiners to develop a common learning outcome assessment language capable of describing "vaguely defined terms as thinking and problem-solving" (Bloom et al., 1956, p. 10; Newton et al. 2020, p. 3). The committee aimed to overcome the problem of subjectively described statements of learning used by educators and assessors, such as "students should really understand … students should grasp the core … students should internalise knowledge" (Bloom et al., 1956, p. 1). Such nebulous phrases made it impossible for students or assessors to know what the phrases meant or if they all carried the same meaning. By providing a universally applicable learning outcomes reference guide, the committee hoped to overcome such constraints.

Chaired by Benjamin Bloom, Tyler's former student, in 1956, the committee published Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Outcomes. The taxonomy was organised across three knowledge domains: factual, conceptual, and procedural, each of which was ranked by

levels of complexity: remember, understand, apply, analyse, evaluate, and create (Bloom et al., 1956, p. 201). These domains have remained unchanged except for the "create" domain. This domain was updated to "synthesise" in the revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy to ensure the three cognitive processes of generate, plan, and produce, associated with the concept of creation, were better accounted for (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 86). Since 1956, Bloom's taxonomy has been widely adopted by school and university curricula developers in the United States and internationally. It remains ubiquitous today (Maher, 2004, p. 47), demonstrating its universal and longitudinal appeal.

Notably, a metacognitive domain to address the development of self-awareness, self-reflection, and self-regulation was determinedly absent from the taxonomy. This was because metacognitive behaviours were considered too subjective to be evaluated (Bloom et al., 1956, pp. 3-7). Motivated to remove this absence and help better prepare students for employment (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 15), some of the originating committee members subsequently included a meta-cognitive domain in a 2001 revised version of Bloom's Taxonomy. However, its assessment hinges on a student's evaluation of their abilities (Anderson et al., 2001, p. 44). Several dialectical tensions and contradictions will likely arise when a student's assessment of their meta-cognition relies on their evaluation. These include a distorted self-perception based on biased judgement, an over-estimation of abilities or self-doubt leading to over-confidence or a lack of self-belief, the absence of external validation and resistance to change their self-perception when confronted with evidence of the need to change their behaviour. Although personal evaluation can serve as an important component of self-improvement by balancing accountability with motivation towards self-improvement, its subjective and biased nature highlights self-assessment's inherent difficulties and complexities.

Learning outcomes: a compliant conundrum

Scholarly opinions on the concept of learning outcomes, including the efficacy of Bloom's original taxonomy, are well-rehearsed. Many scholars consider learning outcomes can indicate levels of complexity without constraining learning (Cedefop, 2022, pp. 76-79). Thus, they are important learning assessment and quality assurance tools (Barrie, 2006, p. 226; Beard et al., 2007, pp. 249-250; Gurukkal, 2019, p. 2; Ilonen & Heinonen, 2018, p. 400;

Rochon, 2021, p. 29; Shephard, 2008, p. 95). Opposing scholarly views include the contention that learning outcomes encourage grade inflation and serve only to satisfy regulatory compliance (Ure, 2019, p. 179). Thus when grades are based on students achieving learning outcomes, the broader the learning outcome, the easier it is to award high grades.

Similarly, negative views include the difficulty in objectively measuring and assessing behaviours (Green, 2013, p. 44) due to the need to write broad and generalised statements of curricula content (Atkinson, 2015, p. 169). Explicit learning outcomes are often accompanied by detailed instructions on how to achieve them. Thus, some scholars believe that the more explicit the learning outcomes are, the greater the likelihood of an instrumentalist and reductive approach to learning (Tam, 2014, pp. 164-5). Whilst this explicit approach may be welcomed by students who do not want to be challenged in their learning (Barkas & Armstrong, 2022, p. 52; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, p. 185), overly prescriptive guidance can stifle genuine learning (Torrance, 2007, p. 282) and lead to a transactional learning approach (Erikson & Erikson, 2019, p. 2297; Gurukkal, 2019, p. 2; Biggs & Tang, 2011, pp. 114-8). Such an approach means that students do what is needed to satisfy their module or course learning outcomes whilst simultaneously expecting high grades (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 465), thus reinforcing an instrumentalist mindset to degree acquisition.

Learning outcomes and their dialectical tensions

Highly detailed instructions and a transactional approach to learning ignore several dialectical tensions manifested in the *(empirical)* layer of reality, shifting the pursuit of mastery of subject knowledge to grade-oriented learning. This shift can change a learner's intrinsic motivation for knowledge into an extrinsic motivation for reward. Transactional learning can also lead to contradictory tensions between thinking critically and prescriptive learning if students rely too heavily on explanatory guidelines to meet the learning outcome goals. Students may, therefore, miss opportunities to explore creative solutions, hindering the development of their resilience in tackling challenging tasks and ultimately limiting their growth and ability to adapt to new and unexpected situations. Therefore, when learning outcomes prioritise grades over mastery, it may inadequately prepare students for real-

world challenges, due to their superficial understanding of the topics studied. Consequently, students and employers might find that the substantial investment in higher education does not translate into the skills promised per degree course of study due to a focus on grade acquisition over learning mastery.

Compulsory learning outcomes also fail to recognise the dialectical tension between the assumption of competence and genuine competence. Scholars researching the efficacy of learning outcomes as indicative standards of competence have found a paradox between higher and lower levels of learning outcomes (Brockmann et al., 2008, p. 105; Soozandehfar & Adeli 2016, p.6). Constructing a learning outcome at the three higher levels of cognition as per Bloom's taxonomy (analyse, evaluate, synthesise) assumes that the learner has already acquired the three lower levels of competence (remember, understand, apply) (Bloom et al., 1956, p. 201) in the same field of learning but this may not be the case. For instance, a post-graduate in business studies may be able to synthesise complex business data presented to them to develop strategic plans for achieving organisational growth. However, they may not understand how to gather business data in the first place or apply alternative data resources to develop strategic plans. In other words, they may be able to synthesise the presented data. Yet they may not know how to find the necessary data in the first instance if understanding data sourcing and sources is absent in their tuition.

Enabling specific yet vague statements of learning

Furthermore, when learning outcomes are used for the competing goals of providing precise learning objectives and achieving high progression rates, it enables educators to craft generalised statements of learning which are both specific and vague. Such contradictions also permit learning outcome statements to be interpreted broadly to facilitate progression rate statistics. To illustrate this point, the learning statement that on successful completion of a BA in Business Management, students will be able to "show an independent and professional approach to their own development of transferable, subject-specific and employability skills" (Coventry, 2021, p. 4), does not give any indication of what a "professional approach" means or what "transferable" or "employability skills" a student will be capable of on completion. Nevertheless, the ambiguous language permits educators to successfully progress students through to graduation. In addition, referring to

"transferable" and "employability", implies that the university considers these different skills. However, no explanatory distinction is offered for the student or employer to know what is different between transferable and employability skills.

The illustration of compliance in the learning outcome statement also invites educators to apply individual interpretations (Bachan, 2017, p. 1592; Havnes & Prøitz, 2016, pp. 216-9; Erikson & Erikson, 2019, pp. 2296-7). For example, the ambiguous phrases "professional approach", "transferable", and "employability" skills indicate a dialectic tension between the absence of clarity in what these terms mean and the opportunity for individual assessor interpretations. When the assessor is also the educator responsible for teaching the students, the subjectivity of learning outcome achievement carries the risk of passing a student to achieve a successful progression rate, regardless of the student's level of performance.

Grade inflation

Employers are known to use grades as an indicator of recruitment suitability, often stipulating a minimum grade requirement for a candidate to be considered suitable for an advertised role (Pollard et al., 2015, p. 138; Tholen, 2020, p. 290). However, awarding grades without an equal increase in a student's capability ignores the contradictory tensions of grade inflation (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002, p. 7) and employers' dissatisfaction with graduate skills (CBI, 2019b, p. 8; GoS, 2017, p. 48). Further tension is introduced with the recognition that English universities rely on students' tuition fees as their principal income source. Thus, if learning outcomes are written to make it easier for students to progress, it can causally influence an increase in higher enrolment numbers as students see other students passing the same course (Bachan, 2017, p. 1592). Therefore, more students equal more tuition income for a university, thus increasing a university's capital. Whilst a higher income may seem attractive for English universities, it underscores a fundamental contradiction and conflict between the opposing forces of balancing education quality standards with politically and commercially driven performance metrics.

Professional standards' approach to learning outcomes

The policy requirement that UK universities write explicit learning outcomes closely aligns with professional bodies' measurements of standards of practice. Professional bodies expect their members to meet the standards and professional practice requirements in their respective competency frameworks and learning outcomes (Lane, 2017, p. 419). Universities who wish to align with professional body standards must map their syllabi, courses and module learning outcomes to the respective professional body's competency frameworks and learning outcomes. This mapping requirement suggests professional bodies have the potential to offer universities rich sources of learning outcomes language. However, a brief review of two large Professional bodies – the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA) and the Royal College of Occupational Therapists (RCOT) reveals that they also use broad and vague learning outcome terminology. For example, the ACCA expects its members to demonstrate collaboration by "engaging effectively with internal and external stakeholders, being inclusive and influencing with impact" (Machado, 2022, p. 28). Similarly, the RCOT states that their professionals "must utilise their colleagues' skills to maximise the outcomes of intervention when appropriate" (RCOT, 2021, p. 31). Whilst their respective statement appears reasonable, they do not explain what "utilise", "maximise", "engaging effectively", "being inclusive" or "influencing with impact" mean at a performative level.

The lack of explanation leaves educators and professional bodies free to apply their personal interpretations. Such freedom of interpretation, in the same vein as Bloom's challenge of nebulous learning phrases (Bloom et al., 1956, p.1), introduces the risk of disagreement between educators when assessing student outcomes of learning. This risk exposes the potential for a student to fail or pass the same learning outcome simply because the assessors hold different meanings of the same learning outcome statement.

Learning outcomes – a double-edged sword

Consequently, compulsory learning outcomes are a double-edged sword. On the one hand, the regulatory mechanism of compulsory learning outcomes, which can be traced back to the NCIHE Dearing Report recommendation, tells students and employers precisely what learning will be gained from a module or degree course. The Dearing Report's assumption that learning outcomes give students and employers a better understanding of the "purpose

and benefits" of a learning programme and help students understand what skills they would gain from their degree (Dearing, 1997, pp. 10-11) may have been well-intended. On the other hand, the persistent subjectivity of learning outcomes leaves educators, universities, and their aligned professional bodies in conflict over whether the learning outcome has been achieved. Thus, the conflicting tensions in learning outcome compliance surfaced through the *M.E.L.D.* enquiry process, create uncertainty and a lack of trust in the higher education system. They invite subjective interpretations and reduce mastery, potentially leading to grade inflation. This situation increases the risk of producing graduates with a degree marking their academic achievements but lacking the skills employers want.

Further tensions between the social structures of government and universities include the mechanism of tuition fees. Therefore, the following section sets out the progressive rise of tuition fees and how they have influenced higher education since their inception in 1997.

2.4.6   Introduction of Tuition Fees

Annual tuition fees of £1,000 were introduced in 1997 in the UK, based on the principle that graduates should contribute more to their higher education (Dearing, 1997, p. 323). Since 1997, tuition fees have risen successively under the Labour, Coalition and Conservative governments, from £3,000 in 2006 to £9,250 by 2017 (Hubble & Bolton, 2018, p. 2). Despite tuition fees being universally unpopular (Scott, 1998, p. 5), research carried out by the Centre for Global Higher Education, funded by the ESRC and HEFCE, found that student numbers, measured by those receiving an undergraduate degree, have continued to grow (Murphy et al., 2019, p. 15; Sa, 2014, p. 16; Wakeling & Jefferies, 2013, p. 510). For example, between 1979 and 2021, UK universities experienced student numbers growing by 726.12% from 68,150 in 1980 (Bolton, 2012, p. 20) rising to 271,000 by 1994 when the binary divide between universities and polytechnics was removed and to 563,000 by 2022 (Bolton, 2023b, p. 9). This growth illustrates the inelasticity of higher education as a commodity, as pricing does not appear to affect growth in student numbers. In other words, university enrolment rates in the UK have continued to rise despite the introduction of progressive increases in tuition fees.

Tuition fees and their dialectical tensions

The sustained growth in student numbers, even amid rising fees, indicates deeper socio-cultural and economic structures and motives at play. These include the cultural value of higher education in UK society, the perceived long-term socio-economic benefits of a degree, and the enduring belief that higher education is a pathway to social mobility (DBIS, 2015, p. 10; Williams, 2016, pp. 132-133). Thus, higher education is perceived as more than a tradable commodity; society views it as an essential life investment, almost inelastic to price fluctuations. Although this study is not centred on the inelasticity of higher education, or the UK's entire education landscape, the relentless policy focus on pushing students towards university-led higher education degrees has led to the problematic axiological constraint (Bhaskar, 2008a, pp. 76-76) of society prizing university education and de-valuing non-university vocational education and training (Hyland, 2002, pp. 290-292).

Contemporary policy attempts to redress the imbalance between university and other forms of education are evident in the increase of Technical qualifications and apprenticeships (IfA, 2017); the 2023 enacted legal duty of secondary school proprietors in England, colloquially referred to as "the Baker Clause" after its proposer Lord Baker, to give pupils advice on alternative post-16 education and training provision (DfE, 2023a, p. 6); and the policy strategy to replace academic A-levels and technical T-levels with an Advanced British Standard qualification, by 2035. This qualification will place equal value on academic and technical study with a strong emphasis on essential employment skills (Dickerson et al., 2023, p. 15) to include communication skills, information literacy, and maths (DfE, 2023b, pp. 3, 18) for 16-19 year-olds. However, the recent inception of these education policy initiatives means there is currently insufficient evidence to determine their impact on the English education landscape.

To help university students fund their education, the government-sponsored Student Loans Company was set up in 1990 as a mechanism to offer tax-payer-backed loans against future income (DfE, 2019a, p. 16), with the promise that loans would be written off after 25 years (Dearing, 1997, p. 338; Lodge, 2015, p. 1). In 2013, the social structure of Government removed the student numbers cap, designed to limit the number of students a university could recruit (Hillman, 2014, p. 5). This event meant the social structure of UK universities

could enrol as many students as they could attract. Consequently, the removal led to a crowded market of graduates caused by universities' motivation to increase their revenue, and an increased student loan book debt caused by students motivated to improve their social mobility (Bill, 1998, p. 289; Tomlinson, 2012, p. 25). The Student Loans Company currently administers a staggering loan book of more than £135 billion (DfE, 2019a, p. 17) and is forecasted to reach £560 billion by the middle of this century (Lewis & Bolton, 2022, p. 35). Shouldering half-a-trillion student loan debt is an unsustainable position for the Government. The following section, therefore, addresses how the *(real)* social structure of the UK government changed the higher education system by foregrounding the mechanisms of the employer's voice and enforcing heavy regulatory burdens on English universities. The *(actual)* impact and *(empirical)* effect of both actions on English universities is also presented.

2.4.7   The employer voice in higher education policy

Putting the employer's voice at the heart of higher education policy was encouraged by the CBI's demand for highly skilled graduates (Hesketh, 2000, p. 246). The CBI demand follows their long-term pattern of research evidencing employer dissatisfaction with peoples' skills when leaving education (CBI, 2008, p. 23:2019a, p. 25; GoS, 2017, p. 48). This pattern includes the Education and Skills surveys commissioned by the CBI to inform education policy (CBI, 2013, p. 46) since 2008. Following the NCIHE Dearing Report's employer skills survey (Dearing, 1997, Appendix 4, Annex A, p. 3), the UK Department for Education (DfE) launched a biennial Employer Skills Survey (ESS). Using computer-assisted telephone interviews, the ESS draws data on the skills needs, recruitment challenges, and training practices of over 80,000 employers (Winterbotham et al., 2020b p. 19). The output of each large-scale ESS informs policy on employers' skills needs and recruitment challenges (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 17). It is reasonable, therefore, to expect the employer skills surveys to offer rich evidence of the skills employers want.

From 2010-2017, the UK government also commissioned an outward-focused Employer Perspectives survey (EPS) comprising approximately 28,000 employers' engagement with

the wider skills system in alternate years to complement the ESS (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 9-19). It aimed to identify the types of skills lacking in education leavers (Shury et al., 2017, p. 13). With an estimated rolling cost to the State of £30.5 million to date[7], voices within the halls of Westminster have criticised the UK government's employer skills surveys for being expensive (Burke, 2017) and lacking a common skills language across it and related data sources (SPB, 2022, pp. 3-13). The rolling costs have the potential to hide the cost of commissioning skills-related reports to support higher education policymaking. For example, the cost incurred by the Government Office for Science in commissioning twenty papers between 2016 and 2017 to understand the implications of skills policies (GoS, 2017, p. 98) is unknown. Perhaps due to such criticisms, in 2019, the EPS, estimated to have cost £6,662,803[8] since its launch, was subsumed within the ESS to save costs (Conlon et al., 2017, p. 34) and thus establish a single bi-annual employer skills survey.

Every ESS since 1999 has questioned how well-prepared education leavers, including graduates, are for employment, what skills they lack, and in what way they have been poorly prepared (Blake et al., 2000, p. 49; Bosworth et al., 1999, p. 17; Winterbotham et al, 2020b, p. 74)[9]. Thus, it is reasonable to suppose that such a large and consistent survey series over time will offer rich insight into the skills employers want from graduates. The totality of government-commissioned employer skills surveys published between 1999 and 2019, along with CBI-commissioned skills surveys from 2008 to 2016, are examined in Chapter 3 to determine if this is a reasonable supposition.

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills

In 2008 the government set up the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES). Its purpose was to incentivise employers to own the skills agenda and drive the development of technical and transferable skills for current and future employees (Leitch, 2006, p. 18; UKCES, 2011, p. 4; CBI, 1990, p. 25). Practically, this meant offering employers tax incentives to encourage them to train their workforce (Diamond et al., 2015; UKCES, 2011, p. 5; Crush,

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[7] See Appendix B for the freedom of information requests on which the approximate ESS costs of £30.5m are based

[8] See Appendix B for the freedom of information request detailing the costs of the EPS surveys.

[9] The ESS surveys use regularly updated and publicly available questionnaires reflecting current policy interests (Winterbotham et al.,2020b, pp. 13-16).

2008). However, following its set-up, several studies evaluating the impact of the UKCES found that employers were not motivated by tax incentives and pushed the responsibility of supplying a ready-trained workforce back to the government (Keep, 2015, p. 29). Such findings indicate a disconnect between the CBI's desire to influence education policy by demanding that the UK government put the employer's voice at the heart of the skills system (Hesketh, 2000, p. 246) and employers' reluctance to assume direct responsibility for skills development initiatives.

Although the UKCES failed to establish an employer-led skills system and was closed in March 2017 (UKCES, 2017, p. 8) introducing a National Occupation Standards (NOS) database was a legacy outcome. Similarly, the current Skills Builder Framework of eight essential skills and 130 sub-skills, developed for UK schools, was borne from the combined UKCES "The Employability Challenge" 2009 and the CBI's 2008 employability framework (CBI, 2008, p. 23; UKCES, 2009, p. 10, Ravenscroft, 2017, pp. 24-26). However, no methodology is available to know how the Skills Builder authors settled on the eight essential and 130 sub-skills in the framework, nor how the skills are mapped across the framework. Furthermore, access to the tools and resources necessary to apply the framework is protected behind a commercial paywall (SBF, 2022); thus, the applicability of the skills framework is not universally available to educators, nor is it possible to critically review or replicate the methodology applied to develop the framework.

To establish the National Occupational Standards (NOS), the UKCES partnered with 27 UK standard-setting organisations to create a common standard for industry competencies and transferable skills (NOS, 2022). The result was a National Occupation of Standards (NOS) database of 23,000 National Occupation Standards, grouped into 900 sector-specific suites. Research to identify how useable employers found NOS revealed two key findings: 1) employers and educators support a common competency and skills standard but 2) consider the NOS database overwhelming and too difficult to navigate (Laczik & Fettes, 2020, pp. 4-5). Therefore, the need to develop an accessible single standard for industry-relevant transferable skills persists.

Although the NOS still exists despite its limitations, the UKCES was closed in March 2017 (UKCES, 2017, p. 8) Representation of the employer's voice was immediately shifted to the Institute for Apprenticeships (IfA), which was later renamed the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfA, 2017, p. 2). At the time of this study, there is insufficient research to know what impact the IfA has in contributing to the UK government's skills agenda.

In summary, despite concerns over the costly failure of putting the employer voice at the heart of the education sector, the UK government has, since the 1960s, pursued an employer-centred skills policy agenda via its universities (Atherton et al., 2023, pp. 7, 60; Robbins, 1963a, p. 5) and treated education policy as an economic policy to drive the UK's economic growth (Green, 2013, p. 184). The impact of these policy-centric activities on English universities is detailed in the next section.

2.4.8   From implicit to explicit regulation

Regulation has been a theme in UK higher education since 1985. During the 1980s and 1990s, UK universities only had to deliver quality assurance plans and teaching standards in exchange for funding (Tasker & Packham, 1990, p. 185). Thus, regulation remained light until 2010, when the dual rods of public accountability and tuition fees (Dearing, 1997, p. 3) opened the door of public accountability and scrutiny (Fry, 2015, p. 35). By opening this door, the UK Government shifted higher education from an implicit to an explicit regulatory landscape with far-reaching consequences.

By 2015, students were given the legal right to be recognised as higher education customers under the Consumer Protection Law. This legal status was granted in recognition of the fact that students purchase educational goods and services through tuition fees (CMA, 2015, p. 2). Despite the mutually complicit dialectical contrariness of students as both consumer and learner, higher education delivery was recast to the legal standing of service providers and consumers (Elliot, 2021, p. 43). In recognition of students' customer status, the UK government introduced the Higher Education and Research Act 2017 (HERA) to systematise

English universities' contractual obligations to students. A significant part of HERA 2017 was the government-sanctioned introduction of the Office for Students (OfS) as England's new higher education regulator (Palfreyman et al., 2018, p. 78). The introduction of conditional funding based on universities meeting economic growth targets meant that the UK government had a regulatory machine through which it could influence the higher education landscape in England – a continuing theme since the Thatcher government's abolition of the UGC.

Also embedded in HERA 2017, Schedule Four, was the need for a Designated Quality Body (DQB, 2018, p. 4) in England. Its role was to independently assess higher education quality and standards and provide advice on quality to the OfS (DfE, 2018a, p.5; HERA, 2017, p. 21). The UK's internationally recognised and respected Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), established in 1997 from the combined Higher Education Quality and Funding Councils (Dearing, 1997, p. 35), was appointed to this role. However, its appointment led to a significant conflict. When the OfS was established, the QAA's membership of the European Quality Assurance Register (EQAR), which mandates that its members must operate free from political influence, was put into jeopardy in 2023 due to the subordination of the QAA to the politically influential and more powerful OfS. Consequently, to maintain compliance with the EQAR register (Boggs, 2023, p. 5), the QAA ceded its Designated Quality Body role to the OfS. The QAA's demission has had a significant controlling and centralising effect on higher education: the OfS, under Ministerial influence, now holds the dual authority to set and adjudicate performance standards in the English higher education sector, including addressing grade inflation and imposing sanctions for poor institutional performance (OfS, 2021, p. 2). The danger of the OfS holding this dual authority lies in the potential for a conflict of interest, reduced institutional autonomy, and the perpetual politicisation of higher education. Thus, the OfS's consolidated powers challenge English higher education's independent quality assurance framework by reshaping its scope, standards, and content towards a highly centralised and consumer-driven landscape.

New conditions of university registration

A significant example of reshaping English higher education occurred in 2017 when the OfS introduced new conditions of registration for all English universities to continue to access

public funding, recruit internationally, and be able to apply for degree-awarding powers (DfE, 2018b, p. 18; OfS, 2023a, p. 1). The OfS intention was to improve the quality and standards of higher education in England, tackle grade inflation, and ensure students have the skills for employment (OfS, 2022c, p. 1). However, the OfS actions intensified the focus on a consumerist value-for-money agenda. Under new conditions B1, B3, and B4, it is now mandatory that English universities equip students with the relevant transferable skills employers value (OfS, 2022a, pp. 90-121). However, no unified set of relevant transferable skills is attached to these conditions. In a similar vein to choosing which of its statutory duties to prioritise (HoL, 2023, p. 9), the absence of an agreed set of transferable skills raises several tensions. It allows the OfS to sanction universities if they fail to deliver the required relevant transferable skills. Furthermore, employers are empowered to reject graduates lacking these skills. This scenario opens the door for student complaints that they have not received value for money or positive outcomes from their university education, especially if they do not get a job post-graduation due to lacking the transferable skills employers want.

The OfS also launched the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) for England "to incentivise excellence in teaching, learning and student outcomes" (OfS, 2023b, p. 6). Initially, the TEF was optional. However, by 2022, it became mandatory for all English universities with more than 500 students to participate under condition B6 of their registered university status (OfS, 2022a, p. 133). Assessment of an institution is now set over two principal aspects: student experience, measured by how student rate their academic experience and the quality of resources and support offered to them, and student outcomes, measured using the concept of "positive outcomes" (OfS, 2023b, p. 7). Reviewing the prolific OfS literature reveals that the student outcomes metric is based on three specific and numerical indicators against which English universities are measured (Atherton et al., 2023, p. 7; OfS, 2022a, p. 108, 2022b, p1): These metrics are the percentage of students who progress through their studies and into highly skilled or professional roles, or further study broken down as follows:

- o 80% of students must progress through their studies.
- o 75% of students must complete their course.
- o 60% of graduates must progress into further study, professional or managerial roles or other positive outcomes.

The OfS considers these threshold indicators to be necessary consumer protection mechanisms (HoL, 2023, p. 36). English universities that perform poorly in the TEF face a range of OfS monetary and institutional sanctions, which include monetary penalties and suspension of registration or de-registration of programmes (OfS, 2021, p. 2).

To determine successful student outcomes, the OfS uses a range of complex algorithms (OfS, 2023c, p. 6). However, viewed through a DCR lens, applying such specific risk and reward measures introduces several contradictory tensions and consequences. When measures become both the target and mechanism of reward and punishment, they cease to be good measures and instead create the conditions for manipulation to either receive the reward or avoid the punishment (Mattson et al., 2021, p. 2; Sidorkin, 2015, p. 322). Consequently, a regulatory punishment and reward system encourages English universities to game the system to ensure compliance with regulations. This consequence promotes short-term compliance goals over long-term transferable skills improvements.

Regulatory dialectical tensions

Highlighting the dialectical tensions between risk and reward should not be taken to imply corruption in higher education. Nonetheless, when universities are incentivised to meet their progression targets to avoid regulatory sanctions, it carries the consequential risk of unsatisfactory outcomes for employers and students. This incentive is evidenced by employers, who consistently report dissatisfaction with graduates' transferable skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 25; GoS, 2017, p. 48), and students who reportedly do not believe their tuition fees offer value for money (OfS, 2018, p. 5). Thus, capturing such dialectic tensions through a *M.E.L.D.* enquiry process, evidence is provided that the regulatory mechanisms intended to improve academic and institutional performance are compromised because the measures are used both as targets and as a means of punishment and reward.

Additional contradictory tensions include the disparity between the 60% graduate progression threshold and broader economic instability, including labour market fluctuations (EC, 2018, p. 70; HoL, 2023, p. 39) outside universities' control. Such labour market volatility might make it more difficult for graduates to progress into managerial or professional roles regardless of their degree-status. Nor do the narrowly defined positive

outcomes account for the broader positive outcomes such as improved self-confidence or self-esteem. Similarly, the inference that young graduates must be eligible for professional or highly skilled roles, defined by the Standard Occupational Code as managers, directors, associate professionals, and technical or professional occupations (Blyth & Cleminson, 2016, pp. 5-9; Elias & Ellison, 2012) seems to be nonsensical. Such eligibility will likely inflate students' expectations of getting senior-level roles upon graduating. Their elevated expectations also pose an inherent danger in setting English universities up to fail if students do not immediately find professional employment. Furthermore, graduates may reject jobs that are economic drivers of wealth, such as lorry drivers, shop assistants and labourers, because they may not consider such positions commensurate with their degree status.

A lack of balanced regulation

Enforceable regulation is not inherently bad, particularly given its purpose of protecting students' interests in the face of high-cost tuition fees. However, the weight of responsibility it presses on the shoulders of English universities is not balanced by a government or regulatory responsibility to ensure English providers of higher education know what the OfS means by industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121). This narrow focus on employment and value for money suggests that policymakers view English universities as harbingers of human capital and economic growth (Holmwood, 2017), with the measure of their success being entirely supply-side driven.

In a related concern, the close relationship between the government and its independent higher education regulator, reinforced by the demittance of the QAA as the Designated Quality Body (Boggs, 2023, p. 5), raises concerns that its regulatory actions are politically driven rather than in the best interests of the higher education sector and its students. Such a perceived lack of regulatory independence can potentially undermine the regulator's credibility and trustworthiness. There is some evidence from the University Alliance body that this is indeed the case, with providers reluctant to approach the OfS with a regulatory concern for fear of punitive sanctions (HoL, 2023, p. 33). Ironically, this lack of trust has the potential to compromise the effectiveness of the OfS in carrying out its statutory duties of protecting students' rights and ensuring institutional autonomy. Given the risk of this trust

deficit, the OfS faces a formidable challenge in upholding its statutory duties, warranting careful reconsideration of its close relationship with the Government.

In summary, from a pre-1979 autonomous and self-regulated environment, English universities now operate in an enforced and interventionist State-sponsored regulatory environment. Although the OfS sets out conditions of registration and a series of seven statutory obligations, (HERA, 2017, p. 93; OfS, 2022a, pp. 92, 121, 189), the opaque positive outcomes and value-for-money language make it impossible for its universities to know precisely what relevant transferable skills employers most want. Unsurprisingly, the OfS approach to regulation has drawn heavy criticism from the higher education sector. These criticisms are detailed in the following Part B.

2.5 Part B: Impact of UK Higher Education Policy

This sub-section examines the impact of the UK government's regulated data-driven regime of control, delivery, and accountability on UK higher education since 1997 and how the academic community has responded to such policy changes. The nascent call for a common skills language and the growing trend for building large-scale machine-driven skills taxonomies in response to higher education policy are also considered.

2.5.1 Tensions in measuring excellence

The changes to English higher education since the 1997 Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997) have prompted significant scholarly debate. The central argument favouring rigorous regulatory policies is to drive up academic standards and excellence and use data on institutional quality to improve the student experience and help inform students' choice of university (Ashwin, 2017; Naidoo et al., 2011, pp. 1145-56). Higher education policy researcher Dr Andrew Gunn enthusiastically recognises the duality of students as consumers and learners and recommends that the compulsory Teaching Excellence Framework for English universities with more than 500 students (OfS, 2022a, p. 133) be viewed as a quality

assurance tool of a university's entire function within a liberalised market (Gunn, 2018, p. 144). However, Gunn's enthusiasm is not widely shared in academia and is countered by academic voices challenging the wholesale re-purposing of higher education.

Such challenges include the policy retreat from financial responsibility and the sovereignty of consumer demand (Collini, 2012, p. 179) and a politically biased data-driven regime of control expressed through the subjective language of delivery and accountability (Ball, 2003, p. 217; Rammell, 2016, p. 10; Wild & Berger, 2016, p. 42). Concerns also exist that higher education policy interventions are not amenable to economic evaluation (Machin & Vignoles, 2006, p. 1). These concerns include fears about reducing universities to instrumental functions of human capital development and economic growth (Holmwood, 2011, p. 13: 2017, p. 2) and laying the blame for market failures at the feet of higher education for not producing employable graduates (Cheng et al., 2022, p. 10). Furthermore, research conducted on behalf of the Department for Education found that some participating institutions felt that the Teaching Excellence Framework increased their administrative costs, decreased staff morale, caused reputational damage, and led to an increased focus on ensuring student retention rates to comply with regulatory policy (Vivian, et al., 2019, pp. 11-12, 46). Consequently, scholars have called for research on the value of government-driven policy interventions (Ashwin & Clarke, 2022). Such research focus presents an increasingly important area for further enquiry.

An independent review of the Teaching Excellence Framework commissioned in 2019 by the UK government highlighted widespread academic concern over the OfS positive outcomes measure. Such concerns include the belief that employment data is too blunt a tool as it does not capture the broader value students gain from their degrees (Pearce, 2019, p. 38). Research also indicates that a highly regulatory and measurement-based landscape has led to academic burnout (Perkins, 2019, p. 315) due to the intense focus on academic and institutional performance in which academics must progress students through their studies or face a range of sanctions. An intense performance-based academic landscape has also prompted fears of job loss and academic burnout among educators if they fail students (Czerniewicz et al., 2021, p. 10; Hansen et al., 2019, p. 12; Plunkett, 2014, p. 2). Thus, conforming to regulations has become a task that does not necessarily benefit the

pedagogic goals of higher education. Conversely, if students had a better understanding of what transferable skills to develop and why they are important to their futures, this may help them to see the link between their studies and their future career options. This awareness could potentially lead to improved engagement and attainment (Hughes et al., 2016, p. 27) and, thus, reduce the pressure on academics to progress students regardless of their levels of achievement.

Vice-Chancellors support of regulation

In stark contrast to academics' concerns, research has also found that 96% of vice-chancellors support regulation policies as a generally positive higher education trend (Boxall & Woodgate, 2019, p. 10). For example, Universities UK (UUK), the collective voice of 140 UK universities through which vice-chancellors express their views, has long supported the mechanisms of higher education policy interventions. Although in 2008 the UUK testified to the House of Commons post-Leitch skills review (Leitch, 2006) of the risks in pursuing an employment needs agenda over broader thinking skills due to ever-shifting employment needs (HoC, 2008, p. 61) by 2011 its President, Sir Steve Smith, then Vice-Chancellor of Exeter University, did not equivocate in his policy support. In contrast to the 2008 evidence to the House of Commons, Professor Sir Steve Smith pronounced that UK higher education policies, with their focus on labour market skills, offered the only route to strengthening higher education's standing in a competitive market (Smith, 2011, p. 127). This UUK support of policy endures with Smith's successor, Professor West, Vice-Chancellor of the University of West England, confirming that the UUK continues to collaborate with and support its regulator, the OfS. Professor West, has, however, also encouraged a proportionate regulatory approach (West, 2022), but UUK has not set out what proportionate measures the OfS should adopt.

Notwithstanding the UUK's positive support for regulatory higher education policies, individual vice-chancellors have been found to be less supportive. Through interviews with 50 senior higher education leaders, the UK's Policy Exchange think tank reported recognised tensions between the need for higher education reform, reliance on public funding and undesirable competitive behaviours to attract more fee-paying students (Hudson & Mansfield, 2020, p. 13). Nevertheless, despite identifying such tensions, the Policy Exchange

also supports the policy drive for UK universities to make their curricula more relevant to market needs (Hudson & Mansfield, 2020, p. 22). In the paradigm of dialectic critical realism, vice-chancellors' voices of support of regulatory policies reflect what Bhaskar refers to as "mutually complicit dialectical contraries" (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 10). These contraries are exposed at the *(2E)* dialectic. Vice-chancellors accept the need to comply with regulatory policies in exchange for funding, and the government recognises the need to regulate universities to ensure quality and standards in higher education, and rely on aggregated and unreliable blunt metrics (Beech, 2022) to defend tuition-driven funding mechanisms. These competing tensions are visible at the *(4D)* dialectic moment in which higher education compliance and behaviour are mediated (Brown, 2009, pp. 4-6) through the established mechanisms of student satisfaction surveys, positive outcomes, and value-for-money directives (OfS, 2019, p. 10).

Looking back at the *(3L)* dialectic, quantifiable metrics of progression and attainment rates have driven a tick-box response to higher education at the expense of developing graduates with the transferable skills employers need. These contraries are mutually complicit, despite their opposing goal, because they contribute to the current state of higher education and employers' dissatisfaction with graduates' skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 25; GoS, 2017, p. 48). The need for funding ensures that universities maintain financial viability. Conversely, the policy drive for high standards and prescriptive progression rate targets undermines the positive outcomes goals for students by encouraging universities to meet their progression, attainment, and positive outcomes targets to receive funding. Collectively, these opposing forces create a dynamic tension that shapes the policies, practices, and outcomes of higher education and highlights the complex, contradictory nature of policy objectives and their implications.

Contradictions in measuring excellence

Policymakers cannot have it both ways. They cannot have narrowly defined performance metrics (Rammell, 2016, p. 10) and the power to sanction English universities for not equipping graduates with the transferable skills employers want (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) when these skills are neither defined nor their intended meanings agreed upon (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807). Such ambiguities call for the removal of narrow performance metrics, a

more collaborative and flexible approach to delivering positive higher education outcomes for all stakeholders, and a clearer understanding of what relevant transferable skills employers want and what they mean at a practical level in higher education learning and the workplace.

Furthermore, the absence of a unified transferable skillset with clear meanings per skill leads to several other dialectical tensions between the social structures of government, regulation, education, and employers. The fact that educators are free to apply vague language in compulsory learning outcome statements (Cedefop, 2022, pp. 76-79) to ensure they meet regulatory targets of progression and attainment is revealed at the *(2E)* dialectic. Consequential to this freedom is the manifestation of several more tensions. These include higher grades (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002, p. 7) as educators strive to comply with the regulatory mechanism of progression targets and employers' dissatisfaction with graduates' transferable skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 8), which do not materialise in the workplace.

The UK government and its higher education regulator have put English universities in the invidious position of operating in a highly regulated market against wholly subjective metrics. If the regulation of English universities is to continue, it beholds the UK government to establish a set of key skills and a common language capable of expressing performance levels per skill. By acting, the government will create an opportunity to mitigate the presence of the constraining forces of the OfS powers to sanction universities for not delivering graduates with the transferable skills employers want and the absence of a clear understanding of what these skills are or how to objectively measure them (Wild & Berger, 2016, p. 48; Rich, 2015, p. 43) which is evident at the first dialectical moment of *(1M).*

Unsurprisingly. the spotlight on skills metrics has led to nascent calls to establish a common skills language to address the need for skills metrics in the OfS regulations. The following section considers this growing call and the efficacy of big-data skills taxonomies to offer such a common skills language.

2.5.2　The nascent policy call for a common skills language

In the same year as HERA 2017, the UK government commissioned the Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices. The purpose of the review was to make recommendations for fair working practices and improve opportunities for people to develop their skills (Taylor, 2017, p. 10). An outcome of the Taylor review found that different employers use different criteria to explain the same skills, for example, communication skills (Taylor, 2017, p. 86). Such differences meant that jobseekers could not compare the transferable skills employers want across multiple employers. Taylor also highlighted academic research conducted in 2015, calling for a skills framework based on a common skills language which could be spoken by any student, university, and employer, with systematic metrics for each skill in the framework (Rich, 2015, p. 43). Consequently, the Taylor review called on the government to develop a unified employability skills framework (Taylor, 2017, p. 87) to address the issues of incomparability.

Earlier policy-driven research conducted in 2008 also identified the need for an employability framework to address the complexity of the employability skills landscape. In their field-based research, policy researchers Martin et al. (2008) found that employers, quality assurance representatives, educators, and work-based learning providers would welcome the creation of a unified transferable skillset to enable a shared understanding "among learners, employers, and providers and as a starting point for defining more specific employability skills in different contexts" (Martin et al., 2008, p. 14). This consensus among diverse stakeholders highlights an urgent need for collective action to bridge the gap between education and employment and ensure that graduates are equipped with universally valued and industry-relevant skills.

The UK government accepted the broad principle of an employability skills framework (DBEIS, 2018, p. 53). However, researchers who have reviewed the implementation of the Taylor Review recommendations have found that the UK government has entirely dropped the idea of a unified employability skills framework (Codd & Powell, 2022, pp. 13-14;

Ferguson, 2020)[10]. Despite policy research highlighting the need for such a framework (Martin et al., 2008, p. 45), the UK government has neither defended nor explained its reasons for not pursuing a unified skills framework. This lack of action and transparency on the part of the government not only undermines its efforts to address the complexity of employability skills but also raises questions about its commitment to improving employability and workforce development.

Since the Taylor review, a range of corporate and education institutions, researchers, and policy advisors, including the UK Government commissioned short-lived Skills and Productivity Board (SPB), have called for a common skills language (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; CBI, 2019a, p. 8; CG, 2021, p. 32; EC, 2020, p. 1; HEA, 2015, p. 3; SPB, 2022, p. 5; WEF, 2021, pp. 2-6). The following quote from the 140-year-old Royal Chartered City and Guilds Institute exemplifies their calls:

> "As the skills we possess, rather than just the qualifications we hold, grow increasingly important so does the need for a common language to describe those skills that are universally understood by employers, individuals and Government". (CG, 2021, p. 32).

Their combined calls coalesce around three specific themes:

- the need for consistent data on the transferable skills developed through university degrees,
- give learners more detailed skills information,
- give educators, the OfS and policymakers a language to objectively measure skills

The drive for a standardised language since Bloom's original taxonomy attempt in 1956 (Bloom et al., 1956, p. 10) underscores a persistent dialectical tension between nebulous learning outcome statements, the desire for clarity, precision, and measurable outcomes, and ambiguous regulatory performance metrics. For example, in contemporary education,

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[10] See Chapter 3 for a review of employer and scholarly developed skills frameworks, their limitations and benefits

rubrics, a matrix of scaled criteria and standards connected to learning objectives are used to evaluate students' work. The matrix format enables educators to assess specific elements of student performance across a spectrum of proficiency levels. Scholarly opinions are, however, divided on the effectiveness of rubrics as an evaluation tool. Arguments range from rubrics being unreliable (Jonsson & Svingby, 2007, p. 137) because they contain ambiguous, subjective, and vague descriptions which do not give learners clarity on what knowledge and skills they are being assessed on (Chan & Ho, 2019, p. 539) to the potential for rubrics to bring course teams together in a shared understanding of learning objectives (Dawson, 2017, p. 357). Whichever argument is accepted, the longstanding need for academics to draw on unambiguous descriptive language to assess learning attainment remains. Despite such needs and tensions, the absence of a language capable of describing the cognitive behaviours employers continue to demand of students (Dearing, 1997, p. 156; GoS, 2017, p. 48) signals an unresolved enduring void in higher education.

The complex task of establishing a common skills language

Establishing a common skills language is a complex task. First, it requires identifying a set of transferable skills, agreed upon by a broad range of employers, as key skills for employment. The skills must be described to their lowest level of detail, and how they relate to each skill in the key set must be transparent. For example, at the lowest level of performance, employers might expect graduates to speak clearly and concisely, a skill typically categorised under communication. However, since clear and concise speech is also necessary for effective interaction in, for example, teamwork and leadership, confining the skill to the communication category risks overlooking its broader significance and fails to acknowledge its essential role in teamwork and leadership. Therefore, how transferable skills are described and categorised to establish a common skills language is a complex and messy business. Nevertheless, the repeated calls for such a language capable of articulating and measuring performance levels suggest it still needs to be established and included in the UK higher education system.

2.5.3 Online job descriptions and large-scale skills taxonomies

Policymakers, commercial institutions, and academic researchers believe that job advertisements have the potential to expose the most frequently called for transferable skills (Evans et al., 2021, p. 25; WEF, 2021, p. 5; Kanders & Sleeman, 2021a, p. 1). This section, therefore, examines the usability and reliability of the growing trend for building large-scale machine-driven skills taxonomies from online job descriptions as the preferred policy approach to developing a common skills language.

Taxonomies are formal classification systems in which common conceptual domains and dimensions are connected through a thematic structure (Boyatziz, 1998; Bradley et al. 2007, p. 1765). They can be simple structures such as gender lists (Maslin, 2021, p1) or complex and hierarchical. For instance, the UK standard industrial classification of economic activities is built on a complex and hierarchical structure of unique five-digit codes, divided into 21 sections, 88 divisions, 272 groups, 615 classes and 191 subclasses (Prosser, 2009, p1). This complex classification system highlights the challenge of accurately categorising the diversity of the UK's economic landscape within a rigid taxonomy. Nevertheless, whether simple or complex, taxonomies have the potential to provide a valuable structured framework to categorise and organise skills.

Large-scale skills taxonomies drawn from online job advertisements exist, albeit in minority form. The most widely cited one is the US government-sponsored occupational information network O*Net taxonomy, established in 1998. It is a vast database of 923 occupations and 151,904 skills (NRC, 2010, p. 3). Its maturity in the market and continued state sponsorship have inspired other countries to develop similar large-scale skills taxonomies. For example, in 2013, the European Union developed its European Skills, Competences, Qualifications and Occupations (ESCO) taxonomy; the UK began a pilot construction of an Open Job Observatory (OJO) skills taxonomy in 2020 (Kanders & Sleeman, 2021b, p. 15); and the WEF began construction of their Skills Taxonomy (WEF, 2021, p. 2) in 2021. Each draws their data from online job advertisements, and all share the goal of creating a common and frictionless skills language to enable greater collaboration between employers, employees, educators, and students (EC, 2022, p. 5; Kanders & Sleeman, 2021a, p. 1; WEF, p. 7). Pursuing a

frictionless common skills language assumes that the historical differences between employers, educators, and policymakers are due to misunderstandings of what skills mean rather than, for example, divergent interests. This assumption hides tensions predicated on the different perspectives and priorities of the three stakeholders. Policymakers have positioned economic competitiveness and fulfilled employers' needs for graduates with the skills to immediately contribute to their workforce as a central aim of higher education. Despite this central aim, employers continue to be dissatisfied with graduates' skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 25; GoS, 2017, p. 48); in response, the government now champions large-scale skills taxonomies as the panacea for a frictionless common language to ensure employers get the transferable skills they need from higher education.

A problematic panacea

Despite their growing popularity, there are several problems in relying on constructing large-scale taxonomies from job descriptions as the basis for a common skills language. Many academic researchers attest to the inherent weaknesses of online job advertisements. Their arguments are based on the poor quality of job descriptions (Romanko & O'Mahoney, 2022, p. 14) in which cliched terms such as "team player", "resilient", and "good communicator" do not describe what a person is expected to do when enacting such behaviours, a lack of standardised skills vocabulary (ILO, 2020, p. 1), and an absence of levels of performance expected per required skill (Bennett, 2002, p. 471). Researcher selection and coding biases, the lack of shared understanding of skills terminology (Messum et al., 2016, p. 79) and skills definitions holding contradictory meanings (ILO, 2020, p. 27) are also cited as significant limitations.

Such critiques align with criticisms of large-scale skills taxonomies. For example, a critical review of O*Net sponsored by the United States National Research Council found that the 151,904 skills listed in O*Net are frequently duplicated across different skill categories and lack descriptive meaning (NRC, 2010, p. 42). Earlier research by Bennett (2002), who analysed 1,000 UK-based online job descriptions published between December 2000 and November 2001, also found that online job descriptions do not expose the meanings of the transferable skills listed per job advert. Bennett (2002) concluded that university graduates "will not know what they are being asked to demonstrate, and universities cannot know

what they need to teach if there is no shared understanding of the skills employers look for"
or their meanings made transparent (Bennett, 2002, p. 471). This conclusion points to the
longstanding problem of a disconnect between higher education outcomes and employer
expectations, and the enduring uncertainty about skills requirements and educational
objectives.

Similarly, in their peer-reviewed content analysis of 40 studies reporting the employability
skills in online job descriptions, Messum et al. (2016) found that researchers use various
terms when categorising the same skills label. For example, communication skill was
categorised in one study as a social skill and in another as an interpersonal skill (Messum et
al., 2016, pp. 79-81). I found similar categorisation issues when exploring ESCO's large-scale
skills taxonomy of 13,890 skills. In one part of the taxonomy, communication is categorised
as a singular label skill with three elements – "communicating, collaboration and creativity".
In another area of the taxonomy, communication is categorised as a combined skill
incorporating "social and communication skills and competencies" (ESCO, 2023 dataset
v1.1.1). This inconsistency in labelling and categorising skills introduces ambiguity and
suggests that the taxonomy architects impose their personal biases and values-laden
judgements (Kilgarriff, 2007, p. 148). Thus, how they interpret the meaning of a skill directly
influences how they categorise it. Users are then faced with difficulty choosing which skill to
select when a skill may have the same name across different taxonomies but may not hold
the same meaning. Such differences also make assessing the quality of skills taxonomies
challenging, rendering them impossible to revise in future research (Kundisch et al., 2021, p.
427) or to adopt to establish a shared understanding.

Systemic confusion and ambiguity
Thus, the lack of consistent skill categorisations in large-scale skills taxonomies introduces
systemic confusion and ambiguity. This confusion increases the risk of misunderstandings
and miscommunications among users, undermining their confidence and leading to
questions of reliability and usability. The assumption that each job advertisement has a
complete list of transferable skills and that all authors of job descriptions and analysts
reviewing them hold the same meanings per skill must also be considered weaknesses in
relying on job advertisements to answer the call for a common skills language. With

contradicting taxonomy structures and an absence of an agreed skillset, students, educators, employers, and policymakers cannot know which skills taxonomy to rely on as a single version of the truth. Ironically, if a skills taxonomy with a commonly agreed language for transferable skills existed, job descriptions could adopt this language, making them immensely valuable in exposing the transferable skills employers seek.

The nascent call for a common skills language is welcome. However, the inherent weaknesses in online job descriptions, with their poor data quality, skills lacking meaning, researcher coding and interpretation bias and confusing categorisations, mean they cannot support the development of a common skills language. Furthermore, the high level of abstraction, unclear meanings, and ambiguous categorisations inherent in current skills taxonomies render them unreliable for generating a common skills language. Additionally, the unsurfaced divergent interests between employers, educators, and policymakers mean the potential for establishing a flexible and detailed common skills language remains. Therefore, without a set of relevant transferable skills with clear meanings, the OfS and UK policymakers may find their goal of ensuring graduates have the transferable skills employers want is impossible.

2.6   **Chapter Summary**

In summary, this chapter has set out some of the core milestones in England's higher education policy journey in response to sub-research question one – How have successive UK governments steered English higher education towards a skills-driven agenda, and how have academia and employers reacted? The contradictions and tensions in successive government policies for higher education revealed through the dialectical *M.E.L.D.* analysis. have led to significant changes in the (*real)* domain of the English higher education landscape. These changes have shifted the previously autonomous higher education landscape to one characterised by State control and dependency. As higher education transitioned towards a mass-market approach with a regulatory aim of providing students, employers and the state with positive outcomes, value for money and relevant transferable

skills, the conflicts, contradictions, and tensions of successive policies have become increasingly apparent.

In the 1960s, higher education was liberally viewed as a social right and thus freely available for all qualifying UK citizens. However, rapid expansion (Robbins, 1963a) led to a State funding crisis culminating in the introduction of tuition fees in 1997 to address the financial strain and promote a value-for-money and outcomes-focused agenda. The current national policy requires English universities to deliver tangible value and positive outcomes to students by equipping them with industry-relevant transferable skills valued by employers, with the risk of severe financial and institutional penalties for non-compliance. The Dearing Reports' acknowledgement that it could not find a consensus on the 11 key skills universities should focus on (Dearing, 1997, p. 133) highlights the challenge of identifying what these skills are and how they should be described. Such challenges underscore the ongoing struggle to align higher education with employers' needs.

Despite ongoing appeals from policymakers and researchers for a unified framework and language for industry-relevant transferable skills, efforts to categorise such skills using big data taxonomies have not resolved the issue. The continuous emphasis on ensuring graduates possess the transferable skills employers seek is contrasted by employers' persistent dissatisfaction with the transferable skill capabilities of graduates (CBI, 2019a, p. 25; GoS, 2017, p. 48). These contrasting tensions highlight a significant gap in agreement on the nature of these skills and how they should be assessed. This gap makes it challenging for universities to align with higher education policies and for students to be assured they have the necessary skills employers demand.

Consequently, the sum of state-driven higher education policy events and outcomes metrics has failed to support higher education in delivering the UK's higher education policy agenda against narrow and ambiguous metrics whilst accruing half a trillion pounds in student loan debt (Lewis & Bolton, 2022, p. 35). With no option but to comply with a culture of policy demands and public accountability, it is reasonable to ask what relevant transferable skills English universities should develop in their students and what such skills mean at a practical level of employer and academic expected performance. The lack of consensus and absence

of a unified transferable skillset with clear meanings indicates the potential for agentic actions at the fourth dialectical moment *(4D)* to remove the constraining absence of a common understanding between employers, academics, and the State. Thus, focussing on the transferable skills graduates need for successful employment, the next chapter continues to address sub-research question one by reviewing the mechanisms academia and employers have used to identify the transferable skills employers want.

Chapter 3 What transferable skills do employers want, and are their meanings clear?

3.1 Introduction

This chapter explores how the mechanisms of higher education policy have shaped the published academic and industry literature on transferable skills. The purpose is to continue addressing sub-research question one by considering how academia and employers have experienced and reacted to successive UK governments' ongoing policy directive that all English universities must deliver graduates with the skills employers want. The chapter also examines the well-rehearsed practice of investigating non-discipline-specific transferable skills in the broader skills literature to add context to the overall research question.

Graduate skills, employability skills and transferable skills have become proxy mechanisms to measure productivity output globally, thus synonymising the relationship between higher education and the economic environment (Tomlinson, 2016, p. 12). In 2015, these proxy mechanisms were estimated to be worth £127 billion to the UK economy (McDonalds, 2015, p. 9). Therefore, if a set of transferable skills can be identified as common to all industries and their meanings described, the education sector will have the information it needs to teach and assess them. Finding a defined set of skills with common meanings is, therefore, a golden egg for employers, scholars, and students.

The chapter begins with a critical review of skills terminology before considering how employers and scholars have responded to the mechanisms of skills policy directives. As per the policy analysis approach in Chapter 2, a DCR lens and integrative *M.E.L.D.* approach was adopted. This multi-faceted non-linear approach helped to explore how the concept of transferable skills is discussed and understood in the social structures of government, employers, and universities, and what is absent in their understanding in the *(1M)* dialectic; identify the tensions and contradictions caused by absences in *(2E)*. At the *(3L)* dialectic, the complex interplay of different perspectives and interests in developing graduates'

transferable skills is explored. What practical actions have been taken by the UK government, employers, and scholars at the *(4D)* dialectic to curate a unified transferable skills language, and whether these actions addressed the absences found in the *(2E)* dialectic?

3.2 Literature review methodology

A critical review of exploring peer-reviewed papers, articles, and book publications was conducted in 2018 and revisited in 2023 to incorporate subsequently relevant literature. The aim was to engage in scholarly discussion, synthesise the vast skills literature and identify gaps in the research. The search encompassed UK and international literature published since 1987. This date was chosen to situate the literature historically in the context of policy-based economic growth targets for UK universities in exchange for State funding (Salter & Tapper, 2013, pp. 39-67), which proceeded the 1963 Robbins' call for higher education to supply skills for the labour market (Shattock, 2014, pp. 117-123).

Five specific search terms closely related to the purpose of the study were applied using the Boolean search operators [and, or] to find rich literature relevant to this research. These operators are logical connector words search engines need to refine and focus search results by combining specific search terms:

- "Graduate skills" OR "Transferable skills", OR "Employability skills", OR "21st century skills" OR "Skills frameworks"
- AND "Universities" OR "Policy"

These search terms were entered into established academic databases accessed via Coventry University's electronic library and Google Scholar. Attention was given to prominent skills reports commissioned by political and commercial organisations, which have featured heavily in the UK and international media since 2018 when this study

commenced. Attention was also given to peer-reviewed qualitative and quantitative articles offering skills frameworks. Although these articles promised insight into scholarly views of transferable skills, no useful insight was gained from them[11]. Finally, additional sources were found by analysing relevant journals and pursuing citations and bibliographies. The purpose of reviewing the skills literature was to critically review the main findings, identify contradictions and tensions between authors and locate gaps in knowledge.

Thirty-five publications published between 1987 and 2020 were reviewed[12]. Eight were specific employer skills reports published between 2018 and 2021, seven were specific scholarly reports published between 1987 and 2020, and the remaining 22 were papers containing accounts of transferable skills relevant to the literature review, published between 1998 and 2020. The range and dates of publications offered a temporal view of the skills landscape in relation to the skills employers most want graduates to demonstrate.

3.3   A vast landscape of skills terms

Given the promise that a highly skilled and flexible workforce will lead to high economic growth, higher income, and job satisfaction (Dearing, 1997, p. 9; Dondi et al., 2021, p. 2), the scholarly literature has generated a vast range of academic and commercially sponsored studies, surveys, books, articles, blogs, and skills frameworks, each proclaiming the top skills graduates' need. For example, in December 2022, a Google search for the terms graduate skills, transferable skills, and employability, which are terms variously used by UK policymakers as measures of higher education quality and graduate outcomes (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 349), returned a combined hit of 170 million different articles, studies, reports, blog posts, programmes and skills frameworks. The words 'employability' and 'graduate' dominated the results with 84 million and 79 million hits, respectively.

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[11] See Table 3: Review of eight prominent employer skills studies 2018 -2021 for the eight skills frameworks reviewed.

[12] See Appendix C for the list of journals and publishers from which the 35 articles were sourced. No journal or database was prevalent. The slight exception, with four studies of employability skills, was the International Journal of Higher Education, more commonly referred to as Higher Education. See, Barrie, S. C. (2006); Bennett, N., Dunne, E. & Carré, C. (1999); Jones, A. (2009); Suleman, F. (2018).

Graduate as a term is not generally contested as any student completing their studies can legitimately claim the graduate title. However, scholars have raised concerns that employability has become an institutionalised hegemonic meta-narrative framed on a skills gaps and skills shortages narrative and market-driven university performance metrics (Arora, 2015, p. 644; Prinsloo, 2012, pp. 29, 90). Several dialectic tensions occur when a hegemonic narrative on employability dominates higher education. It risks establishing narrow standards for evaluating individuals, perpetuating social inequalities, and disregarding other factors, such as labour market fluctuations (EC, 2018, p. 70). Nevertheless, the ubiquity of the term employability linked to education and graduate skills, evidenced by the prolific internet search results, indicates the hegemonised acceptance of the term in society.

Despite the scholarly views contesting the term employability, in the context of graduate skills and employability, a range of 30 terms (see Figure 1), whilst not intended to be exhaustive, are regularly found in published literature.

Figure 1: Variety of terms used in the context of graduate and transferable skills

basic skills, behavioural skills, broad skills, core skills, critical skills, employability skills, essential skills, foundation skills, fusion skills, generic skills, graduate attributes, graduate competencies, graduate employability, graduate outcomes, graduate skills, interpersonal skills, higher-level skills, key skills, life skills, meta-skills, professional skills, soft skills, technical skills, transferable skills, transversal skills, workplace skills, work-ready skills, work-readiness skills, work-relevant skills, 21st-century workplace skills.

Examples of how these terms are used are given by Barrie, 2006; Byrne, 2020; Bamford, 2019; Dench et al., 1998, pp. 69-83; OfS, 2020; Fettes et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2016; Joynes et al., 2019; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018). The titles of the reports listed here all share the terms graduate attributes, graduate employability, and skills terminology in their titles. However, thereafter the terms listed in their reports present a vague and imprecise landscape of skills terminology.

Notably, the CBI draws attention to the issue of skills language being "imprecise" (CBI, 2018, p. 15) without acknowledging that it is also guilty of the same sin. For example, the CBI variously refers to the skills graduates need as "foundation skills", "core skills", "key skills", "transferable skills, "positive attitude", "workplace skills", "employability skills", and "higher-level skills" (CBI, 1990, p. 7; 2007, pp. 6-11; 2018, p. 23; 2021, p. 12). In 2007, the CBI published a list of seven employability skills - Self-management, Teamworking, Business and customer awareness, Problem-solving, Communication and literacy, Application of numeracy, and Application of information technology - to address the lack of clarity on what the term employability meant (CBI, 2007, pp. 6, 16). The CBI did not describe its methods of data collection or analysis, except to say that it reviewed the broad skills literature and the views from 101 of their employer members (CBI, 2007, p. 21). Furthermore, none of the seven skills definitions contained detailed descriptions of performance. For example, problem-solving is defined simply as "analysing facts and situations and applying creative thinking to develop appropriate solutions" (CBI, 2007, p. 16). This definition relies on a collective understanding of what analysing means, what creating thinking involves, and what appropriate solutions mean.

Ambiguity and disagreement

Research conducted by the UK-based Education Development Trust on behalf of the UK government found that the broad terminology and lack of definitional understanding of the skills needed for the workplace are ambiguous and without consensus (Joynes et al., 2019, p. 8). Their analysis supports the view that scholars and policymakers often concatenate terms, for example, graduate skills, graduate attributes, and employability as if there is a common understanding that they are distinct. Nevertheless, the reality is that the terms are used interchangeably (Byrne, 2020, p .2; Holmes, 2013, p .546), suggesting that they are not distinct or unique terms.

Unsurprisingly, some scholars consider the terms used to express graduate skills, transferable skills, and employability to be no more than wish lists constructed by interested parties (Yorke, 2006, p. 13). Similarly, labour market researcher, Suleman (2018) reviewed the findings from 30 different employability skills studies to determine if there is broad consensus on the employability skills employers want. The methods of analysis were not

disclosed; however, as per the Dearing Report (1997, p. 133), the study found *no* consensus on a unified set of skills graduates need for the labour market (Suleman, 2018, p. 275). This persistent lack of unification leaves students and academics to determine the skills they will need with no certainty that they will match employers' expectations.

Some scholars suggest that the term employability enjoins a range of unconnected skills, for example, communication, teamwork, and flexibility, into an unhelpful relationship with each other because what each skill means is unknown, and therefore, of little use to students (Cremin, 2009, p. 133). The enjoining of such skills and their absence of meaning are unhelpful because they leave educators and students to speculate on what they are and how to teach and acquire them through module and course curricula.

Other scholars argue that there is an implicitly accepted discourse of what such skills mean (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; Bennett et al., 1999, p. 90). Such implicit discourse assumes that the skills are readily observable and describable in language (Hesketh, 2000, p. 247; Hirsh & Bevans, 1987, p. 80; Wild & Berger, 2016, pp. 36-48). However, the broad skills literature suggests this is not the case. Combining an implicit and speculative skills discourse with an assumptive understanding of what each skill means creates a cacophony of contradictory opinions and conflicting skill descriptions. This contradictory language makes it difficult, if impossible, to resolve the competing regulatory drivers of positive outcomes for students and employer satisfaction with industry-relevant transferable skills because there is no agreement on what they are or what they mean at a demonstrable level of academic assessment. The following section, therefore, reviews the language employers and educators use through the medium of skills frameworks to explore the potential of identifying a common skills language.

3.4   The employer view

Political and commercial organisations have invested much time and money over at least four decades to identify the skills employers need. An example selection of eight UK-based and international skills studies conducted between 2018 and 2021 revealed, through manual analysis, a list of 111 skills employers say they need – see Table 3. The eight reports were chosen due to their consistently high ranking in the Boolean search methodology described in Section 3.2 and being readily available online.

Table 3: Review of eight prominent employer skills studies 2018 -2021

Publication Title	Commissioned by	Authors (Date and page location of skills list)	Number of transferable skills listed
The Currency of Learning: 2021 Employer Research Report	Pearson plc	Choksi & Rosenhaus, (2021, p. 34)	11
Defining the skills citizens will need in the future world of work	McKinsey Global Institute	Dondi et al., (2021, p. 3)	56
The Global Skills Gap in the 21st Century	The UK Institute of Student Employers (ISE) and Quarelli Symonds (QS)	Karzunina et al., (2018, p. 22)	7
Joint Dialogue: How are schools developing real employability skills?	City & Guilds, National Education Union, Edge Foundation, and Education and Employers Group	Kashefpakdel et al., (2018, p. 18)	12
The enterprise guide to closing the skills gap: Strategies for building and maintaining a skilled workforce	Institute for Business Value	LaPrade et al., (2019, p. 4)	6
Transferable Skills in the Workplace: Key findings from a survey of UK Employers	Nesta	Nesta (2019, p. 4)	12

The Global Skills Shortage: Bridging the Talent Gap with Education, Training and Sourcing	Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM)	SHRM (2019, p. 4)	3
Future of Jobs, 2020 report	World Economic Forum (WEF)	WEF, (2020, p. 36)	15

Collectively, these studies represent the views of over 60,000 employers worldwide, and thus, they had the potential to provide rich insight into the transferable skills employers want. Each study also presented their findings in easily identifiable lists of skills. Although communication, problem-solving, and teamwork skills are typically highlighted across the reports, the collection of reports does not offer a unified skillset or a common skills language with sufficient detail to make it of use to educators, students, and policymakers.

After manually reviewing these studies, I clustered the limitations of these studies as follows:

1) A lack of meaning: There are no descriptions of what each skill means at an expected level of performance.
2) Lack of commitment to a unified skillset: The use of the phrases: "skills include" and "skills such as" to describe the skills employers want was prevalent throughout all the studies. Their use suggests an unwillingness or inability by the researchers to focus attention on a unified skillset.
3) Inconsistent skillsets: All the skill frameworks cite different sets of skills.
4) Single skills versus packaged skills: Skills are either presented as inventories of single skills labels or packaged together as one skill.
5) A synonym problem. Synonyms are not acknowledged in any of the studies. Therefore, skills terms with different names but the same base meaning are not avoided. For example, different surveys refer to the same skill but use different names.
6) A lack of skills mapping: None of the studies maps their lists of skills to show the relationship between the skills or how they interact.

7) <u>Pre-determined skills lists and recycling skills terms:</u> Skills lists are generated from survey participants selecting skills from pre-determined lists or curated from existing skills research. Pre-determined lists have the potential to limit participants' choices and risks excluding skills. Whereas, generating lists from existing literature suggests a potential recycling of skills terms.

Inconsistency and confusion

As the limitations in the above studies expose, the literature presents a picture of inconsistency and confusion regarding the nature of transferable skills literature. These limitations, which expose the tensions and absences in the transferable skills studies, make it impossible for students, graduates, educators, and policymakers to identify a single set of transferable skills that a broad range of employers value. For instance, Karzunina et al. (2018) offer a set of five skills they consider most important for graduates to develop: "communication, problem-solving, teamwork, ability to learn, and adaptability/flexibility" (Karzunina et al., 2018, p. 23). Absent from their listing are descriptions underpinning what each skill means at a performative level. Furthermore, the combined use of the terms "adaptability/flexibility" raises concerns. It is unclear whether Karzunina et al. (2018) intend these terms to be synonymous and carry the same meaning or if they hold distinct meanings. At the same time, LaPrade et al (2019) present a list of six skills, four of which are packaged together as if they are single skills: "willingness to be flexible, agile, and adaptable", "time-management skills and ability to prioritise", "capacity for innovation and creativity", "ethics and integrity". The two outlier skills which are referred to in their singular form are "the ability to communicate effectively in a business context" and "the ability to work effectively in team environments" (LaPrade et al., 2019, p. 4). A concern with such packaging and generalised language is that the authors do not explain each skill's meaning at a performative level of detail. Nor can a reader know if the authors believe "flexible, agile, and adaptable" (LaPrade et al., 2019, p. 4) hold the same or different meanings.

A lack of skills mapping

Having exposed the lack of descriptive meanings per skill and the synonym problem, the issue of skills not mapped to other skills to show how they relate and interact with each other was considered. For example, Dondi et al. (2021, p. 2) offered a list of 56 skills. Each was helpfully described, but not mapped to others in their framework. For instance, the authors defined active listening as "the ability to be present, remember what is being said, and acknowledge it in following conversations and decisions". Furthermore, the authors situate active listening under the sub-skill of communication, which, in turn, is situated under the principal skill of cognition (Dondi et al., 2021, p. 12). Similarly, the authors define Interpersonal skills as involving teamwork, collaboration, empathy, negotiation, and conflict resolution (Dondi et al., 2021, p. 9). A particular dialectic tension here is that active listening and communication are required across multiple skills, for example, teamwork, leadership, and problem-solving. Thus, presenting active listening under its fixed silo of cognition and not connecting it to the Interpersonal domain implies that active listening and communication are not connected to teamwork and leadership or relevant to other skills, which is nonsensical.

The trio of critical thinking, analysis, and problem-solving are also not mapped to other transferable skills in any of the seven frameworks. Instead, they are cited as either distinctly different from each other (Dondi et al., 2021, p. 9); packaged as if the trio is a single skill (WEF, 2020, p. 36); or packaged with different skills, for example "critical and creative thinking" (Choksi & Rosenhaus, 2021, p. 34). If the skills are not mapped to show how they interact, users of their skills framework can only conclude that each skill is discreet and bears no relation to other skills in the same framework.

The dialectic tensions caused by a lack of mapping include a fragmented understanding of how the skills interconnect and how they support or enhance each other. Such oversight, whether in the context of students developing the skills employers want or training in the workplace, could result in inefficient learning, which fails to capitalise on the synergy between the skills. Equally, students are left to draw their own conclusions on the potential relations between the skills that may not match employer or educator views.

Finding three skills – communication, problem-solving, and teamwork – were common across some of the studies was encouraging. However, *no* consensus that these are the definitive skills all employers want was found. Furthermore, with such a confusing list of 111 unmapped and poorly defined skills, students do not have the information they need to learn the complexity of each skill or the opportunity to reinforce their learning by combining skills. Similarly, educators do not have the information needed to teach industry-relevant transferable skills.

3.5   The scholarly view

Scholars have also invested much effort over a long time to establish a common set of skills that are agnostic of discipline and valued by employers. Bloom and his compatriots were early protagonists in recognising the assessment challenge posed using vague skills acquisition and performance language (Bloom et al., 1956, p. 10). Some 31 years later, in 1987, researchers Hirsh and Bevan (1987) at the Institute of Manpower Studies (IMS), now the Institute for Employment Studies, raised concerns at the lack of a common skills language for terms such as communication and leadership skills when helping organisations plan for the supply and development of graduates and future managers (Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, pp. 2-4). Commencing with Hirsh and Bevans' (1987) report, this section critically reviews seven scholarly reports published between 1987 and 2020 – see Table 4, supported by a range of relevant skills literature. The seven scholarly reports were chosen due to their claims for offering a skills framework agnostic of industry, acknowledging the need for a shared language, being readily available online and offering a temporal view over almost thirty years of employability skills research.

