Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education ISSN: 1759-667X
Issue 18: October 2020

An evaluation of a translation intervention to raise awareness of employability skills gained from higher education.

Tom Lowe
University of Winchester, UK

Abstract

The challenge of ensuring that graduates of higher education are employable has become a pedagogical issue for teaching colleagues at universities worldwide. Employability, as a theme, has changed the general environment of higher education (Frankham, 2017, p.632) and is strongly emphasised on degree programmes' planning for desired outcomes (Moore and Morton, 2017, p.591). This paper reports on an evaluation of an intervention that was conducted with eight final year (Level 6) students from multiple disciplines to investigate to what extent a translation exercise can raise student awareness of employability skills gained through their higher education experience. This study shows that through a skills translation exercise, students' ability to highlight their graduate skills, which align to personal specification skills such as communication, organisation, and business acumen, increased. This paper reports on an intervention that was valued by the participants as having a positive impact on their understanding of their own employability and explores how translating discipline specific skills through short conversations can have relevance in the pressurised world of higher education.

Keywords: employability; student success; skills; higher education.

Background

'Employability' and 'student success' have become key phrases that describe desired outcomes for university graduates. These notions have gained increasing traction in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the United Kingdom (UK), due to increased governmental and policy pressure (BIS, 2009; Department for Education, 2017; Office for Students, 2018). This increased level of focus has come at a time in higher education

where increasing change is occurring, including increased student numbers, changes to the student loan structures, and an increasingly diverse student body (Lea, 2015, p.5). Universities, and, more specifically, their courses, are under increasing pressure to ensure graduates meet the priorities of employers and their workforce needs (Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 2017). Alongside governmental pressure, students are one of the key drivers for an outcome based higher education system. Recent research from Unite (2017) and Universities UK (2017) outline that the top reason students invest their time in higher education is to raise their employability to attain a graduate job. As the cost for higher education has shifted from the taxpayer to the students, the emphasis on student experience and student success has increased (Thomas, 2012). The majority of students surveyed by Hongkong and Shanghai Banking Corporation (HSBC) and National Union of Students (NUS, UK) now have an even higher expectation of universities than those who attended before them (NUS/HSBC, 2011, p.7). The commodification of higher education exerts a considerable pressure on academics today; this is compounded by increased marketisation and the model of 'students as consumer' in Western higher education (Levy, Little and Whelan, 2011, p.2).

The Green Paper of 2015 states an aim to drive Universities to evolve and modernise for contemporary industries, describing graduates who have the desired skills as 'what employers want' (BIS, 2015, p.31). Often, this agenda is referred to as the 'skills gap' concept, viewing the challenge of curriculum design as one of seeking to 'bridge the gap' between the domain of education and the workplace (Moore and Morton, 2017, p.604). HEIs and employers have often created lists of graduate skills, attributes, or hallmarks, and described them as being the 'soft skills' that graduates will possess following a degree level education (Yorke, 2006; Oliver, 2015; University of Portsmouth, 2016; Dunne, 2017). Target Jobs, an example of a recruitment site used by graduates, lists examples of these desired skills. This list provided the focus for this study, which both communicates and encourages students to 'religiously record the skills you gain' for future applications (Target Jobs, 2017). These skills are listed below and will be explored in this paper through the intervention with students to evaluate whether there is a need to translate discipline specific skills into the skills listed below. The students were also asked to evaluate the translation process through a survey to assess whether they perceived the

process to have had value. By translation, this study means a conversion which brings understanding of something from one form or medium into another in the same language, to make a meaning of a word more accessible and comprehensive. The skills on which the study focused, as identified by Target Jobs (2017, are listed below:

1. Commercial awareness (or business acumen).
2. Communication.
3. Teamwork.
4. Negotiation and persuasion.
5. Problem solving.
6. Leadership.
7. Organisation.
8. Perseverance and motivation.
9. Ability to work under pressure.
10. Confidence.

This research aimed to highlight that students already possess the skills sought after by employers and that students are only missing the opportunity to translate their discipline specific skills into more flexible graduate attributes (Dunne, 2017). The research was conducted through a trial intervention with eight final year (Level 6) students from multiple disciplines, to assess whether a translation exercise would raise awareness of skills and then to evaluate the student experience of this exercise. This study sought to empower the value of the curriculum through making its learning outcomes flexible to raise the employability of graduates. This study offers an alternative to longer, or more expensive, interventions and instead explored how translating discipline specific skills through short conversations may have both relevance and impact in a pressurised higher education world.

Literature review

‘Employability’ both drives and causes debate within the skills discourse, with the literature united that the term employability is unclear and subjective (Tymon, 2013). Oliver states

that employability is about enabled graduates who are equipped for the working world (Oliver, 2015), while Wright and Jeffries-Watt relate employability to values, attributes, and behaviour, which may all change as a result of university experience, including improved resourcefulness (Wright and Jeffries-Watts, 2017, p.152). Hunter et al. refer to 'student success' rather than employability, stating that the key to student success is complicated and includes a differing combination of factors beyond ability and motivation (Hunter, Tobolowsky and Gardoner, 2010, p.30). 'Student success' has featured heavily in new UK policy relating to higher education with the Teaching Excellence and Framework incorporating the words 'Student Outcomes' into its title, as the metrics to measure teaching excellence now include graduate outcomes (Office for Students, 2020). Hillage and Pollard (1998) define employability as a movement through the labour market and the ability to gain, maintain, and obtain new employment. Yorke (2006) enhances the skills discourse through describing employability as a set of achievements improving the probability of employment, with Pegg et al. (2012) describing employability as a set of attributes that improve the probability of success. Tymon (2017) agrees, showing that it is skills and attributes that are the factors which constitute the overall employability of individuals.

