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The 15th Enhancement Conference - 7 June 2018

**Evaluation, Evidence and Enhancement:**  
Inspiring Staff and Students

The gap between degree outcomes and employability skills

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With thanks to RGU Careers and Employability Centre, RGU Assistant Chief  
Academic Officer and Ezinne Ileagu

**ABSTRACT:**

This research aims to highlight, via the use of qualitative and quantitative methods, a possible mismatch between a degree learning outcomes and employability skills. By use of a mixed methods approach, inclusive of employer feedback, relevant data can be extrapolated to provide a fuller picture on skills gaps. This is in addition to other mechanisms such as student evaluation questionnaires (SEQs), National Student Surveys (NSS) and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA) benchmarks. Together these approaches can aid in course development, informing educators and for students give an awareness of the meaning of a degree outcomes to an employer. Up skilling moves quickly in today's society, in a 'disrupted' workplace, which is seeing skill sets changing to meet the needs of the digital economy (Gray 2016), otherwise termed the fourth industrial revolution (4.0).

This is a subsequent piece of research from last year's QAA enhancement themed presentation (Bremner 2017) extending the mixed method research conducted with alumni to add in qualitative research which focused on employers. Original data analysis highlighted gaps in digital and soft/group skills from a Fashion Management (FM) degree perspective, which some alumni felt missing. This year's research identified the importance of digital skills in the workplace from the employer point of view. This additional step strengthens the debate for employers and universities to work more symbiotically to close any gaps between a degree outcomes and employability skills to provide graduates who are 'work ready' for 4.0.

Given the findings, recommendations highlighted that the data gathered can be used to inform our FM degree, and that mixed methods approaches are required to include employer input to contribute to the further success the RGU FM graduate, through the learner journey. Notwithstanding this it has to be noted that this is small scale research, whilst at RGU level research has been conducted to support the wider strategic direction on graduate outcomes. This research aims to be reflective in nature and suggests educationalists need to think out of the box.

**1.0 Introduction:**

The stimulation for investigating this topic builds on from previous research (Bremner 2017), where it was highlighted that workplace skills are disrupting with digital and soft skills becoming a highly commonplace necessity. With 4.0 on the horizon many reports (ECOYRS UK 2016, Gray 2016) are noting changing skills, which degree developers must consider for students, 'enabling each to succeed in a rapidly changing workplace' (Hounsell 2011, p.2). However, at degree level the feedback course teams tend to receive is that of

SEQs, NSS and the Destinations of Leavers from Higher Education (DLHE). This data is often extrapolated to produce analytics to form league tables which are used in the external environment to benchmark courses and universities. Notwithstanding this educational institutes and employers collaborate, sharing best practice in the area of employability and transferable skills, taking into account the QAA benchmarks for subject areas. Although achieving high course satisfaction rates our FM course had no recent empirical research (2017) to support course developments and our Institutional Led Subject Review (ILSR).

As Head of Year for stage four FM, it gives responsibility for preparing a Professional Skills Enhancement Programme (PSEP). In collaboration with colleagues from RGU's Careers and Employability Centre (CaEC), this aims to provide sessions which consider the transferability of skills, engaging the students to be more aware of the skills they have developed. Taking these things into account the purpose of this paper is to highlight, via the use of qualitative and quantitative methods, a possible mismatch between the FM degree level learning outcomes (LLOs) and employability skills into a 'disrupted workplace'

## 2.0 Literature:

First destination employment for any graduate is challenging as competition is high (High Fliers 2018). Robert Gordon University was the top University in Scotland for graduate prospects (Guardian 2017). Its previous vision for employability was '*for its graduates to be recognised as the most fit-for-work, innovative, creative and engaged participants in the labour force and the economy, and for the university to be recognised for its close engagement with employers*'. (Walker, 2014). However, skills requirements are evolving (Hamill, 2018) meaning changes are required in order for employees, future graduates, to be 'work ready'. Gray (2016, World Economic Forum) noted the top 10 skills required for 2020 (Figure 1). With the many challenges in respect of 4.0, the repurposed vision of a RGU graduates framework has evolved.

