Chapter

Making Business Graduates Work-Ready by Cultivating Their Durable Skills

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Abstract

This chapter examines the development of durable skills among business graduates by integrating these skills into the curriculum of a UK business school. Despite higher education institutions' (HEIs) claims to prepare students for successful careers, a disconnect persists between these claims and the tangible teaching of essential skills within the curriculum. Through a carefully designed seven-week Strategic Human Resource Development module, utilising a 'dark side' case study integrated with game-based learning concepts (GBL). This research addresses the skills gap identified by employers. It utilised the case difficulty cube in conjunction with game-based learning principles to foster critical competencies, including problem-solving, critical thinking, adaptability and resilience. Data from reflective accounts reveal that this pedagogical approach successfully enhances students' preparedness for the workplace by integrating the development of durable skills into their learning journey. This chapter contributes to ongoing discussions by demonstrating the effectiveness of transparent curriculum design and immersive simulation in fortifying work readiness among graduates.

Keywords: durable skills, business school, simulation, case study, game-based learning

1. Introduction

For organisations and the broader global economy to grow, skilled employees are required at all levels, and higher-level skills are essential to build adaptable economies. There are over 10,000 business schools globally, with approximately one-fifth of the world's students studying business and management. Business schools contribute to the flow of graduates entering the global workplace, hoping they have developed the necessary skills and knowledge to apply during their careers. However, business schools have also received their fair share of negative publicity for not preparing graduates for future career roles [1–3]. Employers frequently report that graduates lack essential soft and some technical skills specific to their jobs when entering the workplace [4, 5]. To address this issue, higher education institutions (HEIS) need to prepare students more effectively for the diverse roles they may encounter upon entering the workforce. Shifting demands for skills across all parts

of the global economy will necessitate the regular updating and adoption of business schools' curricula [6]. This means that we, as educators, need to be creative in developing graduates and realistic and pragmatic in facilitating the development of these durable skills.

Durable skills are defined as:

> *"Durable skills have replaced soft skills as those highly sought after, rarely taught professional capabilities like problem-solving, leadership, critical thinking and personal skills like teamwork, flexibility, adaptability and creativity. Durable skills are known for their long-life durability, while hard skills are often considered perishable. Think about durable skills like the roots or trunk of a tree, while hard skills are the branches and leaves that come and go with the seasons" [7].*

Higher education must 'step up and listen' and include durable skills development in their explicit curricula [7]. To develop those, we must bring the student learning experience to life and make it as realistic as possible by replicating the workplace. It is an essential feature of any business school. This is supported by the views of [8], who proposed that "cases recount—as objectively and meticulously as possible - real (or realistic) events or problems so that students experience the complexities, ambiguities, and uncertainties confronted". To achieve this, a simulated case study was integrated with concepts of game-based learning, aiming to enhance the learning experience and develop the durable skills required in a fluid workplace [9].

This chapter contributes to ongoing discussions by demonstrating the effectiveness of transparent curriculum design and immersive simulation in fortifying work readiness among graduates. In particular, our contribution is three-fold. Firstly, this chapter contributes to the discussion on developing durable skills in business schools, with a focus on preparing graduates to be work-ready. In doing so, our second contribution emerges specifically by mapping durable skills into explicit module documents and illustrating to tutors and students where these skills will be developed and how they will be developed. Lastly, our third contribution involves a creative approach, where students are immersed in individual consultant roles from the start of the module until its completion, and learning outcomes are assessed using a simulated case study. This sink-or-swim approach was designed to help students experience a challenging entry into the workplace. However, support was always available from tutors throughout the module.

The chapter is structured as follows. We begin by outlining a changing landscape of higher education, where graduates are educated and developed. We then explore the employers' perspective, the demands for making graduates work-ready, and the skills required in a fluid workplace that emphasises durable skills. The chapter provides a brief examination of how immersive games, gamification, and the associated theories serve as a platform for discussion. When woven together with a case study, these elements have the potential to enhance the learning experience and develop durable skills. To provide a measure of the validity of the case study and the development of durable skills, we discuss how we planned and collected two sets of data, and how this contributed to a positive learning experience for students. Finally, we present conclusions by drawing together the lessons learnt from adopting this novel approach by highlighting the potential this approach brings to the learning environment and exploring where current practices may lead in the future in developing durable skills.

