GRADUATES FOR A GREATER MANCHESTER: ENHANCING GRADUATE SKILLS AND EMPLOYABILITY FOR THE TECH AND CREATIVE INDUSTRIES

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Graduates for a Greater Manchester: Enhancing graduate skills and employability for the tech and creative industries

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SUMMARY

Graduates for a Greater Manchester (GfGM) was a three-year project led by Manchester Metropolitan University Careers Service (in partnership with University of Manchester Careers Service) - one of sixteen funded by the Office for Students (OfS) Local Challenge Fund to tackle employability support for 'local' students.

It sought to develop tech and creative digital skills amongst student participants, whilst providing opportunities to apply and gain recognition for these skills, with a view to enhanced employment outcomes. It also sought to develop greater connectivity between participating Universities and local tech and creative digital SME networks and industry bodies in the city region. The project was delivered via two sub-projects- 'RISE Digital' at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and the 'Digital Capabilities and Careers Self-Efficacy' subproject at the University of Manchester (UoM).

Our evaluation of the Graduates for a Greater Manchester Project has shown the success of both sub-projects in achieving their employability targets but also in their development of closer partnerships with City regions policy makers and industry representatives. The projects achieved this success despite the disruption of the COVID pandemic. Areas for future development include expanding the range of employer partners and paying greater attention to the 'demand side' of the labour market within the tech and creative digital industries.

This case study has been adapted by Adam Hugill and Cerys Jones from the Graduates for a Greater Manchester final report (Christie et al, 2022) lead by Fiona Christie. The full report can be found here.

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CONTEXT

The original OFS competition call for funding (OFS, 2018) recognised the diverse and often unequal nature of the UK graduate labour market. While Greater Manchester overall has a relatively buoyant labour market and a strong higher education sector, it was recognised that the benefits of these two positive factors were unequally shared across the local population. Our project combined a focus on the growth areas of the tech and creative digital industry and the graduate prospects of local students from less advantaged backgrounds.

A top priority for the project from its inception was the digital skills development of students. Our aims were to equip students better with the skills they needed to satisfy labour market demands whilst helping to establish a pipeline of talent into the tech and creative digital industries. The successful partnership bid to the OfS was able to highlight how a focus on tech and creative digital skills aligned with what city policymakers and sector representatives were calling for. The Decent Work and Productivity Evaluation team (DW&P - Manchester Metropolitan University, Decent Work and Productivity Research Centre) were able to create additional insights on the city region labour market context in two initial reports (Christie & Lupton 2020, Ball et al 2020), which further supported the project's rationale.

Local economic context

The Greater Manchester Local Industrial Strategy (2019) built on the findings of the Greater Manchester Independent Prosperity Review's (2018) and its detailed analysis of the local economy and the social and environmental challenges. In the Local Industrial Strategy, strong opportunities for growth are identified as digital and creative media, health innovation, clean growth and advanced materials and manufacturing. All these broadly align with the 'Graduates for a Greater Manchester' project's focus on tech and creative digital sectors. The Prosperity Review authors also identified a misalignment between learning provision and sector requirements most clearly in Digital and Creative, and Business and Professional Services. The Local Industrial Strategy responded to this with numerous policy aspirations regarding people and skills. A specific one is - 'a skills and work system that enables people to realise their potential, supports emerging industries and is responsive to employers' (2019). Universities and the education they provide are part of this process of creating a skilled workforce and helping to ensure a skilled and qualified workforce, that can respond to high tech and digital needs. However, the Prosperity Review also highlighted that sometimes high skilled labour is under-utilised. The Review found that productivity was being significantly limited by low demand for skilled labour and poor skills utilisation by businesses and in the public sector. This speaks to a wider national debate about a traditional over-emphasis in policy on the supply of skills at the expense of demand.

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A recognition of this shared responsibility for skills development, which balances supply and demand issues, led to the partnership working that was integral to the GfGM project. This partnership working was evident from the planning stage led by the project Steering Group to the design and delivery of the final activities and initiatives. Alongside the projects headline aims, was a focus on the wider issues of employability, career self-efficacy and confidence as a foundation for digital skills development. Career self-efficacy (drawing upon psychological theory) was explicitly included in the name of the UoM sub-project but was equally relevant to the MMU's RISE Digital project, itself part of a larger university project to support all aspects of student and graduate employability.

METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

As previously mentioned, the overarching GfGM project was delivered via two sub-projects - 'RISE Digital' at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU) and the 'Digital Capabilities and Careers Self-Efficacy' subproject at the University of Manchester (UoM). RISE Digital was one stream within a large-scale university-wide programme to enable students to claim academic credit for traditionally extracurricular activity, including one off events, self-directed online courses, internships, skills development courses, and more.

Project activities ran from the Autumn of 2019 for three years until September 2022. It should be noted that the impact of the disruption of Covid-19 was enormous. For example, the first cohort of UoM students completed their activities in the Autumn of 2019 in a traditional face-to-face format. However, with the commencement of the first national lockdown in March 2020, online and hybrid modes of delivery were introduced and remained in place until the end of the project in September 2022.

For UoM, in contrast, the embedded nature of the sub-project within the Psychology programme meant the impact of lockdowns was less dramatic as all planned curriculum activity was adjusted to meet the new format of teaching and learning across the university. However, subproject leaders and students at UoM commented on how the disruption of Covid-19 firmly drove home the importance of digital skills amongst Psychology students – students who had previously been indifferent to use of digital skills.

RISE Digital (MMU)

The RISE Digital project was actually one stream within the larger, university wide programme RISE, an initiative designed to enable students to claim academic credit for traditionally extra-curricular activity. These activities included one off events, self-directed online courses, internships, 4–8-week skill development courses, and more. The RISE programme is open to all students at MMU and features several different activity strands, one of which is Digital. The OfS grant specifically funded the RISE Digital activities outlined below[1]:

- 4/6 week Creative Digital Incubators in each year, 2 Digital Photography Bootcamps, 1 UX Design Bootcamp and 2 sets of fortnight long Marketing and Production Placements.
- 6 week Media for Wellbeing Advocacy activity in all three years.
- Coding introductory sessions named "Make a ….. with Code" sessions included music, stories, and art.
- Digital Eagles – Involved all years offering access to specialist training on AI, Influencing and future proofing your profile
- 2 sets of social media introductory sessions focussing on using social media to build a personal brand and to use it professionally.
- Digital career workshops.
- Online certifications for Adobe & Microsoft.
- Created an online learning resource for student learning in social media.
- 2x one day events called Creative Data lab.
- 2 sessions on more career confidence themes and weren't exclusively focussed on digital, but a wider remit.
- 2 sessions for us on 'Using LinkedIn to Smash your job search'
- 2 x Design Thinking Self-Study Kits
- 3 x sessions for us on 'Content marketing' 'International MarComms Management' and 'Influencer Relations Management'

[1] It should be noted that there are many more activities delivered under the RISE Digital umbrella but these activities are funded by mainstream university funding and so not listed here.

Digital Capabilities and Careers Self-Efficacy (UoM)

The University of Manchester GfGM sub-project focused on the BSc Psychology programme and their second year 20 credit modules. The project involved the enhancement of two existing academic modules to build the digital skills and confidence of its students. In their second year, Psychology students either completed a work placement unit (The Short Work Placement Unit) or a career management unit (Career Management). The OfS project funded the development of a new blogging assignment and the associated blogging and social media training delivered to students on both modules. They completed this reflective blogging assignment in April each year, reflecting on their experience of digital skill development and digital confidence.

The OfS project also involved the creation and delivery of an accredited 'Building Confidence' academic module delivered as one option within the Career Management unit. The aim of the module was to build student confidence, and help them engage in career enhancing behaviours, through the discovery and exploration of their career options and the new employment sectors open to them. These new sectors included a specific focus on digital.