Figure 1 The top ten skills for 2020

### Top 10 skills

#### in 2020

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
3. Creativity
4. People Management
5. Coordinating with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Judgment and Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
9. Negotiation
10. Cognitive Flexibility

#### in 2015

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Coordinating with Others
3. People Management
4. Critical Thinking
5. Negotiation
6. Quality Control
7. Service Orientation
8. Judgment and Decision Making
9. Active Listening
10. Creativity



Source: Future of Jobs Report, World Economic Forum

Gray 2016 in World Economic Forum

Pressure has grown for students to differentiate themselves (Walker 2014) and the requirement for 'employability skills' to be intrinsically incorporated (Norton 2016) in degree

programmes has strengthened. Many reports have highlighted the need for digital skills/literacy (DS/DL) incorporation in learning contexts (Hounsell 2011, Laurillard et al 2016, ECOYRS UK 2016, Scottish Government 2016) or within the work sphere (Price Waterhouse Cooper 2018). 'Digital literacy' in its generic state has been identified as a necessity for all jobs (Laurillard et al 2016). Yet the CBI (2014) noted weaknesses in employee IT skills, a point furthered by ECOYRS in 2016. Jisc describes DL as 'those capabilities which fit an individual for living, learning and working in a digital society' (Jisc 2014, np). They further the 'seven elements' in DL with the inclusion of Beetham and Sharpe's (2010) framework encompassing four areas: access and awareness, skills, practices and identity, a starting place for many institutions in terms of degree DL integration. The Employability in Scotland (2017) forum have stressed a 'collective approach to skills must continue' as the necessity for digital skills becomes 'vital to the economic development, internationalisation and innovation' of Scotland (Hepburn 2017). A hidden pipeline of talent is identifiable in non computing sectors such as the creative industries (Employability in Scotland 2017).

Notwithstanding this, the top ten skills (Figure 1) include soft skills with numbers 4-6 involving people to some extent, which is ironic considering 4.0 is supposed to be AI and robot driven. Working with people is still as important (CIPD 2017), as a typical web site for jobs, monster.co.uk (2018) cites personal effectiveness and relationship management as employee requirements. Bremner (2017) previously highlighted 'traditional graduate skills have to be transferrable and attribute based inclusive of; communication and interpersonal skills, team working, intellect and problem solving, critical and reflective ability, adaptability and risk-taking if organisations are to 'proact' to change' (p.3). Soft skills can often be incorporated in degrees through team work, presentations, workplace experience and working with clients on coursework's. The communities for practice framework C4P (Hoadley and Kilner 2005) was noted (Bremner 2107) as a useful group work model for incorporation in modules as it works 'by emulating the activities of industry teams on group projects' (Hoadley and Kilner, 2005. p. 53).

Part of the School of Creative and Cultural Business suite of courses includes the BA (Hons) in Fashion Management. The course is designed taking into account the QAA benchmarks, Scotland's Quality Enhancement Framework (QEF), the Enhancement-Led Institutional Review (ELIR) and the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF). Employer's viewpoints are taken into account through liaison committees. The BA (Hons) has achieved a course satisfaction rating of over 80% consistently from the NSS with a 100% in 2015-2016. The fashion sector itself is constantly undergoing change though and is one of the largest sectors of the UK economy with a market value of "£62 billion" in 2017 (Statista, 2017). Globally, consumption patterns and the introduction of digitisation practices such as 3d printers, AI for supply chains, is disrupting fashion employment, whilst many consumer reports highlight the need for 'market prioritisation' as a strategy for survival (Euromonitor 2017).

