Journal of Work-Applied Management

Improving the articulation of skills towards proving "value for money"

Trevor Gerhardt
WBL, Kent Business School, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK, and
Joel Montgomery
Kent Business School, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK

Received 27 March 2024
Revised 18 June 2024
8 August 2024
14 October 2024
18 October 2024
Accepted 29 October 2024

Abstract

Purpose – Ensuring value for money is becoming more of a priority for UK university degrees. The aim of the action research project was to add value by improving skill acquisition and articulation amongst Chartered Management Degree Apprentices through a problem-based learning module called Self-Managed Learning.

Design/methodology/approach – Intentional weekly interventions to develop skill acquisition, development and articulation were implemented over 10 weeks. A focus group at the end of the 10 weeks to reflect upon the interventions would then reveal through a thematic analysis whether there was indeed added value.

Findings – The action research intervention to improve and enhance how apprentices construe and construct what they experience and then learn to articulate that accurately was well received. Key outcomes included increased awareness of and enhanced use of reflection, merging work and university and increased self-efficacy and skill development awareness.

Practical implications – This research underscores the significant impact of enhanced stakeholder engagement on educational delivery and skill development. The study illustrates how the involvement of all parties, from apprentices to educators and employers, within the learning process can aid the development of intentional skill and professional development when work-based learning is effectively integrated within the educational curriculum.

Originality/value – The action learning intervention was an educational improvement enhancing personal development, social mobility and an opportunity for individuals to pursue knowledge for their own sake.

Keywords Skills, Degree apprenticeships, Value for money, Action research

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Rhetoric in the UK (Moulton, 2023) (and beyond) around the complexity of the value for money that university education offers is growing (Maina and Guàrdia, 2023), often measured by the employability impact of the degree. Since their introduction in 2015, Higher-Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs) have expanded to over 100 providers in 2018 (UK Parliament, 2018), highlighting their growing significance in addressing the skills gap and enhancing productivity (Smith *et al.*, 2020), a recognised growing value addition. Research studies argue that new graduates may possess the desired employability skills, but they are not aware that they have them or are unable to articulate effectively that they have them (Goodwin *et al.*, 2019; Maina and Guàrdia, 2023; McBain *et al.*, 2023).

Further implications: This research underscores the significant impact of enhanced stakeholder engagement on educational delivery and skill development. The study illustrates how the involvement of all parties, from apprentices to educators and employers, within the learning process can aid the development of intentional skill and professional development when WBL is effectively integrated within the educational curriculum.

Journal of Work-Applied Management
Emerald Publishing Limited
e-ISSN: 2205-149X
p-ISSN: 2205-2062
DOI 10.1108/JWAM-03-2024-0039

The aim of this research was to increase and evaluate the skill awareness and skill articulation amongst Chartered Management Degree Apprentices (CMDA) apprentices and thus justify "added value". This paper will initially explore the discourse in grey literature on "educational value" before expanding more specifically on the role of HDAs and the skill demands of erratic labour markets as the critical focus to what "adds value for money". This paper demonstrates how an improved module (through action research) illustrates added value through skill development and the increased articulation of those skills (Moulton, 2023).

Value for money

UK Parliament committees in 2018 stated that universities must focus on graduate outcomes, teaching skills and improving access, i.e. a concentration on value for money, posing:

> . . . too many universities are not providing value for money and that students are not getting good outcomes from the degrees for which so many of them rack up debt. Too many institutions are neither meeting our skills needs or providing the means for the disadvantaged to climb the ladder of opportunity (UK Parliament Committees, 2018, no page).

In contrast to this idyllic vision, the practical reality of fees has hindered this same Coalition Government, with robust criticism (Tettenborn, 2022) that the increase in tuition fees in 2012 resulted in a nearly £30,000 burden for a three-year degree. Some argue that any figure remains unattainable for non-plutocratic students, given the additional intangible university expenses. However, the £9,250 per year fee cap may paradoxically contribute to financial distress for universities, with many facing closure due to debt (Williams, 2024). Additionally, restrictions on international students have also created crises in the UK, Australia and Canada (Nash, 2024).

Addressing this financial challenge is complex, exacerbated by the use of data seeking to identify the value of universities through graduate employment, which is included in the three main UK university league tables: *The Times and Sunday Times*, *The Guardian* and the Complete University Guide. Whilst governmental data highlight that graduate employment continues to rise, with the average working-age graduate earning £10,000 more than the average non-graduate (Department for Education, 2019), differing data sets provide more nuance. For example, the UK Parliament Committee (2018), referring to the Office for National Statistics, shows that in the same year, 2017, 49% of recent graduates were working in non-graduate roles across the UK based on the Longitudinal Education Outcomes (LEO) dataset. This dataset links information about students. Pertinently, both the subject studied and the institution attended have a significant impact on graduate earnings, with medicine, maths and economics graduates all earning at least 30% more than the average graduate. Indeed, the type of institution also matters, with Russell Group institutions leading the way across the board in graduate earning outcomes (UK Parliament Committee, 2018, no page).

Goodwin *et al*. (2019) report that many employers rank employability skills above degree designation or university reputation. Further, concerns about the use of LEO data are prevalent, with Guild HE highlighting the omission of self-employment data, particularly affecting graduates in freelance or entrepreneurial roles. Additionally, Vignoles (2020) notes that LEO fails to capture other significant outcomes of HE, such as intellectual gains and a deeper understanding of societal engagement. Moreover, LEO data instead indicate that early career earnings for graduates surpass those of non-graduates, with women experiencing a 28% earnings increase by age 29 and men an 8% increase compared to non-graduates. Regional disparities in job availability and sector-specific issues, such as relatively lower pay in the public sector, further complicate the employment landscape (Vignoles, 2020).

