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# Digital globalisation and graduate careers: Work-readiness as the new frontier

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### Work-readiness employability

- Middle-office jobs which provide the formative experience to professional careers are being offshored.
- Employers report that talent-pipelines into mid-level, knowledge-based roles are drying up!
- Higher education has raised employability levels, but the bar has been raised again. In a digitally-connected world, work can be moved to the 'cheapest place on earth'!
- Graduates now need to be employable to get the job, and also work-ready to do the job in the face of declining graduate training programmes and overseas competition.
- Universities have an ethical responsibility to ensure that their students can compete in a global market and build sustainable careers.



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# DIGITAL GLOBALISATION AND GRADUATE CAREERS: WORK-READINESS AS THE NEW FRONTIER

## SUMMARY

*'Work-readiness is the set of skills, knowledge and behaviours necessary to adapt to an organisational situation and perform a job independently.'*

There is growing pressure on the entry-level positions in business support functions that form the traditional gateway into professional careers such as finance, human resources, procurement and IT. The accelerating digitalization of back-and middle-office activities means that many tasks are eliminated through user-led access to corporate systems. Moreover, the jobs that remain are being simplified, commoditised and moved to cheaper locations.

Graduates in more economically developed countries such as the UK and US must now compete for career entry opportunities against workers across the world. With significant cost arbitrage and inward investment benefits available off-shore, investment in domestic graduate training programmes suddenly looks expensive. This pressure adds to a 'perfect storm' of declining graduate recruitment (AGR, 2016), rising student debt (typically £45,000 Kirby, 2016), and declining social mobility (Commission for Social Mobility, 2016: Coughlan, 2017).

Based on discussions with practitioners and students, and interviews with working graduates, this enquiry asks two questions. First, what is 'work-readiness', and is it really different to employability? Second, based on research

with managers, undergraduates and working graduates, how should higher education and employers help graduates to become 'work-ready' upon graduation? We believe that they have an ethical responsibility to do so.

The findings suggest that the construct of work-readiness is both different and complementary to more general notions of employability. In a competitive world, a key factor in 'getting in and getting on' is the extent to which a graduate is 'work ready': in other words, being able to work unsupervised and contribute beyond the formal job specification.

Amongst the recommendations is a call for greater awareness of work-readiness as a competitive edge for young people, and more opportunities for students to gain relevant experience of organisation cultures and systems while studying. Doing so will help to close the gap in cost between entry-level jobs in more economically developed countries, such as the UK and the US, and the new 'offshore' service destinations such as India and Malaysia.

The full report is available at:  
[www.shared-services-research.com/earn-to-learn-scheme/](http://www.shared-services-research.com/earn-to-learn-scheme/)

## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 The peer-group just got bigger!

While universities have responded to calls to enhance the employability of graduates, for example by embedding transferable skills into curricula, professional support services such as finance, HR, procurement and IT have now become a global matter (Lambert, 2016). Through the digitalisation of work and the internet, many jobs are being relocated to lower-cost locations. Employers tell us that simply being 'employable enough to get a job' is no longer sufficient. Indeed, in a digitally-connected landscape, young people are now competing against a worldwide peer group that can perform, at a distance, the sort of good, white-collar, jobs that, traditionally, have formed the bedrock of a career into professional life.

This concern was informed by our research into captive shared service centres (SSC) and external business process outsourcing (BPO) from 2003. An early article (Rothwell, Herbert and Seal, 2011) articulated the way in which young people in Asia were prepared to work any hours and shifts to get their 'work passport stamped' in a prestigious multi-national company. A further impetus came in 2012, in the form of the following two statements reflecting two different sides of the new global landscape. The first, from (quite young) finance professional in Malaysia, expressing a confident and determined approach to seeking opportunities for growth. The second, from the London-based head of finance business partnering for a big European bank, nicely demonstrates how the offshoring of work can cause unexpected consequences, in this case, an evaporating talent pipeline.

*"I'm Head of Finance and Accounting - Asia-Pacific for [large multinational company]. I have 500 staff in Kuala Lumpur, 300 in Chennai, 200 in Manila. Next fiscal [year] we have plans to migrate another 1,500 jobs from the 'sunset economies.'"*

*"I rang up HR and said 'Please send me the next 20 trainee business partners'. They replied 'Sorry, but we don't have anyone this year. Don't you remember, we offshored the training nursery [finance operations] 5 years ago? Your department did the financial appraisal for it!'"*

### 1.2 What is happening?

Put simply; graduate entry jobs are disappearing through the offshoring of increasingly commoditised, work-flow controlled, middle-office jobs. Little wonder that in 2016 the Association of Graduate Recruiters reported an 8% fall in entry-level graduate jobs amongst its members (Burns, 2016). The UK's Apprenticeship Levy could help undergraduates to compete in a world in which they must pay the full cost of their post-school education (at least in England), whilst at the same time, employers have access to alternative low-cost labour overseas. Paradoxically, the resurgence of apprenticeship schemes could result in further pressure on graduate jobs, as employers take opportunities to use (cheaper) school leavers as apprentices to perform tasks that have been streamlined and routinised. At least one of our SSC case organisations, a multi-national engineering company headquartered in the UK, has disbanded its flagship graduate finance programme in favour of apprenticed school leavers studying professional examinations part-time. This approach is possible because the nature of many professional jobs is changing. Work is being reconfigured, re-engineered and re-organised into computer controlled, work stream, processes that can be undertaken by a wider range of workers, with less direct human supervision.

### 1.3 Why are things changing?

Professional functions are undergoing transformative change, yet it is hard for outsiders to appreciate this, especially when the work is moved offshore. As an illustration, think of the call centre industry with automatic call distribution around the world, customers self-routing through option menus, operators who merely follow computer generated problem-solving scripts are now being supplemented by self-learning robots! (BBC, 2017). The same process-oriented technologies and philosophies are now being applied to professional work.

A key driver of change is the way in which back-office computer systems are no longer configured to reflect the way in which a company already works. Rather, the company aligns its systems with the proprietary 'out-of-the-box' (or vanilla) solution, saving programming time and reducing the variation between operating units across the world. The company can thereby concentrate its management resources on doing what makes its core products/services distinctive. Many of the activities that comprise professional support services are now becoming commodities, to be made or bought in at the lowest cost, from wherever.

Our research has highlighted the need for work-readiness as a distinction by employers between attributes of long-term employability and the experience necessary to perform a job without supervision and training (Lambert and Herbert, 2017). What some people refer to euphemistically as the corporate 'sheep dip'.

#### 1.4 Does it matter?

For the talented/lucky few, this technology-led disruption will provide exciting opportunities, but for the majority of young people, it makes it harder to get a foot on the training ladder towards 'middle-career' positions. Goos and Manning (2007) describe this future as a 'Lovely or Lousy' jobs syndrome.

Tomlinson (2008) found that students perceive their academic qualifications as having a lesser role in shaping employment outcomes. Furthermore, students perceive the graduate labour market to be congested and extremely competitive, and therefore they feel they must add more value to their academic achievements in order to find work upon graduation.

The decline in graduate recruitment mentioned earlier might be compensated by reductions in the graduate pipeline. Already, applications to English universities are down by 5% for the 2017-18 cycle (UCAS, 2017) and this may reflect the softening of graduate job vacancies and the availability of alternative, apprentice-led, opportunities?

In the face of global competition for jobs consider the following. The total cost of operating in Asia are typically one-third or less of the cost of operating in the UK (SSON). If a graduate starting a two-year training programme costs £21,000 per annum (median salary - 2014-15, HESA, 2017) with on-costs (employment costs, supervision, infrastructure, etc.) double that, then that is a total cost of £100,000 over the two years. If an assumption is made that there could be a modest 25% reduction in that cost due to a compaction of the learning curve to becoming fully work-ready, that equates to a saving of £50,000 – coincidentally around the average student debt. While these are broad brush assumptions, it is interesting to see how the 'cost' of in work training is equivalent to the typical student debt of £45,000 on graduation. In other words, both students and employers have a significant incentive to do something about this. Perhaps, students could graduate debt free and work-ready by combining study and work experience? Employers might have less incentive to offshore training roles.