The importance of employers and universities working together cannot be underestimated given these skills priorities, where the gap between degree outcomes and employability skills may have to be identified more quickly if the education sector is to be competitive. Students transferable skills are often highlighted in attribute conceptual frameworks by many universities (Glasgow, Oxford Brookes, Leeds Beckett) to underpin a student and employers understanding, as is the case in the Jisc digital literacies programme (Jisc, 2014). As jobs become more transient, skills and employee development for 4.0 will become more end to end, 'where the employee digital experience can be better designed, orchestrated, simplified, aggregated, and connected' (Hinchcliffe 2018 np). This point is not unlike that of the RGU student learner journey, which has to be 'intrinsically involved in any degree programme'. This suggests a business process model which could be incorporated at appropriate university level for employees and future employees (Alumni). It has to be noted



The initial focus groups (Stage 1) with 6 FM students returning from placement highlighted their use of many degree developed skills within the workplace but post thematic analysis findings suggested the need to investigate the areas of group/soft and digital skills, a point supported by the 2 alumni (Stage 2). Stages 1 and 2 aided the development of the e-questionnaire (Stage 3), allowing for triangulation (Denscombe 2014), where the modified LLOs were used as four point Likert scale questions. Questions examined personal data, the LLOs and a final section targeted the missing group/soft and digital skills. Post pilot (Bell and Waters 2014), the e-questionnaire was moved to a snap survey platform and distributed to the FM alumni. A 16% response rate allowed for deductive analysis, prior to stage 4, where 7 follow up interviews were used to investigate the findings in more depth in relation to the gaps noted.

As the importance of digital skills as a gap had been highlighted through the previous research in 2016-2017, phase 2 (2108) involved semi structured interviews (no =8) with employers and representatives in RGU CaEC. There were 10 questions, 3 relating to the business and 7 relating to the topic of what are digital skills, their importance, training and development, HE degrees and the future development. The sample of employers included 2 owners (fashion social communication), 1 communication manager (food agency), 1 IT manager (fashion manufacturing), 1 marketing manager (fashion/retail), 1 design consultant (fashion) and 2 managers from RGU. Five out of 8 of these businesses were SMEs, but were chosen for their industry knowledge and experience of digital skills.

Whilst there are limitations to this study, due in part to its small sample size and a one degree, one institution only approach, there has been an element of 'closing the loop' with phase 2 of the research. It allows for some generalisation to occur, whilst the extension of more data collection adds weight to the validity of the findings from phase 1.

## **4.0 Findings/discussion:**

With such a variety, range and amount of data collected only the important findings will be reported here. Reflection on a previous recommendation is also provided. The two themes include: the gap between employability skills delivered on the FM degree and the workplace and the second examining digital skills gaps and employers points of view. Finally, the relevance of using mixed methods research to enhance student employability will be highlighted.

### **4.1 The gap between employability skills delivered on the FM degree and the workplace**

From phase one of the research, there was overwhelming support for the fact that a majority of degree skills delivered had transferred into placement and first destination employment whether in fashion related jobs or not. The FM degree was noted by all for its diversity providing a good grounding for employment upon graduating (Bremner 2017).