2. Theoretical lenses: The need to make graduates work-ready

As we began writing this chapter, it became evident that longstanding concerns regarding graduates' work-readiness and skill requirements persist across both academic and grey literature, with various perspectives and arguments shaping the discourse. A report published by the Advanced Institute of Management Research [10] highlights several challenges faced by business schools, including funding constraints, declining student numbers, and the pressure to prepare graduates for the workforce. By 2025, these concerns have intensified, given the interconnected nature of financial sustainability, enrolment trends, and the need to align graduate competencies with the demands of a fluid labour market. Despite ongoing efforts, employers continue to report that many graduates lack the requisite skills to transition seamlessly into professional roles [11].

However, the development and education of graduates extend beyond employability, positioning them within a broader societal framework influenced by multiple stakeholders, each contributing to their growth and integration [12]. The World Economic Forum's Future Jobs Report (2023) highlights the importance of workforce preparedness, noting that 50% of workers across 300 countries possess adequate training, which has significant implications for the global labour market [13]. The report identifies key skill requirements for the next five years, including analytical thinking, creative thinking, artificial intelligence (AI), data skills, social influence, curiosity and lifelong learning, resilience, flexibility and agility, emotional intelligence, leadership, and complex problem-solving [14].

The debate surrounding graduate skill requirements remains multifaceted, with varying perspectives influenced by differing methodological lenses and theoretical frameworks [15–17]. Each argument is shaped by distinct assumptions regarding education, employer expectations, and workforce adaptability, contributing to the complexity of discussions on graduate employability.

2.1 Framing the employer lens

Human Capital Theory (HCT) frames education and development as strategic investments that generate returns at the individual, organisational, and societal levels [18]. Since its foundational articulation by [19], the scope of HCT has undergone significant evolution, extending beyond its initial emphasis on education and skill acquisition to encompass broader dimensions, including health and well-being [20, 21]. This theoretical expansion reflects a growing recognition that human capital development extends beyond technical competencies, encompassing a more comprehensive understanding of the factors that contribute to workforce productivity and economic sustainability.

From the perspective of education and workforce development, the term 'development' is often favoured over 'training', as the latter denotes a narrower, task-specific approach. In contrast, development encompasses a more expansive and continuous process of skill enhancement and knowledge acquisition in durable skills [22]. In juxtaposition to HCT, the societal approach to skill development considers two primary domains: the education system and the role of organisations. These interconnected elements collectively influence the supply of graduates and shape their professional growth, ensuring their long-term adaptability within an evolving employment landscape. The challenges facing the domain constituents are outlined in the Korn Ferry's report.

Global consulting firm Korn Ferry predicts that by 2030, there will be an international human capital (talent) shortage of 85 million people due to a lack of sufficiently skilled individuals to fill jobs [16]. Most employers rely on traditional skill proxies, such as degrees and job history, and place less emphasis on skill assessments [14]. A similar theme emerges in the World Economic Forum (WEF) report "Putting Skills First" [6], which highlights that 58% of workers believe their skills are unclear from their qualifications or job history, and 46% believe that employers focus too much on their job history and too little on their abilities.

In the United Kingdom (UK) context, graduates across many labour market sectors often face a mismatch between the academic skills they possess and those required by employers; a similar situation is presented in the Future Jobs Report (2023) [23, 24]. The situation is one of confusion; on the one hand, employers require a steady supply of work-ready graduates, and higher education institutions (HEIS) need to educate and develop them. The urgent need to consider human capital at different levels emerged in 2015, with the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) recognising the importance of starting early in schools. The need to develop durable skills, as well as the need to create human capital at both individual and global levels, given that these are the future graduates and employees that employers will require [25].

The Business Council of Australia [26] explored what is meant by the term being work-ready; the findings suggest that employers are looking for potential employees to have more than formal qualifications. For example, formal qualifications or degrees may apply to some job functions; in others, the focus is more on skills and experience [26]. In other words, it is a shift from "We need people who can fill these jobs" to "We need people who have these skills" [27]. A survey of employers and workplace professionals revealed that the top five skills lacking at the entry-level were: critical thinking and problem-solving; positive work ethic; initiative and self-direction; time, task, and resource management; and speaking and listening [28]. Inconsistencies in the literature suggest that not all stakeholders agree on the essential skills that graduates must have [6, 14, 15, 23, 24]. Other contributors promote various skills that encompass a range of durable skills listed in the literature, including communication skills, teamwork and collaboration, problem-solving and critical thinking, organisational and planning skills, work ethic, initiative, and independence [4, 29].