#### 1.5 But, should anyone care?

Added to the growing entry gap is also the added pressure of students accumulating significantly higher levels of debt. For those graduating after 2015, this is, typically, between £40,000 and £50,000 (Kirby, 2016). Perhaps more worrying, is the unknown number of students from less advantageous socio-economic backgrounds that might be put off applying to university?

In the new 'sharing society' there is a growing number of voices about the 'rich' older generation, with their gold-plated pensions and second homes, that are 'pulling up the wealth ladder behind them'. The new term in town is 'intergenerational conflict', rooted in a range of social and economic issues such as, high housing costs, lower 'life-time' earnings, high student debt, reducing social mobility.

Global forces are changing many aspects of life and knowledge work. Just as manufacturing jobs have largely moved east from more developed economies such as the US and UK, there is a further opportunity to transform and move into new fields of high-level knowledge work. The problem is that any work that can be done via a keyboard can similarly be done anywhere in the world (Herbert and Rothwell, 2013).

Thus, we suggest that there is a strong ethical argument that universities, in conjunction with employers should do more to create a sustainable and inclusive model of student learning. Universities could help students to mitigate debt by 'earning as they learn' and, at the same time, to further improve both employability and work-readiness on graduation by undertaking entry-level professional jobs alongside academic studies.

### 1.6 What can be done?

Placements schemes (especially the SBE's excellent example) play a useful part in preparation for work although such training positions still rely on suitable opportunities being available on shore. The emphasis tends to be on relating the (new) world of work to the curricula already studied, rather than relating ongoing work experience to new academic learning.

*"You don't have that confidence until you go out to work – I think university kind of prepares you for work, but being in the environment and doing the job builds up your confidence, you can't be taught that."*

*Emma, Recruitment Advisor*

While students have traditionally undertaken term and holiday work in bars and shops, these jobs are harder to get as employers prefer the greater flexibility of 'full-time' staff on 'zero-hours' contracts. There may also be opposition to students taking employment away from locals, given the greater scale of the student population in some areas. What tends to be overlooked is the growing number of students who choose to work through the course of their studies in professional rather than manual/customer service environments?

Such work-based experiences may be on a regular basis with a single organisation, or as a series of episodic, part-time periods of employment. Such work can vary from entry-level, operational, tasks in professional support functions, to more skilled activities over time. Even work that can appear relatively mundane can, nonetheless, provide valuable opportunities for students to evidence the link between theory and practice, earn money and ease their path into a chosen profession (c.f. O'Neil, 1997).

The bank mentioned earlier can afford to send its trainee business partners to its SSC in Eastern Europe for three years so that they become steeped in the global operating systems, protocols and behaviours of the company.

Although the term 'work-readiness' tends to be used synonymously with 'employability', employers tell us that it still takes time, measured in months (and even years) for an 'employable' graduate to be 'work ready', prompting two questions. First, what is work-readiness if not employability? Second, can HE better prepare students for work? This report investigates what constitutes work readiness for graduates and employers and considers how students might achieve a greater level of work-readiness.

## 2. What is Work Readiness and is it different from Employability?

These terms are often used synonymously, but those employers that we spoke to in the UK and the US were clear that while they wanted good employability skills and a solid academic track-record in graduates, their businesses also needed people to contribute much faster than might traditionally have been the case (Cabellero, and Walker, 2010) A partner in a top management consultancy in New York stressed the need for what he termed 'cross-over' skills in graduates with good quality technical degrees. He used the example of chemical engineers that he could send to an oil company, but not before they had learnt about the real working environment, how to act, how to communicate, how to navigate the firm's systems and actually get things done. Now that takes time, and that training period is measured in hundreds of thousands of dollars in salary, office accommodation, supervision, training, not least considering that some attrition is inevitable.

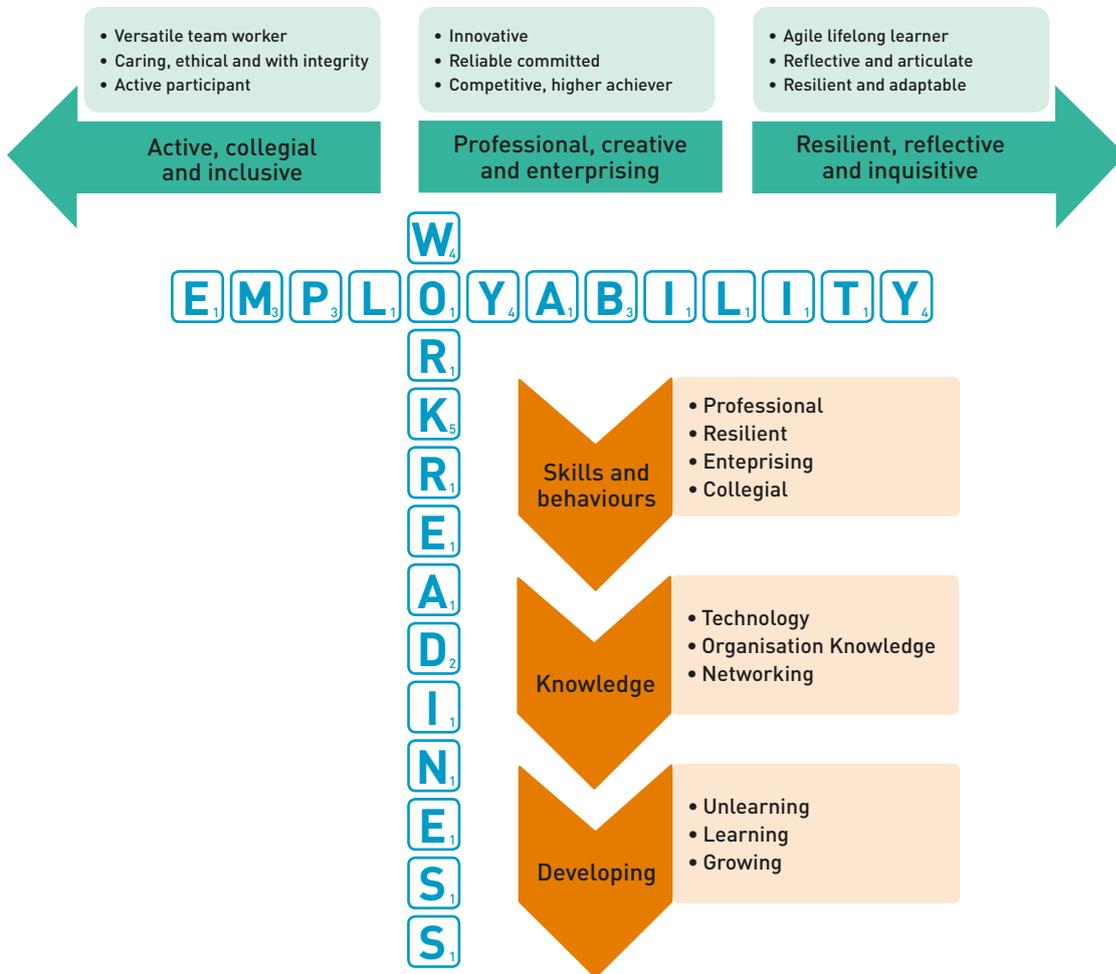
The point about the example above is that 'work-readiness' is both different and additional to the usual attributes of graduate employability (Loughborough University, 2016). It has a tangible value that can be compared with lost productivity and benchmarked against alternative models across the world. Moreover, work-readiness should not be dismissed as a low-level construct, or as a merely a substitute, not a complement to employability (Caballero, Walker and Fuller-Tyszkiewicz, 2011; VGW Consulting, 2017).

In other words, an employable graduate will not be work ready, and there will be a period of apprenticeship ahead when the graduate first observes how senior professionals conduct themselves and then practises what they have learned. Lave and Wenger (1991) described this process of acquiring and deploying situation specific tacit knowledge within the notion of a Community of Practice.