Table 4: Review of seven scholarly skills frameworks 1987 to 2020

Publication Title	Published by	Authors (Date and page location of skills list)	Number of transferable skills listed
Employers' Demands for Personal Transferable Skills in Graduates: a content analysis of 1000 job advertisements and an associated empirical study	Journal of Vocational Education & Training	Bennett (2002, p. 465)	14
Bases of competence: an instrument for self and institutional assessment	Assessment & Evaluation in HE	Berdrow & Evers (2010, p. 426)	21
Mediating Soft Skills at Higher Education Institutions	European Union	Haselberger et al. (2012, p. 7)	21
What makes a manager? Report 144,	Institute of Manpower Studies	Hirsh & Bevan (1987)	Not identified
Employers' perceptions of the employability skills of new graduates	Edge Foundation	Lowden et al. (2011, p. 12)	12
Graduates' employability skills: A review of literature against market demand.	Journal of Education for Business	Osmani et al. (2019, p. 428)	26
Development and validation of a global competency framework for preparing new graduates for early career professional roles.	Higher Learning Research Communications	Strong et al. (2020, p. 73)	20

Problematising skills

As with the employer view, these studies report employers' skills needs and views. Five of the seven studies problematised the need for a common skills language (Bennett, 2002, p. 464; Haselberger et al., 2012, p. 67; Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, pp. 44-5; Lowden et al., 2011, p. 9; Osmani et al., 2019, p. 424), leaving Berdrow and Evers (2010) and Strong et al., (2020) as

the outliers. Excepting Hirsh and Bevan (1987), each study presented their findings as a table of skills. The tables helped to identify that communication was the only skill to be common across all the studies. Although the reports were detailed in their analysis of the skills employers want, the inconsistency in their findings and a lack of a unified skillset meant that none offered a common skills language with sufficient detail to make it of use to educators, students, and policymakers.

Hirsh and Bevan (1987) situated their research in the context of general management skills. However, their research is directly relevant to this study as they intended to identify what skills managers, including graduates, need and if a common and transferable skills language exists (Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, p. 2). When examining what skills language major UK-based employers adopted during interviews, appraisals and job descriptions, researchers Hirsh and Bevan (1987) found three key problems (Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, pp. 44-5):

1) An examination of the commonest [skills] terms – communication, leadership, judgement, initiative, organising, motivating … shows that … they are differently interpreted in different organisations.
2) No specific criteria are attached to the lists of skills. This means that the meaning beneath each skill is hidden, leaving assessors free to apply their own interpretation of the skill when assessing an individual's performance.
3) There is no shared language for skills at the level of meaning.

Hirsh and Bevan (1987) concluded that companies do not use the same language when speaking of the same skill because of a lack of a nationalised common language (Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, p. 6; p. 44). To address this absence, they recommended a harmonised skill language with simple, well-understood descriptive criteria to assess a candidate's ability (Hirsh & Bevans, 1987, p. 80). However, absent from their recommendation was a process for harmonising such a language.

With no progress on Hirsh and Bevan's (1987) recommendation, some 15 years later, Bennett (2002) also drew similar conclusions. Bennett (2002) analysed 1,000 online job

descriptions and found that employers do not describe the level of competency they expect beneath the broad skills they list. The absence of meaning left Bennett (2002) to conclude,

> "If there is no shared understanding of the precise skill attributes that a firm is looking for, candidates will not know exactly what they are being asked to demonstrate, and universities cannot know what they need to teach… [Thus] Universities, governmental organisations and employers' associations need to get together to create a uniform set of short, straightforward, and easily memorable definitions of key skills to facilitate shared understanding… Consensus in this regard on the parts of universities, government organisations and employers can only be to the benefit of future graduates" (Bennett, 2002, p. 472).

As per Hirsh and Bevan (1987), Bennett (2002) succinctly identified tensions and contradictions in employers' articulation of the transferable skills they claim to need. Nevertheless, despite each study presenting powerful evidence decades apart, no UK government has acted on the recommendations from either study to support a common skills language.

Skills frameworks – clarity or more confusion

Other academic researchers, cited in Table 4 above, have attempted to generate key sets of industry-relevant transferable skills with some studies presenting defined meanings -see Berdrow & Evers, 2010; Haselberger et al., 2012; Lowden et al., 2011; Osmani et al., 2019; Strong et al., 2020. However, after manually reviewing these studies, I found none shared the same set of skills, and all suffered from the same six principle limitations detailed below. Therefore, their findings cannot be compared to identify whether a common skills language exists across these studies.

1. Lack of definitive descriptions
2. Skills not mapped to other skills in the same framework
3. Confusing clustering and categories of skills
4. Unacknowledged use of synonyms

5. Incomparability of transferable skills across the published studies

6. Poor methodological descriptions and unexplained category protocols

The lack of definitive descriptions for measuring and developing transferable skills is problematised by Osmani et al. (2019, p. 424) and Lowden et al. (2011, p. 9). However, neither study describes what each skill in their respective studies means, nor do they map connections between the listed skills. Instead, Lowden et al. (2011) rely on the supposition that there is a broad understanding of the 12 skills terms listed in their study despite offering no evidence to support their claim (Lowden et al., 2011, pp. 12, 24). The supposition of a broad understanding of skills terms in higher education is problematic because it overlooks the dialectical complexities and contradictions in interpretations. Contradictions in meaning lead to ambiguity and miscommunication between individuals and organisations and hinder the deeper understanding necessary to effectively address the complexities of transferable skills development in higher education.

In their framework of 21 skills graduates most need Haselberger et al. (2012, p. 74) include communication, teamwork, and leadership, and offer brief sets of learning outcome statements per skill. However, no explanation is offered to understand the relationship between the skills. For example, the authors diagrammatically map leadership to four skills: communication, negotiation, conflict management, and culture adaptability [sic] at a headline level. Nevertheless, the leadership learning outcome statement only refers to leadership behaviours (Haselberger et al., 2012, p. 20), leaving the reader mystified vis-à-vis how leadership relates to the other four skills.

Illustrating connections between skills with a diagram without accompanying verbal explanations exposes two contrasting dialectic tensions: 1) Visual clarity versus lack of written explanation. The tension here is the immediacy of a visual diagram showing how the skills are interrelated, which is not supported by a detailed explanation of how the skills are connected. 2) Implicit versus explicit understanding. Here, the tension is that an unexplained illustration leaves users to either apply their interpretations, which may not match other users' interpretations, or leaves them seeking an explicit explanation. Again, an

explicit explanation is likely to be borne from an individual's interpretation, which cycles the tension back to inconsistent meanings per listed transferable skill.

A confusing cacophony of skills

The inconsistency with which scholars offer their versions of the key skills employers want also adds dialectic confusion rather than clarity to the literature on transferable skills. In their ten-year research study investigating the most required transferable skills, scholars Berdrow & Evers (2010) list 21 skills divided across four principal skills: managing self, managing people, mobilising innovation and change and a sub-collection of 17 other skills (Berdrow & Evers, 2010, pp. 422-6). By contrast, scholars Strong et al. (2020) cite 20 principal skills in their large-scale and longitudinal research (Strong et al., 2020, p. 81). Some commonality between the two frameworks was found. For example, both refer to the need for innovation and an ability to manage change as key skills. Additionally, brief definitions per skill are provided in each study (Berdrow & Evers, 2010, p. 426; Strong et al., 2020, pp. 87-115). However, neither set of authors explains how they categorised and defined their lists of skills, nor do their skills categorisations match. For example, Berdrow & Evers (2010) situate problem-solving/analytic as a sub-skill of managing self and describe problem-solving in one summarised statement:

> Identifying, prioritising and solving problems, individually or in groups. Includes the ability to ask the right questions, sort out the main facets of a problem, and contribute ideas as well as answers regarding the problems
> (Berdrow & Evers, 2010, pp. 422-426).

Whereas Strong et al. (2020) situate problem-solving and analysing as a principal skill and list seven sub-skills across three proficiency levels: basic (level 1), intermediate (level 2) and advanced (level 3). The proficiency levels involve:

> The need to consider the accuracy and value of the data source; gaps in information; establishing evaluation criteria; synthesise all information; identify patterns in the data; and identify new ways to solve the problem. (Strong et al., 2020, p. 99)

None of the seven sub-skills in Strong et al. (2020) were found in Berdrow & Evers's (2010) research. The differently presented frameworks and use of different terminology to label and describe the skills in their frameworks means educators and students cannot easily compare Berdrow and Evers (2010) and Strong et al. (2020) to know which framework they should adopt to be sure they are developing the industry relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) for employers.

The findings from the employer and scholarly studies cited in Table 3 and Table 4, and critiqued above, reflect the broader skills literature over time in which there is a litany of transferable skills lists and an absence of descriptive meanings – see, for example, Dench et al., 1998, pp. 12-13; Karzunina et al., 2018; Dickerson et al., 2023, pp. 76-78). Notably, the most frequently called for transferable skill over time was communication. However, the complexity of this skill means that any attempt to incorporate it in teaching and assessment must, as with all employer-demanded transferable skills, start with a deep understanding of its meaning and the context in which its meanings are linked.

Poor methodological descriptions

Furthermore, although many of the scholarly studies offered details of their data selection and analysis methods their methods of data selection and analysis were limited. For example, Berdrow & Evers (2010) stated that they used "factor analysis" (Berdrow & Evers, 2010, p. 421) but did not explain what they meant or how they conducted their analysis. Similarly, the methodology adopted by Strong et al. (2020) to develop their competency model was opaque. No methods of analysis were found. Instead, Strong et al. (2020) stated that their competency model was based on an extensive literature review, following which a team of industrial psychologists drafted behaviours that exemplified the list of 21 competencies from the literature review. These behaviours were then reviewed by 5000 professionals, a global panel of stakeholders and 18 global focus groups comprising employers, faculty members and students (Strong et al, 2020, p. 70). No detail is offered to know on what basis the 5000 professional, stakeholder panellists and focus groups reviewed the skills or whether there were areas of common agreement or disagreement. Similarly poor methodology detail was provided by Haselberger et al. (2012) to know how their 21 skills were found or how they relate to each other.

Whilst the scholarly studies reviewed in this section have undoubtedly been extensively researched, several challenges arise from their poor methodology descriptions. These include undermining the reproducibility and credibility of their findings and the inability of other researchers to replicate their studies or assess the reliability of their results. The issues borne from a lack of clarity in their methodologies can, in turn, lead to misunderstandings and erode trust in their research outcomes.

3.6   Absences, tensions and contradictions in employer and scholarly views

Mutually complicit dialectical contraries

Policymakers and the UK government emphasise the importance of students developing essential skills for the labour market (DfE, 2023b, p. 18; Dickerson et al., 2023, p. 15) to address skills gaps, shortages, and mismatches (Karzunina et al., 2018, p. 5; SHRM, 2019, p. 2). Similarly, the OfS mandates that universities provide industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, pp. 92, 121). However, neither policymakers nor the OfS provide a clearly defined set of transferable skills for measuring university compliance and students' essential labour market skills. Simultaneously, the skills landscape is cluttered with recycled skill labels that lack detailed descriptions or a comprehensive skills map to illustrate their interconnections. The tensions between policy directives demanding universities address skills gaps with industry-relevant skills and the practical challenges of the absence of a unified skill set have led to significant mutually complicit dialectical contrariness (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 10) between policy and practice. Policymakers and the OfS push for compliance without establishing clear guidelines, while the skills landscape exacerbates universities' compliance challenge with an overwhelming preponderance of vague, undefined, and recycled terms. The dialectical tensions, with policy expectations on the one side and the realities of skill descriptions and mapping on the other, create a cycle of ambiguity. Both contribute to the difficulty in aligning educational curricula with industry needs, perpetuating inefficiency and ambiguity in meeting labour market demands with appropriately skills graduates.

"It is difficult to teach what is not well defined" (Dondi et al., 2021, p. 2)

A recurring theme throughout the preceding studies reviewed in Sections 3.4 and 3.5, and the broader published skills literature, is the persistent effort to define transferable skills. Authors present their sets of transferable skills as factual statements, attempting to define each skill definitively. With the exception of philosophical debates on the folly of attempting to define truth (Davidson, 1996, p. 269) there is little evidence that the tensions between defining and describing are problematised in the skills broader literature. The pursuit of a singular, fixed definition of a skill belies a series of dialectical tensions which warrant surfacing to consider their contradictions. Logically, pursuing a single definition of a skill leads to rejecting alternative interpretations. Consequently, there is a risk of disagreement between embracing or dismissing a specific definition of a transferable skill based on individual experiences. Conversely, pursuing a shared skills lexicon must also raise questions concerning whether pluralism is more important than precision or whether both are possible. The causal effects of who benefits from a shared language and what might be lost in a hegemonic meta-narrative of employability and market-driven university performance metrics (Arora, 2015, p. 644; Prinsloo, 2012, pp. 29, 90) are also dialectically relevant questions in the pursuit of a common skills language. These tensions are drawn into discussion in Chapter 7.

A definitional dilemma

American scholar of communication and rhetoric Professor Edward Schiappa acknowledges the definition dilemma by positing that acts of definition are traditionally regarded as factual propositions. He suggests that instead, questions of definitions should be treated as sociological questions towards shared knowledge (Schiappa, 2003, p. 90). In other words, taking the example of teamwork, a more logical question is to ask educators and employers what they expect a graduate to be capable of when working with others instead of attempting to define teamwork. Avoiding the definition dilemma by adopting a contextual approach and delving beyond surface-level definitions opens up the possibility of generating a more profound understanding of meaning. Thus, by considering individual employers' and educators' real-life experiences and performance expectations, a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of transferable skills could be achieved unfettered from

boundary definitions. Adopting such an approach suggests the possibility of a pluralist and precise common skills lexicon.

3.7   Problematising the articulation of transferable skills

There is some evidence that employers and academic researchers problematise the need to describe, rather than define, transferable skills and recognise the challenge this gives to educators. Economist and researcher Grinis (2017) highlighted the skills gap between graduates and employer needs, pointing to the lack of a unified skillset, ambiguous skill definitions and mismatches between job vacancies and applicants' skills (Grinis, 2017, p. 3). The solution Grinis (2017) proposed to bridge this gap was to align academic course descriptors with online job vacancy listings to create a comprehensive set of transferable skills. However, this approach overlooks the complexity of reconciling generic course descriptors and vague job advertisements with the need for clear, detailed learning outcomes. Without explicit skill descriptions that clarify performance expectations, combining academic course and job descriptions will not effectively address the disconnect in graduates' transferable skills acquisition desired by employers.

Employers articulation struggles

When researching graduate recruitment practices on behalf of the UK Government's Business Innovation and Skills department, Pollard et al. (2015) found that employers do not articulate their transferable skills needs in a language graduates and universities can understand (Pollard et al., 2015, p. 77). However, despite the strength of this finding, the authors did not recommend employers address their failings to better describe their skills' needs. Nor do the authors explain how they arrived at their findings beyond broadly describing their research approach as "rapid evidence assessment", stakeholder interviews and "bespoke analysis" (Pollard et al., 2015, p. 22). Instead, the authors simply pushed the responsibility to develop the skills employers want onto students, universities, and policymakers (Pollard et al., 2015, p. 231). The contradiction between the report's findings and recommendations suggests a government-sponsored research bias in favour of

appeasing employers and perpetuates the lack of clarity on the transferable skills employers need.

In their UK-based research to establish a common set of skills with descriptive meanings, Kashefpakdel et al. (2018) found a small group of 12 employers could not articulate what they meant when referring to teamwork, communication, problem-solving, self-belief, and self-management skills, or offer workplace examples of these skills. The employers defended their inability to articulate such skills "because they do not exist in isolation; they slip and merge into others" (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, pp. 16-22). Although these employers had experience of being unable to articulate the skills listed, they did not offer any solutions to overcome their challenges.

Transferable skills often not taught or assessed
Equally, when investigating how critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication, defined as generic skills, were perceived and taught in two Australian universities, Jones (2009) found that whilst all three skills are valued, they are often neither taught nor hold the same meanings between disciplines. Jones (2009) drew her findings from formal interviews with 37 educators across five disciplines and an undisclosed number of informal conversations with other educators from the same disciplinary faculties.

Through iteratively reading the interview texts and applying thematic analysis to generate initial codes from which themes and patterns emerged, Jones (2009) found four issues educators face when teaching generic skills (Jones, 2009, p. 178). All five disciplines cited tensions between 1) prioritising technical content over generic content, 2) large class sizes, 3) students' resistance to being challenged, and 4) the need for more clarity regarding what each skill means (Jones, 2009, p. 186) as barriers to teaching generic skills (Jones, 2009, pp. 181-184). For example, communication was assessed in all five disciplines but not taught, with students expected to acquire the skill tacitly (Jones, 2009, p. 181). Legal and medical educators consider critical thinking and problem-solving synonymous. Students are assessed on their ability to evidence logical arguments and reasoning, with educators expecting students to acquire these skills rather than teaching them (Jones, 2009, p. 184). The academic expectation of tacit skills acquisition is problematic because it assumes, or

perhaps enables, a passive learning process. This assumption can lead to misunderstandings, and inconsistent skill development and does not help students know how to apply such skills effectively in a real-world context.

Jones (2009) also found that Historians do not teach critical thinking and problem-solving and expect students to tacitly acquire them through understanding the complexity and ambiguity of historical subject matter (Jones, 2009, p. 179). Other studies examining the teaching of such skills have found similar barriers. See, for example (Al Mallak et al., 2020, p. 408; Barrie, 2006, p. 234; Drummond et al., 1998, p. 23; Okolie, 2020, p. 304). The barriers to teaching generic skills due to the need for more clarity on their meaning suggest more research is required to identify what each generic skill means to a level at which it can be taught, practised, and assessed. Similarly, the inconsistency in developing students' critical thinking, problem-solving, and communication skills across faculties suggests the need for institutions to review and agree on common approaches to ensure all students from the same institution have the same opportunity to develop these skills.

Too much information, too little agreement

The scholarly literature offers a rich view of the skills employers most want. As Kashefpakdel et al. (2018) observed in their research with UK educators and employers:

> "it appears that the problem when it comes to employability is not lack of information about what employers want, or what makes a young person work ready, but instead a lack of well-researched and agreed language between all stakeholders" (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, p. 1).

This observation by Kashefpakdel et al (2018) highlights that the issue of employability is not just a lack of knowing what employers expect from young people. It also recognises that the main problem is the absence of a common skills language that can effectively communicate and align with all stakeholders' perspectives.

Acknowledging the absence of a common skills language in the scholarly literature and cognisant of the OfS regulatory mechanisms, UK Higher Education Academy fellows Barkas

et al. (2019) have called for a "normalised language of skills with precise standardised meanings" (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807). Their calls echo those made three decades earlier by Hirsh and Bevan (Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, p. 80). However, a normalised skills language still does not exist. Its absence is evidenced by a confusing inventory of skills, an absence of meaning and cross-mapping, and a pattern of using the ambiguous language expressions "include" and "such as" to provide examples of skills employers need. The problem in using these expressions is that they forgive employers and policymakers for not committing to a specific transferable skillset with unambiguous meanings. These limitations make it impossible for educators to know which transferable skills framework to adopt to be sure they are teaching and assessing the industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) employers want and the OfS measures. This absence leaves educators to guess what employers mean when asking for transferable skills, framed in a high-stakes regulatory landscape. Thus the call for a harmonised, well-understood and simple skill language capable of assessing the industry-relevant transferable skills employers want and graduates need remains an important area for further enquiry.

3.8   Summarising the policy and academic calls for a common skills language

Chapter three set out to continue answering sub-research question one - How have successive UK governments steered English higher education towards a skills-driven agenda, and how have academia and employers reacted? It examined how non-discipline-specific transferable skills are presented in the broader literature. The dialectical exploration of the broad skills literature has revealed a vast sea of transferable skills marked by their inconsistency, disconnection and lack of meaning. It also revealed a pattern of studies lacking methodological rigour with findings reported without detailed evidence of analysis methods or philosophical underpinning. This lack of methodological rigour means their methods are not verifiable or replicable.

Furthermore, through dialectical analysis, this study has illustrated how 60 years of evolving higher education policy actions that require English universities to construct compulsory

learning outcomes and teach relevant transferable skills or face regulatory sanctions have failed to resolve employers' dissatisfaction with graduates' transferable skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 8; GoS, 2017, p. 48). Pursuing regulatory compliance as the answer to delivering the skills employers want reveals deeper structural and dialectical tensions in the higher education system, reinforcing policy motives towards validating and pursuing education policies without understanding their impact. It is, however, important to recognise that the issue of identifying and describing transferable skills predates any policy attempts to regulate universities and to make it a condition of university registration (OfS, 2022a, pp. 92-121) that they develop industry-relevant transferable skills in their students. This predating is evidenced by the millions of pounds the UK government and UK industry bodies have spent over many years identifying the skills employers want. Thus, even if the shifting sands of higher education policy change, employers still expect graduates to demonstrate industry-relevant transferable skills for employment.

Consequently, any work to establish a common and normalised skills language must take the need to establish a defined skillset as its starting point. Then dig beneath the surface level of clichéd skills labels to set out employer and educator performance expectations of each skill instead of attempting to define them. Furthermore, applying a *M.E.L.D.* process of enquiry offers the potential to achieve a much deeper level of understanding of the meanings employers and educators assign to a defined skillset. For instance, identifying each person's meanings at *(1M),* exposing the contradictions, tensions, and absences of meanings at *(2E)*, and connecting what is known with the revealed tensions at *(3L)* would provide an opportunity for agentic actions at *(4D)* to establish a richly populated and mapped network of industry-relevant transferable skills. With such a skills map, educators will know what transferable skills to help their students develop, and students will be able to check their progress against the network of transferable skills. Normalising a common skills language will also provide an opportunity for fairer regulatory judgement of a university's ability to develop such skills in their students.

The next chapter sets out the philosophical framing of the study to ensure a rigorous and replicable methodological approach to identifying and describing industry-relevant transferable skills. It also sets out a detailed account of the processes for analysing the UK

government and CBI-commissioned skills surveys, as well as educators' and employers'
descriptions of a set of transferable skills drawn from the surveys.

Chapter 4 Methodology

In response to the UK's higher education policy, how can a common language for a defined set of transferable skills be established to enable educators, employers, and universities to assess graduates more objectively within a heavily regulated higher education landscape? (Overarching research question).

4.1   **Introduction**

This study examines higher education regulation in England, specifically the requirements for English universities to provide employer-valued and industry-relevant transferable skills without clarity on what these skills are or entail. The study utilised qualitative research, framed in DCR and adopting a *M.E.L.D* enquiry process, introduced in Chapter 1, Section 1.51.5, to explore identifying these skills and assess agreement between employers and educators on their meanings. To foreground this study, details of the secondary data collection and analysis methods to address sub-research question one - How have successive UK governments steered English higher education regulations towards a skills-driven agenda, and how have academia and employers reacted? - have already been provided in Chapter 2, Sections 2.3 and 3.2, and Chapter 3, Section 3.2.

This chapter builds on the theoretical and philosophical framing of DCR and the *M.E.L.D.* model of enquiry already detailed in Chapter 1, Section 1.5, before moving through the specific analysis methods employed in this thesis. DCR's application by other researchers and criticisms are presented and reflected upon. Research validity, relevance, and the ethical procedures adopted are explained before setting out the details of the data identification, collection, and analytical methods, which address sub-research questions two and three.

A large desk-based corpus of 100 policy-influencing employer skills surveys, comprising 3 million words, was built to address sub-research question two - How are transferable skills represented in the UK Government and Confederation of British Industry (CBI)

commissioned skills surveys, and to what degree is there a convergence on a unified set of skills with explicit and coherent articulation of their meanings across these surveys? A smaller corpus of 31,748 words generated from focus group fieldwork with employers and educators addressed sub-research question three - How can asking educators and employers to describe their expectations of graduate performance as related to a set of transferable skills (identified in sub-research questions one and two) contribute to the process of establishing a common skills language as part of graduate preparedness for employability? The corpus generation and analysis techniques are detailed in Sections 4.5 and 4.6.

Adopting a DCR framing and *M.E.L.D.* enquiry process provided the philosophical framework to identify and connect the tensions in understanding and applying transferable skills in education, policy, and employment. I was interested to see how the findings of five specific transferable skills from the large corpus of 100 commissioned skills surveys and reports compared with the most cited skills identified in the policy and literature review Chapter 2 and Chapter 3 and how these findings compared with the focus group participants views of the five skills.

I intended that by dialectically identifying and exploring the connections and relationships between the transferable skills in the literature, the corpus of 100 commissioned skills surveys and reports, and focus group discussions *(1M),* this would uncover how the published literature and focus group participants think about transferable skill in the context of graduate performance. This dialectical approach could, thus, reveal if the researchers and focus group participants held the same or similar views, where absences and contradictions of views between participants occurred *(2E)* and how the focus groups' views could be presented as a totality of views to surface what might be present and absent *(3L)* in their respective expectations of graduate performance relative to the five transferable skills. The collation of *(1M), (2E),* and *(3L)* would thus carry the potential for a mapped network of skills to be established at *(4D)* to complete the M.E.L.D enquiry process.

4.2   Theoretical and philosophical framing

This study explores the evolution and tensions in higher education regulations, with particular attention paid to the regulatory need for English universities to deliver relevant transferable skills to employers, positive outcomes, and value for money to students and the state. As already introduced in Chapter 1, Section 1.5, this study is framed on the three ontological layers of critical realism – structures and mechanisms *(real)*, the events they create *(actual)* and our experience of the events *(empirical)* - and their extension into the four *M.E.L.D.* moments of dialectics – see Illustration 3 for an original illustration of the combined DCR and M.E.L.D approach adopted in this study. The additional exposition in this chapter explains why I chose DCR in preference to other philosophical approaches and how criticisms of its dense language and complexity ultimately helped me understand Bhaskar's philosophy. It also includes a précis of how other researchers have applied DCR in education-related research.

Illustration 3: Combined DCR and *M.E.L.D.* graphic
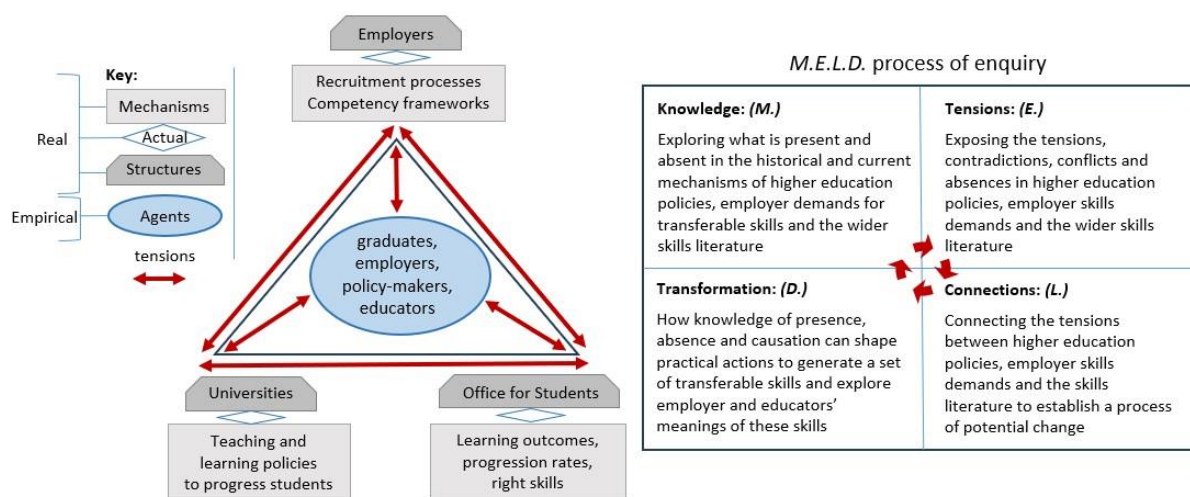
The (r*eal)* domain represents the deeper underlying social structures and mechanisms of government, employers, and universities that have led to the events of higher education regulation and employer-demanded transferable skills. Borne from these social structures, regulation and policy events have manifested in the (*actual)* domain, regardless of our direct experience. The *(empirical)* domain completes the three layers of ontology, where

employers, educators, policymakers, and students experience the regulation and policy events to create their sensed and perceived reality (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 22). The non-linear nature of critical realism means that mechanisms in the (*real)* domain might only become visible through their effects on events that occur. In other words, although mechanisms in the (*real*) domain have a causal impact on events, their impact is not always immediately visible until an event occurs for which a connection back to the original mechanism can be mapped. For instance, student loans book debt of more than £135 billion (DfE, 2019a, p. 17), and the principle that UK higher education provide skills for the labour market (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) on a mass level (Shattock, 2014, pp. 117-123;) can be traced back to the mechanism of the 1963 Robbins report which catalysed the expansion of UK higher education without a fiscal plan or an agreed set of labour-market skills. This example also instantiates Bhaskar's view that individuals act in a pre-structured society with constraints that are not of their making (Archer et al., 1998, p. xvi). Similarly, distinguishing between the *(empirical), (actual)*, and (*real)* domains and dialectically investigating their causes and effects brings about a critical exposition of the paradoxical tensions between them. For example, it is unreasonable to conclude that graduates do not have the transferable skills employers want without investigating what such skills are or how higher education policies affect graduates' acquisition of the transferable skills employers want.

Alternative philosophies

In contrast, relativism as an alternative philosophy is more concerned with understanding the uniqueness and diversity of viewpoints and cultural contexts to arrive at a subjective position of reality (O'Grady, 2014, p. 28). The philosophy of phenomenology also focuses on the subjectivity and intrinsic nature of human experience (Groenewald, 2004, p. 43). Although this study is interested in exploring the views of employers and educators in the context of what a set of transferable skills means to them in practice, my concern in adopting a purely relativist or phenomenological stance is that it only focuses on personal perspectives. This risks not deeply exploring the interplay between the social structures of government, universities, and industry and their respective mechanisms to identify overarching patterns capable of explaining the causal events that generate individual and collective perspectives and meanings of transferable skills. Furthermore, we, as humans, need to understand how we experience and influence these structures and mechanisms

over time if we are to propose and pursue transformative change towards a common skills language.

The positivist paradigm, particularly Durkheimian positivism, which involves understanding reality through causal analysis (Hassard, 1993, p. 17), shares similarities with Bhaskar's DCR. However, a positivist paradigm does not thoroughly examine underlying social structures and events. Thus, a positivist approach risks failing to recognise and understand the complexities and interconnections of phenomena (Sharar, 2016, p. 13), particularly when influenced by underlying social structures and events. This neglect can create a gap between how transferable skills are conceptualised and their practical application in education and the labour market. It can also lead to a shallow understanding of transferable skills, which neglects the dynamic relationship among the social structures of higher education, government, employers, and students' capabilities as assessed through explicit learning outcomes.

In contrast to the above philosophical approaches, DCR emphasises the notion of absence as a real and powerful force, the contradictory nature of reality, and the transformative potential that emerges from understanding and resolving these contradictions (Bhaskar, 2008b, p. 56). Thus, DCR offers a framework for understanding the interplay between reality, knowledge, and perception in the context of my study.

4.2.1   Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR) criticisms, reflections, and applications

Criticisms and reflections of Bhaskar's philosophy

A range of scholars are critical of Bhaskar's approach, which I found helpful in developing my understanding of DCR and the *M.E.L.D.* enquiry process. These criticisms generally fall into two main categories: 1) dense and difficult-to-understand writing and 2) redundancy of the three domains.

1) Dense and difficult writing

The density and difficulty of his writing are due to the complexity of his language and, thus, the challenge in practically applying DCR. For instance, Bhaskar's definition of DCR as "absenting absences of constraints on absenting ills" (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 83) is thick with obscurity. Eminent critical realist scholars such as Alderson and Morgan (2023), Norrie (2009), and Outhwaite (2019) all acknowledge that Bhaskar's language is difficult to understand and requires deep engagement in the philosophy to reach a level of understanding (Alderson & Morgan, 2023, p. 143; Norrie, 2009, p. 6; Outhwaite, 2019, p. 130). To navigate Bhaskar's obscure language, I read a variety of his texts and related his key points to my experiences to construct a more straightforward understanding. In particular, his 2008 publications – Dialectic Pulse of Freedom and A Realist Theory of Science (Bhaskar, 2008a; 2008b), as well as his posthumously published Enlightened Common Sense (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016) and his summarised collection of lectures (Bhaskar, 2017) were illustrative texts on the complexity and insight of Bhaskar's writing.

Finding a route through the density

Although his language remained challenging, his use of metaphors and explanatory notes helped me to make sense of his thoughts and concepts. For instance, Bhaskar breaks down critical realism into seven key features (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016, pp. 1-6):

1. Under-labouring refers to helping to remove obstacles to knowledge,
2. Seriousness refers to critical realism being a serious and actionable philosophy,
3. Immanent critique involves avoiding transplanting a solution or theory to all contexts automatically and instead approaching a problem from within the system under critique using concepts and principles inherent in the system,
4. Pre-supposition requires surfacing individual worldviews, thoughts, and practices and understanding their influences and impact on a problem,
5. Reflexivity involves reflecting on one's own and others' actions,
6. Hermeticism involves questioning and testing new knowledge,
7. Dispositional realism means accepting that reality is a complex mix of underlying structures and mechanisms *(real)* that cause seen and unseen events *(actual)*

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which are experienced *(empirical)* whether or not they are observed, and that transformational praxis is possible through agency and reflection.

Through reflecting on each critical realism feature, I could see how Bhaskar's dialectic emerged by exploring the contradictions, tensions, and conflicts between opposing forces and identifying what is missing to cause these tensions (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 72: 2017, p74; Norrie, 2009, p. 17; Roberts, 2014, p. 3). Thus, the act of dialectics exposed through Bhaskar's seven features of critical realism reveals the multi-layered nature of reality. This dialectical process encourages a critical awareness of absence, enabling potential resolutions to the revealed tensions. An important observation is that whilst Bhaskar enumerates his seven features of critical realism chronologically from one to seven, there is no evidence that he intended each feature to be sequentially applied. On the contrary, Bhaskar's explanation that reality is multi-layered suggests the implausibility of considering each feature sequentially. For example, the hermeneutic act of questioning and testing new knowledge, situated as the sixth feature, may catalyse the need to question one's own or another's worldview located at the fourth step, which may, in turn, lead to the need to under-labour to remove obstacles to knowledge.

Furthermore, Bhaskar's depiction of the under-labouring metaphor, which involves clearing away obstacles that hinder our understanding of the world (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 7), carries a cautionary reminder that our systems of thoughts and beliefs are part of what can obstruct the acquisition of new knowledge. As an NLP practitioner and mediator, the philosophy of DCR aligns with the NLP and mediator need to recognise the existence of and uncover the presuppositions, distortions, and deletions in one's own and others belief systems are important reflexive actions towards achieving desired outcomes (Strasser & Randolph, 2006, pp. 34-49). Equally, as an intensely curious person, I wonder what prompts my actions and their impact on others. Thus, DCR encouraged me to reflect on the forces, contradictions, tensions, and complexities inherent in what has driven my desire to investigate a common skills language and what methods I have adopted to pursue my study goal (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 91). Similarly, recognising that a feature of dialectical critical realism is reflexivity helped me to acknowledge that I am entangled in the inquiry process, not separate from it. This

reflexivity helped me to consciously acknowledge that my subjectivity and experience as a former business owner and current academic will likely influence how I appreciate and make sense of the secondary and primary research data. Therefore, by moving back and forth in Bhaskar's writings and relating them to my experiences and research intentions, I found a way to embrace the discomfort of Bhaskar's dense and obscure "absenting absences of constraints on absenting ills" writing (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 83) to deepen my understanding of dialectical critical realism.

To represent my understanding of Bhaskar's complex and rich philosophy which combines critical realism with dialectics, I have developed a novel and visual representation of Bhaskar's principles relevant to this study – see Illustration 4 below.

Illustration 4: Visual representation of Bhaskar's DCR principles

Bhaskar's seven principles of CR [1]

Under-labouring:	removing obstacles to knowledge
Seriousness:	CR as a serious & actionable philosophy
Immanent critique:	not transplanting solutions
Pre-supposition:	surfacing worldviews & their impact
Reflexivity:	reflecting on own & others' actions
Hermeneticism:	questioning & testing new knowledge
Disposition:	accepts multi-layered reality & possibility for change

A novel visual framework of Bhaskar's Dialectical Critical Realism

Critical Realism
Karl Marx,
Georg Hegel,
Emile Durkheim,
Anthony
Giddens:
Human agency
produces
and transforms
society

Bhaskar's Dialectical Critical Realism [2]:

• Society is pre-structured
• Reality is multi-layered (*real, actual, empirical*)

✓ Seen and unseen forces
✓ Absence as a real determinate force
✓ Duality of absence
   ✓ present in one phenomena, absent in another [3]
✓ Problematic axiological constraints
   ✓ good for one, bad for another
✓ Consequential tensions, contradictions, impact
✓ Mutually complicit dialectical contraries [4]
   ✓ interconnected, enabling, sustaining

M.E.L.D. Process of dialectical enquiry [5]
Dialectic = thesis, antithesis, synthesis, change circularity manifested in M.E.L.D. process of enquiry

1M: something has happened in the past
2E: identifying absences, cause and effects
3L: collating & recognising the problem
4D: agency motivation to resolve problem

[1] Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016, pp. 1-6
[2] Bhaskar, 2017, pp. 57-87
[3-5] Bhaskar, 2008a, pp. 75-76 [3], 82 [4], 193 [5]

2) Redundant domains and their validity challenges

Other criticisms of Bhaskar's philosophy question the validity of his three ontological domains – *(real), (actual)*, and *(empirical)* – and suggest they are confusing, redundant, or non-existent. Critical realist scholars Fryer and Navarrete (2022) argue that researchers can innately distinguish between events, experiences, and causal mechanisms without the need for Bhaskar's three domains (Fryer & Navarrete, 2022, p. 2). However, the authors concede that a priori knowledge is necessary to understand the concepts of events, experiences, and causal mechanisms. Their concession implicitly acknowledges that understanding these concepts is not entirely straightforward, intuitive, or innate and that some foundational teaching or framework is needed. Furthermore, they believe it is possible to conduct scientific research without reference to the *(real), (actual)*, and *(empirical)*, domains. However, just because the authors do not consider Bhaskar's framework necessary for scientific understanding of cause and effect does not make the framework invalid or non-existent.

In addressing the redundant domains argument, critical realist Nellhaus (2022) proposes an intriguing idea of removing the *(empirical)* domain and replacing it with an "emergence" domain (Nellhaus, 2022, p. 2). His proposition is based on two beliefs: 1) that when the domains of the *(real)* and *(actual)* merge, a new reality emerges, which requires its own domain, and 2) experiences are events that Bhaskar already accounts for in the three domains. This proposition led me to reconsider the structure of Bhaskar's DCR philosophy and the *M.E.L.D.* enquiry process. As each new event occurs it has a visible or hidden causal impact on individuals. Thus, to understand this multi-dimensional impact, the *(empirical)* domain must be considered separate from the events that caused them. In other words, as each domain catalyses events, new events occur and their causal impact on past, current and future events and the experiences they create must be considered separately and holistically to gain a deeper understanding of reality.

For instance, the social structure of the OfS in the *(real)* domain created progression targets, manifesting as an event in the *(actual)* domain. The effect of this event leads some educators to feel intense pressure to meet progression targets (Czerniewicz et al., 2021, p.

10; Hansen et al., 2019, p. 12; Perkins, 2019, p. 315; Plunkett, 2014, p. 2), whilst others may not feel the same pressure. Thus, each will have their reactions to, experience of and impact on the same event. Dialectically examining the event and effect of progression targets through each layer of reality to understand why, how, and when progression targets were established *(1M)*, what their causal impact and constraints are on educators *(2E/3L)* and what resolutions can be established to overcome them *(4D)* led me to conclude that Nellhaus' (2022) proposition of emergence occurs organically. Therefore, adding emergence as a separate domain is, itself a redundant idea.

Nevertheless, Nellhaus' (2022) criticism of Bhaskar was helpful as it offered me a way to better understand DCR and the four dialectical enquiry moments by more deeply considering how both enable new knowledge to emerge. In other words within each layer of reality, there is more to something than meets the eye. Within the known social structures of higher education policy and university education, there are mechanisms that exert causal influences on the events they interact with and our experiences of them, but which may only be visible once they are investigated deeply and holistically.

Domain validity

Elder-Vass (2022), a former student of Bhaskar, also questions the validity of the *(real)* and *(actual)* domains. He suggests that Bhaskar's separation of these domains risks overlooking causality because it features in both domains. Thus, they should be treated as one domain to understand their cause and effects (Elder-Vass, 2022, pp. 2-4). However, conflating the *(real)* and (*actual)* into a single domain risks insufficiently exploring the historical and contemporary motives of the social structures that cause events. For example, the current regulatory environment is a product of the actions of the social structure of government to expand higher education in the 1960s. Exploring why and how the motives were formed can help shed light on how the events the expansion catalysed are manifested and experienced. Thus, maintaining a distinction between the domains offers a means of exploring how each event materialises and understanding their impact on social structures and human experiences.

4.2.2 Applications of Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR) in research

The preceding criticisms contrast with scholars who have applied a dialectical critical realist approach to their research. Reviewing their approaches and how they have applied *M.E.L.D.* helped me to make sense of the framework from a practical perspective and what might be missing from existing dialectical critical realist studies.

An absence of process

Critical realist scholars have explored education policy from a dialectical perspective. For instance, in his study of revolutions in higher education policy since 1970, Lauder (2020) examined the credibility of the neoliberal policy of human capital theory as a mechanism to increase the economy and improve graduates earning potential through higher education (Lauder, 2020, p. 191). Drawing on statistical evidence of graduate numbers versus those in highly paid roles, Lauder found a contradictory tension between political ideology and human capital theory because graduates' recorded salaries were lower than the human capital theorists predicted, and graduate unemployment was higher than theoretically anticipated (Lauder, 2020, p. 191). To overcome this tension, Lauder concluded that a slower roll-out of policy using pilot studies would have been beneficial to test the neo-liberal political ideology of applying human capital theory to higher education policy (Lauder, 2020, pp. 192-193). However, Lauder's (2020) analysis failed to identify what components of higher education policy could be tested, how testing should occur, and what tensions might arise - for example, rolling out tuition fees or regulatory compliance in one part of the country versus free education in another. A more holistic dialectical critical realist approach would have delved deeper into potential contradictions, offered practical implementation suggestions, and emphasised reflexivity. Critiquing Lauder's view of education policy helped me to consciously consider potential contradictions in my research and the potential consequences of my recommendations.

The presence of process

In contrast, in her case study of food security knowledge in rural South African primary schools, environmental educationalist Associate Professor of Education Schudel used Bhaskar's *M.E.L.D.* framework to systematically explore how two teachers of food security

enable their students' learning by understanding the tensions between the historicism of politics, education policies, and pedagogical cultural norms in South Africa. Schudels' exploration encompassed knowledge of what exists and what is absent in the context of food security and nutrition in South Africa *(1M)*, knowledge of what could be done differently *(2E)*, what should be done *(3L)*, and what can be done *(4D)* (Schudel, 2017, pp. 164-171). Schudel's approach helped me to think about how my application of *M.E.L.D,* illustrated in Section 1.5.2, could be described by considering the historical and present-day dialectical interplay, tensions, contradictions and complexities between social structures, the higher education policies they create, how the policies impact higher education and how their effects might be resolved.

Social science scholar Otto Laske applied Bhaskar's *M.E.L.D.* dialectic to create his Dialectical Thought Framework (DTF). Referring to his four dialectic moments as "four classes of thought forms" (Laske, 2015, pp. 73-75) showed how human thought is inherently complex with internal contradictions, interdependencies and tensions operating in a continuous and dynamic cycle. Laske's DTF model moves dialectically through contextual questions *(1M)*, enabling a teacher or coach to listen to a person's assumptions and follow up with supporting questions *(2E)*. This questioning process helps reveal what evidence a client relies on to frame their assumption or judgement *(3L)* to set the stage for *(4D)* transformative change (Laske, 2015, p. 87). From my experience as an NLP practitioner and mediator, I saw how Laske's dialectical thought framework underscores the importance of being aware of a client's thought process to help them reach mediated resolutions and reframed thinking to achieve desired outcomes (Strasser & Randolph, 2006, pp. 34-49). The dialectical journey between context, assumptions, clarification, and personal realisation helped me to reflect on how the focus group questions could enable participants to reveal and reflect on their thoughts. For instance, setting an opening question gave participants the same context whilst allowing for their worldviews. This approach enabled participants to share their thoughts and offered space for them to reflect on what they had said and heard. Adding a clarification question and a space for open discussion deepened the enquiry and reflection process. See Sections 4.6.2 and 4.6.3, which explain the process of establishing the focus group questions.

4.2.3 Reflective Summary

Ironically, I found the criticisms of Bhaskar's philosophical approach and the need to deeply engage with Bhaskar's dense writing to reach a level of understanding were helpful. Reading how other researchers have critiqued and applied DCR helped me to develop my understanding and approach of DCR and the *M.E.L.D.* enquiry process. Equally, DCR encourages a reflection on the driving forces, contradictions, and tensions inherent in what has motivated my desire to investigate a common skills language and what methods I have adopted to pursue my study goal (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 91). Thus, the enquiry process of DCR is not dissimilar to the act of mediation which requires that our emotions as mediators are surfaced, recognised, and bracketed to ensure we maintain as neutral and non-judgemental as possible (Strasser & Randolph, 2004, p. 51). As an educator and researcher, I sat between an insider-outsider position. This positionality required that I take a disciplined and iterative approach to my intentions and thoughts throughout the study (Tufford & Newman, 2010, p. 81). Here, I drew inspiration from Laske's DTF model and my training as a mediator and NLP practitioner to reflect on my practice iteratively. In so doing, I endeavoured to constantly move back and forth in the research process (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 59) to maintain a commitment to authentic, open, and unbiased inquiry.

In addressing sub-research question one, I sought to balance the strengths and weaknesses of higher education policy and the broader skills literature by presenting various contrasting views. My motivation was to understand how education policy, since 1960, has developed in the UK and led to the current skills-driven, students-as-consumers-oriented landscape. I was also driven to understand how employers, educators and policymakers perceive this landscape. For sub-research question three, using pre-set questions in the focus groups and how I might address issues of unclear dialogue helped to remove myself from the narrative. For example, following a pre-set question, if a participant's comments were ambiguous, I asked them to expand on their comment instead of involving myself in the discussion. If their expanded comment was still unclear, I did not pursue further clarification, again, to avoid engaging in their discussion. I also considered a single point of clarification to be an interesting finding insofar as identifying where participants could clarify their thoughts and

where they could not. I also intentionally did not want to exhaust or badger participants by repeatedly asking them to explain their points.

Consciously reminding myself of my role as moderator and not interlocutor or participant helped me refrain from engaging in debate and discussion with each focus group. For example, I listened to the lengthy discussions between educators on the purpose of higher education but did not engage in the conversation or offer my thoughts. The conscious bracketing of my emotions, honed through my years of experience as a mediator and reflexive reminder of my role, ensured I remained as objective and focused as possible on uncovering participants' meanings and experiences of the transferable skills under discussion and faithfully representing these meanings when analysing them.

4.3   Research Ethics and Validity

This study was subjected to an iterative ethical process to consider its purpose, planned outcomes and research design. Key aspects included participant selection, recruitment, and data storage. Details of the participant process are accounted for in Section 4.6.4. Both focus group transcriptions were anonymised to protect individual perspectives. All primary data (anonymised transcriptions, focus group notes, non-anonymised audio and Zoom recordings) are stored on a secure, password-protected server at Coventry University. On completion of the study, all non-anonymised audio and Zoom recordings will be destroyed after five years and the anonymised data will be retained on the secure server for potential future research.

Research validity and relevance

Clark et al (2021) explored research quality and proposed Hammersley's credibility, plausibility, and relevance approach as a framework to assess research validity and relevance (Clark et al., 2021, p. 364).

- **Plausibility and Credibility:** judging the adequacy of evidence to support researcher "truth" claims.

- **Relevance:** Does the research address the concerns of those who have a vested interest in its questions and findings?

Each element has an important part to play in this research. On plausibility and credibility, only original data sources (employer skills surveys, focus group data and policy documents) have been used in this study. Using a combination of corpus analysis of employer skills surveys and semantic coding of the focus group data maintained a credible and truthful account of employer and educator views. On relevance, the study offers plausible and credible evidence for employers, educators, the government, the OfS, and policymakers – all of whom have a vested interest in constructing a common skills language.

In the next section, I set out the details for addressing the three sub-research questions introduced in Chapter 1, Section 1.4 and the data collection and analysis methods.

4.4 UK higher education policy and skills review – sub-research question one

The research questions guide the DCR framing and *M.E.L.D.* enquiry process adopted in this study. Addressing each research question was considered from structures, mechanisms, and agency perspectives, as well as how each interacts to generate tensions for employers, educators, students and policymakers.

In sub-research question one:

How have successive UK governments steered English higher education towards a skills-driven agenda, and how have academia and employers reacted?

I examined the rich literature relevant to higher education policies and the skills employers say they need from the perspective of all three social structures – the UK government, UK employers, and English universities. The mechanisms of policy directives, regulatory power and the published skills literature were considered in the context of agency practices and response to the higher education skills policy directives. Details of how the policy analysis

and skills literature methods were conducted have been respectively set out in Chapter 2, Section 2.3 and in Chapter 3, Section 3.2. The remaining sections of this chapter set out the data collection method, selection and analysis for sub-research questions 2 and 3.

4.5 Data collection method, selection, and analysis - sub-research question 2

A corpus generation and analysis of the mechanisms of government and CBI-commissioned skills surveys were undertaken to address sub-research question two:

> How are transferable skills represented in the UK Government and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) commissioned skills surveys, and to what degree is there a convergence on a unified set of skills with explicit and coherent articulation of their meanings?

The intention was to explore how these surveys and reports' underlying structures and mechanisms can reveal potential tensions and contradictions in the conceptualisation of transferable skills. The decision process for selecting texts for the corpus was crucial as it aligns with the dialectical critical realist principle of examining the interconnections between different components of social phenomena. By carefully curating the corpus, dialectically identifying the presence and absence of transferable skills, and exploring the connections and relationships between the skills literature and the corpus of 100 commissioned skills surveys and reports, deeper insights into the complexities and nuances of transferable skills' definitions within the higher education policy context were possible.

The corpus approach enabled a deeper understanding of these survey and report mechanisms' underlying assumptions, intentions, and contradictions. This understanding ultimately contributed to a more holistic and transformative understanding of the role and impact of transferable skills in higher education policy and practice. The following section, therefore, describes how the employer skills corpus was generated and analysed and explains the decision process for selecting the texts to include in the corpus.

4.5.1   Employer skills corpus generation

A search of all UK government and CBI-commissioned employer skills surveys and reports published between 1999 and 2019 was conducted between March and April 2020. Using the Boolean logic operators "and", "or" to connect key words and phrases, three specific search terms reflecting the known titles of the commissioned skills surveys and reports and five additional terms were used to find the most relevant and up-to-date data on the skills UK employers need from graduates:

"Employer skills survey" OR "Employer Perspectives Survey" OR "Education and Skills Survey"

AND "UK government skills policy" OR "21st-century skills" OR "Employability skills" OR "generic skills" OR "graduate skills".

The websites were restricted to the UK government and CBI websites as the commissioners of the surveys. However, the search function of the UK government and CBI websites revealed only some of their surveys. So the search engine Google's "site:uk.gov" and "site:cbi.org.uk" search modifiers were used to find the surveys on each site. This modifier instructs the search engine to look across all the official websites of the UK government at once, rather than the researcher needing to know all the official website addresses or visiting them individually.

The top 100 results for each of the eight search terms were downloaded using the SERPs Rankings Tool by Phedra Tech. The results were filtered in Excel to show only web pages containing original PDF surveys and related reports commissioned by the UK government and the CBI. PDFs are fixed in time and print; thus, their provenance is reliable. One hundred and sixty-nine documents were downloaded and saved in the researcher's university-encrypted Microsoft One drive using their original file names.

4.5.2 Corpus selection procedure

The 169 web-search-generated documents were opened in Microsoft Word, and a two-step cataloguing process was adopted, with the results recorded in a Microsoft Excel master document. In the first step, the metadata was recorded to capture the document title, commissioning organisation, authors, research partners, publication dates, URL and date downloaded. The documents were grouped based on whether they were survey results or reports commenting on the results. Content analysis methods were used to review the first few pages of each document. Attention was given to text that described the purpose of the document. This method established short abstracts per document as illustrated in Table 5 below.

Table 5: Summary of 169 employer skills surveys and reports

Group	Report Type	Quant	Report Type Abstract
Survey	Results (surveys)	29	Provides extensive details on the findings of UK Gov Employer Skills and Employer Perspectives surveys and CBI Education and Skills surveys
Report	Skills focused report (reports)	71	Commissioned reports with a core focus on improving employability skills and skills provision in the UK
	Annual report	1	Provides an overview of an organisations mission, history and past achievements
	Corrections	1	Correction to ESS2015 to rectify an occupational coding error for vacancies and retention difficulties
	Economic report	4	Provides information on UK economic performance, labour market changes and challenges
	Evaluation	1	Evaluates investment and outcomes of 2014-2016 UKCES UK Futures Programme (UKFP)
	Executive summary	5	Presents a summary of the corresponding survey findings and skills focused reports
	Key Findings	11	Presents key findings of the corresponding survey results and skills focused reports
	Market reform	4	Provides market reform evidence of publicly funded training provision
	Methodology	3	Details the datasets and the methods used to collect the corresponding survey data
	Questionnaire	10	Questionnaire accompanying the corresponding survey
	Review	15	Reviews UK Government education and training policy interventions and evidence
	STEM	2	Provides evidences of science, technology, engineering and maths provision and demand
	Strategy	2	Provides advice on policies and practices for UK economic competitiveness, enterprise and growth
	Technical report	9	Provides background information on methodology and techniques in carrying out the survey or report
	User guide	1	Provides guidance on how to analyse the underlying ESS 2017 datasets
		169	

Abstracting the documents provided the basis for choosing which to include in the employer skills corpus. Of the 169 documents, 69 were key findings from documents already included in the search results or broader economic/market reports with no focus on employer-demanded skills. These documents were excluded to avoid over-inflating the corpus and to maintain a focus on the main research question. The goal in reviewing all documents was to find relevant reports, not to aim intentionally for 100, but it is acknowledged that this is a neat round sum.

4.5.2.1 **Report naming protocol.**

In the second cataloguing step, the 100 remaining documents were sorted in the master Excel document by commissioning organisation, report type, and publication date. The first few pages of each document were read to document its key purpose and where they were present, and a list of the most requested skills was noted against the relevant documents. All documents were sequentially numbered from oldest to most recent publications, and short name identifiers were created from their long titles to establish abbreviated labels for each document.

The following format was used to create an abbreviated cataloguing system:

      <Org><Type><Year>_<Title>

Where:

      Org = Organisation (3 characters, CBI, or Gov)

      Type = Survey results or skills-focused Report (1 character, s, or r)

      Year = Year of publication (4 digits)

      Title = Abbreviated title of survey or report (alphanumeric string of characters)

The abbreviated cataloguing protocol – see Table 6 - made it easier to identify each document when collectively analysing them[13].

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[13] A master list of the 100 reports with their full report titles is in Appendix E

Table 6: Example Step 2 corpus cataloguing process

Org	Report Type	Year	Abbreviated title	Key purpose	Skills found in Exec summary
CBI	Results	2010	CBI2010s_ESS	the underlying skills needed for success in any job	employability skills including problem-solving, teamwork, business & customer awareness, time management
CBI	Report	2011	CBI2011r_Working Towards	helping graduates prepare for employment after University	none
UKGovt	Results	2022	Gov2002s_ESS	findings from the Employers Skill Survey 2002	generic skills: communications, customer handling, and team-working,
UKGovt	Report	2005	Gov2005r_Getting OnPart1	call to action for a template of the skills employers need	none

The cataloguing review and recording process generated an employer skills corpus of 100 documents comprising 2,996,616 words, rounded in this thesis to 3 million, in which four sub-corpora were identifiable:

The UK government's complete set of 18 employer skills surveys and 63 skills-focused reports, published between 1999 and 2020. The CBI's complete set of 11 education and skills surveys and eight skills-focused reports, published between 2007 and 2019. This 3 million word corpus of UK commissioned skills surveys and reports, represented in Table 7, offered a rich 20-year corpus of UK employer skills survey and reports data to address the research questions.

Table 7: Web-generated employer skills corpus

Organisation	Report Type (Sub corpora)	Quantity	Word count	Timeline
UK government	Survey results	18	839,725	1999 - 2020
	Skills-focused reports	63	1,791,320	
CBI	Survey results	11	243,952	2007 - 2019
	Skills-focused reports	8	121,709	
		100	2,996,616	

4.5.3 Reflections on web-based corpus generation

Although a time-consuming search process, the advantage of using web-based searching to generate the employer skills corpus is that it offers free and immediate access to billions of stored data items across the web. However, Google Chrome generates search results using a highly complex and unknown algorithm to index the billions of web pages across the World Wide Web. This complexity means the researcher cannot know what biases are at work in the range of hits returned from search terms (Kilgarriff, 2007). Similarly, web pages change frequently, with new pages added and old pages removed, resulting in different pages indexed at different intervals (Schafer & Bildhauer, 2013, p. 3). This frequency of change makes it impossible for other researchers, or even the same researcher, to reproduce identical search results over time. Researcher expertise is therefore necessary to identify documents relevant to their research questions. The combined collection of 29 UK government and CBI skills survey series have fixed titles, so targeted searches using the survey titles mitigate Google Chrome's complex and opaque algorithm. However, the remaining 69 reports were not as well defined, so it could reasonably be argued that they were influenced by Google Chrome's search algorithm bias and page indexing changes. The search strategy, however, was intended to find relevant reports with which to address the research question and not to generate a complete list of all UK-commissioned reports held on the Internet.

4.5.4 Corpus linguistic software

Two corpus linguistic software were used to analyse the survey results and reports. Antconc, a freeware multi-platform and multi-purpose corpus analysis toolkit (Anthony, 2004), was chosen as the principal software for its ease of use for non-corpus linguists, the ability for users to choose the global settings, and to enable other researchers to replicate the methodology in this research. The reference corpora chosen, against which the two corpora generated for this research were compared, was the British National Corpus (BNC) of 100 million words of written (90%) and spoken (10%) British English language. While Antconc had the functionality to upload reference corpora it did not have the convenience of a pre-loaded large reference corpus. Sketch Engine, the more specialist subscription-based corpus

linguistic software, was, thus, chosen for access to its pre-loaded BNC reference corpus to address this limitation. The BNC offers a broad range of different language styles, predominantly from published texts, and is generally regarded as a microcosm of current British English (BNC User reference guide). The UK government and CBI-commissioned employer skills surveys and reports are also British English texts, so the BNC appeared to be a reasonable choice to compare keywords. All subsequent corpus queries were conducted using Antconc corpus software.

SketchEngine can receive PDF files, but Antconc requires plain text files. So, to prepare the 100 PDF reports in the employer skills corpus, they were converted to plain text format using pdftotext freeware. Antconc file converter was originally used, but many of the converted plain text files were found to have single letters stacked on top of each other – see Figure 2: Plain text file converter comparison. The plain text files were batch-cleaned using Notepad++ and the "find in files" option. All non-printable characters were removed by matching their hexadecimal using the following regular expression: [^\x0D^\x0A^\x20-\x7F]+. Form feeds (\x0C) and line breaks within words were replaced using -\r\n.

Figure 2: Plain text file converter comparison
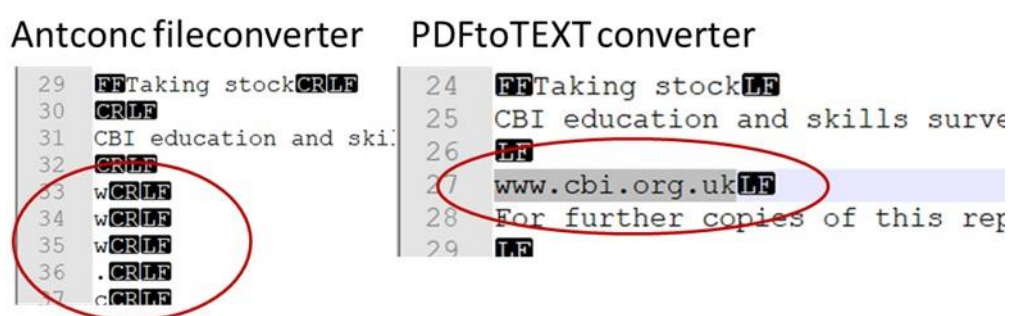
4.5.5 Corpus linguistic techniques applied

The next step was to choose which corpus techniques to use to identify the most requested transferable skills. The choice of corpus linguistic query techniques and how the results from each technique were examined are described below and summarised in Table 8 at the end

of this section. Each corpus query result was downloaded to a master Excel spreadsheet, and each sheet was named to reflect its contents. The contents were then examined to identify their saliency to sub-research question one.

Before applying any corpus techniques, I considered whether to grammatically annotate the corpus with parts of speech (POS) tags prior to examining it using a range of corpus analysis techniques. For example, nouns, verbs, prepositions, and adjectives. I chose not to annotate the corpus, as I preferred maintaining a close connection to the plain text. Using Antconc's TagAnt software would have broken the employer skills corpus into single units of grammar. Taking an excerpt from the CBI's 2019 Education and Skills Survey, POS tagging would have presented the text as follows:

> "Attitude_NN and_CC aptitudes_NNS for_IN work_NN ranks_NNS consistently_RB
> higher_JJR than_IN any_DT other_JJ factor_NN when_WRB considering_VVG
> graduate_JJ recruitment_NN –_NN far_RB above_RB
> factors_NNS such_JJ as_IN the_DT university_NN attended_VVD…… This_DT
> underlines_VVZ the_DT importance_NN of_IN continuing_VVG to_TO develop_VV
> the_DT broader_JJR ,_, 'work_NN
> readiness'_JJ skillsets_NNS that_IN/that employers'_JJ value_NN –_NN such_JJ as_IN
> time_NN management_NN ,_, team_NN working_VVG ,_,
> and_CC problem-solving_VVG"

POS tagging the text cluttered it with grammatical markers, making it difficult to see text segments in their semantic environments (Scott, 2001, p. 50). I was interested in exposing the presence of identifiable skills in the employer skills corpus in the context of a "demand for" or a reported "absence of" and any descriptions of these skills. Thus, not POS tagging the text, as per the same extracted example below, made it easier to read the text excerpt:

> Attitude and_aptitudes_for_work_ranks consistently higher than any other factor
> when_considering graduate_recruitment - far above factors such as the university
> attended…. This_underlines the importance of continuing to develop the

broader,_"work readiness" skillsets that employers' value_- such_as_time

management, team working, and_problem-solving

In the above example, my attention was more easily drawn to the terms attitude, aptitudes, readiness, time management, team working and problem-solving, prompting the opportunity to search for how each term might be described in the corpus. Antconc has the functionality to hide Tags so this option could have been used if POS tagging was an element of my analysis. However, I chose not to focus on the grammatical construction of the texts in preference to the semantically presented text throughout the corpus.

Text segmentation was used in preference to POS tags. The benefit of text segmentation is that it helps divide text into visible and meaningful units, instead of presenting the grammatical functions of individual words. Thus, text segmentation helped to illustrate and reveal how the text was structured and flowed in the employer skills corpus without getting lost in the detailed linguistic attributes of the texts. This semantic consideration using corpus query techniques provided a method to document the most demanded skills based on their frequencies in the employer skills corpus. It also offered a method of identifying how such skills are described by searching for words indicative of describing the skills, for example, "defined as", "characterised by", "expressed as", and so on.

4.5.5.1 Keywords

The purpose of identifying keywords was to gain an impression of the content and nature of the employer skills corpus (Stubbs, 2010 p. 25). To identify words and phrases that appeared more frequently in the employer skills corpus of 3 million words than in the BNC reference corpus of 100 million-words of written (90%) and spoken (10%) British English language, the employer skills corpus was uploaded to Sketch Engine. From SketchEngine's dashboard, the keywords tool was chosen and configured to expose all keywords, multiwords and 4-gram phrases – see Figure 3. The 4-gram range was chosen to reflect the basic number of words in the employer skills survey and CBI education and skills survey titles. In each case, only items that appeared more frequently in the employer skills corpus

than in the BNC reference corpus were included in SketchEngine's keyword tool. The results indicated what was typical of the selected corpus compared to the reference corpus.

Figure 3: SketchEngine keywords
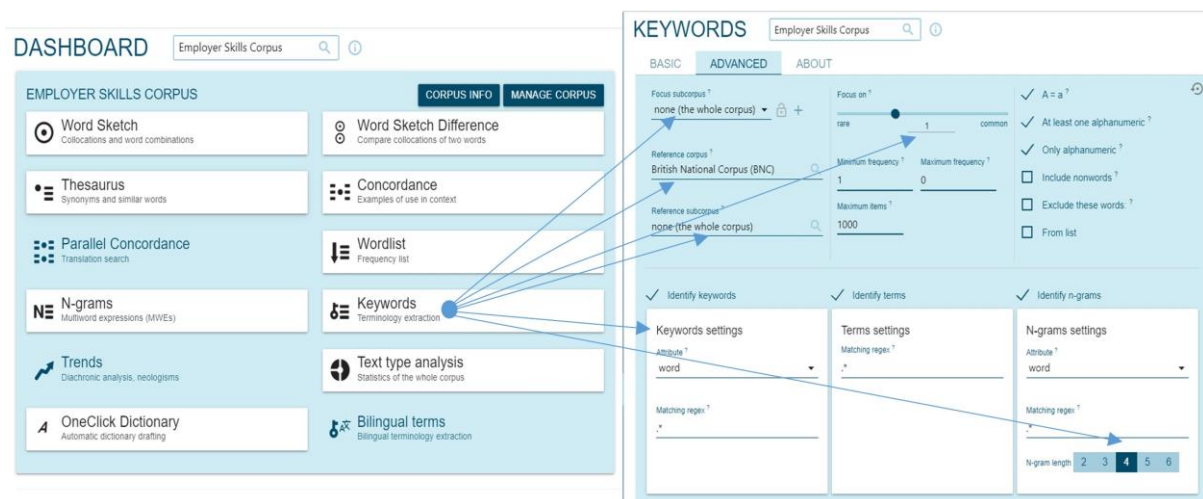
4.5.5.2 **Word Lists**

The employer skills corpus was uploaded to Antconc to find the most frequently used words in the employer skills corpus. The standard settings in Antconc were used with two exceptions: In the global settings, the "wildcards" feature was set to replace whitespaces with a single character; in the Tool Preferences, the "delimiter" was chosen in the concordance view to put square brackets around the keywords in context (KWIC) per concordance view. The word list tool, set to show the frequency of words, was selected to show all words in the employer skills corpus in order of frequency of usage. This word frequency was an important first step both to reveal frequently found words and because all other corpus query techniques are predicated on generating a word list. Connecting words - the, and, of, in, to - were excluded from the frequency lists to maintain a focus on the main research question.

A 50% threshold range was used for all corpus search queries to identify how many reports contained the same phraseology. This range was considered appropriate to find the skills of common concern across the 20-year universe of employer skills surveys. If a smaller range, below 50%, had been adopted, the findings risked being skewed by unusually large

frequencies of named skills in a small subset of files. Opting for a 50% marker provided some level of assurance that the skills found in 50 or more reports would be the most demanded skills.

4.5.5.3 **n-Grams**

A search of n-grams of two, four, and six contiguous words in length was conducted using the n-gram tool to search for patterns of persistent recurrence (Rutzou & Elder-Vass, 2019, p. 412) as such patterns could indicate stabilised collections of skills over time. The results were viewed in the concordance tool. Attention was paid to the following words and their synonyms to build a picture of the employer skills corpus aligned to sub-research question one:

- skill and its lexemes skills, skilled, skillset.

- employer, employers, employability.

- graduate, graduates.

- skills classifier words, for example "generic", "functional", "soft".

- quantifier words, for example "most" "some", "all", "many".

- expressive phrases indicating an action, for example – "be able to".

- words expressing a need, for example – "demand", "must have".

Synonymous words were identified using the online www.thesaurus.com tool. This online tool draws synonyms directly from the dictionary definition of a root word. Relying on a dictionary definition did not account for how words were used colloquially. So, to mitigate this limitation, false-positive synonyms require the human eye to recognise the context of the words in the printed text. For example, "soft" in dictionary terms refers to something or someone being comfortable, pliable, agreeable, and so on, and is semantically opposite of "hard". However, "soft" is not associated, in dictionary.com, with the concept of "skills", so a secondary consideration was the context in which the word "soft" was used in the printed text.

4.5.5.4 Collocates

The collocation tool explored non-sequential language patterns surrounding the most persistently recurring words and phrases. It was set to a minimum collocation frequency of 1 and a span of five words to the left and right of the search word. Raw frequency was used to measure the overall repetition of words in the texts (Gablasova et al., 2017). It is also used to identify how authors draw their readers' attention to themes by using co-occurring phrases. For example, "skills gaps", "skills deficits", "skills needs". No minimum collocation frequency was set in order not to limit the search results.

4.5.5.5 Concordance

The collocation results were viewed in the concordance, concordance plot tool, and file view to understand the context in which the collocated words and phrases were typically used and their relative positions in the texts. The concordance plot view displayed each searched-for keyword in context in red text. This view was instrumental in visualising where frequently occurring words appeared in the corpus and the context in which the words were set. It also offered insight into the level of importance placed on each phrase, for example, in the executive summary section of a text or contextually throughout the text.

The search window size in Antconc was set to 100 to offer a contextualised view of the results. Frequency, when compared with the range, gave a view of the consistent use of the persistently recurring phrases. Where no results were returned in the 50% range, the range was reduced to 40 to maintain a high ratio of texts to results output, and thus, the best opportunity to answer sub-research question two. No minimum frequency was set to ensure the most possible results per search query.