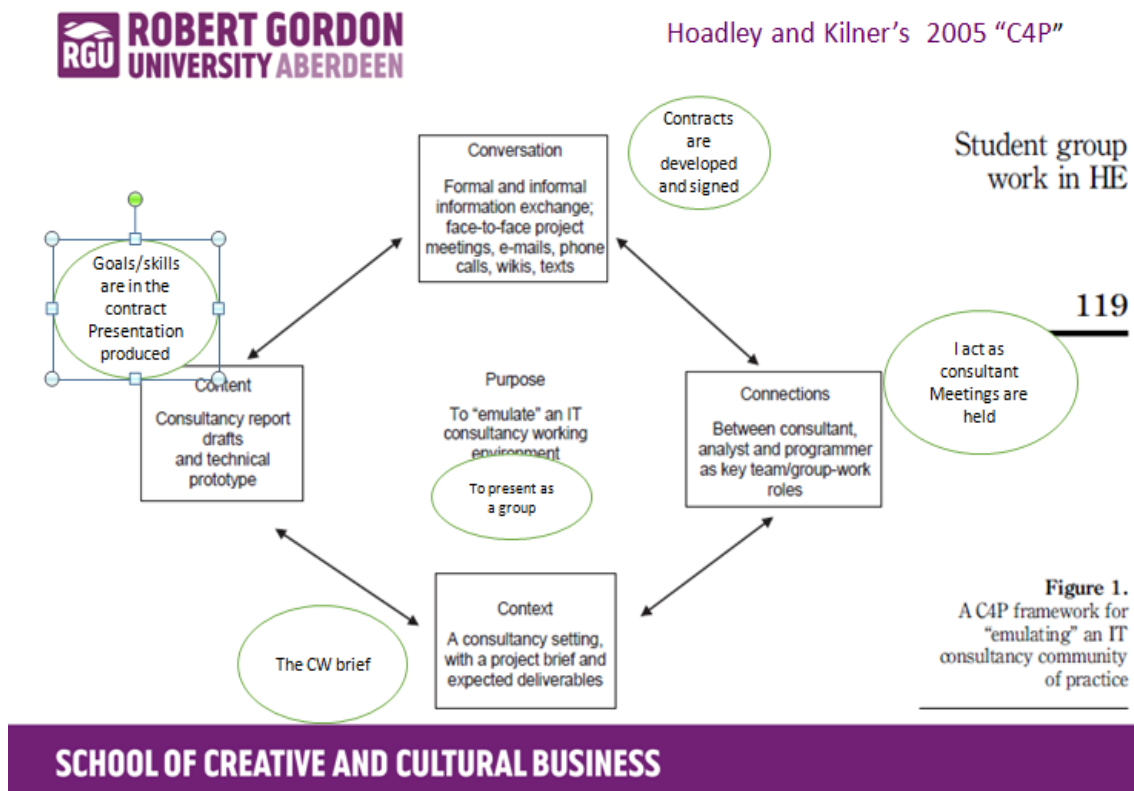
A similar pattern was identified from the e-questionnaire where a number of the degree's LLOs were positively skewed. These included aspects on employability, transferability and enterprise skills supporting the fact that the FM degree has high course satisfaction rate (NNS 2017) and that skills transfer when embedded into degrees (Norton 2016).

LLOs from the questionnaire which did not fare as well included development of digital, group and soft skills. A point supported by the interviewees (no=7) from stage 4 of the process. A range of 'digital literacy' points were noted such as the use of Photoshop, Excel, creation of digital portfolios, app development and mail chimp, whilst they also recognised more of these 'digital skills may have been incorporated' since their graduation' (Bremner 2017 p.4). Interviewees noted that workplace experience, oral presentations and working

with 'real clients' aided soft/group skills development and although they did not like group work they realised the need for it. A couple of them highlighted they did not feel ready for working in groups meaning that skill set had not transferred as well. It could be stated though that only experience gives you this kind of skill, but as educationalists we have to try and 'bridge that gap'.

Focusing on the soft/group work skills, these findings add to the work of Hoadley and Kilner (2005) and Fearon et al (2012). As recommended by Bremner in 2017 and reflected upon the C4P ethos was piloted in the stage 4 Global Fashion Strategy module (2017) (Figure 3), in order to increase the level of soft/group skills' transferability. A 'team' contract was deployed to emulate work practice situations in the teams. As yet no follow up research can provide feedback (awaiting SEQs), however an industry employed external examiner expressed the following observations (Figure 4).