A graduate is employable if he/she has a certain set of credentials which match the employer's role and person specification and has the potential to develop further (Dacre-Pool, Qualter and Sewell, 2014). Whereas, a graduate is work ready if they can perform to the required level on a consistent basis with minimum supervision and 'bring something to the employer's party' (c.f. Gardner and Lui, 1997)

From the focus groups and in work interviews with graduates the distinctiveness and complementarity of employability and work-readiness became much clearer when viewed as a 'Deep and Wide' approach. This is depicted schematically in Figure 1. Employability is represented as a lateral range of more general graduate attributes that prepares students to get a job. Work readiness signifies a deep understanding within a specific work context.

Figure 1: The Deep and Wide approach



It is implicit in the flow chart that a graduate develops after being employed. One student who had been out on industrial placement explained how being productive is about both unlearning and learning to fit into an organisation.

Broadly speaking, we define 'work-readiness' as 'the skills, knowledge and behaviours necessary to adapt to an organisational situation and perform a job independently'. Employability infers that a graduate has the skills to find an appropriate job and develop in a range of organisational situations. Alternatively, work readiness can be described as one's abilities and behaviours to perform a specific role in an organisational context. It is the deep understanding of how an organisation works and one's place in it. One of our graduate interviewees explained the challenge of knowing exactly how to do a job.

*"So we are in an interesting place right now, especially with the client-based work; and the question is how do you approach clients? What are you supposed to say to them? What's the process of that conversation from start to finish, how you get meetings with them? How do you put yourself in front of people and sell an idea?"*

The interviewee is describing how they are employed by a company, but becoming work ready, needs a more particular set of attributes and skills specific to the organisation together with the ability to develop within the context. Several working graduates stressed the importance of mimicking the way that their seniors approached clients.

From an HE standpoint, employability tends to focus on the transferable skills that students develop as part of their learning that can relate to a wide range of situations, employment, social, family, sporting, etc. For example, Loughborough University (2017) recommends that graduates should be able to demonstrate a range of employability attributes across the following headings: versatile team worker, active participant, innovative & enterprising, reflective & articulate, and resilient & adaptable.

However, the notion of 'employability' does not, necessarily, provide the skills, needed for the job, or infer that a graduate is actually ready to work for three reasons.

1. Not organisational expectations can be taught/simulated in a classroom;
2. Some work readiness skills and behaviours are not consistent with the culture of HE;
3. Work readiness skills are still very transferable between employment situations, despite appearing more situation specific.

## 2.1 The Role of Higher Education

There has been a significant increase in the attention given to graduate employability in recent years, not least, as a result of it being a key indicator in university recruitment, generally measured in terms of the number of graduates in full-time jobs (or in further studies) six months after graduation. Although, employability measures, do not reflect the quality of those jobs in terms of earnings, potential longevity or job satisfaction. The proportion of graduates in non-graduate occupations (GRINGO) is not generally known.

Despite the advances, it was clear from our first focus group that employers felt that greater work readiness was required and bemoaned the lack of real-life preparation in universities. It appeared to be more a case of what universities could not do. One manager observed that universities had to tell every student they were great, but in real-life this could not be the case and many new workers had difficulty coping with 'honest' feedback and 'unlearning and then relearning' ways of doing things.

*"Resilience is important. In this job it's OK to have a bad day, you just have to learn from it, pick yourself up and do a better job tomorrow. At university you only have a few chances to do your best."*  
John, Recruitment Advisor

## 2.2 How do you develop work readiness skills?

Some employability skills can be developed in the classroom, but this is perhaps not the case for work readiness. Cranmer (2006) finds that in developing work readiness skills resources would be better utilised to increase employment-based training and experience, and employer involvement in courses. WR skills positively affected prospects in the labour market and support graduates in the transitional stage into employment (UK). There have also been positive outcomes with project-based learning subjects and skills development for engineering graduates (Jollands, Jolly and Molyneaux, 2012).

### 3. Research method

We explored the significance and relevance of work readiness in a three step process. First, we scoped the issues and the notion of work-readiness in two meetings with a focus group of around 20 practitioners and students in each event (Merton, 1987). After the first meeting when the 'problem' of work-readiness was stressed we decided to explore this further in an organizational setting (c.f. problematiation, Alvesson and Sandberg, 2011).

Second, we conducted a series of at desk interviews with 11 graduate workers in a case study organisation, Grovelands Ltd, to explore the concept of becoming ready for work (Yin, 2011). The survey used a semi-structured interview format based on the PINT framework developed by Herbert and Rothwell (2004) to analyse the work readiness based on a range of skills, e.g. Personal skills (general conduct and behaviour), development of Interpersonal skills, communication, Number and Technology.

Third, we analysed all data sources in accordance with the procedure recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), using qualitative analysis software (NVivo 11) which enabled us to take a systematic approach to managing, organising and understanding complex narrative data. A copy of the draft report was circulated to all participants, to triangulate our interpretation.

The project used a qualitative approach to investigate work readiness. It explored the views and opinions of both current students, graduates in employment, employers, teaching academics and careers guidance staff from Loughborough University. The data, summarised in, were collected over a three-month period from interviews and focus groups.

**Table 1: Data Sources**

Source	Date	Participants	Data collected
Focus group 1	December 2017	Current students* Employers Teaching academics Careers guidance staff n=24	What is work readiness? 65 minutes
Interviews	January 2017	Graduates in employment n=10	10 x interviews
Focus group 2	February 2017	Current students Employers Teaching academics Careers guidance staff n=16	55 minutes

### 3.1 Practitioner and professional focus groups

The first focus group focused on ways of fostering work-readiness in students as part of their degrees based at Loughborough University, UK. The discussion took place over a one hour period. Participants were asked 'what does work readiness mean to you?' as an open question to be answered by each of four groups of six. Ideas were recorded on a before a plenary session which participants verbally agreed to be recorded. The purpose of this first interview was to gather broad data on how work readiness is perceived and understood by students, academics and practitioners.

A second focus group was conducted in February 2017, again at Loughborough University, to discuss the early findings from the field interviews specifically. The meeting considered how work experience may improve student work-readiness and employability, together with reducing debt on graduation, and how it may provide employers with cost-effective, flexible sourcing solutions feeding into the acquisition and development of emerging talent needs.

### 3.2 Case study organisation

*Grovelands* is a relatively young company based in the UK which supplies various business support services to a range of commercial organisations, particularly in the financial services sector. The business model is to supply good quality, flexible, services at a relatively low-cost by employing graduates who might otherwise be struggling to get the first job after graduation, more often because they have completed a degree that is not directly relevant to a business environment. The idea is that workers will stay for around two years before moving on to other career positions once they have a track record in a business-oriented work. Thus, the company had a particular interest in getting new workers to be fully effective in the shortest time possible.