As discussed above, much of the discourse surrounding employability focuses on the skills, or the graduate attributes, agenda. Oliver (2015) re-works Yorke's (2006) definition of employability to mean that students and graduates can discern, acquire, adapt, and continually enhance their skills whilst in a higher education setting. These 'soft skills', also known as 'generic skills', are transferable, non-discipline specific skills that may be achieved through learning and can be applied in study, work, or life contexts (Nghia, 2017). However, the transferability of these 'core' and 'key' skills gained in higher education is often assumed and HEIs have to develop students' awareness of these skills (Yorke, 2006; Oliver, 2015; Dunne, 2017). The emergence of the general skills agenda referred to as 'twenty-first-century skills' include abilities such as communication, critical thinking, and teamwork (Moore and Morton, 2017, p.592; Nghia, 2017, p.25), which are similar to those seen adapted by the Target Jobs list above (Target Jobs, 2017).

Despite ongoing debate about whether they can and should, most HEIs include the development of employability skills within their curricula, quality documents, and even recruitment material (Tymon, 2017).The Target Jobs skills outlined above now feature in many programmes where these attributes are embedded in learning and regulated in vocational programmes (Strampel and Lewis, 2016, p.23). However, Smith and Trevor (2015, p.47) caution that the adoption of learning outcomes in higher education brings the potential danger of these becoming formal and rigid, with students having to demonstrate their learning through what they *can do*, which is hard to sum up in verbally described learning outcomes. Some degrees have graduate employment at their heart with a strong vocational focus (Frankham, 2017), such as the University of Winchester's programmes in Primary Education, Digital Media Design, and Event Management; however, employability can often be an add-on to less vocational programmes.

Another major theme within the critical literature features research around the power of reflection to raise awareness and the realisation of skills gained to enhance employability (Lackner and Martini, 2017). Dunne (2017) outlines reflection as a powerful tool for increasing employability, stating that students need the opportunities and the spaces to critically evaluate the quality of their own work. Lackner and Martini (2017) state that self-reflection is important in preparation for interviews and job applications. Inspired by the reflection agenda, Personal Development Planning (PDP) has emerged as a major area of activity, which relies heavily on Self-Regulated Learning (SRL), personal monitoring, and managing one's own cognitive processes (Strampel and Lewis, 2016, p.23). In recent years, e-Portfolios have taken PDP online to enhance employability and are recognised as being a powerfully effective activity as they can be used to raise aspirations through goal setting (Strampel and Lewis, 2016).

Many HEIs run several activities for employability and enhancement reasons, which have also been identified as aligning with skills development and general engagement in the HEI (Kuh, Laird and Umbach, 2004; Kuh, 2007). Standardly, these activities offer one-to-one support where HEIs employ careers advisors who are sector specialists and are empowered to run cross-institution activities or specific events per programme. This one-to-one advice system is where the translation process could already exist; however, the

usefulness of these sessions has not been widely evaluated in the literature. Furthermore, not all students interact with careers advisors, so many will pass through higher education without a conversation or intervention to help them raise awareness and translate their skills. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) argue that interactions with staff play independent and positive roles in persistence, development of career relevant skills, career choice, cognitive development, reflective thinking, and moral reasoning. It takes time and effort for graduates to 'translate' and 'transform' the knowledge and skills they have learnt in universities into working contexts (Tran, 2015, p.211), yet not all students are necessarily strategic enough to make use of these services, especially if their career path is not clear.

Rationale

For this research study, Tran's reference to 'translating' was evaluated, by running an intervention which translates students' discipline specific skills into the employer's description of skills, such as those outlined by Target Jobs (Target Jobs, 2017). This intervention took place with final year students to help further understand student awareness of the flexibility of their learning outcomes to the job market (Tran, 2015, p.211). As outlined above, reflection drives advances in employability through articulation and evidencing transferable skills (Dunne, 2017; Lackner and Martini, 2017). However, this study wishes to take this one step further and add translation onto reflection. Many of the interventions discussed in the literature above rely on financial or high time investment from the government, institution, or student, all of which also require oversight and strategy. The intervention in this study would ask the academic personal tutor/mentor to take responsibility for the personal attribute development of students. This study will focus on more tangible and vocational skills through a conversation that could be adapted to already operating tutorials, which are often for academic and pastoral purposes only (Tymon, 2017). This evaluation aims to outline whether a short intervention lasting less than an hour could have the potential to enhance skills awareness through translating consciously aware discipline skills into employer sought skills, similar to those outlined by Target Jobs (2017) above, so students may become more able to convey their abilities in applications and interviews.