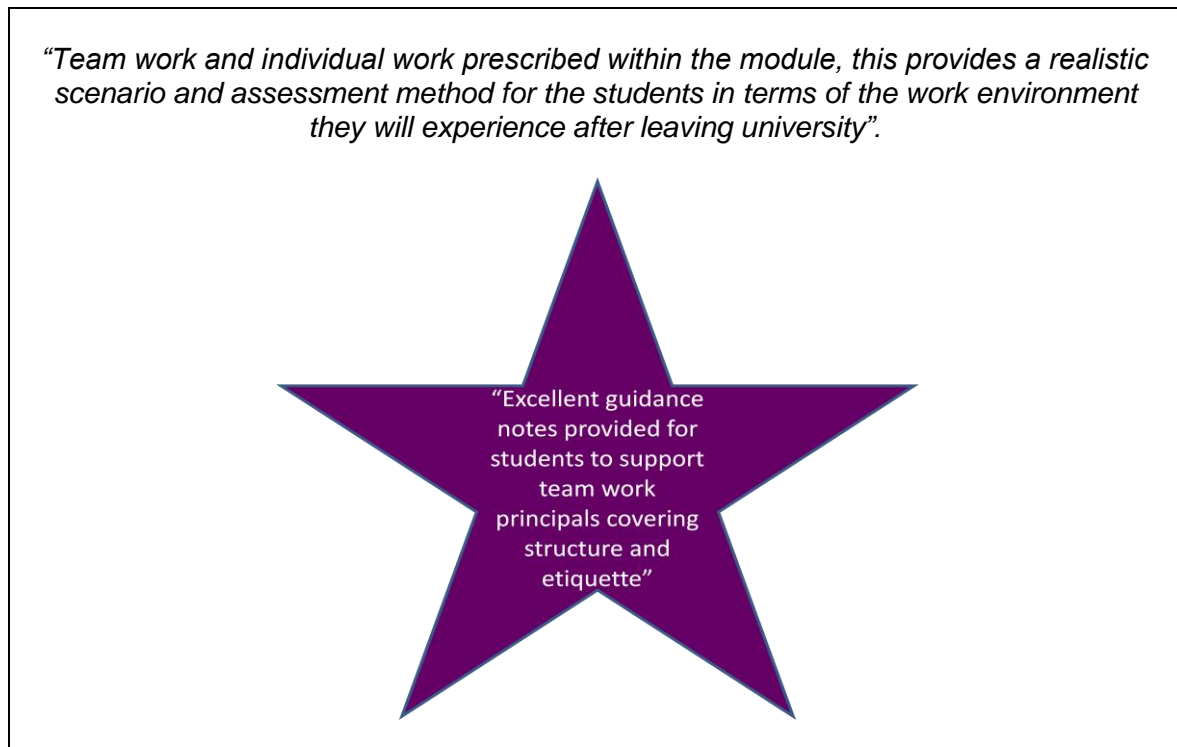
Figure 3 Communities for Practice Model applied to the Global Fashion Strategy Module coursework



Bremner (2018), Fearon et al (2012), Hoadley and Kilner (2005)



Figure 4 Comments from the external examiner on the module assessment for Global Fashion Strategy module



Bremner 2018

#### 4.2 Digital skills gaps and employers points of view

The 8 employer interviews provided some useful findings to support the embedding of digital skills. Firstly, in defining the term digital skills the interviewees noted technical and functional aspects citing the use of IT packages, typing, content development, social media, digital communication and brand presentation as key aspects. All 8 highlighted the increase in company employees requiring digital skills, where improving strategy, customer relationships, data analysis and increasing profits were noted as benefits from having these skills, which was driven, in some cases by consumer demand. The CaEC interviewees noted the point that graduates are not always clear on what their DL is, or not knowing they have it. In terms of higher education a general consensus existed with 6 out of 8 interviewees noting that universities should have some sort of ‘digital’ input in place in any degree discipline. In contrast 2 interviewees in the marketing/content creation sectors said only marketing type courses needed to have digital skills input.

Turning to digital skills ‘futures’ all interviewees noted the need for greater knowledge and ability with ‘digital’, stressing that new employees should ‘come prepared’ with digital skills for employment. Yet training and development in these skills seems to be piece meal where it evolves around what is needed technically such as specific IT programmes, and on an ‘ad hoc’ basis for a number of the companies. One exception existed where a social communication company has a monthly approach to training and development. Additionally, all of the interviewees said digital skills transferred within the workplace albeit it was dependent on the type of employment. One SME owner pointed out they are not benefiting from digital skills transfer. As a final point though digital skills were noted as very relevant for the future highlighting the fast paced nature of its change, the lack of educational input to keep up, the evolution in visualisation of analysed data with a strong suggestion that digital skills are necessary for company survival.