Table 8: Summary of corpus linguistic query techniques
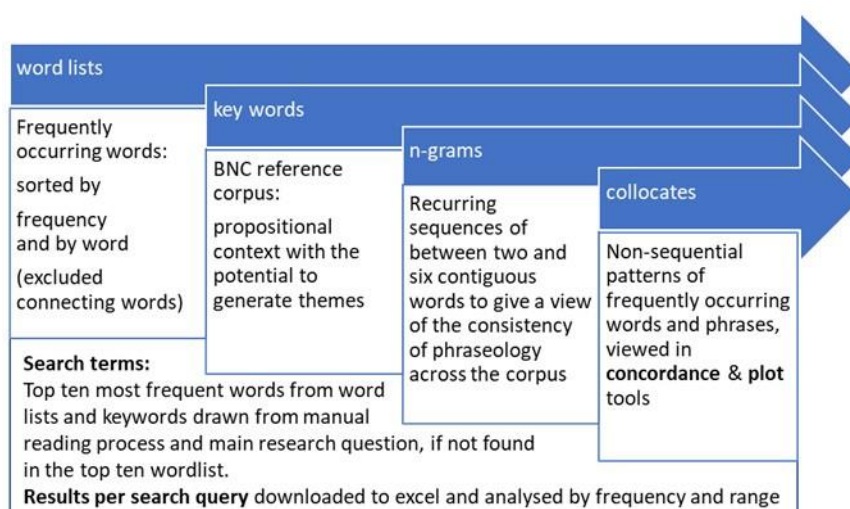
4.5.6   Familiarisation with the data – sample reading process

The cataloguing process, described in Section 4.5.2.1, captured skills reported in the executive summaries. Nine skills were found to be common across 21 of the 100 reports, but four reports also contained additional skills. These four reports, two of which were commissioned by the UK government (Belt et al., 2010; Winterbotham et al., 2020a) specifically the UK Commission for Employment and Skills and the Department for Education, and two by the CBI (CBI, 2016, 2017) were chosen as the sample reading selection – illustrated in Table 9. The purpose of this sample reading was to become familiarised with the data and to find a way into investigating the whole corpus. Collectively the four reports comprised 334 pages and 120,882 words. The expectation was that they would offer a representation of a comprehensive skills vocabulary to establish the basis on which the whole employer skills corpus could be examined. From the data familiarisation process, a working list of search terms was generated and used to interrogate the entire dataset of 100 reports.

Table 9: Sample reading selection

Sample texts chosen from the cataloguing process	Short code cataloguing protocol	Common skills found across 21 of the 100 reports	Additional skills noted in red text
CBI: The right combination: Education and Skills Survey 2016 (CBI, 2016)	CBI2016_ESS	Business and customer awareness Communication + literacy Customer-handling Information technology Management Numeracy Problem-solving Self-management Teamworking	Analysis
CBI: Helping the UK Thrive: Education and Skills Survey 2017 (CBI, 2017)	CBI2017_ESS		Cultural Awareness and Resilience
UK Govt: Employer Skills Survey 2019: Research Report (Winterbotham et al., 2020a)	Gov2019_ESS		Leadership and task priority
UK Govt: Employability Skills: A research and policy briefing (Belt et al., 2010)	Gov2010_PolicyBriefing		Positive approach Thinking skills

Researcher bias was an inherent and unavoidable risk. For instance, my previous academic and business interests in the skills employers seek had the potential to direct my focus on the skills with which I was already familiar. To help mitigate this, I devised a reading plan. The sampled reports were reviewed twice to gain a fuller understanding of their content. In the first review, I read the four reports manually and took notes on the purpose of each report and the skills mentioned therein relative to sub-research question two.

To avoid selection bias toward known pre-determined lists of skills already dominant in published literature, for example, Rios (2020, p. 82); and Nesta (2019, p. 8), I noted words and phrases that pointed towards a skill. For example, "such as", and "including" are phrases commonly used in published literature in relation to the skills employers want. See, for example, Karzunina et al. (2018, p. 12); Choksi & Rosenhaus (2021, p. 32). I also noted purpose phrases, for example, "the aim of this report" and "the purpose of this report is to", to confirm that the intended purpose of the reports was to identify the skills employers most need as opposed to reports detailing skills gaps without naming specific skills. This reading plan helped me keep an open-minded and curiosity-based focus on the transferable skills featured in the four publications instead of deterministically looking for skills familiar to me.

The philosophical arguments that skills gaps do not exist are acknowledged as important issues. For instance, economists have critiqued the analytical usefulness of such a concept. Arguments tend to fall into three domains. 1) the term skills gap is used in connection with unexamined assumptions about how the labour market functions (Krugman, 2014, p. 1) and, therefore, represents a pattern of implicit discourse. 2) the term is mythical (Van Rens, 2015, p. 3.) and should be revised to a skills mismatch to reflect more accurately the presence of skills and the mismatch between skills supply and demand. 3) skills gaps, shortages, and mismatches represent different measures (Grinis, 2017, p. 10), and are therefore different concepts. Although these are important perspectives, such philosophical arguments are not problematised in this study as they are out of the scope of this research, which focuses on employer skills needs from a higher education regulatory perspective.

In the second reading review, I uploaded the four reports to Antconc and ran the corpus query techniques referred to in Section 4.5.5, with some minor exceptions. Due to the small sample of four texts, no minimum range was set, and a keyword comparison with the BNC corpus was not conducted for the same small sample size rationale. Informed by the manual reading, the purpose was to test intuitions about the texts and generate a working list of search terms to interrogate the whole corpus. The most frequently recurring words and phrases were viewed in their textual settings using the concordance tool. Thus, I used the manual reading and corpus analysis techniques described in this section to establish a working list of frequently recurring words and phrases. This list was then used to interrogate the whole corpus. A critique of this approach is considered in the next section. The findings from the data familiarisation procedure can be found in Chapter 5, Section 5.1.

4.6   Data collection, method, and analysis - sub-research question three

To address sub-research question three: How can asking educators and employers to describe their expectations of graduate performance related to a set of transferable skills contribute to the process of establishing a common skills language as part of graduate preparedness for employability? - two small and homogenous focus groups of educators

and employers discussed their expectations of graduate performance in the context of five specific transferable skills found during the analysis of the 100 employer skills corpus. Exploring educator and employer expectations of graduate performance related to transferable skills aligns with a DCR and adapted *M.E.L.D* enquiry process by revealing nuances, variations, diverse interpretations, and perspectives on these skills to expose the complexities and contradictions within the social phenomena of transferable skills. Analysing the focus group transcription data made a comprehensive understanding of the role, impact, and interpretation of transferable skills in higher education policy and practice possible. This section, therefore, describes how the data was generated and analysed in response to sub-research question three and explains the decision process for selecting the focus group participants. The limitations of the research design are addressed in Chapter 7, Section 7.7.

4.6.1   Qualitative synchronous and virtual focus groups

Synchronous virtual focus group discussions were held online in December 2020. The synchronous virtual focus group method was necessary due to COVID-19 restrictions on meeting face-to-face. Delaying the focus groups to a time when face-to-face would be possible was considered but rejected because COVID-19 presented a volatile environment with no certainty on when restrictions would be lifted. At the start of this research, the idea of conducting two rounds of focus groups with the same participants and questions was considered but ultimately rejected. While this decision might be seen as a limitation, it was based on the realisation that the questions for the second round could only be established once the analysis of the first round had been completed. The complexity of individual viewpoints and the unknown time required to analyse the first round created a time-bound tension. Thus, I took a cautious approach to analysing the focus group data without time constraints.

The findings in this study, viewed through a DCR lens, were focused on uncovering the intricate interplay of expectations, similarities, and differences between the expectations of graduates' performance of the five skills between two focus groups instead of generalising

their contributions. Thus, they were context-specific to the two groups. Aiming for statistical generalisability to make inferences on what the transferable skills mean across the entire employer and educator populations was not desirable due to the complexity of what the skills might mean in different employment and education contexts. However, a thematically based analytical generalisability in the bounded nature of the focus groups was anticipated to be useful. Its usefulness is expected to be the provision of a method of mapping the meaning of each skill through a themed approach to inform further research.

The growing trend and challenges of online communication platforms

The use of online communication platforms for synchronous focus groups in which the participants appear on screen, replicating as closely as possible the real environment, had been, until 2020, a relatively recent phenomenon, for example, Fox (2017); Wirtz et al. (2019) and Weller (2017). The onset of COVID-19 forced the world into isolation from March 2020. To continue operating, businesses and education institutions had to adapt and embrace an online virtual meeting and teaching world. This adaption presented a unique opportunity for synchronous meetings, including focus groups, to be normalised into daily practice. By December 2020, when the focus groups in this research were conducted, my focus group participants were well-rehearsed in communicating in a virtual meeting space on various platforms, including Zoom.

Several previous studies using online meeting platforms were reviewed to identify critical success factors. For example, in their focus group studies, researchers Wirtz et al. (2019) used the Zoom online meeting platform to conduct seven 60–90-minute synchronous focus groups of 5-10 participants. The researchers reported an overall positive experience, with Zoom offering a secure and efficient method of convening geographically disparate participants. Critical success factors were cited as establishing clear ground rules and using a skilled facilitator to manage the discussions (Wirtz et al., 2019. p. 7). These success factors can foster productive discussions by helping maintain order and ensuring equal participation. For example, ground rules set expectations of behaviour, which can help minimise disruptions and establish a respectful environment. A skilled facilitator can help guide discussions, maximise output and establish a positive, engaging experience for participants.

As a trained mediator and experienced facilitator, I acted as the facilitator to collect qualitative data (Fox, 2017) to answer sub-research question three:

> How could asking employers and educators to describe what each expects a graduate to be capable of when demonstrating a set of transferable skills offer a process of establishing a common skills language as part of graduate preparedness for employability?

I was concerned about connectivity issues, audio quality, rapport building and overlapping conversations due to the virtual nature of the focus groups. To reduce these concerns, I invited participants to join the focus group ten to fifteen minutes earlier than the scheduled start time to test their audio and camera settings and to meet each other. The connectivity challenges of meeting virtually were openly discussed, and experiences of engaging with the virtual meeting world were shared at the beginning of each focus group meeting. These discussions set the stage for the adoption of speaking, muting, and reconnecting ground rules. It was agreed that if a participant dropped out due to connectivity issues, they would immediately reconnect, and proceedings would be momentarily paused to bring them up to speed in the dialogue. Participants also agreed to adhere to the principle of muting their microphones while another participant spoke. I explained the speaking order, and all participants agreed to abide by the meeting protocol of electronically raising their hand if they wished to comment outside their speaking order. This informal yet disciplined approach established a sense of rapport among the participants, confidence in their audio setting, and security in knowing there was a structure to the proceedings, as also found by Archibald et al. (2019), Weller (2017) and Lo Iacono et al. (2016) in their respective studies.

Various research studies in online and in-person focus groups using the same topics, questions, and procedures have found online focus groups to have equal potential to in-person focus groups. See, for example, Walston & Lissitz (2000, p. 457-483) and Woodyatt et al. (2016). There is, however, limited research on the efficacy and experience of running real-time virtual focus groups, both from a researcher and participant perspective. Therefore, alongside its primary purpose of addressing the research questions and establishing a process to expose the meanings of commonly called-for transferable skills

beneath their broad labels, this research will contribute to the growing literature on running virtual focus groups.

4.6.2   Focus group pilot

Drawing from my experience as an NLP practitioner and mediator and Laske's DTF model (Laske, 2015, pp. 73-75), which shows how human thought is inherently complex with internal contradictions, interdependencies and tensions operating in a continuous and dynamic cycle, I was mindful that asking employers and educators to describe what specific transferable skills mean to them is not a straightforward process. It required careful treatment to generate shared meaning rather than more constrained factual propositions (Schiappa, 2003, p. 90). For example, leadership as a skill could potentially speak to a culturally bounded nature of skills language that might be difficult to uphold in a global economy hegemonised by English. Five pre-set questions were tested in small virtual pilot groups, to mitigate such potential. Each pilot group comprised three graduate employer participants and three educator participants. The focus group pilots aimed to explore the ease or challenges in answering the questions, allowing for adaptations before formal discussions. The questions were shared on-screen, and participants shared their views in real time. Electronic field notes were taken for each pre-defined question discussion. The field notes were shared after each question, and feedback on the ease of responding to the questions was gathered from the participants.

Using communication skills as the testbed, the five pre-designed questions were:

1) "How do you define communication skills".
2) "What words define communication skills".
3) "What are the components of communication skills".
4) "What are the characteristics of communication skills".
5) "What does communication skill mean for you".

Participants found all five questions too difficult to answer as the questions implied the need to provide a definitive statement with fixed components. Consequently, the five

questions were rejected and replaced with one principal question to explore expectations of graduate performance related to five specific transferable skills and two follow-up questions. The two follow-up questions checked for clarifying meaning and offered an opportunity to supplement original responses. Therefore, the pilot was valuable in establishing the focus group questions detailed in the next section.

4.6.3   Focus Group Questions

Based on the pilot findings, the three questions posed in both focus groups were agreed upon – see Table 10. Question 1 (Q1) was tailored to each focus group whilst retaining its universal principle of "expectation". Question 2* (Q2) checked for meaning, and (Q3) provided an opportunity for additional contributions. Q2 was only asked when a participant made a statement with unclear meaning.

Table 10: Focus group questions

Question	Focus Group	Question
Q1	Educators	What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their X skills?
	Employers	What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of X skill
Q2	Both groups	At the graduate level are you characterising (X skill) as….(facilitator summarises each participants contribution).
Q3	Both groups	Is there anything else you would like to add?

The principle question was inspired by the review of higher education skills policies (1.7) in which universities must write learning outcomes describing what skills students will gain from their learning experiences (CBI, 1990, p. 13; Dearing, 1997, p. 156; HoC, 2018, p. 40; QAA, 2014, pp. 10-22). The clarifying question was inspired by the literature review (Chapter 3), which had established a significant literature gap of not digging beneath skills labels to identify their deeper meanings. By encouraging participants to voice their expectations of graduate performance, the similarities and contradictions of expectations can be exposed.

When exposed, greater understanding and awareness of others' views can help to facilitate a shared understanding of transferable skills. Thus reducing, or at least informing, the basis of contradictions, tensions, and misunderstandings of performance expectations between employers and educators becomes possible.

4.6.4 Focus group selection, recruitment, and composition

Purposeful sampling from a rich network of professional contacts was employed to select articulate participants relevant to and who understood the research questions. Contacts were selected based on their experience of recruiting or teaching graduates. At the recruiting stage, I was unaware of what stance potential participants held on the need for and articulation of skills for employment; however, the focus on choosing participants based on their experience helped to narrow the potential pool to a total of 12 UK-based participants - six employers and six educators. Attrition was considered, and a back-up list of potential replacements was established but was not required. The sample size of 12 was influenced by the research aims, methodology, analysis strategies and a desire for rich dialogue (Malterud et al., 2016, p. 1756). Six is considered a reasonable number per focus group (Daymon & Holloway, 2010, p. 247) to ensure sufficient dialogue, without losing voices in the group or suffering pressure of influence.

All participants were full-time employees, fluent English speakers, and had extensive experience in the British business and education sectors – see Table 11. The educators had experience teaching business or psychology courses in higher education, while the employers were drawn from diverse industries such as aerospace, project management, transport, education, and technology. Educators were selected based on having at least three years of experience in course design, delivery, and student assessment. Whereas employers were chosen for their three-plus years of expertise in recruitment interviews, working with graduate trainees, and employee appraisals against competency frameworks.

Table 11: Focus group composition

Participants	Nationality	Group	English fluency
7	British	Employers (4) Educators (3)	Fluent
2	Irish	Employers	
1	German	Educators	
1	Greek	Educators	
1	New Zealand	Educators	
TOTAL 12			

Participants were recruited through email inquiries and follow-up telephone conversations. Those willing to participate received a participant form and information sheet, approved through the ethics review process. The form included questions to confirm suitability, covering willingness, availability, experience, consent for recordings, and acceptance of respectful dialogue rules[14]. Participants were assigned letters and numbers to ensure anonymity in reporting focus group results and data analysis. Employers were allocated Participant Employer numbers PE1 to PE6, and educators were allocated Participant Academic numbers PA1 to PA6. While participants were not required to have their cameras on during the sessions, consent to be recorded was necessary for transcription purposes.

4.6.5 Focus group management

Following the initial recruitment via email and follow-up telephone calls, a doodle poll was used to select a common date and time for each group's focus session. Participants were advised of the speaking order and protocols of electronically raising their hands and muting their microphones when not speaking. At the outset of each skill discussed, the speaking order rotated to ensure each person had an opportunity to speak first. These protocols avoided overlapping voices, reduced background noises and created fair speaking order. Participants were given the opportunity to clarify the protocols, but no clarifications were

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[14] For copies of all documents sent to participants, see Appendix F

needed. Both groups completed their discussions within the assigned time. As an insider and an outsider in understanding employer, academic, and policy expectations for graduate skills, I was aware that I was actively involved in the enquiry process, not separate from it. This entanglement meant that it was important to maintain an objective facilitation stance (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009, p. 59) to enable participants to share their views openly and freely. As facilitator and researcher, I consciously recognised that my role in the focus groups was to create a structured environment for open dialogue without imposing preconceived notions or influencing the participants' responses. The speaking order's structured nature also helped to ensure that I maintained my facilitation role without involving myself in the focus group discussion.

Each participant was addressed by name prior to being asked a question, and pauses were introduced between questions to allow participants to gather their thoughts. The decision to introduce name signalling and question pausing was based on my experience of participating in multiple online meetings since March 2020. Since conducting the synchronous virtual focus groups, other researchers have published articles confirming the usefulness of pausing and signalling (Carter et al., 2021, p. 716). Other studies have reported the need for a structured speaking order. For example, in their virtual focus groups conducted and facilitated over two hours, Nobrega et al. (2021) reported that facilitators had difficulties with managing talk time and discussion flows. They also found that participants would have welcomed a more structured speaking environment (Nobrega et al., 2021, p. 8). Such research confirms the importance of establishing and managing a structured speaking protocol to ensure a safe speaking environment for participants and facilitators.

Participants reacted well to the structured speaking rotation and adhered to the muting ground rules when not speaking. All participants had equal opportunities to speak, and each spoke openly and candidly about their expectations of graduates' capabilities. The structured speaking order, therefore, appeared to provide a safe and uninterrupted environment for sharing perspectives. However, each participant would need to confirm they felt safe to express their views, so this supposition would need to be tested in future research. At the end of each focus group, participants commented on the usefulness of their

group discussion, how hearing their peers' views was insightful and reiterated the importance of establishing a common skills language.

After both focus groups had been conducted, each participant received a post-focus group survey containing ten questions on the objectives, composition, structure, participant roles, advanced communication, meeting virtually and motivation to participate. They were also invited to suggest improving future focus group procedures[15]. The purpose was to reflect on their experience of the virtual focus group format, forced due to COVID-19 restrictions, identify their motivation for participating in this research and seek their views on improving future focus group research. To help support future research and reflect on the process adopted in this study, a reflective summary of their responses is included at the end of this chapter.

4.6.6   Recording and transcribing the focus groups

Recording

Each focus group was recorded using the online web conferencing Zoom platform to record the dialogue. All participants had confirmed their willingness to be video and audio recorded during the recruitment stage. Brief notes on the order in which participants spoke were taken to ensure no participants were missed as the speaking order rotated per the skills question asked. All recordings were uploaded to Coventry university's secure password-protected server.

Transcribing

The focus group audio recordings were manually transcribed over four days. As the moderator and transcriber, I maintained objectivity by verbatim transcribing the recordings. This verbatim strategy helped me to refrain from subjective interpretations or reducing the data by removing ambiguous statements. Although verbatim transcription is more time-intensive than abridging focus group discussions using tape-basis analysis (Onwuegbuzie et

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[15] See Appendix G for a copy of the focus group questionnaire and participant responses.

al., 2009, p. 4), verbatim transcription enables rich familiarity of the discussion content (Rapley, 2018), offering a more rigorous approach for analysis.

Each transcript was marked-up with transcription markers noting the start and end time of each participant's contribution. This marking process helped to organise the text and note the length of time each participant spoke. Participants were distinguished as employers (PE) and educators (PA), where the "A" represented academic as a synonym for educator. The transcripts were colour-coded for visualisation during analysis and saved in Microsoft Word 2016 format. Following the individual mark-up and colour coding process, the transcripts were combined by pairing each skill discussed. For example, the employer focus group "communication" discussion was followed immediately by the educators' "communication" discussion and so on to enable close comparisons between the focus groups' content. The combined transcribed data contained 31,748 words over 86 pages. So, I considered it to be a large enough set to extract useful findings but not so large that I would have to sacrifice manual accuracy for an artificially intelligent process.

Filled pauses and discourse markers, for example, "ahs", "ums", "errs", "like", and "you know" were excluded to provide clean, verbatim transcripts. Similarly, the transcription analysis did not consider prosodic analysis of volume, speed, stress, and tone as it was beyond the scope of this research. Researchers exploring filler words and discourse markers found either there was little psychological impact in spoken dialogues (Laserna et al, 2014, p. 335) or that "ums" were linked to production difficulty (Fox Tree, 2002, p. 40). In the context of this research study, participants' comfort with the topic made hesitancy less important and no evidence was found to suggest they had difficulty articulating their thoughts.

4.6.7   Reflections on focus group selection, participation, and process

Focus group process

All participants felt their roles and that of the mediator were clear; the focus group was well structured with clear objectives, sufficient time to answer each question, and everyone had

an equal opportunity to speak. Participants welcomed the speaking rotation and signalling of the next speaker. It is acknowledged that the open forum nature of the focus group dialogue may have influenced participants' individually held views. However, the consistency between the levels of satisfaction with the group discussions and individually expressed sentiments of satisfaction in their post-focus group questionnaire responses implies that participants had a sense of agency in the discussions and felt able to express their thoughts and perspectives freely[16]. Future research could consider interviewing each participant separately, although, this approach would need to acknowledge that individuals would not have the opportunity to hear their peers' views. Thus, the potential to enrich and reflect on their thoughts may not be realised.

Participants felt the focus group information sent in advance was clear and timely. However, one participant would have preferred more than 24 hours of advanced notice of the five skills themes to prepare their contribution. Three participants would have preferred to meet face-to-face if COVID-19 restrictions had not been in place. However, they acknowledged that meeting remotely did not impact their ability to contribute to discussions. Post-focus group suggestions from the participants centred on the need for:

- greater clarity on whether the skills discussed were from the perspective of evidence of competences demonstrated during the application/selection process or after the graduate has started in the business,
- clarity on the meaning of the word "skills" prior to the focus group discussions,
- more than 24-hour advanced notice of the skills under discussion,
- graduates and HR professionals to be included in future focus group discussions.

Participants were not asked to attend a follow-up focus group due to the time required to analyse their collective views and to avoid exhausting participants with the same questions. Future research could, however, build on the focus group output by inviting their views on how their contributions were analysed and presented as a thematic map of skills. Similarly, the same questions could be posed to subsequent participants to enrich the data.

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[16] See Participant recruitment form

Intersectionality, gender, and ethnicity

Participants were invited to include their ethnicity and gender in the participant application process. However, they were not required to do so as the influences of intersectionality, gender, and ethnicity as complex and socially constructed categories (Abrams et al., 2020) were beyond the scope of this study. Furthermore, the optionality meant that any extrapolation from the findings based on ethnicity would only be complete if all participants shared their ethnicity. However, it is recognised that ethnicity and gender identification can influence how individuals express what they mean when speaking of specific transferable skills and thus offer insight into how skills are articulated.

All participants were fluent English speakers, of whom ten were native English speakers; one was Greek, and the other was German. None of the participants struggled to search for a word, based on their English fluency when describing their expectations. Future research using a note-taker primed to listen for colloquialisms and ambiguous phrases could add rich data vis-à-vis the potential use of colloquial expressions and other forms of non-native language expressions. Understanding how colloquial terms are used may also help to contribute to the richness of how employers and educators describe their expectations of graduates. Mindful of the potential influence of colloquialisms and linguistic cultural norms, the focus group transcriptions were carefully examined for any evidence of differing views based on national or institutional backgrounds; none were found.

Similarly, the ratio of nine male participants versus three female participants did not appear to affect the balance of the focus groups. Nevertheless, the inclusion of a more balanced gender and broader racially and ethnically diverse group in future research could add insight to the findings in this research. Similarly, a broader demography to include a wider range of academic, industry and professional disciplines could enrich a deeper understanding of the behavioural expectations linked to the five skills.

The following section outlines the thematic analysis adopted in this study for sub-research question three. Reasons for choosing thematic analysis in preference to content analysis and its relative application in the study are explained, framed in the philosophy of DCR.

4.7   **Thematic Analysis**

This study shifts from a critical review of skills policy and literature in Chapter 2 and a corpus analysis of employer skills surveys addressed in this Chapter 4, Section 4.5 to a thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts, guided by a DCR and *M.E.L.D.* approach to address sub-research question three.

4.7.1   Introduction

A recognised issue in contemporary thematic analysis research is the paucity of detailed explanations of how researchers have worked their data into themes and, consequently, their emergent conclusions (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2). The lack of descriptive detail questions the trustworthiness and rigour of research findings and conclusions. Thus, this section is lengthy due to the complexity of the blurred boundaries between the skills.

The thematic analysis process adopted in this research enabled themes and patterns in the focus group data to be uncovered (Clarke & Braun, 2017, p. 297), beneath which any or all the skills can be contained. Thematising the focus group data was a complex and challenging process. The language humans use when speaking about transferable skills is not easily reducible to a fixed set of rules and, thus, fixed definitions of what each skill means. However, by paying semantic attention to what each participant said in answer to each question posed and what was said across the universe of the focus group data, it was possible to discover relationships within the corpus of words to generate key themes and sub-themes. Therefore, this study's thematic analysis method offers a route to describing each skill not found by Kashefpakdel et al. (2018) and the universe of skills literature detailed in Chapter 3.

Alternative thematic analysis strategies
As an analytical tool, thematic analysis offers advantages over content analysis and critical discourse analysis, as this study aims to delve into the nuanced language speakers use on the complex topic of transferable skills. A known problem in the literature is the difficulty in

developing a common skills language due to the causal effect of being unable to identify where one skill starts and another stops due to speakers blending skills in their conversations (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, pp. 16-22). Although content analysis aligns well with DCR it tends to categorise and quantify explicit data rather than explore the richness of the data and its causal effect or impact (Parra et al., 2021, p. 169). This explicit categorisation makes content analysis helpful in identifying what is overtly said but less effective at identifying and thematising the nuanced ways speakers discuss interconnected skills or the complexities behind why they are mentioned together.

Transitioning to considering critical discourse analysis (CDA), this analysis method also finds alignment with DCR. CDA is, however, more typically used as an analytical tool to theorise social change discourse (Newman, 2020, p. 5) and uncover historical and current ideologies, power dynamics, and social inequalities (Wodak & Meyer, 2001, p. 3). While this is valuable for understanding the social and political context in which conversations about transferable skills occur, it does not typically focus closely on the subtleties of individual understanding or the nuances of how different skills are conceptualised, delineated or blended by different speakers. Although this thesis expresses concern about the manifest power that employers, policymakers, government, and students hold over universities, the research questions are aimed at exploring the presence of a defined set of transferable skills in commissioned research and language alignment between employers and educators as opposed to studying the discourse on dominance, discrimination, power, and control manifested in language.

In contrast to content and CDA, thematic analysis allows the researcher to unearth underlying themes and patterns that help to expose how speakers discuss certain skills in conjunction or have difficulty separating them. It also allows for a deeper understanding of the context, potential contradictions, and overlapping ideas that the speakers might not be fully aware of. By capturing these subtleties, thematic analysis provides a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities and contradictions inherent in the meaning of transferable skills. Understanding and exposing meaning is particularly valuable in higher education, where the discourse around transferable skills is laden with overt and covert meanings with real-world implications for policy and practice.

The following section provides extensive detail of how the focus group transcripts were thematically analysed. Examples of the coding and thematising process are provided to give context for each step.

4.7.2   Combining Thematic analysis and Dialectical Critical Realism (DCR)

Before explaining the systematic process of thematically analysing the focus group dataset, it is appropriate to consider how the adapted *M.E.L.D* enquiry process, detailed in Chapter 1, Section 1.5.1, and elaborated further in this chapter, 4.2, enabled deep thematic analysis of the focus group discussions. This approach exposed at *(1M)* the knowledge each participant held of the five skills in the context of their worldviews. Their expectations of graduate performance were exposed at *(2E)*, which, in turn, enabled connecting at *(3L)* their expectations to establish at *(4D)* a networked thematic map of transferable skills.

Thematic analysis has traditionally been framed in two paradigms: a "small q" systematic coding approach for statistical analysis and a "large Q" interpretivism approach emphasising researcher subjectivity (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 1; Finlay, 2021, p. 104). The "small q" paradigm generates neat formal structures like taxonomies, while the "large Q" paradigm interprets data and generates storytelling themes. This research study sits between explanatory (explaining causal events) and exploratory (openly exploring complex events to generate new insights) (Fryer, 2022, p. 366). The approach developed in this study intends to provide a process for thematising key concepts connected to specific transferable skills. The purpose is to illustrate how employers and educators think of these skills and what aspects of performance might be missing or absent from their individual and homogenous views. In this sense, the DCR framed analysis seeks to tell a story (large "Q") from the systematic coding (small "q") rather than subjectively interpreting the data or attempting to thematise bounded definitions of skills.

Braun and Clarke's systematic six steps

A systematic and rigorous method to make sense of the complexity of views was essential to ensure the validity and reliability of the analysed output from the focus groups. Thus, I

adopted Braun and Clarke's (2006) six steps of thematic analysis to code and categorise the focus group data. This six-step approach offered an accessible non-linear framework and recursive method for dealing with complex data (Finlay, 2021, p. 107). Braun and Clarke's later adaptation of thematic analysis to "reflexive thematic analysis" is applied to enhance the original six steps. For example, the updated reflexive step 4 avoids establishing topic summaries (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91) in favour of establishing a shared concept borne from finding patterns of meaning (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 209). The distinction between topic summaries and a shared concept is subtle but important in this study. Themes are not fixed within tightly boxed criteria relevant only to the individual theme. Instead, the themes are offered as concepts capable of illustrating the rich connections between the themes. This more reflexive approach aligns with generating flexible and interconnected themes, allowing for a more nuanced understanding of the focus group data.

Although widely accepted as theoretically flexible, thematic analysis is not analytically neutral, as the analysis is influenced by the researcher conducting it (Braun & Clarke, 2023, p. 4). Semantic coding was deliberately chosen in preference to latent coding to help mitigate researcher influence and maintain a dialectically critical realist stance and to address sub-research question three: How can asking educators and employers to describe their expectations of graduate performance related to a set of transferable skills contribute to the process of establishing a common skills language as part of graduate preparedness for employability?

Latent coding interprets what participants mean, while semantic coding stays faithful to the words used to express meaning. Semantic coding aligns with a *M.E.L.D.* enquiry process by considering the "duality of absence" (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 5) conundrum in which meaning might be present in one participant's statement and absent in another's. For instance, when discussing teamwork, participants' statements about "just getting on and solving a problem" and "being positive" raise questions about what actions a student or graduate should take to satisfy the deeper meanings underlying these surface-level expressions. This absence of meaning contrasted with other participants who explicitly articulated how they expected graduates to perform in a team. Thus, semantic coding prompted a deeper exploration of performative behaviours from different perspectives.

To semantically code and thematise the focus group data, each focus group transcript was analysed separately before combining them into a single Word document for further analysis. Combining the texts into a single document provided a convenient data source of 86 pages and 31,748 words for reviewing and analysing the data during thematic steps 2 to 6. The original transcripts were historically retained as the source documents.

The six steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 87) are briefly described below before delving into the details of each step:

1. **Data familiarisation:** To become familiar with the entire body of data, each focus group transcript was read separately, re-reading iteratively, and making notes on my early impressions. The transcripts were then combined, and the entire data was again iteratively read.

2. **Generating initial codes:** Interesting data features were collated and semantically coded, drawing precise data extracts to stay close to sub-research question two.

3. **Searching for themes:** This was an active process in which the coded data were reviewed and clustered to build potential themes.

4. **Reviewing themes:** Themes were checked to ensure they worked with the coded extracts and the entire dataset. This review is an important two-step review process of re-reading the collated semantic extracts from step 3 against the entire dataset (combined transcripts). The purpose is to ensure that the themes reflect the semantic meanings expressed by the focus group participants (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 91) and that the semantic patterns of meaning are anchored by a shared idea or concept (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 209).

5. **Defining and naming themes:** Each theme was defined by its central character and given a concise and informative name. Six themes were organised around shared topics to capture the diversity of employer and educator meanings (Braun & Clarke, 2019, p. 593) concerning the set of five transferable skills. See 6.2 for a detailed account of the six key themes. The concept of a shared topic representing a theme was an important consideration. It allowed for a deeper understanding of the semantic context of each theme. It also revealed the complexities and variations in

how the employer and educator focus groups perceived and interpreted the five transferable skills.

6. **Writing up:** The analytic narrative and vivid data extracts were woven together to present a coherent and persuasive story about the data and to contextualise it with existing literature. The themes were manually analysed using the pivot table function in Excel to slice the data and expose the different dimensions of each theme. All analytical findings were cross-referenced back to the original transcriptions to ensure a faithful approach to the semantic coding and to check for any unconscious bias that may have crept in during the analysis.

The manual process of iteratively and reflexively annotating meaningful text in step one, moving back and forth in the process (Braun & Clarke, 2021), was labour-intensive. It was, however, chosen in preference to using computer-assisted qualitative data analysis (CAQDAS) software to stay close to the participants' contributions and view their contributions in the context of the given discussion. CAQDAS software can identify words, but it cannot identify the absence of meaning or the context in which the words are situated. Various researchers have also argued against using CAQDAS software when seeking to identify meaning and context. Their arguments coalesce around being distant from the data, an overreliance on the software reduces a researcher's capacity to analyse, and that good quality analysis relies on careful human analysis, which CAQDAS cannot offer (Cabrera, 2018; Gibbs et al., 2002; Rademaker et al., 2012). Although the thematic analysis process was painful and complex, the focus group data could not be automated by creating an algorithm or using a find-and-replace process to code the data, because participants naturally merged the skills being discussed. This complexity meant the data required human evaluation and patience to iteratively look for what was known and meaningful in the focus group data *(1M),* identify and expose the tensions inherent in participants' views *(2E/3L)* and test how the data could be grouped and ultimately themed *(4D).* This complex analysis process is detailed in the next section.

A codebook was created to document the coding process, and my reflexive notes were recorded in a separate Word document to explain why the text was interesting.

This iterative process of moving back and forth in the data, taking notice of what appeared interesting, helped to identify different and shared patterns of meaning relevant to sub-research question three. See Appendix H for a copy of the codebook.

Care was taken to keep an open mind when identifying codes and themes to avoid closing the analysis too early, leading to a potential lack of substantive findings (Connelly & Peltzer, 2016, p. 51). For example, I initially thought the much-repeated "interaction and engagement" performance expectation would become a key theme. However, I ultimately chose "working with others" as a more all-encompassing theme in which the expectations of interacting and engaging were situated and in which an analytical approach, supporting others and taking responsibility could also be accommodated. The data guided the contentious issue of when to stop the coding process because the nature of the questions posed to the participants led to a natural saturation. When each participant had answered all questions, and the open discussion confirmed by the participants was concluded, there was no more data to process.

4.7.3   Making sense of the focus group data

Data familiarisation – Step 1

As I read through each transcript, I noticed multiple instances where participants expressed their expectations embedded within general comments. I adopted a dialogue annotation process to help manage the wealth of transcription data from each focus group. Each focus group transcript was assigned a unique font colour and colour coding, and square brackets were used to document my early impressions. In a separate code book, I also made notes on what I found interesting[17].

Each skill discussed was assigned a unique colour code:
Communication / Problem-solving / Team work / Self Management / Leadership / Open Discussion

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[17] See Appendix H for a copy of the codebook

No significance is attached to the choice of colour per skill. Specific expressions of expectations, for example, "I expect a graduate to", were enclosed using square bracket markers [what/*] and [end/*]. General comments with no identifiable performance expectations were enclosed by [comment/*] and [end/*]. In both cases, /* represented either the skill discussed or open discussion agnostic of skill. Manually annotating the text in this way offered a means to exclude words which would have caused noise in the analysis without adding any value whilst highlighting valuable segments of text. See Figure 4 for examples of data familiarisation using this highlighting and marking process.

Figure 4: Data familiarisation highlighting & marking process – Step 1

The annotation scheme helped reference the nature of the dialogue during the analysis process. It captured what skill was discussed, by whom, and whether the dialogue was a direct answer to a question, the result of a clarification, a general comment, or an open discussion (Stewart, 2006). It was expected that clarification responses would offer the opportunity to review a participant's original response to look for instances of any initial difficulty in expressing an expected behaviour. Additional answers and open discussions had the potential to consider what additional responses might have been prompted by previous dialogues.

Generating initial codes – Step 2

The rationale for step 2 was to identify concise units of expectation from the interesting text segments. A spread sheet was created, and each highlighted text segment was manually exported and divided across five columns. The columns identified the focus group, skill discussed, participant speaker, type of response and the segmented text – see Figure 5 for an example of the type of response and segmented text.

Figure 5: Generating initial codes – Step 2

Group	Skill	Parti	Type of response	Text segment
Educator	Problem solving	PA5	answer	I agree with what PA7 said, in terms of the ability to analyse the problem
Employer	Communication	PE11	additional answer	linking it back to the problem solving environment, we expect them to bring new ideas

Generating initial codes involved reviewing the rows of segmented data and looking for smaller semantic text segments capable of summarising the text string. Equal attention was given to each text segment to identify interesting aspects of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006; p. 89) by cross-referencing the text segment back to the original transcript. All types of responses were treated equally but to manage the data set, I sorted the data by skill and then by type of response. This sorting process helped me to focus on expectations of performance before considering more generalised comments.

Each row of data was read, and individual words and short phrases that appeared to be particularly significant in expressing an expected behaviour were emboldened to augment the thematic analysis. At this stage, I became aware of multiple codable elements in a single row of text. For example, PE12's comment on expecting a graduate to be able to describe an approach to managing their time had four codable elements to it: describe an approach to managing their time / how they manage their task list / - see Figure 6 for an example of multiple codable text segments

Figure 6: Multiple codable elements – Step 2

Group	Skill	Participant	Type of response	Text segment
Employer	Self management	PE12	answer	**describe an approach to managing their time.** How they **manage their task list,** how that **task list is prioritised.** I'd expect a grad to be talking to me about "right boss, this is the stuff that I'm working on this week and I'm doing them in this order, is my priority list right?" **Communicating** their task list and just saying where they're at periodically throughout the week really

To manage the multiplicity of codable content when participants spoke of what they expected a graduate to do in the context of each skill, I duplicated each multiplicitous segment of text and assigned each codable element to a unique row. Thus, this duplication process established four rows of identical text, to retain the context, with each row carrying a specific expectation – see Figure 7.

Figure 7: Unique codable elements – Step 2

Group	Skill	Participant	Type of response	Text segment
Employer	Self management	PE12	answer	**describe an approach to managing their time.** How they manage their task list, how that task list is prioritised. I'd expect a grad to be talking to me about "right boss, this is the stuff that I'm working on this week and I'm doing them in this order, is my priority list right?" Communicating their task list and just saying where they're at periodically throughout the week really
Employer	Self management	PE12	answer	describe an approach to managing their time. **How they manage their task list,** how that task list is prioritised. I'd expect a grad to be talking to me about "right boss, this is the stuff that I'm working on this week and I'm doing them in this order, is my priority list right?" Communicating their task list and just saying where they're at periodically throughout the week really
Employer	Self management	PE12	answer	describe an approach to managing their time. How they manage their task list, **how that task list is prioritised.** I'd expect a grad to be talking to me about "right boss, this is the stuff that I'm working on this week and I'm doing them in this order, is my priority list right?" Communicating their task list and just saying where they're at periodically throughout the week really
Employer	Self management	PE12	answer	describe an approach to managing their time. How they manage their task list, how that task list is prioritised. I'd expect a grad to be talking to me about "right boss, this is the stuff that I'm working on this week and I'm doing them in this order, is my priority list right?" **Communicating their task list** and just saying where they're at periodically throughout the week really

When all multiplicities of significant words and phrases had been found, I returned to reviewing each row of text to find short, codable extracts guided by the emboldened text. I constantly moved back and forth between the annotated transcripts in each row of data to ensure the appropriate contextual link was made between the transcripts and the initial coding data. These codes were entered in an "Iteration #1" column. I took care to draw on precise data extracts to stay close to the data and to sub-research question three. See Figure 8 for an example of this iterative coding process.

Figure 8: Iteration 1 process – Step 2

Group	Skill	Parti	Type of re	Text segment	Iteration #1
Educator	Problem solving	PA5	answer	ability to analyse the problem	ability to analyse the problem
Educator	Problem solving	PA8	answer	looking at the root cause of the problem	looking at the root cause
Employer	Problem solving	PE4	answer	can they critically evaluate	critically evaluate
Educator	Self management	PA8	additional	to be able to **take criticism**	able to take criticism
Educator	Leadership	PA9	additional	**competent** and confident about your own skills	competent in own skillset
Educator	Leadership	PA9	answer	convince others and lead them at the same time	convince and lead others
Employer	Communication	PE4	answer	**evidence of curiosity,** sense-checking, clarification	evidence of curiosity
Employer	Self management	PE12	answer	**describe an approach to managing their time**	describe how they manage their time
Employer	Leadership	PE11	answer	I expect them to **be brave** and to go first on occasion	be brave and go first
Employer	Team work	PE10	answer	able to **describe** what they want the others to do	describe what they want the others to do
Employer	Problem solving	PE10	answer	**describe** how they problem solve	describe how they solve problems
Educator	Team work	PA7	answer	evidence of collaboration	evidence of collaboration

Deconstructing each row into the smallest units of meaning (potentially) relevant to the research question was the key to establishing a set of non-hierarchical units of semantic codes. This deconstruction process generated 585 rows of codable data with codable extracts located in a unique "Iteration 1" column.

Searching for and reviewing themes – Step 3

From 581 to 28

The rationale for step 3 was to consider a higher level of expectation, keeping faithful to the principle of semantic coding, and cluster all similar expectations under the same sub-clustered theme. To find the themes, I alphabetically sorted iteration 1 and refined the coded extract, where possible, without losing its essence to establish a second iteration. If the text in iteration 1 could not be refined, it was repeated in iteration 2. If it could be refined, it was. For example, "understand others' emotions" was already semantically concise, so this text was repeated in iteration 2. By contrast, "take complex ideas and break them down" and "break convoluted ideas down" both carried a surface meaning of being able to "break down ideas", so they were coded as such. See Figure 9, which shows the process of iteratively thematising the text.

Figure 9: Searching for and reviewing themes – Step 3

Iteration #1	Iteration #2
take complex ideas and break them down	break down ideas
break convoluted ideas down simply to say wha	break down ideas
understand others emotions	understand others emotions

This coding logic was applied to all 581 data rows, generating a condensed set of 217 rows of semantically explicit or surface-level meanings data. I considered 217 still too large to cluster codes into related categories, so I continued the logic of sorting and reviewing the data. I alphabetically sorted iteration 2 and looked for commonalities in the data. To help with this step, I also used the text filter in Excel. For example, "emotions" appeared to recur in iteration 2 codes, but the text entries were not in alphabetical order. So, using the text filter, I searched for entries containing "emotion" and words expressing an emotion such as "anger". It is important to note here that commonalities in the data did not exclude contradictions in the data because a single word is agnostic of common or different meanings. For example, the word "emotion" does not convey a meaning unless it is read in the broader context of its surrounding words. Each data row was reviewed for its semantic or surface-level meaning and clustered under the new sub-theme of "understanding self". Similarly, data rows focussed on "confidence and self-belief" were also linked to the broader concept of understanding self. Both concepts of understanding self and others were common expectations across both focus groups. See Figure 10 for an example of how the themes were clustered using iteration 2.

Figure 10: Searching for and reviewing themes - Step 3

Iteration #1	Iteration #2	sub theme
manage and regulate their emotions	manage and regulate own emotions	understanding self
manager your anger when criticised	manage and regulate own emotions	understanding self
regulating your emotions to manage your anger	manage and regulate own emotions	understanding self
don't bottle up how you are feeling in a team	manage and regulate own emotions	understanding self
not over-stressing	manage and regulate own emotions	understanding self
building confidence, self-efficacy	confidence and self belief	understanding self
confident in own skillset	confidence and self belief	understanding self

The sorting and searching principle was an active process, moving back and forth between the spreadsheet of segmented texts and the original transcripts, clustering the codes, and ensuring the context was secure. Following the logic of sorting, iteratively reviewing, and clustering semantically similar or surface-level meanings established a manageable 28 sub-themes.

Non-coded segments. Several interesting text segments were found to be non-codable in the context of an explicit expectation of graduate behaviour. For example, PA8 raised several questions related to the role of universities today: "if we have a look at what is the role of a university in society today, it's quite clearly changed, and I think many universities need to be able to have the discussion about what is it that we're supposed to be doing". Such comments were interesting points of view as they emphasised the interplay of different forces, structures and contexts that shaped participants' views. Thus, these interesting text segments were categorised as "comment" and qualitatively examined to inform a deeper understanding of the dynamic and evolving nature of higher education policy contextualised to employer and academic viewpoints.

Clustering themes to generate key themes – Step 4

From 28 to 6

The rationale for step 4 was to establish sub-clusters capable of staying faithful to the semantic meanings of the interesting text segments, iterations 1 and 2 and the original transcripts. Thus, each data line in the spreadsheet was re-read, beginning with the interesting text segment and moving across the iterations to find patterns of the same or similar meanings in the whole dataset. This fourth step in the thematic process demonstrated the importance of sub-dividing the segments of interesting text and emboldening each parsed section to manage the multiplicity of significant words and phrases. In other words, step 4, and the preceding steps, helped to disassemble a participant's contiguous string of thoughts to expose their rich content.

To find thematic patterns of meaning anchored by a shared idea or concept (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 209), I alphabetically sorted the 24 codes. I then looked for patterns and

connections across the iteratively coded rows. For example, the following segments of text all carried the surface meaning of being emotionally intelligent:

- understanding self in the context of adapting to others.

- interaction and engagement in the context of understanding social cues.

- receptive to feedback in the context of being aware of feedback received.

- understanding others, in the context of appraising and evaluating others.

Thus, emotional intelligence was established as a key theme. See Figure 11 for an example of finding thematic patterns of meaning.

Figure 11: Finding thematic patterns of meaning - Step 4

Iteration #2	sub theme	principle theme (highest order)
ability to adapt to others	understanding self	emotional intelligence
understand social cues	interaction and engagement	emotional intelligence
aware of feedback you're rec	receptive to feedback	emotional intelligence
appraise and evaluate others	understanding others	emotional intelligence

Once anchored, I tested each row of code by reading across the columns from the highest order key theme to sub-theme and iterations 2 and 1. I also reviewed the original transcribed data to ensure each key theme worked in relation to both the coded extracts and the entire dataset. This sorting and searching principle was an active process, moving back and forth between the spreadsheet of segmented texts and the original transcripts, providing a lengthy but convenient and logical thematising procedure.

Although step 3 helped to filter the original 581 rows of data to generate 28 sub-themes and six key themes, there were still 581 original rows of text segments, many of which were duplicated as part of the step 2 process. So, to manage the 581 coded rows without losing information, each key theme was sorted by the skill to which it was attached. All rows of duplicated expectations connected to each skill were highlighted. These highlighted rows were then filtered out to refine the coded data further. This final step retained the 28 sub-themes and six key themes. The data was re-sorted by key theme and first iteration to show

categories of expectation connected across all skills with sufficient context to understand each key theme. Highlighting the duplicate texts rather than deleting them kept the integrity of the original 581 lines of coded data intact for future reference. Although this manual process was lengthy, the alternative option of simply deleting duplicate rows of data from the 581 rows of coded data would have materially altered the findings, as multiple instances of duplicated text were attached to different skills. For example, "asking questions and clarifying understanding" was found in 18 different rows of text across all five skills. Automatically removing all duplicates of "asking questions and clarifying understanding" would have also removed entries in four of the skills, leaving an unintended gap in the findings.

Defining and naming themes – Step 5

Each theme was defined by its central character and given a concise and informative name using the connected concepts from the sub-theme coding. For example, the key theme of **Applying knowledge** carried the concept of being able to "apply the knowledge you have into practice", "knowing some analytical tools and methods", and "selection of tools". Conceptually mapping categories into key themes capable of shared or independent concepts of meaning across the five skills enabled sub-themes to function independently of a related category. Establishing and maintaining sub-themes was an important step in the thematic analysis as they could tell a more detailed story than a key theme.

Writing up – Step 6

To establish a coherent story about the data, each key theme was viewed back through its sub-clustered themes and iterations. Each key theme was filtered in Excel to expose its sub-themes and connections to the five skills. An important step in the thematic process was not attempting to artificially link any sub-theme with a unique skill because all participants had merged the five skills in their discussions. Their merging made it impossible to separate one skill from the other. The blurring of the boundaries exposed a complex web of six key themes and 28 sub-themes linked to the five skills. This complex map is illustrated in Chapter 6, Section 6.2.1. The complex blurring of boundaries supports Kashefpakdel et al

(2018, p. 19) findings of the challenge of identifying where one skill starts and another stops.

The connections to each of the five skills were identified by cross-referencing with the Excel spreadsheet and taking screenshots of the sub-themes connected to each key theme. See Figure 12 for an example of how links between the sub-themes and key themes were made. The advantage of this approach was that the sub-clustered themes were always presented in alphabetical order in Excel, thus exposing the interconnection between the key themes, the clusters, and skills. For example, the sub-cluster of **supporting and enabling** was linked only to the key theme of **working with others,** which was a feature in three of the five skills. Meanwhile, the sub-cluster **taking responsibility** was linked to three key themes and was a feature of all five skills.

Figure 12: Connecting sub-themes to key themes - Step 6

Each key theme was sorted by iteration 2 and filtered per clustered theme in its alphabetical order to expose the rich pattern of expectations employers and educators have of graduates

when speaking about each of the five skills. Maintaining the text colour coding and the skills' highlighting throughout the coding process also provided a helpful way to view the entire data set. See Figure 13 for examples of the colour-coded texts.

Figure 13: Colour-coded text segments

Group	Skill	Partici	Type of r	sub theme: clustered code (wh	principle theme (highest	Skill
Educator	Self managemen	PA5	answer	approach to problem solving	ability to analyse	Self management
Employer	Problem solving	PE10	answer	approach to problem solving	ability to analyse	Problem solving
Employer	Problem solving	PE10	answer	approach to problem solving	ability to analyse	Problem solving
Employer	Self managemen	PE12	answer	approach to task management	mindset and attitude	Self management
Educator	Leadership	PA7	answer	being clear and precise	working with others	Leadership
Educator	Self managemen	PA6	answer	being curious	mindset and attitude	Self management
Educator	Problem solving	PA7	answer	being curious	mindset and attitude	Problem solving
Educator	Leadership	PA8	clarificati	being curious	mindset and attitude	Leadership
Educator	Leadership	PA8	clarificati	being curious	mindset and attitude	Leadership
Educator	Open discussion	PA8	what	being curious	mindset and attitude	Open discussion
Educator	Problem solving	PA7	answer	being curious	mindset and attitude	Problem solving
Employer	Communication	PE10	comment	being curious	mindset and attitude	Communication
Employer	Communication	PE4	answer	being curious	mindset and attitude	Communication
Employer	Communication	PE10	comment	being passionate	mindset and attitude	Communication
Educator	Communication	PA8	answer	being proactive	mindset and attitude	Communication

4.7.4 Thematic reflections

I acknowledge that identifying words and phrases I considered to be relevant was necessarily subjective. Adopting a semantic coding strategy to extract verbatim text helped to mitigate the potential challenge of unacknowledged researcher assumptions (Braun & Clarke, 2021, p. 206). This mitigation was an important consideration as it helped to draw my attention to instances when I might have introduced a biased perspective based on my insider/outsider role. For instance, I originally coded "the ability to learn" in the second iteration as "ability to learn and review learning". When I checked this sub-code against the original transcript, I realised I had added the word "review" as my interpretation of the theme. Whilst the concept of reviewing one's learning might be a reasonable outcome of the ability to learn, I chose to use "reflect" as a derivative of self-reflection as this was mentioned several times in relation to learning whereas "review" was not mentioned at all in either focus groups' transcript.

The data familiarisation and deep transcription strategy offered a way of becoming familiar with each focus group's thoughts before viewing them as a whole dataset rather than maintaining two separate entities. This strategy was a deliberate attempt to manage the complexity of participants' thoughts. Furthermore, the filtering process employed in steps 2, 3, and 6 was introduced as an adapted component of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (2006). The filtering was an essential step as the participants' blurring of one skill into another made it difficult to distinguish boundaries between the skills, as also found by Kashefpakdel et al. (2018, p. 19). The filtering processes were valuable in facilitating the creation of a coherent and compelling narrative about the data while contextualising it to existing literature. Segmenting the text, iteratively reviewing and categorising codes and themes, moving back and forth in the data and checking against the original transcripts helped identify potentially common and uncommon behaviour expectations across the skills discussed. Thus, acknowledging the complexity of unravelling the meanings of each skill and taking a semantic approach to coding a complex web of six key themes and 28 sub-themes was established in Chapter 6. The complexity of thematising the focus group conversations is illustrated in Chapter 6 and expanded upon in Chapter 7.

Chapter 5 Employer Corpus Findings and Analysis

This chapter explores the corpus analysis findings drawn from 100 large-scale UK-commissioned skills surveys and related reports, framed in DCR. The purpose is to respond to sub-research question two:

> How are transferable skills represented in the UK Government and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) commissioned skills surveys, and to what degree is there a convergence on a unified set of skills with explicit and coherent articulation of their meanings?

The UK Government and Confederation of British Industry commissioned skills survey series are a definitive source of intelligence for understanding employers' skills needs, and their findings directly influence education and skills policies in the UK (CBI, 2013, p. 46; Shury et al., 2017, p. 10; UKCES, 2010b, p. 1; Winterbotham et al., 2021, p. 3). Therefore, they form the nucleus of the large-scale employer skills survey critique. The corpus analysis of the 100 commissioned skills surveys is expected to reveal the transferable skills employers want.

The section begins with a short analysis of the data familiarisation process drawn from a sample of four reports, described earlier in Chapter 4, Section 4.5.6, before proceeding into a detailed analysis of the 100 employer skills surveys and reports. The findings are summarised, and the five skills found to be most common across the employer skills corpus taken into the focus group discussions.

The style is illustrative and supported by quotes to present the data. Relevant information and recurring patterns, trends, and themes in the data are explored to comprehensively analyse and identify underlying contradictions, complexities, and patterns within the mechanism of skills surveys.

5.1 Data familiarisation

This section details the findings from the sample reading process of four initial reports. The purpose of this data familiarisation was to establish the basis on which the whole employer skills corpus could be examined. Initially, four reports were manually read before analysing them using corpus linguistic techniques. The four reports, two commissioned by the UK government and two by the CBI, comprised 334 pages and 120,882 words, illustrated in Table 9, were considered a sufficiently large corpus to inform the whole corpus analysis process. The reports are referred to in this section only by their citations (Belt et al., 2010; CBI, 2016, 2017; Winterbotham et al., 2019a) due to their lengthy titles.

5.1.1 Skills terminology

A wide range of common words were used in reference to transferable skills. For example, "ability, core, soft, and generic" were regularly used but were not defined. When referring to the skills graduates need to demonstrate to employers, the CBI reports used the terms "work-relevant", "right skills", "transferable skills", "aptitude, attitude, competency, and core", each of which dominated the CBI discourse (CBI, 2016, pp. 7-8, 45; CBI, 2017, p. 13, 43). None of the terms were explained. The term "employability" was found in the Government's Policy Briefing report (Belt et al., 2010, p.2) but not found in the three other reports.

5.1.2 Skills categorisations and definitions

Skills were categorised and clustered differently by each of the four report authors. For example, in both CBI reports, three different categories of skills were presented: "work-ready", "work-relevant" or "right skills". Despite the different categorisations, both CBI reports contained the same list of 15 skills:

> analysis, business and customer awareness, communication, IT, literacy, numeracy, foreign language, intercultural awareness, knowledge of chosen job/career, positive

attitude, problem-solving, resilience, self-management, team-working, technical skills (CBI, 2017, p. 93; CBI,2016 p. 49).

In contrast to the CBI, the government's 2019 skills survey report divided skills into two specific categories. Technical and Practical skills were job-role related and included a list of five skills: analytical, problem-solving, IT skills, numeracy, and operational. Whereas the second skills category, People and Personal, was defined as a set of four soft and less tangible skills required to manage oneself and interact with others in the workplace - self-management, teamworking, management and leadership, and sales and customer skills (Winterbotham et al.,2020a, p. 37).

Curiously, when the government's 2019 skills survey report was examined against its supporting 2019 questionnaire, the terms "Technical and practical skills" and "People and Personal Skills" (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 53-55) were not used in the 2019 employer skills questionnaire at all. The absence of these categories in the questionnaire suggests that skills categorisation occurs subjectively during the writing-up of the findings as opposed to being directly informed and evidenced by participant responses.

The government's Policy Briefing report (Belt et al., 2010) presents a list of ten skills the authors had collated from reviewing the broad skills literature. They categorise these ten skills, listed below, simply as "employability skills" (Belt et al., 2010, p. 5) with no descriptive explanations of each skill's meaning:

- Employability Skills: self-management, thinking and solving problems, working together and communicating, understanding the business, using numbers, language and IT effectively, and positive approach.

In a departure from the CBI reports and the government's commissioned skills survey, Belt et al. (2010) problematised identifying and defining the skills employers want. They highlighted the discrepancy that employability skills are not measured in major employer surveys due to problems defining the skills (Belt et al, 2010, p. 9) and concluded their report with several pertinent recommendations, in particular:

"Review how employability skills are best measured and assessed among different groups and use this to evaluate the impact of employability policies…[and]…better understand precisely what employers mean by "soft skills". (Belt et al., 2010, pp. 45-48)

The extensive volume of skills literature published since Belt et al. (2010) suggests that whilst much effort has been exerted to identify and define the skills employers want, their recommendations have not been taken up by the UK government. Consequently, there is still no commonly agreed unified set of employability skills, nor an agreed process for describing and assessing them. Thus, a gap in the literature remains.

Broad, abstract skills clusters

In all four reports, skills were clustered under broad, abstract terms, with some skills featuring in more than one cluster. For example, Belt et al. (2010) clustered problem-solving under abstract generic skills term (Belt et al., 2010, p. 40) as well as under the broad terms of "functional skill", "employability skill", and "soft skill" (Belt et al., 2010, pp. 22, 24, 26). By contrast, in the UK government's 2019 employer skills survey, problem-solving was clustered under Technical and Practical skills. Planning and organising skills clustered under management and leadership skills, which, in turn, were sub-clustered under People and management skills (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 53). This clustering approach underscores the challenge for educators and students in recognising and identifying the multi-faceted nature of transferable skills and the potential contradictions and confusions of overlap among their broad, abstract categories.

No meanings behind any of the terms were found in any of the four reports. This absence of meaning reinforces a pattern of implicit discourse (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807), which effectively prevents a transformative understanding (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 60) of the skills employers want.

Furthermore, both UK Government reports led with a skills deficit and skills need narrative, which emphasised employers' dissatisfaction with graduate skills (Winterbotham et al.,

2020a, pp. 27-56; Belt et al., 2010, pp. 44-48). By contrast, the CBI emphasised a more positive skills satisfaction narrative and referred to skills needs. However, all four reports called on education to meet employers' needs (Belt et al., 2010, p. 42). The government's skills-deficit narrative risks driving education policies towards addressing skills shortages and mismatches. Whereas the CBI's more positive satisfaction narrative risks focusing on broad skills labels which do not carry a wide consensus or detailed descriptions of meaning.

Furthermore, the hegemonic meta-narrative of skills gaps and skills shortages (Arora, 2015, p. 644; Prinsloo, 2012, pp. 29, 90) and the proliferation of skills terms and categorisations across the four reports highlight critical dialectical tensions and conflicts between employment and education. These tensions arise from differing viewpoints on the skills needed in the workplace, their definitions, and inconsistent representations in commissioned research versus the potential narrowing of higher education to job-specific skills and consequential loss of broader educational goals. Such issues also highlight the challenges of aligning the interests of diverse stakeholders, and thus the importance of a dialogic approach to reconcile these differences if a unified understanding of transferable skills, their practical teaching, learning, and fairer assessment is to be achieved.

5.1.3   Recurring patterns in the data

The corpus-informed reading familiarisation explored word list frequency, bi-grams (word pairs), and collocates of high-frequency words. The rationale for choosing these corpus techniques, described in Section 4.5.5, was to test intuitions about the texts and to generate a working list of words to take into the whole corpus analysis.

From the word list frequency, among the top 25 words salient to this study were: "skills", "employers", "employability" and "graduates". Patterns of repeated word pairs linked to "skill/s" and word/phrase patterns expressing needs and demands were also found in all four texts. These included: "be able to" and "right-skills". All four reports repeatedly used the phrase "such as" collocated with examples of skills. For example, "such as

communication skills, organisational skills and team working" (Belt et al., 2010, p. 12; CBI, 2017, p. 9).

The collocated word pairs were viewed in Excel to reveal twenty-three high-frequency words and nine-word pairs linked to five identified skills. Table 12 presents the collocated word pair findings which include five commonly found skills across the sample reading underlined in red.

Table 12: Sample reading skills identification

| 2019 Employer Skills survey (Winterbotham et al 2020a) | | | CBI Survey 2016 / 2017 |
Technical & Practical skills	People and personal skills		work-relevant skills
Adapting to new equipment or materials	Ability to manage own time and prioritise own tasks		Analysis skills
Advanced or specialist IT skills	Team working		Attitudes/behaviours e.g. resilience
Basic numerical skills and understanding	Customer handling skills		Basic literacy & use of English
Communicating in a foreign language	Instructing, teaching or training people		Basic numeracy skills
complex problem solving requiring a specific solution	Making speeches or presentations		Business & customer awareness
Computer literacy / basic IT skills	Managing their own feelings, or handling the feelings of others	Referred to as manage-ment and leadership skills	Communication skills
Complex numerical or statistical skills and understanding	Managing or motivating other staff		Flexibility
Digital skills	Persuading or influencing others		Foreign language skills
Knowledge of how your organisation works	Setting objectives for others & planning human, financial & other resources		International cultural awareness
Knowledge of products and services offered by your organisation	Sales skills		Knowledge about chosen job/career
	Self-management skills		
Manual dexterity	Employability Skills: A research and policy briefing 2010, Belt et al (2010)		Leadership
Oral communication			Positive attitude to work
Reading and understanding instructions, guidelines, manuals or reports	Self-management		problem solving
Specialist skills or knowledge needed to perform the role	Thinking & solving problems		Self-management
Writing instructions, guidelines, manuals or reports	Team working & communicating		Team working
Writing in Welsh language	Understanding the business		Technical skills
			Use of IT

The high-frequency of single words, word pairs and the five skills are represented in Table 13. The highest frequencies are presented in red font. The words and word pairs were used as the basis on which to explore the whole employer skills corpus. The skills were, however,

not immediately searched for in the whole corpus to avoid a bias towards them. The extent to which these skills were found in the whole corpus is discussed in Section 5.3.4.

Table 13: Sample reading high-frequency single words, word pairs and top five skills

Search terms drawn from manual reading			
Single words		**Word pairs**	**Named skills**
Ability (52)	Functional (5)	*cited as (12: Gov/CBI)	problem solving (11: CBI/Gov)
Analysis (24)	Generic (18)	lack of (71: CBI/Gov)	communication skills (26: Gov/CBI)
Aptitude (9)	Graduates (156)	employability skills (234: Gov)	self-management skills (34: CBI/Gov)
Attitudes (61)	Leadership (38)	right skills (15: CBI/Gov)	leadership and management (17: CBI/Gov)
Attributes (15)	More (509)	skills gaps (223: CBI/Gov)	team work* (18: CBI/Gov)
Basic (106)	Management (80)	skills lacking (13: Gov)	
Behaviour (20)	Needs (118)	skills needs (10: CBI/Gov)	
Competencies (8)	Resilience (19)	*such as (96: CBI/Gov)	
Core (42)	Satisfied (43)	work-relevant (4: CBI)	
Deficiencies (10)	Skills (1613)	*these terms were found to precede a list of skills as examples of those either lacking or required	
Employers (498)	Soft (20)		
Employability (428)			

When viewed in the concordance, a policy narrative and an employer needs narrative were visibly characterised by single words and word pair expressions. For example, "deficiencies", "needs", "employers", "employability skills", "skills gaps", and "skills needs" were prevalent in all four reports. A range of quantifier words, for example, "some", "all", "many", and "more", were also detected. The quantifier "more" collocated most frequently with "skills", "people", "businesses", and "employers". Viewed in the concordance, "more" was typically used to describe the economic climate or to give direction to how people should act as opposed to the types of skills employers need from graduates. For example,

- "employees need to be much more flexible in terms of their outlook on work" (Belt et al., 2010, p. 8)
- "skills gaps were more likely to impact large employers" (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 43)

The terms "graduates" and "skills" regularly appeared in each other's company with "skills" predominantly appearing to the right of graduates, but they did not regularly co-occur. This meant they did not appear to be directly connected. To test this theory, a search for the

term "graduate skills" revealed only two occurrences, once in CBI (2016) and once in Belt et al., (2010).

The single word "graduate" was found to be most frequently connected with a recruitment narrative to express the state or appetite of graduate recruitment among employers as opposed to signposting the skills graduates need to be recruited. For example:

- "Graduate recruitment is on the rise" (CBI, 2016, p. 5)
- "employers now look for interactive attributes in their new graduate recruits" (Belt et al., 2010, p. 14)

The most frequent bi-grams were "employability skills", "skills gaps", "and skills", "of skills", "skills and". However, the patterning of these bi-grams did not reveal any clear results beyond that already established in the frequency and collocation analysis above. On the other hand, the bi-gram "such as" was useful in revealing skillset patterns when viewed in the concordance tool. For example, communication, self-management, problem-solving, leadership and management, and teamwork all appear to the right of "such as" in the same text segments.

- "help graduates improve key employability skills such as project management, communication, leadership, team work, and analysis" (Belt et al., 2010, p. 27)
- "a lack of management and leadership skills such as managing or motivating other staff, persuading and influencing others, and setting objectives and/or planning resources".

The revealed skillset patterns suggested that the bi-gram "such as" was a useful phrase worthy of further investigation. However, it was difficult to discern any significant patterns relevant to sub-research question two beyond these large-scale patterns.

5.2   Manual reading conclusion and themes

The manual reading results led me to consider several possible observations and conclusions. These are presented below in the format of themes.

Five common skills but contradictory categorisations and terminology:
From the first manual reading, described in Chapter 4, Section 4.5.6, five skills were common across all four reports:

> communication, teamwork, self-management, leadership and management, and problem-solving.

However, the different ways these skills were categorised across the four reports illustrated the confusing language used to categorise the skills. For example, problem-solving was categorised as a functional skill and a generic skill. Finding that the word "skills" was categorised differently by different authors ensured that a wide range of skills terms were included in the whole corpus analysis. For example, "generic", "functional", "soft", and "employability". These category terms were each combined with the bi-gram "such as" to interrogate the employer skills corpus. While the five common skills imply the presence of consistent messaging between the UK Government and CBI reports of the transferable skills employers want, interrogating the whole corpus will prove or disprove this.

Contradictory and confusing language:
The contradictory language on skills and a lack of detailed skills descriptions adopted across the four reports create significant unseen constraints and tensions for educators, employers, policymakers, the OfS, and students. Raising awareness of the known implicit discourse on transferable skills (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807) and the hidden tensions it causes between educators, employers and policymakers is an essential step in the dialectical process. The potential of removing constraints on ills (Bhaskar, 2017, p.60) towards the possibility of explicit understanding of what transferable skills mean could shift implied understanding to explicit knowledge to inform their practical acquisition and assessment.

A skill needs and gap narrative:

From the collocate findings of high-frequency words - "skills", "employers", "employability", and "graduates" - I noticed the results showed an emphasis on skills need and skills gap narrative, leading with the high-frequency words "employability" and "skills". The use of the words "employers", "employability", and "graduates" were not found to be useful terms with which to address sub-research question two due to an absence of named skills in their concordances. The word "skills" was found to be too prevalent a word to be a useful search term. It was regularly used as a noun in titles of reports without any noun phrases to describe specific skill types. This prevalence led me to conclude that although the terms "employability", "skills", "employers", and "graduates" were terms to express general skills needs, they were not useful terms with which to address sub-research question two. However, when the word "skills" was used in the context of the bi-gram "such as" it revealed specific types of skills, leading to the conclusion that the bi-gram "such as" could be an insightful phrase capable of finding examples of transferable skills.

Summary: The reductive data familiarisation selection method helped me to become more familiar with the employer skills corpus. Some emerging patterns and trends were noticed. These findings will be checked across the main corpus to determine if they are unique to the four data familiarisation reports or are representative of the whole corpus. The corpus analysis process also provided an opportunity to become familiar with and test the corpus linguistic techniques prior to analysing the whole corpus. The range of single words, n-grams, and skills terms - for example, "generic", "functional", "soft", "core", and "such as" – were used to inform the whole corpus analysis. The following section presents the findings and analysis of the whole corpus, inspired by the data familiarisation process.

5.3   Employer corpus findings

Learning from the data familiarisation process was taken into the whole corpus. This section, therefore, sets out the findings from the whole corpus. It begins with a summary of the nature and methodology of the UK-government employer skills reports. The methods

adopted by the CBI's commissioned survey series are hidden from public view (Grimes, 2021)[18]. Thus a critique of their findings is absent from this study. The section then moves on to the detailed findings of the 100 surveys and reports that comprise the whole corpus.

The search terms used to interrogate the employer corpus findings were drawn from two sources: the combined frequent and salient words and phrases in the whole employer skills corpus and words and terms drawn from the manual reading process. The keyword comparison and frequent/salient words and phrases were deliberately chosen to offset potential researcher bias towards words that were already familiar to the researcher from the manual reading process.