Further, other data sources such as *The Economist* in 2017 posted their own league table of graduate earnings regardless of the university and revealed non-Russell Group universities as top achievers. The top five are listed in Table 1 with the first Russell Group University only coming in at 10th for actual value, with Clarence-Smith and Butcher (2023) adding

Table 1. Top 5 universities for graduate earnings

Rank	University	Actual earnings	Expected earnings	Actual value
1	University of Portsmouth	£26,168	£23,075	£3,093
2	Aston University	£29,050	£26,084	£2,966
3	Newman University	£24,357	£21,557	£2,801
4	Bournemouth University	£26,671	£23,942	£2,730
5	Robert Gordon University	£28,858	£26,155	£2,730
10	University of Oxford	£42,788	£40,855	£1,933

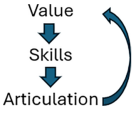
Source(s): Adapted from The Economist (2017)

contemporary weight detailing how graduates from former polytechnics were earning more than their Russell Group counterparts.

Therefore, the interplay of expected value is important, with UK University Minister Gyimah (2018) calling for a better deal for students at the Higher Education Policy Institute annual conference, as their survey suggested 32% of students reported poor value for money. He argued that the basics needed enhancing: contact hours, timely feedback, highly motivated staff, appropriate training and support for excellent teaching. From 2012 to 2021, there has been a steady decline in "value" perception and a steady incline in "poor value perception", with *The Guardian* reporting that 50% of UK university students think a degree is poor value for money (Hall, 2021). This issue is widespread, with news outlets such as *The Spectator* (Tettenborn, 2022) reporting that universities no longer offer good value for money and questioning the value of a university degree. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimates that one in five graduates would be better off financially if they hadn't gone to university, and the Office for Students (OfS) shows that nearly three in ten graduates do not progress into high-skills jobs or further study 15 months after graduation; the Department of Education (2023) has called for a "crackdown on rip-off university degrees" that fail to deliver good outcomes and will be subject to strict controls.

The "value for money" debate, however, is multi-faceted (Moulton, 2023). Hare (2023) notes a decreasing graduate earning gap, particularly for those with higher qualifications like master's degrees, who now earn an average of 71.5% more per week compared to those without high school qualifications, down from 93% in 2011. Additionally, large survey data of 3,505 UK graduates and 3,506 UK business leaders concerning the value of university degrees highlight 73% of UK graduates credit their degree for finding their dream job within a year; 79% recognise that the skills built provided professional value and 71% of first-generation students confirm this opened doors to companies (UK Universities, 2023). Importantly for this paper, the increase in degree apprenticeships is part of the reforms needed to address some of the negative concerns within the HE landscape. Apprenticeships have historically been about occupational preparation, shaped by societal sentiment and governmental preference and imperatives, established to overcome skill deficits and avoid unemployment amongst young people and enacted through bureaucratic control and means (Billett, 2016).

Universities need to help students not only to become more aware of their skills but also, once aware, to better articulate these skills to others, postulating that the skills gap (Konstantinou and Miller, 2020) is better characterised as an "articulation of skills" gap (Goodwin *et al*., 2019), which requires deeper interventions (Moulton, 2023) (cf. Figure 1).



Source(s): Generated by authors

Figure 1. Value added extracted employability

This paper used action research to enhance the articulation of skills amongst CMDA apprentices. This addresses the articulation skill gap (Goodwin *et al.*, 2019; Moulton, 2023) and the value for money argument (UK Parliament Committees, 2018) (cf. Figure 1).

Study context

The Chartered Management Institute (CMI, n.d.) defines the CMDA as an apprenticeship that delivers a quality degree, on-the-job experience and a professional pathway for future development. The CMDA standard, which is employer-led, focuses on specific employability knowledge, skills and behaviours.

A class of 29 CMDAs doing a module called Self-Managed Learning (SML) were part of an action research project aimed at enhancing skills awareness, skills reflection and the articulation of skills. This study adapted the action research approach by Goodwin *et al.* (2019) and McBain *et al.* (2023), where they aimed to develop the ability of students to sharpen (describe the situation), deepen (describe the action) and transfer (describe the outcome) the articulation of skill development, i.e. extract employability (Moulton, 2023). The SML module (taught at Levels 4, 5 and 6) has been the focus of previous research by Konstantinou and Miller (2020, 2021). Konstantinou and Miller (2021, p. 9) describe the SML as a module that requires "students to solve a real work-based problem, which can be decided in consultation with their managers or, especially at a higher level, through the students' ability to identify problems at their workplace", and as part of this process, students are required to reflect on their skills. Their research amongst Level 5 SML students illustrated bridging the gap between theory and practice. This research builds on this by exploring how final-year SML apprentices (Level 6) develop the ability to articulate their skills, similar to the research conducted by Maina and Guàrdia (2023) using student reflection, expert formative feedback and ePortfolio exhibits of employability skills. The SML module was delivered on Fridays for 10 weeks, which included a 30-min pre-recorded lecture and a 2-h seminar. The module taught and used problem-based learning (PBL) methodology such as the Kepner Tregoe (KT) analysis (Fogler *et al.*, 2014).

The Cogent module aims are to (1) demonstrate a systematic knowledge and understanding of key aspects of the topic, informed by the forefront of defined aspects of a discipline; (2) demonstrate an ability to devise and sustain arguments and/or to solve problems using ideas and techniques; (3) demonstrate an appreciation of the uncertainty, ambiguity and limits of knowledge; (4) develop a conceptual understanding of a subject; (5) effectively communicate the results and (6) achieve greater personal development.