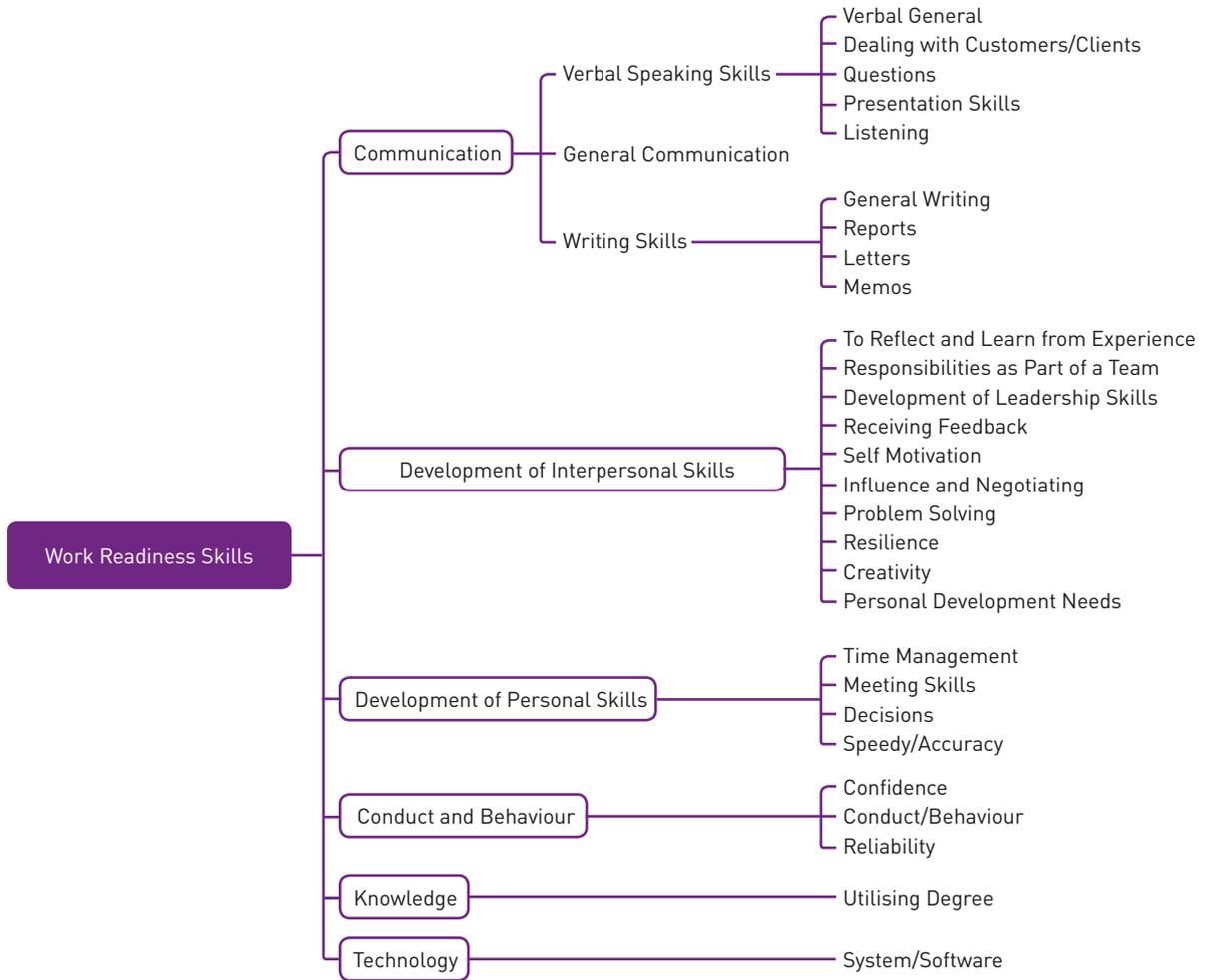
The organisation chosen for the field interviews recruited staff for a range of companies, mostly in the financial sector. Interviews were conducted at the company's offices in the South East of England. Participants were all university graduates representing both males and females between the ages of 21-30. Their degrees were in diverse subjects and did not necessarily relate to their role in recruitment or financial services. Ten interviews were completed on site at the organisation, the format of each session followed a semi-structured interview prompt (see Appendix 2). Participants were voluntary and sourced through a senior manager at the organisation who is a contact of the researchers. The details and names of the participants have been anonymised for confidentiality; individuals were briefed about the nature of the interview and gave their written consent to participation before the interviews began. On average, the interviews lasted between 20-30 minutes; all interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. The discussion was recorded (with the permission of the participants) and transcribed verbatim.

### 3.3 Data analysis

All data sources were input into NVivo 11 (qualitative analysis software) which aided the researcher in complying with a systematic approach to managing, organising and understanding the data (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). Thematic analysis was used as a foundational method for qualitative analysis allowing a theoretically flexible approach for identifying and reporting themes within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This method organises data in detail and enables interpretation of various aspects regarding the topic in question (Boyatzis, 1998).

The data were coded into themes and then categories and subcategories. These were largely based on the original PINT framework (Herbert & Rothwell, 2004) although a flexible approach was taken to coding which allowed the flexibility for new themes and categories and also the omission of items that did not appear in the data. For an overview, the results of the coding are visualised below.

Figure 1: Work Readiness Coding Tree



The themes and categories are shown in descending order of the number of references made by the participants. The next section will examine each theme, category and subcategory based on the qualitative data with quotes from the participants.

## 4. Findings

This section summarises the data from the field interviews and the focus group meetings.

### 4.1 The role of HE

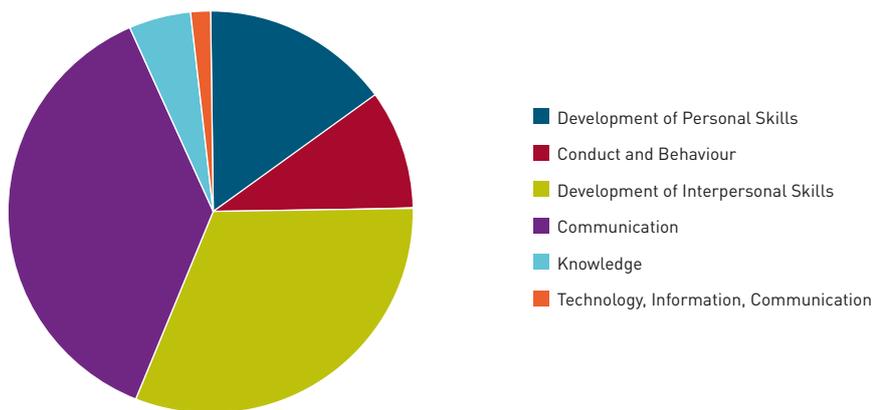
Despite the advances in embedding employability into curricula, it was clear from our first focus group that employers felt that greater work readiness was required and commented on what they perceived as a lack of preparation for real-life in universities. It appeared to be more a case of what universities could not do. One manager observed that universities had to tell every student they were great, but in real-life this could not be the case, and many new workers had difficulty coping with 'honest' feedback and being able to 'unlearn' and then 'relearn' ways of doing things.

This may seem a little harsh, but in the focus groups, the students that had had the benefit of placement experience made a comment that roughly speaking, almost everyone got a 'middle' grade.

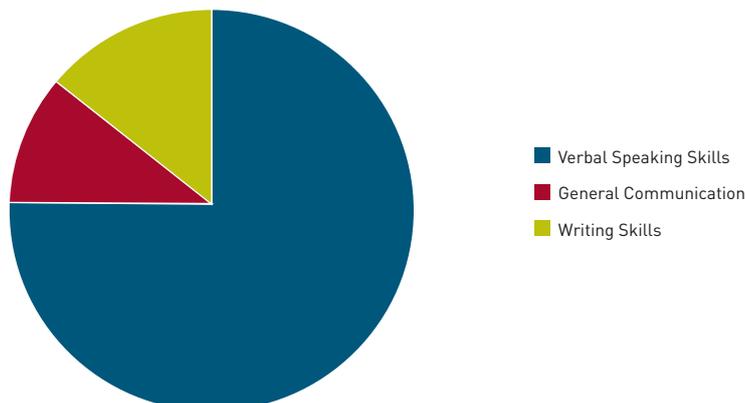
### 4.2 PINT Framework Skills Audit

#### Analysis

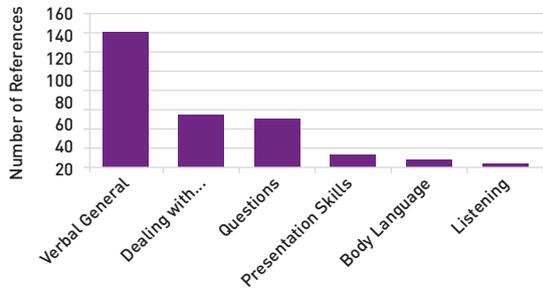
Nodes (Number of References)



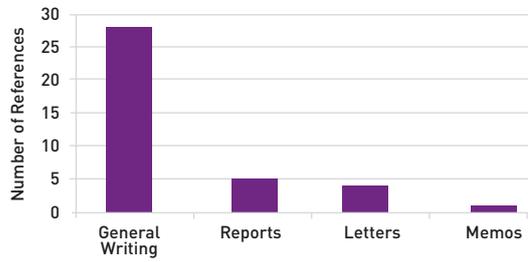
Communication (Number of References)