5.3.1 Skills survey structure and methodologies

The government-commissioned employer skills surveys draw findings from various organisations, from small organisations of two employees to 250+. All sectors of the economy are included and randomly drawn from the Market Locations database (Conlon et al., 2017, p. 35). Typical respondents are general managers, small company business owners, HR managers, and employees most responsible for staff training (Winterbotham et al., 2020b). Whilst the choice of respondents seems logical, it is impossible to know with certainty if the respondents per organisation were best placed to answer the questions.

Several methodological issues were found among the UK-government employer skills surveys, supporting other scholars' arguments that skills surveys suffer from poor methodology (Rios et al., 2020, p. 81; SPB, 2022, p. 13; Williams et al., 2023, p.2). Firstly, there is a mismatch between the language used in survey questionnaires and that in their respective published findings. For example, in the UK government's 2018 survey questionnaire, problem-solving was categorised as a soft skill yet reported as a technical skill

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[18] The costs of the CBI surveys are not published as the CBI is a membership-based organisation with no requirement to disclose its costs. Some indication of costs can be found in the CBI annual reports under "promotional activities and surveys", but the education and skills survey is not exposed as a separate line in the accounts.

in its companion published report (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 37). This misalignment points to a significant issue of language precision. It may obscure data patterns and undermine trust in research findings due to potential confusion and ambiguity in the researchers' interpreted survey findings[19].

Secondly, visible in the 1999 and 2019 employer skills survey questionnaires is the long-standing practice of employing static, predetermined lists of skills, for example (Blake et al., 2000, p. 15; DfE, 2019b, p. 28). This persistent approach, also found in the broader skills literature, see Sections 3.4 and 3.5, risks perpetuating outdated biases in the deeper structures and mechanisms of government skills agendas and regulatory policies. It also risks overlooking emergent trends and phenomena such as technological advancements, and changing market conditions which may call for different skill demands. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, students had to transition to remote working without preparation. Some studies found that many students suffered increased mental health issues (Chen & Lucock, 2022, p. 2). However, other studies found that students developed enhanced transferable skills, including listening, conversing, teamwork, and digital skills (Dyki et al., 2021, p. 233). Whilst these skills are not new, their nuanced nature can evolve through emergent phenomena such as a global pandemic. Querying the same skills deficits in skills surveys risks perpetuating a status quo that does not reflect the evolution of skills needed or available in the labour market.

Furthermore, the UK government employer skills surveys focus on identifying deficiencies in university students' preparation for the workplace without equal attention to their strengths, for example (IFF, 2005, p. 7; Selner, 2019, p. 28). This one-sided questioning introduces a negative bias, potentially influencing participants' responses, and does not offer a balanced view of graduate preparedness. Therefore, the absence of open-ended questions to explore positive graduate attributes or delve deeper into specific areas of under-preparedness limits the depth of insight from these surveys.

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[19] Full details of the Employer Skills Survey methodology are publicly available on the gov.uk website.

An additional research bias is introduced insofar as the same researchers and the same research company, IFF Research, have been designing and implementing the employer skills survey series since 1999 (Bosworth et al., 1999, p. 3; DfE, 2022, p. 1). On the one hand, it makes sense for the same market research company and staff to administer the employer skills surveys to ensure year-on-year comparisons and rich insight into the skills employers want. However, using the same company and asking the same questions raises concerns over potential researcher fatigue in designing and reporting survey findings and complacency from employers accustomed to answering the same or similar questions year after year. A dialectical critical realist perspective would advocate for continuous dialectical engagement to review how the surveys are conducted and revise the survey questions to ensure they align with the evolving stratified reality of higher education.

The employer skills survey methodological limitations underscore the importance of evolving survey methodologies to reflect a more nuanced, dynamic understanding of labour market skills. It calls for a more reflective and adaptable approach to better capture workplace skills and preparation complexities, thereby enhancing research findings' validity, reliability, and value and forming more balanced, informed policy decisions.

Notwithstanding the above limitations, the UK government and CBI employer skills surveys remain the principal surveys used by the UK government to set the direction and tone of their skills policies. Therefore, the remaining sections set out the detailed findings of the 100-corpus analysis, beginning with the keyword search and progressing through the corpus linguistic techniques detailed in 4.5.5.

5.3.2   Keywords

Compared with the British National Corpus, I found the employer skills corpus to have an unusually high frequency of keywords across a range of single words, multi-words and 4-gram phrases. The emphasis on "skills shortages", "gaps", and "employability skills" across the whole corpus of texts was notable – see Table 14.

Table 14: Employer skills corpus high-frequency keywords, multi-words, and 4-grams

Single words	Multi-words	4-gram phrases
Employability	Skills gap	For employment and skills
Competencies	Skill-shortage vacancy	Commission for employment and
Apprenticeships	Skills survey	Density of skills gaps
Employers	Skill gap	Density of skills-shortage vacancies
ESS (Employer skills survey)	Employability skill	Education and skills survey (ESS)
Gaps	Employer skill	Employer skills survey for
Generic	Digital skill	Graduate recruitment and selection
Graduate	Hard-to-fill vacancy	National employers skills survey
Graduates	Employer perspective	National strategic skills audit
Hard-to-fill	Skilled trade	Of skills gaps by
Skills	Generic skill	Poorly prepared for work
Skills-shortage	Employer skills survey	UK Commission for employment
Skillset	Proportion of employers	Review of skills final
Stakeholders	Skills system	Technical and practical skills
UKCES		
Vacancies		

The top-ranked single word was "employability", with "skills gap" topping the multi-word ranking and "for employment and skills" topping the 4-gram phrases. These keyword patterns, drawn from the top 50 words and phrases across the corpus of 100 texts, reveal that the main topics of the texts are purposefully focused on "employability", "stakeholders", and "skills needs". This finding supports the earlier reading familiarisation that the UK government's skills surveys are dominated by a skills gap narrative.

5.3.3   Word list frequency

When reviewing the most frequent words across the employer skills corpus, using Antconc's automated wordlist and exporting the results to Excel, a similar pattern to the keywords was noticed. The most frequently used words provided a view of the corpus vocabulary. This

view confirmed the employer skills corpus focused on a skills narrative related to skills gaps, vacancies, and needs. See Table 15 below for a summary of the top 13 wordlist frequencies across the whole employer skills corpus:

Table 15: Employer skills corpus high-frequency words

Word	Frequency	Word	Frequency
Skills	43,677	Survey	7,429
Employers	19,461	Employer	6,696
Training	16,118	Vacancies	6,153
Employment	10,753	Gaps	4,775
Education	9,741	Students	3,681
Skill	8,219	Skilled	3,220
Business	7,429		

The manual reading had established that bi-grams did not reveal anything interesting except for the phrase "such as". This bi-gram phrase offered the potential of finding specifically mentioned skills in the corpus. However, it was found that "such as" was typically used to introduce an example of something; thus it could not be assumed that the phrase captured a defined set of employer-demanded skills. To address this assumption, 4-gram and 6-gram searches were conducted with the minimum range of texts set to 50 in the hope of finding specifically identifiable sets of desired skills.

Twenty-six 4-gram results were returned, and the results were sorted by range. The most frequent 4-gram across 70 texts with a total of 214 concordance lines was "a wide range of" in the context of describing the skills employers want. This 4-gram phrase proved to be a disappointing finding when the results were viewed in the concordance tool, as the concordance texts related only to generalised statements. For example:

"a wide range of skills were lacking among applicants" (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 26); "this is the tenth CBI education and skills survey, run in partnership with

Pearson, to give an authoritative picture of trends in business opinion, practice and future plans across a wide range of education and skills issues" (CBI, 2017, p. 94)

Although these early findings indicated that it would be unlikely to find significantly different results with an increased n-gram span of 6, a search was still conducted for research robustness. Only two results were found: "UK Commission for Employment and Skills", and "the UK Commission for Employment and". While both phrases refer to skills, neither n-gram revealed any skill or lists of skills when viewed in the concordance lines.

The span of words was reduced to 3-grams to explore the difference this would make in the results. Three hundred and three hits were found and viewed in the concordance tool with more promising outcomes. Two phrases stood out as potentially useful to identify what is important to employers vis-a-vis skills: "as well as" and "the importance of". The concordance results for each term were downloaded, and the columns on either side of the search term were filtered to look for the skills employers most want, including the five skills drawn from the manual reading.

The phrase "as well as" was found in all 100 texts to be commonly associated with lists of skills employers want or to support a skills gap narrative. For example:

"There has been little change since 2015 in terms of the types of skills that employers most commonly judged to be deficient among their workforce [refers to Technical and practical and People and personal skills], "as well as" the proportion of all skills gaps for which each skill was a contributing factor" (Winterbotham et al., 2017, p. 74).

"the skills to manage complexity and risk, as well as the ability to analyse and translate vast amounts of data to inform decision making, are required" (Stormer et al, 2014, p. 55).

Although the phrase "as well as" did expose a list of skills, the use of the phrase suggests an incomplete list of skills and a lack of definitive explanations. When skills are listed in such a

manner, it leaves room for ambiguity and limits a definitive understanding of the transferable skills employers want.

To further interrogate the corpus, the lines of text to the left and right of the phrase "such as" were filtered to search for the term "skills". The search returned 213 results in the lines of text to the right of the search term and 217 results to the left. The results were filtered to show 72 unique texts. From these 72 unique texts, the combination of:

communication, teamwork, leadership, self-management, and problem-solving

occurred 70 times. This search process was repeated for the phrase "the importance of". Again, multiple instances of these five skills were found to be collocated in the same lines of text throughout both the UK government and CBI texts. Finding a persistent set of five skills was promising in confirming the likely presence of a set of transferable skills employers consider most important to them.

To identify proximally close words and textual patterns linked to specifically identifiable skills, the non-specific skills terms "core", "generic", "competencies", and "soft" from the manual reading process were each viewed in the collocate and concordance tools. The results per search term were downloaded into Excel and manually reviewed to look for patterns of skills in the concordance lines.

All the searched-for terms were found to collocate with the five transferable skills in 72 of the 100 texts in the corpus: communication, teamwork, problem-solving, self-management, and leadership – see Figure 14. In addition, "resilience", "generic", and "competencies" which were terms not identified during the data familiarisation process, were also found to collocate with the five transferable skills.

Figure 14: Non-specific skills terms collocating with the 5 transferable skills

that will be at a premium in future, including | resilience, adaptability, resourcefulness, enterprise, cognitive skill
las long pointed to the central importance of | resilience and a positive attitude, demonstrated for example by a
ills amongst colleagues, such as adaptability, | resilience and collaborative aptitudes. Whilst these can be harder
tion, alongside character traits like empathy, | resilience and confidence are and will continue to be at a premiu
61%) of businesses are not satisfied with the | resilience and self-management of young people, while nearly a

eded to the importance of | generic skills (communication, team working) as well as technical skills in ICT worl
r technical/practical skills; | Generic skills comprise communication skills, customer handling skills, team work
r technical/practical skills; | Generic skills comprise communication skills, customer handling skills, team work

lift towards uniquely human | competencies, such as communication, interaction, and emotional connections
well as the broader value of | competencies such as communication skills and teamworking. If students have
requisite for developing soft | competencies such as critical thinking and problem-solving (Rolleston, 2018; K
prerequisite for developing | competencies such as critical thinking and problem-solving (Rolleston, 2018; K

5.3.4 Most requested skills

After finding that a repeating pattern of words and phrases revealed five specific transferable skills - Communication, Leadership, Problem-solving, Self-management, and Teamwork - I sought to find all instances of each skill. The purpose was to determine if there was a hierarchical order to the skills and how they might be described across the corpus. I used the concordance advanced find tool with the context parameter set to "skills" and the search terms "communication", "leadership", "problem*", "self*" and "team*". The asterisk (*) was applied to problem, self, and team to find the various ways these words are presented, for example, self management, versus self-management. From this process, I found 1,876 occurrences of the search terms across all reports from 1999 to 2019. Communication was the most cited skill, with 721 occurrences across the employer skills corpus. Teamwork was found x446, ahead of problem-solving x342, leadership x243 and self-management x124 – see Table 16 below.

Table 16: Employer skills corpus five most common transferable skills

Communication	Teamwork*	Problem-solving	Leadership	Self-management
721	446	342	243	124

Whilst not intentionally ruling out other skills, the findings from the manual reading and whole corpus analysis indicate that there is strong evidence that the UK government and CBI-commissioned skills surveys and reports have contained a consistent set of employer-demanded transferable skills for at least 20 years, from 1999 to 2019. The repetition of these skills in the literature in the Government and CBI-commissioned skills surveys and the broader literature indicates the importance of these skills in the workplace. The dominance of the five skills across the employer skills corpus is an encouraging finding. It helps to answer sub-research question two partially:

> How are transferable skills represented in the UK Government and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) commissioned skills surveys, and to what degree is there a convergence on a unified set of skills with explicit and coherent articulation of their meanings?

It is considered partial because the common set of five skills was only revealed through extensive corpus analysis of all 100 employer skills surveys and reports. Thus it was not readily found in digestible form. However, the set of five skills does appear to help answer what the CBI might mean in their longitudinal call for graduates to have the "right skills" and "work readiness skillsets that employers value" (CBI, 1989, p. 29; 2019b, p. 54) – see Figure 15. Similarly, finding five consistent transferable skills within the UK government and CBI-commissioned reports indicates that the OfS has access to a long-researched set of five transferable skills but failed to look for them. This failure indicates a lack of immanent critique (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016, p. 44) by the OfS, as it does not walk the talk between theory and practice. In other words, they, and by its OfS sponsorship, the UK government demand that English universities develop relevant transferable skills in their students as a condition of university registration (OfS, 2022a, pp. 92-121) but fail to acknowledge the complexity of teaching and assessing such skills or establishing what they are.

Figure 15: CBI 2019 call for "right skills"

When it comes to university graduate recruitment, businesses are looking above all at the qualities of the individual. Attitude and aptitudes for work ranks consistently higher than any other factor when considering graduate recruitment – far above factors such as the university attended

This underlines the importance of continuing to develop the broader, 'work readiness' skillsets that employers' value – such as time management, team working, and problem-solving – in order to be best placed to seize future opportunities. The reality for graduates is that simply gaining a degree is not enough to win entry to a successful career meaning developing the right skills and attitudes is critical for a successful transition from higher education to the world of work.

5.3.5   Clarity or absence of meanings

The partial answering of the research question also left the question of meaning unresolved. So, to test whether the meanings of each skill were clearly stated, I reviewed the whole corpus word list and documented all words related to the root words "define" and "describe". The top five skills were not included in the root word searches to ensure a non-biased and holistic search outcome. For example, I could not be sure that a meaning for a particular skill would be collocated directly with the skill, so deliberately connecting the root word to each skill may inadvertently lead to meanings related to the five skills being missed in the corpus analysis. The search process identified misspelt words in the corpus. For instance, the word "descriptiors". Misspellings were, however, included in the corpus analysis due to their presence in the corpus.

Figure 16: All units of words related to "define" and "describe"

	Rank	Freq	Range
definable	5412	1	1
define	5413	108	52
defined	5414	546	84
definers	5415	2	1
defines	5416	34	24
defining	5417	109	45
definite	5418	42	12
definitely	5419	21	8
definition	5420	426	67
definitional	5421	11	7
definitions	5422	374	57
definitive	5423	31	20
definitively	5424	5	3

	Rank	Freq	Range
describe	5648	150	51
described	5649	558	69
describes	5650	66	37
describing	5651	70	35
description	5652	291	41
descriptions	5653	82	22
descriptiors	5654	2	1
descriptive	5655	18	13
descriptor	5656	18	5
descriptors	5657	94	4

The root word "define" had 13 associated units of words, five of which were most frequently found in a range of 45 and 85 of the corpus texts. The word "describe" had slightly fewer with ten associated units of words, of which three were most frequently found in the range of 41 and 69 of the corpus texts. Collectively, the words occurred x3,059 throughout the corpus – see Figure 16 above. Each word was viewed in the KWIC tool to determine how they were used and if they would reveal definitions or descriptions of skills (see Chapter 4, Section 4.5.5.5 for a description of the concordance technique) to determine how they were used and if they would reveal definitions or descriptions of skills. Interrogating the text surrounding each word was a laborious and lengthy task. However, it was necessary to determine with confidence if the 23 words were linked to detailed meanings for any of the five skills listed in the whole corpus.

Define, describe, and their root words

The words "define", and "describe" and their root words were used in UK government and CBI-commissioned research with similar and different intentions – see Figure 17. Typically, the UK government referred to defining or describing economic market conditions and skills gaps. Furthermore, they emphasised the need to put the employers at the heart of identifying and defining transferable skills (DfEE, 1999, p. 6; Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 10). The UK government also referred to the potential of O*Net's large-scale database of job

descriptions modelled on the US Labour Office to provide work-based skills descriptors (Dickerson et al., 2012, p. ii). Whereas the CBI typically described employers' levels of satisfaction with peoples' skills (CBI, 2008, p. 31) or made assertion claims of much work having been done to "define" employability skills (CBI, 2007, p. 11). In all such instances, no set of skills was found connected to the define, describe and their root words.

Where similarities occurred in how the UK government and the CBI used the words "define" and "describe" and their root words, they typically problematised the ambiguous language employers used when defining transferable skills (CBI, 2018, p. 15; Joynes et al., 2019, p. 68; Martin et al., 2008, p. 18; UKCES, 2010a, p. 10). Both also raised concerns that efforts to define employability skills have led to confusion over what they are and how they can be assessed (CBI, 2018, p. 15; Joynes et al., 2019, p. 68; UKCES, 2010a, p.10). Such concerns led to general conclusions that employability skills should be clearly defined (Martin et al., 2008, p. 7), thus signalling the enduring challenge of a lack of clear definitions despite the passage of time.

Figure 17: Employer skills corpus: "define", "describe" and their root words

: ambiguity in how employers understand and **define** a number of generic skills such as communication, team working and custome (UKCES, 2010, p. 10)

employers that had skill-shortages vacancies (**defined** as vacancies hard to fill due to applicants lacking the skills (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 10)

iployer coalitions.</s><s>Skill Gaps • We have **defined** a 'skill gap' as arising where a deficiency in the skills of existing (DfEE, 1999a, p. 6)

ent occupations.</s><s>They include what are **defined** as key skills – communication, problem solving, team working, IT skill (DfEE, 1999b, p. 15)

•They conclude that the ambiguity in terminology and **definitions** is hindering the ways in which such skills are taught. (Joynes, et al., 2019, p. 68)

78 64 30 31 31 32 35 41 48 23 53 55 61 ...but narrow **definitions** of achievement are causing tolerance of underperformance achievemen (CBI, 2013, p. 15)

ntly, many interviewees told us that the language and **definitions** used by business, government and providers about skills can lead to challenge (CBI, 2018b, p. 15)

Employer needs should be at the heart of identifying and **defining** transferable 16 skills, with the skills agenda being (Pumphrey & Slater, 2002, p. 16)

:imise growth. 1.2 How the UK compares to other nations **Defining** skill can tricky, and there are different kinds of measures (UKCES, 2014, p. 1)

ised for 'soft skills'.</s><s>As well as the lack of clarity in **defining** 'soft skills', there is also a lack of clarity regarding which soft skills (Joynes et al., 2019, p. 15)

and communication.</s><s>Much work has been done in **defining** what employability means i (CBI, 2007, p. 11)

O*NET-type system for the UK which could provide a broad set of **descriptors** of the skills that people utilise in their job (UKCES, 2012, p. ii)

skills gaps continued to be more prevalent in what might be **described** as 'labour intensive' roles (Winterbortham et al., 2017, p. 15)

e initial and continuing employability of individuals, generally **described** as the key skills - ie communication, application of numbe (DfEE, 1999, p. 8)

Nowhere in the segments of texts were meanings for any of the five skills offered beyond their broad meta labels. The conclusion from interrogating the corpus using the root word "define" and its associated words is that none are useful terms to find instances of

describing the meanings of any skills listed in the corpus. Considering the dominance of the 13 words linked to "define" and "describe" across the whole corpus this was an interesting, albeit disappointing finding.

The extent to which the root words "define" and "describe" and their associated words exposed the corpus narratives related to market conditions, skills gaps and skills shortages. These narratives speak to the academic concerns raised in Chapter 3, Section 3.3, that higher education is framed by the hegemonic meta-narrative centred on skills gaps, shortages and market-driven university performance metrics (Arora, 2015, p. 644; Prinsloo, 2012, pp. 29, 90). Such a narrative risks obscuring the value of non-market-driven achievements, for example, the value of university research-generated data and the potential of marginalising alternative perspectives and measures of success.

Problematising narrow definitions

The CBI's call for clear and specific definitions contrasts with its views that narrow definitions cause tolerance of underperformance (CBI, 2013, p. 15). Similarly, the CBI has, for many years, reported that employers remain dissatisfied with graduates' transferable skills (CBI, 2007, p.9; 2019a, p. 8; 2019b. p. 42). These contradictions highlight the complex balance between the CBI and education policy need for standards and the tolerance of underperformance such standards invite. Furthermore, the contradiction is intensified by the CBI's simultaneous reporting of employers' dissatisfaction with graduates' transferable skills despite their advocacy for specific definitions. The tensions caused by the contradictions reveal the inherent challenge of defining and measuring skills in a way that accurately captures their breadth and applicability in higher education and the workplace.

When viewed through a DCR lens, several problems arise from the UK government and the CBI's pursuit of defining the skills employers want. DCR recognises the complexity and evolving nature of reality, including human capabilities and concepts such as "employability skills". It cautions against simplifying these complex phenomena into rigid, bounded definitions and instead advocates for synthesising diverse and contradictory perspectives to deepen our understanding. In a DCR context, definitions are not final conclusions but the beginning of a continuous dialogue and exploration, emphasising the need to move beyond

reductive understandings towards a more comprehensive insight. Defining a skill necessarily binds it in a rigid form, which closes off or restricts the opportunity for further exploration of what other criteria a skill might involve whilst also inviting disagreement. Enclosing a skill in a fixed definition thus risks incompletely describing it. It invites people to disagree on the definition if it does not fit their version of reality (Bhaskar, 2008b, pp. 19, 74, 246). Whereas a DCR approach invites a continuous cycle of exploring the possibilities of what a skill might encompass, enabling a much richer and deeper understanding.

To date, attempts to define employability skills have not resolved employers' persistent dissatisfaction with graduates' transferable skills (CBI, 2007, p.9; 2019a, p. 8; 2019b. p. 42; GoS, 2017, p. 48; Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 27-56). This persistent dissatisfaction indicates ongoing dialectical tensions, contradictions and uncertainty between employers, the government, and the CBI concerning what these skills are, what they mean to whom, or how they can or should be measured and assessed.

5.4   Conclusion – the top five relevant transferable skills

This chapter has sought to answer sub-research question two: How are transferable skills represented in the UK Government and Confederation of British Industry (CBI) commissioned skills surveys, and to what degree is there a convergence on a unified set of skills with explicit and coherent articulation of their meanings across these surveys?

By applying the specific corpus linguistic techniques described in Chapter 4, Section 4.5.5, finding a common set of transferable skills across 20 years of UK Government and CBI on commissioned skills surveys and reports (1999-2019) has been possible. Although the applicability and interpretation of the set of five skills might vary depending on the specific needs and culture of each workplace, the findings from the employer skills corpus and the broader skills literature (Joynes et al., 2019; Karzunina et al., 2018) suggest a consensus. The five skills are universally valued because they contribute to an individual's ability to navigate different professional environments, collaborate effectively, and manage challenges.

However, the five skills were not packaged neatly across the employer skills corpus (or the broader skills literature) but scattered throughout the corpus using messy and confusing terminology. The lack of an easily identifiable unified set of skills means they were only revealed through the detailed corpus linguistic techniques adopted in this research. Furthermore, per the broader skills literature, the five skills were presented at the abstract level of a label. Thus, their meanings were absent. Sub-research question two is, therefore, only partially answered.

Framed on a DCR lens of exploring the dialectic tensions, contradictions and conflicts between higher education policy and the transferable skills employers want, the import of the findings from sub-research questions one and two is that identifying, describing, and assessing transferable skills in an educational context is complex and messy. Furthermore, the discrepancies between the UK government's employer skills surveys and the questionnaires used to generate their findings hide potential researcher biases. Due to the complex and chaotic manner in which the transferable skills are presented through the corpus of 100 skills surveys and reports, English universities face significant dialectic tensions in embedding and delivering transferable skills. Tensions include balancing personalised skill development with standardised evaluation and academic rigour versus practical application. Delivering value for money and positive outcomes in the absence of a set of relevant transferable skills employers want exposes English universities to the risk of draconian regulatory sanctions (OfS, 2022a, pp. 90, 121, 133, 189). These tensions illustrate a significant conflict between educational goals and market demands. The difficulty in assessing transferable skills in an educational context adds further complications for educators. Furthermore, the tensions reflect the complex task of preparing graduates for the workplace and thus the need for a harmonised skill language with simple, well-understood descriptive and assessable criteria.

The next chapter analyses the findings from the employer and educator focus groups tasked with describing the five transferable skills to remove the constraining absence of a common skills language in higher education and wider society.

Chapter 6 Focus Group findings

This extensive chapter sets out the findings of the focus group research in response to sub-research question three: How can asking educators and employers to describe their expectations of graduate performance related to a set of transferable skills contribute to the process of establishing a common skills language as part of graduate preparedness for employability?

Part A analyses the focus group findings and explains how each group contextualised and described the five skills. Challenges in articulating and assessing the skills and similar and different views are explored before drawing out shared frustrations about students' and graduates' performance. The process of managing the focus groups and the responses to the post-focus group questionnaire are also considered. In Part Two, the key themes drawn from the thematic analysis described in Chapter 4 are revealed. The chapter concludes with a summary discussion before moving to the final discussion in Chapter 7. Verbatim extracts are colour-coded, green for employers and brown for educators, to highlight each focus group's content.

A conscious decision was made to keep the problematising challenges and thematising solutions in the same chapter. This two-part story connects, exposes, and supports the challenges other studies have found in defining transferable skills. It then shows how thematising the five transferable skills across six key themes overcomes the definitional challenge, to establish a mapped network of expectations across all five skills.

At each stage in the thematising process, I was conscious of my role as researcher and interpreter of the findings. I took care to remain neutral and objective by staying close to and constantly referring back to the semantic transcription narratives so as not to add my subjective interpretations to the thematically mapped key themes.

6.1   Part A: Contextualising and describing the five skills

Both employers and educators acknowledged the interdependence between all five skills and thus the challenges in describing, quantifying, and assessing the skills independently. How each group framed their responses to the focus group questions using context and scene-setting is explored. Significant areas of common expectations of graduate performance of the five skills were found among and between the focus groups. The commonalities and challenges are considered and illustrated using extracts from the focus group transcripts.

6.1.1   Mean-making scenarios, shorthand speaking and prompts

Each focus group was given a contextual framing to discuss the five skills. The context-setting helped to avoid the abstract and disconnected ways in which skills are often spoken about in the broader literature (Grinis, 2017, p. 3; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, pp. 16-22; Pollard et al., 2015, p. 22; Osmani et al., 2019, p. 424). The employer focus group was asked to consider what they expected a new graduate to be able to demonstrate relative to the five skills. Educators' expectations were positioned in the context of assessing a final-year student. All participants also drew from their worldviews, evidenced by using self-selecting scenarios to explain and describe their expectations of graduate performance. For instance, employers drew on their experience when interviewing and onboarding graduates, whereas educators drew on their experience of assessing students' class participation and assignment submissions:

> Employers: "…I've got a couple of scenarios that I play out in an interview; when we on-board graduates, there is a structured programme"; "I have had coaching sessions with graduates who can't make decisions"; "one of the key interview questions that I've often asked is around volunteering; generally in a project scenario"

Educators, on the other hand, contextualised their expectations of graduate behaviour on assessments, classroom participation, and future performance. For example:

Educators: "if it's a group presentation for example, have they been able to meet the deadline, have they been able to submit their work on time"; "I say to students in doing their dissertation, you're going to get a dose of the flu, you're going to miss a few classes … but that isn't going to be an excuse for extending your deadline".

Signalling agreement

Contextualised scenarios also provided a shorthand mechanism for participants to signal their agreement without repeating what others had said. Although agreeing without repeating comments could potentially hide deeper levels of thought, or indicate peer pressure influence, no evidence was found to indicate that one speaker unduly influenced other speakers or contradicted them. Furthermore, instances of agreement prompted deeper levels of reflection. For example:

Educators: [Teamwork] [PA6]: "Yes, I sort of have the same view of PA5 .. I agree with that thing about stepping back and letting other people shine. But I also believe in stepping up … [PA8]: "I think PA6 brought out a point that is present in my mind – the ability to step forward and the ability to step back" [Teamwork]

Employers: [Teamwork] "[PE2]: I would like to pick up where [PE11] was leaving off there because something I don't think I would have said, but is so so important, is self-awareness"; [PE3]: "And again, echoing what [PE10] has just said, I think it's vital that, you know, people have the ability to take responsibility for the deliverables".

The initial contextualising questions helped participants to discuss the performance behaviours they expect of graduates relative to the five skills and encouraged them to give specific examples. The positive influencing and reflective insights suggest that the protocol of speaking without interruption was helpful prompting listeners to think thoughts they may not otherwise have done. The speaking order protocol also suggests that participants had time to reflect on others' thoughts and build on them without having their thoughts crowded out by competing voices. This approach helped the participants relate each skill to their real-life experiences, providing contextualised real-world expectations and descriptions of performance. Participants offered clear descriptions for other participants to

understand the speaker's perspectives. Thus, the context, expectation, description (CED) sequencing enabled participants to richly describe their expectations in an accessible and understandable manner for their peers.

The value of scenarios

Using scenarios to explain individually held thoughts reflects a dialectical approach as scenarios navigate between conceptual and abstract understandings in the *(real)* domain and concrete personal experiences in the *(empirical)* domain. Furthermore, scenarios also revealed how each group's contextualised meanings were shaped by the social structures, historical events, and political ideologies in the *(real)* domain and their subjective experiences in the *(empirical)* domain (Bhaskar, 2015, p. 146). For example, employers spoke of the expected behaviours that the social structure of a university degree should confer on graduates:

Employers: "I'm happy to accept any subjects whichever discipline I'm recruiting for because I'm actually looking for potential rather than content. So I expect them to be able to demonstrate through whatever subject they've done that they can take in information, and simulate it and reflect it to come out with a conclusion. That's what I think their degree tells me …. we're looking for people to effectively keep breaking the mold … for me, the fundamental there is not to be afraid to fail … show how resilient you are in dealing with failure … Not everything works, get over it, move on, that's the sort of attitude that we need to have".

In contrast, educators spoke of the policy requirement to successfully progress students:

Educators: "understanding of theory and academic used to be the role of going to University and part of the journey through these kinds of institutions was that journey of self-discovery that we ask for our students but our students aren't asking that of us now. They're saying that we're a customer and we want you to do X Y and Z because we're paying money. And so therefore, these aspects around what we ask students to do around leadership, around self management, problem-solving skills, I don't necessarily think that we are actually delivering on providing those for our students. Because we're

looking at providing them a nice cushion in terms of looking at them as customers … and that's not necessarily what is in the best interest of our students".

6.1.2   A critical contextual contradiction

The contextualised examples illustrate a critical contradiction in higher education. Employers expect graduates to leave university with a mindset of not being afraid to fail. However, this contrasts starkly with institutional, and thus, educators' motivations to comply with progression targets and ensure students get the degree they have paid (OfS, 2019, p. 7). The net contradictory tension, evidenced by employers' dissatisfaction with graduate skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 25; GoS, 2017, p. 48), is that graduates enter the labour market unable to demonstrate the fail fast and resilient qualities employers seek because their OfS university experience metrics preferences pass-rate success often over their actual abilities.

The critical difference between employer expectations of graduate performance and the pressure educators face to progress students indicates that a gap exists between what society expects a formal education to instil. This gap is evidenced by the employer expectations linked to graduates' mindset, and the political and societal pressures educators face to ensure students progress through and graduate from university. This observation reveals the complex dynamics between educators' agency and society's structural forces, prompting a deeper reflection on how knowledge and skills are developed, recognised, and valued. Furthermore, the complex relationship between the *(real)* structures of universities, employers, and the mechanisms of education policies illustrates the mutually complicit contrariness of the roles education policies and labour market demands play in shaping educational objectives. These elements conflict with and reinforce each other in shaping what universities aim to achieve.

6.1.3 Difficulty describing and quantifying the five skills

Both employers and educators spoke similarly of the challenge of describing the five skills in isolation and out of context. They explained their difficulties were due to the interdependence between the skills and, therefore, the skills are not bounded by their headline labels. Both groups also raised concerns over how to quantify and evaluate the skills. Their shared recognitions include the following focus group extracted text segments:

Difficulty describing and quantifying:

Educators:

> [self-management] "is a hard concept to be able to really define"
>
> [team work] is a really difficult question because it is so context driven"
>
> [communication] "is a combination of skills that are actually very much linked to a series of other skills …. communication is tricky to evaluate because its' not one skill that you need to evaluate…. it's a combination of skills that are actually very much linked to a series of other skills".
>
> [leadership] "they're problem-solvers … they're good solid communicators ….. it goes back to self-management
>
> [self-management] it's a range of skills ….. it's a hard concept to be able to really define …. we're assessing more their ability to write very good reports on various topics related to leadership. It doesn't necessarily say whether or not they are a very good leader; I have classes with 400 students … so I don't evaluate leadership;

Employers:

> [Leadership] "the ability to influence …. encourage people to contribute, and that's a lot of the back to where we were with the communication and the team working;
>
> [communication] linking it back to the problem-solving, we expect them to bring new ideas…[and] communicate those ideas through both written and verbal communication skills"
>
> [Teamwork] its very very closely and tightly linked to the communication skill"
>
> [open discussion] "it's so difficult to actually pin down what is it we're actually looking for ….. most of the stuff that we're talking about when we're identifying

something, its traces of, its not the actual thing itself...... the really difficult thing is how you quantify any of this that we have just talked about....in the world of qualitative assessment, I need to have a reference that I can say yes, they have demonstrated, no they haven't... it is important to be able to say, this is why I saw good in this person but not in this person."

The educator's challenges in assessing the skills reflect the problems found in the broader skills literature. For instance, large class sizes, the complex make-up of a skill, the lack of clarity on what the skills mean, and that assessment is usually cognitively based on writing reports rather than on observations, align with studies conducted by Al Mallak et al., 2020; Barrie, 2006, p. 234; Drummond et al., 1998, p. 23; Jones, 2009, p. 179; Okolie, 2020, p. 304. Similarly, the employers' expressed difficulty in pinning down what they are looking for aligns with other studies, which also found that employers struggle to articulate their transferable skills needs in a language graduates and universities can understand or articulate what good performance looks like – see, for example, (Bennett, 2002, p. 471; CBI, 2018, p. 15; Grinis, 2017, pp. 3, 33; Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, pp. 44-5; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, pp. 16-22; Pollard et al., 2015, p. 77). These collective studies, dating from 1987, demonstrate the long-standing problem of describing and teaching the transferable skills employers want.

Blurred boundaries

The habit of referring to other skills when speaking of one skill evidences the complex nature and interdependence of the five skills. Furthermore, the fact that both groups found it difficult to speak of each skill in isolation suggests the necessity of discussing transferable skills as an integrated whole rather than discrete and independent skills. The complexity and interdependent nature of the skills were critical factors when considering how to construct the key themes discussed in Part B of this chapter.

It was also noticeable that employers were asked to clarify their language expressions across the five skills, more than the educators across a ratio of 9:1. The educators' transcript was re-read to check for missed opportunities to clarify meanings but none were found.

Clarifications were needed due to using euphemisms and obscure expressions when referring to behaviour expectations. For example, an employer's euphemism of "being a grown-up" and an educator's obscure expression of "put it all together" without explaining what they meant – see Figure 18.

Figure 18: Unclear meanings

Unclear meanings for which clarifications were sought.

Communication:
- Employer: "a willingness to communicate"
                "positively communicating a message"
- Educator: "put it all together as the situation demands"

Problem solving:
- Employer: "use different strategies to get a result"
                "look at a problem a different way"

Teamwork:
- Employer: "being diplomatic in a team"

Self-management:
- Employer: "sorted on the home front"
                "being a grown-up"

Leadership:
- Employer: "demonstrate a desire to lead, or coach"

Euphemisms – a duality of absence

Euphemisms and obscure expressions illustrate Bhaskar's duality of absence concept (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 5). In other words, the term "being a grown-up" is present, but there is an absence of meaning to know what a speaker means when using the phrase "being a grown-up". However, when asked to clarify their meaning, rich detail emerged. For example, one employer explained the concept of "being a grown-up" as follows, with concurrence by all employers:

> "being able to make decisions, respond to those tasks and deliverables on their graduate programme that align with the work that they've been first assigned …. be flexible and adaptable … put some effort in…..[not having] tantrums and hissy fits about the fact that they've got to produce a report …. get to work on time every day … turn up inline with the terms of your contract … behave appropriately, legally and professionally. You're a grown up now"

Similarly, the educator unpicked their "put it all together" comment, which was made in relation to student presentations, by adding that it was important for them to:

> "know the right media, they know the right message…. able to select the right tools…. engaging, persuading but as required so that the great student …. would not go ranting on on a sales pitch if the situation didn't demand a sales pitch. Similarly, I wouldn't expect anybody to make an hour-long presentation when a 6 minute 40 petcha-kucha is the way to go"

When surface-level meanings are clarified, they have the potential to uncover a much richer vein of intended meanings. Thus, the need to not accept implicitly articulated statements and dig below surface-level meanings is an important finding.

A rich and detailed set of expectations

Despite their professed difficulties, it was striking that both groups spoke in rich detail about their expectations of graduate performance, detailed in Part B below. Their fluent descriptions confirmed the value of the pilot studies in this research, which found that when participants were asked to describe what performance they expected from graduates, as opposed to being asked for bounded definitions, they could do so easily and fluently. This finding of descriptive over definitional aims contradicts other research, which found that employers could not articulate the transferable skills they expected graduates to demonstrate. For example, Kashefpakdel et al. (2019) and Pollard et al. (2015) found that employers could not articulate transferable skills.

A solution to the enduring definitional problem

The long-standing pattern of asking participants to define skills rather than describe them is common across the broad skills literature. This enduring pattern is reinforced by the use of pre-determined skills lists in employer skills research and questionnaires, which, by their nature, are also defined – see, for example, Dearing, 1997, Appendix 4, Annex A, p. 3; Nesta, 2019, p. 8; Rios, 2020, p. 82; Winterbotham et al., 2020b, p. 72, and the eight prominent employer studies listed in Table 3. Thus, intentionally asking participants to describe, rather than define, the five skills is an important finding in this study as participants could

articulate the performance behaviours they expect of graduates concerning the five skills in clear and straightforward language.

Although the broader skills literature problematises the difficulty of describing and evaluating transferable skills, neither the OfS nor the policymaking literature acknowledges the challenges these might cause in higher education. If employers and educators struggle to describe and assess relevant transferable skills, it is unreasonable of the OfS to measure universities' compliance in delivering such skills.

However, this research has found that employers and educators are capable of describing relevant transferable skills. Thus, the following section illustrates the capacity of both groups to dig beneath a surface-level skills label to generate rich and meaningful common descriptions for all five skills.

6.1.4   Similar expectations

Both focus groups used three identical words and their derivatives: expect/ed/ing, able and ability/ies. Both groups incorporated these in a range of signalling phrases preceding an expectation of performative action:

ability to	can do	demonstrate	have some	look at
able to	can they	Evidence of	know how	looking for
be able	do they	Expect them	know where	need to

Although these short phrases were not considered significant as participants were primed to use them by the wording of the focus group question: "What do you **expect** a graduate to be **able** to do…..", they were useful to draw my attention to interesting segments of text. Consequentially, when iteratively reading each skill discussed in the respective focus groups, there appeared to be common agreement on expectations of graduates in possession of the skills discussed. The similarities per skill discussed are set out below.

6.1.4.1 **Communication similarities**

There was common acceptance that good communication involves a combination of skills. Both groups provided a range of views which, when analysed, were found to be similar and coalesced around two concepts:

- being clear and structured   - interaction and engagement with others

Both groups spoke equally of the need for graduates to have a clear structure when speaking – see Table 17. By structure, employers spoke of graduates needing to structure their ideas and convey ideas clearly; educators spoke of an ability to structure effective arguments and ask questions. Both expectations require a graduate to structure their thoughts but from different perspectives. The employers are focused more on hearing clear ideas from graduates, whilst educators want to hear effective arguments in which graduates take a position for themselves.

Table 17: Focus group perspectives: Clear and Structured (Communication)

Skill	**Employers**	**Educators**
Communication – clear thinking and structure	**break** that [convoluted idea] **down** into something that gets to the point very quickly	can take complex ideas and **break** them **down** and deliver them in simple, easy to understand ways
	coherent in their communication through … both **written and verbal** communication skills..	someone who can articulate well, **writing, speaking**….
	structure their ideas concisely, clearly, articulately, to the team receiving that information	**structure** and deliver effective arguments using insight and applying key concepts in precise and engaging mannerable to **articulate**, express
	coherent in communication through writing……….speak in written word to the team receiving that information	demonstrate what they're trying to get across by writing
	choice of words needs to be exact and **clear** and not confuse the idea…	…..interact precisely with audience to get message across with clarity….
	clearly **articulate** exactly what they want to say…don't overtalk	….. deliver complex ideas in simple, easy to understand ways…
	asking the right kinds of questions, which is one of the key skills that we ask of our students at University	
	asking questions you are communicating something that you have done some research and are seeking clarification	
	communication is the primary skill in getting the work done, you know, being an employee	

On being clear and structured, the expectation that graduates need to ask the right questions suggests both groups had experienced students and graduates not clearly articulating their thoughts. Both groups emphasised the need for graduates to focus on ensuring their intended message is easily understood by others.

The need for interaction and engagement

Both groups talked equally about the need for graduates to interact and engage with others, recognise there are different ways of communicating and tailor their communication style to their audience – see Table 18.

Table 18: Focus group perspectives: Interact, Engage, Listen (Communication)

Skill	Employers	Educators
Communication – interaction and engagement	**engage** with all different types of people….	in communication if you can **engage** your .. then you are on the right track
	being able to **interact** to communicate on its simplest level	being able to **interact** precisely with the audience
	demonstrably **listening**…. to listen a lot to the environment that they're in…	**listen** to others
	recognise that there are different ways of communicating and that different people that they communicate to may need to be dealt with in various different ways	**tailoring** your communication style according to the person that you are seeking to communicate with
	it's also about the way in which you carry yourself the way in which you carry yourself	someone who can articulate well, …. body language

The hidden complexities of communicating

When viewed through a DCR lens, the similar views between educators and employers on the inability of graduates to clearly articulate their thoughts verbally and in writing highlight several tensions regarding the hidden complexities of communication as a skill. DCR illustrates that communication is a multi-faceted skill beyond the act of verbal or written

articulations. It involves understanding the dialectical interplay between different viewpoints, contexts, and the underlying structures that inform those views. This complexity suggests that effective communication requires a combination of clarity, simplicity and a deep understanding of the content and context of the subject being communicated. Graduates' perceived difficulty in clearly and effectively structuring arguments indicates the need for deeper, more critical engagement with the subject matter, which involves exploring and synthesising opposing viewpoints and hidden or unacknowledged assumptions or perspectives. The skill of communication is thus revealed to be a complex interaction between critical thinking, judgement, rationality, analysis, and respect for diverse perspectives.

6.1.4.2 Problem-solving

Both groups provided a similar range of expectations of graduates' problem-solving behaviours. When analysed, these were found to coalesce around three concepts:

- analytical approach   - innovative thinking   - being resilient

Each concept is illustrated using extracts from the focus group corpus – see Table 19.

Table 19: Focus group perspectives: Problem-solving (Problem-solving)

	Employers	Educators
analytical approach	have some clear thinking to get the root cause of the problem before they rush off and try to solve the wrong problem	looking at the root cause of the problem because quite often the problem that is being presented is not actually the problem
	take in information and simulate it	to be able to think synthetically
	knowing analytical tools and methods	applying the right tool in the right way
	come up with a solution to a situation	able to provide a solution depending on the problem you have
	demonstrate different approaches... having a very clear analytical approach	structured and disciplined approach
innovative thinking	look at a problem in a different way	looking at the problem from different perspectives
	thinking outside the box	thinking out of the box in terms of being creative and innovative
resilience	the ability to bounce back is definitely important..... show how resilient you are in dealing with failure.. fail fast	resilience and also confidence because, when people are confronted with problem solving it means a change of a situation

What employers and educators do not want

Both groups also expressed clear indicators of what they do not want graduates to do when solving problems. Employers do not want graduates to "just google it" or "rush off and try to solve the wrong problem," and educators do not want students "not just run with what they see." These extracts offer powerful evidence that employers and educators are closely aligned in their expectations of graduate performance.

In summary, it was interesting to note the relative ease with which both groups described problem-solving compared to communication skills. This ease may be because problem-solving is a more tangible skill involving concrete situations and actions. This hypothesis could be tested in future research by including a post-focus group question to ask participants if they found any skill easier to describe than others and why this might have been so.

The hidden complexities of problem-solving

However, underlying the three concepts (analytical approach, innovative thinking, being resilient) lay more complex expectations of cognitive, emotional, and behavioural elements. This complexity shifts the tangible dimension of problem-solving skills onto a more intangible dimension of human behaviour. How a person approaches problem-solving will likely be influenced and shaped by their culture and personal experiences. Thus, the complexity of problem-solving requires surfacing to help a deeper understanding of the behaviours involved in solving problems.

6.1.4.3 **Teamwork**

There were many similarities in expectations of graduates' performance related to teamwork between the groups. When analysed, they were found to coalesce around three concepts:

- work collaboratively with others   - emotional intelligence
- positive mindset and attitude

Each concept is explored using semantic extracts. Due to the complexity of making sense of the data, the concepts are set out in three different tables below: Table 20 provides examples of how similarly the focus groups spoke about the need for graduates to work collaboratively, Table 21 illustrates the close relationship between teamwork and emotional intelligence, and Table 22 illustrates the link between teamwork and a positive mindset.

Indicators of a shared language for problem-solving – working collaboratively

The concept of working collaboratively was evident in both group discussions. The behaviours of communicating, collaborating, and offering help to others were strong indicators of a shared language. Again, the similarity of expectations surfaces how aligned the employers and educators were in their views – see Table 20. Such alignment offers the potential to progress greater dialogue and cooperation with larger groups of employers and educators to test how their respective views might coalesce around a common skills language.

Table 20: Focus group perspectives: Working collaboratively (Teamwork)

Employers	Educators
bring everybody up to speed. So being a collaborator	evidence of collaboration, commitment to the purpose and required outcome
understand how to engage in teams with the different cultures	sensitive to different cultures
listen to understand what needs to be done and communicate that out to the team	Communication I very much link to this one... to be able to assess who you are talking to or who is talking to you
some evidence in performing teams will be seeing that individual offering help, offering collaboration, offering ideas	when somebody sees someone else, being able to develop their role so giving them the opportunity to go with that and to be able to support them
first of all, to understand the purpose of the team	
follow as good as you want to lead	
don't keep secrets, share, tell them what you're doing and tell them what you've done and then tell them again	
listening as part of team skills development	
try to build constructive solutions or constructive pattern of working out	

A convergence of understanding and shared meanings – emotional intelligence

Regarding emotional intelligence, both groups used the same or similar language to describe their expectations that graduates understand team dynamics, can solve conflict, respect others, and understand their own thought processes – see Table 21. Their similarity indicates a potential convergence of understandings and shared meanings between employers and educators. With convergence comes the potential to uncover patterns, connections, and contradictions in how teamwork is understood across a larger cohort of stakeholders.

Table 21: Focus group perspectives: Emotional Intelligence (Teamwork)

Employers	Educators
recognise when they're excluding others	understand social cues and adjust accordingly your own behaviour
understand its important to get the dynamics of the team and not just ride roughshod over the people they consider not to be important	understanding and being cognizant of where you are in team development. So if you know that the team is not functioning in certain ways, ..look at being able to solve that in order to move forward
understanding how to resolve conflict in a team	how they have resolved problems within the team members
understanding your own thought process	cognitively appraise and evaluate process of your own thoughts
have a perception of everybody is an equal and has something to give	giving everyone the opportunity to fully contribute
respect of others' words	respect of the others thoughts

A common expectation for a positive mindset

In the context of a positive mindset and attitude, both groups referred to the need for graduates to get involved and take responsibility for their actions when employed or working in a team. Although the employers offered more examples of ways in which they expect graduates to have the right attitude and positivity during the teamwork discussions, educators expressed similar expectations that graduates need to have the attitude of not being the weakest link and doing their work to the standards expected of them – see Table 22. One employer spoke illustratively about the soul-destroying feeling when a graduate has

a negative response to a problem - "You'll all know the soul-destroying feeling when you get that person who goes "oh we tried that before, it'll never work, we're all doomed"". The employer's comments drew nods of agreement from their peer participants, indicating a collective lived experience of the scenario. However, both groups referred to the need for graduates to take responsibility for their actions, and participate in and do the work allocated to them. Again, the alignment in expectations offers hope that a common skills language is possible between employers and educators. In the context of gathering market intelligence on employers' skills needs, asking employers and educators to describe their expectations of graduate performance against a set of specific transferable skills offers policymakers the opportunity to curate much more detailed research on employer skills needs.

Table 22: Focus group perspectives: Positive Mindset and Attitude (Teamwork)

Employers	Educators
demonstrate a way in which they can take the responsibility for certain activities	not being the weakest link is the key. Step up, do your work, do your work to the standards and participate
do what you said you would do	
being reliable in communication if you can't turn up	
to be very positive in a team	
punctuality for time-keeping. If we've got a meeting at 10 o'clock, be there 10 minutes before	
communicate back to a team when you've hit a peak and you can't deliver everything.	

In summary, the commonality of findings between the two groups concerning teamwork clearly indicates a shared set of expectations based on language expressions and, thus evidences the potential for a common language between employers and educators.

6.1.4.4 Leadership

The discussions on leadership for both groups were mostly focused on the four concepts of:

- taking initiative   - role-modelling behaviours

- influencing and inspiring others   - self-understanding

Taking initiative and role-modelling

The concepts of taking initiative and role-modelling are combined in Table 23. Their common expectations were evident in the use of the same or very similar language. For example, both groups expect graduates to take initiative, convince, inspire, and influence others – see Table 23.

Table 23: Focus group perspectives: Taking initiative and Role-modelling (Leadership)

Employers	Educators
be a self starter in that sense, that they're not looking to be hand-held	takes the initiative to solve problem, … not waiting to be led
having initiative to say "right, okay, I don't know the answer yet but…I'm going to find out.	spots issues and resolve them…..solving problems without being asked
being prepared in leadership role to have courage to start a discussion	managing the discussion in the room
role-modelling and leading by example to gain respect and credibility, what and how you do it	set an example to their team members
leading to me is bringing other people along with you…. the ability to influence, the ability to encourage people to contribute	the ability to convince and inspire other team members to achieve a good outcome… influence others in a positive way
understanding your own thought process	manage your own understanding

A close alignment of expectations

The similarity of language between employers and educators demonstrates how closely aligned they are in expecting graduates to take the initiative and lead by example. For example, both groups used the same expressions in relation to the need for graduates to

lead by example, set an example to their teams and take initiative. Both also expressed the need for graduates to influence others – see Table 24. The ability to influence and encourage others suggests a deeper need for graduates to be taught the art of influencing during their degree education.

A contrasting lack of expectation

Interestingly, the employer focus group members do not expect a graduate to arrive with any leadership skills. For instance, employers stated: "I'm not expecting a graduate to arrive with any. I'm expecting them to arrive with, or to demonstrate a desire to lead, or coach... I don't expect the graduates to have a huge leadership capability … don't expect graduates to bring leadership skills to the role". However, they expect graduates to want to lead and show their potential to lead. This lack of expectation contradicts the UK government-commissioned skills survey reports, which regularly cite employers' need for people with leadership skills (Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 19). This contradiction is further amplified because the UK government's survey participants, since at least 1999, have only been asked for their views on management skills lacking in their workforce. However, since 2009 the survey report authors introduced the double theme of leadership and management as if it is a single skill (Selner, 2019, p. 28; UKCES, 2010b, p 237). The absence of leadership in survey questions means that this study's focus groups' views on graduates' leadership skills could be shared more broadly across employers than is currently reported in the literature. Adding leadership as a skill not asked for in the UK government's survey questionnaires also reinforces the concerns of biased reporting to align with the deeper structures and mechanisms of successive UK government skills and employability agendas found in Chapter 5, Section 5.3.

Table 24: Focus group perspectives: Influencing and Inspiring others (Leadership)

Employers	Educators
the ability to influence.. to encourage people to contribute	convince and inspire other team members to achieve a good outcome
ability to influence and to build up that concept of influence and respect and collaboration to get a result	ability to influence and to build up that concept of influence and respect and collaboration to get a result
engage in different ways to steer it into a more collaborative space if we want to get others to work with us	so it needs possibly some collaboration with others
one of the aspects of leadership that we look for is facilitation. So that relies on influence..	they're good solid communicators, they influence others in a positive way

A need to understand self

Both groups also talked of the need for graduates to understand themselves, although educators broke down this self-understanding to a deeper level than employers – see Table 25. The greater depth of expressions used by educators when discussing expectations of understanding self in the context of leadership is not intended to illustrate employers' lack of descriptive depth. Educators' depth of thinking may be indicative of the value education sets on reflective learning and thus an educative focus on examining students' awareness of their skillsets. That said, the insight offered by employers is similarly valuable in helping graduates to know how they should conduct themselves to evidence their leadership ability.

Table 25: Focus group perspectives: Understanding Self (Leadership)

Employers	Educators
Patience with themselves, with others, with the process	take the lead of your own tasks, be the leader of your own self, manage own understanding
not to go into a sulk when it's not your idea	manage your own emotions
	a sense of empathy within the teams that you lead
	empathetic approach towards problem solving with their other team members
	they're very aware of what their skills sets are
	competent and confident about your own skills in certain domains
	be the leader of your own self, manage your own understanding

Educators' expertise in articulating understanding self

The deeper level to which educators break down self-understanding may also be due to the influence of one educator whose discipline is psychology. Their level of expertise suggests that the IFF research company responsible for designing and delivering the UK government's employer skills surveys (DfE, 2022, p. 1) could benefit from including discipline-specific experts in reviewing and reporting survey results. This inclusion suggestion is particularly important as questions related to graduate preparedness for employment (IFF, 2005, p. 7; Selner, 2019, p. 28) are included in the UK government's employer skills survey questionnaires.

Influencing, not leading

The finding that both groups expect graduates to influence and persuade others when working with others rather than leading others feels like an important distinction. If universities are required to develop leadership skills in their graduates, the implication of the focus group findings suggests that educators must start a graduates' learning journey from the perspective of self-leadership before leading others.

6.1.4.5 Self management

As with the preceding four skills, a common language of self-management was also evident among the employers and educators. The common discussions on self-management coalesced around three centralising concepts:

- self-understanding and self-management
- having a disciplined approach and taking responsibility
- being receptive to giving and receiving feedback

Each concept is discussed below to illustrate how close employers' and educators' language is when describing their expectations of self-management.

Both groups considered that self-management included the idea of managing emotions and stress. The language expressions used by each group demonstrate how aligned employers and educators are with the need for graduates to manage their emotions.– see Table 26.

Table 26: Focus group perspectives: Understanding self (Self Management)

Employers	Educators
not have tantrums or hissy fits	manage their emotions and regulate them
not over-stressing because there are always ways around it	able to live in a balanced way to be able to deliver despite the odds
confidence to ask for help when they're not sure	aware of your own self and understanding your own self,

The need for discipline and responsibility

The employers' and educators' views were also very closely aligned on being disciplined and responsible – see Table 27. The close alignment was evident by both groups often using identical words and phrases. For example, there is a need for graduates to "manage their time" and be "disciplined" to complete their tasks.

Table 27: Focus group perspectives: Disciplined and Responsible (Self Management)

Employers	Educators
managing their time and realising time is money	manage their time to meet deadlines
scope activities they're expected to deliver	manage workload pressure
discipline and work ethic to get the work done	implement a form of structure in whatever tasks you lay out and to adhere to a form of discipline
turn up in-line with the terms of your contract	motivation to work in way that is required
being organised and taking care of themselves	being in balance between personal and professional life
ownership so when there's a project or a target ... they know they're owning it	
being a grown-up they have to put some effort in..	

A convergence of expectations for self-management

The close alignment of views indicates a potential convergence of expectations and perceptions regarding how graduates should demonstrate self-management in a real-world context, either in the workplace or in a university setting. It also suggests employers and educators prioritise similar self-management behaviours when evaluating graduate performance and employability.

Both groups strongly expected graduates to be able to give and receive feedback. Educators spoke at greater length on the concept of giving and receiving feedback. This may be indicative of the educative need for students to reflect on their assessment feedback and use it to improve their performance. However, the similar expectations expressed by employers and educators suggest that a graduate's ability to give and receive feedback is a crucial element in shaping collective understanding and helping to inform and evolve graduates' perceptions and actions – see Table 28.

Table 28: Focus group perspectives: Giving and Receiving Feedback (Self Management)

Employers	Educators
learn how to receive feedback, how to give feedback	the ability to give and receive constructive criticism is a key part of Self management
evidence of reflective skills and a commitment to continual improvement ...aware of the criticisms you are receiving, and the feedback you're receiving and how you give feedback	
using feedback in order to improve and make a judgement on how you might improve.	
the ability to be teachable and to receive that feedback	
openness to receive feedback.. to hearing the areas they can improve	

More alignment than division

In summary, the common expectations of graduate performance suggest employers and educators are more aligned in their views of the five skilled discussed than separated. Viewed through the lens of DCR, exploring the meanings of the five skills through expected performance rather than bounded definitions can contribute to the development of a more coherent and transformative approach to setting skills policies. This approach recognises the

interdependence of social structures, mechanisms, and human agency in shaping a common skills language among stakeholders.

6.1.5   Shared frustrations

A range of frustrations was evident in each focus group. Both groups used the same expressions when sharing their frustrations with graduates' behaviours in all five skills. For example:

"what I don't like", "one of the worst", "an example of bad", "soul destroying", "frustrates/frustrated, "don't want", "wouldn't expect".

Frustrations centred on the topic of students'/graduates' reluctance to accept responsibility, be challenged, or make inflated claims of leadership capability -see Table 29.

Table 29: Focus Group Shared Frustrations

Shared frustrations	"what I don't like is people who just go 'well it can't be solved' or 'well everybody thinks it should be done this way so I'm going to do it this way" [problem solving]	"one thing I get frustrated with in our final term students …. they look at an issue and think, okay, all I can apply is what I've been taught" [problem solving]
	"not to think that they are the gift that is given to the team and they are going to be the centre of that team" [teamwork]	"what frustrates me the most is that some people believe that teamwork means they don't have to do anything" [teamwork]
	"I'm not going to hand-hold them through and I don't expect the rest of my team to hand-hold them. This isn't school anymore and sometimes we have had a few graduates who have treated it like it's school and that we're going to chaperone them and mollycoddle them through" [self-management]	"we are living in a very much nurturing way of educating, we're hand-holding .. and, personally, as an educator, I sometimes struggle with that .. some people don't want to be challenged .. and I struggle with that lax approach of not wanting to challenge yourself" [self-management]
	If I may, just PE11's concept of a grown-up … it's not thinking your too good for anything. You'll make your fair share of coffees, you'll just be a good work citizen" [open discussion]	"Their expectation is that they come to sort of demonstrate their genius. Be lauded, praised, given a first even though they've not done any work and they've not fulfilled the criteria that have been set out". [open discussion]

The collective frustrations illustrated by the above employer and educator extracts suggest that both groups have similar lived experiences of graduate performance in the context of the five transferable skills. From the perspective of frustrations, the employers and educators speak the same language. Taking the example of teamwork, the employer and educators' frustrations are the same. However, the fact that employers are still dissatisfied with graduates' skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 25; GoS, 2017, p. 48) illustrates a key tension between the structures of universities, employers, government, and the OfS.

Progression rate tensions

From the educators' perspective students, their belief that students "just need to pass" the course evidenced their frustrations in meeting the progression rate targets set by the OfS. For example:

> "If we are always being demanded that we should be getting 4.5 and 4.8's ….. we're giving the students exactly what they want …. [yet] this conformity doesn't lead to self-management and problem-solving and all these other skills … I think that the Government, through the various regulatory bodies, QAA particularly, have an awful lot to answer for".

The tension of meeting progression rates suggests that it leaves educators with personal struggles of needing to hand-hold students through their studies. Students expect a return on their education investment through employment when they graduate. They can, thus, reasonably expect to be employed, given that they have successfully passed their course. When the graduate enters the workplace, the employer expects them to be able to demonstrate, for example, effective teamwork skills. However, if the graduate cannot do so, the employer is faced with sacking the graduate or investing in training that the promise of industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) did not deliver. Furthermore, when the threat of regulatory sanctions influences academic conformity and positive outcomes are prioritised over challenging learning, this scenario can lead to inadequate preparation for the workplace, resulting in poor job performance and a higher risk of unemployment. Thus, no one wins.

The employer and educator shared frustrations indicate the longstanding need to break down the transferable skills to a level at which there is a common understanding of their meanings (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; Bennett, 2002, p. 471; Grant & Scrivens, 2005, p. 12; Hirsh & Bevans, 1987, p. 80; Jessup, 1991, p. 134). In doing so, educators will have a rich and detailed language they can use for assessing students' transferable skills performance; students will know more precisely what behaviours to exhibit in the workplace; employers will have more confidence that academia shares the same behavioural-based language; and the OfS will have a language against which it can more reasonably determine a university's ability to deliver industry relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121). Thus, everyone wins.

6.1.6   The one exception: behavioural versus evaluative language

One critical difference in language expressions was noticeable during the dedicated skills discussions. Educators adopted a strong evaluative language. This contrasted with employers adopting a more behavioural language. Although this may not be a surprising finding, it illustrates each group's very different contexts.

Employers behavioural language

The employers' exclusive and repeated use of behaviourally driven language dominated their narrative. When discussing their expectations of graduate performance in the five skills, employers regularly used the following words: "willing", "willingness", "prepared", "potential", and "attitude". Thirty-seven instances of these words were regularly found either individually or in the company of each other. For example:

> "…a willingness to engage in communication….. a willingness to communicate in the right way….. a willingness to engage is definitely a key aspect….. a willingness to be proactive and take on roles of responsibility….. a willingness to develop them [skills]….. a willingness to try….. a willingness to volunteer….. a clear willingness to work collaboratively….. someone is willing, is enthusiastic…. prepared…to start a discussion"

"everything we have just discussed is actually summed up in attitude, work ethic, willingness to try and thereafter you see their potential….. to have the potential and I think the potential is epitomising what good is of all of the other skills….. what I look for when they come is the potential. It's the willingness to volunteer to do something, it's the willingness to get engaged to contribute to a situation that is to the benefit of others, not to themselves"

Educators evaluative language

Educators, by contrast, used exclusively the formal language of measurement, with the words "assess", "assessing", "assessed", "assessments", "evaluate", and "measure" a combined 47 times. The word "assess" and its units dominated the educators' narrative. The word "assess" was most commonly spoken 15 times, either as an acknowledgement that the skills discussed were "difficult to assess" or as an intention "to" assess". For example:

"I think that assessing of is very key…. to assess teamwork for me it's about evidence of collaboration…. In the courses that I teach there is no real assessment on leadership…. How we assess [empathetic approaches] is quite challenging…. I'm going to assess now these outcomes in an objective manner…. in studies you need to be able to measure and evaluate the outcomes of teaching"

The behavioural versus evaluative conundrum

In summarising the difference between behavioural and measurement language the following two quotes stand out:

Employers: "PE4 put it really nicely, the traces of or you know, this insight into that potential of those skills. But the willingness to develop them is I think, fundamentally in attitude"

Educators: "In studies, you need to be able to measure and evaluate the outcomes of teaching so we need to understand better those skills"

The quotes illustrate the different behavioural versus evaluative perspectives of employers and educators. The language employers use indicates they look for graduates to demonstrate willingness when executing a skill, whereas educators are more focused on having to measure and evaluate a graduate's skill in a particular area. The educators' language is unsurprising given that English universities are legally required to explicitly state and measure what knowledge, skills, and behaviours a graduate can expect to acquire in exchange for paying for their degree education. In contrast, employers just want a graduate to have "willingness" and "potential". However, willingness and potential are intangible attributes which do not lend themselves to evaluation. This intangibility problem may, therefore, lay at the heart of employers' dissatisfaction with graduate skills (CBI, 2007, p.9; 2019a, p. 8; 2019b. p. 42; GoS, 2017, p. 48; Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 27-56) as it is impossible to measure what cannot be articulated.

The difference in the employers' use of behavioural language versus the educator's evaluative language offers powerful evidence that employers want to see evidence of graduates' "willingness" to perform an action associated with the five skills, whilst educators focus on measuring a graduate's capability. However, as evidenced in the previous shared frustrations section, employers and educators share the same graduate performance frustrations, indicating they are aligned in their thinking.

6.1.7   Part A conclusion

Part A of this chapter reviewed the focus group similarities and differences drawn from thematic analysis step 1. The formal structure of the focus group with speaking order protocols provided a safe and open environment, enabling each speaker to share their views without interruption. Participants used their lived experiences to contextualise their answers, expressing their expectations and frustrations about graduate performance. The regular use of "I agree" to signal agreement with each other indicates that each focus group was aligned in their expectations of graduate performance.

There was some difference concerning where the groups located a particular expectation. For example, employers spoke of the need for graduates "to listen to understand what needs to be done", in the teamwork discussion whereas educators spoke of the need "to listen" in the communication skills discussion. The differently located examples prompted the need for key themes that illustrate expectations of graduate behaviour unbounded from definitions of skills.

The use of similar expressions and expectations by employers and educators reflects a shared understanding and meaning beyond a coincidental or superficial level and thus indicates the potential for a common language between employers and educators. Furthermore, the finding that both groups agreed on the need for a common language and their multiple examples of similar or same expectations of graduate performance shows that a common skills language is desirable and possible. Surfacing and acknowledging the alignment of meanings and where meanings might diverge has the potential to enable more effective dialogue and cooperation between educators and employer groups. This hypothesis will be revisited in the discussion in Chapter 7.

Although the structured focus group discussions involved a small group of 12 participants, they offered powerful insight into the meanings each person assigns to the skills discussed. The following section sets out the key themes drawn from the interesting text segments from both groups.

6.2   Part B: Focus Group Key Themes

This section sets out the results of thematically analysing the focus group corpus. The naming convention for the six key themes and the rationale for establishing key themes capable of encompassing all five skills rather than themes defining each skill is explained before presenting each theme with its respective sub-clustered themes in the context of the five skills. The section has been intentionally kept in Chapter 6 as it summarises and brings together the focus group findings in illustrative form.

6.2.1   Introduction: From complexity to clarity

The blurring of the skill boundaries exposed a complex and messy web of expectations related to each skill, illustrated in Figure 19. The colour-coded collection of arrows emanating from each skill along the bottom of the illustration shows how each skill links to the six key and 28 sub-themes. This messy web makes attempting to define and identify the components of each skill impossible. The messiness also makes it impossible to coherently represent the employers' and educators' expectations of performance for each of the five skills.

Figure 19: A blurred and complex web of expectations
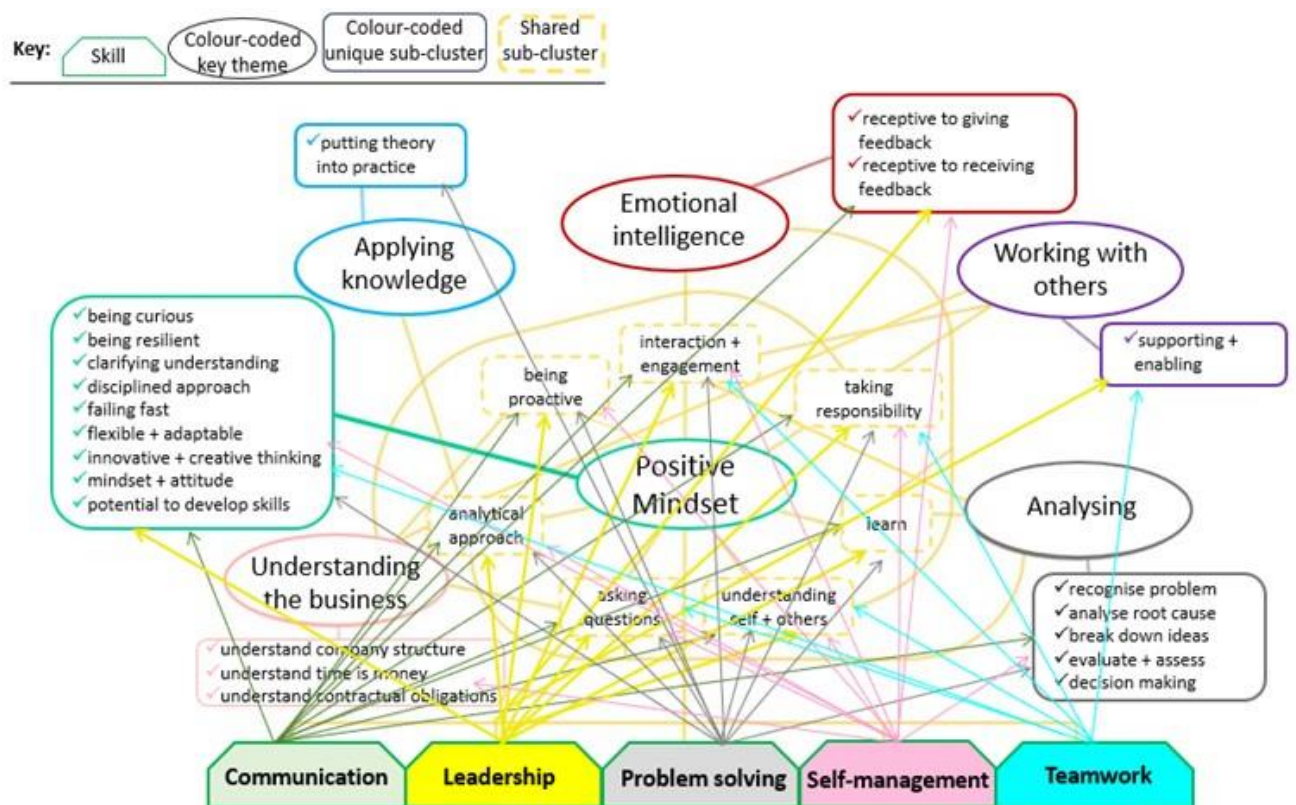
6.2.2   A transparent network of performance expectations

However, from the messy complexity came the opportunity to thematise the five skills. The thematic analysis closely adhered to the semantic expressions used during the focus group discussions to avoid the trap of treating definitions as factual propositions (Schiappa, 2003, p. 90). This approach, combined with the extensive data familiarisation process described in Chapter 5, Section 5.1, unveiled a complex, deeply interconnected yet transparent map of six key themes and 28 sub-clustered themes – see Figure 20. The colour-coded key themes are:

Positive mindset (green), Emotional intelligence (red), Working with others (purple), Analysing (grey), Understanding the business (pink), and Applying knowledge (blue).

