

EMPLOYMENT SKILLS DEVELOPMENT IN A SIMULATION ACTIVITY: AN INVESTIGATION OF POSTGRADUATE STUDENT PERCEPTIONS

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Extended Abstract

Simulations Track

INTRODUCTION:

The authors report a short-term research study which is at the nexus of two current avenues of importance in business school education:

1. Development of skills that enhance students' employability prospects and future career development;
2. Embedding of experiential learning within business school curricula – in the context of this study, through simulation-based training [SBT]

The contemporary Higher Education institution [HEI] environment in the UK and elsewhere is rapidly evolving. Within this dynamic arena, students are increasingly indicating financial drivers as the primary motivator (Crockford, Hordósy, and Simms, 2015) for undertaking study. As such, HEIs are becoming increasingly aware of the need to support students' transition into employment by addressing the needs of employers more effectively. Consequently, universities engage with a number of activities designed to support employability of graduates, including work placement schemes (representing a form of on-the-job training [OTJT]) and a wide range of simulations and role-playing scenarios. These are intended to contribute to the development of generic employability skills, as well as provide a 'head start' for graduates at the outset of their careers (Wilton, 2012).

Similarly, universities are more alert to how their programs, assessment strategies and on-campus activities can support graduate and postgraduate employability. One such approach is the use of SBT in the classroom as a form of 'free-practice' activity, often linked to assessment. The use of SBT has been shown to act as both a catalyst and a vehicle for learning (e.g. Loon, Evans, and Kerridge, 2015).

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS FOR UNDERGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS

In reported studies with cohorts of final year undergraduate students studying strategic management, SBT has been shown to develop student perceptions of their own employability (Evans, Kerridge, And Loon, 2013; Evans, and Kerridge, 2021).

One such study by the authors evaluated student perspectives, after working in "management" teams of four to six members on a proprietary business strategy simulation, which had been chosen to comply with an established rubric (Proserpio & Gioa, 2007): to be based on sound pedagogic principles; have an engaging story; involve mystery and opportunity for learner discovery; and be supported and integrated with instructional design. The research data was generated through a detailed questionnaire survey, plus in-depth semi-structured 'exit' interviews and written student reflections post-study.

The questionnaire addressed knowledge (K), skills (S) and attitudes (A) acquired by the students. These KSA categories and measures were adopted following an analysis of academic literature on employability skills required by industry. While the broader findings have been reported elsewhere (Evans, and Kerridge, 2015), responses on the skills considered most relevant to employability are summarized in Table 1. This data was based on a large dataset gathered from three cohorts spread across three consecutive years (487 responses, 93% response rate).

In the questionnaire surveys, and in the exit interview comments, there were a series of interesting and pertinent responses, most of which were very affirmative. In terms of transferrable skills, most students felt they had improved team working, communication, negotiation and conflict resolution skills, recognizing those as particularly relevant to the development of employability skills and prospects. These results echoed with the literature review conducted as a component of the study.

Survey category (K-S-A)	Parameter (student responses on skills development, in relation to the simulation)	Agree/strongly agree	Disagree/strongly disagree	Mean (0-5 scale)	Std. Dev
B (S)	Helped to improve my team-working skills	81%	6%	4.02	0.83
C (S)	More confident in decision-making skills	71%	9%	3.75	0.92
D (S)	Helped to improve my interpersonal skills	58%	12%	3.47	1.06
E (S)	Helped to improve my communication skills	69%	10%	3.74	0.89
F (S)	Helped to improve my negotiation skills	68%	9%	3.72	0.86
G (S)	Helped to improve my problem-solving skills	69%	9%	3.74	0.87
H (S)	Helped improve my conflict-resolution skills	61%	10%	3.60	0.84
J (S)	Helped to improve my critical thinking skills	≥/75%	8%	3.85	0.85
K (S)	Helped me appreciate the complexity of business strategies	78%	7%	3.90	0.88

Table 1 Employability skills acquisition responses (after Evans & Kerridge, 2015)

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS FOR POSTGRADUATE BUSINESS STUDENTS

The previous studies (as above) were focused on final year undergraduates studying a strategic management module. The study being reported here investigates the application of similar SBT in a large single-year cohort of MSc postgraduate students in a UK university business school.

These students are similarly focused on post-degree employment and career development. Although typically older than their UG counterparts, many of these MSc students also have only limited workplace experience before starting their masters course studies (in contrast to most MBA students).

The objectives of the current study are:

- To validate (or not) the evidence reported in previous literature of the benefits of SBT for undergraduate business students; a similar research methodology is applied but to a postgraduate cohort.
- To establish a point of reference for a subsequent broader study, establishing data on student perceptions and performance evaluations with SBT which can be evaluated vs. data for OTJT e.g. work placement programs.

Against a backdrop of increased use of business simulations in HEI business schools, our paper reports data from a large group of participants (n=200) that are also studying a strategic management module and engaged in a multi-week simulation-based learning activity, to evaluate student perception [both pre- and post-learning activity] of the advantages of SBT, with particular focus on developing employability skills.

A similar methodology is being applied to that of the cited undergraduate study (ibid 2015), with a questionnaire survey covering student perceptions in the following categories: demographic sample information (responses anonymous); experience of the simulation; experience in the management meetings; employability skills development; learning outcomes; financial and non-financial metrics and performance. After the online surveys are completed, a number of semi-structured interviews are conducted and analyzed

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The study utilizes both qualitative and quantitative data and analysis to draw conclusions and make recommendations for further development of SBT in the HEI context. In doing so, we hope to contribute to the growing academic literature on the subject of SBT and to provide empirical evidence to support the pedagogic use of the approach in post-graduate programs as well as in the undergraduate programs we have previously studied. Finally, as reported, we hope to use this study as the basis for a subsequent broader study into the relative efficacy of SBT versus OTJT programs.

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