Durable skills are "the cognitive and non-cognitive skills necessary to engage with, interact with, and adapt to any work environment" [30]. The data revealed that 44% of HR professionals would hire an applicant with strong, durable skills over an applicant with superior hard or technical skills; however, the report is sparse in detail on what sectors of the labour market this refers to [31]. In discussing the three dimensions of employability theory: [25, 32] career identity, personal adaptability and social and human capital, within these dimensions, the cultivation of durable skills occurs by promoting personal constructs that contribute to being work-ready. Deconstructing work readiness reveals that it occurs at two levels: at the macro level, considering the economic contribution that graduates, with their human capital they can bring to society and the workplace [33]. At the micro level, teaching and learning involve activities that develop knowledge, skills, attitudes, and behaviours, as well as the application of HCT in education [34].

The macro level is defined as the extent to which graduates possess attributes that prepare them for success in the working world; this suggests that a solid foundation is required to build upon [35]. However, a two-year lag of substandard performance can occur before graduates become proficient [36]. This position is juxtaposed with

the first stage of rites of passage; it is in the first stage that graduates emerge from the comfort of university life and its support, crossing a threshold [37]. Interpreting the earlier works of [34], there is an expectation that HEIs are 'blamed' for not producing work-ready graduates with the necessary skills crossing the threshold into employment [38, 39].

2.2 Framing the higher education institution (HEI) lens

Higher Education has experienced rapid change and, recently, uncertainty, driven mainly through neoliberalism on issues ranging from funding to students' expectations and employers suggesting HEIs need to do more to prepare graduates for the world of work. Across the world, many students pay for their education, often incurring significant debt. They behave like consumers by viewing their education as a commodity rather than an investment [40]. The rise of the Precariat draws our gaze to the fact that graduates are not guaranteed employment at a level they expected, due to the economic crisis in which graduates leaving HE are experiencing, resulting in graduates being employed in non-graduate jobs [41, 42].

Research undertaken by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development (CIPD) [43] posits that over-qualification has become a reality. Yet, employers bemoan a lack of talent, which is congruent with [31's] appraisal of the labour market across many countries. HEIs are part of the graduate supply chain, meeting the demands of the government, businesses, and industries, and employability is high on the strategic agenda in the UK and many other countries [44, 45]. Many HEIS incorporate aspects of Work-Integrated Learning (WIL) options, both outside formal learning, as a valuable opportunity for graduates to experience field trips to organisations, business fairs, and volunteering in the local community, among other activities. Within this curriculum, students can assume consultancy roles with employers, applying the knowledge and skills they have learned during formal learning [46].

In Australia, a discrepancy exists between employer expectations and the work readiness of graduates [11]. Their research highlighted that some employers engage with HEIs to develop graduate skills; however, the patchwork lacks an evaluation process within the pedagogical structure [47]. There is less focus on philosophical and higher-order thinking skills. University teaching and learning should be regularly reviewed and revised, as necessary, to develop transferable skills [48–50]. Business schools need to adopt design thinking to address the deficits in business school education [51], as this approach can support business graduates in making informed decisions in complex situations where clear facts are scarce. Simulated case studies can effectively facilitate this process [52] if they are well designed and the process of engagement via the learning pathway has been carefully considered.

2.3 Framing cultivating durable skills through game-based learning (GBL) using immersive case studies

If we ask most educators whether their institutions teach these skills, the answer will almost be a resounding "yes". Yet, if you ask them to point out where in their curricula they teach these skills, few will be able to do so [53]. The learning space can be a 'muddled space' and is defined as "where the symbolic interaction can be positive and negative" [18].

Teaching and learning shape professional preparation at the micro level. Pedagogy aims to develop durable skills through a variety of instructional approaches. To

achieve this, educators must apply situated learning [34, 54], ensuring business students gain transferable skills that enhance work readiness and support workforce development at the macro level [55–57].

This muddled space [18] enables self-determination theory to foster durable skills, with GBL driving motivation, autonomy, competence, and connectedness [58], all of which are essential to GBL [59]. Gamification is increasingly relevant to immersive learning, where games provide authentic contexts [60] and create the impression of full participation in a realistic experience [61]. The literature debates distinctions between games, simulations, and case studies [62], which encourage persistence in goal-oriented tasks, supported by high motivation through self-determination theory [63–65].