The assessment consisted of a proposal (10% weighting), a 6,000-word project report, of which a third focused on skill development (60% weighting) and a 15-min project presentation including the skill development section (30% weighting).

Literature review

The literature review will focus on HDAs in the UK. As work-based learning (WBL), they are a unique mode of learning and model of education, with the aim of producing work-ready skills and thus adding value (Rowe *et al.*, 2016) (cf. Figure 1).

Higher-Degree Apprenticeships (HDAs)

HDAs represent a potentially transformative approach within higher education. Historically, apprenticeships were the domain of trades and artisans who acquired their skills through apprenticeships, whilst higher education was reserved for theoretical and professional knowledge (Crook, 2008). Apprenticeships thus were often about occupational preparation, shaped by societal sentiment and governmental preference and imperatives, established to overcome skills deficits and avoid unemployment amongst young people and enacted through

bureaucratic control and means (Billett, 2016). HDAs, however, blur these traditional lines by integrating practical, hands-on learning with academic rigour (Campbell, 2022).

Within the modern-day higher education sector, graduate employability is incredibly important, postulated by government ministers, for institutions to showcase and a draw for students when choosing what educational route to choose. However, these are not stagnant; graduate employability is a broader concept than just human capital or employability skills and thus is more dynamic, relational and contextual (Benati and Fischer, 2021). Therefore, with Mckinsey and Company (2023) suggesting that higher education is shifting to a skills-first approach that provides more flexible credentials, will this effectively develop the skills required, which are not just technically based but also reflective and adaptable?

A mode of learning and model of education

This HDA provision discussed often encapsulates being taught or directly guided by more experienced practitioners who are seeking to directly mediate their learning is a relative rarity historically (Billett, 2016) and thus is referred to as WBL. This is a specific mode or form of teaching, a model and process of curricular experiential education that formally and intentionally integrates a student's academic studies within a workplace or workplace setting (CEWIL Canada, 2021; Gerhardt and Annon, 2023), i.e. deeper interventions (Moulton, 2023). Here, apprentices as employees are novice practitioners learning from masters and/or experts with similar contexts in other countries (Bates *et al.*, 2018; Lisa *et al.*, 2019; Pitan and Muller, 2020).

WBL plays a crucial role in how apprentices construe and construct their experiences, making it an integral mode of education within apprenticeships (Billett, 2016; Konstantinou and Miller, 2020). WBL is recognised as a distinct educational field, offering unique advantages such as "extracted employability" (Moulton, 2023; Portwood, 2001). This mode of learning facilitates the micro-genetic development of knowledge through moment-by-moment experiences, shaping the learner's ontogenetic growth (Billett, 2016). The concept of personal epistemologies – what individuals know, value and can do – forms the foundation of active learning, encompassing not only cognitive knowledge but also embodied skills, self-perception, agency, intentionality and introspection (Billett, 2016). WBL, therefore, not only enhances skill awareness and reflection but also improves the ability to articulate and exhibit these skills, making it a vital component of this study's focus (McBain *et al.*, 2023; Maina and Guàrdia, 2023).

Universities, however, must consider the importance of learning with and from others and creating communities of practice, as these are all important elements when considering the creation of WBL modules (Konstantinou and Miller, 2020). Learning in such a context often takes place through mimetic learning (observation and imitation) (Billett, 2016) and incidental learning (Konstantinou and Miller, 2021). Historically, rather than being dependent on others (e.g. teachers, experts, "meisters", etc.), apprentices progress interdependently within physical and social environments, identifying what needs to be learnt, knowing how that knowledge is acquired, actively engaging in acquiring it and monitoring engagement and development, actively engaging, apprehending and appraising what those contributions provide for them – interdependently, rather than being taught (Billett, 2016).

Billett (2016) argues that apprenticeships as a model of education are based on bipartite or tripartite arrangements representing the interests of government, employers and employees in varying degrees, subject to governmental and societal imperatives. Konstantinou and Miller (2021, p. 8) describe this as "a series of relational 'crossings' between sites of learning". In HDAs, experienced experts assist novices in learning as practice pedagogies (Billet, 2016; Quigley *et al.*, 2018). Heuristics or "tricks of the trade" are also used to promote procedural capacities (Billet, 2016). However, the efficacy of these pedagogic practices is largely mediated by individuals' engagement with them. The augmentation provided by these pedagogic practices is shaped by learners' engagement with and apprehending of what they

have experienced (Billett, 2016), which can then be evidenced in the way they articulate it. This is vital, as the focus of this paper is the articulation of skills.

The intentional design of HDAs and WBL curricula to include deeper inventions and extracted employability (Moulton, 2023) reflects what Goodwin *et al*. (2019, p. 447) state that "students are most likely to better acquire employability skills when they are explicitly integrated into programme goals." Therefore, PBL, WBL and work-integrated learning are best placed to help students produce professional skills and attitudes, developing, for example, self-confidence and ethical behaviour (Costley and Abukari, 2015; Toledano-O'Farrill, 2017), producing work-ready-plus graduates and also agentic professionals (Bowen and Drysdale, 2017; Martin and Rees, 2019), which not only acquire technical skills but also develop reflective practices with the capacity to articulate these skills effectively.