Research design

For this evaluation, it was concluded that a mixed research method of semi-structured interviews along with an evaluation survey would be used. The method of semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to be flexible and adapt following the questions of the interview. The intervention involved a single one-hour interview with participants covering the four stages. An interview (Stage 1), was conducted to explore students' perceptions of their skills gained from university, followed by the student completing Likert scale responses to Target Jobs' top 10 demanded skills by graduate employers (Stage 2). These two exercises were followed by a translation conversation (Stage 3). The evaluation was then completed by the student completing the Target Jobs Likert scale on paper, including a feedback question on their experience of a translation conversation (Stage 4). Both paper surveys were conducted without the researcher viewing them until after the session, with the researcher stepping away from the interview table while the participants completed Stage 2 and Stage 4. The paper surveys were put in a sealed envelope until after the interview to allow the translator/facilitator to remain unbiased and to ensure the participant was comfortable. The research design is summarised in Table 1 below.
For the participants of the study, final year (Level 6) students were chosen to take part in the intervention through a snowballing method. First year (Level 4) or second year (Level 5) students were not chosen as they would have had less exposure to a curriculum, therefore the ability to reflect on the whole degree would be less in-depth. Students from other educational levels, for example in further education, were not accessible to the researcher so therefore not used. Graduates were also not included in the study as they are more likely to have high exposure to the working world and more awareness of their applicable skills, as well as each having diverse experiences. Ethics approval was attained prior to the study in line with the University of Winchester's Ethics Guidelines and Processes (University of Winchester, 2014).

Table 1. Research Method.

Research Method

Stage 1: Interview questions	Research Tools: 1) Please state your home Faculty: 2) Why did you choose to come to study at university? 3) What do you consider to be your main outcome or goal as a result of completing your degree? 4) What skills do you feel you have gained from your degree for future employment?
Stage 2: Pre-intervention Survey	Research Tools: Likert Scales for Target Jobs' Top 10 skills [Researcher does not see the responses]
Stage 3: Intervention	Research Tools: Conduct translation skills conversation with student where the researcher has a conversation based on the interview response to questions 4 (Stage 1)
Stage 4: Post-Intervention Survey	Research Tools: Questionnaire of Likert Scales for Target Jobs' Top 10 skills with additional question to be completed by hand: How did you find the skills translation process? [Researcher does not see the responses]

Two comparative surveys, which the evaluation was based upon, were conducted in Stage 2 and 4, following the translation conversation, and allowing for comparison. This consisted of a list of the 10 Target Job skills with a question at the beginning instructing the participant to 'please answer the questions below circling how much you feel you gained the below skills from your degree (1 = strongly disagree and 10 = strongly agree)'. Then, an open field was chosen for the final evaluation of the experience of the intervention in Stage 4 (See Table 2 below). All surveys were kept in numbered envelopes referring to the participant's number for the duration of the primary research before being entered into a database analysis system.

Participants

To conduct the study, the researcher disseminated an internal call on the university's internal student portal asking for participants (students) in their final year, to volunteer to take part in a short skills reflection interview taking one hour of their time. The interviews took place at one of the catering outlets on campus. It was felt that as this was a one-to-one, relatively personal intervention, it was most appropriate to conduct this study in a public place to allow the participant to feel comfortable with the knowledge that they could withdraw at any time from the study.

A £20 voucher per participant was used as an incentive and the opportunity was advertised through the university online portal. The participants also signed a participant consent form prior to the research commencing. For this study, eight participants were recruited. All participants completed the full study, and none chose the option to withdraw. Details of the participants per faculty are outlined below (Table 2).

Table 2. Faculty and number of participants.

Faculty	Number of participants
Arts	3
Business, Law and Sport (BLS)	2

Education, Health and Social Care (EHSC)	1
Humanities and Social Science (HSS)	2

Findings

Stage 1: Why higher education?

The participants were asked why they chose to come to university, to benchmark the sample of participants against recent literature and reports outlining that a high proportion of UK students now come to higher education to strategically secure graduate employment (Unite, 2017; UUK, 2017). Participant 1 (BLS) stated they 'didn't feel quite mentally challenged if that makes sense' explaining that their occupation prior to higher education was 'bit dull' and that they 'didn't feel like I was progressing anymore', indicating that they sought more intellectual challenge. Participant 8 (BLS) suggested they thought similar, stating that their apprenticeship did not 'excel me as far as I thought it might', identifying business admin as the discipline of interest and desiring more of a challenge.

Participant 6 (HSS) stated that partly their 'family members wanted me to go' because they 'knew I had to get a degree in something' as 'it helps advance careers, um, and start at a higher position', so, 'it wasn't just for the pursuit of academic knowledge'; but, they chose the subject of history because they enjoyed it. Similarly, participant 3 (HSS) stated that 'the course, like, seemed really interesting' but also that they sought higher education 'to broaden, like, my horizons' for more opportunities in the future. Participant 7's (EHSC) attraction to higher education was also strategic, stating that originally they wished to become teacher and they had chosen to return to education as a mature student.

Participant 2 and 4, who were both in the Faculty of the Arts, were less certain about why they chose university, explaining that, basically 'all of my friends came', that at their 'school it's advertised as like the right thing to do', and that they were not 'very sure what I wanted

to go onto'. Participant 5 (Arts), however, stated that they 'wanted to gain more skills in the area' they wanted to go into and to 'have the experience of living independently'. Overall, six out of the eight participants stated some form of strategic reason or outcome-based motivation for study at higher education, based on learning, a challenge, unlocking future employment, or gaining new skills.

Perceived outcome of higher education?

This point of enquiry deliberately built on the literature asking the participants to state their main outcome or goal of completing their degree. In reflection of the above, where only 25% of the participants did not give an outcomes-based reason for higher education study, the researcher was interested to see if these students would continue the trend. Participants 6 (HSS), 7 (EHSC), and 8 (BLS) all referred to graduate or 'better positions' with participant 6 (HSS) referring to a 'higher wage' in a company and participant 7 (EHSC) stating that their decision to come to university 'was literally just to get a job, which I couldn't [get] without a degree.' Interestingly, aligning with Strayhorn (2015)'s language surrounding 'student success', participant 8 refers to 'obtaining a role in an organisation that I recognise as successful'.