These findings strengthen the works of Hounsell (2011), Laurillard et al. (2016), ECOYRS UK (2016), Scottish Government and Price Waterhouse Cooper (2018) who noted the need for digital skills in both learning and workplace contexts. It adds to Jisc's (2014) meaning on digital literacy and supports the use of Beetham and Sharpe's (2010) framework in degrees to aid educational development. In terms of collaboration it concurs with Employability in Scotland (2017) and the World Economic Forum's (2018) need for a collective approach where educationalists and employers have to work more closely together on course development to ensure there are no gaps.

#### 4.3 Use of qualitative and quantitative approaches to enhance student employability for the FD degree

Anecdotally, 4.1 and 4.2 highlight findings from qualitative and quantitative research which can be used in addition to that of the SEQs and NNS surveys. Whilst the SEQs and NSS give good data it's obtained prior to first destination employment and may be used to give high praise or negativity if poor grades are given. They are a form of course satisfaction measures and don't necessarily highlight any gaps in course delivery, which in turn can enhance student employability. Whereas, the use of these mixed methods can. For example, findings have supported course development and the ILSR to confirm the introduction of more 'digitally skilled' focused modules. For soft/group skills the C4P model has been adapted into a coursework to make the scenario more work like, showing reflective practice. Evidence of successful implementation is a work in progress; however alumni from the 2017 FM degree are employed as a 'Digital Marketing Executive' at Porsche, and 'Content Developer' at a social communication company. This supports the points raised by the employers about graduates being digitally ready, coming prepared for the job in hand.

Wider research is required to ensure depth and breadth of information can be provided in relation to employability and the FM course. At University strategic level research has been also been ongoing, using mixed methods approaches with key stakeholders (employers and students) to ascertain a 'bag of skills' required to meet the needs of an RGU graduate, working towards the graduate outcomes framework. The issue as practitioners lies with the speed at which course changes can be implemented, if universities are to 'disrupt,' keeping pace with the speed of change, module changes maybe need to be more flexible.

## 5.0 Recommendations Presented

Recommendations from this research are:

### 5.1 Use mixed methods research for employability skills feedback

Taking on board the findings it is clear that a mixed methods approach with a variety of sources is required to gather data, alongside the course feedback obtained. It would be useful to interview the same respondents annually, for feedback on employability skills, how they have evolved and how this may impact on the FM course, but logistically this may not be easy. Given this though some structured research should take place to ensure FM modules deliver as many of these digital and group/soft skills as possible. As 4.0 develops new skills will evolve and requirements may change.

### 5.2 Collaboration with employers and flexibility in course development is required.

As new information has been found it needs further examined to identify if any more group/soft/digital skills need embedded into the FM degree. To do this successfully, collaboration and engagement with employers is key as part of this process. An employer champion could be sought for reach module to support and add to the skills, transferability and development outcomes. Additionally students could complete skills diaries to keep a log of what they have learned, what they need to learn and how they are going to do this, as part

of their learner journey. On the wider scale universities and employers must collaborate more through partnerships to ensure the right group/soft/digital skills are incorporated for 4.0. This means employers working more closely with degree developers, to future proof students, giving clarity on skill sets and outcomes needing developed to provide a clear graduate outcomes and attributes. However it may mean educationalists have to think out of the box as flexibility on LLOs may be required to deliver outcomes which respond to a disrupted workplace.

## 6.0 Conclusions

It was clear from the mixed method research that the FM alumni suggested some changes were required in relation to group/soft and digital skills within the degree programme. Some changes have been implemented and their success has yet to be assessed in some cases. The additional employer research added to the debate on the importance of digital skills and that future employees must come to jobs 'digitally ready'. It is recognised that these mixed methods approaches are useful in ascertaining skills gaps and this is a vital step to enhance course development.