Work-ready skills

This, moreover, leads to the importance of having the skills ready for the modern-day workforce. Skills-based learning emphasises what you need to know and be able to do, and life-long learning accentuates the ever-changing nature of the workplace, requiring constant learning, reviewing and adapting (Baracskai *et al.*, 2016; Drysdale *et al.*, 2022). Talbot (2019) illustrates the broader concept of "value for money" when he describes education as: an instrument for personal development, the creation of citizens able to fully participate in a democratic society, a means to foster social mobility and integration, an instrument for social control to enable the creation of national identity, an opportunity too for individuals to pursue knowledge for its own sake and a collective mechanism for creating universal knowledge. This reflects classical educational models from the past such as "the real university and the other university" – the real university being a state of mind, the continuing body of reason itself, whereas the other university is the physical branch of the state, a legal corporation, receiving money and responding to legislative pressures in the process (Pirsig, 1974) and "monastery or marketplace" – the former being about the forming of citizens and the latter providing for the economy (Haldane, 1994). This research recognises that both dichotomies are part of what adds "value for money", as professionalism (the forming of citizens) is a part of modern-day skills expectations, and WBL is best placed to deliver this.

In 2016, pre-COVID-19, the World Economic Forum (WEF) emphasised limitless new opportunities but also massive job dislocation, skills disruption and high skills instability requiring reskilling and upskilling. Other key industry papers highlighting certain key skill demands include the Government Office for Science and Foresight Report (Campbell, 2016), a 2017 Deloitte report by O'Boyle *et al*., Deloitte (2020, 2021, 2022) and McKinsey & Company (2023). These skills are constantly changing as labour markets change and technology continues to impact the workplace. WBL provision needs to adapt too. Goodwin *et al*. (2019) report that the top 10 employability skills for undergraduates, as identified by employers, include oral and written communication, which is a crucial focus of his paper. Additionally, McKinsey & Company (2023) state that demand will grow for social and emotional skills, a close link to the focus of this paper. A 44% disruption in skills is predicted in the next five years, meaning that six in ten workers will require reskilling and upskilling (WEF, 2023). The crucial aspect emphasised by all these reports is the ability of an individual to recognise their skill shortage and know what and how to solve that skill gap, the skill of how to be a lifelong learner (UNESCO, 2023) and then exhibit those new skills (Maina and Guàrdia, 2023).

Methodology

The methodology in this study was grounded in action research, a qualitative research approach or "research strategy, which sets out to change the situation being researched" (Scott and Morrison, 2007, p. 4), designed to effect change and improve practice. The study

received ethical approval from the institution and aimed to enhance employability within the SML module (cf. page 4) for Level 6 apprentices, with the addition of seeking to increase the skill articulation of the cohort. The intervention was implemented over a 10-week period and evaluated through a focus group.

Research design

Action research is characterised by its reflective cyclical process (Opie, 2019a), which is a form of practitioner research (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016) that integrates research with application and unfolds through interaction, feedback flops and a research spiral process (Scott and Morrison, 2007). The study followed the five principles of action research outlined by Merriam and Tisdell (2016), which consists of: (1) It focused on a problem situation in practice – student development in skill articulation (Mcbain *et al*., 2023); (2) it had an emergent design – consisting of weekly interventions, which were tweaked for improvements (Maina and Guàrdia, 2023); (3) participants were co-investigators, which meant that apprentices were part of the feedback loops (Maina and Guàrdia, 2023); (4) consideration of lead research as an insider, i.e. the author engaged in weekly reflexivity and reflection based on the interventions (Billet, 2016), and (5) data were analysed systematically whereby reflective feedback was provided weekly with a focus group at the end to conclude the effectiveness of the intervention (Goodwin *et al*., 2019).

Data collection

The SML module, which was done at Levels 4, 5 and 6, was a starting point where students were asked about their experience of the module, with a particular focus on skills. However, many admitted they "just made it up", as there was no real input into that particular aspect. Therefore, based on that initial feedback, an intervention was introduced each week to address the skills-focused aspect of the module. The key aim, to develop their articulation of skills, was not revealed to the students; instead, they were simply informed that the skills elements needed improvement to increase skill awareness and reflection (Mcbain *et al*., 2023) and that the leader researcher would attempt such an intervention with their collaboration.

Therefore, it was agreed that there would be weekly reflective feedback whereby within the two-hour seminar, 30 min would focus on skills and explicitly link the module to their workplace contexts, therefore adding theory to aid deep learning and reflection on experiences. After the input and discussion, students would provide feedback on the relevant content, i.e. extracted employability (Moulton, 2023).

In addition, at the end of the 10 weeks, as part of a focus group, students would be asked what the new interventions were and whether they thought they added value. The focus group was about two unique interventions: an intentional 30-min focus on skills and the content covered in those 30 min. The focus group was conducted after the last session in week 10 and aimed to elicit detailed feedback on the interventions through discussions between participants (Opie, 2019b), supplemented by flip chart notes. Based on opportunistic sampling, 20 from a class of 29 students (taught by the researcher) consented to be part of the focus group. Eight were selected to participate: 4 men (P2, P3, P4 and P8) and 4 women (P1, P5, P6 and P7). One male was from another class doing the same module. He was the only one that consented from that class (wanted to participate), i.e. P8 – Participant 8.

The key intervention content discussed each week consisted of (reflect, feedback and exhibit – Maina and Guàrdia, 2023):

(1) Week 1: the signalling theory and doing a skill audit of future career prospects (skill gaps – Smith *et al*., 2020);

(2) Week 2: explaining the top soft skills and reflecting on them (WEF, 2016);

(3) Week 3: discussing three reflective models (Gibbs, Kolb and Dewey) and the reflective cycle (construe and construct – Billett, 2016);

(4) Week 4: explaining professional skills and career advancement and reflecting on these (post-technocratic model - Bines and Watson, 1992);

(5) Week 5: discussed written and oral communication of skills (awareness and communication – McBain *et al.*, 2023);

(6) During reading week, apprentices wrote their draft skills section and recorded their draft presentation on their skills section (a top 10 skill – Goodwin *et al*., 2019);

(7) Week 6: peer feedback on written drafts and discussed feedback (Moulton, 2023);