Participant 2 (Arts) stated that a 'job in a sector' where they would have 'a career' they liked would be the main desired outcome. Participant 4 (Arts) did not agree, stating that 'social skills' were a main outcome, developed through experiences of working with 'diverse people'. Participant 5 (Arts) also spoke about skills like independence, living by themselves, and having the confidence to speak. Interestingly, participant 1 (BLS), did not refer to a graduate job or a specific career and stated a more traditional view of university outcomes, identifying greater criticality or a 'new perspective'. Participant 3 (HSS) did state that a 'decent job' was a desired outcome, yet also reasoned that more traditional higher education was associated with expecting that they would become 'more wholesome as a person.'

Perceived skills gained

The final part of the interview in stage one was intended to explore the participants' perception of the skills that they had gained from higher education study, to benchmark the kind of words used in comparison to the skills referred to by Target Jobs and the other literature above (Target Jobs, 2017). The participants and the referenced skills are listed in the table below, with some analysis following:

Table 3. Summarised list of skills stated in answer to Stage 1, Question 4.

Participant No.	Referenced Skills
Participant 1 (BLS)	Organisation; Critical Thinking; Writing Skills; Speed Reading; Research.
Participant 2 (Arts)	Practical Film Skills; Equipment Knowledge and Application; Script Writing; Leadership Skills; Organisation; Time Management; Planning.
Participant 3 (HSS)	Communication Skills; Academic Skills; Writing Skills; Mathematics; Life Skills.
Participant 4 (Arts)	Social Skills; Enhanced Work Ethic towards Learning.
Participant 5 (Arts)	Confidence; Clarity; People Skills;

Participant 6 (HSS)	Analysis; Presenting an Argument; Critical Thinking; Reasoning; Working with Limited Knowledge.
Participant 7 (EHSC)	Critical Thinking; Different Perspectives; Different Approaches; Organisation.
Participant 8 (BLS)	Organisational Skills; Communications Skills; Teamwork; People Skills.

The skills outlined above are the first responses to the question asking the participants what skills they felt they gained from their degree alone. A large portion of the skills raised are attributes that can be often seen on programme documents relating to learning outcomes (Smith and Trevor, 2015), such as criticality of different perspectives and certain discipline specific skills such as writing and practical skills. This was expected, as these students were currently being tutored on these courses. Of the 35 skills referenced above by the students, only four (mathematics; academic skills; practical film skills; equipment knowledge and application) can be argued to be discipline specific, though with further analysis below, this number increases.

When further analysing the 35 skills above, 20 of these skills referred to academic programmes of study and 15 skills referred to the wider higher education experience. This is useful to assess as it shows the students perceive that the majority of skills gained from their university experience are directly linked to their academic course, in contrast to wider, more general skills like time management or communication. Therefore, at this stage in the analysis, there is scope for raising awareness through the following translation exercise. For example, participants would refer to skills in an academic sense such as: ‘everything that kind of relates to research or writing’ (participant 1 (BLS)), ‘well I learnt a lot of skills,

like a lot of practical skills about Film' (participant 2 (Arts)), and 'it's made me have a better work ethic, um, so I can learn things a lot quicker as well like new concepts' (participant 4 (Arts)). General skills such as teamwork and organisation were referred to more generally in the context of the entire higher education journey, with participants referring to 'organisational skills and kind of how to manage my time and how to plan my time as well' (participant 2 (Arts)) and 'working in teams, but not just the ability to work in teams, but value what other people bring to it as well' (participant 8 (BLS)). This was considered in the next phases of the study when the participants were asked about their perceived skills strength against the general Target Jobs list.

Stage 2: Pre-intervention skills survey

The second stage of the research asked the participants to fill in 1-10 Likert Scales of the Target Jobs skills list to assess their perception of their existing skills prior to the intervention. The weighted average of each students' responses pre- and post-intervention are shown in Figure 1.

Assessing the results produces some initial observations. First, for the majority of the skills (9 out of 10), perceived possession is high with all skills apart from 'commercial awareness (or business acumen)' rating six and above on average. 'Commercial awareness', referring to an awareness of business general knowledge is certainly the most ambiguous of these skills, and could be seen as less relatable to disciplines in the Humanities or Arts. Certain skills scored highly with the weighted average agreeing that they possess the skills of 'communication', 'perseverance and motivation', and 'confidence', scoring 8/10 and above pre-intervention. These high scores are not a surprise as those exact skills, or similar surrounding organisation or work ethic, were referenced in stage one by many of the participants (participants: 1 (BLS), 2 (Arts), 3 (HSS), 4 (Arts), 7 (EHSC), 8 (BLS)). The remaining skills all scored between 7 and 8, showing a reasonably high self-awareness of these skills. Therefore, pre-intervention, the participants on average agreed that they possessed the majority of the skills, yet with some space for increases post-intervention.