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# The gap between degree outcomes and employability skills

Dr Pauline A M Bremner



# The gap between degree outcomes and employability skills

Content:

- Rationale
- Aim
- Literature
- Sample and Method
- Findings
- Recommendations









# Literature

## Top 10 skills

### in 2020

1. Complex Problem Solving
2. Critical Thinking
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4. People Management
5. Coordinating with Others
6. Emotional Intelligence
7. Judgment and Decision Making
8. Service Orientation
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### in 2015

1. Complex Problem Solving
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6. Quality Control
7. Service Orientation
8. Judgment and Decision Making
9. Active Listening
10. Creativity



Source: Future of Jobs Report, World Economic Forum









# Sample and method



## Method

2 X 6



2



### Tell us about your Fashion Management Degree

*Understanding the transition of the skills embedded in your University Degree and their transferability into graduate employment*

RESEARCH LEAD  
Dr Pauline A M Bremner. [p.bremner@rgu.ac.uk](mailto:p.bremner@rgu.ac.uk), Tel: +44 (0)1224 263012

#### Dear Respondent

Please help us with our research and give yourself a chance of winning a £50 Amazon voucher for completing our short questionnaire. It will only take ten minutes and all responses are confidential. Take the chance to shape our future as your valued input is meaningful to our courses and transitional developments.

As one of our Fashion Management alumni we want to find out if the learning outcomes and skills delivered on your Fashion Management Degree have helped you transition into your first graduate job. We hope you will help us with this project. All responses will be kept confidential in line with RGU research ethics policy, which can be found at <http://www.rgu.ac.uk/research-ethics-policy>

57

7



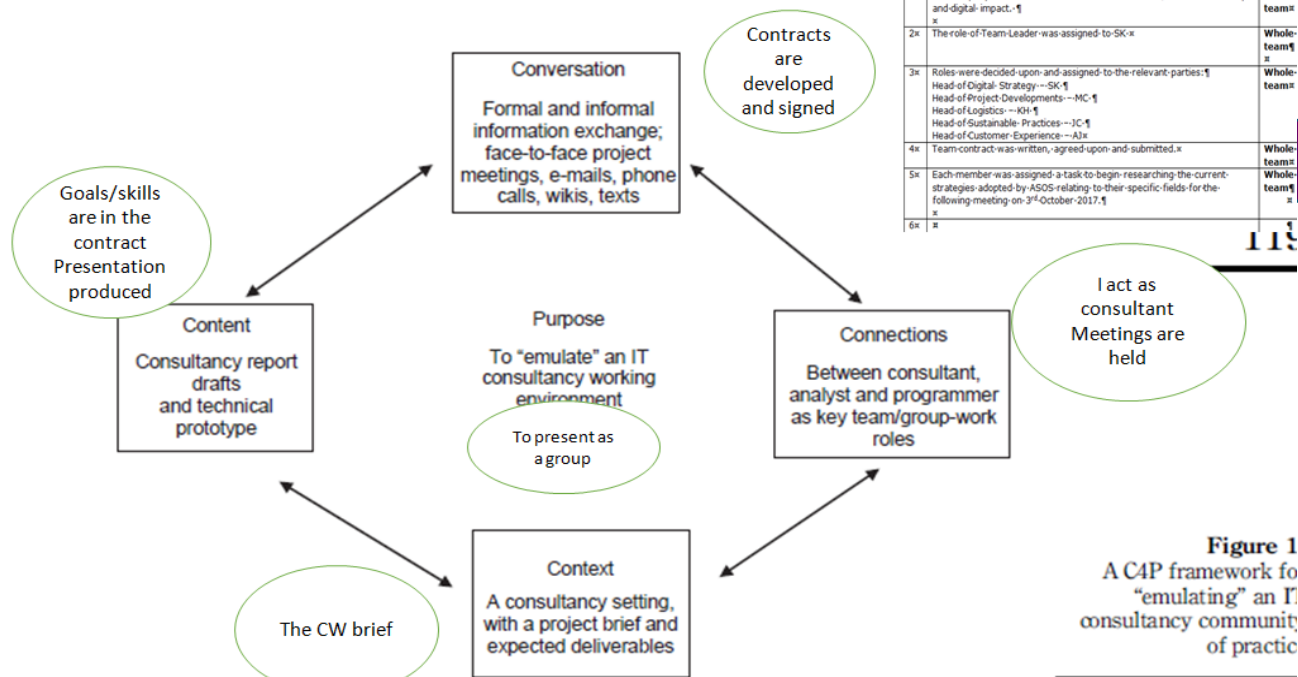
Now added interviews with key stakeholders and employers focusing on digital