During the final year of the project, an online Building Confidence resource was developed to provide an alternative option for building student confidence. This resource took the key elements and success factors of the academic module and built them into an articulate RISE learning resource, which was then embedded into core University wide services as part of their digital skills offering available to all students. The final year of the project then saw the creation of a two-day experience for Psychology students designed to build their digital and creative career awareness, with a focus on the transferability of their psychology learning to the sector. The students were also given the opportunity to build their digital skills through a series of bespoke training workshops.
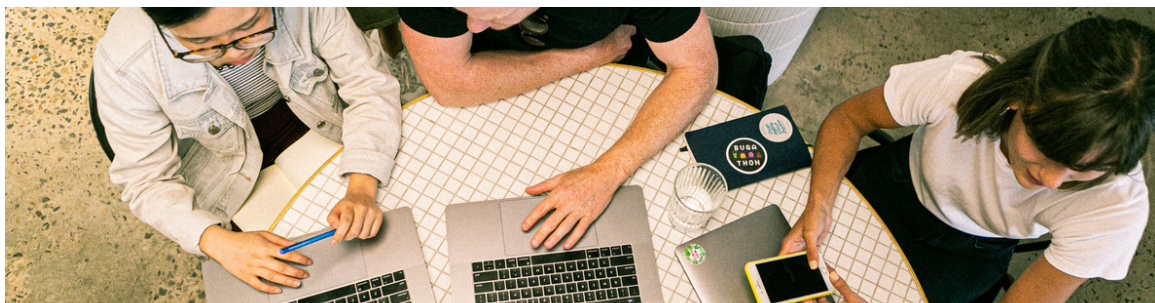
ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

For the MMU sub-project team, the impact of COVID and national lockdowns meant that some of the intended activities were significantly impacted, with the providers of RISE Digital activities having to rapidly adapt their activities for online delivery. To expand the offer to students at a time of unprecedented lockdown, there was also a rapid shift to scale up short intensives (e.g., everything from one hour to one-week activities), in addition to more extended activities envisaged in original "Third Term model".

The DW&P evaluation explored how partners delivering RISE Digital activities experienced benefits (e.g., ability to scale up) and some drawbacks (eg. harder to identify talent) from in a shift to online. Whilst the courses and activities designed by partner organisations were not always able to be delivered as intended, the partners' digital expertise meant they were able to adapt efficiently to new demands. Indeed, many delivery partners (already immersed in tech and creative digital fields) commented that the move to online delivery had been relatively easy for them. Having said this, even these digital specialists missed face-to-face interactions and argued that the combination of both in-person and virtual activities were crucial for the development of students' more generic employability skills.

Questions were raised about what mode of delivery worked best for developing different purposes in relation to various skills. For example, short online activities were considered good for working at scale, for basic upskilling, for creating awareness of job roles, and for building digital confidence. Indeed, partners observed that online activities required students to do more independent exploration of digital skills and that this in turn could lead to enhanced independent learning skills greater self-learning ability, which tested their own skills as activity creators.

Overall, the shift to online learning, which was an unexpected consequence of by the pandemic, was helpful to the project as it served to accentuate the role and value of digital skills as moves to online learning and delivery were accelerated.

The context in which students undertook these projects was notable. The value of higher education in giving students the opportunity to still gain experience and skills at a time of crisis cannot be under-estimated. Many students recognized the opportunities that the project gave them to keep engaged and connected during lockdown restrictions. Overall, students saw their participation as a valuable employability opportunity during in a period when that many other career options were closed to them.

Action research conducted by delivery partners during the delivery process provided additional insights into the about students' experience of two projects and this were created proactively by delivery partners which formative feedback assisted them in planning the next iteration of activities. Findings from their research work align with the themes generated by the DW&P Evaluation team. Details of this quantitative and qualitative evaluation are detailed below.

Quantitative analysis- performance against initial success criteria

On commencement of the overall GfGM project, success criteria for both sub-projects were established. Many of these initial criteria were quantitative outcome targets. The projects performance against these initial criteria are outlined below:

MMU Number of credits accrued by students		
Date	Target	Actual
2020	1500 credits (Equivalent to 50 students)	Practice credits: 4,290 credits
2021	3000	Practice credits: 5,535 credits
2022	6000	Practice credits: 9,930 credits

MMU Hours of skills training in T+CD		
Date	Target	Actual
2020	2000	6,696
2021	4000	10,161
2022	8000	41,985

MMU Hours of placement and project work		
Date	Target	Actual
2020	1000	2516
2021	2000	21527
2022	4000	14552

MMU Students Engaged in T+CD		
Date	Target	Actual
2020	100	Engaged: 634
2021	200	Engaged: 861
2022	400	Engaged: 750