Figure 20: A transparent interconnected map of the five transferable skills
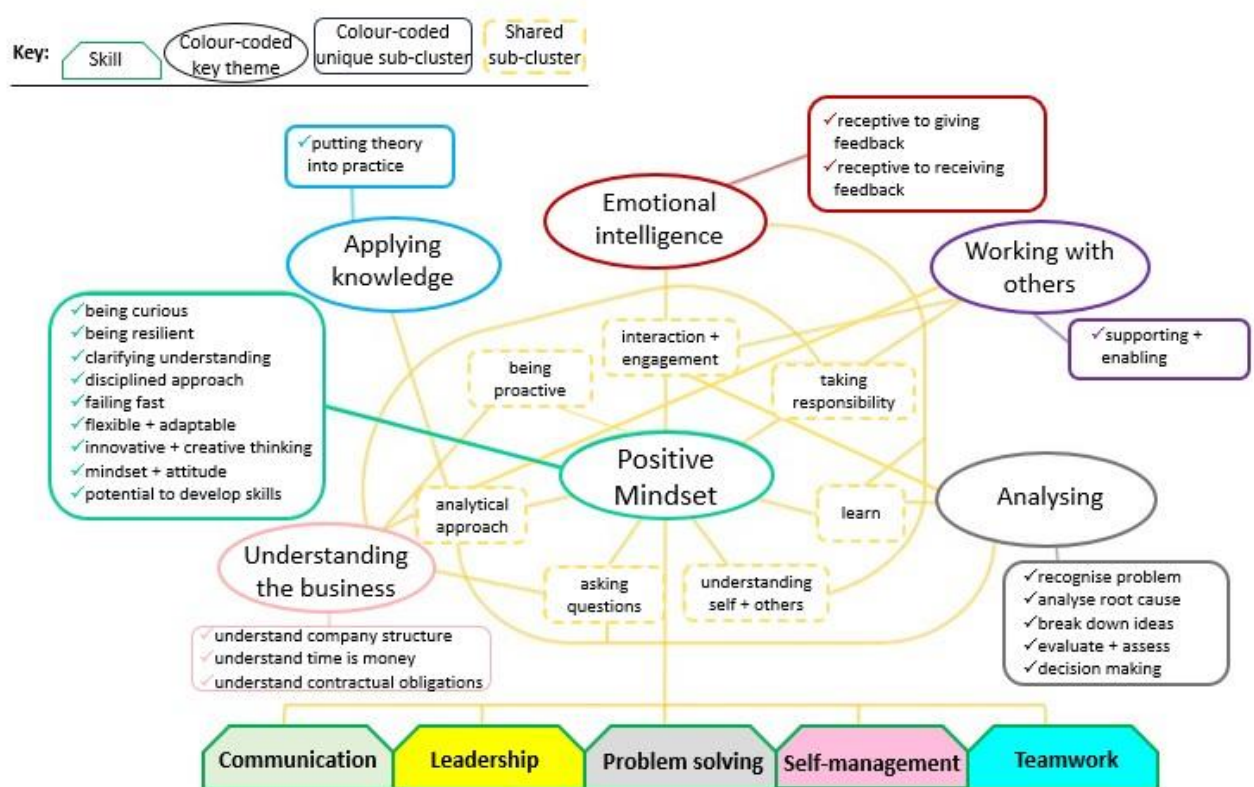
The naming convention for the key themes was inspired by the focus group questions in which participants were asked what each expects a graduate to be able to do when demonstrating the set of five skills. Therefore, the themes needed to make sense when prefixed with "to be capable of, or capable of demonstrating".

The six key themes present an interconnected network of performance expectations of the five transferable skills, in which each theme is connected to one or more of the five skills. The colour coding helps to enhance their visibility when presented as a whole group. Each key theme has a set of shared themes outlined in gold and unique sub-themes, outlined in its key-themed colour. For example, the key theme of Positive mindset is outlined in green with gold connectors to shared sub-themes, and a green connector pointing to its set of unique sub-clusters. The themes are illustratively presented in a clockwise formation. Positive mindset is positioned at the centre to show its complexity relative to the remaining themes.

Five skills with three identical themes

All five skills shared three identical themes: **Positive mindset, emotional intelligence**, and **working with others**. The similarity of expectations between the five skills suggests that a synergistic potential for learning across multiple environments exists. These three themes offer hope of better aligning university curricula and workplace training programmes to enable a more cohesive learning culture where a common language is shared among learners, tutors, assessors and employers. Furthermore, the key theme of **analysing** was common among four of the skills: communication, leadership, problem-solving, and self-management, indicating its importance in the synergistic mix of themes. The outlier themes of **applying knowledge**, which featured only in problem-solving, and **understanding the business,** featured only in self-management, suggest the importance of considering them as complementary themes in the set of six themes.

When the key themes are viewed in the context of each of the five skills, it is interesting to note that there are multiple cross-overs between the skills. For example, the skills of Communication, Leadership, Problem-solving, and Self-management all feature in three key themes – **positive mindset, emotional intelligence,** and **working with others.** This cross-over links back to the complex composition of each skill.

Figure 21: Key themes and their links to the five skills

The key themes present a compelling story about the data's interconnectedness. They also provide a common language account of what employers and educators expect a graduate to be capable of when demonstrating each of the five skills.

The significance of sub-clustered themes

The complexity of the employers' and educators' expectations of graduate performance meant it was essential to find sub-clustered themes capable of illustrating the connections between the skills. The sub-clustering approach taken in this study – see Chapter 4, Section 4.7.3 – exposed the intricate connections and relationships between the themes and the skills. For example, the text excerpts below and earlier presented in Section 6.1.4, illustrate employer and educator shared expectations of graduate performance in the context of communication. However, the text segments were scattered across all five skills rather than located just within communication:

communication: "articulate, express, argue, persuade [and] communicate ideas through written and verbal communication skills".

leadership: "convince and inspire other team members to achieve a good outcome".

problem-solving: "work within a successful team environment to bring an idea in".

self-management: "communicating their task list and just saying where they're at".

teamwork: "listen to understand what needs to be done and be able to communicate that out to the team".

Finding a thematic route avoided artificially locating the shared expectations under a fixed theme or drawing the false conclusion that the statements illustrated only the defining elements of, for example, communication. Thus, when the key themes, sub-themes, and the five skills are viewed as a holistic network of skills, the complex and messy issue of skills not existing in isolation because they "slip and merge into others" (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, pp. 16-22) is both revealed and avoided. This complexity reinforces the benefit of thematising the skills into key and sub-clustered themes rather than attempting to define each one because the behaviours employers and educators expect of graduates transcend bounded definitions of each skill.

A hierarchy of themes, not skills

Although the educators and employers spoke in detail about each skill, they did so in a manner which merged the skills into a holistic web in which each skill influenced and was influenced by the collection of five skills. Thus, the illusion of the relative skill hierarchy from communication to self-management, detailed in Chapter 5, section 5.3.4, and illustrated in Table 16, melted away making it impossible to identify if one skill was significantly more dominant than another. Thus, the five skills form a relational family of skills where each influences and is influenced by the others.

However, when the skills are viewed individually through the lens of the key themes, a hierarchy of themes becomes evident by considering the number of shared sub-clustered themes linked to the five skills. The key theme of **positive mindset** had the greatest number of sub-clustered themes, seven of which connected to all six key themes, followed closely by **emotional intelligence** and **working with others**. Thereafter, **analysing**, **understanding the business**, and **applying knowledge** were closely tied in 4th, 5th and 6th place. Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that it is possible to see a hierarchy of key themes illustrated in Figure 22 by viewing the interconnection of the key themes to each of the five skills.

Figure 22: Hierarchy of Key Themes
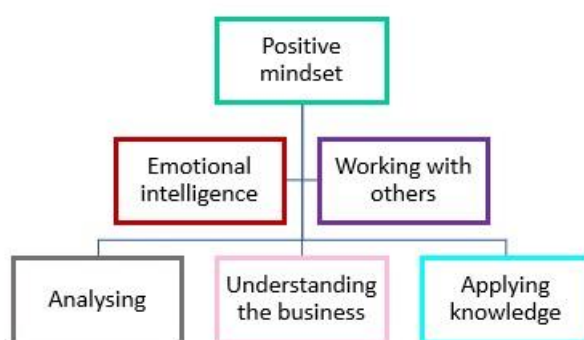
6.2.3 Theme 1: Positive mindset

The key theme of having a **Positive mindset** - was the most complex and dominant theme with sixteen sub-clusters, of which seven sub-clusters were shared with all other key themes and all five skills, as illustrated in Figure 23 below. The nine unique sub-clusters of graduate

performance expressed through the first theme of **positive mindset** are listed in the single, green, colour-coded rectangular box. The seven shared sub-clusters are set out in gold rectangles to demonstrate the complexity and breadth of having a **positive mindset**.

Figure 23: Theme 1: Positive Mindset
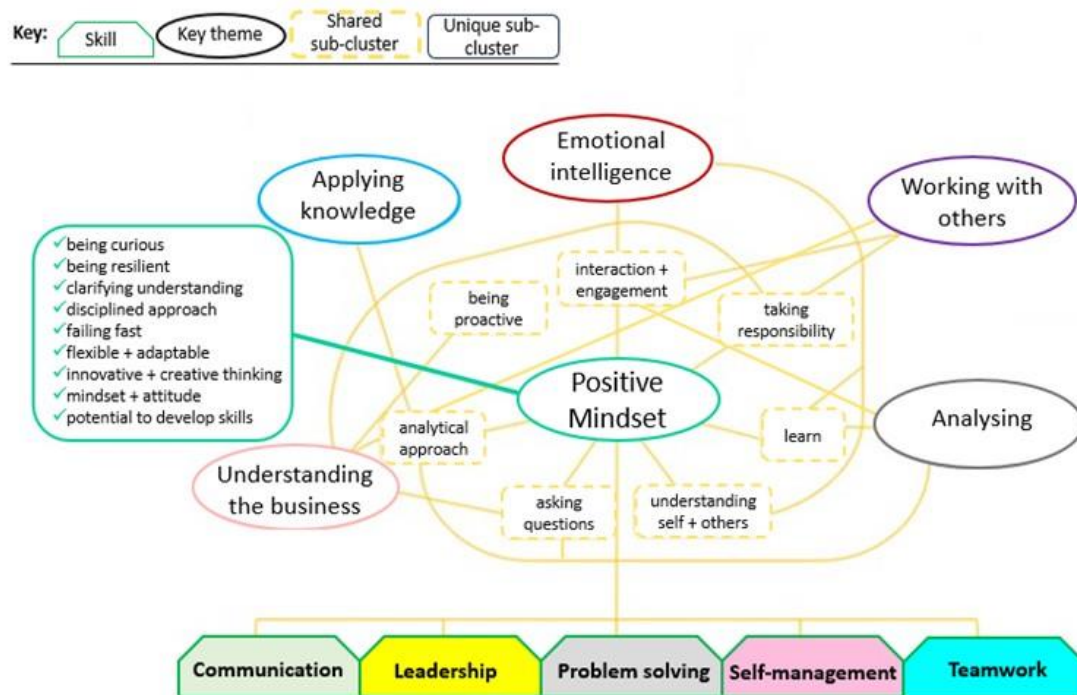
Both focus groups spoke passionately about expecting graduates to interact and engage with others in a positive way, ask questions and take initiative to solve problems without being asked - see Figure 24. Although both groups used similar expressions and shared a common set of expectations of a **positive mindset**, only the employers spoke of the expectation that graduates show "willingness".

Text segment	Sub theme
willingness to be **proactive** and take on roles of **responsibility**..... demonstrate a way in which they can **take responsibility** for certain activities.... I think its vital that you know people have the ability to **take responsibility** for the deliverables.... **taking responsibilities**, so if they over step somewhere that they're actually able to turn round and say, "look I got that particular bit wrong but will learn from that"..... motivation to work in way that is required... understanding that as a leader you are ultimately responsible... do your work to the standards and participate....	take responsibility
being innovative and creative in their thinking... have innovative and original ideas ...thinking out of the box in terms of being creative and innovative... think outside the box... looking at the problem from different perspectives......... look at problem in different way... think of different solutions	being innovative and creative
asking questions and clarifying everything with everybody... asking questions and seeking advice of others.... asking questions and seeking clarification	asking questions / clarifying understanding
willingness to **be proactive** and take on roles of responsibility..... being a self-starter, not looking to be hand-held... not waiting to be led ....having initiative to solve problems without being asked.... capability to take initiative... come with an expectation of how to address a challenge.... being **curious and inquisitive**... being **curious** to think what else is there...	being proactive / being curious
insight into their potential to develop their skills.... identifying their potential... being open to new ideas, seeing their potential... have the potential to lead, open to developing themselves	potential to develop skills
understand how to resolve conflict in a team..... how they resolve problems in a team... how to solve team dysfunction to be able to move forward	manage and resolve conflict
willingness to get engaged and contribute to a situation for the benefit to others.... willingness to engage in communication.... evidence of ... engagement of the team... ability to persuade, convince, engage...	wllingness to interact and engage

When employers were asked to elaborate on what they meant by "willingness", they provided various examples. These examples revealed the deeper significance to employers of graduates demonstrating "willingness". The examples also serve as a testament to employers' ability to share more detailed insights beyond the surface meaning of "willingness" when they are encouraged to explain the meaning of "willingness".

The link between Interaction and Engagement is also a dominant sub-cluster within the key themes of analysing, emotional intelligence, positive mindset and working with others. When combined, the sub-clustered themes connected to a **positive mindset** demonstrate the complexity of the performative behaviours employers and educators expect of graduates. Equally, the number of sub-clusters is a testament to the rich detail of graduate performance expectations both focus groups provided in their discussions across all five skills.

The key theme of having a positive mindset aligns with CBI's long-held views that employers look for education leavers to have a positive attitude (CBI, 2008, p. 23; 2018a, p. 23). However, the CBI does not break down what a positive attitude means into a clear set of described characteristics. Instead, they suggest it encompasses "a willingness to take part and openness to new activities and ideas" and connect it to a series of employability skills, such as "self-management, teamwork, business and customer awareness, problem-solving, communication, numeracy and IT skills" (CBI, 2007, pp. 6-11). These short surface-level descriptions are not sufficient for educators and students to know what employers mean by being willing to take part and being open to new ideas.

By contrast, in this thesis, the employer and educator focus groups and the thematic analysis of their combined expectations expose to a much deeper level what employers and educators mean when asking graduates to demonstrate a positive mindset. The complexity of having a **positive mindset**, with its multiple connections to other key themes, as illustrated in Figure 23 is, thus, evidence of the complicated and interrelational nature of the transferable skills employers expect graduates to possess. This complexity may be why the CBI has not explicitly stated what having a positive mindset means for employers in their longstanding education and employment skills surveys or supporting publications.

6.2.3.1 **Positive Mindset collective characteristics**

From the analysis of the focus group transcription data and interrogation of the interesting segments of text in Excel format, it can be argued that the collective characteristics of having a **positive mindset** are the need for graduates to:

- ask questions and clarify their understanding
- being curious
- be proactive, volunteer and take responsibility for assigned tasks
- be innovative and creative in looking for ideas of what is possible to deliver solutions
- be willing to contribute to a situation for the benefit of others
- be aware that things might not go as expected, yet still deliver despite the odds
- fail fast, be resilient, flexible and adaptable
- have a disciplined and structured approach to solving problems,
- have a disciplined approach to managing their time
- have a disciplined approach to being organised
- have a mindset to want to lead
- have a mindset that looks for positive outcomes
- have the potential to develop their skills
- interact and engage by being willing to communicate with others
- learn and understand the rationale why somethings work and others do not

Recognising that a positive mindset is a complex combination of behaviours and skills has the potential to help students know what constituent behaviours and skills to develop and improve to achieve a positive mindset. It also has the potential to transform broad and regulatory-compliant learning statements. If broad learning outcome statements are supported by much more detailed explanations specifying what skills and behaviours a student has acquired, it can help educators to develop more evidenced-based and tangible learning outcome metrics.

6.2.4 Theme 2: Emotional intelligence

The second most complex key theme was **emotional intelligence** with five sub-clusters, of which three sub-clusters – interaction and engagement, learn, and understanding self, were shared respectively across four, three and two key themes and all five skills. See Figure 25 for an illustration of **emotional intelligence** and its connections to **analysing, positive mindset** and **working with others**.

Figure 25: Theme 2: Emotional intelligence

The key theme of **emotional intelligence** was most closely associated by employers and educators with teamwork, leadership, and self-management skills, although connections to all five skills were evident. Both employers and educators had markedly similar expectations, with the most common expectation being the ability to "interact and engage with others" and "to understand others" and "understand oneself". For example, when interacting and engaging with others, educators expect graduates to be able to "persuade, convince, and engage" across the universe of five skills. Similarly, employers expect graduates to be able to "interact and engage with all different types of people" as illustrated in Figure 26.

Figure 26: Interaction and engagement text segments

Text segment	Sub theme	Key theme	Skill
I'm looking for people with the traits who can engage with all different types of people	interaction and engagement	being emotionally intelligent	Communication
persuade, convince, engage. I think in communication if you can engage your audience and then persuade them then you are on the right track	interaction and engagement	being emotionally intelligent	Communication
leading to me is bringing other people along with you. Not just because its their job but because they want to and they've bought into what your vision is	interaction and engagement	being emotionally intelligent	Leadership
convince and inspire other team members to achieve a good outcome	interaction and engagement	being emotionally intelligent	Leadership
whether they've got any notion of role. Can they distinguish, in a sociological sense really, can they lead, can they support	interaction and engagement	being emotionally intelligent	Problem solving
able to understand their own involvement in a project for example, and how they can make a significant contribution to that	interaction and engagement	being emotionally intelligent	Self management
engagement of the team including the leadership of the team	interaction and engagement	being emotionally intelligent	Team work
understand its important to get the dynamics of the team and not just ride roughshod over the people they consider not to be important	interaction and engagement	being emotionally intelligent	Team work

The wide range of expectations regarding graduates' abilities to interact and engage with others provides valuable insights for a deeper understanding of **emotional intelligence**. Interacting and engaging with others enables effective communication, fosters teamwork and collaboration, and enhances networking and professional relationships. It also develops leadership and interpersonal skills, essential for career success and personal growth.

Turning to the sub-clustered concepts of understanding self and understanding others, unsurprisingly, employers and educators spoke of the need for graduates to demonstrate these **emotional intelligence** behaviours mainly in the context of self-management, as illustrated in Figure 27. The focus groups' combined expectations indicate how aligned employers and educators are when speaking about self-management skills.

In addition, employers also spoke of the need for graduates to "learn how to manage a team" and "learn more about communication" in the context of leadership. The contextualised scenario offered by employers was of graduates being put in charge of small tasks, projects, or work streams. The need for graduates to learn how to communicate with

and manage a team offers clear insight into employers' need for graduates to be taught how to manage and communicate with teams.

Figure 27: Understanding self and understanding others text segments

Text segment	Sub theme	Key theme	Skill
Patience with others	understanding others	being emotionally intelligent	Leadership
show that you can interact and show that you can understand others and listen to others as well	understanding others	being emotionally intelligent	Communication
Self management, they're very aware of what their skills sets are and their professionalism and that's linked to leadership	understanding self	being emotionally intelligent	Leadership
resilience and also confidence because, when people are confronted with problem solving it means a change of a situation and people, by nature do not like that	understanding self	being emotionally intelligent	Problem solving
emotional intelligence … ability to know and understand how others behave and adapting to it	understanding self	being emotionally intelligent	Self management
confidence to ask for help when they're not sure	understanding self	being emotionally intelligent	Self management
not over-stressing because there are always ways around it as we've just discussed in problem solving	understanding self	being emotionally intelligent	Self management
aware of your own self and understanding your own self, regulating your emotions for example, being able to manage your anger when you get criticised or critiqued by your tutors, being able to manage your capability	understanding self	being emotionally intelligent	Self management
able to understand their own involvement in a project for example, and how they can make a significant contribution to that	understanding self	being emotionally intelligent	Self management

As per the sub-clustered themes of interaction and engagement and understanding self and others, the remaining sub-clustered themes of being receptive to feedback and giving feedback, coalescing under the key theme of **emotional intelligence**, share a common language between employers and educators. Both groups expect graduates to be receptive to receiving feedback, capable of giving feedback, demonstrate emotional maturity when communicating and be open to learning how to communicate, manage people and understand team dynamics. These combined behaviours help graduates to build meaningful relationships and create a positive impact in the workplace.

6.2.4.1 Emotional intelligence collective characteristics

From the analysis of the focus group transcription data and interrogation of the interesting segments of text in Excel format, it can be argued that the collective characteristics of having **emotional intelligence** involve the need for graduates to:

- be willing and able to give feedback
- be open to receiving constructive feedback
- be committed to continuous self-improvement and development
- be able to communicate with and manage a team
- be able to convince, influence and inspire team members
- be able to engage with all different types of people
- have awareness of their own emotions and are able to regulate them
- have empathy and understanding of others and be intentionally inclusive
- be diplomatic by showing respect to everyone, and not being antagonistic
- understand social cues and adjust their behaviours
- understand how to resolve conflict in a team

The rich content provided by both employers and educators when sharing their thoughts on a graduate's ability to be emotionally intelligent offers an informative set of common expectations derived from their different lived experiences. Being able to interact and engage with others, understand oneself and others, give and receive feedback, and be open to learning are essential components of emotional intelligence. They facilitate effective communication, promote empathy and compassion, foster positive relationships, enhance self-awareness, support continuous personal growth, and enable successful interpersonal and professional interactions.

Thus, by developing the conceptual key theme of **emotional intelligence** and breaking it down into smaller components, students and graduates, can have a clearer understanding of what educators and employers mean when asking for demonstrations of **emotional intelligence**. Educators will have more evidence-based and tangible learning outcome

metrics against which they can set descriptive learning outcomes, and employers will have a deeper understanding of graduates' emotional intelligence abilities when entering the workplace.

6.2.5 Theme 3: Working with others

The third most complex key theme is **working with others**, with four sub-clusters, of which three sub-clusters – interaction and engagement, approach to problem-solving, and taking responsibility were shared respectively with four and three key themes across all five skills**.** See Figure 28 for an illustration of **working with others** and its connections with **analysing**, having a **positive mindset**, **emotional intelligence** and **understanding the business**.

Figure 28: Theme 3: Working with others
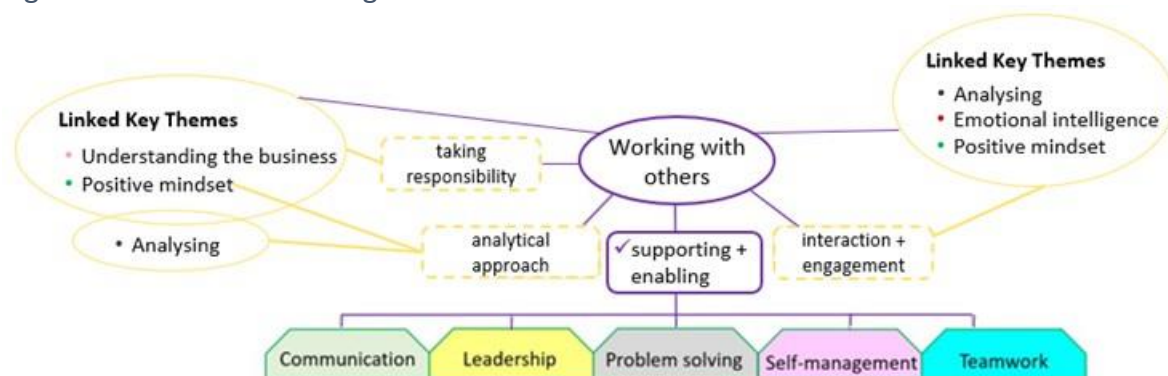
This interconnectivity between key themes and clustered themes indicates the complexity of employer and educator expectations of graduates when **working with others**.

6.2.5.1 **Working with others' collective characteristics**

From the analysis of the focus group data and interrogation of the interesting segments of text in Excel format, it can be evidenced that **working with others** requires graduates to be willing to:

- building constructive solutions and relationships with others when working in teams
- being clear, concise and easy to understand in communicating their ideas, through their verbal, written and body language signals, when working in teams and leading others;
- collaborating when working in teams, problem-solving and leading others;
- convincing, influencing and inspiring others when leading;
- engaging and participating when leading others and working in teams
- listening and respecting others, knowing how to take turns in discussions and not over-talk when communicating, leading others and problem-solving
- sharing information and ideas when communicating, problem-solving and working in teams
- understanding the context in which the team is operating when problem-solving
- understanding how to engage with and being sensitive to other cultures when working in teams

Supporting and enabling others by:

- stepping back to give others opportunities to contribute
- developing and supporting others

Taking responsibility by:

- being diplomatic when working in teams
- role-modelling behaviours when leading others
- volunteering to take on roles of responsibility
- working to required standards, stepping up and taking responsibility for own tasks when self-managing and working in teams.

The ability to **work with others** is closely connected to the theme of **emotional intelligence** - in particular, the expectations for diplomacy, the ability to convince, influence and inspire others, and being deliberatively inclusive of others. These shared expectations were found to be common across all five skills. As with the positive mindset and emotional intelligence

themes, the descriptive language offered by the theme of working with others has the potential to provide tangible evidenced-based metrics of value to students, graduates, educators, and employers.

6.2.6 Theme 4: Analysing

The fourth key theme of **analysing** had a set of four closely related sub-clustered themes and a complex series of connections to four out of the five skills discussed. See Figure 29 for an illustration of **analysing** and its connections with **emotional intelligence, positive mindset, understanding the business**, and **working with others.** Although the ability to analyse was most frequently spoken about in the context of the skill of problem-solving, its collective characteristics are a set of closely connected performance expectations linked to communication, leadership, problem-solving, and self-management. Employers and educators spoke of the need to have an analytical approach, being able to evaluate and assess, and make decisions in the context of self-management; breaking down ideas, being clear and easy to understand, and interaction and engagement were mentioned in the context of communication; and learning how to prioritise was spoken of during the leadership discussion.

Figure 29: Theme 4: Analysing
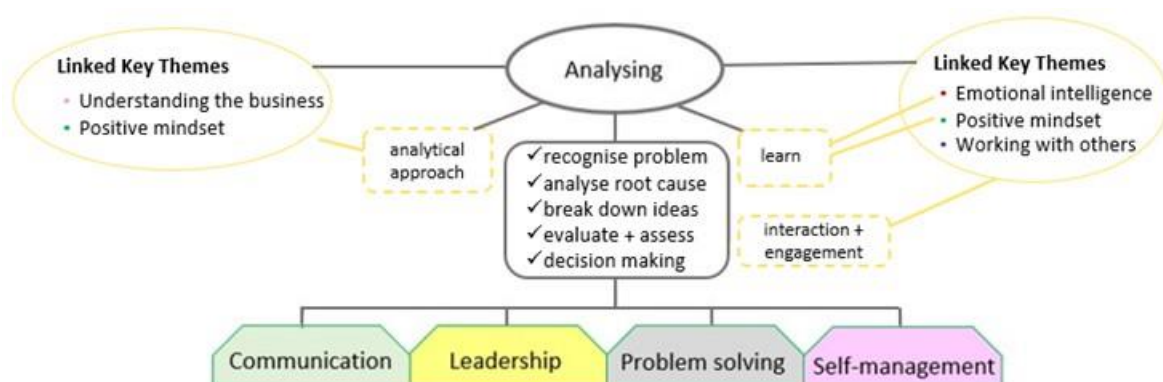
When analysing a problem, employers and educators expect graduates to recognise that there is a problem which needs to be solved and then devise a plan to solve it. This recognition requires taking an analytical approach to the problem to break down ideas in

clear and precise ways, identify its root cause, and have a decision-making process to prioritise, evaluate and assess options, as illustrated in Figure 30 below. Both groups also expected graduates to learn as they go through the process of solving problems, understand why some things might work, and others do not and think around the matter to identify what they have learnt about the problem and what more might be learnt. The ability to learn as graduates go through the process of solving a problem, therefore, requires that graduates spend time reflecting on their experience of problem-solving.

Figure 30: Breaking down problems and decision making

Text segment	Sub theme	Key theme	Skill
It comes back down to the same type of skills as problem solving. Are they able to solve problems and what avenue do they take to actually do that?	analytical approach	analysing	Self management
I've seen very convoluted ideas and people can't break them down simply to say what they do or don't want. And sometimes I get back to questions, you know, and very simply "are you asking me a yes or no question? If not, what are you asking me" so that we break that down into something that gets to the point very quickly	break down ideas	analysing	Communication
Clarity and simplicity is key because one of the things about being a great communicator is you can take complex ideas and break them down and deliver them in simple, easy to understand ways	interaction and engagement	analysing	Communication
Self management is being able to implement a form of structure in whatever tasks you lay out ... and then be able to evaluate and assess ..	evaluate and assess	analysing	Self management
learn how to prioritise	learn how to prioritise	analysing	Leadership
make decisions I think is what that comes down to. I mean I have had	making decisions	analysing	Self management

Employers offered at least five steps they expect a graduate to take when problem-solving:

list what it is you're trying to get to, and what all the characteristics are and [identify] what the impact of each one is and therefore you prioritise … [and also] seek advice from somebody else …. don't just Google [the solution].

The scenario of graduates relying on Google searches to help resolve problems indicates a pattern of behaviour experienced by employers that suggests graduates do not take an analytical approach to problem-solving as described above. Relying on Google searches can be problematic. This is due to the potential inaccuracy of search results, the lack of context, overwhelming information, and ethical concerns. Thus, for employers and educators, the need for graduates to learn how to solve problems is a key concern.

6.2.6.1 Analysing collective characteristics

From the analysis of the focus group transcription data and interrogation of the interesting segments of text in Excel format, it can be argued that the collective characteristics of **analysing** are the need for graduates to:

- have a clear analytical approach
- understand the problem they are facing
- break down complex ideas and communicate them clearly and simply
- identify the root cause by listing all characteristics of the identified problem
- evaluate and assess the impact of each characteristic
- ask questions

The need to break down the steps necessary when **analysing** illustrates the complex connections to all other key themes. This reveals **analysing** to be a much more complex set of cognitive and emotional behaviours than might appear at a surface level. Furthermore, by deconstructing the elements of problem-solving, graduates and students can create checklists of steps necessary to employ problem-solving techniques. In turn, the deconstruction should help to develop more advanced levels of problem-solving proficiency and offer an evidenced-based set of metrics for employers and educators.

Similarities in employer and educators' expectations of graduate performance were also found across the skills literature. For example, in their respective longitudinal research studies identifying the skills graduates most need in the workplace, Berdrow and Evers (2010) and Strong et al. (2020) also cite the need to ask the right questions, contribute ideas, identify the components of a problem (Berdrow & Evers, 2010, pp. 422-426), establish evaluation criteria, synthesise all information and ask questions (Strong et al., 2020, pp. 87-99). The similarity of language between employers and educators when stating their expectations of graduates' problem-solving abilities is indicative of the potential for a common language at the *(4D)* dialectic.

6.2.7 Theme 5: Understanding the business

The fifth theme of **Understanding the business** was less complex than the preceding four themes. Nevertheless, it shared characteristics with two connected themes: **Positive mindset** and **Working with others** and their respective sub-themes of asking questions, being proactive, and taking responsibility - see Figure 31. Within these three sub-themes, employers expect graduates to ask questions to clarify their understanding and proactively self-manage their way through the organisation in which they are employed.

Figure 31: Theme 5: Understanding the business
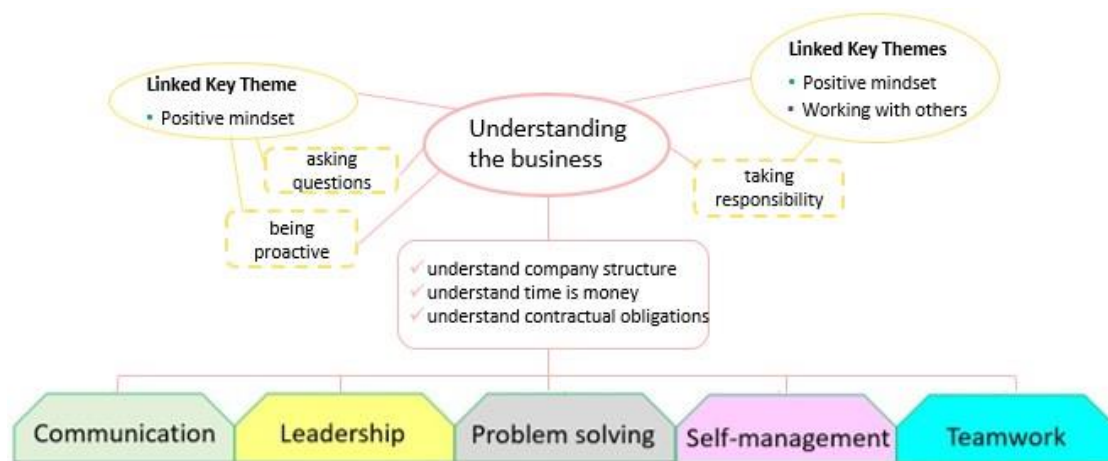
By contrast, three sub-themes framed on understanding the company structure, that time is money, and contractual obligations were unique expectations in the employer group during their self-management discussions – see Figure 32. However, the need to ask questions and take responsibility as a feature of all five skills. The mixture of skills and behaviours under the **Understanding the business** theme belies employers' complex expectations of graduates in the workplace. Furthermore, the semantic detail offered by employers illustrated their previously hidden tensions and frustrations that graduates do not understand the context of the business into which they are recruited.

Figure 32: Employer expectations of Theme 5: Understanding the business

Text segment	Sub theme	Key theme	Skill
clarifying everything with everybody	clarifying understanding		
learn that there are implications of their time content on the budget for the business	taking responsibility		
understand company framework and how they relate to it	being proactive		
understand company structure, codes of practice and legal requirements	taking responsibility	understanding the business	Self management
understand time is money	understand time is money		
understanding and navigating through organisation	asking questions		
I would expect a new graduate to have the mind-set that said they needed to know what all these reference points were and therefore, they need to find out	being proactive		

6.2.7.1 Understanding the business collective characteristics

From the analysis of the focus group transcription data and interrogation of the interesting segments of text in Excel format, it can be argued that the collective characteristics of **understanding the business** are the need for graduates to have a mindset of curiosity to:

- Have a mindset of curiosity
- Ask questions and be proactive
- Take responsibility for their actions
  Understand the scope of activities within a job role
- Understand the company structure and codes of practice
- Understand the need to comply with all legislative requirements
- Understand how the graduates' role fits within the company structure
- Know where to go to ask questions related to understanding the business
- Understand that the contractual nature of the job translates as "time is money"

The rich detail beneath the theme of **understanding the business** has the potential to provide graduates with more informative guidance on how to conduct themselves in the early stages of their new roles.

6.2.8 Theme 6: Applying knowledge

The sixth and last key theme of **applying knowledge** was the least complex theme with two sub-clustered themes, both connected to the skill of problem-solving as illustrated in Figure 33.

Figure 33: Theme 6: Applying knowledge
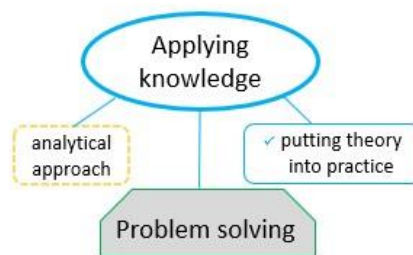
The principle characteristics of **applying knowledge** are the need for graduates to know and be able to use various analytical tools and methods, understand the context in which the knowledge is required, and be able to apply theory into practice to solve problems as illustrated in Figure 34. Although a less complex theme than the preceding five themes, **applying knowledge** is important as it connects the development of knowledge gained at university with the workplace.

Figure 34: Theory and application of knowledge text segments

Iteration #1 - expectation	clustered theme	key theme	Skill
apply knowledge to provide a solution based on context and situation	ability to put theory	applying knowledg	Problem solving
apply models to develop own frameworks	ability to put theory	applying knowledg	Problem solving
applying the right tool in the right way	ability to put theory	applying knowledg	Problem solving
applying theory and models into practice	ability to put theory	applying knowledg	Problem solving
having insight to take the useful parts of the methodology	ability to put theory	applying knowledg	Problem solving
knowing analytical tools and methods and applying them	analytical approach	applying knowledg	Problem solving

6.2.8.1 Applying knowledge collective characteristics

From the analysis of the focus group transcription data and interrogation of the interesting segments of text in Excel format, the collective characteristics of **analysing** are revealed to be the need for graduates to:

- Have knowledge of a range of analytical tools and techniques
- Identify which components of the tools and techniques are relevant for a given task
- Provide solutions based on knowledge of context and situation

The educators emphasised the need for graduates to apply theory taught in university and take the useful parts of a methodology without necessarily applying the whole method when solving a problem. The employers expect that graduates will have knowledge of a range of analytical tools and methods and be able to apply them to solve problems. It was noticeable that the general principle of applying knowledge was shared by both focus groups only in connection with the skill of problem-solving. The shared emphasis on the application of knowledge points to the need for students to appreciate the value employers and educators place on the acquisition of knowledge and its practical application during their university studies and in the world of work.

6.3   Key themes summary

The desired behaviours employers and educators seek from graduates, expressed through the six key themes and 28 sub-clustered themes, bring to the surface a previously hidden set of rich and interconnected performance expectations across a unified set of five transferable skills. By paying attention to the totality of the focus group discussions and semantically coding the combined transcript into distinct themes, a clear narrative of the behaviours educators and employers expect graduates to demonstrate is evident: **A positive mindset** fosters resilience and a solution-oriented approach; **Emotional intelligence** enables effective communication and empathy in diverse workplace environments; the ability to **Work with others** promotes teamwork and synergy; **Analysing** skills empower graduates to tackle complex challenges with critical thinking; **Understanding the business** equips graduates with a practical understanding of and advice on how to navigate their respective employment environments and, **Application of knowledge** ensures graduates can translate theory into tangible results.

Furthermore, when the six themes are viewed through the complex web of shared sub-clustered themes, a convergence of supporting themes is also evident. **Interaction and engagement** underscore the value of effective communication and collaboration in the workplace. **Taking responsibility** exemplifies accountability and ownership in tasks and decisions. **Learning** signifies a commitment to continuous improvement and adaptability. **Understanding self and others** emphasises emotional intelligence and empathy. **Asking questions** reflects curiosity and a desire for knowledge. Taking an **analytical approach** showcases critical thinking and problem-solving abilities. Lastly, **being proactive** demonstrates initiative and forward-thinking. Delving more deeply into each of the unique sub-clusters per key theme deepened the layers of meaning employers and educators attach to the five skills. These rich meanings underpin the six key themes.

Conclusion

Assessing students, graduates, and employee behaviours is challenging at each point in the person's learning journey, from designing and constructing learning or training content to formative and summative assessment. By dialectically exploring employers' and educators' lived experiences of the five transferable skills, it has been possible to identify their expectations of graduates' performance relative to the five skills. This language has the power to lead to a process of change and transformation (Bhaskar, 2017, p. 6; Laske, 2008, p. 457) in higher education. The rich, granulated, and shared understanding of each skill offers higher education stakeholders a common language of behavioural themes to evidence the acquisition of the five transferable skills appropriate to their level of study or job role. The common language can reduce the subjectivity of evaluation by replacing it with detailed and explicit descriptions of learning, thus reducing the constraints of bland learning outcomes. A rich and common skills language also offers a method by which a person's level of performance can be measured over time. With rich descriptive learning outcome statements, employers can probe for more specific information during interviews to ask the graduate or employee what they did to achieve their learning outcomes. In turn, graduates and employees will have a language to help them build a checklist of the skills and behaviours to acquire and a language to illustrate them on their CVs and during interviews. Finally, the UK government and the OfS will have a unified framework of transferable skills

with unambiguously described meanings (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; Taylor, 2017, p. 87) to measure the performance of English universities and their students more fairly.

Chapter 7 Discussion, Conclusion and Reflections

7.1   **Introduction**

Situated in the philosophical framing of DCR, this thesis has explored, in Chapter 2, how over 60 years of successive UK government neo-liberal higher education policies have steered English higher education towards a skills-driven agenda and the enduring impact of these policies on students, academics, employers and universities. Chapter 3 explored how academia and employers have reacted to these policy enactments and revealed a collective call for a unified set of transferable skills with a common language to describe and assess the behaviours connected to each skill. Chapter 4 documented the methodologies adopted in this study. Chapter 5, reported the corpus analysis findings of the employer skills survey corpus, and Chapter 6 reported the focus group findings and the potential for change to occur.

This final discussion chapter, therefore, discusses the consequences and inherent tensions in current higher education policy regulations and the need for a common language for transferable skills. Articulated through a DCR lens and *M.E.L.D.* process, the discussion addresses 1) the tensions between higher education compliance mechanisms and employer skills demands and their effects on developing graduates' transferable skills; 2) the illusion of clarity offered by UK-commissioned skills surveys; 3) why big data scraping is not the answer to a common skills language; 4) the importance of finding a set of relevant transferable skills; and finally, 5) the consequences of the common and different meanings employers and educators assign to these skills. A reflection on the study design and approach is addressed at the end of the chapter, along with the contributions to knowledge that this study offers, future research recommendations, and next steps.

7.2   The tensive interplay between policy, regulation, and higher education

Sub-research question one sought to answer what impact successive UK governments' skills policies have had on its universities and the consequences of steering English higher education regulations towards a skills-driven agenda. Charting and critiquing 60 years of higher education policy and regulation through a DCR and *M.E.L.D.* process of enquiry has revealed the critical influence of past higher education policies on current higher education regulation and practice (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 50). This approach challenges the wisdom of contemporary regulatory policies by exposing the vulnerabilities, tensions, and effects these policies have on UK universities. Beneath the visible policy directives and education acts, a range of observable and hidden events and mechanisms have impacted English higher education today. Discovering and dialectically exploring these deeper mechanisms through data collection and analysis methods has revealed how the spatio-temporal nature of higher education policy and enactment has moved through six connected phases over six decades. Each phase has generated events with significant causal effects on each subsequent phase.

-   Event 1: 1960-1970s: University expansion and a focus on labour market skills,
-   Event 2: 1980s: From autonomy to state management of higher education,
-   Event 3: 1990s: Enforced learning outcomes, tuition fees, 50% student enrolment target
-   Event 4: 2015: Sovereignty of students as legal consumers of higher education
-   Event 5: 2018: Centralised enforced regulation of UK higher education
-   Event 6: 2022: Prescriptive progression rates and conditional relevant transferable skills

Six decades since the UK's university expansion and almost three decades since the 1997 Dearing Report directive of compulsory learning outcomes and tuition fees (Dearing, 1997) may seem sufficient time for English universities to have settled into the political ideology of economic wealth generators. However, the evolution of higher education reforms in the UK, from the 1963 Robbins expansion (Robbins, 1963a) through to the 2022 enforcement delivery of relevant transferable skills, explicit learning outcome statements, and positive outcomes valued by students and employers (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) reflects a continuous fusion of mutually complicit yet opposing forces (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 10), tensions and contradictions: the ideology of higher education as a public good versus the reality of a

marketised and commodified service in which the sovereignty of an employability agenda, and students as consumers, reigns. These opposing forces have put universities on a high-stakes collision course with employers, students, and policymakers with potential detriment to each stakeholder.

University Expansion, labour market skills and lost autonomy

The Robbins Report - **Event 1 -** promulgated higher education for all who qualified and fostered the idea that access to education should be merit-based and not contingent on socioeconomic status (Robbins, 1963a, p. 8). This ideal underscored the societal belief in the positive force of education for personal development and catalysed a significant expansion of universities from 32 in 1963 to 160 by 2011 (Tight, 2011, p. 657) and 413 institutions registered with the OfS by 2023 (OfS, 2023a, p1). However, Robbins also promoted higher education as a positive force for economic growth and the provision of skills for the labour market (Robbins, 1963a, p. 43) – two persistent politicised themes which continue to date. These counter-thesis narratives expose the dialectical tensions between higher education for personal intellectual gain versus economic growth and the self-imposed financial pressures on the State caused by higher education expansion without a fiscal plan to manage the expansion.

Eventually, to manage the spiralling costs of higher education, by 1988, the Great Education Reform Bill - **Event 2** - brought universities under state control and mandated the delivery of economic growth targets in exchange for state funding (Salter & Tapper, 2013, pp. 39-67). This 1988 Act signalled a more decisive shift towards market-driven principles, further shaking the foundational ideals of higher education by reinforcing the political ideology of higher education driving economic prosperity. In removing institutional autonomy and introducing state control, the 1988 Bill also laid the groundwork for subsequent political policies to treat higher education as a commodity and students as consumers.

Learning outcomes, tuition fees, and more expansion

The groundwork became evident within a decade in the 1998 Teaching and Higher Education Act for England (THEA, 1998) – **Event 3**. This Act introduced annual student tuition fees (THEA, 1998, p. 20), which rose quickly from an initial £1,000 per annum to

£9,250 per annum (Bolton, 2023a, p. 9). The same time period also saw the reinforced idea of compulsory learning outcomes (CBI, 1990, p. 13; Dearing, 1997, p. 156; Jessup, 1991, p. 82; Melton, 1996, p. 410) and a national 50% target of the English population graduating from higher education by the age of 30 (O'Leary, 2009, p. 474). These pivotal events magnified the preceding tensions of the cost versus the value of higher education. Furthermore, they shifted the idealistic vision of higher education onto a more materialistic platform of higher education as a measurable, quantifiable, and marketable service. Although learning outcomes first featured in higher education in 1949, they were non-compulsory and driven by pedagogical motives to assess learners' progress and acquisition of knowledge (Tyler, 1949, p. 51). Their compulsory and prescriptive inclusion in UK higher education in 1997 (Dearing, 1997, pp141-156) is indicative of contemporary policy efforts to align with industry demands, as opposed to pedagogical research and theory, and standardise quality and transparency of higher education achievements for students and stakeholders.

While some scholars consider learning outcomes are essential quality assurance markers, for instance (Barrie, 2006, p. 226; Beard et al., 2007, pp. 249-250; Gurukkal, 2019, p. 2; Ilonen & Heinonen, 2018, p. 400; Rochon, 2021, p. 29; Shephard, 2008, p. 95), others believe they encourage students to take a transactional approach to their learning (Biggs & Tang, 2011, pp. 114-8; Erikson & Erikson, 2019, p. 2297; Torrance, 2007, p. 282). The dialectical contradictions inherent in the paradoxical role of learning outcomes include students only doing what is prescribed in their module and course learning outcome statements in the expectation that they will pass with high grades (Tomlinson, 2017, p. 465); employers' distrust and dissatisfaction in students' ability to demonstrate skills necessary for employment, and a lack of trust or consensus between educators on how to approach the construction and interpretation of learning outcomes (Bachan, 2017, p. 1592; Havnes & Prøitz, 2016, pp. 216-9). These tensions inevitably put students at risk of failing or passing the same learning outcome simply because assessors hold different meanings of the same learning outcome statement.

Sovereignty, centralised regulation, and relevant transferable skills

By 2015, the sovereignty of consumer demand (Collini, 2012, p. 179) led to **Event 4** - the legal protection of students as customers of higher education. Positioning higher education as a service provider led to **Event 5**, the 2018 centralised regulation of higher education (HERA, 2017, p. 93). Students as consumers and centralised regulation reflected policy attempts to reconcile the opposing dialectical forces of the previous events catalysed by the 1960s expansion of higher education. The UK government aimed to balance educational accountability and employer skills demands with positive outcomes for students. By 2022, this policy harmonisation was extended to regulating English universities to deliver relevant transferable skills valued by employers and achieve prescriptive progression rates or risk, at worst, deregistration - **Event 6**. The effect, however, did not reconcile the opposing forces of reinforced higher education compliance. Instead, since 1963, themes of persistent political survivalism to manage higher education costs and dependency on State subsidies have cemented the political ideology of higher education as an economic wealth generator while employers dissatisfaction with graduates' transferable skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 8; GoS, 2017, p. 48) prevails.

A contradictory paradigm of centralised control

While the positive benefits of higher education expansion include the possibility for a more highly educated population, increased social mobility and potential income parity between social classes (DBIS, 2015, p. 10; Williams, 2016, pp. 132-133), the paradigm of centralised control of higher education exposes the contradictions and tensions between the social structures and mechanisms of government, the OfS, universities, and employers. English universities now operate in a highly metricised system under state control, with their existence dependent on delivering the political ideology of economic wealth generators judged by ambiguous performance metrics. Furthermore, the intense focus on employability within educational discourse results in a paradoxical outcome: when education is centred around graded outcomes as indicators of graduates' capabilities, lower degree classifications may make it harder for graduates to secure employment. This dynamic pressures educators to award higher grades (Bachan, 2017, p. 1592), potentially inflating academic achievements (OfS, 2021, p. 2) to align more closely with employability expectations and the regulatory mechanism of positive outcomes for graduates.

To mitigate the persistence of political interventions in higher education, researchers and employer organisations have, for at least the past three decades, called for a common language to describe transferable skills, for example (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; Bennett, 2002, p. 464; CBI, 2018, p. 15; Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, pp. 44-5; Joynes et al., 2019, p. 68; Martin et al., 2008, p. 18)[20]. However, the six pivotal events over sixty years of higher education policy enactment reveal a significant gap between what employers and educators define as necessary transferable skills. The persistent disconnect highlights the critical need for renewed efforts to bridge this divide, aligning stakeholder expectations to ensure graduates have the skills they need for future success.

Storms and tensions in higher education policies and enactment

Some policy authors and researchers have recognised the contradictions in higher education policies, thus implying a lack of immanent critique of policies. For example, the 1997 Dearing report recommended a review of funding policies without a commensurate review of the impact of compulsory learning outcomes or integration of key skills in the curriculum (Dearing, 1997, pp. 141, 156; HoC, 1997, p. 13). On the one hand, there is a reliance on narrow, subjective, and fuzzy metrics (Rammell, 2016, p. 10) for evaluating English universities. On the other hand, there is an expectation for these metrics to lead to stable and specific higher education outcomes despite the inability to economically evaluate such metrics (Machin & Vignoles, 2006, p. 1). A small community of scholars have also voiced concerns that the political prioritisation of an employer-driven skills agenda (Arora, 2015, p. 644; Prinsloo, 2012, pp. 29, 90) has led to academia accepting, whether willingly or not, a policy-driven hegemony.

This hegemonic acceptance is visible in the prolific scholarly and grey literature on the skills employers need and their adoption of employer-driven skills language. For instance, employability skills, transferable skills, basic, core, employability, generic, interpersonal, soft, transferable, and work-ready skills (Barrie, 2006; Bamford, 2019; Byrne, 2020; CBI, 2019b, Dench et al., 1998; Fettes et al., 2020) are terms regularly found in the academic

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[20] See also Appendix I for a list of all authors referenced in this study as problematising the need for a common skills language

literature on transferable skills. Such widespread acceptance of a hegemonic meta-narrative suggests that higher education has been recast as an employee training service provider to employers in which graduates pay for the training with no guarantee of secured employment. The constraining dominance of regulatory and political hegemony over higher education where progression and completion rates are championed (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121, 2022b, p. 1) carries the risk of serving neither employers nor students.

Viewing these contradictions through a DCR lens reveals a clear policy motive: to drive an employability agenda through universities. However, with minimal exception, for example (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807), current academic and policy-based skills research does not address the dialectic tensions and constraining forces between a lack of consensus on what constitutes relevant transferable skills and how to assess them. Nor the regulatory pressures for English universities to deliver undefined relevant transferable skills or face a range of sanctions. Additionally, stakeholders' assumption that a common skills language will follow if educators understand employers' needs remains unchallenged.

It is reasonable for employers to expect graduates to immediately apply effective workplace skills because their operational efficiency relies on new employees contributing quickly to organisational goals. Nevertheless, the relentless hegemonic drive for employable graduates risks narrowing students' learning. The focus on job-specific skills may not fully prepare students for their longer-term career development or personal growth. However, educational and employer goals need not be incompatible. If stakeholders understand what workplace skills are, educators prioritise them alongside academic and technical knowledge, and students have an opportunity to develop them, graduates are likely to be better equipped to manage their personal and professional development and be immediately effective in the workplace.

Recycled and ambiguous skills terms
The prolific use of such terms to describe graduate skills highlights a contradiction in the academic, policy and grey skills literature: terms are recycled without a deep or critical understanding of their descriptions or applications, leading to a sea of ambiguous transferable skills terms which lack consistent and clear meanings. Recycling might indicate

that researchers and policymakers believe these terms to be so well understood that further critique is unnecessary. Alternatively, it may suggest a strategy to use terms interchangeably to avoid repetitive use of any single term in their research.

Whichever hypothesis is accepted, the assumption that the terms are so well understood that they do not require deeper explanations exposes English universities to the significant regulatory risk of failing to deliver employable graduates because the terms are ambiguous. Graduates also risk being unable to articulate their transferable skills to the satisfaction of employers. Vague skills terminology at a policy level raises questions about the meanings of specific industry-relevant transferable skills that the OfS expects universities to develop in students to satisfy its positive outcomes metric (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) and how they can be objectively measured.

Moreover, English universities face significant financial pressures in a highly volatile market. To attract fee-paying students (Bachan, 2017, p. 1592) and comply with their regulatory obligations, English universities must articulate clear learning outcomes, achieve high progression rates, demonstrate value for money, and deliver positive outcomes for students, measured by the number of graduates in highly skilled roles or further study (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121). These goals must be met whilst also safeguarding staff well-being amidst concerns over job security for not progressing students (Czerniewicz et al., 2021, p. 10; Hansen et al., 2019, p. 12; Plunkett, 2014, p. 2). However, pursuing these goals leads to mutually complicit dialectical contrary (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 10) motives which conceal the complexity of achieving what might appear to policymakers to be straightforward outcomes from the intricate dynamics of higher education. Mutually complicit dialectical contrariness occurs when contradictory and opposing goals are interconnected, and thus are reliant on each other to sustain and enable their achievement. The dialectical component refers to the symbiotic conflict, contradiction, and resolution process. For example, the goal of regulation influences institutional behaviour to progress students through their university courses regardless of their actual levels of competence (Rosovsky & Hartley, 2002, p. 7). The specific contrariness of compulsory learning outcomes is discussed in the following section.

Explicit learning outcomes - a misleading harbinger of poor performance

The tensions between the regulatory mechanisms of fixed learning outcomes and progression raise significant concerns about the quality and delivery of higher education. Learning outcomes can conceal a student's poor performance when written in broad terms. Their breadth enables educators to be lenient when progressing students through their studies to satisfy progression rate targets. This leniency creates moral and ethical dilemmas as educators must balance academic standards with pressure to pass students to meet targets. Leniency also risks inflating grades (Bill, 1998, p289; Wild & Berger, 2016, p35; Tomlinson, 2012, p. 25), devaluing qualifications, and producing graduates ill-prepared for the real world. Furthermore, it may not be evident to an employer or the graduate that they do not have the relevant transferable skills until they are in the workplace, thereby diminishing employers' trust in academic qualifications.

The broad literature findings that learning outcome and progression rate targets have a negative effect on learning (Erikson & Erikson, 2019, p. 2297; Tam, 2014, pp. 164-5; Torrance, 2007, p. 282) also concerned the employer and educator participants in this research. Their concerns centred on two issues: the need to hand-hold students through their studies and in the workplace and the challenge of assessing transferable skills due to the need for clarity and a shared understanding of what they mean in an education and employment context.

Suppose a graduate believes their course learning outcomes have given them the relevant transferable skills employers want. Nevertheless, they fail to secure job interviews because they cannot demonstrate these skills. Alternatively, they fail to explain their transferable skills to the employer's satisfaction. In that case, it is too easy for employers to reject students for not demonstrating that they have the skills the employers want. Similarly, it is too easy for graduates to blame their university for lacking employer-valued skills, despite this study's educator participants and published studies finding that students resist being challenged – see, for example, Barkas & Armstrong, 2022, p. 52; Jones, 2009, p. 186). See also (Bennett et al., 1999, p. 90; Dondi et al., 2021, p. 2; Hirsh & Bevans, 1987, p. 80; Joynes et al., 2019, p. 8; Yorke, 2006, p. 13). The concerns expressed in these previous studies and by the educator focus group participants in this study point to persistent challenges of

teaching and assessing transferable skills in higher education despite the passage of time and geography. Therefore, rather than improving student outcomes, the mutually complicit contradictory policy interventions of learning outcomes and progression rate targets encourage a race to the bottom. Thus, setting English universities on a utilitarian policy-driven performative path (Ball, 2003, p. 217; Tomlinson, 2017, pp. 713-724) of labour-market preparation without agreed criterion to recognise them exposes a perfect storm of tensions and contradictory forces in contemporary English higher education.

The dialectical tensions of vague metrics and terminology

Notwithstanding the narrow metrics and hegemonic debates that employability skills have become a market-driven meta-narrative (Arora, 2015, p. 644; Prinsloo, 2012, pp. 29, 90) framed on addressing skills gaps and skills shortages, universities benefit significantly from public investment. Therefore, it is reasonable to expect universities to serve the public good and respond to public accountability measures. Arguably, it is not the role of the OfS to establish or describe the relevant transferable skills graduates need for employment. However, accepting this argument reveals a significant dialectical tension. It permits the social mechanisms of government and the OfS to use deliberately vague terms (Gunn, 2018, p. 137), such as positive outcomes and relevant transferable skills, whilst using specific regulatory levers on English universities to deliver them. This policy and regulatory practice presents a critical problem for all stakeholders: the lack of clear descriptions makes it difficult for universities to interpret and implement the prescribed policies. Furthermore, the discrepancies between vaguely articulated expectations and prescriptive and strict regulatory enforcement lead to the potential for inconsistencies in regulatory compliance and an imbalance in educational quality and fairness. Additionally, the practice fails to ensure students are equipped with the transferable skills that will lead to positive employment outcomes and set employers up for disappointment because students are graduating without the transferable skills employers expect.

It is clear from the literature on employability skills that the tensions between employer skills needs, political ideologies, and higher education's ability to deliver and assess transferable skills for the labour market have remained unanswered for the past three decades – see, for example, (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; Belt et al., 2010, pp. 45-48; Hirsh &

Bevan, 1987, p. 80; Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, p. 1). When these tensions are connected to the opposing forces of higher education regulations, positive outcomes, and value for money, there remains a significant gap between what value higher education has to society and what employers and educators define as necessary transferable skills. However, a unified set of five transferable skills has been lurking in plain sight for at least three decades in the UK government and CBI-commissioned employer skills surveys. This seminal finding, discussed in the following section, offers hope to all higher education stakeholders that it is possible to agree on the most relevant transferable skills employers want.

7.3   Five relevant transferable skills in a confusing sea of skills terminology

The UK government and the CBI are motivated to identify the skills employers need. Their motivations are expressed through their long-established multi-million-pound investment (Burke, 2017; Conlon, 2017) in market intelligence skills surveys and reports, designed to understand the skills employers want and what skill gaps employers experience. Their motivations are also evident in the increasingly regulated Higher Education environment, with conditions of university registration now required to meet employers' and students' needs (OfS, 2022a, pp. 90-121). Therefore, sub-research question two of this research sought to find a common set of transferable skills from the purposefully chosen corpus of 100 UK-commissioned skills surveys. The sub-research question was partially answered in Chapter 5, and the import of this partiality is discussed below.

Through extensive corpus analysis, it was possible to find a consistent set of five transferable skills from the combined UK government and CBI skills surveys and reports:

- communication
- leadership
- problem-solving
- self-management
- teamwork

However, these skills were not unified in a neat set. Instead, the skills were scattered throughout the 100 reports under various, often recycled skills categorisations - for example, employability, foundation, functional, generic, key, soft, transferable, technical and practical, people and personal, workplace, and work-ready skills (Belt et al., 2010, pp. 22, 24, 26; CBI, 1990, p. 7, 2007, pp. 6-11, 2018, p. 15; 2021, pp. 6-12; Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 53-55). No detailed descriptions were found for the five transferable skills across the corpus. Ironically, despite the CBI accusing employers of adopting imprecise and vague language to describe the skills they want (CBI, 2018, p. 15), they have a long history of adopting the same imprecise language patterns (CBI, 1990, p. 7; 2018, p. 23; 2021, p. 12) leaving their accusations somewhat hollow.

The varied ways the UK government and CBI-commissioned reports categorise the five transferable skills followed similar patterns in the broader published skills literature. These patterns include recycling skills terminology without a substantive understanding of their descriptions or applications, confusing categorisations and clusters of skills, the absence of a common agreement on skill descriptions, the absence of showing how the skills interconnect, the unacknowledged use of synonyms, and the adoption of well-rehearsed clichéd statements such as team player, self-starter, self-motivated, problem-solver, and goal-oriented. These persistent issues illustrate educators' significant challenge in accurately identifying, describing, teaching and assessing employer-demanded relevant transferable skills.

Establishing a standard set of transferable skills with a common language should not imply my acceptance or rejection of the hegemony of a market-driven meta-narrative framed on employability skills, gaps, and shortages (Arora, 2015, p, 644; Prinsloo, 2012, pp. 29, 90). Nor that a unified set precludes other transferable skills or binds them within restricted statements of meaning or that curricula design will be narrowed or constrained. Equally, identifying the five transferable skills should not imply that there is a definitive skills hierarchy among the five skills. This is because all participants in both focus groups spoke of the five skills as a familial set of behavioural expectations making it difficult to identify where one skill stopped and another started (see also discussion in section 7.4). Nor should it imply that all five skills will be weighted equally with all employers. I recognise that

employers will have different transferable skills requirements with some preferencing one, or a subset of the five, over others in the set. However, as English universities are measured on their ability to deliver relevant transferable skills, a baseline set of transferable skills upon which employers can broadly agree must be established. Thus, establishing the five skills as a standardised set is intended to facilitate the development of a benchmarked and commonly agreed standard (Atkinson, 2015, p. 174) in which all users can have confidence in exactly what each skill means at a practical level of performance, and benefit both graduates and employers.

Millions of pounds must do better

Undoubtedly, successive UK governments have spent millions of pounds of taxpayers' money over many years (Burke, 2017; Conlon et al., 2017, p. 34) to identify the transferable skills employers most want. Their efforts have led to hundreds of policy reports and initiatives directing centrally regulated universities towards an employer skills agenda. However, despite positioning their skills surveys as the definitive labour market source for influencing UK education and skills policies (Shury et al., 2017, p. 10; Winterbotham et al., 2021, p. 3), the vast expenditure of £30.5 million[21] has not improved employers' satisfaction with graduates' transferable skills (Belt et al., 2010, pp. 44-48; Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 27-56). Additionally, the CBI's practice of hiding its questionnaires and methodology from public view whilst claiming proprietorial policy rights as "the largest policy unit outside of Whitehall" (CBI, 2023) and influencing education policies (CBI, 2013, p. 46) suggests it is wholly unreasonable for the CBI to maintain a dominating and influential voice in higher education policy and direction.

The combined ineffectiveness of the UK government and CBI-commissioned skills surveys in delivering meaningful data on the skills employers want highlights significant tensions in implementing and interpreting large-scale skills surveys. These include the difficulty of structuring survey questions to elicit employers' views on the meaning of the skills they want to a level of detail at which they can be taught, practised and assessed in academia.

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[21] See Appendix B for the freedom of information requests on which the approximate ESS costs of £30.5m are based

Furthermore, the long-standing survey practices of using static, predetermined lists of skills and negative questions concerning graduate preparedness for work (Blake et al., 2000, p. 15; DfE, 2019b, p. 28) risk perpetuating higher education policy biases. Additionally, the long-term commission of the same market research company, IFF Research (Bosworth et al., 1999, p. 3; DfE, 2022, p. 1), may overlook emergent trends and phenomena, such as rapid technological advancements, sociological crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, and changing market conditions. For instance, the challenges society faced in transitioning immediately to remote working during the COVID-19 crisis highlighted an even greater need for self-management, leadership, discipline, the ability to communicate, and teamwork (Dyki et al., 2021, p. 233), all of which are encapsulated in the five transferable skills. Given these considerations, it is essential that the UK government regularly reassesses its Employer Skills Survey research partners to ensure they remain responsive to rapid societal, technological and labour market changes to understand and articulate the critical transferable skills needed in the workplace and the broader society.

Presence of sanctions versus absence of transferable skills and their meanings

The limitations of large-scale skills surveys notwithstanding, the longstanding calls for a common skills language which aligns with multiple party interests – see, for example (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; Hirsh & Bevans, 1987, p. 80; Jessup, 1991, p. 134; Oates, 2004, p. 57) are reasonable and transcend academic and policy discourses. The collective need for people to communicate, solve problems, work in teams, self-manage, and lead are universally recognised skills for human interaction and success. These skills help people, regardless of employment status, and society to adapt and thrive in a fast-changing world. However, the calls for a common skills language take on a more urgent resolution when examining the nexus between higher education skills policies, regulation and the labour market.

The OfS conditions B1, B3, B4, and B6, which link the development and acquisition of relevant yet undefined transferable skills to university registration (OfS, 2022b, p. 1; 2023b, p. 44), expose a significant dialectical tension: the presence of draconian regulatory sanctions versus the absence of a unified transferable skillset with unambiguous descriptions against which to measure English universities. This tension, seen through the lens of DCR, underscores a critical contradiction in the paradigm of contemporary higher

education skills policies – a system striving to equip students for economic prosperity yet constrained by its own ambiguities and inconsistencies in defining relevant transferable skills and what they mean at a performative level of assessment.

Addressing this critical contradiction and its tensions highlights the imperative for transformative change. The constraints advocate for a systemic overhaul in higher education policy, regulation and delivery to resolve the contradiction of an absent skills language and address the underlying mechanisms perpetuating the discord between employers, academics, policymakers, and learners. Such a goal calls for a more reflective and adaptable approach in which stakeholders across sectors collaborate to agree on a unified set of transferable skills encapsulated in a common and shared transferable skills language that aligns with the dynamic needs of the labour market and human potential. Such a unified set and common language must also acknowledge and understand their preparation complexities in an academic environment driven by specific yet vague metrics. This approach would help to form more balanced and informed policy decisions. Therefore, sub-research question three of this study sought to address the ambiguous descriptions of the five transferable skills identified by sub-research question two by exploring the expectations of performance employers and educators have of these skills. Thus, the following section discusses the headline trends from this study's focus group findings before concluding on the effectiveness and potential for using focus groups to generate meanings for the five transferable skills.

7.4   The complexity of transferable skills

Like the findings of the broader literature, for example, Kashefpakdel (2018), the employers and educators spoke of the challenge of describing and quantifying transferable skills because they slip and merge into each other, as illustrated by the focus group comments:

Educators: "Communication is a combination of skills that are actually very much linked to a series of other skills; [Leadership] "they're problem-solvers … they're good solid

communicators ….. it goes back to self-management; [Self-management] it's a range of skills ….. it's a hard concept to be able to really define." **Employers:** "the ability to influence …. encourage people to contribute, and that's a lot of the back to where we were with the communication and the team working; [communication] linking it back to the problem-solving… Teamwork its very very closely and tightly linked to the communication skill"

The challenges employers and educators face in attempting to quantify and describe transferable skills point to the nuanced, subtle, multifaceted and subjective interpretation of the skills across contexts and disciplines. It is not surprising, therefore, that the subjective perceptions of proficiency in such nuanced transferable skills complicate their assessment and quantification. This complexity highlights the importance for employers and educators to discuss transferable skills holistically and not as isolated and separate skills. Such discussions are essential to ensure that students can develop transferable skills that are assessable and measurable throughout their higher education learning journeys.

Furthermore, such collaboration will enable academics to apply a consistent language in their assessment criteria and assessment tools, including rubrics. With a shared understanding academics and employers can collaborate to better prepare graduates to be more immediately effective in the workplace (CBI, 2019a, p. 6; Dearing, 1997, p. 156; GoS, 2017, p. 50) and in their personal lives.

Same expectations different language

It was clear from the focus group discussions reported in Chapter 6, Section 6.1.4, that employers and educators held similar and often identical expectations of graduate performance. Finding that employers think the same but use a different language to describe their expectations of graduate performance contradicts the broad skills literature, which has regularly pointed to a long-standing disconnect between employers and educators. This contradiction is evidenced in the broad literature that employers believe academia does not understand their needs. See, for example, (CBI, 2019a, p. 8; Dearing, 1997, p. 130; Lowden et al., 2011, p. 15; Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 27-56). This finding reveals a potentially complex misalignment between employers and educators, highlighting the urgent need to bridge their communication gap. Successfully addressing this

misalignment could significantly narrow the perceived disconnect in understanding graduates' skills needs.