### Verbal Speaking Skills



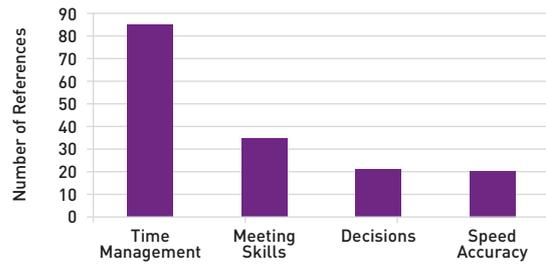
### Writing Skills



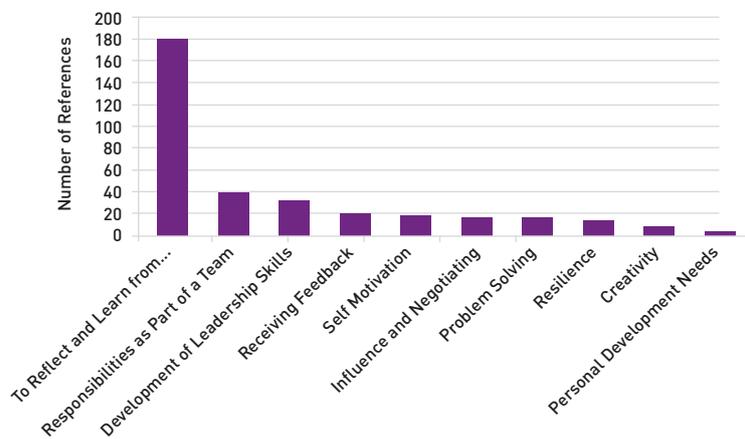
### Conduct and Behaviour



### Development of Personal Skills



### Development of Interpersonal Skills



## Communication

The theme of interpersonal communication was referenced the most by the participants and was divided into three categories, verbal speaking skills, general communication, and writing skills. The interview explored those communication skills that were learnt predominantly in the workplace. Participants acknowledged that some basic communication skills had been fostered during their university education but that these were developed and refined in their graduate roles. The participants expressed how 'mimicking' their peers formed the large part of their learning experience rather than formal training methods.

## Verbal Speaking Skills

The participants expressed the importance of verbal speaking skills in their vocation; their roles involved many telephone calls to 'warm' clients pitched at different levels of seniority from graduates to senior managers. While verbal speaking skills dominated many of the interviewee's views on graduate work readiness skills, these were often accompanied by references to confidence.

### Verbal General

The sub-category 'verbal general' coded information that linked to speaking in general. Participants talked about the value of gaining experience of talking to people on the job:

*"...you are always talking to people; you are talking to candidates on the phone... Trying to bring in new clients is obviously going to require good communication skills to get them on board and around to your way of thinking... So it is really [about] communication within the role, I can't stress how big it is."*

The experience of making the phone calls, whether these were successful or not, was key to the participants learning experience. Participants were able to assess their progression in this area cognitively:

*"And speaking confidently and not immediately thinking, well I am the little guy, he's not going to have any interest in anything I've got to say!"*

There were several instances where participants felt that communication skills had to develop within the role and that generally, university education did not instil the confidence to speak in the way that their working roles required:

*"So I do not know if university teaches you to, for that very well, in terms of confidence to speak to people in very senior positions."*

The sense of confidence was reiterated at one of the focus groups from an employer's point of view:

*"I spent ten years in financial services, and one of the most important things is recruiting someone new. Those new people coming in don't want to make mistakes, they do not want to be seen to make mistakes. If you've made a mistake or you need to escalate something, having the confidence actually to do that is so important in the Finance sector. So, we spend ages and ages telling people, don't be afraid, speak up. We would rather you stood up and shouted than not say anything, because we can lose millions by staying quiet. Moreover, that comes down to the confidence side of things, knowing that you can say those things and it is fine."*

Such issues may be commonplace in organisations and businesses, however it could be difficult to instil these skills in a university setting; confidence and experience appear to build specific verbal skills for graduates. But, workplace experiences can feel very when there is real money and careers at stake.

### Dealing with Clients

Another example of how graduates learnt from their peers, rather than from formal training programmes, was in addressing clients. There was a consensus that on the whole university education did not develop this skill.

*"So we are in an interesting place right now, especially with the client based work; how do you approach clients? What are you supposed to say to them? What's the process of that conversation from start to finish, regarding how you get meetings with them? [How do you put yourself in front of people and sell an idea? So it is a case of learning from the experienced people around you, and it is up to you at the end of the day, it feels a bit more now like it probably does in many other recruitment environments where you go and learn about it yourself."*

Some of the participants expressed how they had gone to seek advice from their senior managers on dealing with clients:

*"That is probably the main way that you learn how to do that sort of thing, learn how to manage clients and learn how to manage kind of large projects, is by getting advice from people that have done it before. Otherwise, you are a bit of rabbit in the headlights type thing, and it's a bit of a struggle."*

Again, this demonstrates the importance of learning on the job, especially in the service sector, where you can draw on the experiences of those around you to learn. This is clearly specific to the experience of working rather than learning theories or transferrable skills at university.

### **Asking questions**

Asking the right questions was another skill that the participants developed in the early part of their graduate roles. As with the other verbal speaking skills, the passage of experience and consequential confidence contributed to the development of being able to ask the right questions. Asking questions is quite specific to the nature of the role in recruitment; the participants had to get enough details, and the correct details, to place their clients in appropriate roles. Training around asking questions was provided soon after the participants began work at the organisation:

*"I think, like with them, we did an awful lot of like role-play exercises and those sorts of things, such as open questioning, those types of skills which are essential to this particular role. You might have conversations in any form of sales job, for instance when I was trying to sell membership schemes before graduating, but you're doing it in a slightly different way with this."*

Skills around questions also applied to handling questions:

*"...handling questions I think is important. Not really something I was that used to from university. Because you do not get critiqued really. You hand the work in, it gets marked, and OK, that is your mark. You cannot go back and properly understand that sort of thing, whereas here, questioning is quite encouraged."*

The participants found that handling questions in their current role was a lot less objective than at university and was coupled with the confidence of answering a question professionally even if they were not totally sure of the answer; thus, using such situations as learning and development experiences.

### **Presentation Skills**

Many of the participants reported building up some presentation skills at university, but found that it was confidence and experience that led to their capacity to successfully present at work:

*"Obviously that comes with doing more presentations, being more confident and just talking more to people."*

### **Listening**

Listening was only referred to four times. It was conveyed as a skill that is needed in the recruitment sector, but participants did not suggest that this was learnt as part of their early vocational experience.

*"For example, I think that I am quite a good listener, you know, you get some recruitment consultants that will just talk at people, and you know they will not listen to what the other person is saying, whereas I constantly get told that I am good at listening."*

## General Communication

This category included many cross references to both spoken and written communication. The data in this node reflects the participants' general views on communication, which was dominated by verbal speaking skills. It also conveyed how the participants believed university contributed in some ways to their foundational communication skills but that vocational experience taught them more about the application of their skills:

*"...the degree I did was great and gave me many things, so the ability to write well and communicate over paper effectively and be able to do hours and hours of research without becoming bored or distracted, they are things that my degree showed me. What my work here has shown me is, or given me the ability to do, is speak to people more effectively, communicate better, explain my logic behind reasonings and things like that a lot more clearly. Also, it has helped to build relationships with people which in general life, and particularly on a day to day basis at work is massively important. That was something I did not get at university, and that is what this job has done for me."*

This idea was supported by many other of the participants.

## Writing Skills

### General Writing, Reports, Letters and Memos

Writing skills were mentioned considerably less than the verbal and speaking skills required. Some participants mentioned that good written communication skills are imperative as they projected their competence to clients:

*"Written skills I think are important because it is just, especially if you are e-mailing clients and that kind of thing, it's just the quickest way just to get yourself completely struck off the business pipeline."*

The directness of written communication was important in both internal and external written communication:

*"You know as I say on the internal memos, I always think when I started here I would write like essays to people going through what I have done, you would see the directors and CEOs and individuals that were more senior writing two lines that cover the same points. So that is something that improves pretty drastically when you're in a work environment, just because you get used to other people doing it."*

'Mimicking' or replicating the style of peers' written communications was crucial in learning methods of written communication to a variety of internal and external recipients. The participants had been formally trained on writing external letters to clients but also referred to the value of having a university education as a basis for these skills.