MMU Number of students holding a relevant T+CD external accreditation		
Date	Target	Actual
2020	100	176
2021	200	155
2022	400	167

UoM Number of graduating students having engaged in a digital literacy assignment and reflection on skills.		
Date	Target	Actual
2020	200	204
2021	200	232
2022	200	307

UoM Number of students from population of interest engaging in targeted career enhancing behaviours in their 2nd and final year of study.		
Date	Target	Actual
2020	50	36
2021	100	133
2022	200	200

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The results above show the level of success the project enjoyed over the three years of activity, with the majority of our annual targets significantly exceeded. In addition, the increased ratio of hours of skills training to the numbers of students engaged highlights the increasing engagement of students over the course of the project. One area which requires further improvement is the number of certifications awarded. This slower progress was largely due to these processes taking longer to adapt to hybrid approaches following the pandemic than expected.

Qualitative analysis- RISE Digital (MMU)

The DW&P Evaluation team conducted qualitative research interviews with a range of partners and stakeholders in the summer of 2020 and 2021. These partners were responsible for providing and delivering a range of RISE Digital activities and courses for students from the commencement of the project in July 2020 onwards. This evaluative research evidences the 'deep partnerships' of the sector specialists who collaborated with RISE Digital project leaders to create learning experiences for students.

The interviews sought to understand partners' perspectives of the RISE Digital sub-project at MMU. Moreover, the interviews explored the extent to which the RISE Digital skills sub-project successfully addressed labour market needs and the effectiveness of industry partnerships in delivering these specialist activities. The time lapse between partners' delivery of activity and their subsequent evaluation interview varied due to the dispersed nature of RISE Digital provision.

Overall, the evaluation evidenced an increase in the perception of positive and lasting partnership between the parties. Similarly, all partners were supportive of a shared social responsibility to develop student skills and address skills gaps. The partners recognised their important role in providing placement opportunities, short intensive courses, project work and networking opportunities that were aligned with emerging job roles, occupations, and skills gaps. The positive working relationship developed between industry partners and the RISE Digital team also enabled them to adapt their activity design swiftly (eg. as a response to Covid-19) and to ensure they delivered activities that were appropriate to meet the needs of the wider digital sector (eg. addressing skills shortages) but that would also appeal to the students.

Partners involved in RISE Digital were overwhelmingly supportive of the sub-project. RISE Digital was considered mutually beneficial, valuable, and positive for both students and for themselves as employers, stakeholders and learning providers. Partners described the success of RISE Digital in raising awareness of the sector and contributing to upskilling the next generation and providing a talent pipeline to fill entry level positions. Some partners, who also had a role as recruiters, saw engagement in RISE Digital as a valuable opportunity to spot future talent. All partners acknowledged the success of the project in delivering effective courses and were keen to continue their collaboration with MMU and RISE Digital in the future.

In addition, the RISE Digital programme was considered an effective way of enabling students to gain valuable experience which would help students transition from university to work. Therefore, RISE was seen as mutually beneficial in helping to creating a mini-digital skills ecosystem through which:

a)   students taking degrees aligned to a digital sector and non-aligned degrees could learn about Technical and Creative Digital skills and careers and gain a more realistic understanding of what to expect from their first job.

b)   employers could foster and find new talent whilst also addressing both existing and emerging skills gaps.

At the level of the broader GfGM project, the collaboration between the two sub-projects facilitated by the project Steering Group and project team meetings led to the sharing of partner contacts for mutual benefit. For example, some of the partners who had worked with MMU, went on to support digital skills activities at UoM.

Both the evaluation carried out by UoM and that conducted by the DW&P Evaluation team for RISE Digital at MMU, questioned the value of one of our original Key Performance Indicators – that of impact on students' career intentions.Instead, a more valuable indicator was the impact of both sub-projects on subjective feelings of confidence. These confidence levels increased across the board, with students reporting higher career self-efficacy and preparedness to respond to challenging situations. Although digital skills improved (more so at MMU due to the specific focus of this sub-project), most students were more appreciative of the increased confidence levels that they acquired when interacting with others and undertaking project tasks. This improvement in interpersonal and employability skills reported through both sub-projects was particularly appreciated against a backdrop of increased anxiety caused by the pandemic. Interestingly, the UoM sub-project foregrounded increases in confidence and career self-efficacy in their work more strongly, but this also emerged as a strong theme for MMU students.