(8) Week 7: peer feedback on draft oral presentations and discussed feedback (Moulton, 2023);

(9) Week 8: discussed self-perception and growth mindset (lifelong learner - UNESCO, 2023);

(10) Week 9: did the career anchors test by Schein and discussed (framing - Konstantinou and Miller, 2020) and

(11) Week 10: discussed self-awareness and completed a few tests such as Myers Briggs and discussed (social and emotional – McKinsey and Company, 2023)

Analytical procedures

The collected data and transcript were analysed using thematic analysis, a generic approach that gives codes to chunks and labels them as examples of a particular "thing" (Robson, 2011, p. 469). In accordance with the stages of thematic analysis, the recording and transcription went through various processes such as familiarisation, reviewing data several times, systematic coding and theme development from the coded data and meaning integration and interpretation (Brown and Scaife, 2019). This procedure was applied to the transcript material, and the themes were subsequently displayed in Table 2.

Findings

The weekly reflective spiral feedback from apprentices on the 30-min catalyst content is summarised below in Table 2:

The transcript of the focus group at the end of week 10 was thematically analysed, and the results can be seen below in Table 3:

"Value added" are the employability skills, but that is dependent on the awareness and articulation of those skills (Figure 1):

Discussion

It is clear that the SML action research intervention (cf. Table 2) to improve and enhance how apprentices construe and construct what they experience (Billett, 2016) and then learn to articulate that accurately was well received. Apprentices commented on their increased awareness of and enhanced use of reflection, merging work and university. This, in turn, increased their self-efficacy and skill development awareness (cf. Table 3). Montteiro *et al.* (2021) argue that self-efficacy arises mainly from successful performance, which increases the likelihood of future effective performance, and this includes the workplace and the learning space. Konstantinou and Miller (2021, p. 13) in their research of SML found that "one of the frequent questions students asked us is whether their assessments should discuss how they develop skills in the classroom/completing assignments or at the workplace". This intervention has helped to merge these sites of learning. The action learning intervention in

Table 2. Weekly summary

Week	Skill theme	Author-synthesised feedback	Implication and refinement
1	The signalling theory and skills audit	Found the theory helpful but raised questions about how to identify key skills in a changing environment Finding a dream job to base skills audit on was helpful	Introduce signalling theory at level 4 and then develop skills to identify, monitor and adapt skills requirements throughout level 4, 5 and 6
2	Soft skills and employability	Recognised the nuanced difference between students learning for and through work and students learning in/from work	Stronger links need to be made to WBL. Link success of becoming an apprentice with employability skills at level 4
3	Reflective models	No-one had actually taught the theory before. They admitted they were "making it up"	Introduce a reflective model at each level
4	Professional skills and career advancement	Similar to week 1 and 2, raised questions about how to identify key skills in a changing environment recognising their skill development was more about getting a promotion or using their experience to advance in their career. Felt the CMDA Knowledge, Skills and Behaviours were only relevant to the End Point Assessment	Make the skills focus at level 6 more about the "next step" e.g. End Point Assessment (EPA) or next promotion or next job. Encourage identified problems for the SML report to be about the next step
5	Written and oral communication skills	Knew the theory but needed more examples such as role models	Incorporate more TEDx talks from younger generations in the SML skills sections and use the levels to develop and reflect upon communication as a skill
6	Peer feedback on written drafts	Found the peer feedback exercise very helpful and suggested it be done from the start	Incorporate peer feedback from level 4
7	Peer feedback on presentation drafts	Found it helpful, but many had not produced a draft finding the presentation (oral communication) more challenging than the written communication	Focus on habits of mind to develop self-efficacy etc. Perhaps make it a key focus at level 5
8	Self-perception and growth mindset	Reflecting on peer feedback and matching self-perception with the perception of others was very insightful. Linking this to reflection was also very helpful	Enable more discussion in class to enable reflection and therefore guidance on how to improve reflection, i.e. deep learning
9	Career anchors	Found this very helpful, especially at level 6 as they now think about "what next"	Apprentices suggested doing this at level 4 and monitoring any changes
10	Self-awareness	Found self-assessment tests such as DISC, Belbin team roles etc. very helpful. The discussion of results as peer feedback etc. was needed to make links	Create a reflective profile and stagger the tests to be completed throughout the levels, allowing enough time to reflect on results

Source(s): Generated by authors

the SML module was an educational improvement enhancing personal development, social mobility and an opportunity for individuals to pursue knowledge for its own sake (Talbot, 2019). It is also evidence of what value WBL adds.

However, several key factors emerged overall:

Table 3. Thematic analysis

Main theme	Sub-theme	Verbatim quotes
Intentional skills focus	• self-efficacy • reflection	• more focus on skills from the start yeah so it's not like a rushing at the end (P2) • more confident (P1) • you know like the Gibbs and stuff we've never come across them before (P5) • more around like employability (P4) • it's more focused (P1) • as a self-reflection thing we've never had any theories and skills mentioned before (P5) • you've aided the process of being able to justify every step of the way in order to establish where you are right at the beginning (P3)
Future focused		• preparing us for our future (P1) • more focused on skills from the start and future work (P2) • where do you actually want to be like in your career in five years' time how are you going to get there (P5)
Practical applications	• strong links with work	• yeah I don't know if it's because we're in person but we actually like learning stuff [reference to Covid] (P6) • ability to draw data and information from industry research (P7)
Linking skills and the PBL focus	• WBL pedagogy • theory	• didn't give us the answer (P4) • there's a lot more theories (P5) • coming up with solutions through scholarly journals (P7) • actually explain how all of it comes together (P5) • how do I integrate that (P3) • so I think this module has been a million times better at explaining how do we bring that into the project (P2)
Delivery	• blended learning • student centric	• we've collaborated (P2) • I watch all the lectures (P5) • overall goal of the assessment was yeah at the beginning (P5) • I feel like this is the only module that is actually like applied to the degree apprenticeship (P5) • having a half an hour like every week to talk about skills was really good because we've not spoken about skills in our other ones (P6) • implemented earlier on like in year one (P7) • from our class . . . sometimes when we've spoken about skills . . . it doesn't really make sense (P8)