## Development of Interpersonal Skills

### Reflecting and Learning from Experience

Reflecting and learning from experience was a significant category, not just on the development of interpersonal relationships, but throughout the majority of themes. There was a recurring view that reflecting and learning from experience on the job contributed to the development of many skills that were necessary for their roles as recruitment consultants.

*"I mean that is something that I have gone from essentially zero through to having, you know not tonnes of experience but much experience really. And that, I think it is a combination of training and just sitting in on other people in meetings and stuff ... I think that is I think with experience, you just kind of get used to it [the role] and you find your own style."*

While university education did have some relevance to some skills (such as written communication and presentations) it could not provide the graduates with this particular skill in depth.

*"They taught you the basics on how to do it in a classroom, but it is one of those things you cannot really learn how to do until you start doing it."*

*"You can have all the training under the sun, but the best way to actually learn is just to do it repeatedly over and over again."*

Perhaps this sense of repetition demonstrates very clearly the difference between work and university, where an employability attribute might be more experienced than practised? For example, doing a simulated business presentation might be required a couple of times each academic year. In the work-place some people might be doing that several times a week, others very infrequently. Hence, the idea of university led employability attributes providing a wide span of experience and organisational life providing deeper, more specialised, demands (Loughborough University, 2017). The interviewee's accounts of learning through mimicking and subsequently, building up confidence demonstrate the importance of experience in the learning process. The examples above capture the essence of how graduates felt that their experiences around working had developed them personally and how many other of the skills described in the PINT framework. This also highlighted the role of the environment and influence of peers in their learning process.

### **Responsibilities as Part of a Team**

While the participants were driven by their performance, in terms of billing and placing clients in roles, they also had a requirement to work as part of a team:

*"I mean with this job, we might be given fifty roles at any given time. So even though you want to do well for yourself, you have to have a team behind you in those roles because if you don't fulfil the requirement, you're not going to get it again."*

Teamwork was important to manage heavy workloads and maintain relationships with clients. The participants did relate teamwork to coursework that they had completed at their university. In this situation, students still had to perform well individually but for the overall result of the team. One example where teamwork skills diverged from experiences at university is when participants were responsible for managing teams:

*"regarding the sharing of responsibility for all aspects of team performance and team building, I think as a manager that's something that I have had to learn. Well, it is something that you have [to learn] ... however, I think when you manage people, it takes on a whole different kind of meaning."*

### **Development of Leadership Skills and Receiving Feedback**

Development of leadership skills was only discussed by a few of the interviewees that had experience in leading. Again their learning was based on learning from their seniors with some coaching.

*"So development of leadership I think comes more from ...you learn from your managers really because you know they're basically making the plans and coaching you where required and stuff to develop, so you just pick things up from them."*

This tied in with receiving feedback and the willingness to act on advice given:

*"I think the willingness to accept and act on feedback received is a massive one, you're learning from those around you primarily if they've got feedback that's – it might sound negative – but they're critiquing you in order to improve you."*

This attitude to learning was reflected in many of the interviewee's responses both in regards to developing leadership and receiving feedback but also in their general training agenda. All interviewees placed value on the role of mentors in their learning process, and the influence of their peers on their own development.

### **Self-Motivation, Influencing, Negotiating and Problem Solving**

These skills were necessary for the recruitment sector according to the interviewees. The roles were very sales driven, and that required a level of motivation, even on less productive days. Many of the interviewees enjoyed having targets to motivate them in their work, both on an individual and team level:

*"...you're obviously part of a company and your team, but in effect, you're running your own mini business yourself within the company because you have billings targets for what you need to do, and quite clear progression paths for where you want to go with the role. You develop quite a lot within the position, but you need a lot of self-motivation within recruitment to drive yourself forwards."*

Fostering this motivation was a combination of individual attitude and organisational support systems. Interviewees did not draw comparisons between motivation at work and motivation at university.

Influence and negotiation were, again, learnt through experience using senior colleagues as reference points for best practice. Senior managers were able to provide advice on building these skills if employees approached them for it. One interviewee claimed that influencing and negotiating skills were quite simple, but it wasn't until they were practically shown how to do it that they felt capable.

In terms of problem-solving, the interviewees found that there were many more problems to solve in a working situation than in an education setting.

### **Resilience**

This was a reoccurring theme throughout the interviews. Many attributed the need for resilience to the recruitment sector, especially at lower level roles where consultants may make fifty calls just to find a single interested client in a particular role.

*"... you need to have a certain kind of mental strength or confidence in yourself initially. That resilience is developed over time as well, just from speaking to more people, you start to understand the process and that you will make a number of calls that won't lead to anything."*

Resilience was also a theme in a focus group; the view below is from a graduate:

*"Resilience is important in dealing with difficult situations, for example when you've done something wrong in a supportive working environment where people are helping you. It's a bitter pill. And resilience in terms of making constructive points at work, sometimes the feedback you get is wholly unconstructive and makes you feel pretty awful, and if you don't have the skills really to pick yourself up and think about it and improve the situation, then it's going to be very difficult for you."*

Again, this resilience was built up over time and experience. Whilst a level of resilience was needed while studying at university putting it into practice in a new working context had new, work specific, implications.

### **Creativity**

Some of the interviewees had attended lessons on creativity at Grovelands. These involved looking at different ways to approach situations that may arise in their role. One interviewee spoke about how the lessons were useful, but until she had gone out and experienced those situations, it wasn't possible to put theory into practice.

*"I think you can be taught that to a degree but then at the end of the day, if you're not going to think outside of the box, then it doesn't matter if you have the best sessions from the best people in the world about how to do it, you've still got to go out and do it proactively."*

Again, the value comes from the experience and exposure to different situations.

### **Personal Development needs**

Personal development needs were mentioned by a few of the interviewees. They described action plans and how the organisation monitored their performance through KPIs and gave feedback quarterly. The interviewees believed that if they recognised a need for development in themselves, then there were a number of people that they could approach.

## Development of Personal Skills

### Time Management, Meeting Skills, Decision Making and Speed Accuracy

Many of the interviews expressed that they had developed the foundations of Personal Skills at university, but these took on a different meaning in a working context:

*"At university, my life was quite ... structured and rigid, and to a certain extent with the degree itself I knew exactly what I was doing, I had deadlines for coursework, I knew when my exams were, I knew exactly when all my lectures and seminars were. Whereas now, I know what my day to day generally looks like, but things can change in an instant..."*

Time management was, of course, important to manage assignments and exams at university, for personal progression, but at Grovelands it also had implications for the larger operation (see case study 3).

University hadn't prepared the interviewees for developing effective meeting skills. This was key to the recruitment role and included meetings with a range of people, both internal and external and at differing levels of seniority. This was learnt through sitting in on colleagues meetings, mimicking their behaviour and also learning their own style through trial and error:

*"...effective meeting skills, I don't really think you can just learn that from being taught, I think you have to go out and experience it and go to some bad ones."*

This was similar to making decisions based on research, analysis and fact. Speed and accuracy were also important:

*"...speed and accuracy are the difference between having a great quarter or having an OK quarter."*

## Conduct and Behaviour

### Confidence

Confidence was a key theme throughout all of the interviews, and a competency that was mentioned in conjunction with interpersonal skills and communication. The interviewees reported that the environment and the capabilities of their senior peers contributed to this (see case study 1).

*"I do think the environment has allowed me to feel like I am capable of doing this and doing it well, so that's good. I think it has only ramped up my communication skills..."*

Many referred to learning from their peers as a confidence booster; they mimicked the behaviours and strategies where they had witnessed their peers succeed and employed them in their own work. Often the consultants were able to tailor or refine the behaviours of their peers and develop their own style, which leads to a greater feeling of confidence. Confidence, as a theme, underpinned most of the other skills and competencies listed in the PINT framework.