Overall, students showed positive changes in their digital confidence levels as the result of their participation in the programme. Although some students saw these programmes as very short-term and commented on the need for longer duration, many appreciated that short experiences could introduce topics and spark interest and confidence to learn more. For instance, some students started engaging with specific digital platforms (eg. LinkedIn, Futurelearn and HobSport) because of their exposure to the project and the internships they had experienced. They also commented that after the participation in the programme their confidence in using digital skills in other parts of their lives had increased. The need to be adaptable and to continually learn new digital skills emerged as a theme in student reflections. Students commented on the relationship between developing interpersonal and social skills which complement digital capabilities. For instance, students were particularly positive about learning teamwork skills in an online learning context and facing the difficult challenges that this posed.

Qualitative analysis- Digital Capabilities and Careers Self-Efficacy (UoM)

The UoM sub-project team created a career self-efficacy survey based on the work of Bandura and Taylor and Betz (1994) that students completed at appropriate times before and after activities took place to measure impact and change. Internal reports were created each year using this data. The UoM sub-project put greater emphasis on broader career self-efficacy rather than specific digital career self-efficacy. Having said this, students were required to develop digital skills in creation of their digital literacy assignment. For UoM students, the project increased the confidence levels of year one (2019-20) and year two (2021-22) participating Psychology students. In terms of both career self-efficacy and digital capabilities, confidence levels had significantly increased after the completion of the project activities.

In all three years of the project the biggest impact on confidence levels came from those behaviours that the students originally felt the least confident about; namely, connecting with people doing different roles and marketing themselves to others. Increases in confidence levels as reported by students resulted from being pushed outside their comfort zones, having to deal with new and challenging tasks, and working with different groups of people. Experiencing unfamiliar situations and communicating with new people was seen as a key benefit of the project.

Students seem to have increased their confidence levels following support from either the Careers Service or the career module, with many citing help with applications, coaching for interviews and confidence building sessions as important confidence drivers. Students regularly commented on the significance of the compulsory careers units – either the short work placement module or the career management unit (which included assessed video interviews, assessment centres and a confidence building option). Work-based learning seems to have been particularly appreciated by students and seen as a key driver for their increased confidence levels after participation in the programme. All types of part-time work for students – from customer service positions to support worker roles – as well as short work placements and volunteering appear to have had a positive impact on student confidence levels. The increased confidence levels of students led to an improved sense of self and career behaviours as evidenced in their self-described attitudes to career situations and opportunities.
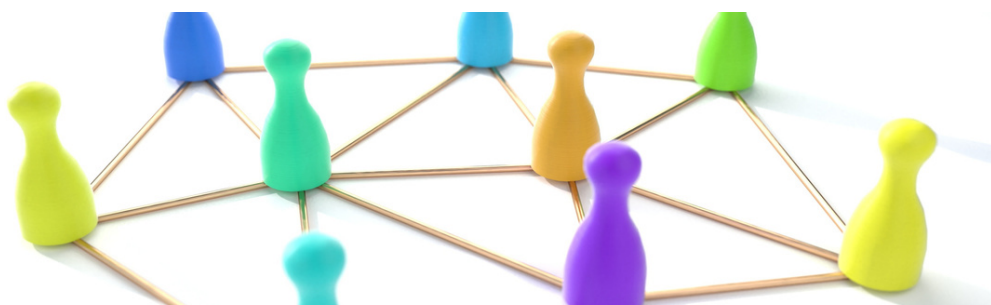
REFLECTION AND NEXT STEPS

Whilst longer term data trends on entry to the tech and creative digital labour market is limited, both sub-projects have been successful in achieving the targets set as part of their original success criteria.

For MMU, closer alignment with the city region's policymakers and industry representatives has been cemented through three years of regular meetings (e.g., Steering Group) and delivery (eg. partners running RISE Digital activities). This has contributed to improved connectivity between students and the regional labour market. Students on non-aligned degree programmes have had the chance to develop digital confidence and skills, which would not have been possible without the RISE Digital stream. Additional learning opportunities have been created for students that can be recognised for academic or practice credits providing an impetus for engagement in activities that may have previously been dismissed by students as "just extra-curricular".