Stage 3: Translation process

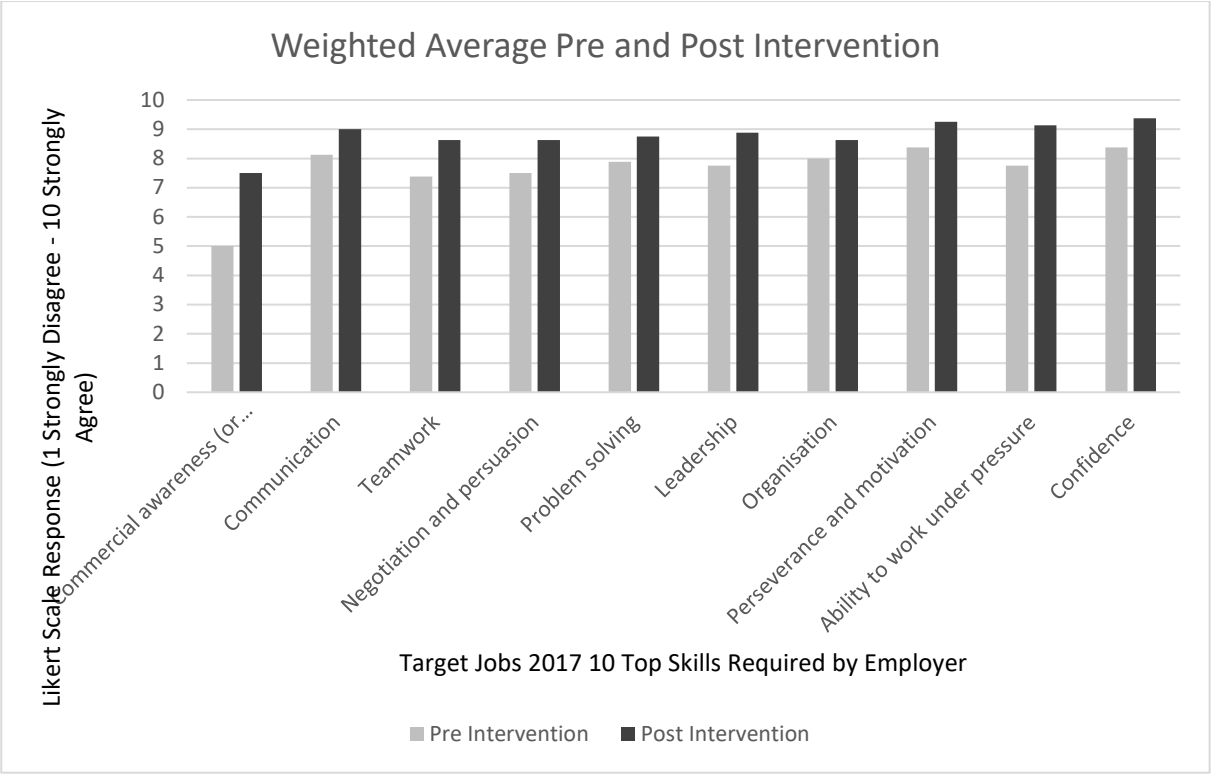
As stated above, the translation conversation was inspired by Tran who outlined that students do not always possess the ability to 'translate' their skills to potential employers post-secondary education (Tran, 2015). The researcher for this study performed the role of the translator of skills to help the participants potentially raise their awareness/transferability of the skills derived from their programme. The researcher was aware of the students' academic faculty of study and had conducted the interview questions in Stage 1, but otherwise had no knowledge of the participant. The researcher also had not seen the responses to the first Likert Scale of Target Jobs' skills as they were not present during this stage and the paper survey was put away in an envelope following completion (Stage 2).

The researcher used motivational and persuasive language when translating each of the skills. Often the researcher would have to improvise and adapt conversation for the students' academic faculty, as some programmes with a more vocational focus were more likely to align with the skills list. One consideration is that this project relied heavily upon the translation facilitator: if one was to consider widening this intervention with multiple individuals across a course, or hundreds of colleagues across an entire education institution, it cannot be guaranteed that all colleagues would have the personal skills suitable for the process. There was also no standard translation order or script, therefore this might present some difficulty when transferring this intervention.

Stage 4: Post-intervention skills survey

Stage 4 offered an opportunity to evaluate the intervention by using the same Target Jobs' list of Likert Scales for a second time. Again, for this process, the researcher left the interview table to avoid adding pressure to the participants completing this task. The overall weighted averages of the responses (pre- and post- intervention) are shown in Figure 1 below.

Figure 1. Weighted averages of entire sample pre- and post- intervention.



As shown in the table above, each of the skills has shown an increase, with students responding that they felt their understanding of the skillset they had acquired through their degree had increased as a result of the translation exercise. The increase on average per skills was by 1.163 points on the Likert scale and the highest increase in skills awareness came from 'commercial awareness (or business acumen)' with a weighted average increase of 2.5 points. This has already been noted to be one of the more ambiguous skills for students who are not on a business or private sector vocational course. Out of the skills featured, all ten have increased, which shows that the translation conversation has had an impact with this small sample size (see table below for weighted average differences).