### Conduct Behaviour, Reliability

*"So work readiness for me is really knowing some of the basic behavioural skills that you need to show early on. Because I remember there was one employer who said, there was an individual who started, who was fantastic, but every morning he'd come into the office and try to high five his co-workers down the office. Now, his manager pulled him up and said, do you realise that's not appropriate behaviour? And he just said, no. The manager said that he'd got to know him really well and he said to him 'that's great but don't do that in the office' and apparently he just didn't get it."*

This quote from one of the focus groups demonstrates the way in which graduates are expected to conduct themselves in a different way to which they perhaps did at university. All of the interviewees at Grovelands had learnt about conduct (this is demonstrated in case study 2 where Gemma speaks about professionalism). Again, it comes down to watching peers but also, there are repercussions for inappropriate conduct, especially in a client facing role such as recruitment.

Reliability was also part of this appropriate conduct at Grovelands because the consultants had responsibilities and around their clients and commitments to meet.

## **Knowledge**

### **Utilising Degree**

Only a few of the interviewees had degrees that related to the field in which they were recruiting. Some had degrees in sports based subjects. All agreed that having higher education had helped them with some of the softer skills such as communication, presentations and writing but that the foundations of these skills had to be adapted to their work at Grovelands. For example, communication had to be a lot more succinct than it was in writing experiences during university, time management had much more facets, and a lack of organisation and prioritisation skills could negatively impact your team, rather than just your individual grades. One interviewee said that university had helped them in their role, but it was only through experiencing work that they really developed and grew.

The case studies demonstrate how interviewees with related and unrelated degree subjects seemed to have similar experiences in their jobs, especially with how they could employ their knowledge in the workplace. It appeared that the degree was a requirement to get the role, but the soft skills built at university were actually more important than the subject matter when it came to recruitment.

## **Technology, Information Communication**

### **System Software**

All interviewees spoke about having to learn the specific systems and software at Grovelands. This wasn't particularly challenging but was very important to the role. Training was given in the first few weeks of employment.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

Our research shows that, through the pressures of global competition and/or domestic austerity programmes, the vast majority of back- and middle- office positions in the UK are being challenged and that this commodisation and relocation of middle-office professional jobs is taking place under the radar of national labour statistics.

We believe that a new approach is required to provide real opportunities for young graduates to enter the world of work in roles that whilst initial process-based will enable them to gain the experience, skills and behaviours to develop sustainable professional careers. It is hoped that this report can contribute to that goal. The PINT framework (Herbert and Rothwell, 2004) has been refined to reflect those skills and competencies were necessary for the graduates in our sample (see Appendix 4); the qualitative analysis explored what these concepts meant, in reality, to the graduates.

## 6. Recommendations

- That awareness is raised across a range of stakeholders about the emerging issue of graduate underemployment as result of the offshoring of traditional training roles, and the subsequent mid-career skills gap.
- Identify employer needs for work-readiness and further define the concept as distinct from employability.
- Create a framework of entry-level skills and behaviours within the concept of 'Earning to Learn' to guide employers and students in seeking and evidencing work experience in preparation for entry-level graduate roles, especially where the nature of the work is episodic and across several employers.
- Further research should be undertaken to establish the full extent of the reduction in entry-level graduate positions and the potential effects of the erosion of the talent pipeline into subsequent middle-career roles. This should include consideration of new activities such as data analytics that could be viable if there was a suitable cost-efficient labour force available.

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## APPENDIX 1: PINT FRAMEWORK – PRE-RESEARCH

### Skills Audit Appraisal

Using the PINT framework from Herbert and Rothwell (2004) below, assess your competencies, how would you rate the following skills on the score from 1 to 5 (1 is the lowest). The maximum score in each section is shown.

#### Development of Personal Skills (Maximum score 5 points x 5 items = 25 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Displays effective meeting skills					
Makes decisions based on research/analysis/fact					
Plans prioritises and tracks activities/tasks					
Effectively manages use of time					
Speed/accuracy of work					

#### General Conduct and Behaviour (Maximum score 5 points x 4 items = 20 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Interest demonstrated and sustained					
Reliability					
Confidence					
Conduct					

#### Development of Interpersonal Skills (Maximum score 5 points x 14 items = 70 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Identifies fresh approaches and has a positive approach to future developments					
Creativity					
Shares responsibility for all aspects of team performance/team building					
Influences or negotiates in a manner that gains agreement or acceptance					
Shows motivation, initiative and proactiveness					
Is resilient and consistent in the face of challenges and change					
Displays a willingness to accept/act on feedback received					
Problem solving					
Ability to reflect on and learn from experience					
Critical assessment of progress towards objectives					
Development of Leadership:					
Demonstrates the ability to manage 'whole' projects					
Seeks to improve work-related processes and documents appropriately					
Understands and addresses personal development needs					

**Communication** (Maximum score 5 points x 17 items = 85 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Writing</b> reports					
memos-internal					
letters -external					
note taking					

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Verbal</b> speaking					
listening & comprehension					
feedback					
body language					
presentations structure & use of visual aid					
audience contact					
handling questions					
negotiation					
personal assertiveness					
dealing with customers/clients					
handling queries					
working as part of a team					
task management					

**Knowledge & Number** (Maximum score 5 points x 3 items = 15 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Integration of subject knowledge from studies					
Exposure to other disciplines/areas of business					
Use of numerical data					

**Technology – Information & Communication** (Maximum score 5 points x 5 items = 35 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Word-processing					
Spreadsheets					
Presentation Package					
Databases					
E-mail systems					
E-commerce/The Internet					
Specific applications such as scientific packages, business systems etc.					

## APPENDIX 2: INTERVIEW PROMPTS

### Semi-Structured Interview Prompts

*The interview will last for around half an hour and will be recorded. You are entitled to withdraw at any point, and your data will be destroyed. This interview is strictly confidential, and your identity will only be known to the researchers. The interview is semi-structured, so it will not necessarily follow the prompt below precisely.*

*Do you have any questions about the interview before we begin?*

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Participant:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Organisation: Grovelands**

**Start:** \_\_\_\_\_

<b>Background</b>	How many years have you been working at Grovelands?
	What have been your previous job roles?
	Have you previously worked in another business processing role?
	If yes: Where and for how long?
	What other roles did you consider before joining Grovelands?
	What training did you receive for your present role?
	- Prompts: organisation & regulatory/role/processes/tasks
	- What form did that take? Group/individual/mentor/online/colleague - What aspects has since proved particularly important/relevant?
<b>Role and structure</b>	What is your job title?
	What are your responsibilities?
	Who do you report to? (how many others report to the same supervisor?
	How many people do you a) work with and b) manage? (If applicable)
	How to you see your next job/career?
<b>Skills</b>	What are the key skills and capabilities required in your role?
	- Prompt PINT framework but expanded as required
	How did you learn these? Can you provide examples
	What is the most important thing that you have learnt from your time at Grovelands so far?
	How does your role at Grovelands add value to you personally?
<b>Personal Progression</b>	What might be the next career move for somebody at your level or in your role?
	What skills do you have that you believe will help you secure your next role?
	How do you think your time at Grovelands will impact your career? How?
	Are there any other comments you have about your job, your work or your career?
<b>Discussion based on skills in PINT Framework</b>	

## APPENDIX 3: PINT FRAMEWORK – POST RESEARCH

### Skills Audit Appraisal

Using the PINT framework from Herbert and Rothwell (2004) below, assess your competencies, how would you rate the following skills on the score from 1 to 5 (1 is the lowest). The maximum score in each section is shown.