For UoM psychology students their enhanced digital skills were able to be paired with greater career self-efficacy, their interventions supporting them to upskill digitally whilst also improving their practical career learning.

A three-year funded project involving multiple collaborators provides ample opportunity to consider lessons for the future. Moving beyond the pandemic, future activity development needs to consider the benefits and drawbacks of how and what activities are delivered. Both sub-projects also highlight the nuanced nature of career self-efficacy and the steps required to facilitate this. This is particularly the case for the RISE Digital sub-project which relies on the optional engagement of students and partners. Maintaining this engagement will require careful consideration of the intended outcomes of their planned activities, as well as their duration (eg. short intensive, or longer-term courses), format (eg. soft skills development, artefact creation, hard skill development) and mode of delivery (face to face, virtual online, or hybrid). In contrast, the UoM sub-project's more compulsory nature affords greater opportunities to embed and stage digital skills acquisition and even scale up learning across the University.
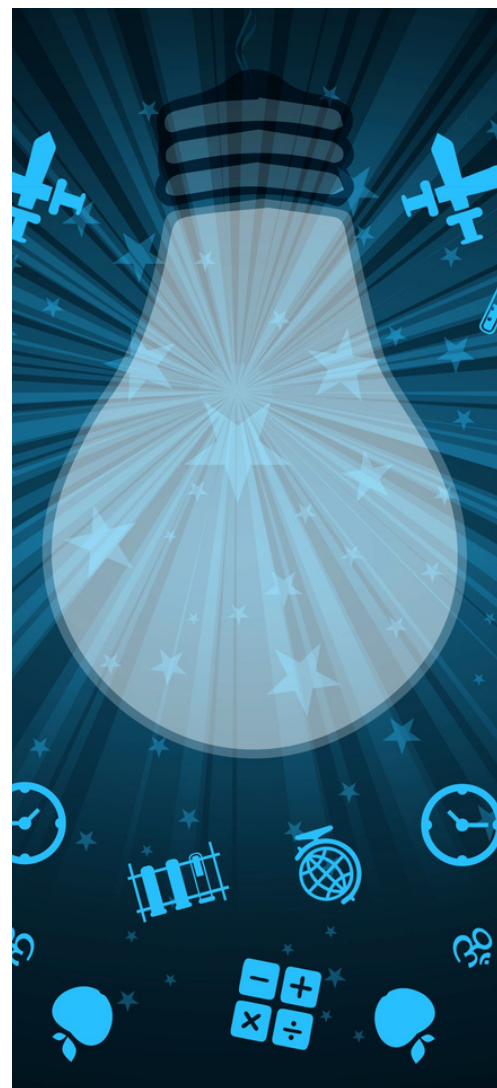
Graduates for Greater Manchester has been very successful in meeting its outcomes. Its relevance and value have only been accentuated by the impact of the pandemic. Stakeholders and partners are now turning their attention to a consideration of the legacy and sustainability of the activities that sit under the GfGM umbrella. Areas to consider for university partners going forward include expanding the employer network and paying more attention to the 'demand side' of the employability ecosystem in tech and creative digital industries.

The annual Manchester Digital Skills Festival provides an opportunity to do this and was attended by sub-project leaders in 2022. The festival offers an opportunity for universities to raise awareness amongst tech and creative digital employers of the opportunities to work with them and to plug their skills gaps for graduate level jobs. These events that bring employers together with students and university stakeholders are an essential channel for developing and enhancing university and employer partnerships. They also educate sector employers as to the value of 'fusion skills' alongside the technical skills (eg. software development) which they often report shortages of in entry level staff.

Several new initiatives which take forward best practice learning from the project, are currently under discussion. These include, the creation and development of e-learning modules, online certification, ongoing collaboration with organisations to create further 'experiential learning', reviewing evaluation and assessment practices, sharing best practice across institutions, and building digital fluency as part of ongoing 'business as usual KPI's. University partners are also exploring how they support this process through the provision of more in-depth micro-credential learning in tech digital skills. Our project has shown us that there is currently tremendous demand in this area of provision, and it is imperative that universities increase short course and CPD opportunities to support non-linear careers and enable our students to adapt to an ever changing graduate labour market

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