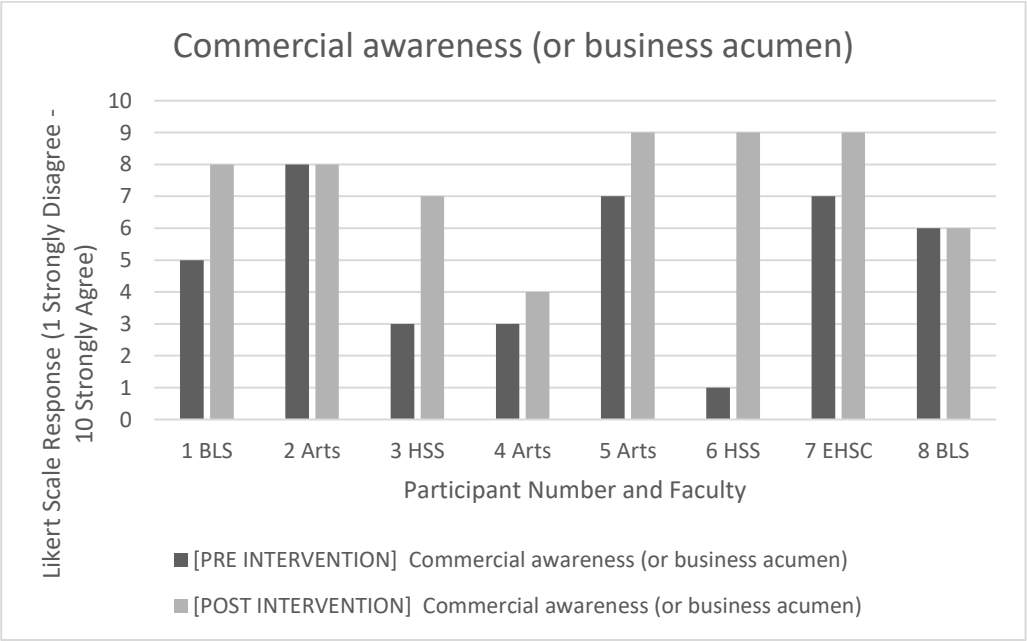
Table 4. Difference in weighted average pre- and post- translation conversation (intervention).

Skills	Weighted Average Difference Pre- and Post- Intervention
1.Commercial awareness (or business acumen)	2.5
2. Communication	0.87

3. Teamwork	1.25
4. Negotiation and persuasion	1.13
5. Problem solving	0.87
6. Leadership	1.13
7. Organisation	0.63
8. Perseverance and motivation	0.87
9. Ability to work under pressure	1.38
10. Confidence	1

Looking further at the skills that saw the largest increase, which were ‘commercial awareness (or business acumen)’ and ‘ability to work under pressure’, it was of interest to see if any patterns existed across the participants from different faculties/academic disciplines. Detailed graphs for these two skills of each individual are included below (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

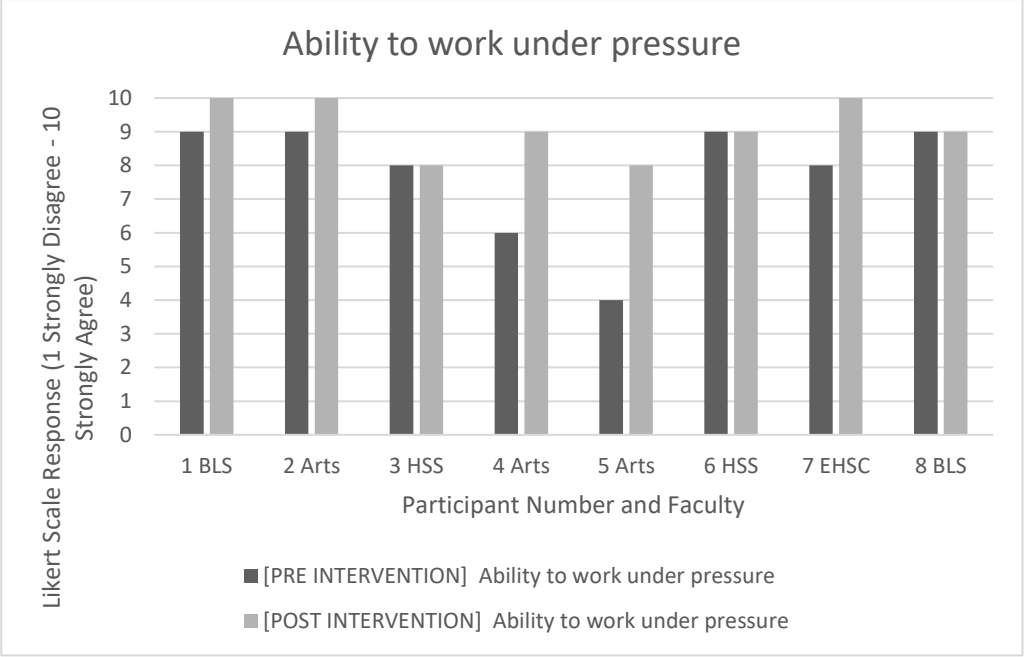
Figure 2. Response for ‘commercial awareness (or business acumen)’ averages of total sample pre- and post- intervention.



The ‘commercial awareness (or business acumen)’ skill needed the most translation in the exercise as it initially appears to be a skill that pertains to courses relating to the private

business sector. The perception of this skill can be seen in the responses of the participants from the Faculty of the Arts and Humanities and Social Sciences, with three participants (3 (HSS), 4 (Arts) and 6 (HSS)) completing the pre-intervention with a score of 3 or lower. Every participant apart from participant 8 (BLS) and 2 (Arts) showed an increase post-evaluation, most notably the two participants from Humanities and Social Sciences showed an increase of 4 and a more substantial 8. Although this is a small sample, HSS participants did show benefit from the intervention. However, drawing conclusions from the other faculties is difficult, as the BLS and Arts participants varied in their responses and unfortunately the single participant from the Faculty of Education Health and Social Care makes general conclusions unreliable as there is only one individual.

Figure 3. Response for 'ability to work under pressure' averages of total sample pre- and post- intervention.