Source(s): Generated by authors

(1) Changes at SML Level 6 needed to be supported by similar cohesive changes at SML Levels 4 and 5 as well (i.e. deeper interventions);

(2) Skills adaptability was just as important as skill awareness and development (Goodwin *et al.*, 2019);

(3) SML Level 6 needed to focus on skill development for "what's next" (i.e. extracted employability);

(4) Peer feedback was a valued contribution (Maina and Guàrdia, 2023) and

(5) New activities and resources added value, such as skills audits, reflective profiles and career anchors (Billet, 2016).

Furthermore, on reflection, educators pedagogically recognised:

(1) More links can be made to the successful attainment of an apprenticeship;

(2) More explicit WBL modes of learning needed to be incorporated across all of the modules, but especially in SML;

(3) The value-appropriate theory and models add within WBL;

(4) Reflection as a skill needed to be taught, developed and monitored;

(5) Communication skills need to be curriculum-wide focus and

(6) Consistency is required across modules.

Konstantinou and Miller (2020), in their research on SML, found that employees and/or apprentices who adopted reflective processes were also able to be reflective in their workplace, and this was reflected in the focus group as being enhanced. Furthermore, this intervention made this even more possible by explicitly teaching, monitoring and developing reflection as a skill. Additionally, this intervention helped reduce the distance between self-perception and other people's perceptions of ourselves; as stated by Montteiro *et al.* (2021), it is helpful to have a deeper understanding of the relationship between students' perceptions of their competencies and preparation for the labour market and whether that matches what the actual labour market requires. Apprentices adapted their skill articulation based on the audience and outcome to be achieved. Furthermore, as stated by Quinlan and Renninger (2022), this research was a reframe of employability interventions beyond just teaching skills or attributes; instead, we supported the exploration of how they can continue to pursue a career, a helpful adaptation in traditional WBL. The research indicated that more intentional, deeper interventions were required across the entire SML module at Levels 4–6 to enable explicit extracted employability (Moulton, 2023) through increased skill awareness (construe and construct) (Billet, 2016), reflection and feedback and then developed articulation of those skills (Goodwin *et al*., 2019; Maina and Guàrdia, 2023). Interventions succeeded in making enhancements, but feedback provided also identified further improvements required overall.

Conclusion

Value for money goes beyond human capital and graduate employability (Billet, 2016). However, this study of a UK CMDA indicated how a WBL module using the PBL module was able to deliver value for money across the course in terms of soft skill development and exhibition (Maina and Guàrdia, 2023). An action research deeper intervention further enhanced its value based on focus group feedback by apprentices by making the skill of reflection explicit, linking skill development to career transitions and using peer feedback to develop the articulation of these skills (Goodwin *et al*., 2019). These developments were also then cohesively implemented across Levels 4 and 5 to create a consistent skill development process. WBL tutors must be aware of the skill development focus and work on consistent delivery to ensure continuity across modules.

References

Baracskai, Z., Dörfler, V. and Kádár, J.A. (2016), "The new practitioner: transcending disciplinary boundaries", *WBL e-Journal International*, Vol. 6 No. 1, pp. 8-21.

Bates, L., Hayes, H., Walker, S. and Marchesi, K. (2018), "From employability to employment: a professional skills development course in a three-year bachelor program", *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, Vol. 19 No. 4, pp. 413-423.

Benati, K. and Fischer, J. (2021), "Beyond human capital: student preparation for graduate life", *Education + Training*, Vol. 63 No. 1, pp. 151-163, doi: 10.1108/ET-10-2019-0244.

Billett, S. (2016), "Apprenticeship as a mode of learning and model of education", *Education + Training*, Vol. 58 No. 6, pp. 613-628, doi: 10.1108/ET-01-2016-0001.

Bines, H. and Watson, D. (1992), *Developing Professional Education*, The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University, London.

Bowen, T. and Drysdale, M.T.B. (Eds) (2017), Work-integrated Learning in the 21st Century, Emerald, Bingley, available at: https://www.emerald.com/insight/content/doi/10.1108/s1479-367920170000032015/full/pdf

Brown, D. and Scaife, H. (2019), "Understanding and applying qualitative data analysis", in Opie, C. and Brown, D. (Eds), *Getting Started in Your Educational Research*, SAGE, Ch11.

Campbell, M. (2016), "The UK's skills mix: current trends and future needs", *Foresight*, Government Office for Science.

Campbell, C. (2022), "Afterward? Moving onwards for developing pracademia and pracademics in education", *Journal of Professional Capital and Community*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 98-108, doi: 10.1108/JPCC-01-2022-104.

Clarence-Smith, L. and Butcher, B. (2023), "Graduates from former polytechnics earning more than Russell Group university peers", *Telegraph*, Graduates from former polytechnics earning more than Russell Group university peers, available at: telegraph.co.uk (accessed 14 November 2023).

CMI (n.d.), "Chartered manager degree apprenticeship", Chartered Manager Degree Apprenticeship | Level 6 - CMI, available at: managers.org.uk (accessed 14 November 2023).

Co-operative Education and Work-Integrated Learning Canada (CEWIL Canada) (2021), "WIL definitions", available at: https://www.cewilcanada.ca/WIL

Costley, C. and Abukari, A. (2015), "The impact of work-based research projects at postgraduate level", *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 3-14, doi: 10.1108/JWAM-10-2015-006.