#### Development of Personal Skills (Maximum score 5 points x 5 items = 25 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Displays effective meeting skills					
Makes decisions based on research/analysis/fact					
Plans, prioritises and tracks activities/tasks					
Effectively manages use of time					
Speed/accuracy of work					

#### General Conduct and Behaviour (Maximum score 5 points x 4 items = 20 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Reliability					
Confidence					
Conduct					

#### Development of Interpersonal Skills (Maximum score 5 points x 14 items = 70 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Creativity					
Shares responsibility for all aspects of team performance/team building					
Influences or negotiates in a manner that gains agreement or acceptance					
Shows motivation, initiative and proactiveness					
Is resilient and consistent in the face of challenges and change					
Displays a willingness to accept/act on feedback received					
Problem solving					
Ability to reflect on and learn from experience					
Development of Leadership					
Understands and addresses personal development needs					

**Communication** (Maximum score 5 points x 17 items = 85 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Writing</b> reports					
memos-internal					
letters -external					
note taking					

	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Verbal</b> listening & comprehension					
presentations structure & use of visual aid					
handling questions					
negotiation					
dealing with customers/clients					
handling queries					
working as part of a team					

**Knowledge & Number** (Maximum score 5 points x 3 items = 15 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Integration of subject knowledge from studies					

**Technology – Information & Communication** (Maximum score 5 points x 5 items = 35 points)

	1	2	3	4	5
Specific software, systems and databases					

## APPENDIX 4 – EMPLOYEE CASE STUDIES

The following three examples of early graduate career journeys at Grovelands, show a reasonably diverse set of backgrounds and motivations. In terms of learning and development in their roles, the common themes are, practice, trial & error, learning from peers and seniors. The highlight the difference between wide employability attributes at university to the much more focussed, deep learning, required in the workplace.

### Case Study 1: Trevor

After graduating from sports based degree, Trevor moved down to the South East to be closer to his partner. He has been working at Grovelands for two and a half years and is a Senior Recruitment Consultant managing his own clients. His motivation for starting the role was to earn some money for a year whilst his partner was in the final year of her studies. Initially, Trevor considered his role in recruitment to be short term until he went travelling, but Grovelands offered him a sabbatical for this so that he could return. His longer term career goal is to pursue his interest (and degree subject) in sport, but for the moment he is enjoying his work in recruitment and can see himself spending another ten years in the sector.

Trevor received a lot of training around systems and processes when he joined Grovelands, but he feels the most valuable learning experience for him was 'buddying up' with a colleague. He believes that he has learnt more about the role and conduct in this way than he would by attending training sessions. There were many training sessions during Trevor's first few weeks; but, he felt that the material was hard to remember and there was potentially too much to learn. However, he referred to how he gained instant confidence by mimicking the telephone manner and approach of colleagues when making a telephone call, "it sounds so natural to them, you think, I can just say what they said... it just gives you a lot more confidence in what you're saying because you've seen it happening, you've seen it done, and it obviously works."

He understands that there is not necessarily a right or wrong approach to sales and it is important to build up your own technique based on experience, "I'm someone who just likes to get on, try the job and trial and error, as long as I'm not handling millions of pounds, where I can afford to actually do a bit of trial and error on a job..". Conversely, he also emphasised the importance of knowing when to ask peers for help; he referred to difficulties with IT/systems where he needed to call upon the specialist knowledge of a colleague.

Trevor cited communication skills as paramount in his role and referred specifically to the importance of successful verbal communication, and then forming good interpersonal relationships as a consequence of this, "In this role you're going to meet very, very senior people, and you can't really conduct yourself like a student or like a young person. You want to try and give off this impression that you're not 'weathered' (experienced), but you do have a bit of experience in the area." Mimicking traits and mannerisms of more experienced peers helped Trevor develop his communication skills on the job.

Organisation skills were also essential in Trevor's role. Planning, prioritising and tracking activities in conjunction with effectively managing time were learnt early on, through experience, for Trevor. He admits that he finds this difficult but has worked out his own method to succeed in his job.

## Case Study 2: Gemma

After graduation, Gemma worked briefly in another recruitment firm for a different sector (HR) but moved to Grovelands as its focus aligned with her Business and Accounting degree. Gemma has been working at Grovelands for just over three years and in her time has been promoted to Senior Recruitment Consultant. Initially, she had wanted a role in recruitment to build up her office experience and earn some money, as previously had only worked part-time jobs, such as paper rounds and restaurant waitering. Her long-term goal is to move into financial services.

Gemma enjoyed the initial training in the role which was given over a two-week period, “we did presentations, sitting down with people and actually seeing what they do and then applying it yourself, it was good”. However, Gemma considered the ‘on the job’ training more important and relevant to the work she is doing now. One such activity was ‘shadowing’, especially around making telephone calls and looking at job specifications. She refers to learning a level of professionalism by watching how her more experienced peers approach their work and talk to their clients. Specifically this was learnt in the first few weeks at Grovelands, and Gemma claims that University did not directly teach her to work in this style, “I don’t think what I did at university has helped me massively, it’s helped me in the sense of getting the job because, well the degree was a requirement! And I think most people would agree with what are we actually going to expect when we began working in an office because it’s a completely different environment to university.”

Again, verbal communication was a skill that Gemma had to develop to succeed in her role, “In this role you need good telephony skills, know how to present yourself in an office, and you have to be professional, well-spoken and generally quite pleasant to be with”. Gemma believes that having a confident communication manner portrays her as more credible in her role which enables her to build strong relationships with her clients. Negotiation skills were also learnt on the job by making mistakes and learning from them. She is aware that some of the very senior staff at Grovelands will help colleagues develop their negotiation skills, but it is the ‘putting it into practice’ that is the real learning experience for Gemma.

Gemma learnt some teamwork skills at university but feels there is a lot more motivation to work well together in Grovelands. She finds that group work at university is still very focused on individual achievement whereas at Grovelands, if the team did not pull together to complete a job, then they probably wouldn’t get repeat business from that client. Gemma enjoyed the university experience, although, whilst it gave her some foundational skills in presenting and writing, it did not fully equip her for her current role.

### Case Study 3: Liam

Liam is entering his fourth year at Grovelands after graduating in 2013; this was his first role after his Business Management degree. Liam began working at the Slough branch of Grovelands and then moved to the South-East after a year; he has had two promotions and now manages a team of five.

When Liam began in his first role, he mainly received training 'on the job' as opposed to classroom-based learning. He is now part of a Management Development Programme (MDP) which involves very structured training. Liam has positive learning experiences from the MDP where he has been able to draw on the experiences of his peers and in turn share his.

Resilience was the most important skill that Liam believed he had learnt since working at Grovelands, "you can't let a bad day ruin your week, you need to pick yourself up and keep going, even if that does sound like a cliché...". For Liam this was self-learnt because of the Grovelands environment; he had to tackle problems head on and not let bad experiences impact his work.

For success in his role, Liam must display effective meeting skills; he claimed to have no experience of this when he came into his role. He learnt this through a combination of training and sitting in meetings of his colleagues and then developed his own style for both internal and external meetings. Seeing his own success in this area has also built his confidence, "that confidence comes from listening to other people and then taking a leap of faith and doing it, sometimes you will get it wrong, but mostly you will get it right." When Liam was given the responsibility to build a relationship with a client without being monitored his confidence grew further, "When you cut those sort of shackles off you, you become more natural, you don't feel as pressurised and you can build it your own way."

The transition from consultant to manager has been challenging for him, especially in terms of building on inter-personal skills and the increase in responsibility for all aspects of performance and team building, "You have to work as a team anyway, but I think when you manage people it takes on a different kind of meaning, going from being less individually focused and getting the team to perform."

University taught Liam to manage his time effectively, and he feels that he employs this skill in the office to work backwards from deadlines to prioritise tasks. He refined these skills on the job. Greater responsibility required him to manage more tasks at once. He believes that his good time management skills were part of the reason he was promoted. Furthermore, university taught Liam some of the principles of management, but he believes that this is quite far removed from practically implementing some of the theories. His expanded skillset was acquired in performed the role, and with some considerable trial and error! Liam believes that having a good education is useful in his current role in terms of understanding how things work but aspects such as communication and interpersonal skills were developed on the job.

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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He joined Loughborough University in 2001, after holding a broad range of accounting and general management roles in both the private and public sectors. His extensive commercial experience now informs his teaching, research and consultancy.

Ian is a regular contributor to international conferences and has published over 80 academic and practitioner articles. His chief research interest is the transformation of the professional functions such as finance, HR, procurement and IT through new organisational forms.

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