The average for the skill 'ability to work under pressure' is drawn from certain faculties with the largest increases coming from participants 4 (Arts) (increase from 6 to 9) and 5 (Arts) (increase from 4 to 8), which suggests there is a need for a translation exercise that raises the awareness of their transferable skills in this area for these disciplines/faculties. These two responses alone have made this skill the second highest increase post-intervention,

as the other participants have noted minor increases of one or two points on the Likert scale (participants 1 (BLS), 2 (Arts), and 7 (EHSC)), or not at all (participants 3 (HSS), 6 (HSS), and 8 (BLS).

Stage 4: Feedback on translations process

At the end of Stage 4, an open field question was included asking the participants 'How was your experience of this process, as a means to raise awareness of skills gained from your degree course/programme?' All eight participants wrote a response to this question. The feedback on the process was largely positive with participants stating that the conversation helped them 'look at the listed skills in a different light' suggesting that they 'became more aware of the meaning of the different skills' (participant 1 (BLS)). Participant 3 reported a heightened awareness, stating that they felt 'like I have gained a lot more from my degree other than a psychology and criminology degree' (participant 3 (HSS)). The process was identified as a useful means to learn how to draw examples and use language appropriately (participants 4 (Arts) and 6 (HSS)). Participant 6 spoke about how it was 'good … to have these terms explained' (participant 6 (HSS)) and participant 7 agreed expressing a positive experience which had helped them 'realise skills are better than I thought by explaining what I've learnt to put into practice' (participant 7 (EHSC)).

Participant 7 also stated how the conversation was 'very helpful in terms of how to interpret/re-word/put across skills to prospective employers in relation to the work needed for a degree' (participant 7 (BLS)). This aligned with participant 8 who said 'conversations like this can help with positive thinking. If I were to think alone about my skillset, it may be more limited and less creative' (participant 8 (BLS)). Finally, participant 8 stated that the process had helped their 'knowledge of how you can *promote* yourself for employability. Particularly relevant to the negotiation/persuasion skills', and they commended 'the researcher [who] brought a new perspective to this for me' (participant 8 (BLS)).

Interestingly, participant 4, who showed the least difference pre- and post- intervention, stated that they already felt quite 'self-aware of my skills as I'd already approached careers', neatly confirming the introduction to this study, which assumed that translation

exercises were already occurring in careers services. Only one response participant did not feedback positivity on the process, instead stating that their 'own self-doubt can get in the way of what I'm capable of' (participant 5 (Arts)), which could be a reflection on their confidence following the translation conversation.

Limitations

As stated throughout this study, the sample size of this intervention is small, consisting of only eight final year student participants, therefore the conclusions cannot reflect the entire institution. The study would have to be repeated with a wider portion of students, hopefully reaching the number of the population deemed desirable by Bryman who asks for 30% of the population to create a more reliable sample and conclusion (Bryman, 2015, p.225). It can be argued that the contexts and experiences of higher education for individual students, who are each on different courses, are too different to compare due to the sheer amount of variables which are not accounted for in this study (Neuman, 2012, p.95). Reviewing any aspect of the student experiences or gain from higher education is complex, with several variables influencing results, and this study was specific to Winchester's context (Antonucci, 2013).

It is also important to consider the situation of the participant when completing this evaluation. As noted in the methodology, the researcher felt that it was important to ensure the student felt comfortable in the study by ensuring they were well informed of the study and conducting the intervention in a public place. However, the participant could have felt persuaded in the intervention to answer positively, picking up the motivations behind the research, or that they needed to show confidence about their skills even if such confidence was lacking (Neuman, 2012, p.95). It is worth considering that positive responses are more common in personal questions, as an example of positive acquiescence (Bryman, 2015, p.228). It is also a probability that Likert scales of random answers lower reliability (Yates, 2003, p.93). The study lacked a control group to compare the overall findings to, making this an isolated small study.

One common variable of this study was the translation facilitator, who was the same individual across all eight participants. However, it must be recognised that this individual would have brought their own personal attributes to this process. As stated in the reflection of the translation process section above, the facilitator drew upon personal skills such as persuasion, motivation, improvisation, and an accessible manner, which could have enhanced the opportunity for the student to gain greater understanding from the process. If this process is used on a wider scale, more translation facilitators would be required and therefore the personal skill sets of those individuals would differ and this could mean the outcome of the translation intervention could be different.

Conclusions

This small intervention followed the terminology of Tran who argued that it takes time and effort for graduates to 'translate' and 'transform' the knowledge and skills they have learnt in higher education into a working context (Tran, 2015, p.211). The study highlighted that following the intervention the participants' perception of their gain in these skills from their degree had increased. Skills awareness increased across all eight participants, with the highest increase and impact of the intervention falling on the previously lowest scoring skill 'commercial awareness (or business acumen)'. This research paper suggests that there is a space for translating discipline specific skills into the skills listed above through a translation exercise. The above findings have outlined that possible students may communicate their academic disciplinary skills gained from their degree rather than more general skills that could be asked for by employers. This study has also offered an intervention that could have a notable influence on the students' journeys and enhance opportunities in graduate employment life, raising awareness through reframing skills which students already possess. Finally, the intervention met its target of creating a time efficient intervention, taking less than one hour per participant, therefore offering a shorter employability action for HEIs.

References

Antonucci, L. (2013) 'Comparative research in higher education studies: considering the different levels of comparison and emerging mythological challenges', in Huisman, J. and Tight, M. (eds.) *Theory and method in higher education research*. London: Emerald Group Publishing, pp. 1-19.