Integrating these aspects of the continuum allows the simulated case study to adapt fluidly to reality. In design stages, we apply four critical thinking approaches—general, infusion, immersion, and mixed [66]—while incorporating motivational drivers [58]. These frameworks shape materials and activities that build confidence in data analysis, problem-solving, and practical solution development [67]. Our case study pedagogy integrates infusion and immersion to develop durable skills. Infusion involves systematically identifying data and instructional materials, incorporating key information and Excel datasets to support skill cultivation—the "how" phase of our design process. In immersion, with clear objectives, we design activities that challenge students, foster reflection, and enhance skill development.

A simulated case study in business can highlight management as a complex, context-dependent practice beyond general principles or theories [68]. This contrasts with [51], which emphasises synthesising business disciplines with real-world challenges. The best approach is immersing students in realistic simulations to develop durable skills [69, 70]. Clearly defining the skills and knowledge to be created, gained, and applied is crucial [71]. Exposure to real-world complexity enhances problem-solving and decision-making abilities [72]. At the heart of effective business education lies the need to synthesise knowledge of the functional business disciplines with the day-to-day challenges faced in practice.

Effective case study design hinges on pitching it at the right level. A basic framework categorises cases as introductory, intermediate, or advanced but lacks difficulty differentiation, limiting analysis [73]. The case difficulty cube offers three dimensions—analytical, conceptual, and presentation, each with three difficulty levels, allowing tailored case study design for undergraduate, postgraduate, and executive education [52]. This approach helps tutors align skill development with learning objectives. Applying self-determination theory, overly challenging tasks increase cognitive load, disrupt flow, and diminish students' confidence. Another key factor is whether the case study is delivered digitally, non-digitally, or as a hybrid format [62]. For Masters students, all dimensions were set at level 3 to maximise durable skill development (see Appendix B).

The simulated case study served two key purposes: assessing learning outcomes and fostering durable skill development. Instead of prescribing specific skills, it encouraged students to engage in reflective practice, identifying and articulating competencies gained throughout the process. This learner-centred approach enabled organic skill recognition through direct engagement with the case study.

The case study, based on a fictional organisation, was awarded first prize in 2024 at the University Forum for Human Resource Development (UFHRD) annual competition for its contribution to Learning and Education Resource Development [74].

The organisation is presented as a 'dark side' case study. A dark side case study is described as:

> *"Dark side" case studies can tell us a great deal about the weaknesses of the broader systems of business and our societies. 'Dark Side' case studies have faults and rather than painting a 'Bright side', they are designed to be challenging" [75].*

The module teaching team devised a transformative assessment strategy with three key tasks. First, students analysed diverse organisational data, Excel spreadsheets, management meeting minutes, and policy documents, over a week to simulate workplace data retrieval. Their output was an audit report, structured within a predefined template for systematic needs analysis. Based on these findings, Task Two required students to propose solutions for a substantial gap identified, detailing cost, timeline, and required resources. Finally, Task Three involved critical reflection on their learning and the transferable, durable skills developed.

2.4 Summary

There is a persistent misalignment between the practices in higher education institutions (HEIs) regarding the development and preparation of graduates and the evolving needs of employers. Divergent definitions and perspectives from various countries highlight a fragmented understanding of employer skills requirements, juxtaposed with the competencies of graduates entering the workforce through HEIs' graduate pipelines. Engagement with simulated case studies provides students with a dynamic learning environment, wherein scenarios are subject to recalibration in response to fluctuations in market conditions or changed at any time due to regulatory changes at levels one and two [76]. However, all the evidence from the literature suggests that case studies are a valuable tool for developing durable skills. A salient theme emerging from the review underscores the nuanced and ongoing negotiation between institutional curricular frameworks and employer competency benchmarks.

3. Research methodology

The research location was a business school in the United Kingdom, a triple-crown accredited institution with EQUIS, AACSB, and AMBA, the highest international benchmarks of excellence for business schools. We adopted an inductive research strategy to establish descriptions of characteristics and general patterns linked to answering our research questions [77]. This led us to adopt a single-case study strategy. For our case study, we drew on [78] Hamilton & Corbett-Whitter's ([78], pp. 15–19) types of case study, using their definition of a collective case study as "working separately and sometimes asynchronously to gather data about a particular phenomenon, situation, or topic (e.g., a curriculum innovation)".