Furthermore, the employers' emphasis on the behavioural traits of "willingness", "attitude", and "potential" revealed in Chapter 6, Section 6.1.6, highlights significant contradictions and ambiguities in higher education: the enforced prioritisation of progression metrics and teaching excellence over workplace-valued behaviours, and the inherent subjectivity in assessing ambiguous concepts. These contradictory tensions are encapsulated in the following two stand-out verbatim extracts from the respective employer and educator focus groups:

> Employers: "everything we have just discussed is actually summed up in attitude, work ethic, willingness to try and thereafter you see their potential .. PE4 put it really nicely, the traces of or you know, this insight into that potential of those skills. .. to have the potential and I think the potential is epitomising what good is of all of the other skills"

> Educators: "In studies, you need to be able to measure and evaluate the outcomes of teaching so we need to understand better those skills"

The above contrasting views present a real challenge for educators tasked with designing and delivering curricula and assessment methods that foster and measure the transferable skills employers seek. Willingness and potential are ambiguous concepts, open to different interpretations which makes it impossible for educators to teach and measure them to the satisfaction of employers. Furthermore, the compulsory quantifiable learning outcomes environment in which educators must operate makes it impossible to align with the employers' concepts of willingness and potential. Using abstract concepts in learning outcomes, thus, leads to tensions and contradictions in interpretation, unclear learning expectations, difficulty in designing consistent and clear curricula and the impossibility for educators to meet regulatory obligations.

The gap between employers' abstract expectations and educators' specific learning outcome directives highlights the need for an open dialogue between employers and academia. One in which employers understand the regulatory constraints educators must operate within and in which educators understand what employers mean when looking for willingness and potential in graduates. This understanding and collaboration between employers and educators is essential to develop a common language and measurable standards that bridge the divide between university education and workplace expectations.

Calling for a common language should not imply that a pluralistic language incorporating diverse perspectives is the only necessary bridge to understanding employer-demanded skills. However, advocating for and adopting a shared, and unambiguous language will help to ensure that all stakeholders in the education system have more precise information to foster skills for personal and economic growth. Moreover, this clarity will contribute to enhancing more meaningful learning assessment, thereby helping to improve educational outcomes.

The magnification of societal dialectical tensions

The above complexities are further magnified when considering the dialectical influences of social structures, historical events, and political ideologies on interpreting transferable skills (Archer et al., 1998, p. xvi; Bhaskar, 2015, p. 146). Since at least the 1997 Dearing Report (Dearing, 1997), the UK's policy-driven agenda on transferable skills has led to a proliferation of vaguely defined terms, including "fusion skills", "key skills", "important skills", "people and personal skills", "soft skills", "the right skills", and "transversal skills", see, for example (Bamford, 2019, p. 1; CBI, 2021, p. 8; 2017, p. 14; Karzunina et al., 2018, p. 13; Winterbotham et al., 2020a, p. 37). Such terms are not helpful in education, employment, or policy narratives. They invite disagreement and confusion regarding what employers, educators and policymakers perceive such skills to entail and unhelpfully focus on stakeholders' preferences for broad skills terms instead of how each stakeholder expects graduates to think and behave when entering and progressing through the labour market.

Viewed through the lens of DCR, developing and assessing the five skills across a spectrum of behavioural expectations presents a profound challenge for students, educators and

employers. The nuanced interplay of the five skills complicates the assessment process because the skills are not easily distinct. Assessment is further complicated by employers' inability to articulate what behaviours they expect of graduates, and thus, graduates are left uncertain about how to demonstrate their skills to employers. Contrasting employer and educator priorities have been underscored in industry and scholarly reports since at least 1997, (see for example, Dearing, 1997, p. 156; Kashepakdel et al., 2018, p. 27; CBI, 2021, p. 400). These reports further amplify the dialectical tensions between employers and educators: employers seek observable transferable skills, whilst educators are mandated to assess knowledge and skills acquisition through explicit learning outcomes.

A lack of immanent critique

The tensions emanating from these contrasting perspectives have motivated the UK government and its higher education regulator, the OfS, to centralise a quality assurance solution in higher education. This centralisation is driven by the language of accountability and performance metrics framed on learning outcomes and punishment. However, their centralisation does not recognise the known employers' difficulties in describing transferable skills (Bennett, 2002, p. 471; Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, pp. 44-5; Pollard et al., 2015, p. 77) or the blurred boundaries between the skills (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, p. 19), also found in this study. Nor are the transactional consequences that progression metrics and learning outcomes mete on students and universities recognised as a significantly limiting factor in developing graduates with relevant transferable skills for the labour market.

The centralised and directive nature of the UK government's higher education policies and the OfS strict regulations indicate that they have fallen into the trap of not immanently critiquing (Bhaskar & Hartwig, 2016, p. 44) the consequences and effects of their higher education policies. Although the government has commissioned many papers to critically review its policies, for example, Augar (2019); Browne (2010); DfE (2019a); and Pearce (2019), such reviews typically focus on one policy in isolation of other policies impacting higher education. If a holistic critique of higher education policy had been undertaken, the policymakers may have uncovered the mutually complicit dialectical contradictions (Bhaskar, 2008a, p. 10) in their policy directives. On the one hand, they demand that universities close the skills gap by delivering graduates with industry-relevant skills. At the

same time, they expect universities to describe these skills through explicitly worded learning outcomes without defining or describing what these skills are. On the other hand, they enforce sanctionable progression and attainment rates to ensure students enjoy positive outcomes from their tuition fee expenditure, leading inevitably to a transactional approach to learning (Erikson & Erikson, 2019, p. 2297) and ultimately to employers' persistent dissatisfaction with graduates' skills (CBI, 2007, p.9; 2019a, p. 8; 2019b. p. 42; GoS, 2017, p. 48; Winterbotham et al., 2020a, pp. 27-56). Successive UK governments' lack of immanent critique of their policies and actions has, therefore, had a profound effect on higher education today, one in which society values extrinsic grades and classifications at the expense of positive, memorable learning that creates an authentic shift in students' perspectives and behaviours.

Academic assessment serves as a bridge to ensure that students' abilities to solve problems, communicate, lead, self-manage and work in teams can be applied in the real world. However, if employers cannot articulate these skills, it is unreasonable for the government and its policymakers, including the OfS, to hold higher education solely accountable for delivering employable graduates. Similarly, it is unreasonable for employers to expect graduates to be immediately effective in the workplace if employers cannot articulate the transferable skills they want such that graduates can acquire them during their studies. Thus, the UK's policy-driven skills agenda has led to a regulatory paradox: the challenge of measuring the output of relevant transferable skills without a clear framework for describing and assessing these skills. This paradox marks a significant gap between policy directives for relevant transferable skills and the practical reality of identifying, describing and integrating these skills into the educational framework.

7.5   Finding clarity in themes

The joint expectations expressed by the employer and educator focus groups in this study coalesced in a mass of expectations linked to all five skills. Ironically, the complex and blurred boundaries of where one skill stops and another starts helped to focus my attention

on how the five skills could be thematised. Rather than attempting to taxonomise each skill, I deconstructed the participants' contributions per skill into smaller semantic parts. I then created an interconnected thematic network of skills. This approach enabled me to richly illustrate the behavioural components of each skill, across six key themes, evident in Figure 20, and re-presented in Section 7.8 below. This rich illustration shows the complex, non-linear connections between the five transferable skills and how hidden beneath their broad labels, there is much more to these skills than meets the eye. Thus, the six themes revealed how the five transferable skills involve a highly complex set of cognitive and emotional behaviours. For example, having a positive mindset - Theme 1 – revealed a complex set of expectations through its sixteen sub-clustered themes, seven shared with other key themes and a set of 14 defining characteristics, as illustrated in Chapter 6, Section 6.2.3. The levels of complexity in each theme, and therefore, each skill, belies the simplicity of well-rehearsed bland performance statements repeatedly found in the broad skills literature, such as having a positive attitude and mindset, being a good communicator, being a self-starter, being a team player, and being resilient.

The benefit of a thematic analysis approach within the framework of dialectical critical realism is that it facilitates the identification and mapping of transferable skills through conceptual themes characterised by performative actions. This method acknowledges the fluid boundaries between the five skills and reveals the complex expectations employers and educators have of graduates' performative behaviours across them. Thematising their expectations further mitigates definitional tensions between the skills and exposes their hidden complexities. This strategy effectively clarifies their blurred boundaries and navigates the dialectical tensions in defining and understanding transferable skills by linking performance expectations to themes rather than specific skills. Whilst also enabling a deeper understanding of each skill.

Furthermore, by cultivating the behavioural themes the potential exists to enhance the five transferable skills in a more integrated and efficient manner than is currently the case in higher education and the workplace. The six themes identified through this study, illustrated in Figure 21 and re-presented below, hold the potential to streamline university curricula and workplace training programmes, fostering a more cohesive learning culture where a

common language is shared among learners, tutors, assessors and employers. The themes introduce a method for combining family resemblances of skills into an interconnected network of performance expectations. This approach encourages employers, educators, and students to look beyond surface-level statements to seek a more comprehensive understanding of each skill. It also respects multiple interpretations and perspectives while keeping the framework of a standardised skills language intact. Thus, the thematic strategies adopted in this study aim to enhance communication among all parties, fostering a deeper and more nuanced understanding of transferable skills within a standardised framework.

Figure 21: Key themes and their links to the five transferable skills

7.6   Summary in relation to the research questions

This study has addressed its research questions. Sub-research question one found that successive UK governments have steered English universities towards a highly regulated, skills-driven, and consumerist agenda. This agenda has garnered the long-term support of employers but has been largely rejected by educators due to its overly prescriptive focus on learning outcomes and ambiguous metrics. Although a unified skillset was not immediately apparent from the corpus of 100 UK government and CBI-commissioned large-scale skills

surveys and reports or the broad skills literature, through extensive corpus analysis, it was possible to find a set of five transferable skills in response to sub-research question two. From the focus group discussions, sub-research question three realised the potential for a common skills language as part of graduate preparedness for employability. However, the OfS and policy failure to recognise the mutually complicit dialectical contrary tensions has led to the contradictory regulatory challenge of measuring the output of relevant transferable skills without a clear framework for describing and assessing these skills. In particular, the following four regulatory challenges are notable:

1) Ambiguous OfS teaching quality, attainment and progression metrics which serve as targets and mechanisms for reward and punishment,
2) The contrasting behavioural priorities of employers wanting graduates to demonstrate the ambiguous qualities of willingness, potential and positive attitude versus educators' priorities to evaluate and assess knowledge and skills acquisition through explicitly described learning outcomes,
3) The blurred boundaries between transferable skills and the common practice of confining skills in fixed bounded definitions, creating opportunities for individuals to apply their own interpretations and reject definitions that do not fit their worldviews,
4) The absence of an agreed unified, relevant transferable skillset with clear meanings

When measures become both the target and mechanism of reward and punishment, they cease to be good measures (Mattson et al., 2021, p. 2; Sidorkin, 2015, p. 322). Instead, they foster an environment ripe for manipulation to secure rewards or avoid punishment. These conflicting motivations give rise to multiple contradictory tensions. Employers are dissatisfied with graduate skills (CBI, 2019a, p. 25; GoS, 2017, p. 48), graduates expect value for money and employment post-graduation (OfS, 2019, p. 7), and educators struggle to satisfy all stakeholders due to centralised and state-sponsored regulatory controls. Therefore, the hegemonised higher education policy of prioritising prescriptive learning outcomes, progression rate targets and positive outcomes for students risks eroding universities' role as a safe space for critical thinking, learning, and exchanging ideas.

Furthermore, this focus threatens to erode the trust of prospective students, employers and even the OfS who sets the targets in the first place.

The employer and educator focus group participants expressed joint frustrations and common expectations regarding graduate performance. Their sentiments are supported by evidence from the broad skills literature. The collective frustrations indicate the ongoing need for a more coherent and standardised approach to describing and assessing the relevant transferable skills employers want as dictated by the OfS higher education policies. It is not, therefore, surprising that the tension between employer skills demands, the absence of a unified skillset with descriptive meanings, the acknowledged difficulty in defining transferable skills (EC, 2020, p. 15), and employers' inability to break them down (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, p. 19) has led to long-standing calls from researchers, academics, and policymakers for a common skills language to demystify the transferable skills employers want (Barkas et al., 2019, p. 807; EC, 2020, p. 11; HEA, 2015, p. 3; Hirsh & Bevan, 1987, p. 61; Rich, 2015, p. 43; Wild & Berger, 2016, pp. 36-48). Indeed, so ubiquitous is the literature examining what graduate and employability skills are that no literature rejecting the need to define them has been found during this research. Despite the significant regulatory directive for English universities to deliver industry-relevant transferable skills (OfS, 2022a, p. 92; 121) to date, there remains no unified transferable skillset agreed upon by employers and educators with a shared language to enable stakeholders to understand the meanings of relevant transferable skills, their importance in society and the workplace and to facilitate their acquisition through education.

This research has found that a set of five relevant transferable skills is present in the universe of UK government and CBI-commissioned skills surveys. Furthermore, when educators and employers are asked to describe the behaviours they expect graduates to exhibit concerning these skills and the researcher digs beneath surface-level and implied meanings, a shared, well-understood, and simple language to assess relevant transferable skills is possible.

7.7   Reflections

Philosophical reflections

The originality of taking a dialectically critical realist approach introduces a depth and complexity that goes beyond traditional policy analysis. It ensures that the seen and unseen forces shaping higher education are considered and understood. However, adopting a dialectical critical realist stance for this research was risky as it is not an established way of reporting in higher education and skills policy analysis. Its novelty was contingent upon understanding the complex reality of higher education skills policies and ensuring that the analytical mechanisms of critically reviewing the policy and skills literature and methods of corpus and thematic analysis could challenge existing evidence and interpretations. I recognise that these methods of analysis underpinned by the philosophy of dialectical critical realism are an alternative approach in higher education policy formations, however, their adoption offers a comprehensive approach to identifying employer-desired transferable skills. The methods combine detailed language pattern analysis with semantic thematic exploration, using dialectical critical realism to explore the complex social realities of higher education policies. This framework helps uncover labour market-demanded transferable skills and understand the societal and economic contexts influencing these needs, effectively aligning educational outcomes with labour market requirements.

My insider-outsider researcher positionality further complicated the need to understand the nexus between skills policies and higher education delivery. As the researcher, I had a history, knowledge, and experience that allowed me access to nuances in the findings that could be overlooked by those with only an outsider or insider position. It also enabled me to appreciate the issues each focus group raised without reacting to what could appear to other researchers to be inflammatory comments. For instance, the employers' frustrations of wanting graduates to be "grown-ups" and the educators' frustrations of expecting a first without putting in the work", illustrated in Table 29: Focus Group Shared Frustrations, are judgement-laden viewpoints. However, a dialectical critical realist stance requires examining the potential for hidden or unacknowledged biases. My supervisors were vital in contributing different ontological stances in their respective roles as critical friends. By

recording our supervisory meetings and reviewing their written feedback, their challenges to my assertions and knowledge helped me to see what I could not always see. They challenged me to a deeper understanding of Bhaskar's dialectical critical realism and the arguments I advanced. Re-listening and re-reading their feedback also moved our supervision meetings from fixed moments to positions where they could be repeatedly re-examined and critically considered. This iterative reviewing process was not a smooth or linear transition. However, it was immensely helpful in developing my writing and critical stance.

In seeking to answer the research questions, I acknowledge that this study does not address a range of additional complexities in higher education, which also have the capacity to influence the interplay between the structures of government, employers, universities and the OfS. For instance, collaborative partnerships, student activism, career support and advice, the time required to develop a degree course versus the yearly reporting of employers needs. Specific pedagogic practices and curricula design methods are also not accounted for to support transferable skills development and acquisition. These unexplored mechanisms offer opportunities for other scholars to take a dialectically critical realist approach to examining the tensions and contradictions as additional insight into the challenge of implementing higher education policy at a practical level of delivery.

Forming the thematic map

The complex blurring of skills made identifying and illustrating the focus groups' expectations of each skill problematic. This complexity was revealed when I tried to keep the skills distinct and separate, as illustrated in Figure 19. I realised that attempting to illustrate each skill as a graphic of expectations would not work because of the significant repetition of expectations across the five skills. The messy proliferation of expectations showed that understanding and describing the five skills is not straightforward. It was, therefore, not surprising that the focus groups and the broader skills literature found describing their expectations of each skill difficult. Thematising the skills from the focus groups' semantic extracts offered a clearer and cleaner method of mapping the five skills. However, due to the small size of the focus groups, it is possible that other key themes or sub-themes can be identified by drawing on a wider range of stakeholders.

Furthermore, it is important to recognise that a common skills language generated for English-speaking academic and political communities may not account for culturally diverse interpretations of transferable skills. Therefore, future researchers should be aware of the potential hegemonic influences of the English language when identifying what transferable skills mean across culturally diverse groups.

7.8 Contribution to knowledge

This research has sought to challenge the OfS reductionist and high-stakes approach to measuring English HEI's success in employability development and provide contributory and causal evidence for practical educational policy recommendations (Fletcher, 2017, p. 181). When this study commenced in 2018, although a litany of national and global publications examined the employability skills graduates need, very little was known of the impact of the newly established Office for Students regulator on higher education. Similarly, UK higher education had no unified set of relevant transferable skills, even though English universities risk a range of regulatory sanctions for not delivering relevant transferable skills. Therefore, the research study was deemed timely and of interest to academia and policymakers in identifying a common and relevant transferable skillset and a process to establish a shared language between employers and educators.

Thus, this study contributes to the body of knowledge in four related areas:

1. A novel dialectical critical realist approach to researching higher education policy, exposing its tensions, complexities, and implementation challenges.
2. The existence of a previously hidden set of relevant transferable skills drawn from 20 years of publicly and corporately sponsored UK employer skills surveys (1999-2019).
3. A Context, Expectation, Description process, described in 6.1.1, for establishing a previously non-existent common skills language between employers and educators.
4. A rich thematic map of five relevant transferable skills with an explicitly described thematic analytical process for establishing a common skills language free from bounded definitions.

1) A novel application of DCR and *M.E.L.D.*

The philosophical approach of DCR and its *M.E.L.D.* practical enquiry process is limited in the existing literature. However, the principles of DCR offer a valuable perspective for analysing and exploring the complexities, contradictions, tensions, and dynamics of higher education policies and the concept of transferable skills relative to social structures, mechanisms and agency. Furthermore, when evidence of determinate absences is revealed as real forces in higher education policy regulations, the opportunity to make changes to policy becomes possible. Embracing the research philosophy of DCR, exploring the complex, interconnected reality in higher education and sharing an understanding of transferable skills among educators, employers, students, and policymakers offers the potential to occupy a significant and presently unoccupied position in higher education policy research.

2) The existence of a set of relevant transferable skills

This is the first known study to bring together 20 years of UK government and CBI-sponsored employer skills surveys and apply corpus analysis techniques to interrogate their content. The Boolean search methods, data search and selection criteria and data cleaning process explained in Chapter 4, Section 4.5, offer researchers a transparent and structured approach to finding relevant data sources from millions of Internet search hits and preparing them to upload to corpus analysis software. The corpus analysis methods adopted in this study, documented in Section 4.5.5, enabled the identification of 100 influential UK government and CBI-commissioned employer skills surveys and reports in which a set of five previously hidden relevant transferable skills reside. Although five skills are present across the 100 employer skills corpus, their presence is only evident through extensive corpus analysis techniques. Thus, the corpus analysis techniques offer a detailed methodological process of enquiry other researchers can adopt.

3) Context, Expectation, Description process

To date, the UK government-sponsored employer skills surveys adopt a quantitative computer-assisted telephone interviews technique to collectively record the skills needs, recruitment challenges and training practices of over 80,000 UK employers (Winterbotham

et al., 2020b, p. 19). These long-standing mechanisms do not ask for or capture employers' perceptions of skills' meanings. Nevertheless, their findings have a long history of informing higher education policies (UKCES, 2010a, p. 202) and, therefore, higher education regulations. This study has successfully captured employers' and educators' perceptions of the five transferable skills by adopting a context, expectation, and description process, described in Chapter 6, Section 6.1.1. Therefore, this study contributes to the knowledge of transferable skills, offering a deeper and richer understanding of what these skills mean than the UK government of CBI-commissioned skills surveys or the broader skills literature currently offer. Furthermore, the focus group protocols designed for this study and explained in Chapter 4, Section 4.6 offer researchers a reliable and organised method of enabling people to participate in real-time virtual discussion without interruption.

4) A rich thematic map of five relevant transferable skills

This study's novel thematic approach exposes a richly detailed, transparent, and connected map of behavioural themes employers and educators expect of graduates relative to the five skills not previously found in the literature. This map is presented and explained in Chapter 6, Section 6.2.2, Figure 20, and re-presented below.

Figure 20 - A transparent interconnected map of the five transferable skills
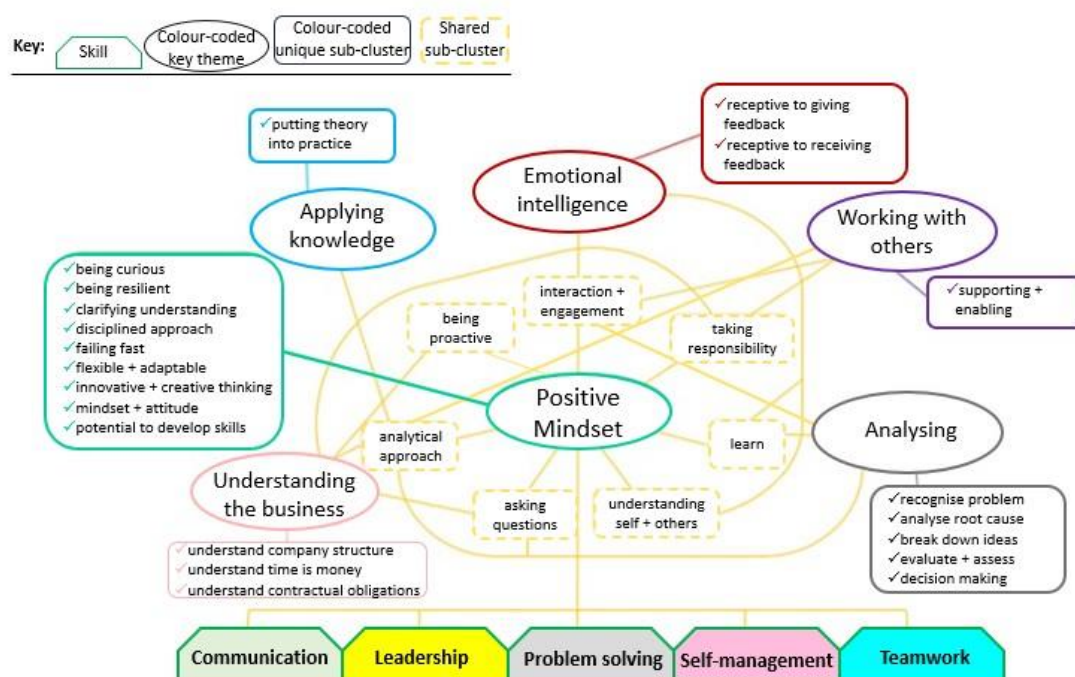
Furthermore, documenting and illustrating how the thematic analysis of the focus groups' data was conducted, in conjunction with a DCR philosophy, contributes to qualitative research as a rigorous analysis method. This study's step-by-step thematic analysis process, explained in Chapter 4, Section 4.7, offers detailed guidance for analysing qualitative focus group content, which adheres faithfully to semantic coding techniques. The thematic analysis methods adopted in this study also exposed commonalities and differences in the language employers and educators use to describe their expectations of graduate performance. The extensive detail, which is commonly absent in other qualitative thematic studies (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p. 79; Castleberry & Nolen, 2018, p. 808; Nowell et al., 2017, p. 2) may thus help to shed light on conducting trustworthy, credible and rigorous thematic analysis in education and other research fields. Thus, this study's key and sub-clustered themes offer a framework for future research to establish a rich universal common skills language free from bounded definitions.

7.9 Future research and next steps

Future research

By adopting the employer and educator discussion-based and thematic approach proposed in this study, the potential exists to adopt and enrich the network of behaviours connected to the five transferable skills. Doing so will give students, graduates, employers, educators, policymakers, and the wider society of job seekers what is currently absent in the literature – a unified set of transferable skills and a shared common language to describe them.

Therefore, the recommendations in this thesis are:

Higher education policy and practice

1. Policymakers and employers should seek to describe the transferable skills they want through the behaviours they expect to see and not attempt to define the skills. Describing expectations fosters shared knowledge, removing the potential for rejecting alternative interpretations or confining skills into rigid definitions.

2. The UK Government should establish a British Standard for a unified set of transferable skills. A British Standard for transferable skills will give a base-line of performance standards and behaviours against which all learners in the education system can be taught and evaluated relevant to their education journey. The benefits of such a British Standard include:

   a. providing all stakeholders with an understanding of the base-line required and desired behaviours inherent in each skill

   b. offering a solid foundation upon which learners, educators and employers can build broader and deeper transferable skillsets relevant to their needs.

   c. providing career advisors, recruiters, and employers with a language against which they can assess candidates' transferable skills

   d. offering a transferable skills language and standard therein as a benchmark in the education system including the Gatsby Career Guidance framework (Gatsby, 2018), and the proposed Advanced British Standard (DfE, 2023b)

   e. showcasing a consistent and clear transferable skills standard at a national and international level, reinforcing and elevating the UK's education reputation.

3. Policymakers should revise the commissioned employer skills surveys to:

   a. include the unified set of five transferable skills and adopt the Context, Expectation, Description (CED) enquiry process to facilitate a richer understanding of these skills as exemplars of employers' skills needs

   b. adopt the thematic formula described in Chapter 4, Section 4.7, to analyse the transferable skills findings of the revised surveys

   c. explore employers' and educators' perceptions of other relevant transferable skills and incorporate them into the rich thematic map, ensuring the connections to the six existing themes are made and exposed.

   d. include educators in the skills survey data acquisition and interpretation as key stakeholders with expertise in understanding and articulating transferable skills.

   e. adopt an academic research-driven skills agenda to drive the UK's future skills needs to balance, replace, or as a minimum, better inform the long-held

employer-led skills agenda which has, to-date, failed to deliver employer-demanded skills to their satisfaction

4. The UK government and the OfS should review the compulsory positive outcomes measures in the higher education regulatory framework to identify how their political motives for a sustainable economy and consumer expectations of value for money can be better served than the current carrot-and-stick regulatory approach to higher education.

Broader application and research

5. Researchers should adopt the Context, Expectation, Description (CED) enquiry process to help their research targets contextualise their expectations of a particular skill and describe how they expect a person to perform the skill. A brief example of this CED process is as follows: Teamwork is the context, sharing information is the expectation, and being willing to share information is the description.

6. Future focus group research should use the foundation of this study to ask students a range of questions related to their perceptions of the five skills.

7. Educators could incorporate the unified set of five transferable skills and their behaviourally expressed language to inform learning theories, curricula design, teaching and assessment of transferable skills

8. The shared language found in this study should be incorporated into learning outcomes and assessment rubrics to help learners understand what behaviours to exhibit to demonstrate their successful acquisition.

Next steps

I plan to disseminate the study findings in a range of ways:

- I plan to present the five transferable skills and the thematic skills map to the British Standards Institute to set the foundation for a British Standard for transferable skills.

- I will also share the five skills findings with Coventry University London and broader academic communities to develop an employability skills map. The map will be useful for educators to develop assessable learning, for students to gauge their current and future skills development needs, and for employers and recruiters to connect the skills students gain in education with the skills needed in the workplace
- I have put plans in place to pilot the CED process with a diverse group of employers and educators. The intention is to generate a detailed map of behavioural skills relevant for inclusion in education curricula, which can also be used as a benchmark for industry appraisals and career progression.
- I will write-up the 60-year history of higher education policy context for a book or paper
- I will write up the methods and findings of this study as a qualitative methods chapter
- I will write up the skills mapping and publish it through a dedicated website to show-case and disseminate my research
- I will establish a series of policy briefings to stakeholder groups to raise awareness of the challenges employers, educators and students face in the development of industry-relevant transferable skills.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Timeline summary of Higher Education Policy 1963-2022

Timeline of UK government higher education white papers, reports and policies 1973-2022		
Year	**Summary Title**	**Consequence for UK HEI's**
1963	The Robbins Report	Set the expansion of higher education to provide skills for the labour market (Robbins, 1963)
1988	Education Reform Act 1988	Abolition of UGC. University autonomy ceded to state control. Funding model changed from state-subsidy to universities contractually supplying education services to the state (ERA, 1988, p. 127)
1990	Education (Student Loans) Act 1990	Non-means tested tuition fee loans heralding policy-driven administrative burdens on UK higher education providers (Harris, 1991, p. 264).
1992	Further and Higher Education Act (1992)	Binary divide between Universities and Polytechnics was removed, giving Polytechnics university status and degree-awarding powers (Watson & Taylor, 1998, p. 9).
1997	The Dearing Report	Recommended tuition fees and compulsory learning outcomes (Dearing, 1997, pp156, 297)
1998	Teaching and Higher Education Act 1998	Tuition fees limited to £1,000 per annum putting higher education providers under funding pressure (THEA, 1998, p. 20)
2002	The Roberts review: SET for success:	Universities to improve the UK's productivity and performance (Roberts, 2002)
2003	Lambert Review of Business-University Collaboration	Universities again forced to respond to employers' needs without knowing precisely what employers' needs are (Lambert, 2003, p. 128)
2004	The Higher Education Act 2004	Office for Independent Adjudication set up to handle student complaints. Introduced concept of student consumers (HEA, 2004, p. 1)
2006	Leitch Review of Skills: Prosperity for all in the Global Economy - World Class Skills	Created the UK Commission for Employment and Skills to drive an employer skills-led agenda in higher education (Leitch, 2006, pp. 27-41) but which did not result in defining what transferable skills employers want, nor described their performance standards.
2009	Higher Ambitions 2009	Higher Education Strategy for England requiring its universities to produce explicit statements of employability describing how students are prepared for employment (Belt et al., 2010, p. 27)
2010	Browne Review: Securing a Sustainable Future for Higher Education	Set the regulatory need for universities to provide students with high-quality information to close the gap between skills taught in the higher education system and employers' skills needs (Browne, 2010, p. 28).
2011	White Paper: Students at the Heart of the System	Formalised the Student Charter, contractually binding UK universities to be service providers of higher education (DBIS, 2011, p. 6)
2012	Wilson Review: A Review of Business-University Collaboration	Set out regulatory requirements for business and university collaboration (Wilson, 2012).
2015	Fulfilling our Potential: Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice	Government manifesto to introduce the Teaching Excellence Framework to deliver better value for money for students, employers, and taxpayers (DBIS, 2015)
2016	White Paper: Success as a Knowledge Economy	Opened the UK higher education market to new entrants. Increased market-driven competitive landscape. Led to the higher education and Research Act, 2017 (DBIS, 2016) requiring UK universities to deliver value for money
2017	Higher Education and Research Act, 2017	Creation of the OfS as higher education regulator. New Teaching Excellence Framework to measure university excellence through three subjective metrics: student satisfaction, continuation rates and graduate outcomes (Woodfield & McIntosh, 2022).
2017	Taylor Review	The Taylor Review of modern working practices (Taylor, 2017)

| 2019 | Augar Review: Independent Review of post-18 Education and Funding | Capped tuition fee rises until 2025 and sanctioned wiping outstanding loans after 40 years (Augar, 2019). Increased pressure on universities to recruit more students without equal increased funding |
| 2022 | Skills and Post-16 Education Bill 2022 | Technical education qualifications and apprenticeships (SPEB, 2022) |

Appendix B: Freedom of Information Requests

Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

28th September 2022

FOI ref: 2022-0032829

Dear Carole,

Thank you for your request for information, which was received on 28th August 2022

You requested:
I would be grateful to know the annual cost of the Employer Skills Surveys since 2017.

Our Response:

I have dealt with your request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The annual year costs for the Employer Skills Survey since 2017 are as follows.

Year (if not specified otherwise, 1st April – 31st March)	Total contract cost		Net cost to Department for Education. (This excludes costs that were paid for by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.)	
Jan - Mar 2017	£	1,266,533	£	1,266,533
17/18	£	1,667,511	£	1,667,511
18/19	£	359,253	£	359,253
19/20	£	2,913,421	£	2,530,591
20/21	£	183,384	£	183,384
21/22	£	319,190	£	280,790
22/23	£	779,741	£	374,741

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are unhappy with the way your request has been handled, you should make a complaint to the Department by writing to me within two calendar months of the date of this letter. Your complaint will be considered by an independent review panel, who were not involved in the original consideration of your request.

If you are not content with the outcome of your complaint to the Department, you may then contact the Information Commissioner's Office.

Yours sincerely

DfE Commercial FoI Team

ContinuousImprovement.COMMERCIAL@education.gov.uk

1

Dear Department for Education,

Please supply me with the cost of the employer skills surveys from 1999 to 2023 and the cost of the employer perspective surveys from 2010 to 2017.

Yours faithfully,

Carole Still 2 October 2022
Delivered

Department
for Education

Department for Education
Sanctuary Buildings
Great Smith Street
London
SW1P 3BT

31st October 2022

FOI ref: 2022-0037740

Dear Carole,

Thank you for your request for information, which was received on 02 October 2022.

Our Response:

I have dealt with your request under the Freedom of Information Act 2000.

The responsibility for the Employer Skills Survey and the Employer Perspective Survey transferred to Department for Education from UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) in 2016 when it was dissolved

We can only provide you with the figures from the time the survey came into the Department.

Employers Skills Survey:

16/17: £1,301,848

17/18 onwards already provided in previous FOI data

Employers Perspectives Survey

16/17: 0

17/18: £109,749.11

If you have any queries about this letter, please contact me. Please remember to quote the reference number above in any future communications.

If you are unhappy with the way your request has been handled, you should make a complaint to the Department by writing to me within two calendar months of the date of this letter. Your complaint will be considered by an independent review panel, who were not involved in the original consideration of your request.

If you are not content with the outcome of your complaint to the Department, you may then contact the Information Commissioner's Office.

Yours sincerely

DfE Commercial FoI Team
ContinuousImprovement.COMMERCIAL@education.gov.uk

1

Estimating the cost of the Employer Skills Surveys 1999 to 2023

Date	Department	Survey	Cost £	Ref
1999	The Department for Education and Employment	Employers skill survey	?	Employers skill survey - statistical report.pdf (ioe.ac.uk)
2001-2002	Department for Education and Skills		?	
2003-2007	Learning and Skills Council	National Employer Skills Survey	?	[1]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk... [2]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk... [3]National Employers Skills Survey 2005: main report (publishing.service.gov.uk) [4]National Employers Skills Survey 2007 Key Findings (publishing.service.gov.uk)
2009-2016	UKCES	ESS	?	
2016-2017	Dept for Education	ESS	1,301,848	
2010-2017*		EPS	*6,662,803 (17/18: 109,749.11 FOI)	
Jan-Mar 2017			1,266,533	
17/18			1,667,511	
18/19			359,253	
19/20			2,913,421	
20/21			183,384	
21/22			319,190	
22/23			779,741	
TOTAL			**15,563,433**	

15,563,433 / 13 = 1,197,187 x 24 = **28,732,488.**

Notes:
2010-2023 = 13 years of known figures but missing a total of 17 years of ESS costs between 1999 and 2016.
Surveys have been commissioned from 1999 to 2023 (24 years).
Divide £15,563,433 by 13 then multiplying result by the 24 years 1999 – 2023 gives the total approximate cost of the surveys as **28,732,488**.
*the EPS, estimated to have cost £6,662,803 (DfE, 2022d) since its launch

The cost incurred by the Government Office for Science in commissioning twenty papers between 2016 and 2017 to understand the implications of skills policies, is unknown. Perhaps due to such criticisms, in 2019, the EPS, estimated to have cost £6,662,803 (DfE, 2022d) since its launch, was subsumed within the ESS to establish a single employer skills survey and save costs (Conlon et al., 2017, p. 34).

The annual year costs for the Employer Skills Survey since 2017 are as follows.

Year (if not specified otherwise, 1st April – 31st March)	Total contract cost		Net cost to Department for Education. (This excludes costs that were paid for by Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.)	
Jan - Mar 2017	£	1,266,533	£	1,266,533
17/18	£	1,667,511	£	1,667,511
18/19	£	359,253	£	359,253
19/20	£	2,913,421	£	2,530,591
20/21	£	183,384	£	183,384
21/22	£	319,190	£	280,790
22/23	£	779,741	£	374,741

Employers Skills Survey:

16/17: £1,301,848

17/18 onwards already provided in previous FOI data

Employers Perspectives Survey

16/17: 0

17/18: £109,749.11

Dear Carole Still,

Thank you for your further enquiry on survey data before DfE took over.
Please find attached details below:
The surveys were owned and managed by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills between 2009 and when the UKCES closed in 2016.

Before that, the 'National Employer Skills Survey' was run by the Learning and Skills Council from 2003 – 2007.
[1]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk...
[2]https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk...
[3]National Employers Skills Survey 2005: main report (publishing.service.gov.uk)
[4]National Employers Skills Survey 2007 Key Findings (publishing.service.gov.uk)

And before that it was the 'Department for Education and Skills' (2001-2002)
[5]Microsoft Word - RR372.doc (ioe.ac.uk)

And before that 'The Department for Education and Employment' (1999)
[6]Employers skill survey - statistical report.pdf (ioe.ac.uk)

Yours sincerely,

Skills Policy Analysis Team

References

Visible links
1. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk...
2. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk...
3. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk...
4. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk...
5. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/4589/1/RR372.pdf
6. https://dera.ioe.ac.uk/15172/1/Employers...

Appendix C: Summary of reviewed skills literature

Additional to the broader literature referred to in this study, 37 publications published between 1987 and 2020 were reviewed to offer a temporal view of the skills landscape in relation to the skills employers most want graduates to demonstrate. Eight employer skills reports (2018–2021), seven scholarly reports (1987-2020) and 22 papers (1998-2020) containing accounts of transferable skills relevant to the literature review. The list of publications below has been extracted from the reference list in the main thesis report:

1. Al Mallak, M.A., Tan, L.M., Laswad, F. (2020) Generic skills in accounting education in Saudia Arabia: students' perceptions. Asian Review of Accounting, vol. 28 no. 3 https://doi.org/10.11016/j.socscimed.2020.113138

2. Bamford, A (2019) The Fusion Factor: White Paper, October 2019. City of London Corporation. accessed 11th April 2020 https://oracy.inparliament.uk/sites/oracy.inparliament.uk/files/2021-04/City%20of%20London%20Corporation_0.pdf

3. Barkas, L., Scott, J., Poppitt, N., & Smith, P. (2019). Tinker, tailor, policy-maker: Can the UK government's teaching excellence framework deliver its objectives? Journal of Further and Higher Education, 43(6), 801-813. https://doi.org/10.1080/0309877X.2017.1408789

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5. Bennett, R. (2002) Employers' Demands for Personal Transferable Skills in Graduates: a content analysis of 1000 job advertisements and an associated empirical study, Journal of Vocational Education & Training, 54:4, 457-476, DOI: 10.1080/13636820200200209

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7. Berdrow, I., and Evers, F. (2010). Bases of competence: an instrument for self and institutional assessment, Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education, 35:4, 419-434, https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930902862842

8. Byrne, C. (2020): What determines perceived graduate employability? Exploring the effects of personal characteristics, academic achievements and graduate skills in a survey experiment, Studies in Higher Education, https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2020.1735329

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14. Fettes, T., Evans, K. and Kashefpakdel, E. (2020). Putting Skills to Work: It's not so much the what or even the why, but how. London: Commercial Education Trust. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080.2020.1737320

15. Green, F. (2013) Skills and Skilled Work: An Economic and Social Analysis, Oxford University Press

16. Haselberger, D., Oberheumer, P., Perez, E., Cinque, M., Capasso, D. (2012). Mediating Soft Skills at Higher Education Institutions, Education and Culture DG Life-Long Learning Programme, European Union. January 2012 https://gea-college.si/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/MODES_handbook_en.pdf

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18. Hill, J., Walkington, H., & France, D. (2016). Graduate attributes: Implications for higher education practice and policy. Journal of Geography in Higher Education, 40(2), 155-163.

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Appendix D: Combined focus group transcripts

Key: MOQ: Moderator opening questions
MCQ: Moderator clarifying question
PE[*]: Participant Employer and their number identifier
PA[*]: Participant Academic and their number identifier
MSI: Moderator signalling intention

Transcription markers:
[what/*] and [end/*] an interesting piece of text with square brackets marking the beginning and end of the text with * denoting the skill under discussion.
[comment/*] and [end/*] an interesting piece of text not specifically related to an expectation of performance but mentioned in the skill under discussion.

Colour Coding:
Transcription text identifiers: Employers – green, Educators brown
Highlighted sections of interesting text:
Communication / Problem solving / Team work / Self Management / Leadership / Open Discussion

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Communication Skills (Employer)
MOQ: PE12: Communication – What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of communication skills?

PE12: Communication answer: Start 2:30
I think firstly if I use communication in its verb sense **[what/c]** a willingness to communicate **[end/c]. [comment/c]** I find with young people in particular an unwillingness or perhaps a fear of communicating because it may be trying to give bad news and not wanting to give it, or just generally in a project scenario, all of our work is project based. **[end/c]** So not **[What/c]** openly communicating status **[end/c]** . So my short requirement is just a **[what/c]** willingness to engage in communication **[end/c]** . I think we can give or enhance the skill in terms of written or spoken comms but first and foremost it's **[what/c]** a willingness to communicate **[end/c]** .
END 3:37

MCQ: PE12: Communication clarification
Can I ask you, in that willingness to communicate what sort of things are they doing?

[what/c] Either written or spoken, this is where I'm at, this is what I'm doing, these are the challenges that I'm facing, this is how I'm going to address them. **[end/c]**
END 4:00
CS notes PE12 comms
Initial thoughts: Interesting reference to the verb "willingness" in reference to wanting to see a graduate do something. Willingness to communicate jumps out as a key statement of expected performance. The word "not" appears to modify a desired behaviour.
Reflection on process: I consciously did not pursue PA1's comments that communication is the primary skill as participants were not being asked to rank the skills.
Initial coding: I highlighted segments of texts which appeared to be expressing a key expectation of performance in each sentence. To expose the boundary of each segment of text I developed an annotation scheme…….

MOQ: PE2: Communication: Can I come to you next please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of communication skills?

PE2: Communication answer: Start 4:19

So, a great start from PE12 there, that **[what/c]** willingness to communicate is certainly essential **[end/c]** . I would just go a little bit further as **[what/c]** a willingness to communicate in the right way **[end/c]** . So, again, it's about **[what/c]** a mindset around positivity **[end/c]** . God forbid, you know, enjoying yourselves and that being contagious as well. **[comment/c]** What I find, just to give the opposite, is really unhelpful, is when people communicate but very negatively **[end/c]** . **[comment/c]** It sounds obvious but I suppose if we're just trying to define what we mean by good communication skills **[end/c]** , its **[what/c]** positively communicating a message **[end/c]** unless there is no way the message is in no way positive. Sometimes you've just got to bite that bullet.
END 5:16

MCQ: PE2: Communication
And if the message isn't positive, what sort of communication are you expecting from them then?
PE2: Communication clarification answer: Start 5:26
Again, I think a level of maturity that is, and I know we can pick apart, **[what/c]** I feel the instinct is to say "professional" but then you could say well what is "professional"? I think its about a level of maturity to communicate with peers and to look for, even in negative situations, positive outcomes **[end/c]** . I know we will probably be moving onto to things like problem solving but **[comment/c]** I never particularly mind hearing bad news from a team as long as there is this is what we can potentially do about it **[end/c]** .
END 6:05

MOQ: PE10: Communication: If I can come to you next please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of communication skills?
PE10: Communication answer: Start 6:11
When they're submitting applications, I would expect them to be able to **[what/c]** demonstrate that they are coherent in their communication through the written word **[end/c]** but also that they **[what/c]** describe situations where they have been tested in communication whether it be public speaking or whether it be engagement in small teams. Several different examples, different scenarios where they would communicate. **[end/c]** And also that they **[what/c]** recognise that there are different ways of communicating, that different people that they communicate to may need to be dealt with in various different ways **[end/c]** . So it's a bit of a collection of all those things. Although recently I've been recruiting for project management, even when I was recruiting for manufacturing or procurement or logistics, its generically the same. **[comment/c]** I don't necessarily look for them to be able to communicate on a technical basis **[end/c]** . I think **[what/c]** the willingness to engage is definitely a key aspect **[end/c]** of it because by applying, they're engaging but a lot of them are forced into that because they're having to look for something. So it's a step further than just following the routine and actually just ticking the boxes and getting an application in. Its actually something meaningful.
END 7:53

MOQ: PE3: Communication: If I can come to you next please What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of communication skills?
PE3: Communication answer: Start 8:01
[comment/c] There are a lot of soft skills I would be looking for in terms of an entry level graduate **[end/c]** . **[comment/c]** One of the key interview questions that I've often asked is around volunteering and to what extent would they volunteer and in what areas would they volunteer **[end/c]** . I think I'm also looking for people who are very much **[what/c]** original thinkers **[end/c]** but there's also a really fine line between confidence and cockiness and you've got to really try and get that right. You pick badly you could end up making a mistake on that. I'm also conscious that the sort of person I would be looking for is **[what/c]** the sort of person who is capable of taking

initiatives **[end/c]** but also **[what/c]** taking responsibilities, so if they over step somewhere that they're actually able to turn round and say, "look I got that particular bit wrong" but will learn from that **[end/c]** . But I would definitely say that a lot of the stuff I look very closely for, I mean, I'm very keen on **[what/c]** Duke of Edinburgh award schemes, taking part in church or scouting, not from the religious aspect but purely from a community, volunteering point of view. **[end/c]** That's the sort of thing I'm looking for.
END 9:28

MOQ: PE4: Communication: If I can come to you next please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of communication skills?

PE4: Communication answer: Start 9:43
Well, I think yes, **[what/c]** a willingness to engage is definitely helpful in being able to interact to communicate on its simplest level **[end/c]** . Also, **[comment/c]** there's no expectation that the person is going to have the sort of knowledge and the technical skills, as PE10 has said**[end/c]** . But I'd be looking for **[what/c]** evidence of curiosity, sense-checking, clarification, **[end/c]** possibly **[what/c]** trying to explain things through the use of simile and metaphor **[end/c]** perhaps. Or **[what/c]** trying to relate it to their own experiences to gain some common understanding or personalised.....maybe that's a huge dollop of EQ – emotional intelligence **[end/c]** probably. (Sorry my internet connection is telling me that it's a bit unstable so I hope...) That's it. **[what/c]** Sense-checking, clarification **[end/c]** , I suppose **[what/c]** demonstrably listening **[end/c]** . (As we are going now… or not being able to hear!)
END 10:54

MOQ: Communication addition: So, is there anything else, just as a free-for-all, thinking about what everyone has said in terms of communication, is there anything anybody would like to add?
PE10: Communication additional answer: Start 11:19
I would. **[comment/c]** Communication isn't just about speaking or projecting yourself or even listening actively **[end/c]** . **[what/c]** Communication is about being passionate, being inquisitive, being curious, as PE4 has said**[end/c]** **[what/c]** It's also about the way in which you carry yourself and the sort of, is not charisma necessarily at that age or that stage in their career. But it's the impression, the overall impression that the individual gives **[end/c]** . So **[comment/c]** looking for communication through the written word in an application process or an online gamified selection is very difficult until you actually get them in front of you and you can actually see the personality of the individual coming through **[end/c]** . Because sometimes, you can get a very good application and its not the person that you meet. And other times you can get a fairly average application and their personality just shines. So taking into account those different things and I think, looking for key words or looking for key phrases in an application is something that I've only become to understand more over the years when I've seen several more. And **[comment/c]** I've got my own sense-checking of the comparison between the applications and the individual I see in front of me. **[end/c]** So**[comment/c]** it's not easy to quantify in that one and the soft skills aspects are probably one of the more important aspects that you need to get right when you're recruiting someone. **[end/c]**
END 13:08

MOQ: Communication Addition: Does anyone else want to add anything else.

PE4: Communication additional answer: Start 13:16
As we were speaking just about that, and again it may be beyond the remit but I was also thinking where sometimes, and this is a long time ago because I'm much more "right-on" now. But I remember I was interviewing for a software developer years ago, and a Goth walked in. And I have to confess I really had to clear the decks for that first impression thing of "what have I got here"? So I'm just also wondering, before we even deign to judge or gauge the impression that these people

have on us, something is screaming out to me about blind, you know doing it undercover, behind a screen**.** And there's also the unconscious bias training that I'm assuming each of us will have gone through before we get into a room with these people and pass judgement or we'd been very clear again about what it was that we were seeking. And also, what was acceptable and permissible or that we should explicitly mark down as this could affect my opinion of this person because it's based upon knowing them for the first 5 seconds. And so there has to be the opportunity for a recap and a second chance either way, I suspect, it won't just be a one-off decision in a process like this.
END 14:56

MOQ: Communication Addition: Does anyone else have anything else to contribute on communication before we move onto problem solving?

PE2: Communication additional answer: Start 15:08
I just think it does, to a certain extent, depend what you are recruiting for as well. Just taking on board everything everyone else has just said, where I've had problems filling roles to do with business development…it's a pleasure …. obviously I'd never go against University policies, but to get out of the university way of doing things, they have to have the relevant experience, etc, to **[comment/c]** [I]go to a temping agency and say "can you just find me a recent graduate has just got the right raw material (nods of agreement) **[end/c]** . That's worked for me so many times. Just someone who, and you describe you know … and **[comment/c]** it's this discussion that you're trying to describe what that is, you know, just someone that's got something about them, can have a good conversation you know, can think on their feet **[end/c]** . And that's got me some of the best people into the new business. But that's because I'm looking for people with the traits who can **[what/c]** engage with all different types of people **[end/c]** . You know, if it was something else, let's say something more computer, which shows my level of computerizes, I would imagine that the technical expertise would be a lot more required. But just speaking about **[comment/c]** I'm generally recruiting for roles where its more about that raw material, raw ability which is I suppose essentially what this discussion is all about(nods of agreement) **[end/c]** .
END   16:44

MSI: PE10 Problem solving - I'm going to come to you in just a second to kick-off problem solving.

MOQ: Communication addition: Is there anything else to add onto the communication skills before I move onto problem solving?

PE10: Communication additional answer: Start 17:05
Just one more thing I was going to say. **[comment/c]** Nowadays, it is quite important that communication through technology is also there because everybody needs the grads to tell us how to do things.(nods of agreement) **[end/c]**
END   17:20

PE11: Communication answer: Start 34:49
Well, **[what/c]** I'd expect them to be articulate **[end/c]** . To **[what/c]** voice their opinions **[end/c]** but I'd also expect them to listen, and to **[what/c]** listen a lot to the environment that they're in and to proactively challenge **[end/c]** . Especially **[what/c]** linking it back to the problem solving environment, we expect them to bring new ideas so they have to be able to communicate those ideas through both written and verbal communication skills **[end/c]** . In **[comment/c]** the written skills, I think that's equally as important as the verbal skills, being able to structure their ideas concisely, clearly, articulately so that they're able to speak in written word to the team receiving that information (nods of agreement) **[end/c]** . **[comment/c]** I'm conscious that we are now a multi-lingual environment of people whose first language isn't necessarily English and we're in that more and more these days. So the choice of words needs to be exact and clear and not confuse the idea

[end/c] .   A lot of times I've seen very convoluted ideas and people can't break them down simply to say what they do or don't want.   And sometimes I get back to questions, you know, and very simply "are you asking me a yes or no question? If not, what are you asking me" so that we **[what/c]** break that down into something that gets to the point very quickly **[end/c]** .   **[comment/c]** There's a huge amount of non-verbal skills as well that I find grads learn as they go through work life and life in general. Some of them are not tuned into that **[end/c]** . So the whole **[what/c]** self reflection on one's own communication skills I think is equally as important **[end/c]** and people don't listen out for that.   **[comment/c]** A lot of people like to be heard and when they're trying to be assertive and present themselves as leaders as young graduates, they over talk rather than clearly articulate exactly what they want to say and leave it at that **[end/c]** .

END 36:54

MOQ: Communication addition: As we've returned to communication skills and you've all heard PE11's comments, has that sparked any further thoughts from anybody, just before we move on? Or are we all happy to move on? (Nods and general agreement "happy").

Communication Skills (Educators)

MOQ: PA1: Communication: What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their communication skills?

PA1: Communication answer: Start 4:00
I think mainly their ability to **[what/c]** persuade, convince, engage. I think in communication if you can engage your audience and then persuade them then you are on the right track **[end/c]** . I think also communication is built on being able to **[what/c]** speak honestly and openly **[end/c]** . And therefore also I think having looked through all your skills we are going to go through is that **[comment/c]** communication is the primary skill in getting the work done , you know, being an employee, but if you work your way up in the ranks in hierarchy to become the big leader then communication skills are still very important **[end/c]**.

End 5:00

MSI: PA5: Communication
can I come to you please – what do you expect from a final term student when you are evaluating their communication skills?
PA5: Communication answer: Start 5:14
Can you hear me? (yes, thank you). So I think for me what I look for is their ability to relay information, I think not just relaying that information but doing so in a confident manner.   **[what/c]** Being very open you know, being able to interact precisely with the audience whoever the audience may be, whether its their peers or the academics, etc. So I think the ability to relay the information, getting the message across with clarity **[end/c]** . I think, that's really one of my main things that I would look for.
End 5:53

MOQ: PA6: Communication - So, can I come to you and ask you the same question. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their communication skills?

PA6: Communication answer: Start 6:08
I kind of see things slightly differently. And to me, kind of a general thing, which is why I asked the question before about what's a skill? is that if someone is a graduate or an impending graduate and they are a great student, as you've said, then I expect them to not just **[what/c]** know how to communicate **[end/c]** or whatever, but I expect them to be recognisably and demonstrably good at it. Which means that, and **[what/c]** for me media is very important, it means that they can choose the right media and style of communication for the right situation **[end/c]** .   And they can do all

those things other people have said, as required. And it comes down to this thing that…we talk a lot about driving a car….you're good at driving a car not because you have basic competencies like braking, or steering or accelerating or indicating, but its because you can put it all together as the situation demands and make effective progress without crashing.
End 7:30

MCQ: PA6: Communication
Brilliant, thank you. Can I just return to you on that and ask you what "it" is when you say "put it altogether"

PA6: Communication clarification: Start 7:43
Um, all the, if you like, competencies which are required for effective skilful communication. The problem I have with Higher Education in France as well as in England is that we seem very (as you alluded to) we seem very concerned with making sure that everybody passes without actually making sure that our best and first class and distinction students are actually really very very good at what they do. And this idea of a skill, if you say to me someone is skilled that means that I think they are better than any sort of average ordinary person would be and very very good at um you know, recognisably very very good. So if you say to me this student is a skilled communicator it means they **[what/c]** know the right media, they know the right message**,** and all the things that PA1 just mentioned about engaging, persuading but as required so that the great student….I would not expect them to go ranting on on a sales pitch if the situation didn't demand a sales pitch**.** Similarly, I wouldn't expect anybody to make an hour long presentation when a 6 minute 40 petcha kucha is the way to go. And so its about the selection of tools, styles**,** all the different competencies which, to me makes a student have great communication skills **[end/c]** and not just a student for that matter.
End 9:20

MOQ: PA7: Communication: Can I come to you please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their communication skills?
PA7: Communication answer: Start 9:30
I think I, I mean I agree with PA1 and PA6 and PA5. I think the one thing that struck me is, and PA6 sort of said that really, is **[what/c]** articulation of how they express things. So having a structure, making sure they know the purpose of what they're doing and **[end/c]** **[what/c]** how they're presenting if you like and how they're discussing certain topics. So that encapsulates what PA1 and PA5 were saying about being persuasive**,** engaging **[end/c]** . But also **[what/c]** how they articulate whether that's, you know everybody has a different, not necessarily vocally through their speech as in accents or their level of English but more how well structured they are presenting and what is the quality of what they are discussing I think is very important. **[end/c]**   So, as I say, it's everything combined.
End 10:28

MOQ: PA8: Communication - Can I come to you please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their communication skills?
PA8: Communication answer: Start 10:43
I don't think I have too much more to add to what has already been said. I wrote down a couple of things when I was thinking about it. **[what/c]** The ability to engage is important **[end/c]** **[what/c]** structure and deliver on effective arguments based on insights from research and application of key concepts and that should delivered in a precise but easy to consume and engaging manner **[end/c]** . So this has all been touched on before. **[what/c]** Clarity and simplicity is key because one of the things about being a great communicator is you can take complex ideas and break them down and deliver them in simple, easy to understand ways **[end/c]** . Also you should be **[what/c]** clearly communicating a positioning for yourself and I encourage this with my students. It's that when

they're asking questions you are communicating something that you have done some research and are seeking clarification **[end/c]** rather than treating some sort of google box. I find myself correcting third year students quite a lot. They ask me, for example, what is a creative brief? And I say, well I go on zoom and share my screen and show them a Google search and sit there and go "you didn't need to ask this question". So, **[what/c]** asking the right kinds of questions, which is one of the key skills that we ask of our students at University **[end/c]** but I still feel that its not something that students, even at third year, have really got their head around. I think the excellent students are great at asking questions, and **[what/c]** those questions are clarifying questions that clearly position themselves **[end/c]** to say, I've done the research, I'm asking a clarifying question that is important, in order for them to be more successful in delivering the deliverables that they need to. So there are those kinds of aspects around communication, **[what/c]** how they're positioning themselves when they're asking questions **[end/c]** and how other people view them. And that encapsulates a lot of what everybody else has said.

End 12:52

MOQ: PA9: Communication - Can I come to you please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their communication skills?

PA9: Communication answer: Start 12:58

Yes, thank you Carole. I think **[comment/c]** communication is a broad skill**.** When I evaluate students and I think of a very good student, I break it down to oral, written communication and body language as well.   Now each one of them has three components, if you like, three aspects**:** A social aspect, an emotional one and a cognitive one **[end/c]** . So **[what/c]**in terms of cognitive skills we are talking about being able to articulate, express, argue, persuade and things that the panel has already mentioned**[end/c]**. These are cognitive skills. In terms of **[what/c]** social skills it means you are able to engage with your communication to show that you can interact and show that you can understand others and listen to others as well **[end/c]** . Plus in terms of emotional skills, which is very likely used possibly in the last 10 years maybe in the private industry is to have awareness of others, **[what/c]** be empathic and show that in communication skills that you understand yourself but at the same time you understand, emotionally, others as well **[end/c]** . **[comment/c]** So there is a combination of social, emotional and cognitive skills in all aspects of communication And that makes it, if you like, a bit more tricky to evaluate because its' not one skill that you need to evaluate, it's a combination of skills that are actually very much linked to a series of other skills that possibly need to be thought of like cogs in a watch **[end/c]** .

END 15:03

MOQ: Communication addition - Thank you very much. So having listened to what everybody has said, is there anything anybody else would like to add, and this is a free-for-all moment.

PA1: Communication additional answer: Start 15:20

Carole, I would like to say one thing.   **[comment/c]** We also need to bear in mind the personality of that individual because its not because you're a great communicator that you'll be very successful at what you will be doing. So in nursing skills, I think we need to also be able to assess this or look at this on a more individual basis on personality-wise **[end/c]** . And **[what/c]** especially what PA9 was saying, that emotional maturity **[end/c]** because you know, PA6 very rightly pointed out, that when they graduate they're not going to be able to stand up and influence the board meeting at their new company to do a completely radical decision. So its about personality and nurturing that skill and adapting it to finding that forum really.

END 16:18

MOQ: Communication Addition - Any one else?

PA6: Communication additional answer: Start 16:33

Just taking on something that PA1 just said is that I think that **[what/c]** one of the key aspects of that communication is tailoring your communication style according to the person that you are seeking

to communicate with **[end/c]**. So that, as you say, if it's the board, well that's one thing, if its your subordinates that's another thing or if it's a group of people a group of students, customers, colleagues, whatever it might be, its being able to differentiate. I think it goes back to what I was saying earlier is that you've got to choose the right style of communication, media, message, emotion, everything that everybody has said, with a key objective in mind and according to your target audience.
END 17:22

MOQ: PA5: Communication addition
PA5: Communication additional: Start 17:25
PA6 just said what I was going to say to be honest. Probably what I would add to that is demonstrating their strengths across the board. So you might find that some can articulate pretty well by speaking, communicate very well by speaking. You might find there are others who are really good when it comes to writing so they **[what/c]** can demonstrate what they are trying to get across by writing. But I think what **[what/c]** I look for is a level playing field, so to speak, so someone who can articulate well, writing, speaking, body language **[end/c]** , the whole lot.
END 18:04

Problem Solving Skills (Employer)
MOQ: PE10: Problem solving - If I can kick-off with you please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of problem-solving

PE10: Problem solving answer: Start 18:00
Okay, again I would say I look for **[what/p]** evidence in an application that they have been in situations where they have had to use some problem solving techniques **[end/p]** . Now normally for a graduate, their courses – and I don't dictate what subjects they do, **[what/p]** I'm happy to accept any subjects whichever discipline I'm recruiting for because I'm actually looking for potential rather than content. So I expect them to be able to demonstrate through whatever subject they've done that they can take in information and simulate it and reflect it to come out with a conclusion. That's what I think their degree tells me**[end/p]**. But in the course of their degree normally they have situations where they have to **[what/p]** discuss or come up with a solution to a situation. And if they use that as an example, even if it's only just a brief description then that can describe something that they've been guided towards doing**[end/p]**. But then I also look for things like, PE3 mentioned the **[what/p]** Duke of Edinburgh Award or involvement in associations or the willingness to be proactive and take on roles of responsibility in student societies or organisations **[end/p]** . And in all of those situations, actually **[what/p]** delivering a result is a form of problem solving **[end/p]** . So **[what/p]** how they achieved that and how they put two and two together to get 6 or 7 **[end/p]** or even more is relevant in **[what/p]** demonstrating what they can do. **[end/p]** **[comment/p]** So get the description through the application and then the recruitment process, the way in which we actually engage them is through not just an interview but through several exercises where they're engaged and demonstrate different approaches **[end/p]** . And we will expect them to be able to **[what/p]** use different strategies to get to a result and the result might be different than we expect but it's the way in which they get there that matters **[end/p]** .
END 20:11

MCQ: PE10: Problem solving
Can I just come back to you on you've said use different strategies. Do you have anything that you would be able to describe there in terms of a strategy?
PE10: Problem solving clarification answer: Start 20:26
Well things like, **[what/p]** having a very clear analytical approach is one strategy. To actually list what it is you're trying to get to what all the characteristics are and what the impact of each one is and therefore you prioritise **[end/p]** . and all of that sort of thing. And also, alternatively it could be

[what/p] a strategy is to seek advice from somebody else and not think that you've got the answer [end/p] . And actually what we would expect from early entry grads is that they would [what/p] try and think of something themselves [end/p] but they would [what/p] look for information from other people [end/p] and they would sort of [what/p] take the initiative but make it controlled initiative by checking and balancing against people who have done it before. So they do not always think they know best, and some grads do. And whatever we do, we bring them through a graduate training scheme anyway but whatever we do we tell them "take care, this situation is known, it's a problem, you'll get frustrated dadedadeda" and they say "no, we can solve that, we know the answer, we can do that". And at the end of 6 or 9 months they say "nope, we didn't, what's the answer". It's a recurring thing but they've got to live the life so its [what/p] knowing some analytical tools and methods [end/p] but also having the [what/p] self reflection ability to say "no, I don't know the answer, I need to find out from somebody else" and not just google it [end/p] . [what/p] Go and talk to people and get information from other people in different ways of approaching things [end/p] .

END 22:20

MOQ: PE2: Problem solving - If I can come to you next please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of problem-solving

PE2: Problem solving answer: Start 22:30
I'd love to just pick up where PE10 left off because whilst completing agreeing with all of that, there is another side to it for me as well that is…. I, ideally I'm looking for someone who just [what/p] thinks of things that other people wouldn't necessarily think of [end/p] , the old [what/p] thinking outside the box [end/p] . And particularly with fresh graduates into the business, I'd be [what/p] challenging them to come up with solutions that are different to what we've done before [end/p] . They might not be right and that's the thing [what/p] not just to go ahead and do it [end/p] but to [what/p] use their lack of being entrenched in the way that we do things to come up with new thinking [end/p] . So for me, what is problem solving, well [comment/p] I love someone who basically solves the problem before it reaches me [end/p] . And that is [what/p] not that they just go ahead and do it, because it all needs to be discussed and we agree that's the answer [end/p] . Going back just those few years to when I did a year out in my degree, probably the best advice I ever had from my very young manager then had a big impact on me was when I was just going to her saying "we need to sort out this". And she said "No. Bring me the problem, but bring me your solution as well". And I appreciated it was far easier to say yes, do that. So staff that make it easy for their colleagues by [what/p] having solutions and effectively conveying them [end/p] .

END 24:25

MOQ: PE3: Problem solving - If I can come to you next please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of problem-solving.

PE3: Problem solving answer: Start 24:33
So problem solving, it's pretty much along the lines of what PE2 has just been saying is that its really important... one of the things I do look out for is [what/p] original thought [end/p]. All too often, businesses can often almost recruit to type and it's good to be able to get people who can actually [what/p] think anything for themselves and don't feel constrained to follow whatever is the prevailing wind [end/p] and actually [what/p] come up with a solution [end/p] . And even if it's not the right answer, that's something I really value in people, is the ability to be able to [what/p] look at a problem in a different way [end/p] . And that's actually not that easy to find even amongst established colleagues so that's definitely one of the things I do look out for.

END 25:23

MCQ: PE3: Problem solving
When you're looking out for it, what specifically are you looking for when you say they look at a problem in a different way. Could you give an example?

PE3: Problem solving clarification answer: Start 25:41
Okay, so **[comment/p]** I've got a couple of scenarios that I play out in an interview. So I will set a particular problem to the candidate and I will ask them "if you're solving this problem today, how would you go about doing it?" **[end/p]**   And what I'm really looking for is for people who are **[what/p]** prepared to go in and actually draw on their own personal experiences and say "look, I've had a similar problem doing this in my life outside of work and this is how I dealt with it". That's the sort of approach I like. **[end/p]**   I've had some mixed responses from people but **[comment/p]**what I don't like is people who just go "well it can't be solved" or "well everybody thinks it should be done this way so I'm going to do it this way"**.** I really do like to see people who actually will come out and say look I think it's this and everybody thought it wouldn't work but I tried it and you know what, it worked. **[end/p]** And so it's really trying to tease out of people **[what/p]** how do they go about thinking about problems being faced **[end/p]** .
END 26:51

MOQ: PE4: Problem solving - If I can come to you next please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of problem-solving
PE4: Problem solving answer: Start 27:02
Well I would like to find out from them **[what/p]** experience of working in a successful team **[end/p]** , and subsequently also **[what/p]** whether they've got any notion of role. Can they distinguish, as an actor does, an actor in a sociological sense really, can they lead, can they support **[end/p]** or can they **[what/p]** critically evaluate **[end/p]** . Because sometimes we need to do each of those things, either altogether or differently. Because it sometimes follows that it's not their idea. That they're **[what/p]** working within a successful team environment to bring an idea in **[end/p]** . So, I'd like some sort of **[what/p]** demonstration that they can work in that environment and that they realise that it's not just down to them **[end/p]** .And I'd also be interested **[what/p]** to see whether they've worked in a failing team or as an individual in an abject failure of an activity, what did they do next? **[end/p]** **[what/p]** How did they pick themselves up? **[end/p]** Is there any evidence of **[what/p]** resilience **[end/p]**   So I'd be looking for…..and again on a CV is there any evidence of **[what/p]** team activity **[end/p]** and maybe **[comment/p]** I would be looking towards the arts. You know, working in theatre or an orchestra or a sports team **[end/p]** . Or also **[what/p]** have they been a representative in any way, throughout their life, on a school council or university council or local charity work **[end/p]** .Those sorts of things where there have been turgid meetings to get through so **[what/p]** they've got some sort of feel for how decisions get made **[end/p]** .
END   28:59

MOQ: PE12:Problem solving - If I can come to you next please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of problem-solving
PE12: Problem solving answer: Start 29:28
Yes, I'd look for the ability to, one, **[what/p]** recognise what the challenge is in front of the individual and come with an expectation of how they're going to address it **[end/p]** . My preference is they do **[what/p]** not run off and try and fix their issue without sharing **[end/p]** . I'd like to **[what/p]** witness some collaboration to perhaps go to some colleagues and say "this is the challenge I'm currently facing. This is what I think I should do about it **[end/p]** and really just get some "yeah that's probably the right way, or not". But **[what/p]** most importantly is actually to do something **[end/p]** . **[comment/p]** Quite often faced with an obstacle especially with someone potentially lacking in experience might mean "I'm not going to do anything because I don't know how to address that problem" **[end/p]** . **[comment/p]** I've got a very strong preference for someone

having a go at something because I'd rather be a "partially right" than absolutely nothing **[end/p]** . In a kind of "ready, fire, aim, approach to addressing the issue.
END 30:46

MOQ: PE11 Problem solving - If I can come to you next please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of problem-solving

PE11: Problem solving answer: Start 31:00
[what/p] I'd expect them be able to try **[end/p]** . Probably have some **[what/p]** clear thinking to get the root cause of the problem before they rush off and try to solve the wrong problem **[end/p]** . We see that quite a lot so**[what/p]** it would be really good to see how they break down the problem into something that makes sense so that they tackle it in the right way **[end/p]** . It would be good to see some **[what/p]** innovative ideas **[end/p]** . **[comment/p]** Some of the problems we have are because we try and treat them like we have always treated them and we don't have any creativity or input of ideas or no different thinking in that process **[end/p]** . And we're looking for people **[what/p]** to effectively keep breaking the mold **[end/p]** . So that we have that **[what/p]** diversity of thought in what we're doing. And for me, the fundamental there is not to be afraid to fail **[end/p]** because it's a problem, we've obviously experienced it before, we're likely to experience it again, let's look at some options. And through that process**[what/p]** I would expect the person volunteering their ideas to learn as they go through that and understand the rationale why some things might work and some things might not work **[end/p]** .   **[comment/p]** Its not that we're looking for a perfect solution in problem solving. We're looking for ideas of what's possible **[end/p]** . **[what/p]** It's also really important to ask questions of others to be able to find it out **[end/p]** . **[comment/p]** It's not something you'll necessarily find out by delving into a book or a bunch of reports because generally by asking people how they do things now and where their pain barriers are now so they can remove those blockers and find an alternative method. **[end/p]** .
END 32:45

MOQ: Problem solving addition - So does anybody have anything they'd like to add having heard everybody else in terms of problem solving?