Bryman, A., (2015) *Social research methods*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (2017) Industrial Strategy: building a Britain fit for the future. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/industrial-strategy-building-a-britain-fit-for-the-future (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2009) Skills for growth: the national skills strategy. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/skills-for-growth-the-national-skills-strategy (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) (2015) Higher education: success as a knowledge economy - white paper. Available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/higher-education-success-as-a-knowledge-economy-white-paper (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Department for Education (2017) Higher Education and Research Act 2017. Available at: http://www.legislation.gov.uk/ukpga/2017/29/contents/enacted (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Dunne, J. (2017) 'Working placement reflective assessments and employability enhanced through highlighting graduate attributes', *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 8(1), pp.40-59.

Frankham, J. (2017) 'Employability and higher education: the follies of the 'productivity challenge' in the Teaching Excellence Framework', *Journal of Education Policy*, 32(5), pp.628-641.

Hager, P. (2006) 'Nature and development of generic attributes', in *Graduate attributes, learning and employability.* Springer, Dordrecht, pp. 17-47.

Hillage, J. and Pollard, E. (1998) *Employability: developing a framework for policy analysis*. London: Department for Education.

Hunter, M., Tobolowsky, B. and Gardoner, J. (2010) *Helping sophomores succeed: Understanding and improving the second year experience*. Chichester: John Wiley & Sons.

Kuh, G.D. (2007) 'What student engagement data tell us about college readiness', *Peer Review*, 9(1), p.4.

Kuh, G.D., Laird, T.F.N. and Umbach, P.D. (2004) 'Aligning Faculty Activities & Student Behavior: Realizing the Promise of Greater Expectations', *Liberal education*, 90(4), pp.24-31.

Lackner, C. and Martini, T. (2017) 'Helping university students succeed at employment interviews: the role of self-reflection in e-portfolios', *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*, 5(2), pp.3-15.

Lea, J. (ed.) (2015) *Enhancing learning and teaching in higher education: Engaging with the dimensions of practice*. Milton Keynes: Open University Press.

Levy, P., Little, S. and Whelan, N. (2011) 'Perspectives on staff-student partnerships in learning, research and educational enhancement', in Little, S. (ed.) *Staff-student partnerships in higher education.* London: Bloomsbury Publishing.

Moore, T. and Morton, J. (2017) 'The myth of job readiness? Written communication, employability, and the "skills gap" in higher education', *Studies in Higher Education*, 42(3), pp.591-609.

Neuman, W.L. (2012) *Basics of social research: Qualitative and quantitative approaches*. Cambridge: Pearson.

National Union of Students [NUS], HSBC (2011) NUS/HSBC Student Experience Full Report. Available at: https://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/NUS-HSBC-Experience-report-web.pdf (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Nghia, T. (2017) 'Developing generic skills for students via extra-curricular activities in Vietnamese universities: Practices and influential factors', *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 8(1), pp.40-59.

Office for Students (2018) Securing student success: Regulatory framework for higher education in England. Available at: https://www.nus.org.uk/PageFiles/12238/NUS-HSBC-Experience-report-web.pdf (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Office for Students (2020) What is the TEF? Available at: https://www.officeforstudents.org.uk/advice-and-guidance/teaching/about-the-tef/ (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Oliver, B. (2015) 'Redefining graduate employability and work-integrated learning: Proposals for effective higher education in disrupted economies', *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 6(1), pp.56-65.

Pascarella, E.T. and Terenzini, P.T. (2005) *How college affects students* (Vol. 2). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Pegg, A., Waldock, J., Hendy-Isaac, S. and Lawton, R. (2012) 'Pedagogy for employability', Advance HE. Available at: https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/pedagogy-employability-2012 (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Strampel, K. and Lewis, A. (2016) 'Personal development planning and ePortfolios in speech pathology: Staff and student perceptions', *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, 7(1), pp.22-41.

Strayhorn, T.L. (2015) *Student development theory in higher education: A social psychological approach*. London: Routledge.

Thomas, L. (2012) 'Building student engagement and belonging in higher education at a time of change: a summary of findings and recommendations from the What Works? Student Retention and Success programme', Paul Hamlyn Foundation. Available at: http://lizthomasassociates.co.uk/commuter_students.html (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Tran, T. (2015) 'Is graduate employability the "whole-of-higher-education-issue"?', *Journal of Education and Work*, 28(3), pp.207-227.

Tymon, A. (2013) 'The student perspective on employability', *Studies in higher education*, 38(6), pp.841-856.

Unite (2017) Student Resilience: Unite Students Insight Report. Available at: http://www.unite-group.co.uk/sites/default/files/2017-03/student-insight-report-2016.pdf (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

University of Portsmouth (2016) Students' Responsibilities: Hallmarks of a Portsmouth Graduate. Available at: https://www.port.ac.uk/about-us/structure-and-governance/our-people/students-responsibilities#:~:text=Our%20graduates%20will%3A&text=Be%20intellectually%20curious%2C%20embrace%20challenges,current%20and%20emerging%20digital%20technologies. (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

University of Winchester (2014) Research and Knowledge Exchange Ethics Policy. Winchester: University of Winchester.

Universities United Kingdom [UUK] (2017) Education, consumer rights and maintaining trust: what students want from their university. Available at: http://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/policy-and-analysis/reports/Pages/what-students-want-from-their-university.aspx (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Yorke, M. (2006) *Employability in higher education: what it is-what it is not* (Vol. 1). York: Higher Education Academy. Available at: https://www.heacademy.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/employability-higher-education-what-it-what-it-not (Accessed: 14 June 2020).

Author details

Tom Lowe is the Head of Student Engagement and Employability at the University of Winchester where he programme-leads the masters in Student Engagement in Higher Education.