Crook, D. (2008), "Some historical perspectives on professionalism", in Cunningham, B. (Ed.), *Exploring Professionalism*, Institute of Education, London, Ch.2.

Deloitte (2020), *The Deloitte Global Millennial Survey 2020*, Deloitte, London.

Deloitte (2021), *The Deloitte Global 2021 Millennial and GenZ Survey*, Deloitte, London.

Deloitte (2022), *The Deloitte Global 2022 GenZ and Millennial Survey*, Deloitte, London.

Department for Education (2019), "Graduates continue to benefit with higher earnings", available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/graduates-continue-to-benefit-with-higher-earnings (accessed 7 November 2023).

Department of Education (2023), "Crackdown on rip-off university degrees", available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/crackdown-on-rip-off-university-degrees (accessed 7 November 2023).

Drysdale, M.T.B., Twyford, K., Glenn, B. and Callaghan, S.A. (2022), "Work, resilience and wellbeing: the long game of work-integrated learning", in Ferns, S.J., Rowe, A.D. and Zegwaard, K.E. (Eds), *Advances in Research, Theory and Practice in Work-Integrated Learning*, Routledge, pp. 75-84.

Fogler, H.S., LeBlanc, S.E. and Rizzo, B. (2014), *Strategies for Creative Problem Solving*, Pearson Education and Prentice Hall.

Gerhardt, T. and Annon, P. (2023), "Towards conceptual clarity: pedagogical liminality", *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, Vol. 24 No. 2, pp. 209-225.

Goodwin, T.J., Goh, J., Verkoeyen, S. and Lithgow, K. (2019), "Can students be taught to articulate employability skills?", *Education + Training*, Vol. 61 No. 4, pp. 445-460, doi: 10.1108/ET-08-2018-0186.

Gyimah, S. (2018), "Delivering value for money in the age of the student", *UK Government Universities Minister*, available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/delivering-value-for-money-in-the-age-of-the-student (accessed 8 November 2023).

Haldane, J., (1994), "The context of education: monastery or marketplace?", Pring, R., (2004), *Philosophy of Education*, London, Continuum, Ch4.

Hall, R. (2021), "Half of UK university students think degree is poor value for money", *Guardian*, available at: https://www.theguardian.com/education/2021/jun/24/half-of-uk-university-students-think-degree-is-poor-value-for-money (accessed 7 November 2023).

Hare, J. (2023), "The income boast from a uni degree is slumping", *Financial Review*, 19 Nov, available at: https://www.afr.com/work-and-careers/education/income-benefit-from-university-degrees-on-the-slide-20231119-p5el2g (accessed 21 November 2023).

Konstantinou, I. and Miller, E. (2020), "Investigating work-integrated learning and its relevance to skills development in degree apprenticeships", *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, Vol. 10 No. 5, pp. 767-781, doi: 10.1108/HESWBL-05-2020-0112.

Konstantinou, I. and Miller, E. (2021), "Self-managed and work-based learning: problematising the workplace-classroom skills gap", *Journal of Work Applied Management*, Vol. 13 No. 1, pp. 6-18, doi: 10.1108/JWAM-11-2020-0048.

Lisa, E., Hennelova, K. and Newman, D. (2019), "Comparison between employers' and students' expectations in respect of employability skills of university graduates", *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, Vol. 20 No. 1, pp. 71-82.

Maina, M.F. and Guàrdia, L. (2023), "Employability skills articulation for micro-credentialing: extending graduate certification to enhance employment opportunities", *EDEN Annual Conference Proceedings*, Dublin, pp. 59-60, available at: https://eden-europe.eu/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/EDEN-2023-Annual-Conference-Proceedings.pdf#page=72 (accessed 14 June 2024).

Martin, A.J. and Rees, M. (2019), "Student insights: the added value of work-integrated learning", *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, Vol. 20 No. 2, pp. 189-199.

McBain, B., Phelan, L., Bennett, D. and Knight, E.B. (2023), "Understanding and articulating your employability as a science graduate", in Rowland, S. and Kuchel, L. (Eds), *Teaching Science Students to Communicate: A Practical Guide*, Springer, Cham, doi: 10.1007/978-3-030-91628-2_67.

McKinsey & Company (2023), "The skills revolution and the future of learning and earning", *World Government Summit*, available at: https://www.mckinsey.com/~/media/mckinsey/industries/education/our%20insights/the%20skills%20revolution%20and%20the%20future%20of%20learning%20and%20earning/the-skills-revolution-and-the-future-of-learning-and-earning-report-f.pdf (accessed 21 November 2023).

Merriam, S.B. and Tisdell, E.J. (2016), *Qualitative Research*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.

Montteiro, S., Almeida, L. and Garcia-Aracil, A. (2021), "'It's a very different world': work transition and employability of higher education graduates", *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, Vol. 11 No. 1, pp. 164-181, doi: 10.1108/HESWBL-10-2019-0141.

Moulton, J.F.G. (2023), "What is the employability value of a degree in politics and international relations?", *Journal of Political Science Education*, Vol. 20 No. 3, pp. 1-17, doi: 10.1080/15512169.2023.2284821.

Nash, P. (2024), "Higher ed policies drive layoffs and cuts in the UK, Australia and Canada", *The Pie*, 2 May, available at: https://thepienews.com/layoffs-cuts-uk-australia-canada-higher-ed-policies-take-hold/ (accessed 14 June 2024).

Opie, C. (2019a), "Research approaches", in Opie, C. and Brown, D. (Eds), *Getting Started in Your Educational Research*, Sage, Ch8.