PE3: Problem solving additional answer: Start 32:47
I think the **[what/p]** failure is really important **[end/p]** …..we know people probably don't really want to discuss failure but actually I think it's the ability to **[what/p]** bounce back from failure is really, to my mind quite important**[end/p]**   – something I've had to deal with in my own life. So I think if you can be presented, you know, **[what/p]** show how resilient you are in dealing with failure **[end/p]** , I think that's a really big strength that people can bring.
END 33:20

PE10: Problem solving addition: Start 33:21
Yes. Now we are looking more …… I mean in the aerospace environment failure isn't really something that we look for but it does happen inside the organisation, with the processes that we carry out, with the methods and tools that we use, there are many ways of getting to the end result, and **[comment/p]** we're working a lot more with the concept of fail fast **[end/p]** . So **[what/p]** if something isn't going right, recognise that quickly and move on and do something different **[end/p]** . And yes, I think **[what/p]** the ability to bounce back is definitely important **[end/p]** .   **[what/p]** Do not take it as a personal affront if something you're involved in doesn't work. Not everything works, get over it, move on, that's the sort of attitude that we need to have(nods of agreement) **[end/p]** .
END 34:10

Wonderful, thank you. Anyone else?
END 34:18

Problem Solving Skills (Educators)

MOQ: PA9: Problem solving - So, PA9, if I can come to you first, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating problem-solving.

PA9: Problem solving answer: Start 19:02

 [what/p] Problem solving is very much a cognitive skill for me**.** It is mostly on applying theory into practice, at least for our students this is what we are seeking. As a general skill its more on take these theories that you have learnt as a student and try to apply them in the everyday practice **[end/p]** , let's say into a case study where you need to solve a problem. You have a case and that case has some significant, let's say psychological difficulties, some mental health issues and you need them to show that you can provide a solution to that problem. Problem based could be equally to suggest and know a solution, to a teacher in the classroom. To be able to **[what/p]** think synthetically so for example to read on the topic where you need to provide a solution to a problem and then synthesise those readings into a coherent whole where you are actually going to solve a difficulty **[end/p]** that a teacher, for example, faces in the classroom, or a clinician faces with a patient. **[what/p]** It is very situation specific and very context specific as well so depending on the situation you are in, you may have to come up with different solutions. But what is behind that and it is very important, is to have the knowledge of the topic **[end/p]** plus to have, what we say are synthetic thought or as others say, **[what/p]** thinking out of the box in terms of being creative and innovative **[end/p]** as well. And **[what/p]** there is a great element of team work there as well. There is problem solving on your own and problem solving with others where communication skills fit in as well **[end/p]** . So as part of a team or as alone. **[what/p]** It is very situation specific, its very context specific and it really depends on your ability to, as I said, apply the knowledge you have into practice to be able to provide a solution depending on the problem you have **[end/p]** . So this is what we assess in evaluating psychology, for example, and in other fields as well.
END 21:48

MOQ: PA6: Problem solving - can I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating problem-solving.

PA6: Problem solving answer: Start 22:00

Similar to PA9 but one stage further on because for me **[what/p]** it's just like the communication one in a lot of ways. The problem solving thing is about selecting a good methodology for the particular problem **[end/p]** . It's that old joke about **[comment/p]** when students don't know what to do, they do a SWOT analysis, no matter what the issue is **[end/p]** . It's this thing about **[what/p]** tailoring your problem solving methodology to the problem at hand, and going just a little bit further, its recognising the theory that you were taught at university, the core theory so to speak, can be applied **[end/p]** . But when you come to apply it yourself in a new scenario and situation, its **[what/p]** having the level of insight, and only the best students get close to this, to be able to tailor that and take the useful parts of the methodology without slavishly applying everything **[end/p]** . So that that SWOT analysis, **[comment/p]**they do a SWOT analysis with 4 squares, strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats, and that's it, they expect a distinction. But in actual fact, the key part of that is what comes out of it, what are the conclusions which come out of that**[end/p].** In a school I worked in many years ago, we talked about three levels, core theory, application and insight. For me if you want a top skilled final year student or graduate then they've got to have the **[what/p]** insight as well **[end/p]** .
END 23:51

MOQ: PA7: Problem solving - can I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating problem-solving.

PA7: Problem solving answer: Start 24:03

I was just thinking, I agree with PA6 I think what's interesting is the **[what/p]** use of models that you've learnt at university **[end/p]** but also about being **[what/p]** curious, like we said in the last discussion, in order to think okay what else is there **[end/p]** and **[what/p]** how do they use the models in order to develop perhaps a bespoke solution **[end/p]** , so like a conceptual framework or a bespoke solution to an issue.   **[what/p]** Not just looking at it as PA6 says, and thinking oh a PESTLE analysis or a SWOT analysis is going to solve this but thinking around the matter and thinking okay what have I learnt but also what more is there **[end/p]** .One thing I get frustrated with in our final term students, can be their …its almost as if sometimes with our internship students or our consultancy project students, **[what/p]** they might look at an issue and think, okay, all I can apply is what I've been taught. Or they don't necessarily make the connection between the problem and potential solution **[end/p]** and how many resources they can actually access and use to solve a problem, in terms of all the various bits of research that are available to them and how to **[what/p]** apply models in order to develop their own frameworks **[end/p]** . So that's what I look for.
END 25:23

MOQ: PA8: Problem solving - can I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating problem-solving.

PA8: Problem solving answer: Start 25: 32
I don't know if there's too much more to add here from these esteemed colleagues and their insights here. I think one of the things that I would be looking for that may not have been mentioned, is are the students **[what/p]** looking at the problem from different perspectives? **[end/p]**   And the other thing too is **[what/p]** looking at the root cause of the problem. Because quite often the problem that is being presented is not actually the problem. **[end/p]**   And your little exercise that I still use with the planks is a very good example of **[what/p]** identifying what is the root cause and then looking at being able to focus on that part of the problem in order to be able to unlock it **[end/p]** . So when I relate this back to what we teach in university, yes, the concepts and everything that they bring with them in their third year, and **[what/p]** many students I think still think in silos**.** And if we're looking at a third year student is that they're no longer looking at the problem that might be in front of them from a silo point of view but from different perspectives **[end/p]** . Building on what PA7 said, what are they bringing into the classroom that they have been able to acquire? And not just in a classroom, but throughout their life. And also **[what/p]** building on what PA6 said being able to apply the right tool in the right kind of way and the most effective way. So I think that those are some of the key elements of problem solving**[end/p]**.   I would add what I started with, the ability to be able to **[what/p]** look at it from different perspectives **[end/p]** and then **[what/p]** being able to choose which is the right kind of tool for the right kind of job **[end/p]** .
END 27:20

MOQ: PA5: Problem solving - can I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating problem-solving.

PA5: Problem solving answer: Start 27:39
[what/p] I agree with what PA7 said, in terms of the ability to analyse the problem **[end/p]**. I think, **[what/p]** I look for the approach they took to analyse what the situation was and not just run with what they see and not just run with the models and frameworks that we actually have**[end/p]**, but the ability to take it a step further and **[what/p]** understand the roots of what the problem is and how it can be rectified, not just by the regular models we would have discussed in class but also by going outside of the box **[end/p]** so to speak. I apologise, because my device is freezing and I'm having a hard time hearing and seeing you all.
END 28:14

MOQ: PA1: Problem solving - can I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating problem-solving.

PA1: Problem solving answer: Start 28:33

[comment/p] Most of the things I was thinking of, the panel have covered but just to build on what PA5 was saying which is very interesting, is that I think that assessing of is very key [end/p] . And next to that, what I would like to add to that is that there is a form of [what/p] resilience and also confidence because, when people are confronted with problem solving it means a change of a situation and people, by nature do not like that. So to be able to drive it all the way through, I think, is very important. [end/p]

END 29:07

MOQ: Problem solving addition - So a free flowing moment if anyone has got anything else they would like to add ……. **29:30** are we all done with that one do we think? Nods of agreement from the panel……**29:36** Great, thank you. If at any stage a thought pops up, do let me know by mentioning the skill you are referring to and we can always go back to it.

Team Work skills (Employer)

MOQ: PE2 Team work - So PE2, can I ask you now to kick-off and turn to team work. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of teamwork?

PE2: Team work answer: Start 37:34

[what/t] I would like to pick up where PE11 was leaving off there because something I don't think I would have said, but is so so important, is self awareness. And I think that's in all aspects of skills but perhaps most appropriate here in team work [end/t] . And again, stealing what PE11 was saying,[comment/t] the number of graduates who will go, when asked what type of role do you take in a team "well I'm a leader" [end/t] . And [what/t] how aware they are of whether they are actually a good leader, you know, critically analysing their own performance in roles [end/t] . But more generally, I think I'm looking for people who are [what/t] agile, so they can play a number of different roles within a team [end/t] . It's not one dimensional, they're always the leader or you know. I'm looking for people who can be [what/t] very inclusive of the other people [end/t] . And once again, I know it sounds a bit of a cliché but that positivity aspect. [what/t] I'm looking for people to be very positive in a team [end/t] . So what are we talking about? It's about [what/t] positive engagement [end/t] . [comment/t]You'll all know the soul destroying feeling when you get that person who goes "oh we tried that before, it'll never work, we're all doomed" [end/t] . So that [what/t] positivity and kind of fun element of a team [end/t] . So I've probably said quite a lot of things there quite quickly.

END 39:20

MOQ: PE10 Team work - If I can come to you now on team work. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of teamwork?

PE10: Team work answer: Start 39:30

I expect an entry level graduate to be able to [what/t] engage in a team, not to think that they are the gift that is given to the team and they are going to be the centre of that team [end/t] . I would expect them to [what/t] understand its important to get the dynamics of the team and not just ride roughshod over the people they consider not to be important [end/t] or you know. To [what/t] have a perception of everybody is an equal and has something to give and then work from that perception to work out how to relate to each of the people [end/t] is what we expect.

[comment/t]I would also say leadership models are changing all the time and to be able to act as a leader is not necessarily the picture that they have in their heads when they come in as a new graduate because they haven't had the exposure to the different environments, the working environments [end/t] . And its very different depending on which sector you're in, which type of working model you use, how you engage. And in times like this, [Covid] team working remotely, or with a higher percentage of remote working is very different than the team working if you're actually co-located with your fellow team members. [what/t] Some of the challenges we have in team working is that we have a lot of transnational teams in our organisation and its quite common for teams to be not co-located together But it's still seen as absolutely essential to get that personal relationship built in order to build on that while you're working remotely [end/t] . So its very much an ability to [what/t] engage with other people both remotely and close working [end/t] and an ability to [what/t] follow as good as you want to lead [end/t] . So [what/t] participation and engagement really is what we're looking for [end/t]. And if they do lead, in certain aspects, because they're[what/t] able to describe what they want the others to do [end/t] , able to [what/t] demonstrate a way in which they can take the responsibility for certain activities [end/t] ,they will find they will naturally get that opportunity if they approach it in the right way. [comment/t] If they go in and say "I'm leader, I know most about this, I'm going to deliver this" it might put other people off and they might not get the involvement that they need to deliver[end/t]. So going through all of those sorts of things is part of team working.
END 42:20

MOQ: PE3 Team work - If I can come to you now on team work. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of teamwork?

PE3:Team work answer: Start 42:30
So on team work I think the key points are in coming into a team and especially in this way that we've been working these last few months, I think its still [what/t] very important to actually get to know who your colleagues are. And its not just on the professional level, I think but its on the personal level as well, is really quite important because that gives you the opportunity, and I think PE10 hit the nail on the head there earlier, is really actually giving you the opportunity to assess the abilities and strengths of your team colleagues [end/t] . So when you come into actually set a task that you actually A) have the ability to [what/t] listen to understand what needs to be done and B) be able to communicate that out to the team [end/t] . And again, [comment/t]echoing what PE10 has just said, I think its vital that you know people have the ability to take responsibility for the deliverables [end/t] of that. As it happens, I've been working in a particular team and we've only met each other online, we've not actually seen each other in person over the last four months, and yet we've actually built almost a team spirit. I think it's important to try and keep some personal contact going in there with people. To me that's really important as it does allow you to, even if you can't physically see the person, is to get to know them as well.
END 43:56

MOQ: PE4 Team work - If I can come to you now on team work. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of teamwork?

PE4: Team work answer: Start 44:33 (longer pause due to mute button issues)
 [what/t] Doing what you said you would do is very important [end/t] , I think. [what/t] Being seen to be pulling your weight, if you've been allocated something [end/t]   Another general bug-bear is [what/t] arriving briefed [end/t] so knowing what it is rather than not having the language. Or at least [what/t] asking questions [end/t] to make sure that when there's a torrent of 3 letter acronyms and names dropped left, right and centre that they endeavour, firstly to pull their own weight in the team and also [what/t] the team itself, hopefully recognises that they're being exclusive in their behaviour in a way or rather not exclusive but not excluding [end/t] . So it's really

a question that they need to induct the individual into the team. So **[what/t]** some evidence in performing teams will be seeing that individual offering help**,** offering collaboration, offering ideas **[end/t]** . And then from a personality point of view, being **[what/t]** diplomatic **[end/t],** easy going, a **[what/t]** listener **[end/t]** . I think going back to PE11's point, **[what/t]** not hogging the floor, not over-talking **[end/t]** it as well.   **[what/t]** Demonstrating that you are listening to people so that would be evidence both through summarisation, clarification statements **[end/t]** helps **[what/t]** bring everybody up to speed**.** So being a collaborator **[end/t]** .

END 46:21

MCQ: PE4 Team work
Can I just come back on a word you used – "diplomatic" – so when someone is being diplomatic in a team, what are you seeing them doing?

PE4: Team work clarification answer: Start 46:33
I'm seeing them…. my daughter calls them complement sandwiches really – you know if you're telling somebody off, you put something nice in front of it and something around the back of it and shove the nasty bit in the middle. Somebody who does **[what/t]** not antagonise or confront directly where there would be every opportunity to do so**, [end/t]** and, actually **[what/t]** try to build constructive solutions or constructive pattern of working out **[end/t]** . Maybe somebody who has turned up and has utterly failed to do the crucial activity which is going to stop the rest of the team from functioning. It could just be the **[what/t]** modulation of the voice, not being too strident and certainly not swearing at anybody **[end/t]** .

END 47:33

MOQ: PE12 Teamwork - If I can come to you now on team work. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of teamwork?

PE12: Team work answer: Start 47:46
Yes, I've not much to add from what everyone else has said but largely a clear **[what/t]** willingness to work collaboratively **[end/t]** . Making sure that, using the old, there's no "I" in team. Make sure that the person **[what/t]** understands that they're a cog in a wheel if you like. Its very very closely and tightly linked to the communication skill. Do not keep secrets, share, tell them what you're doing and tell them what you've done and then tell them again **[end/t]**. Also **[what/t]** respect for your team mates**.** Things about punctuality for time-keeping**.** If we've got a meeting at 10 o'clock, be there 10 minutes before **[end/t]** . We start at 10, not arrive at 10.

END 48:36

MOQ: PE11 Teamwork - If I can come to you now on team work. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of teamwork?

PE11:Team work answer: Start 48:47
So I would expect a graduate, **[what/t]** first of all, to understand the purpose of the team **[end/t]** and **[what/t]** their individual role in that team **[end/t]** . And also to **[what/t]** articulate **[end/t]** and **[what/t]** understand that their role in any team will be different in each team. And that may be something difficult to grasp but each team dynamic is different each team construct is different and their role in each team will be different and could and should be different **[end/t]** . But having them **[what/t]** understand that they don't play the same role each time**[end.t]**, I've found sometimes challenging to get that message across **[end/t]** . I would generally expect the graduate to **[what/t]** scribe in a collaboration or workshop or brainstorming type session to help with overall understanding **[end/t]** and **[what/t]** listening as part of team skills development**[end/t]**. I would expect them to **what/t]** try and understand the workshare balance in the team as tasks are divvied up and issued out. It can become quite disjointed sometimes and we may not even recognise it,

when we're doing it in a team that we've overloaded someone**[end/t]**. **[comment/t]**We never seem to check whether we've overloaded the graduate, we just pile stuff on so it's good to teach them how to say when they've got too much on **[end/t]** .They may be involved in other teams where the workload is far greater than they could have anticipated and they probably don't yet know how to balance it. Look, I'm still learning it, I don't know how many years on but it comes in waves. And I think that's the point, work will come in waves and troughs of intensity and that can be difficult to **[what/t]** communicate back to a team when you've hit a peak and you can't deliver everything. And being able to communicate that back is equally as important**[end/t]**. So again, **[what/t]** understanding how to resolve conflict in a team or to not bottle up the emotions of how you're feeling in a team is important**[end/t]** . Like PE4's diplomatic sandwich there, it was very interesting, but **[comment/t]** graduates do need a voice, they do need to know who the team lead is and whether they can confidentially state what is going on. You don't want them to be overwhelmed, you don't want them to be exhausted and you don't want them to feel like they have no space to grow in. **[end/t]**   **[what/t]** As the others have just said, turning up **[end/t]** but also being **[what/t]** reliable in communication if you can't turn up **[end/t]** because these things will happen and that's, you know, a fundamental. The other thing I wanted to say was to begin to **[what/t]** learn who they are themselves **[end/t]** because in the team we want everyone to be a doer but some people are fast doers and some people are slow doers.   And its about **[what/t]** understanding your own thought process about whether you whack stuff down on paper as it were to get it out there or whether you need deep reflection time in order to process your ideas. So we have to encourage them to figure out who they are in that space and they may be different depending on the topic. But it's okay to be a fast doer in one scenario where you know your topic inside out and a slower doer in another where you have no clue what's going on and you're learning as you go. So we will always be in that dichotomy so to get them to understand that's okay, they just need to recognise where they are on that spectrum with each team and each team will be different **[end/t]** .

END 52:26

MOQ: Teamwork addition - So, having heard everybody's voices on teamwork is there anything anybody would like to add?

PE10: Team work additional answer: Start 52:43
I think, for me, **[what/t]** do what you said you would do is an essential thing **[end/t]** and **[what/t]** respect and listening to some of the other words **[end/t]**. **[what/t]**Respect everybody you meet and they will respect you, more than likely **[end/t]** and that will certainly ease the way through. **[comment/t]** And one of the things that we do try to do with graduates when they come in, and because we have a graduate programme, they come in through a structured opportunity to go and do placements in different teams during two years, so they move. They're only supposed to be with a team for three months at a time so they have to have these re-starts, every three months they have a restart and they get a chance to start again. So they build their tool-box of strategies to work in teams as they go through this, almost subconsciously **[end/t]**in some cases rather than actually intentionally, although **[comment/t]**some of them have certain development needs that need to be addressed, about their interaction with people and their treatment of other people. But giving them somebody to relate to that's outside the teams that they work with gives them somebody to use as a sounding post. Just to talk about, well actually I think I've made a mistake there, I've stepped on somebody's toes, or how to recover this situation **[end/t]** or, you know, that sort of conversation. Or even if I've had feedback that one of them is in a particular situation that isn't good for a team, then **[what/t]** I can have an open conversation with them **[end/t]** and say how's it going for you, sort of thing. And quite often you find that they've sort of got themselves into a dead-end and they need that outlet to think about things in a different way. So, **[comment/c]** working in a team isn't just about sticking them in a box and sticking them in a corner, its letting them grow and as they grow they get more components in their tool-boxes that they can use for different

approaches **[end/t]** . We have such a multi-cultural approach, and so many different cultures have different approaches to teams, they need to learn not just different languages, because over 50-60% of our people are not native English speakers so we've got to **[what/t]** understand how to engage in teams with the different cultures as well as the different behaviours that that brings **[end/t]** . But **[what/t]** respect is really a cornerstone of it all **[end/t]** .
END 55:18

MSI: PE11 Self Management
I'm going to be coming to you in a moment to kick-off self management but just before we do that is there anything anybody else would like to add on top of what's been said on team work? Are we all happy to move on.

PE4: Team work additional answer: Start 55:48
I don't know whether its absolutely relevant but I know that in one particular organisation we got the graduates to **[what/t]** be the note-takers in a meeting. Why? Because they then had to clarify everything with everybody **[end/t]** which got them to know everybody pretty quickly. It wasn't a huge meeting, just half a dozen people but that's how they built up a relationship with everybody because they had to go and say I've taken these notes down, do they make sense, what do they relate to, etc. And that's how they were socialised into the group.
END 56:29
Anyone else?

Team work (Educators)

MOQ: PA1: Team work - So PA1 if I can come to you now please and look at the skill of Team work. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their teamwork.

PA1: Team work answer: Start 30:11
What am I looking for…., especially the first skill you have mentioned, **[what/t]** Communication I very much link to this one. And somebody mentioned it earlier on that it is that forum – and to be able to assess who you are talking to or who is talking to you **[end/t]** . So I think if somebody can really engage in that at different levels, that is a massive step in the right direction of team work. I think for all of you who have been involved with Coventry University, and certainly in London campus, is that I have not got a British student so I have people from all over the world. And maybe Asia, if I compare how team work happens between different cultures, that is something we really work on and stimulate because other people are much more shy or shy away from being in a team or speaking up. Other people are much more dominant within their team so I think really a good graduate should have these skills to **[what/t]** finding that out, what role A) they want to play in a team   and B) how they're going to do that **[end/t]** .
END 31:33

MOQ: PA5: Teamwork - So PA5, could I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their teamwork.
PA5: Team work answer: Start 31:42
I think **[comment/t]**Team work is one of the biggest skills we try to get students to develop whilst at university **[end/t]** . I think, to be honest, **[comment/t]** it takes a combination of the skills we have just spoken about in order to make sure they demonstrate really good team working skills **[end/t]** . So what I actually look at is **[what/t]** their ability mostly to work within a challenging situation **[end/t]** so to speak. **[what/t]** There are many challenges students face when working in teams. You've got language barriers, you've got personalities where we have clashes, etc a number of issues that students face when working in teams So I think what I really look for is their ability to manage these difficult situations and come out on the winning side so to speak. So that will take a degree of

communication skills, leadership skills as well as problem solving skills as well **[end/t]** . And not only that, how much did the student actually **[what/t]** step back a bit to give the other members an opportunity to shine **[end/t]** so to speak. We do have cases where some students actually want to be in the spotlight. You can see from the presentation, let's say, if it's a group presentation for example, they want to be in the spotlight, they take control of the whole presentation, leaving the others to stray a bit. So for me, **[what/t]** giving everyone the opportunity to fully contribute **[end/t]** , have their say and have their moment in the spotlight as well whilst making everyone else feel at home so to speak.

END 33:22

MOQ: PA6: Team work - could I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their teamwork.

PA6: Team work answer: Start 33:32

Yes, I sort of have the same view of PA5 but different which probably reflects that she's a much better team worker than I am but I agree with that thing about **[what/t]** stepping back and letting other people shine **[end/t]** . But I also believe in stepping up because what I see, what frustrates me the most, and this in the French system and the British system, is that some people believe that Team work means they don't have to do anything. And they'll let the guy who wants to shine do all the work and they'll just kind of ride along and catch the grade. For me it's an old cliché but a chain is only as good as its weakest link, so for me **[what/t]** not being the weakest link is the key. Step up, do your work, do your work to the standards and participate **[end/t]** . I think, on the group presentation thing we always tend to insist that everybody takes part and speaks in the group presentation which I'm not sure is absolutely the correct thing to do in every situation. If somebody is a better presenter, well they present, if someone is a better analyst then they do the analysis, etc. I guess I come at this from probably more of an individualistic angle than quite a lot of other people.

END 34:58

MOQ: PA7: Teamwork - So PA7, can I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their teamwork.

PA7: Team work answer: Start 35:08

So I was writing down a few things before. When you're looking to assess teamwork for me it's about **[what/t]** evidence of collaboration **[end/t]** .I guess **[what/t]** its summing up what people have said anyway, evidence of collaboration, commitment to the purpose and required outcome **[end/t]** , **[what/t]** engagement of the team including the leadership of the team **[end/t]** or **[what/t]** significant contribution by an individual to the team **[end/t]** . As well as including **[what/t]** how they have resolved problems within the team members **[end/t]** . As PA6, PA5 and others have pointed out, we do get students who either take over the team themselves, or just actually the team hasn't worked and people haven't got on and it hasn't been structured and nobody has done any work and so one person, probably the one most concerned about their grade, has written the whole presentation. And then, of course, you start challenging the other team members to hear them speak. And those that have done some work will answer correctly and others will shy away and that strong person takes over and answers for the others, so that gives a good indication of how the team has worked. Those would be my thoughts.

END 36:18

MOQ: PA8: Team work - can I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their teamwork.

PA8: (Team work): Start 36:25

Again I find myself in the middle and sitting there thinking yes I agree with everybody. **[what/t]** I think PA6 brought out a point that is present in my mind - the ability to step forward and the ability

to step back**.** Knowing the time to be able to step forward in a group situation and that can be when it's not working **[end/t]**, and **[what/t]** understanding and being cognizant of where you are in team development**.** So if you know that the team is not functioning in certain ways, how can I look at being able to solve that in order to be able to move forward**.** The ability to be able to **[what/t]** step back when other people are starting to emerge**.** When somebody sees someone else, being able to develop their role so giving them the opportunity to go with that and to be able to support them **[end/t]** .**[comment/t]**It's a really because it is so context driven **[end/t]** . Sometimes you need, in context, particularly if it's a very short deadline, you need somebody to step up and take control because you don't have the time to muck around. So you have to be **[what/t]** very cognizant of the context in which your team is operating in in order to be able to choose which is the most correct path **[end/t]** . And that needs to be **[what/t]** sensitive to different cultures **[end/t]** which has also been said. I just think **[what/t]** when we look at problem solving and teams a strong understanding of the context is really critical in terms of what are the kinds of decisions that you need to be able to make and**[what/t]** understanding who you are working with **[end/t]** .

END 38:12

MOQ: PA9: Team work - can I come to you now, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their teamwork.

PA9: Team work answer: Start 38:18

[comment/t] I think it is a general skill, what I would call a meta skill where you actually combine all those cognitive, social, emotional skills that I have been talking about from the first question on communication skills. Because you first need to be able to take a great cognitive appraisals and evaluations of the process, not only of your own thoughts but of the thoughts of others **[end/t]** . So you need to **[what/t]** be very good in, what we call, in your theory of mind where you understand how others think **[end/t]** as well. This is linked to your **[what/t]** emotional ability **[end/t]** as well. **[what/t]** Emotional intelligence as a skill, not as a trait which means that you have awareness of others thoughts and respect of the others thoughts **[end/t]** . You are **[what/t]** conscious about the others **[end/t]** , you **[what/t]** know how to take turns in discussion **[end/t]** , plus you **[what/t]** understand when others feel for example, frustrated or happy, and you can adjust your own behaviour**.** This is very much a social skills, being able to understand social cues and adjust accordingly your own behaviour**.** **[comment/t]** So it is a range of skills that combined, make you a team player **[end/t]** . **[comment/t]** When I evaluate students on that I look into all those [emotional intelligence]skills **[end/t]** . **[comment/t]**Although education is very heavily cognitively focused which means that we don't take into account social, emotional skills as much or we confuse these skills to traits like resilience, which cannot be easily taught or measured, but in studies you need to be able to measure and evaluate the outcomes of teaching so we need to understand better those skills, **[end/t]** .I would add.

END 40:22

Self Management (Employer)
MOQ: PE11 Self management - If I can kick-off with you please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of self-management.

PE11: Self Management answer: Start 56:57
I guess I'm looking for them to **[what/t]** be a grown-up **[end/t]** . This is really tricky because we get a lot of graduates in. In some cases its their first time away from home because they may have gone to university and still lived at home, in some cases its their first time moving away from their home town having gone you know to University, or out of University digs environment, that kind of thing. And in some cases its their first time overseas as well. So they've got quite a lot of stuff to get their heads round in terms of basic life skills, national insurance numbers, taxation, passports, visas, you

name it….a bunch of basic legal stuff. They've left University with everything in order and as life becomes more complex you'd think they're sorted and done with that. And we do quite a lot of helping them through that phase on occasions to get them sorted. And this isn't about a placement overseas, or anything, this is about them moving to a new country and trying to figure out what to do, what's council tax, where you pay it, all that kind of stuff. So there's some very basic things in there that I would expect them to **[what/s]** have their life in order **[end/s]** **[comment/s]** I get a lot of requests of "can I have a half day because I've got to move apartments because something's gone wrong…." And of course the answer is absolutely, straight out of the door, go and sort it out because you're useless to me inside the office if you've got all this going on in your head **[end/s]** So we run, and I think all companies now have some sort of programme to support employees in general, not just graduates, with the grown up life and I generally direct them there first so that they can get themselves sorted. But it just means that **[comment/s]** they probably don't have the grown up life skills you'd expect them to have and we have to put extra effort in helping them sort through them **[end/s]** . So I generally run through a checklist of things with them. And when we on-board graduates, there is a structured programme, obviously, but there's also a structured programme of getting them organised with IT **[what/s]** becoming familiar with where they go for help, becoming office inducted, when we're physically in an office again. Understanding and navigating through our organisation **[end/s]** . Every organisation will have its own complexity. And just **[what/s]** being generally organised and in control of whose who, what's what and where is it **[end/s]** . Trying to get my eleven year old through the door with his PE kit, I expect them to come having been through that phase so they can self manage those kind of things. That they've got the **[what/s]** confidence to ask for help when they're not sure. And thankfully, generally these days, I think they do. Very few hide what they're struggling with which is really important**[end/s]** . And they're able to **[what/s]** make decisions I think is what that comes down to. I mean I have had coaching sessions with graduates who can't make decisions whether to move flat or not and I'm well, I can't make that decision for you but let's walk through a scenario where you have choices and you have to make those decisions for yourself. So a lot of it is about helping them with a decision making process **[end/s]** rather than….. you know, anything else. So, self management is very much about, for me, **[what/s]** being organised and taking care of themselves **[end/s]** and **[what/s]** not over-stressing because there are always ways around it as we've just discussed in problem solving **[end/s]** .
END 1:00:36

MOQ: PE3 Self management - can I come to you next. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of self-management.

PE3: Self Management: Start 1:01:15
[what/s] I think the key things, you know, are some of that basic hygiene stuff, in terms of like you know, how are they set for accommodation **[end/s]** , how are they set for…. and especially in London where everything is significantly more expensive than anywhere else. It's a very, I suppose, it's a pretty pastoral kind of thing that we need to do and we do keep an eye. TFL does, as most large organisations, does have a graduate support scheme but I think, as managers, that's the sort of stuff we do need to ask. Because I know what it was like when I was 19 years old and coming to London for the first time, you know, there's a lot to navigate so its just trying to keep an eye and make sure that, you know, on the home front everything is sorted out. **[comment/s]** Because if you haven't got everything sorted out on the home-front you can't devote your energy to your job **[end/s]** .
END 1:02:10

MCQ: PE3 Self Management
Wonderful thank you. So if someone is "sorted out on the home front" and therefore they are demonstrating these self management skills, what are they demonstrating, what are they doing?

PE3: Self Management clarification answer: Start 1:02:35

 [comment/s] I think one of the issues I've seen, and its not just with graduates but with younger colleagues coming on board into the team is, you know, if they're having problems in terms of getting flats sorted out and all that sort of thing. They become distracted because they're trying to sort of resolve that particular problem, that's the sort of thing I tend to look out for, more than anything else **[end/s]** . You know its just a quick, its not typically formal in my case, I just know what its like, having been there myself in the past and just to try keep and eye in and make sure they're okay for that. I'm afraid I don't have a more scientific approach to it that than, just trying to keep a pastoral eye and make sure they're okay and that sort of thing.
END   1:03:18

MOQ: PE4 Self Management - can I come to you now please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of self-management.

PE4: Self Management answer: Start 1:03:40
Well, it's a check list and I think we're looking, rather like PE3 talked about, the hygiene factors. So for me, the major topics, I'm trying to read my scribble here, are **[what/s]** travel, the journeys to work, **[end/s] [what/s]** timeliness, punctuality, **[end/s] [what/s]** are they eating alright, do you spy on them to the extent are they're spending too much time in the office? Evidence that they've got a life beyond what they're doing. Are there any cultural or even religious issues that need to be taking account of **[end/s]** ,   Again, years back, one guy had a body odour problem and I had the joy of arranging for him to be able to take a shower at work each day because it was one of those things that upset the workforce but nobody had the bottle to tell him. So it was really just a question of doing that and it helped enormously all round. So, also **[what/s]** are aspects of their own personal health needed to be taken into account,. Do they have an underlying condition it would be good for us to know about or be aware of. It might be in the sense of an emergency, what do we do, who do we call. And just general health and safety, do they have an underlying condition like epilepsy, or diabetes, or all those kinds of things. I think really, its incumbent upon us on this side of the fence to make sure that the individual is aware of that **[end/s]**. And above all feels that they've got somewhere to go or feels that there's someone that they can talk to about these issues. So not to just say there's somebody up the road ….and here's a magazine about it or a booklet. It's almost as if they need to have the proper time made during their induction phase to make absolutely sure there's a human face that they can connect to and know that that's being done with the appropriate degree of confidentiality and tact.
END   1:06:25

MOQ: PE12 Self Management - So, PE12, can I come to you now please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of self-management.

PE12: Self Management answer: Start 1:06:35
To be able to **[what/s]** describe an approach to managing their time**.** How they manage their task list**,** how that task list is prioritised. I'd expect a grad to be talking to me about "right boss, this is the stuff that I'm working on this week and I'm doing them in this order, is my priority list right?" Communicating their task list and just saying where they're at periodically throughout the week really **[end/s]** .
END 1:07:25

MOQ: PE10 Self Management - can I come to you now please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of self-management.

PE10: Self Management answer: Start 1:07:27

Yes, **[comment/s]** I must admit when I saw the word "self management" I didn't think of all that pastoral stuff as being directly associated with self management as far as bringing a graduate into the workplace **[end/s]** . For me, all of that health, welfare, admin type stuff is essential and we need to be aware of that from that side of things. However, there's also the separate side of **[what/s]** how do they conduct themselves inside the business and how do they get themselves in the right place at the right time doing the right activities to deliver the role that we are fundamentally paying them to do. So there is a definition of the scope of activities that they would be expected to deliver there's a definition of the company structure and the codes of practice that we have within the company . And also there's a definition of the health and safety requirements and the legislative requirements that every individual who is an employee is expected to comply with **[end/s]**. **[comment/s]** So for me, when I saw the word "self-management" I was more thinking about what we would expect of them in that framework and how they would respond to that framework **[end/s]** . And for me, I would expect a new graduate **[what/s]** to have the mind set that said they needed to know what all these reference points were and therefore, they need to find out that's a form of self management, to find out what the framework that they're working in actually is and how they relate to it **[comment/s]** What I wouldn't expect is for them to take responsibility for actions that really should be done by other people because they are in such an early stage of their involvement and engagement with the company, they wouldn't be expected to know everything, obviously **[end/s]** . But they'd be expected to **[what/s]** know where to go to, to find out or where to ask for the information **[end/s]** . And we do give them the contact points and we do give them the sources of information. That's given to them proactively so that then they're expected to be able to use them if they need them. We do, obviously for the health, welfare and, admin side of it as well, we do create a sort of governance I suppose you would call it, with a routine of meetings and touch points so they're not left on their own. So they don't end up being isolated or just don't turn up for work for weeks on end and we don't notice, you know all of that sort of thing. We do have a care process in place and a welfare system that is an order of magnitude different than my personal experience when I first joined the company as an undergraduate apprentice a million years ago in manufacturing. Then it was just be seen and not heard and get on with what you're doing sort of thing. Now there is a very much more available, inclusive, considerate understanding framework but they're still there to deliver, they're still there for a purpose and we pay them to do things. So **[what/s]** we have to expect them, under the self management topic, to be able to fit into that framework. Normally its for a reason but we don't stifle the creativity of what they do and how they do it but they need to understand that reference and that's what I would call self management. For example, we don't ask them to work any fixed hours any more. We don't have a clocking in time and a clocking out time. We don't even have clocking. We used to, as a manufacturing industry but you know, we don't even have that now. Even, the staff don't have to account for the hours that they work. They have to do the work that they're needed to do **[end/s]** so if they deliver the work, they could be in work 20 hours one day and not in at all the next day, it depends on the work. But they need to **[what/s]** understand how they fit in that **[end/s]** . **[comment/s]** And an example of bad self management would be their assumption that because we don't expect them to be in at certain times, they just don't have to bother **[end/s]** . That's a bad side of it but on the other side of it, they need to be **[what/s]** flexible enough to say I need to do that by that time so therefore if it means me working extra hours on one day I have to do it **[end/s]** . And they can choose to do that and that is a self management situation. That's what went on in my head when I read self management.

END   1:12:23

MOQ: PE2 Self Management - can I come to you now please. What do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of self-management.

PE2: Self Management answer: Start 1:12:31

[comment/s] Yes, completely agree with what's been said. But PE10 in particular, following on from the fact that I think self management, has become more important than it was, even more important. There's a whole load of trust involved with the working remotely**[end/s]**. I think there will be, to use the cliché of the new normal, but our working practices won't be the same again because of how well embraced and how well people have self managed during the last 9 months or so. For me, you will always hear graduates or people generally saying they don't want to be micro-managed. And I, for one, as a manager don't want to spend my time micro-managing so **[comment/s]** in an ideal world we'd all have very good employees and graduates who are very good self-managers **[end/s]**. The fact of the matter is, though, that not everyone is a good self manager. And therefore you have to adapt your management style to suit. For me, **[what/s]** when someone is good at self managing, there's a whole load of trust from my side, a whole load of responsibility and accountability from their side **[end/s]**. And **[what/s]** ownership so when there's a project or a target or whatever it is, that they know they're owning that [project] and they know that they have the trust of me to support them when they need it but they're going to manage it, they're going to self-manage it **[end/s]** and call on whatever they need. So, again, during working remotely, as my entire team has done since March, there are people who have responded exceptionally well and really demonstrated that self management. Because it is the trust, we're not there, you know. We see them walk in the office. What they're doing when they sit down at their desk but there's that whole **[what/s]** getting up, getting yourself ready for work, putting in a day's work **[end/s]**. You know. And you can see the ones who can't adapt to that so well and you have to manage them a bit more because they're not so good at self management. So, hopefully, those words like **[what/s]**ownership, trust, accountability **[end/s]**.
END 1:15:15

MCQ: PE11: Self management
can I come back to a phrase you used earlier which was you "want them to be a grown-up". If you could expand on that please. What are they doing if they're being a grown up?

PE11: Self Management clarification answer: Start 1:15:26
[what/s] For example our graduate programme is very much structured. They have 2 years to complete all the activities on it. They can self-manage themselves through that and generally they would respond to those tasks and deliverables on their graduate programme that align with the work that they've been first assigned **[end/s]**. And **[what/s]**as they rotate and move around a bit they've got to be flexible and adaptable **[end/s]** to that. And by **[what/s]** being a grown up they have to put some effort in. I'm not going to hand-hold them through. I don't expect the rest of my team to hand-hold them**[end/s]**. They're each assigned a mentor and they have to produce things. **[comment/s]** And the people who have not been successful on our graduate programme are the ones who don't produce the tasks and deliverables that are on our graduate programme. **[end/s]** And **[comment/s]** when I say they're not being grown-ups they have, effectively, tantrums and hissy fits about the fact that they've got to produce a report. It has got to be in line with the specification of the report that's identified on the grad programme **[end/s]** and **[comment/s]** I'm not tolerating anything less than the product specification. And the reason I'm not tolerating anything less than that because we're in contract with our clients and we get specifications that are that precise and even more precise. And if you don't understand it through your grad programme you won't be grown up to do this job, legally and professionally**[end/s]**. So from that perspective, **[comment/s]** this isn't school anymore and sometimes we have had a few graduates who have treated it like its school and that we're going to chaperone them and mollycoddle them through **[end/s]**. No we're not. You're going to **[what/s]** get to work on time every day **[end/s]**, you're going to **[what/s]** turn up inline with the terms of your contract **[end/s]** and you're going to **[what/s]** behave appropriately, legally and professionally **[end/s]**. You're a grown up now. You're no longer under the age of 18. And I know we get some who are 18, not necessarily in the grad programme, but I

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have taken non grads in undergrad programmes previously, to give them that control and **[what/s]** discipline and work ethic that needs to go with what needs to be done **[end/s]** . But generally, they're straight out of University and they also don't think that because they're out of university they need to produce these things in a school-like fashion any more. And they miss that step that **[comment/s]** this isn't about teaching them the content, it isn't about teaching them how to put a report together, we've got all those templates there, they're already there. This is about making sure they deliver a quality product **[end/s]**   so that we can, in the future, be able to deliver that to our clients. And we are in a very contractual space. I think it brilliant that PE10's environment doesn't require check-in, check-out times. We don't either to that extent. We have a lot of flexible working arrangements. There's a lot of trust there. But we are still, predominantly though not exclusively, in a billable hours work environment so effectively each of us are working within the terms of a contract every single day. And I think some of our graduates take some time to get their heads around that, **[what/s]** [understand]that time is money and how you spend that impacts the profits and loss of an organisation **[end/s]**. And whether its their own bank account at home or whether its our corporate bank account, they kind of miss some of those steps and we have to hand-hold them through them.

END 1:18:50

MOQ Self Management addition - Is there anything anybody would like to add on this topic of self management?

PE10: Self Management additional answer: Start 1:19:04
I was just going to say, the bit about we do trust them, they do **[what/s]** manage their own time**.** They don't have to clock in and out. But we also record work against projects. So they do have to book hours to a particular project that has got a particular budget.   They might be working on more than one project at a time and the work that they do has to be split and booked to the associated projects. So they have to learn that process as well. So we do try to teach them that there are implications of their time content on the budget for the business **[end/c]** and its becoming more and more obvious as the budget management gets tighter because of the cuts. We don't have the massive reserves of cash to be able to pay upfront and then recover afterwards and all that sort of thing, they have to be quite tight. And that's part of the framework that I said they need to be aware of and the requirements that they have to meet. We give them the flexibility, the freedom, the time isn't tied down but they still have to meet those other requirements. And I think that's the bit that I mean about self management to meet the requirements. Its their choice how they do it but they have to do it.

END 1:20:24

Self management (Educators)

MOQ: PA1: Self management - if I can come to you first, please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their self-management.

PA1: Self management answer: Start 41:01
[what/s] This is a tricky one because, again, this can vary from person to person. But I think that Self management is being able to implement a form of structure in whatever tasks you lay out and to adhere to a form of discipline to be able to manage the time and expectation, whatever it is, to get from A to B. The building of the KPIs and then be able to evaluate and assess them **[end/s]** . That to me is the main thing.

END 41:46

MOQ: PA5: Self management - can I come to you now please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their self-management.

PA5: Self management answer: Start 41:54
I always say, in my mind, that in order to manage others you've got to be able to manage yourself. When I say manage yourself, the things I look for in students is their ability to **[what/s]** manage their time. So let's say we have given some activities in class, have they been able to meet the deadline? **[end/s]** have they been able to **[what/s]** submit their work on time? **[end/s]** do they **[what/s]** arrive to class on time **[end/s]** **[what/s]** I also look at organisational skills, how good are they that at organising in terms of structuring their work? **[end/s]** **[comment/s]** It comes back down to the same type of skills as problem solving**.** Are they able to solve problems and what avenue do they take to actually do that? **[end/s]** I take it even a step further in terms of their dressing. **[what/s]** How do they dress? Are they professional? Even in communicating emails, you have students who will email you by saying "hi" and that's it. And those are emails I will probably ignore. So a level of professionalism **[end/s]** as well. So how professional are they? How **[what/s]** confident are they in terms of organising skills? **[end/s]** And even presentations of their submissions. So I look for all of that when it comes to Self management. You act the part, you dress the part, you have the part so to speak so I think that's probably what I'd look when it comes to Self management. I think the only other thing I would probably add is their ability to **[what/s]** manage the pressure[of] the workload **[end/s]** , that also comes along with it. So I think that's it. I want to try to get everything in because I also wanted to expand on **[what/s]** emotional intelligence and I realise PA9 has covered it before I said it so I think that's the range of things I would cover on that one. Thank you. Is there anything you want to add on the Emotional Intelligence aspect to do with Self management. No, it was just the ability to know and understand how others act and behave, and adapting to it **[end/s]** , that's basically it.
END 44:08

MOQ: PA6: Self management - - can I come to you now please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their self-management.

PA6: Self management: Start 44:15
[what/s] I agree very much with PA1, discipline **end/s]**. And that comes from working in French universities possibly. You have got to **[what/s]** meet your deadlines **[end/s]** .If your tutor says this is the task, the French start negotiations at the point ; the English would sort of get on and do it, its again that cultural thing. I think discipline is big. What I would add that hasn't been said yet is **[what/s]** the ability to give and receive constructive criticism is a key part of Self management**[end/s]**. Not everyone is going to get 100% for every assignment. I know one student who did once but that was very much an exception. It's **[what/s]** the ability to be teachable and to receive that feedback **[end/s]**. Again, many of these group exercises –the team working skills thing – is that we also have to critique our fellow student's work and we have to do that in such a way that they're not going to turn round and rip our heads off. But I think the other thing that I agree with PA5 very much is that these skills, as we go down the list, these are now overlapping seriously and I suspect they're going to overlap a bit more when we get to leadership skills in a second.
END 45:48

MOQ: PA7: Self management - - can I come to you now please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their self-management.

PA7: Self management answer: Start 45:55
I think a lot of it has already been said, to be fair. **[what/s]** I agree with the structured and disciplined approach that PA1 and PA5 were talking about**[end/s]**. **[what/s]** Also with what PA6

said about constructive criticism. Constructive criticism feeds into it quite a lot. Its about the opportunity to receive feedback, using those opportunities to receive feedback **[end/s]** . But also**[what/s]** evidence of reflective skills and a commitment to continual improvement which to me is evidence of Self management. So if you are aware of the criticisms you are receiving, and the feedback you're receiving and how you give feedback, hopefully you're doing something with it i.e. you're using it in order to improve and make a judgement on how you might improve. So I do think that's important. **[end/s]**   And also **[what/s]** what PA5, I think behaviourally, as well, about their appearance, I think that's quite important as well. So their awareness and confidence in their appearance **[end/s]** is something that evidences their Self management. I once had a student who turned up in pyjamas – it was bizarre and its said something about their commitment to themself. **END 47:08**

MOQ: PA8: Self Management - - can I come to you now please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their self-management.

PA8: Self management answer: Start 47:19
I don't really think that I have too much more to add here. When I think of Self management, I think of someone who is in balance. **[what/s]** Balance between their personal and professional life. **[end/s]**   And **[what/s]** in your professional life you need to be disciplined and all those other key aspects that the others have reflected on. **[end/s]**   And also **[what/s]** in your personal life, these areas around more of the emotional and social aspects, **[end/s]** and **[what/s]** how you project that [discipline, emotional, social behaviours] to others so how you look and how you behave **[end/s]** as well in your personal life as well.   So that is what I see as being Self management. And if we're talking about careers, and students in their professional lives at university is an indicator of how they will be in their career as well and those kinds of aspects that go along with that. It's been discussed already, I agree with all the points that the other panellists have said.
END 48:20

MSI: PA8: Leadership - And just to give you a little warning that I'll be coming to you first on the leadership skills in a moment.

MOQ: PA9: Self management - - can I come to you now please. What do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their self-management.

PA9: Self management answer: Start 48:34
[what/s] Self management, again has a range of skills involved there. So you have some meta **cognitive** skills because they're more related to thinking about your own thoughts and being aware of your own understanding of a situation **[end/s]** . And this is where you want your students to be **[what/s]** able to understand their own involvement in a project for example, and how they can make a significant contribution to that[project] **[end/s]** . Then you have **motivational** aspects, that are very much social emotional as well. **[what/s]** Motivation to meet deadlines **[end/s]** , for example, or **[what/s]** motivation to do their work in a way that is required **[end/s]** . And then, obviously this is very much related again to being **[what/s]** aware of your own self and understanding your own self, regulating your emotions for example, being able to manage your anger when you get criticised or critiqued by your tutors for example. **[end/s]**   Being able to manage your capability, if you like. **[what/s]** Being able to manage all these emotions is very important because when we want our students or graduates to work one day in an environment, they will need to be able to manage their emotions and regulate them if we don't want them to become the bullies in the workplace or the victims **[end/s]**. Or the people that cannot communicate with others or work with others or cannot be a team player . So these must be assessed alongside the cognitive

skill of all the right things to do when you manage your own time and space **[end/s]** . This is my opinion. So in this direction, maybe Carole, your research may help and bring that to Universities as well bring it to academia as well.
END 50:48

MOQ: Self Management open discussion
PA5: Self management additional: Start 50:59
Just to add to the last one, I think the additional point I would like to make on Self management is **[what/s]** openness to receive feedback. Not just hearing just about the good things, also open to hearing the areas they can improve. So constructive feedback and positive feedback, working on what they know they're doing well and also working on developing or bridging the gaps they may have **[end/s]** . So that's another point I'd just add.
END 51:36

MOQ: Self Management additional - Does anyone else have anything to add….PA6, asked to speak

PA6: Self management additional): Start 51:44
Just going back to the [what/s] discipline **[end/s]** and overlap thing, **[comment/s]** I notice what's not on the list is project management **[end/s]** , which I think it probably could have been but then we might have been here all day. For me I think the Self management thing is about **[what/s]** how you deal with your assignments or your study or anything else in project management, when things go wrong. I say to students in doing their dissertation, you're going to get a dose of the flu, you're going to miss a few classes, this that and the other, but that isn't going to be an excuse for extending your deadline. You've still got to get things done and we have got to anticipate and deal with that stuff and I guess that's kind of tied up with problem solving **[end/s]** as well but big in Self management. One the things that I hate on the team working side is when groups of students get to a presentation and they miss a bit of the presentation because the guy who was doing that bit didn't turn up or wasn't there or was ill or whatever. And I tell them, if you're a football team – so much of my life comes down to sport - but if you're a football team and someone gets set off or someone makes a mistake, you know the rest of the team has to cope. The team loses or wins, and you can't just say well actually one guy got sent off or our best player was injured, therefore we don't bother to play the match.
END 53:14

MOQ: Self management additional
Building on that, is there anything anyone else would like to add

PA1: Self management additional: Start 53:21
 [comment/s] I think what PA6 pointed out is also the educational system and how it has changed **[end/s]** . Its also the question of **[what/s]** how much does the person want to be challenged **[end/s]**. **[comment/s]** We are living in a very much nurturing way of educating, we're hand-holding and so, how hungry are you to do this. And I think that's a completely different situation but it has led to looking at this particular skill and, personally, as an educator, I sometimes struggle with that. You know that some people just A) have no clue and B) don't want to be challenged. They will come to me and say, well how do I do this, and you think well you're a postgraduate student, you should actually know what you're supposed to do. But that is all muted and silenced now**[end/s]**. And it came to my mind when PA6 mentioned the British education system, or the English versus the French. I grew up on the continent and it was very much the survival of the fittest. You went to University and 500 people started in the first year and 300 made it to the second year. It was natural selection in a funny sort of way. Now if that's right or wrong, I'm not here to debate that but **[what/s]** I struggle with that lax approach of not wanting to challenge yourself **[end/s]**.

END 54:55

PA8: Self management additional: Start 56:57
I'd like to weigh in here because I think, we are all educators…and that's part of our….**[comment/s]** what is our role in being able prepare young people for careers? **[end/s]** Your looking at it from an employability point of view and then asking us, as educators, what are we providing in this aspect? And **[comment/s]** this Self management is, I think, quite important and I think it's a hard concept to be able to really define but I think you've brought up a point here about how we deliver in our classroom to be able to build these kinds of skills sets into our students. If we are always being demanded that we should be getting 4.5 and 4.8's in terms of what we're doing then basically we're giving the students exactly they want and being very explicit in terms of how we are asking them to be able to deliver that and that's what they're demanding of us, and in many institutions I see this conformity and that doesn't lead to Self management and problem solving and all these other skills **[end/s]** that you're looking to be able to, you know, wanting our students to have, unfortunately. So, coming back from an educators point of view, it does leave the institution and the people in the institution that grapple with these challenges. And because I know, from myself, I am not going to be one of these people that get 5.0 or 4.8s and I don't set out to do that. I'm very well aware that if I am getting marked out of 5, I tend to be around 4.2 because **[comment/s]** I believe in challenging my students and putting them into their uncomfortable zone and there are a number of students who don't like that, who are definitely not comfortable with that, but there are a significant number that do appreciate being challenged and that's part of learning about Self management(nods of agreement) **[end/s]** as PA6 said. To be **[what/s]** able to take criticism **[end/s]** to be **[what/s]** able to live in a balanced way to be able to deliver despite the odds and to be able to be well aware that things aren't necessarily going to be hunky dory the whole time **[end/s]** . I don't know whether this is precisely what you're looking for Carole, but this is something that I do see, as an educator, that is one of the issues about meeting these kind of things that our employers want and want to have in our students. And **[comment/s]** I don't see Universities necessarily delivering on that[meeting employers needs] in the way that we are currently structuring what we are going **[end/s]**
END 57:40

I think that's a really really valid point and we're all sympathetic to that.

MOQ: Self management additional - Any other thoughts on Self management?

PA6: Self management additional: Start 58:03
If I might just say that I agree with PA8. We've all had that student feedback thing. And to add to what PA1 said, in the University of Lille, first year Law, they expect a 75% drop out rate. 25% of students make it through to the second year and they (Universities) don't seem too bothered by that but they don't have a national student satisfaction survey. And, yes, I do agree with JB that the Institutions have something to answer for but **[comment/s]** I also think that the Government, through the various regulatory bodies, QAA particularly, they also have an awful lot to answer for **[end/s]** , in the same way that school teachers think about OFSTED.
END 59:00

MOQ: Self Management additional - So any final thoughts on Self management…. We will have a round up at the end as a free for all if anything else comes to mind so keep percolating.

Leadership Skills (Employer)

MSI: PE3. PE4 Leadership - I'm going to come to you first, if I may and then PE4 it will be you.

MOQ: PE3 Leadership – If I can start with you. So thinking about the skill of leadership, what do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of leadership.

PE3: Leadership answer: Start 1:20:58
[what/L] I think, the key thing for me is very much the ability to have initiative and not to have somebody who is sitting around and saying "I don't know what to do, I don't know who to ask" [end/L] . Its almost like, [what/L] if they don't know what to do and they don't know who to ask, then go and ask somebody [end/L] . So its really about having that ability to actually [what/L] be a self starter in that sense, that they're not looking to be hand-held [end/L] . [comment/L] At the same time you do want to make sure that people are going about things in the right way and I think that's where skilful mentoring comes in to play [end/L] . But as I say, for me its really about [what/L] having initiative to say "right, okay, I don't know the answer yet but I'm not going to sit here with my arms folded, I'm going to find out." [end/L]
END 1:21:44

MOQ: PE4 Leadership - Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of leadership.

PE4: Leadership answer: Start 1:20:01
Well, I often describe it as being able to cope, probably more within a project management context, but [what/L] being able to cope with avoiding the blank sheet of paper syndrome. So being prepared, if you are put in a leadership role, or even if you're not, and you're full of a room of people looking at a blank sheet of paper, to have the courage, the lack of embarrassment to stand up and put something out there to start the discussion, you know, to catalyse a conversation in some way. In the full knowledge that what you put up there isn't necessarily going to be what you end up with, but that you are providing momentum, description, context to get the team discussing, the rest of the team discussing and working together [end/L] in that sense. So I suppose possibly, the ability to park one's ego and not feel that the leader has to be the best or the one who knows what the answer is. [what/L] They have to know the way to get the answer, I think is probably the underlying key of what I'm trying to say here [end/L] . And above all, [what/L] not to go into a sulk when it's not your idea [end/L] . I learnt, years ago that having an idea in a workshop, that ultimately the objective wasn't to win the workshop, it was to come out with the best overall idea. And I know that many of my ideas are great starters but they don't half benefit from having other people shove some stuff over it as well. And above all, for buy-in. To get a team of people together, [comment/L]one of the worst things you can do is to say I'm solely and exclusively in charge of this and you will do my will [end/L] . However, I still see an awful lot of that too.
END 1:24:13

MOQ: PE12 Leadership - Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of leadership.

PE12: Leadership answer: Start 1:24:17
[comment/L]I'm not expecting a graduate to arrive with any [end/L] . [what/L] I'm expecting them to arrive with, or to demonstrate a desire to lead, or coach end/L] . I'm expecting to see someone [what/L] raise their hand and say "I would like to take charge of that, I would like to lead that project team [end/L] ". Also, I guess, an observation of their peers, do their peers look to them? Is there a person in our team that stands out as being the one that they all look to. [what/L] For me the biggest point is a natural desire and a want to lead [end/L]. I use the word "coach" as well because I think they're the same thing .
END 1:25:20

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MCQ: PE12 Leadership
Thank you. Can you just say a bit more about the similarity between leading and coaching? Is this in the context of themselves?

PE12: Leadership clarification answer: Start 1:25:35
No, it's about **[what/L]** how you coalesce a group to move forward together to complete an agreed goal **[end/L]** .
END 1:25:59

MOQ: PE11 Leadership - Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of leadership.

PE11: Leadership answer: Start 1:26:06
[comment/L] Very similar to the others. I don't expect the graduates to have a huge leadership capability **[end/L]** but you will see that naturally emerge when they are strong natural leaders. But **[what/L]** I expect them to be brave and to go first on occasion and not to shy away from trying something new **[end/L]** . But **[what/L]** I do expect them to try **[end/L]** . I expect them to **[what/L]** listen to others **[end/L]** because that way they will **[what/L]** learn how to receive feedback, how to give feedback **[end/L]** and to [what/L] learn more about communication **[end/L]** . If they are in charge of something, and generally we do put our graduates in charge of small tasks or projects or work streams. Where they are in charge of that, they **[what/L]** learn how to manage a team **[end/L]** , when they are doing that, **[what/L]** [learn]how to communicate within that team **[end/L]** , [what/L] prioritise, **[end/L]** **[what/L]** problem solve [end/L] and to have that **[what/L]** constant communication dynamic and to know when to seek advice. I think, for me, that's quite important **[end/L]** . **[what/L]** And really important as well is to not be autocratic or a dictator when they are leading a team **[end/L]** because sometimes you can see that come out. And its not necessarily very nice and we have to **[what/L]** engage in different ways to steer it into a more collaborative space if we want to get others to work with us **[end/L]** . **[comment/L]** And one of the other things I've noticed is that leading something, however big or small, during a graduate placement programme, doesn't mean that once you've finished that 3 month task that you are now up for promotion. But we get quite a lot of "I did this pretty well, I can move onto the next level". But, no you go onto your rotation to the next bit and that dynamic is interesting to observe**[end/L]** . But really hungry, progressive thinkers in our graduate programme who want to be the boss, great I love it, but you still have to go through some of the motions of practice before we can get you there. And those who will naturally fly after those 2 years will do so. **[what/L]**A little bit of patience sometimes might help when they're in those leadership roles. Patience with themselves, with others, with the process **[end/L]** because it is designed with the intent of enabling them to be the best.
END 1:28:20

MOQ: PE2 Leadership - Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of leadership.

PE2: Leadership answer: Start 1:28:28
[comment/L]I think like everyone else, I struggled with this one **[end/L]** . And I think its because there is the biggest mismatch between…**[comment/L]** I hear so many graduates claim that one of their greatest skills is leadership and they just claim it. Well, how can it be? And then every time you ask for some substance around that there often isn't a lot **[end/L]** . And**[what/L]** we've heard some people say they don't expect graduates to bring leadership skills to the role and I'm kind of at that end of the scale. But to have the potential and I think the potential is epitomising what good is of all of the other skills **[end/L]** and **[what/L]** modelling and leading by that example so that you

gain respect and credibility. I think its all about, not just what you do but how you do it **[end/L]** and how that again can be infectious on other people. So, you know**[what/L]**, leading to me is bringing other people along with you. Not just because its their job but because they want to and they've bought into what your vision is, **[end/L]**   they've bought into what the culture is. And I don't think its necessarily the person at the top of the organisation who has to create that culture. I think this is what a good leader does. And you know, I think if people comment that you have a good team, its often because there is a good leader there and its all about those culture and values. But its **[what/L]** not simply saying I'm a good leader which goes back to the beginning of the conversation.
END 1:30:20

MOQ: PE10 Leadership Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect a graduate to be able to do when you think of leadership.

PE10: Leadership answer: Start 1:30:31
I think it depends on what you think leadership actually is and what the constituent parts of leadership are. I'm with the concept that in the traditional, people who are put out front who are probably in the more senior positions who are classed as managers, are likely to be seen by graduates coming through as the leaders that they aspire to be. Because it goes with the grade or the remuneration that they might get for working for the organisation. For me, what I try to look for is the**[what/L]** ability to influence and to build up that concept of influence and respect and collaboration to get a result **[end/L]** at the end of the day. So they will naturally bring things that they are strong in. They will naturally bring things that they know about and how to approach. And things on the application that we get through like the **[what/L]** engagement in, again, the Duke of Edinburgh, where they do an expedition where they have to act as some form of leadership at some stage for that group **[end/L]** . Things like **[what/L]** engagement in societies where they take a position of responsibility. **[end/L]** The **[what/L]** recognition that an aspect of leadership is to be responsible for something **[end/L]** is part of the toolkit but then also the **[what/L]** development of the interpersonal skills, the ability to influence, the ability to encourage people to contribute. And that's a lot of the back to where we were with the communication and the team working, the engagement, the collaboration, the exchange **[end/L]** . And**[comment/L]** the people who then demonstrate the ability to lead don't always have to be at the front **[end/L]** . They can be the ones **[what/L]** providing the frameworks or the opportunities for other people to do what they do **[end/L]** . **[what/L]** And one of the aspects of leadership that we look for is facilitation. So that relies on influence and everything. Its very difficult for a graduate though to grab that concept[influence] because someone who is really good at facilitation is never recognised. Because its not recognised they've done something because they've made it possible for it all to happen without difficulty. And yet that is really an essential part of developing that toolkit as a leader**[end/L]**. **[comment/L]**So I don't look for them to say I am the one at the front, I am the one who can deliver, I am the one who can bring the team with me and all of those things because actually as a graduate with that length of life experience, its unlikely **[end/L]** . Although I have had some examples where they are and they've been there and they've done that. And **[what/L]** people who are in the TA or in the you know, they've gone into different forms of activities and in their personal lives where they have got that ability to take people with them **[end/L]** and done all that because they've been there. But the majority don't have that when they come and they need that breadth and **[what/L]** they need to have a lot of reference points to relate to, to be able to take that initiative. I think somebody used that word initiative earlier. And that ability doesn't normally come with a new graduate but we can build on the potential. **[end/L]**   And what I look for when they come is the potential. It's the **[what/L]** willingness to volunteer to do something it's the willingness to get engaged to contribute to a situation that is to the benefit of others, not to themselves. It's the voluntary work. I actually look in CVs for examples where people have worked in the hospitality industry as a part time job while they've been doing their academic life as well. Because doing something in parallel

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demonstrates a level of commitment. Commitment is another thing. But it also demonstrates that they have to work in what can potentially be a difficult role dealing with customers, etc. And that gives them that little bit of life experience. So I don't know if that answers the question but what I look for is potential not necessarily the finished product [end/L] .

END 1:35:13

Leadership (Educators)

MSI: PA8: Leadership - So we're now turning to leadership which is the final skill we are looking at in this focus group. PA8 can I come to you first, this time. I appreciate there may be aspects that are already covered, that doesn't matter at all so - what do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their leadership?

PA8: Leadership answer: Start 1:00:16

Yes I know, and**[comment/L]** I'm still very much struggling with it, I'll be honest with you. I don't really evaluate a lot of my students on leadership. I have classes with 130 students in one classroom so actually I don't really evaluate, I don't think, any of my students on leadership. **[comment/L]** It becomes clear through the process that I'm putting them through that there are students that take leadership roles but you can't see a lot, and necessarily in teams, leadership does not mean the most vocal person in a group, although in some groups it can be the person who speaks for the group **[end/L]** , I accept that. But that's not necessarily who the real leader might be so **[comment/L]** you don't get that many opportunities to really see, in the classroom set ups that I have at University, I don't see that because just the sheer volume of students means that even getting to know some of their names in the classroom is an achievement itself **[end/L]** . **[comment/L]**The reality is that with a group of 130, and I have a class of 400 students coming up next term, I'm not assessing on leadership **[end/L]** , I really am not. And I think part of the process that we put students through in terms of group work and team work that that comes as a result of that. [comment/L] In the courses that I teach there is no real assessment on leadership at all **[end/L]** . And that doesn't mean that I don't see it. [comment/L] I see it in the groups that come into my office for one-on-one's, or to get formative feedback **[end/L]** and I tend to see those kinds of skills coming through but it is not something that I can reward. Do those groups that demonstrate those team work skills and have good leaders in their group, do they come out on top, always, always they come out on top but it is not something that I assess for.

END 1:02:35

MSI: PA8 Leadership - Thank you. I'd like to come back to you, once we've done the round, on this aspect of leadership. So when a team is doing really well and you're seeing they're demonstrating therefore team work and leadership to come back to you and see if we can pull out any components of it, whether or not you actually assess them. So I'll come back to you if I might once we've done the round.

MOQ: PA1: Leadership - Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their leadership?

PA1: Leadership answer: Start 1:03:19

Unlike JB, I'm lucky, I don't have 400 students in front of me, so much smaller groups so and **[what/L]** some really stand out. And, I think for me its that sense of aspiration, are they aspirational, do they have a credibility, also determination **[end/L]** and also to be able to be **[what/L]** innovative but also creative thinking **[end/L]** and **[comment/L]** finding that balance which is hard, I think at a young age because that comes I think through experience, to find a balance between empathy and also the practical things, the jobs that need to be done **[end/L]** . Because **[what/L]** as a leader, at

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the end of the day, you are ultimately responsible **[end/L]** but there needs to be **[what/L]** a sense of empathy within the teams that you lead **[end/L]** , so these are the kind of things that I would look at.
END 1:04:11

MOQ: PA6: Leadership - Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their leadership?

PA6: Leadership answer: Start 1:04: 26
Yes, I think, **[comment/L]** I'm going to keep this brief, to reinforce that its kind of a combination of the previous four[skills] [end/L] . But for me, its about setting an example and you know, the great leaders amongst the student groups if you like are those who **[what/L]** set at example to their team members **[end/L]** . Now **[comment/L]** often you can't assess the ones who didn't show great leadership **[end/L]** very well but the French system, being a little bit more relaxed in terms of how you allocate the grades, means you can reward those who set an example.
END 1:05:10

MOQ: PA9: PA7: PA5: Leadership - can I come to you next, please and then it will be PA7 and then PA5 - what do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their leadership?

PA9: Leadership answer: Start 1:05:19
[comment/L]For me, it is difficult to assess someone as a leader if you have many students **[end/L]** so you need to carefully, maybe group them into smaller groups, and check whether they can show those **[comment/L]** leadership skills. These are the combination of all the other skills **[end/L]** , as the panel has already said. Plus the ability to **[what/L]** innovate**,** create [end/L] and **[what/L]** convince others and lead them at the same time **[end/L]** . Of course **[comment/L]** it combines all these cognitive, social and emotional skills we have been talking about **[end/L]** . The problem with leadership is a problem of being powerful and powerless within the team. And **[comment/L]**we really need to look into, of course, evaluating leadership in different terms, however. Not only for those brilliant people that don't have any mental health, let's say issues, any anxiety disorders, social anxiety because you want an inclusive education and inclusive education may not offer…. may and should offer offer equal opportunities for leadership for all students **[end/L]** . **[comment/L]** So what do we really look into leadership? Only cognitive skills? Only brilliant people that can excellently communicate with others? And how about those people that do have autism, for example, and they cannot socially engage or they cannot show the empathy although they do have emotional understanding of others? So we need to define leadership in different terms there and that is really a big task to do for one person, so it needs possibly some collaboration with others to understand really, okay, what do we want from a leader in our team? Is it only to lead the others and, you know, being popular and organise the others or is it also bringing these creative ideas there and at the same time be the silent person there? **[end/L]** [comment/L] So we really need to think, also how we can evaluate these skills because it becomes very difficult when you have large groups **[end/L]** .
END 1:07:24

MOQ: PA7: Leadership and PA7 - Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their leadership?

PA7: Leadership answer: Start 1:07:31
[comment/L]I agree, I think it's actually something that's quite difficult to evaluate **[end/L]** , particularly now with changing structures due to the pandemic, as to how we teach so we are not as often in the classroom with big groups of students for obvious reasons any more. But I do think its got something to do about the **[what/L]** ability to convince and inspire other team members to achieve a good outcome **[end/L]** , whether or not that outcome has been achieved or not. It also **[what/L]** encapsulates I think good organisation and team work skills**,** Self management, clarity,

focus, those areas that we spoke about earlier, about the individual **[end/L]** . But, also ability to **[what/L]** spot issues and act on and resolve them **[end/L]** but also **[what/L]** having a balance **[end/L]** , as PA1 said, and **[what/L]** empathetic approach towards problem solving with their other team members **[end/L]** . **[comment/L]** How we assess that[leadership], I think is quite challenging **[end/L]** , particularly at the moment. As PA8 has picked up on, **[comment/L]**I feel that we are quite often looking at it from a behavioural position, because leadership is quite behaviourally related but also cognitive but we're assessing more their ability to write very good reports on various topics related to leadership. It doesn't necessarily say whether or not they are a very good leader **[end/L]** . So how we approach it, and I know that's what you're working with Gratien on at the moment, generally, I think is important.
END 1:09:02

MOQ: PA5: Leadership So PA5 Can I come to you now please on leadership - what do you expect from a final term student when evaluating their leadership?