# Findings

Hoadley and Kilner's 2005 "C4P"



#	Item-Discussed/Summary/Actions-Agreed	Action by
1x	The company-ASOS-was-chosen-due-to-its-innovation, market-leadership-and-digital-impact.-§	Whole-team
2x	The-role-of-Team-Leader-was-assigned-to-SK-x	Whole-team
3x	Roles-were-decided-upon-and-assigned-to-the-relevant-parties-§ Head-of-Digital-Strategy--SK-§ Head-of-Project-Developments--MC-§ Head-of-Logistics--KH-§ Head-of-Sustainable-Practices--JC-§ Head-of-Customer-Experience--AJ-x	Whole-team
4x	Team-contract-was-written, agreed-upon-and-submitted-x	Whole-team
5x	Each-member-was-assigned-a-task-to-begin-researching-the-current-strategies-adopted-by-ASOS-relating-to-their-specific-fields-for-the-following-meeting-on-3rd-October-2017-§	Whole-team
6x		

**Figure 1**  
A C4P framework for "emulating" an IT consultancy community of practice

"Excellent guidance notes provided for students to support team work principals covering structure and etiquette"



## SCHOOL OF CREATIVE AND CULTURAL BUSINESS

"Team work and individual work prescribed within the module, this provides a realistic scenario and assessment method for the students in terms of the work environment they will experience after leaving university".



# Findings



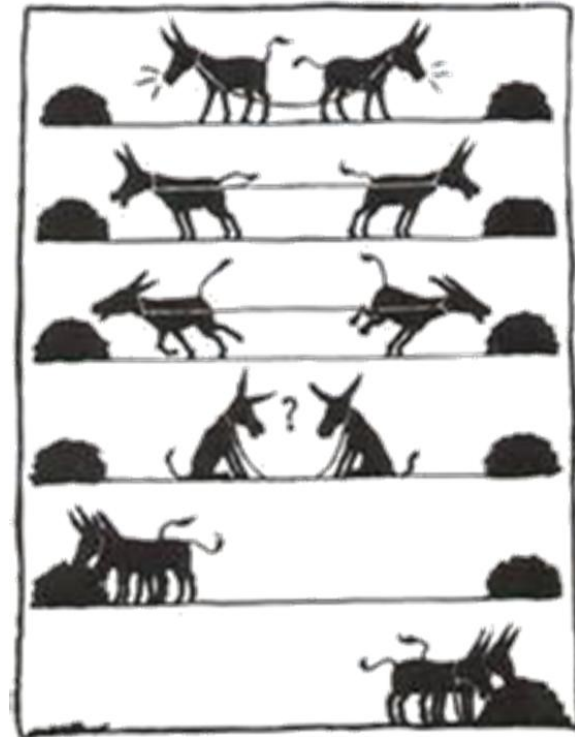
Whilst skills transfer  
New employees should be 'digital ready'  
SME's say they don't benefit

Technical  
Functional  
Digital Literacy  
Skills  
Consumer Demand  
Digital needed in all degrees





# Recommendations:



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