Opie, C. (2019b), "Research procedures", in Opie, C. and Brown, D. (Eds), *Getting Started in Your Educational Research*, Sage, Ch9.

Pirsig, R.M. (1974), *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance: An Inquiry into Values*, Bantam Books, Toronto/New York/London.

Pitan, O.S. and Muller, C. (2020), "Student perspectives on employability development in higher education in South Africa", *Education + Training*, Vol. 63 No. 3, pp. 453-471, doi: 10.1108/ET-02-2018-0039.

Portwood, D. (2001), "Making it work institutionally", in Boud, D. and Solomon, N. (Eds), *Work-based Learning: A New Higher Education?*, Society for Research into Higher Education, Open University Press, pp. 74-85.

Quigley, A., Muij, D. and Stringer, E. (2018), "Metacognition and self-regulated: guidance report", available at: https://educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk/public/files/Publications/Metacognition/EEF_Metacognition_and_self-regulated_learning.pdf (accessed 20 July 2021).

Quinlan, K.M. and Renninger, K.A. (2022), "Rethinking employability: how students build on interest in a subject to plan a career", *Higher Education*, Vol. 84, pp. 863-883, doi: 10.1007/s10734-021-00804-6.

Robson, C. (2011), *Real World Research*, 2nd ed., Blackwell, Chichester.

Rowe, L., Perrin, D. and Wall, T. (2016), "The chartered manager degree apprenticeship: trials and tribulations", *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, Vol. 6 No. 4, pp. 357-369, doi: 10.1108/HESWBL-05-2016-0034.

Scott, D. and Morrison, M. (2007), *Key Ideas in Educational Research*, Continuum, London.

Smith, S., Caddell, M., Taylor-Smith, E., Smith, C. and Varey, A. (2020), "Degree apprenticeships - a win-win model? A comparison of policy aims with the expectations and experiences of apprentices", *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*, Vol. 73 No. 4, pp. 505-525, doi: 10.1080/13636820.2020.1744690.

Talbot, J. (2019), *Global Perspectives on Work-Based Learning Initiatives*, IGI Global, New York.

Tettenborn, A. (2022), "Is university good value for money?", *Spectator*, available at: https://www.spectator.co.uk/article/is-university-good-value-for-money/ (accessed 7 November 2023).

The Economist (2017), "Which British universities do most to boost graduate salaries", *The Economist*, available at: https://www.economist.com/britain/2017/08/12/which-british-universities-do-most-to-boost-graduate-salaries (accessed 7 November 2023).

Toledano-O'Farrill, R. (2017), "Professional application projects: work-based learning in the curriculum. Higher Education", *Skills and Work-Based Learning*, Vol. 7 No. 1, pp. 21-34, doi: 10.1108/HESWBL-07-2016-0047.

UK Parliament Committees (2018), "Universities must focus on value for money", available at: https://committees.parliament.uk/committee/203/education-committee/news/102476/universities-must-focus-on-value-for-money/ (accessed 7 November 2023).

UK Universities (2023), "The value of going to university", available at: https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/what-we-do/policy-and-research/publications/value-going-university (accessed 7 November 2023).

UNESCO (2023), International Trends of lifelong learning in higher education, available at: https://uil.unesco.org/international-trends-lifelong-learning-higher-education-research-report#:~:text=International%20trends%20of%20lifelong%20learning%20in%20higher%20education%3A%20research%20report,-June%202023&text=In%20the%20context%20of%20fast,and%20to%20transform%20education%20systems (accessed 21 November 2023).

Vignoles, A. (2020), "How do we define 'value' in higher education?", *The British Academy*, available at: https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/blog/how-define-value-higher-education/ (accessed 7 November 2023).

Williams, T. (2024), "Recruitment woes could leave eight in 10 universities in deficit", *Time Higher Education*, available at: https://www.timeshighereducation.com/news/recruitment-woes-could-leave-eight-ten-universities-deficit (accessed 15 May 2024).

World Economic Forum (2016), "The future of jobs", available at: https://www.weforum.org/publications/the-future-of-jobs/ (accessed 21 November 2023).

World Economic Forum (2023), "The future of jobs", available at: https://www3.weforum.org/docs/WEF_Future_of_Jobs_2023.pdf (accessed 21 November 2023).

Further reading

O'Boyle, C., Atack, J. and Monahan, K. (2017), "Generation Z enters the workforce", *Deloitte Insights*.

Unknown (2022), "Is it time to rethink the value of a university degree?", *The Week*, available at: https://theweek.com/news/education/957336/is-it-time-to-rethink-the-value-of-a-university-degree (accessed 7 November 2023).

About the authors

Dr Trevor Gerhardt is Reader and Director of Studies for Higher Degree Apprenticeships at Kent University and holds an EdD from Canterbury Christ Church University. Prior to academia, he had a background working in the third sector as a community leader, strategist, curriculum and programme development and CPD officer. Academically, he has held positions as a programme director, project and academic lead and has a nationally and internationally recognised specialism in work-integrated learning (WIL). Dr Gerhardt is a network convenor for the Working Life and Learning Network of the European Society for Research on the Education of Adults (ESREA). He has his own Udemy courses and runs a WIL podcast. He is a Senior Fellow of the Higher Education Academy. Trevor Gerhardt is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: dr.trevor.gerhardt@gmail.com

Dr Joel Montgomery is Lecturer in Management and Director of Studies for the Year in Management at the University of Kent after obtaining his Ph.D. in Management and Masters in Human Resource Management at the same university. His research and teaching have a focus on organisational behaviour, including organisational politics and strategic management, with a passion for pedagogy. He is a Fellow of the Higher Education Academy.