PA5: Leadership answer: Start 1:09:09
I think I will follow on with what PA7 was saying. I think for me, what I look for when I'm assessing leadership skills, I look for their ability to **[what/L]** take action **[end/L]** so to speak. So I'll give an example of a scenario. Let's say we're on Microsoft teams, we've got a class, some students are unable to join, or even me, I'm just speaking from example. I've had problems when my device has been acting up, and I've had students, one specific student who would always contact me, she would reach out, she would send me the link. If there are students asking, this student is there, she's on top, she would reach out, she would send other students the link, she would answer queries on my behalf so to speak. And I think that, for me, would demonstrate someone who has really good leadership skills. Who **[what/L]** takes the initiative to solve problem, who is not waiting to be led **[end/L]** so to speak. You know, that student naturally would stand out for me. And I think also **[what/L]** the level of engagement in class, so that let's say at the end of the class I definitely know that student by name. So if there is an example when we have 400 students as I think someone mentioned before, obviously it's really difficult to assess that but there are some students you know them by name and you know them by name because of their engagement because of their involvement and because of their leadership skills that they demonstrate**[end/L]** . So for me, **[what/L]** solving problems without being asked**,** taking the initiative to jump on things**,** standing out so to speak. So that would probably be my contribution on leadership skills.
END 1:10:48

MCQ: PA8: Leadership
PA8 can I come back to you with any more thoughts you had on the components of leadership if there's anything you wanted to add.

PA8: Leadership clarification: Start 1:11:01
Yes, I think **[comment/L]** because I don't assess on it in my classes it doesn't mean that I don't see it **[end/L]** . And one of the traits that I see, and I think PA5 touched on a number of them for me, is that you tend to know their names even if you've got 400 students or 200 students. You kind of get to know one or 2 of them or 3 of them, and why have they stood out? One of the reasons is exactly the points that she said, **[what/L**] they're taking initiative**,** they're engaged **[end/L]** . Many of the leaders that I see particularly in my comms class and my third year class, they also have an **[what/L]** ability to be able to engage others, and to be able to work with others to get something, if not some great things, out of those that they're working with **[end/L]** . And so they're the ones that **[what/L]** will email you and be polite and be professional, they will show up to your office, they will be there on time **[end/L]** , they will drag kicking and screaming some of their other team mates. You can see how they're **[what/L]** managing the discussion in the room **[end/L]** , **[what/L]** they've done their homework**,** they're engaged, they're interested**,** they're curious **[end/L]** . They're demonstrating

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those kinds of skills that at University are important, as they are in life. And they're problem solvers. And so those are the kinds of things that stand out. And even though I don't measure or look at being able to assess leadership, as I said before, those tendencies that I see in those groups and particularly from individuals in those groups who are taking a leadership role. Those are the ones, those are the groups that tend to excel. We do anonymous marking and I know, when they come back for a reference, I know who they are nine times out of ten with my references. When they write their references its very clear that they've taken a leadership role in terms of what they've done. I don't have to have a discussion with them, they already have managed to pull these kinds of points into their references and things like that. So you do see them, indeed **[what/L]** your thing about Self management, they're very aware of what their skills sets are and their professionalism and that's linked to that leadership **[end/L]** that you see those things coming through. So yes, even though I don't measure or look for leadership in any of my subjects that I do, you tend to know those students and you see those traits that we see in terms of leadership. You know, **[what/L]** they're good solid communicators, they influence others in a positive way **[end/L]** and all those kinds of attributes. You see them coming through, even if it's just a couple of brief interactions, maybe 15 minutes of an interaction with a group, and you see it. And sometimes you see groups with what can clearly be 2 or 3 leaders. That's when you see these attributes coming through. And you know, even though you're going into a blind marking, you know their work, you know, you can see in their work that this looks like this student here, and chances are you're right. You have that sensitivity, I think, as a lecturer or as a teacher that you have that sense that you've got even if the interaction is really quite brief.

END 1:14:42

MOQ: Leadership addition - Is there anything else anyone would like to add on leadership before we have a quick round up?

PA9: Leadership additional answer: Start 1:16:51
Yes, I just wanted to add a point. [comment/L] Maybe we can add a second component or a pre-component like self-leadership skill where you actually learn first how to lead your own tasks, learn first how to take the lead in your own life **[end/L]** . Because this will boost your self-efficacy which is a term, mainly used in social psychology. That means actually you are becoming **[what/L]** competent and confident about your own skills in certain domains **[end/L]** . [comment/L]And this is perhaps the way that we could evaluate through an intra-individual assessment, where you are looking into the trajectory of a student and how, from a not very confident, scared student, very young, has become this experienced leader, this person that can leader others now **[end/L]** . I think it's a journey if you want, Carole, to look into the leadership skills. **[what/L]** It's a journey of building confidence, self-efficacy **[end/L]** and **[what/L]** first take the lead of your own tasks **[end/L]** , you know, [what/L] be the leader of your own self **[end/L]** , **[what/L]** manage your own understanding **[end/L]** , [what/L] manage your own emotions **[end/L]** and then **[comment/L]**building this into something that becomes very self-efficacious, you know, boosts your self-esteem. So perhaps this will be something before evaluating a leader for others **[end/L]** .
END 1:16:29

MOQ: Leadership additional - Does anyone else have any thoughts on leadership.

PA1: Leadership additional answer: Start 1:16:35
Can I say something, because **[comment/L]**I think we need to be very careful with this one too. Because if we have got to measure students against leadership skills, not every student wants to be a leader, some people want to be followers **[end/L]** .   So in assessing this we need to be very very careful because I think we can spot them when we are lucky enough to be working with small groups. [comment/L] But if that certain individual has no desire to develop leadership skills in the way we understand them then I think we need to respect that too **[end/L]** .

END 1:17:11

PA6: Leadership additional answer: Start 1:17:19

Can I just add a couple of things. Number 1 is that over here in France, there is no such thing as blind marking. It just doesn't exist and in my view, rightly so in the sense that you've got to not just grade. We have a thing called "contor-continue" which means you're allowed to adjust peoples' grades according to their, sort of, performance and behaviour over the course of the semester in the lead up to the assignment. And quite right, in my view and many many is the time I would like to have done that in the United Kingdom.   And also to address what PA1 just said, and I'm afraid to have to say, to have to completely disagree. If leadership is a stated assessment criterion for the course, if you have no ambition to lead, don't do the course which requires you to be assessed on leadership. But in actual fact, it comes back to a very wise man I once knew at the University of Westminster and Greenwich, in fact. He said "who is the customer for our product, or our education?" And he was asked this at his interview to be the Chair of department at Westminster. And he said, very wisely in my view, it's the first employer of the graduates. He didn't give a damn what the graduates thought as to their course or whatever, it's what the employers wanted and if the employers, I believe that they do say they want leadership. They say want people who are able to take control and lead projects. And so, I think that very very few are the sort of jobs that we are training people for which don't require the graduate, at some stage, to take some form of leadership and control. And if they can't then the employers are not going to be very happy with them and they're not going to be very happy with us.

END 1:19:27

MOQ: Open Discussion (Employers) - So we've come to the end of the list of skills. Is there anything anybody would like to add on this concept of leadership skill or indeed any other skills that they've had percolating in their heads.

PE2: Open discussion answer: Start 1:35: 40

[comment/od] If I may, just PE11's concept of a grown-up. It's the….its what I…..there's so much in that ……I suppose just a good human-being and the that PE10 was just talking about and I suppose your real challenge is to get under what we mean by all of that. And just to give you an example about being that good human being. Its not thinking you're too good for anything. You'll make your fair share of coffees, you'll just be a good work citizen. And there is so much in that and its about personality and I think that's where you kind of see the potential. Because someone is willing, is enthusiastic, got the raw ability to develop communication, develop leadership. I don't expect any of us are hoping to see really high levels of any of those in graduates but the raw material to develop it **[end/od]** .

END 1:36:57

Thank you. I'm seeing lots of nods. Does anybody have anything else they'd like to add?

PE10: Open discussion answer: Start 1:37:05

[comment/od] I'd just like to say the really difficult thing is how you quantify any of this that we have just talked about. My background, I'm actually an engineer by academic training and through my initial life I was in manufacturing. Its very factual, its very rational. So for me, in the world of qualitative assessment, I need to have a reference that I can say yes, they have demonstrated, no they haven't. And I have created check lists and I've worked through logic and the definition of examples of what good looks like is important to be able to say, this is why I saw good in this person but not in this person **[end/od]** . This is the rational result that I've come to and its so difficult. You've got to really….whenever we go through a graduate recruitment process and we've done it year on year on year and we have a very clear framework and we have prescribed indicators that we think are good. And we do revisit them occasionally because things evolve and things move but

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[comment/od] its so difficult to actually pin down what is it we're actually looking for and therefore what does good look like and how can they then demonstrate what good looks like. And some of the conversations we've had, we've used words that are very difficult to pin down and that's the challenge. Good luck! **[end/od]**
END 1:38:48

PE2: Open discussion answer: Start 1:38:50
Yes, send us a copy of the answer.
END 1:38:52

Thank you. I will be sharing all of the research with you. PE3 did you have something you would like to say?

PE3: Open discussion answer: Start 1:39:02
Not especially. **[comment/od]** I've found this session extremely useful because it's the perspective of everyone else here has really brought home, an awful lot of truths, I suppose that we're looking at. And its been very very useful really and I for one have really enjoyed it. Its been really fascinating listening to what everyone else is saying on these things, **[end/od]** to be honest with you Carole. So its been very useful. So if I could have a CPD credit on this one that would be great. (If what, sorry?). A CPD, continuing personal development credit or something like that, its was great, really really good.
END 1:39: 46

MOQ: PE4 Open discussion - did you have anything you wanted to add?

PE4: Open discussion answer: Start 1:39:56
Well, I think as PE10 has said, good luck mate! There's so much that we try and…..well **[comment/od]** maybe the big danger is we're trying so hard to nail this down….and that most of the stuff that we're talking about when we're identifying something, its traces of, its not the actual thing itself. And, you know, can we really truly distil that? For me, a key word again that came out was "potential". And its really identifying the potential and how can we get….it would be so useful if we can get really good at that. And then figure out the processes and the, I don't know, the environment that we plant these personalities into so that they blossom and flourish in that way but without turning out like a card board copy of what we imagined because, you know, bang goes innovation and creativity if you do that **[end/od]** . So **[comment/od]** it's a tough challenge but again its endlessly fascinating so I'm sure that if we treat this as a series of steps towards a forever illusive target we will still be able to look back and think we've travelled somewhere with this. And I think the key factor is to keep on looking and keep on re-explaining because the definition does change **[end/od]** . And also, **[comment/od]** a very key point for me, which we do forget and it came out in the self management discussion is that very key change that we're experiencing of independent working and that real significant element of trust **end/od]** And, again, you lose trust so quickly by becoming illusive so I think, again, the **[comment/od]** key factor is how do you enforce upon the person that they should be forever, I don't know, touching base with whoever it is that they're working with or for so that everybody knows that they're always contactable? That they can still be trusted to be 50 miles away or a thousand miles away doing what they said they were going to be doing. And get that ingrained thing of, even if you haven't finished or above all if you haven't started what you should have started, for God's sake let the person who needs to know about it, know about it. So its that new way of working which I think, again, we're going to have to get really really comfortable with **[end/od]** . But a good session, good session.
END 1:42:36

MOQ: PE11, PE12, PE11 Open discussion - is there anything else you would like to add?

PE11: Open discussion answer: Start 1:42:45

So I think there's, you know, a lot been said and, good luck! But [comment/od for me everything we have just discussed is actually summed up in attitude, work ethic, willingness to try and thereafter you see their potential, and being open to new ideas [end/od] . And usually I weed out graduates, when my team recruit on my behalf and then I do second round or third round interviews going "what were you folk thinking" or "brilliant" and look at why they're choosing specific people to be on our grad programme over others. And [comment/od] I have a few killer questions that throw these graduates and the first one is how many hours are there in a week, and they're all flabbergasted by that basic question [end/od] . [comment/od] And [interview question]whether they're a morning or evening person, they don't like to discuss it so I say, well you're going to have to figure it out, its not for my benefit, its for yours. [end/od]   And the hours question is very much so that, you know, we live in a quantifiable hours work week and if they don't know how many hours are in a week, not just a work week, they're all flabbergasted by it. We have to actually understand the very basic because [comment/od] in our controls environment its all about managing time so that's part of my grown up conversation, knowing how many hours are in a week [end/od] . So for me, there's quite a lot in that, that I would expect. Again as [comment/od] PE4 put it really nicely, the traces of or you know, this insight into that potential of those skills. But the willingness to develop them is I think, fundamentally in attitude [end/od] . But there is a little piece of me that's questioning whether the successful graduates are more on the extrovert versus the introvert spectrum, and I haven't yet concluded in my head. I can't rationalise it right now but I would suggest that's probably another underlying theme in what you're evaluating potentially. But [comment/od] a very insightful session [end/od] . I'm going to have to try some of these skills at home and see what the boys can come up with!

END 1:44:48

MOQ: PE12 Open discussion - did you have any final thoughts?

PE12: open discussion answer: Start 1:44:56

Not much. Because of what we do, we're very low level tech developers, it would be rare to have a graduate come to us with the experience required to fit into our development team. If I could find one I would. So we're very much the type of organisation that wants somebody else to give them the experience and I'll employ them later. But I think that's just the nature of the work that we're in. The challenge that we face with less experienced individuals is that our on-boarding costs are huge. Having to have an experience developer spending much of their time supporting, and an inexperienced individual makes us not particularly productive which is a shame because I would like to try and find a way of bringing in some younger talent. If I could figure that out, that would be great.

END 1:46:13

MOQ: Open discussion (Educators) - Does anyone have any thoughts on leadership or, now indeed, on any of the skills we've mentioned. Any thoughts that come to mind.

PA8: open discussion answer : Start 1:20:14

I am not entirely sure if this is entirely relevant but [comment/od] if we have a look at what is the role of a University in society today, it's quite clearly changed, and I think many universities need to be able to have the discussion about what is it that we're supposed to be doing [end/od]   Because the rate of attrition that was talked about and what University was when most of us, I would say, were attending, is very very different. Now we don't have polytechs. We have student saying we want more applied skills, we want to work on projects that are really more applied which one would argue is more the role of a Polytech. And the understanding of theory and academic used to be the role of going to University and part of the journey through these kinds of institutions was [comment/od] that journey of self-discovery that we ask for our students but our students aren't

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asking that of us now. They're saying that we're a customer and we want you to do X Y and Z because we're paying money [end/od]. And so therefore, [comment/od] these aspects around what we ask students to do around leadership, around Self management, problem solving skills, I don't necessarily think that we are actually delivering on providing those for our students. Because we're looking at providing them a nice cushion in terms of looking at them as customers and going by their feedback and that's not necessarily what is in the best interest of our students end/od]. And so when we start to have a look at what's passing out of our universities, you know, to basically [comment/od] our end customer, which I agree with PA6 is not the student, it's is actually society, and in this case, employers, in many instances. How we go about being able to deliver that is also a case of hands-on and hands-off and I just don't think we've got it right yet. [comment/od] And when we start to have a look at what we're trying to be able to do, and I see it in institutions falling all over themselves, you know, I just don't see that this is in the best needs of what we should be doing for our students. Because, they're becoming, if you look at what the statistics are actually telling us, these mental health issues that are becoming far more prevalent, and I suspect it's because of the Self management aspects, these problem solving skills are being taken away. They haven't had those ….. and they're arriving at our door and we're not in a position over 3 years to also deliver on them [end/od]. We're almost part of that system. And so, yes, [comment/od] if there's a gap between what the employers expect and what the students are, there's still very clearly a gap here that I don't think that we're addressing at all. I think we're going about it completely the wrong way. So yes, that's one of my comments when we start to have a look at these kinds of terms and we're asking how do we build these into what we're doing and into our education [end/od]. It's not just the education, it's all the other services and things that we provide the students as well.
END 1:23:53

PA6: open discussion answer: Start 1:24:45
Can I just say something. I am agreeing with JB but this comes back down to the time when I went to Polytechnic as it goes. The time that I went to higher education, I felt really really lucky to be there. You know, the Government gave me some money in the form of a grant, they paid my fees and I sort of looked up to and respected the guys who put the course together, and some of my tutors actually worked in business. One of them was an editor of the Financial Times, I remember, and it was all great. But another big part of the problem is that, and its particularly prevalent really in the last 10 years, is this kind of disrespect of experts. Quite a lot of my students turn up in my class not actually believing that I could possibly know anything worth teaching them and that they're not actually going to learn anything from me. Their expectation is that they come to sort of demonstrate their genius. Be lauded, praised, given a first even though they've not done any work and they've not fulfilled the criteria that have been set out and there's hell to pay if we don't give them a first. Because [comment/od] they've paid their money and they've got a national student satisfaction survey which they threaten us, the implicit threat is that they'll give us hell if we don't do what they say. [end/od] In very blunt terms, the lunatics have taken over the asylum in this respect. But the management of the universities and implicitly the government beyond that are complicit in this because, I don't think any university is ever going to be closed down for not delivering employable graduates, but I think several of them could and will and several of them have, in fact already gone out of business. I think the fact that the Government won't let Universities fail, the fact that Universities are too big to fail in certain communities means that some of them have been bailed out and the Government won't let any of them close. But that, to me, is much more the dynamic. Universities aren't there to deliver employable graduates, Universities are there, and particularly the ex- Polytechnics to keep people off the streets, to deliver a certain number of graduates, to pass people and get everybody through. And education, as PA8, I agree with PA8, [comment/od] education has changed dramatically [end/od] and what we understand as University, particularly pre 1992 Universities, Redbricks, Russell Groups, whatever. The assumption was, in 1992 that the ex-Polytechnics, the new universities, should sort of drag themselves up to the

standard of the old universities and everybody would be happy. **[comment/od]** But what's really happened is that there is a race to the bottom going on in an attempt to stay in business **[end/od]** . And it does also beg the question, which came up earlier in terms of equality of opportunity, it does also beg the question whether in fact the massively increased number of students who go into University, particularly those universities who really make token or no effort at selection, whether it really is suitable for them. I would argue, and I know PA1 might disagree with me, that any student who doesn't aspire to any form of leadership shouldn't really be on a business course.
END 1:28:51

MOQ: open discussion
I'd like to pull this together and please feel able to speak as you feel. Thinking about the skills that we have already looked at, is there anything else you would include….. And I know that's a very broad question, but are there other skills or components of skills that you would include?
PA6: open discussion: Start 1:29:34
One that I mentioned earlier was Project Management and that would be the 6th one on my list, not necessarily in place number 6.
END 1:29:49

Great, thank you. PA5, did you have some thoughts? (prompted by appearing to raise her hand)

PA5: open discussion: Start 1:30:00
No not really to be honest, I think I've just based my thoughts on those because those are the ones that are most often recognised as employability skills, to be honest, but I'll have a think as we're speaking.
END 1:30:24

MOQ: PA7: open discussion - is there anything else you would include or indeed add that hasn't already been discussed.

PA7: open discussion: Start 1:30: 43
Not that I can think of because **[comment/od]** I think we've had quite a broad conversation, there's quite a lot of overlapping areas [end/od] . If I do think of anything, I'll get back to you.
END 1:30:53

MOQ: PA1: open discussion - is there anything you would add

PA1: open discussion: Start 1:31:01
[comment/od] Well, what I think, I believe it was PA6 who mentioned this, you know, admission criteria for students. The Universities who don't really have these, then I think it should maybe then be part of that so we have these 5 big featured skills assessed right at the beginning, or mapped out and then they can be followed through on their journey. Because you can then really assess it **[end/od]** .
END 1:31:31

PA8: open discussion: Start 1:31:43
If I just may. We're assuming that we're having students to be able to be employable, which I agree is actually the majority of our students as being career focussed. But you know, I studied English literature and history, and I didn't do it because of, necessarily because I could see a career in English literature and history. I did it because it was intellectually interesting and going through a university degree would be able to broaden my mind, deepen my analytical skills that would be important in the kinds of roles that I envisaged that I might do. And I was always very clear about

what I wanted to do in my life and I did it by the age of 30. And the journey to be able to do what you wanted to set out to do from the age of 12, to have done it by age 30, for me was quite an achievement. But I didn't go to university in order to be able to be there for an employer. I did it for myself and **[comment/od]** the assumption in this discussion is about building skillsets that are helpful in your career and the assumption also here is about business skills, whereas I think that generally at University offering this opportunity to be intellectually curious and to be able to contribute to society not necessarily to employability **[end/od]** . I know this is where our graduates and where a lot of our measurements are but this comes back to that discussion, **[comment/od]** what is the role of a University **[end/od]** .   And if we have a look at asking our students, and **[comment/od]** I have had this discussion with my students, who think that universities are here for them and I've had to point out well, no actually, we're here for society **[end/od]**   We have employers that give us money, that give us projects, to have a look at research and new products and new medicines and all these other things that we get grants from the Government to be able to do this whole area around research. You're just a small, you're a significant shareholder but really you're one of many shareholders and what this institution is actually about.   It seems to me that they didn't really have an idea about what a University was **[comment/od]** So when we have this base assumption, which is what a lot of this discussion is about, is about getting our students to be able to be more employable and I understand that's the focus of your PhD. But my question here is, is this necessarily a key focus of the University **[end/od]** .   My argument is, yes, but there are other things that they are there for and other things that we are looking at also putting that into our students. And we can see this in great entrepreneurs as well. Steve Jobs went to University but didn't quite go to University if you know what I mean. He just took the subjects he was interested in. Those subjects, like calligraphy, ended up being really quite important in terms of what he eventually got involved in. And so **[what/od]** the pursuit of intellectual curiosity, and I say this to my students when I start out is that my job is to get you interested in something in this class and I really hope that that is what I intend to be able to do so that you can go down the rabbit hole and follow your curiosity Because that is one of the things that is going to make you more successful in your life than anything else. Its not about the skills, its about engaging them to be curious about the world because from that a lot of these other skills come from, being able to communicate and talk about the subject that you're interested in, to be able to solve problems. And when we have a look at this thing around leadership skills, yes, valuable for employers in many instances but not necessarily for other roles in society. I don't know how this fits in but it seems in the discussion that we're having, we need to be able to think about if the focus is entirely on looking at employers and employability **[end/od]** ..

END 1:36:08

MOQ: PA9: open discussion - is there anything else you would like to add.

PA9: open discussion: Start 1:36:48
[comment/od] Yes, maybe we could combine both world, the best of both worlds. Maybe we can keep the character we want for University education, make them intellectual and having them there to possibly understand better themselves, help others. And not do a degree just for finding a job, but also not doing a degree just for a degree maybe **[end/od]** . I agree with all of these and **[comment/od]** I think that there is a gap between what we think is a good degree and what the students think **[end/od]** , unfortunately. **[comment/od]** The students pay a substantial amount of money, unfortunately, and they do want to be employed in a good job to pay back this money. And this is the reality now that we are facing **[end/od]** . So our students are strategic learners and selfish learners at the same time. Because many of them they need to work at the same time to be able to pay this amount of money they've been asked to. And especially students of big modern universities, like ours, rely on those students. So **[comment/od]** we need to teach them academic things, of course, and have those rigorous academic things that we want them to have and challenge

them and make them to feel innovative. But we need at the same time to show them that you are able to find a good job if you want to and pay back this debt that you have now. And maybe we do that already but maybe it's not so obvious. **[end/od]**   **[comment/od]** So maybe your research, defining, breaking down those skills will be really helpful because it will show us what we do already and what we don't and what we can add, you know, these kinds of things. So we can add all these things then into our module descriptors, in our course specifications, where currently we have only academic skills. Maybe we can have in addition there some more skills **[end/od]** .

END 1:39:05

MOQ: open discussion - Are there any other comments before I draw this to a close.

PA6: open discussion: Start 1:39:17

First is one to add to the list after project management, which I know we broadly call analytical skills. And thinking about what PA9 has just said about how do we make stuff more academic, I'm deeply perplexed now by dissertations which are now almost completely changed in 30 years and by the inability of students to put together a hypothesis and then test it as part of their research and their dissertation. And I think that is a big big loss. I'm reading a book at the moment by Nate Silver, which deals exactly with that. Here it is on my desk, the Signal and the Noise, a great read for everybody if they want it. But to go back to what JB said, for me, **[comment/od]** the turning points have been many over the last 30 years but it was certainly the Thatcher and Major Governments who introduced student tuition fees, the Blair Government who insisted that 50% of people should go to university and then there's the Cameron and subsequent Governments who have continued that **[end/od]** .   **[comment/od]** But the purpose of University has changed, and by definition its got to change. If you're paying, and I can remember when students were only paying £1000 tuition fees, but now that its £9000, they've got to got to got to get a good job as a result of that **[end/od]** otherwise they're just kind of wasting their money so to speak. But for me, the sort of additional criteria to add, and I don't know if this is relevant, is that there is an assumption on the part of students, and on the part of parents and on the part of the Daily Mail, who I suspect is inciting them both, that how good a job you get depends on the degree that you did and the score, the grade, the classification that you got. And happily, for this panel, we've got JB as a prime example of someone who did something not particularly employment related, seemingly, English Literature and History, but intellectually satisfying which demonstrated his ability to sort of transfer the skills that he picked up to do pretty much whatever he wanted. And this is the other thing that I tell my students is that whether you get a good job or not depends not just on the degree that you've got but on the way that you behave, the way that you interview, the way that you apply for jobs, etc, etc. And, in France, this is very very marked, even more so than the UK, I've noticed, is that what institution you went to determines the kinds of companies that you can then apply for or the kinds of companies that will employ you. And I get students in universities (the sort of what we call the ?) who didn't go to the top level business schools and they say well I can't get a top level business job because I didn't go to the right school or whatever. And the students, they don't seem to think its worth writing a good CV because they feel pigeon holed kind of really to start with. And I sense that in the UK is that **[comment/od]** you get people who….this is why they fight so hard for every grade point and because they've got to get a 2:1 or they've got to get a first or whatever it is so that they can get the good job. And they don't feel that their personal qualities, all the stuff we've been talking about, communication, Self management leadership blah blah blah blah blah, they don't feel that that kind of has any bearing **[end/od]** . And yet, as JB has pointed out, there are some people and I would add Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerburg, Alan Sugar and Richard Branson to the list, who the education system didn't necessarily perform very well for them but their personal qualities got them to great success, kind of much much later on. But of course, the students take that to mean that they don't have to study because university is not important and they will become billionaires anyway.   **[comment/od]** And so, you know, with that very much in mind, the purpose of university has changed and that's kind of been Government driven to me by the need to put most people into University of some kind

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or higher education **[end/od]**. The need for universities to be financially solvent. There are some things in life, swimming pools spring to mind from sports studies, you cannot run a public swimming pool at a profit. It cannot be done. But we still want public swimming pools because we see the benefit to society of having people not drowning because they know how to swim if they fall in a river is very very important. And we need them to be healthy and fit and all of that kind of stuff. And in the same way, we need universities for that reason. Despite the fact that you cannot, under the old style…you know the style of university that I went to … you cannot run those universities profitably. Its inherently a deeply inefficient organisation to run, if you do it properly, according to the old way of doing things. But I'm afraid that old way of doing things is in the past. And I was struck by Michael Heseltine, who was asked in an interview, about student tuition fees, and Michael Heseltine rightly or wrongly said, yes I agree there shouldn't be fees for universities but society will not accept that notion that someone can be paid for by the taxpayer to go and get that degree, to earn more in the course of their life, they get that sort of luck and privilege, so that university isn't for them as JB has rightly pointed out but they do substantially benefit. There, I've said enough.
END 1:45:50

END

Appendix E: 100 Employer Skills corpus surveys and report titles

	Corpus Skills Surveys Full Title (Government)	Corpus coded title
1	Employers Skill Survey : statistical report of data from 1999 ESS	sGov1999_ESS
2	Employers Skill Survey : existing survey evidence and its use in the Analysis of Skills Deficiencies (Great Britain)	sGov2000_ESSAnalysis
3	Employers Skill Survey 2002 : Research Report No.372	sGov2002_ESS
4	National Employer Skills Survey 2003 : Main Report	sGov2003_NESSmainReport
5	National Employer Skills Survey 2004 : Main Report	sGov2004_NESSmainReport
6	National Employer Skills Survey 2005 : Main Report	sGov2005_NESSmainReport
7	National Employers Skills Survey 2007 : Main report	sGov2007_NESSmainReport
8	Skills for the Workplace : Employer Perspectives : Evidence Report 1 November 2008	sGov2008_EPS
9	National Employer Skills for England 2009 : Main Report	sGov2009_NESS
10	Employer Perspectives Survey 2010 (EPS) : Evidence report 25	sGov2010_EPS
11	UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2011 : Evidence report 45, July 2012	sGov2011_ESS
12	Employer Perspectives Survey 2012 : Evidence report 65	sGov2012_EPS
13	Employer Skills Survey 2013 : UK results : Evidence report 81 (Published as "Employer" not "Employers")	sGov2013_ESS
14	Employer Perspectives Survey 2014 : Evidence Report 88	sGov2014_EPS
15	Employer Skills Survey 2015 : Evidence Report 97 (Published as "Employer" not "Employers")	sGov2015_ESS
16	Employer Perspectives Survey 2016	sGov2016_EPS
17	Employer Skills Survey 2017	sGov2017_ESS
18	Employer Skills Survey 2019 Research Report October 2020	sGov2019_ESS
	Corpus Skills Surveys Full Title (CBI	**Corpus coded title**
19	Taking Stock Education and Skills Survey 2008	sCBI2008_ESS

20	Ready to Grow Business : Priorities for education and skills : Education and Skills Survey 2010	sCBI2010_ESS
21	Building for Growth Business priorities for education and skills : Education and Skills Survey 2011	sCBI2011_ESS
23	Learning to Grow : What employers need from education and skills : Education and Skills Survey 2012	sCBI2012_ESS
23	Changing the Pace : Education and Skills Survey 2013	sCBI2013_ESS
24	Gateway to Growth : Education and Skills Survey 2014	sCBI2014_ESS
25	Inspiring Growth : Education and Skills Survey 2015	sCBI2015_ESS
26	The Right Combination : Education and Skills Survey 2016	sCBI2016_ESS
27	Helping the UK Thrive : Education and Skills Survey 2017	sCBI2017_ESS
28	Educating for the Modern World : ESS annual survey report	sCBI2018_ESS
29	Education and Learning for the modern world : Education and Skills Survey 2019	sCBI2019_ESS

	Corpus Skills Reports Full Title (Government)	**Corpus coded title**
30	Skills for All : Proposals for a national skills agenda. Final report of the National Skills Task Force (England)	rGov1999_NatSkillsProp
31	Towards a national skills agenda : first report of the National Skills Task Force (England)	rGov1999_NatSkillsAgenda
32	Towards a national skills agenda : Skills For All : second report of the National Skills Task Force (England)	rGov1999_SkillsForAll
33	Opportunity for All : Secretary of State response to the National Skills Task Force final report	rGov2000_SkillsForAllResponse
34	Skills for All : Research Report from the National Skills Taskforce	rGov2000_NatSkillsResearch
35	Skills Matter : A synthesis of research on the extent, causes, and implications of skills deficiencies	rGov2001_SkillsMatter

36	Skills Dialogues: Listening to employers : An assessment of generic skills needs	rGov2002_SkillsDialogue
37	21st Century Skills : realising our potential: Individuals, Employers, Nation	rGov2003_21stCenturySkills
38	Skills: Getting on in business, getting on in work Part 1	rGov2005_GettingOnPart1
39	What employers look for when recruiting the unemployed and inactive: skills, characteristics and qualifications	rGov2005_WhatEmpLookFor
40	Leitch Review of Skills : Prosperity for all in the global economy	rGov2006_LeitchReview
41	Employability Skills Explored	rGov2008_EmpSkillsExp
42	Re-Skilling for Recovery : After Leitch, Implementing Skills and Training Policies : Vol 1	rGov2008_AfterLeitch
43	Working Futures 2007-2017 : Evidence Report 2	rGov2008_WFmainReport
44	High Performance working : a synthesis of key literature : Evidence Report 4	rGov2009_HPWlitreview
45	Higher Ambitions : the future of universities in a knowledge economy	rGov2009_HigherAmbitions
46	Praxis : An appetite for learning : increasing employee demand for skills development	rGov2009_AppetiteForLearning
47	Skills for Growth : the national skills strategy	rGov2009_SkillsforGrowth
48	The economic value of intermediate vocational education and qualifications : Evidence report 11	rGov2009_EconValVocEd
49	The Employability Challenge : Full Report 2009 (with skills definitions)	rGov2009_EmpChallenge
50	Towards Ambition 2020: skills, jobs, growth : Expert advice from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills	rGov2009_TowardsAmb2020
51	UK Employment and Skills Almanac 2009 : Evidence report 12	rGov2009_ESAlmanac

52	Ambition 2020 : World Class Skills and Jobs for the UK : 2010 report	rGov2010_Amb2020
53	Browne Report: Securing a sustainable future for Higher Education : an independent review of higher education funding & student finance	rGov2010_BrowneReport
54	Employability Skills : A research and policy briefing	rGov2010_ESpolicyBriefing
55	National Strategic Skills Audit for England 2010 : Volume 1 Key Findings for: Skills for Jobs Today and Tomorrow	rGov2010_SkillsAudit1
56	National Strategic Skills Audit for England 2010 : Volume 2 The Evidence Report : Skills for Jobs Today and Tomorrow	rGov2010_SkillsAudit2
57	Praxis: Skills are not enough : the globalisation of knowledge and the future of UK economy	rGov2010_SkillsNotEnough
58	What's the deal : the employers voice in the employment and skills system	rGov2010_WhatstheDeal
59	International approaches to high performance working : evidence report 37	rGov2011_HPW
60	Praxis: Working to learn, learning to work	rGov2011_WorkingtoLearn
61	Student Charter Group Final Report	rGov2011_StudentCharter
62	The role of skills from worklessness to sustainable employment with progression : evidence report 38	rGov2011_RoleOfSkills
63	Developing Occupational Skills Profiles for the UK : A feasibility study : Evidence report 44	rGov2012_OccSkillsProfiles
64	Sector Skills Insights : Education : Evidence Report 57	rGov2012_SSIeducation
65	Skills for Competitiveness : Country report for the UK	rGov2012_SkillsComp
66	The youth employment challenge	rGov2012_YouthChallenge
67	Working Futures 2010-2020 Main Report	rGov2012_WF20102020
68	Employer Ownership of Skills : Building the momentum	rGov2013_BuildingMomentum

69	Skills Conditionality: Preparation and Training for Entry-Level Jobs	rGov2013_EntryLevelJobs
70	Forging Futures : Building Higher Level Skills through university and employer collaboration	rGov2014_BuildingHLSkills
71	Growth through People Report	rGov2014_GrowthReport
72	The future of work : Jobs and skills in 2030 : Evidence report 84 : full report	rGov2014_JobsSkills2030
73	The Labour Market Story (2) : The state of UK skills	rGov2014_LMSukSkills
74	The Labour Market Story (3) : Skills use at work	rGov2014_LMSworkskills
75	The Labour Market Story (4) : Skills for the Future	rGov2014_LMSfutureskills
76	UK Skills Levels and International competitiveness 2014	rGov2014_UKSkillslevels
77	Education, Skills and Productivity : commissioned research : A Literature Review: First Joint Special Report of the Business, Innovation and Skills and Education Committees of Session 2015–16	rGov2015_EdSkillProductivity
78	Understanding Graduate Employers' Recruitment and Selection Practices: Main report	rGov2015_GradRecruiters
79	Digital Skills for the UK economy	rGov2016_DigSkillsEconomy
80	Lifelong Digital Skills Development, current picture and future challenges	rGov2016_DigitalSkills
81	Success as a knowledge economy : Teaching Excellence, Social Mobility and Student Choice	rGov2016_SuccessKnowEc
82	The UK Skills System : How aligned are public policy and employers views of training provision?	rGov2016_UKSkillsSystemAlignment
83	The UK Skills System : How well does policy meet evolving demand	rGov2016_UKSkillsSystemDemand
84	The UK's Skill System: Training, Employability and Gaps in Provision	rGov2016_UKSkillsSystemEmp
85	The UK's Skills Mix : Current Trends and Future Needs	rGov2016_UKSkillsMix
86	Working Futures 2014-2024 : Evidence Report 100	rGov2016_WF20142024

87	Future of Skills and Lifelong Learning	rGov2017_FutureSkills
88	21st century skills : evidence of issues in definition, demand and delivery for development contexts	rGov2019_21stSkills
89	Employer Skills Survey 2019 Developing the skills pipeline Research report	rGov2019_ESSpipeline
90	No Longer Optional : Employer Demand for Digital Skills	rGov2019_EmDemandDigskills
91	UK Skills mismatch in 2030 : Industrial Strategy Council Research Paper	rGov2019_SkillsMismatch
92	Apprenticeship and Skills Policy in England	rGov2020_ApprentSkillsPolicy
	Corpus Skills Surveys Full Title (CBI	**Corpus coded title**
93	Time Well Spent : Embedding Employability in work experience	rCBI2007_TimeWellSpent
94	Future Fit : Preparing Graduates for the World of Work	rCBI2009_FutureFit
95	Working Towards Your Future : Making the most of your time in Higher Education	rCBI2011_WorkingTowards
96	Skills Needs in England : The Employer Perspective	rCBI2017_EPskillsneeds
97	In perfect harmony : improving skills delivery in England	rCBI2018_ImprvSkillsDelivery
98	Delivering Skills for the New Economy Understanding the digital skills needs in the UK	rCBI2019_Digskillsneeds
99	Employers and lifelong learning : the importance of upskilling and retraining in a modern economy	rCBI2019_EmpLifelongLearning
100	Getting young people work ready	rCBI2019_WorkReady

Appendix F: Focus Group participant information

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

**Identifying the common and different understandings of graduate skills
among academics and graduate employers**

You are being invited to take part in research to **break down the broad label skills employers cite as critical when recruiting graduates into the workplace**. Carole Still, PhD student in the Centre for Global Learning, Education and Attainment at Coventry University is leading this research. Before you decide to take part it is important you understand why the research is being conducted and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information carefully.

What is the purpose of the study?

The purpose of the study is to understand how employers and educators define the broad label skills consistently cited by employers as most important when recruiting people into the workplace. UK Government and CBI commissioned research consistently refer to Communication, Problem-Solving, Team work, Self-Management, Leadership, Character, Behaviours and Attributes but do not break these labels down to a level at which they can be taught, practised and assessed in higher education.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

You are invited to participate in this study because you either interview graduate candidates for recruitment into your organization or into other organisations or you design and/or deliver course materials for the HE environment.

What are the benefits of taking part?

By sharing your experiences with us, you will be helping Carole Still and Coventry University to better understand what employers mean when they refer to Team work, Leadership, Problem-Solving, Communication, Character, Behaviours and Attributes. You will be able to share your expertise, knowledge and meanings of the key skills from your own perspective. Your expertise will contribute to a deeper understanding of the interpretation of skills mapped into University curricula thus shaping where universities should be focusing their attention to develop the agile and capable graduates. The skills definitions drawn from this research will be collated into a skills framework containing the definitions behind each skills

label. Whilst focused at the level of graduate skill, the skills definitions from this research will be made publicly available for other researchers and academic institutions including schools and colleges. The findings from all focus group discussions will serve as the final arbiter of the skills framework and be made available to you completion of the research.

Are there any risks associated with taking part?

This study has been reviewed and approved through Coventry University's formal research ethics procedure. There are no significant risks associated with participation.

Do I have to take part?

No – it is entirely up to you. If you do decide to take part, please keep this Information Sheet and complete the Informed Consent Form to show that you understand your rights in relation to the research, and that you are happy to participate. Please note down your participant number (which is on the Consent Form) and provide this to the lead researcher if you seek to withdraw from the study at a later date. You are free to withdraw your information from the project data set up to 14 days after the focus group meeting date. Please note, however, that withdrawing your focus group dialogue data at any time after collection will not be possible as this may affect the dialogue contribution of other participants based on preceding or proceeding points made by you. All dialogues will be non-attributed and participants will be referred to only by their participant number and category of Graduate Employer or Educationalist.

You should note that your data may be used in the production of formal research outputs (e.g. journal articles, conference papers, theses and reports) prior to this date and so you are advised to contact the university at the earliest opportunity should you wish to withdraw from the study.   To withdraw, please contact the lead researcher, Carole Still whose details are provided below. Please also contact the Research Support Office in the Centre for Global Learning, Coventry University, Priory Street, Coventry, CV1 5FB, Tel: +44(0)24 7765 7688, email globallearning@coventry.ac.uk so that your request can be dealt with promptly in the event of the lead researcher's absence. You do not need to give a reason. A decision to withdraw, or not to take part, will not affect you in any way.

What will happen if I decide to take part?

If you interview graduate candidates for recruitment into your organization or into other organisations, you will be placed into a "Graduate Employer" focus group. If you design and/or deliver course materials for the HE environment, you will be placed into an "Educators" focus group.

All focus group participants will be asked the same questions regarding what they believed is required from an entry-level graduate to be effective in Team work, Leadership, Problem-Solving, Communication and what the terms Character, Behaviours and Attributes mean to you. Participants are invited to express their personal views with no obligation or requirement to share institutional or organisational data.

The focus group will take place in a safe environment at a time that is convenient to you. Ideally, we would like to audio record your responses (and will require your consent for this), so the location should be in a fairly quiet area. The focus group should take around 1.5 to 2 hours to complete.

The researcher will not share participant contact details between participants. When each focus group recruitment is completed, participants per focus group will be sent an introductory blind-copy email by the researcher, welcoming everyone into their respective focus group and confirming the meeting arrangements. Participants will be addressed by their first names only in the introductory email. Participants full name and organisation affiliation will be introduced verbally in the focus group meeting. The contact details of the employer focus group will not be shared with the educators group or vice versa.

Focus group etiquette

As a participant, you will be asked to accept the following rules of dialogue:

- Each group members' expressed views and opinions are respectfully accepted and acknowledged by the group
- That participants do not share the identity or affiliation of any focus group member without explicitly given consent by the group member(s).
- That individual participants views and opinions are not shared outside the focus group discussion

Data Protection and Confidentiality

Your data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Your data will be referred to by a unique participant number rather than by name. If you consent to being audio recorded, all recordings will be destroyed, not later than 31st December 2022. Your data will only be viewed by the researcher/research team. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file on Coventry University's server. All paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. Your consent information will be kept separately from your responses in order to minimise risk in the event of a data breach. The lead researcher will take responsibility for data destruction and all collected data will be destroyed on or before 31st December 2022.

Data Protection Rights

Coventry University is a Data Controller for the information you provide. You have the right to access information held about you. Your right of access can be exercised in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation and the Data Protection Act 2018. You also have other rights including rights of correction, erasure, objection, and data portability. For more details, including the right to lodge a complaint with the Information Commissioner's Office, please visit www.ico.org.uk. Questions, comments and requests about your personal data can also be sent to the University Data Protection Officer - enquiry.igu@coventry.ac.uk

What will happen with the results of this study?

The results of this study may be summarised in published articles, reports and presentations. Quotes or key findings will always be made anonymous in any formal outputs unless we have your prior and explicit written permission to attribute them to you by name.

Making a Complaint

If you are unhappy with any aspect of this research, please first contact the lead researcher, Carole Still, carole.still@coventry.ac.uk If you still have concerns and wish to make a formal complaint, please write to Professor Dr Katherine Wimpenny: hsx260@coventry.ac.uk

In your letter, please provide information about the research project, specify the name of the researcher and detail the nature of your complaint.

Carole Still, PhD student, Coventry University, Coventry CV1 5FB   Email: carole.still@coventry.ac.uk

Educator Participant Form

Identifying the common and different understandings of graduate skills among academics and graduate employers

You are invited to take part in this research study for the purpose of collecting data on the broad label skills consistently cited in employer surveys as the most important skills in the workplace.

Before you decide to take part, please **read the accompanying Participant Information Letter and Consent form.**

Please do not hesitate to ask questions if anything is unclear or if you would like more information about any aspect of this research. It is important that you feel able to take the necessary time to decide if you wish to take part in this research study.

If you are happy to participate, in this research please complete your participant details below and return this form to carole.still@coventry.ac.uk, along with your signed consent form.

Title:	First name:		Surname:
Job Title:			
Company or Institution:			
Email address:		Mobile Number:	
With which ethnicity do you self-identify? *(optional answer)*			

1	What is your subject discipline?		
2	How many years have you been working at your current level?		YEARS
3	Do you think there is a need to address the definitions employers use when referring to "skills" to uncover the meanings hidden behind broad skills labels such as "communication", "teamwork", "leadership", "resilience" etc?	YES ☐	NO ☐
4	Are you willing to participate in this focus group research? Time commitment approx: 1.5 to 2hrs	YES ☐	NO ☐
5	Do you design and/or deliver course materials for the HE environment	YES ☐	NO ☐
6	Do you assess student learning against a rubric at HE level	YES ☐	NO ☐
7	If a follow up focus group proves necessary, would you be willing to consider participating in it? Time commitment: 1.5 to 2 hours	YES ☐	NO ☐

Thank you for your participation in this study, your help is much appreciated.

Please return this form by email to carole.still@coventry.ac.uk

Employer Participant Form

Identifying the common and different understandings of graduate skills among academics and graduate employers

You are invited to take part in this research study for the purpose of collecting data on the broad label skills consistently cited in employer surveys as the most important skills in the workplace.

Before you decide to take part, please **read the accompanying Participant Information Letter and Consent form.**

Please do not hesitate to ask questions if anything is unclear or if you would like more information about any aspect of this research. It is important that you feel able to take the necessary time to decide if you wish to take part in this research study.

If you are happy to participate, please complete your participant details, confirm your consent, sign and date the form as participant, and return it to carole.still@coventry.ac.uk along with your signed consent form.

Title:	First name:		Surname:
Job Title:			
Company or Institution:			
Email address:		Mobile Number:	
With which ethnicity do you self-identify? (optional answer)			

1	In which industry do you work? Software		
2	How many years have you been working at your current level?		☐ YEARS
3	Do you think there is a need to address the definitions employers use when referring to "skills" to uncover the meanings hidden behind broad skills labels such as "communication", "teamwork", "leadership", "resilience" etc?		YES ☐ NO ☐
4	Are you willing to participate in this focus group research? Time commitment approx. 1.5 to 2hrs		YES ☐ NO ☐
5	Do you interview graduate candidates for recruitment purposes, either into your organisation or into other organisations?		YES ☐ NO ☐
6	Do you appraise employees using a competency framework?		YES ☐ NO ☐
7	If a follow up focus group proves necessary, would you be willing to consider participating in it? Time commitment will be approx. 1.5 to 2 hours.		YES ☐ NO ☐

INFORMED CONSENT FORM:

Identifying the common and different understandings of graduate skills among academics and graduate employers

You are invited to take part in this research study for the purpose of collecting data on the broad label skills consistently cited in employer surveys as the most important skills in the workplace. The data from this research will contribute towards a British standard on skills, and made available to employers, educators and students.

Before you decide to take part, you must **read the accompanying Participant Information Sheet.**

Please do not hesitate to ask questions if anything is unclear or if you would like more information about any aspect of this research. It is important that you feel able to take the necessary time to decide whether or not you wish to take part.

If you are happy to participate, please confirm your consent by highlighting YES against each of the below statements and then signing and dating the form as participant.

1	I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions		
2	I understand my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw my data, without giving a reason, by contacting the lead researcher and the Research Support Office at any time until the date specified in the Participant Information Sheet		
3	I have noted down my participant number (top left of this Consent Form) which may be required by the lead researcher if I wish to withdraw from the study		
4	I understand that all the information I provide will be held securely and treated confidentially		
5	I am happy for the information I provide to be used (anonymously) in academic papers and other formal research outputs		
6	I am happy for the focus group to be audio recorded		
7	I am happy for the focus group to be video recorded		
8	I am happy to put my web camera on during the video recording		
9	I agree to take part in the above study		

Thank you for your participation in this study. Your help is very much appreciated.

Participant's Name	Date	Signature
Andrew King	10/12/2020	
Researcher	Date	Signature
Carole Still	2/12/2020	

Appendix G: Focus Group post-discussion questionnaire

Introductory text:

You have taken part in an online focus group to break down the broad label skills employers cite as critical when recruiting graduates into the workplace. Carole Still, PhD student in the Centre for Global Learning, Education and Attainment at Coventry University led the focus group research. The purpose of the focus groups was to understand what expectations employers and educators of graduates in possession of the following five transferable skills: Communication, Problem-Solving, Team work, Self-Management, Leadership.

Data protection statement

Your data will be processed in accordance with the General Data Protection Regulation 2016 (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. All information collected about you will be kept strictly confidential. Your data will be referred to by your unique participant number rather than by name. Your data will only be viewed by the researcher/research team. All electronic data will be stored on a password-protected computer file on Coventry University's server. All paper records will be stored in a locked filing cabinet in the researcher's home. The lead researcher will take responsibility for data destruction and all collected data will be destroyed on or before 31st December 2022.

Q1	**Were the general objectives of the Focus Group clear?** (please circle your response) Yes No *Optional: Please add your suggestions for improving the composition*
Q2	**Do you think the Focus Group had the right composition of people for reaching the proposed objectives** (please circle your response) Yes No *Optional: Please add your suggestions for improving the general objectives*

Q3	Was the 2 hour time-span of the Focus Group meeting sufficient to achieve the expected results?
	(please circle your response) Yes No
	Optional: Please add your suggestions for improving the time-span
Q4	Was the meeting well structured?
	(please circle your response) Yes No
	Optional: Please add your suggestions for improving the structure of the meeting
Q5	Were the mediator and participant roles clear?
	(please circle your response) Yes No
	Optional: Please add your suggestions for improving the mediator and/or participant roles
Q6	Was the information provided before the focus group meeting sufficient to prepare for the meeting?
	(please circle your response)
	Yes No
	Optional: Please add your suggestions for improving the information and communication process
Q7	Was information communicated timely enough before the Focus Group meetings?
	(please circle your response) Yes No
	Optional: Please add your suggestions for improving the timeliness of the information

Q8	**Did meeting virtually negatively affect your ability to contribute to the discussions?** (please circle your response) Yes No *If "yes" please explain what affected your ability to contribute and how*
Q9	**Ignoring COVID, would you have preferred to meet physically** (please circle your response) Yes No *If you answered "yes" please explain why*
Q10	**What was your motivation to participate in the focus group?** *Please tick all applicable to you and include any additional motivations in the "other" box*

	to contribute to a common language on skills
	to ensure my sector is represented in a common language
	other:

END OF QUESTIONNAIRE – thank you for your responses. Your answers will be used anonymously to help understand how best to run future online focus groups.

Responses:

PhD focus group questionnaire

1 Were the general objectives of the focus group clear

Yes	12 (100%)
No	0

1.a Please add your suggestions for improving the general objectives

Showing all 3 responses	
With such a broad topic it was not so easy to provide complete information. Maybe a bit more of boundary setting would have been useful eg was it supposed to be from the perspective of evidence of competences demonstrated during application / selection process or after the graduate has started in the business.	683699-683690-70064844
N/A	683699-683690-70151141
Sorry t be a pain in the @$$ but I think clear definition of what was meant by "skills" at the beginning would have helped.	683699-683690-70161961

**2** Do you think the Focus Group had the right composition of people for reaching the proposed objectives?

Yes	12 (100%)
No	0

2.a Please add your suggestions for improving the composition

1 / 5

Showing all 2 responses	
probably. It would be interesting to bounce the thoughts off the populatiuon being required to demonstrate skills.job applicants.The doers.	683699-683690-70056973
I dont think there was HR representation in the group I was with. This can sometimes offer a different / additional view to that from the business	683699-683690-70064844

3 Was the 2 hour time-span of the Focus Group meeting sufficient to achieve the expected results?

Yes	12 (100%)
No	0
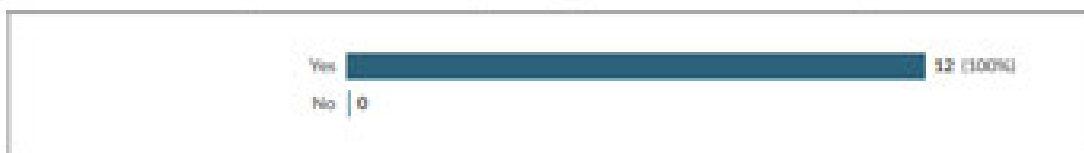
3.a Please add your suggestions for improving the time-span

No responses

4 Was the meeting well structured?

Yes	12 (100%)
No	0

4.a Please add your suggestions for improving the structure of the meeting

Showing all 2 responses	
Everyone having an equal chance to speak is good but we are also influenced by what others say. Is this factor taken into account in some way? Might it skew findings if a very influential speaker 'hijacked' the group.	683699-683690-70056973
Good to move round the attendees and to identify the starting person for each topic in advance.	683699-683690-70064844

5 Were the mediator and participant roles clear?

Yes ━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━ 12 (100%)

No | 0

5.a Please add your suggestions for improving the mediator and/or participant roles

No responses

6 Was the information provided before the focus group meeting sufficient to prepare for the meeting?

Yes ━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━ 12 (100%)

No | 0

6.a Please add your suggestions for improving the information process

Showing all 2 responses	
It was fine for a very general discussion to take place. If more specific information was required then please refer to my previous answer "Maybe a bit more of boundary setting would have been useful eg was it supposed to be from the perspective of evidence of competences demonstrated during application / selection process or after the graduate has started in the business."	683699-683690-70064844
It would have been useful if the key themes were sent earlier to assist with the preparation of our contributions. I believe these themes were sent the night before although the information pack and other documents were sent well in advance.	683699-683690-71262361

7 Was information communicated timely enough before the Focus Group meeting?

Yes ━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━ 12 (100%)

No | 0
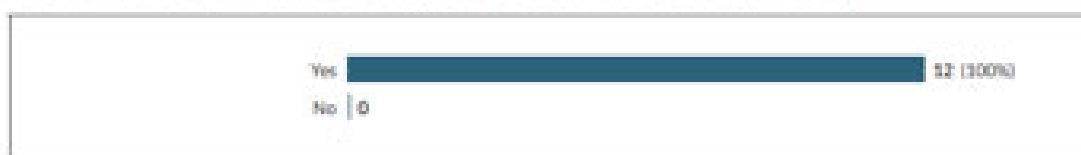
7.a Please add your suggestions for improving the timeliness of the information

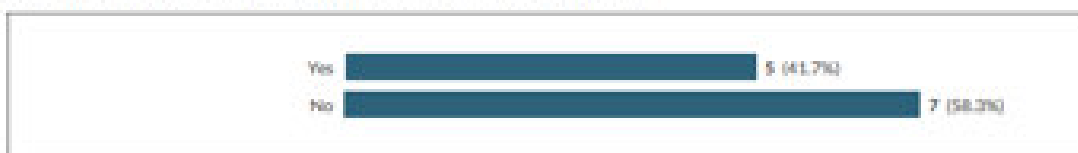| Showing 1 response	
Same as above.	683699-683690-71262261

8 Did meeting virtually negatively affect your ability to contribute to the discussions?

Yes	0
No	12 (100%)

8.a If "yes" please explain what affected your ability to contribute and how

Showing 1 response	
No. Improved it probably. I am aware that face to face can 'muddy the waters'	683699-683690-70056973

9 Ignoring COVID, would you have preferred to meet physically

Yes	5 (41.7%)
No	7 (58.3%)

9.a If you answered "yes" please explain why

Showing all 5 responses	
I think some of the nuance from meeting face to face is missing on virtual meetings, yet the meeting itself was run in a structured and positive way.	683699-683690-69953688
Interesting. Again f2f is more fun. But acknowledging COVID. It has given an opportunity to persist with virtual and get used to it.	683699-683690-70056973
I find that meeting physically enables me to build deeper and longer-lasting connections.	683699-683690-70069282
Just a personal preference to meet physically and further opportunities to network	683699-683690-70150006
No, because I was in France!	683699-683690-70161961

10 What was your motivation to participate in the focus group

to contribute to a common language on skills	10 (83.3%)
to ensure my sector is represented in a common language	0
Other	2 (16.7%)
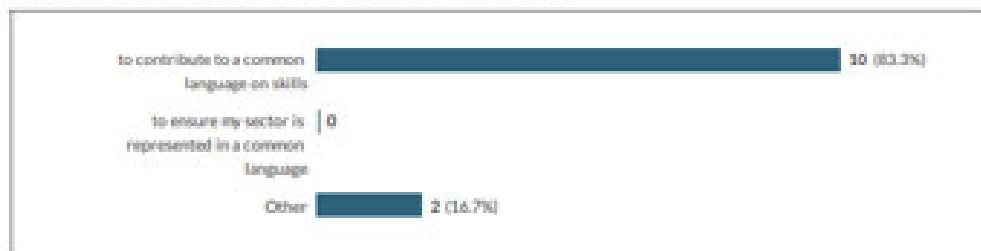
10.a If you selected Other, please specify:

Showing all 2 responses	
to progress to a standard which uses the common language.	683699-683690-70056973
Because we all love Carole!	683699-683690-70161961

Appendix H: Thematic analysis Code Book

This codebook relates to the Focus Group analysis. (Corpus analysis of the 100 employer skills surveys is detailed in the body of the thesis, chapter 4, section 4.5)

Focus Group reading notes and overall impressions:

A colour coding strategy to visually identify group specific content. Each skills was assigned a unique colour to aid visual identification in the large spreadsheet data.

Colour coding:

Communication / Problem solving / Team work / Self Management / Leadership / Open Discussion

Signalling phrases: Participants appeared to use many types of signalling phrases preceding an expectation of performative action i.e. "able to", "expect them", "can", "looking for", "look at", "evidence of", "ability to", "demonstrate", etc.

Expectations of performative actions were stated, often using a keyword or multiple keyword combination e.g.

a willingness to communicate …… have initiative ……. confidence because, when people are confronted with problem solving it means a change of a situation …. have a perception of everybody is an equal and has something to give…. ownership so when there's a project or a target or whatever it is, that they know they're owning that

General commentary: I noticed many instances of general comments in which participants expressed an opinion or made a general statement in relation to a preceding point. For example

I don't necessarily look for them to be able to communicate on a technical basis ……I don't expect the graduates to have a huge leadership capability….. I love someone who basically solves the problem before it reaches me… in the team we want everyone to be a doer but some people are fast doers and some people are slow doers…. we don't stifle the creativity of what they do and how they do it

Contextualised scenarios: Participants were not given a contextualised scenario in which to situate their answers to the focus group questions but the language used suggested they were contextualising their responses to recalled scenarios i.e. employers referred particularly to interviews and educators referred particularly to assessing group presentations and presentation of submitted assignments.

Agreement: When transcribing the texts and during the reading familiarisation process I noticed that participants per focus group agreed with each other – (see *See PA7: Communication: Start 9:30)*. I did not notice any instances of disagreement. To test this initial impression the transcriptions were re-read specifically to look for any instances of "disagree", "I don't agree.

Connections: I noticed participants directly connected, or associated one skill to another, for example when speaking under the problem solving skill, a participant made the connection to communication skill e.g. *"Similar to PA9 but one stage further on because for me it's just like the communication one in a lot of ways"* (see, PA6: Problem solving answer: Start 22:00

Language impressions: Educators appeared to use a formalised language based on measurement and evaluation, e.g. "when you're looking to assess teamwork……" (PA7: Team work answer: Start 35:08). By contrast, employers appeared to use language based on visual clues i.e. "someone is willing, is enthusiastic, got the raw ability to develop communication, develop leadership" (PE2: Communication additional answer: Start 15:08).

Other thoughts: I was intrigued to note that employers spoke of the pastoral responsibility of an organisation in the context of self-management i.e. *"it's a pretty pastoral kind of thing that we need to do"* PE3: Self Management: Start 1:01:15. I noticed that none of the employers expect graduates to arrive with leadership skills and none of the educators assessed leadership skills but both groups were able to articulate what type of leadership behaviours they want to see in a graduate.

"How" is an interesting word as it had the potential to carry a deeper expectation on a level of performance e.g. *how good are they that at organising in terms of structuring their work?* PA5: (Self Management): Start 41:54

Off topic: In the open forum discussion: Educators raised the question of the role and purpose of a university and also the nature and purpose of teaching.

Highlighted text of interest using colour coding per skill.

For each skill discussed, semantically annotated text was highlighted using the following beginning and end of dialogue markers:

[what/*] text text text [end/*]

[not/] [end/*] – originally intended to apply this annotation as participants included what they did not expect a graduate to do even though they were not asked this question. I rejected annotating these views on the basis that all instances of what the participants did not want to see were preceded by the word "do not / would not, wouldn't or don't" so these were filterable in the extracted text.*

[comment/*] [end/*]

Where * was the specific skill under discussion i.e. communication, problem solving, teamwork, self-management, leadership.

For each open forum, semantically annotated text used the same principles with the exception that /* was replaced with "/of" to denote " open forum". This broader annotation provided a reliable method to identify interesting text without pre-judging its content.

Comment was used for general commentary connected to a particular skill e.g. Its not that we're looking for a perfect solution in problem solving. We're looking for ideas of what's possible. All comments were annotated and all comments and their owners were recorded in the spreadsheet, e.g. [comment/p] I think that assessing of is very key (ref PA1: Problem solving answer: Start 28:33).

After recording all comments in the spreadsheet, I reviewed them to look for any explicit embedded actionable words and phrases to add to the "what" list e.g." ideas of what's possible". Implicit views e.g. leadership models are changing all the time and to be able to

404

act as a leader is not necessarily the picture that they have in their heads when they come in as a new graduate because they haven't had the exposure to the different environments, the working environments suggests the need for graduates to be aware of different leadership models. Such implicit comments were included in the discussion but excluded from the list of spoken words and phrases to avoid making assumptions on speaker intentions.

The term "connected to" was considered as an alternative to "comment" but rejected due to its unknown reliability. Connections were looked for in the parsed extracted text using the following strings:

[what/c\]*\[end\] = find all instances of what/communication noted as interesting

\[*/c\]*\[end\] = find anything in the communication category noted as interesting

Data was output to a spreadsheet with 558 rows of parsed text enabling further extraction e.g. of the 70 phrases on "what communications", 15 include the words problem solving. Expect, able and ability were useful to draw my attention to interesting sections of text but these words are not considered significant as participants were primed to use them by the wording of the question i.e. "what do you expect a graduate to be able to do…..".

How I decided what went into each theme and sub themes:

1. I created a master spread sheet containing two sheets of data: "what" and "comments". All the segmented "what" data from the combined Word document transcript was manually entered into the "what" sheet across four named columns : "Skill label", "Participant", "Answer type", "What" and all the comments manually entered into the "comments" sheet.

2. The "what" data column was sorted in alphabetical order to look for themes in the dataset. To identify word frequency the plain text "what" and "comments" parsed texts were saved in plain text format and uploaded to Antconc to generate a wordlist. This frequency helped to interrogate the qualitative data by focusing on the frequency of words, from high to low.

3. High frequency words from the "what" data were searched for in the "comment" data to explore how the participants contextualised their expectations.

4. to organise the texts into related families of behaviours across the skills, the following procedure was adopted:

- Analysis of each column of data included checking for synonyms to look for connections and consider what words others might connect with the found word

- Searching for all repeated words which expressed an action e.g. learn, communicate, give.

- The repetitions were removed to reveal a set of required behaviours between the groups and unique within each group.

Language patterns:

All data was semantically coded. This helped to identify patterns in the data by searching for the same words or synonyms across the dataset.

Discuss how learning outcomes are expressed and how these may be limiting application of behaviours in the classroom or, not sufficiently breaking down what it is a student is expected to do as a consequence of a learning outcome.

Observations: Communication

One employer participant contextualised their answer to the problem solving question to the application process, interview and graduate training schemes (see PE10: Problem solving answer: Start 18:00) , another contextualised problem solving to the interviewing process (see PE3: Problem solving clarification answer: Start 25:41)

Acknowledgement that it is not easy to identify the best candidate from written applications. (PE10 11:19).

Recognition that unconscious bias is at play in first impressions (PE4 13:16)

Communication connected to problem solving by (PE11 34:49)

One employer expressed the need for someone who ==has just got the right raw material, can have a good conversation, can think on their feet, and engage with all different types of people.== This expression drew unified nods of agreement among all the candidates. This suggests an unconscious "we know it when we see it" (express this as an issue in lit review) from employers.

Observations : problem solving

One employer participant focused on team work entirely (see PE4: Problem solving answer: Start 27:02)

One employer looked, in the application process, for *evidence* of different methods and situations in which the applicant had solved problems.

Problem solving - check for a theme of initiative under problem solving…..Problem solving – employers:

Observations : Team work

Check for difference in language re Employers give examples of what they expect someone to do when working in a team…..

Observations : Self management

4 out of 6 employers focused on the pastoral responsibility of an organisation and what they expect a graduate to be capable of doing within this pastoral framework i.e. for a graduate to have "grown-up life skills" i.e. to be able to make decisions about personal matters such moving home, and basic legal matters such as taxation, council tax, national insurance numbers and self-managing themselves through the organisation i.e. knowing where to go to ask for information or help.

The concept of "professional" was used by employers and academics
The employers linked professionalism with appropriateness of communication, maturity
The educators linked professionalism with self management skills of dressing appropriately, being disciplined

Four of the six educators do not assess leadership skills in graduates. The two participants who did assess for leadership skills were educators. One taught on a professional practice skills module and the other taught a leadership module. All educators were able to describe desired leadership behaviours in the context of group and team work.

Reviewed annotations to check for words and phrases linked to other skills i.e.

The ability to give and receive feedback was mentioned in teamwork, self management, leadership. (find and snapshot examples)

The ability to listen was mentioned in communication, teamwork, leadership

Reviewed annotations to check for repeated words and their links across other skills

Collaboration was mentioned in the context of leadership, problem solving, teamwork.

Other commonly repeated words were Initiative…..Willingness ….Empathy….Influence Convince….Persuade…Engage

Discussion : counting the number of instances of a word did not account for instances where participants used the shorthand terminology "I agree with" to signal their agreement with the previous speaker or speakers. Looking for "I agree" revealed 17 occurrences where the speaker referred to the terminology used by previous speakers but without repeating it, i.e. PA7: Communication answer: Start 9:30, I agree with PA1 and PA6 and PA5….

PA8: Self management answer: Start 47:19 "It's been discussed already, I agree with all the points that the other panellists have said."

Communication was mentioned in (all 5) (find and snapshot examples)

Problem solving was mentioned in in (all 5) (find and snapshot examples)

Teamwork was mentioned in in (all 5) (find and snapshot examples)

Self management was mentioned in leadership – look for the components of self management in the other skills to find the connections between the skills.

Leadership was mentioned in

Note to self to check if there is a hierarchy of skills i.e. which skills is mentioned most under another skill's discussion.

Check for which skills participants found difficult to express....

2nd reading

Focused on: repeated phrases which were entered into a spread sheet, and summarised 2n reading notes

Reflections on not having a second round of focus group discussions. Could have picked apart the what/how to generate more examples. Decision not to unpick the statements in order not to exhaust the participants. Intention was to get rich content on what to enable future research on how with a range of examples

Analysing process

Used pivot tables to slice the data to expose different dimensions of the data i.e. the column headings to compare the expectations of graduate performance per skill discussed between employers and educators. Using the pivot table data the results were cross checked with the original transcript to ensure the semantically coded data accurately reflected the original transcript data.

Appendix I: List of authors problematising skills

	Reference	Year	Page reference
1	Al Mallak et al	2020	408
2	Arora	2015	636
3	Barkas et al	2019	807
4	Barrie	2006	234
5	Belt et al	2010	45-48
6	Bennett	2002	471
7	Bloom et al	1956	10
8	CBI	2018b	15
9	CBI	2019a	8
10	CG	2021	32
11	Coates	2014	59
12	Cremin	2009	133
13	Dondi et al	2021	2
14	Drummond	1998	2
15	EC	2020	1, 11
16	Grinis	2017	3
17	Haselberger et al	2012	67
18	HEA	2015	
19	Hirsh and Bevan	1987	p. 61
20	Jones, 2009	2009	181-186
21	Joynes et al	2019	68

22	Kanders & Sleeman	2021b	1
23	Kashefpakdel et al	2018	19
25	Lowden et al	2011	9
26	Martin et al	2008	7, 14, 18, 45
27	Matheson	2020	909
28	Okolie	2020	304
29	Osmani	2019	424
30	Pearce	2019	117
31	Prinsloo	2013	96
32	Rich	2015	43
33	SDS	2018	19
34	SPB	2022	5
35	Suleman	2018	275
36	Taylor	2017	87
37	UKCES	2010	10
38	WEF	2021	2-6
39	Wild and Berger	2016	36-48

Appendix J: Ethical approvals

(Note: applicant's name changed from Still to Campbell during the course of the research)

Certificate of Ethical Approval

Applicant:

Carole Still

Project Title:

"Understanding the interpretation of global graduate skills mapped into the 'official curriculum' and where universities should be focusing their attention to develop agile and capable global graduates"

This is to certify that the above named applicant has completed the Coventry University Ethical Approval process and their project has been confirmed and approved as Medium Risk

Date of approval:

05 March 2020

Project Reference Number:

P94302

Coventry University ✦ **ETHICS**

Medium to High Risk Research Ethics Approval

Project Title

> **"Understanding the interpretation of global graduate skills mapped into the 'official curriculum' and where universities should be focusing their attention to develop agile and capable global graduates"**

Record of Approval

Principal Investigator

I **request an ethics peer review** and confirm that I have answered all relevant questions in this checklist honestly.	X
I confirm that I will carry out the project in the ways described in this checklist. I will immediately suspend research and request new ethical approval if the project subsequently changes the information I have given in this checklist.	X
I confirm that I, and all members of my research team (if any), have read and agreed to abide by the Code of Research Ethics issued by the relevant national learned society.	X
I confirm that I, and all members of my research team (if any), have read and agreed to abide by the University's Research Ethics, Governance and Integrity Framework.	X

Name: Carole Still ....

Date: 20/09/2019...

Student's Supervisor (if applicable)

I have read this checklist and confirm that it covers all the ethical issues raised by this project fully and frankly. I also confirm that these issues have been discussed with the student and will continue to be reviewed in the course of supervision.

Name: Katherine Wimpenny ....

Date: 25/02/2020...

Reviewer (if applicable)

Date of approval by anonymous reviewer: 28/02/2020

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Text protocols

Bold italicised	Emphasised words and phrases are set in bold and italicised font
Italicised, brackets	The three domains of reality – *real, actual,* and *empirical* and the constituent letters of *M.E.L.D.* are italicised. They are also presented in parenthesis *(real), (actual), (empirical), (1M), (2E), (3L), (4D)* to aid identification of each dialectical domain and moment throughout the thesis.