This case study involved a detailed investigation at the micro level into a single situation, focusing on a specific module of a taught Masters programme [79, 80]. Understanding the level at which the case study is focused is essential [81]. The critical point is that we focused our research at the micro level (the module) while acknowledging the meso and macro contexts in the literature review [82–86].

Additionally, we recognised that the module is part of a more expansive Masters programme and the bounded system of the business school curriculum.

3.1 Research approach

We adopted a realist position for this study, the rationale for which was that our research approach and data collection method would provide us with authentic information from students [87]. Our research approach juxtaposed with the assessment strategy of the module that both cohorts of students undertook. Based on these reflective accounts, we sought to investigate whether the durable skills, as perceived by employers as lacking, had been developed. One research question framed the study:

> *What durable skills do users of the simulated case study identify as having been developed?*

The target audience consisted of two cohorts of students pursuing a one-year Masters Degree in Human Resource Management (MSc HRM); we collected data over two years, from 2023 to 2025. The student population of both cohorts came from various countries, including India, Sri Lanka, Nigeria, Thailand, Poland, China and the United Kingdom. Due to the small number of students in both cohorts, we approached the whole student population. The students in both cohorts had varying levels of employment experience; however, the majority had never held positions in human resource management or human resource development. The age profile ranged from the early 20s to the 40s.

A mapping exercise was conducted to integrate various skills into each day's learning activities, as outlined in (Appendix A). Furthermore, we consulted with the professional standards of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) to identify the skills that students should develop to achieve professional accreditation. It's essential to note that students who complete the Masters degree gain entry into the professional body, and membership grade levels are determined by the skills and experiences required for each level.

3.2 Capturing qualitative data

Qualitative data were captured as part of the module's final summative assessment. Using a 'tabula rasa' or clean slate approach [88–90]. Students were encouraged to express their feelings openly, allowing them to be reflexive by being aware of their personal experiences and skill development throughout the module [91]. Some guidance was provided, focusing on skills development and what could be taken forward to enhance their employment prospects.

3.3 Ethical considerations

We were guided by the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) ethical guidelines and procedures [92]. At the end of the module, both cohorts of students gave permission for their reflective accounts to be used in this study. All students were invited to participate and provided information on informed consent and their rights. It was emphasised that whether they participated in the research or not, it had no bearing on their final grade in the module or their overall degree classification. Due to

the sensitivity of the information, all personal responses were anonymised [77]. This was achieved by assigning a number to the 2023–2024 cohort (e.g. student 1) and a letter to the 2024–2025 cohort (e.g. student A), which will be referenced when providing illustrative quotes. The external examiner approved and signed off on these tasks as part of the quality assurance process.

4. Data analysis

Content analysis, a widely employed technique in qualitative research, is typically conducted through one of three approaches: conventional, directive, or summative [93]. In this study, we adopted the conventional inductive approach [94]. Unlike directive or summative content analysis, conventional analysis does not apply predetermined codes, frameworks, or standards to the data [95]. Instead, themes and patterns emerge organically from the dataset, allowing for an unbiased exploration of meanings, concepts, and interpretations without external constraints. The importance of context ensures that the findings accurately reflect the students' perspectives on developing durable skills. This approach allowed us to code the descriptive data, identifying skills and emerging themes and their linkages [96–99]. We sought to identify connections between emerging themes, exploring associations and linking categories to answer the research question [100]. Without considering the broader situational context, there is a risk of misrepresenting or oversimplifying the student experience [77].

4.1 Student assessment performance

The simulated case study served as the primary assessment tool, combining two tasks and marks to yield an overall grade. Management uses this data to benchmark the module with other modules; a threshold of 70% of grades must be above 60%. This data suggests that the module achieved a 13% upward increase over the two years. However, there was a 15% drop in the number of students achieving the highest grade. No students failed the module in the latest results. While these figures are encouraging, we must delve beneath the numbers to understand how using the simulated case study facilitated the development of durable skills.

Furthermore, as described in the methodology section, elements of the (CIPD's) professional standards are evidence-based outcomes that align with the definitions of durable skills [7]. The figures in **Table 1** indicate that students are meeting the

Module grades for the module: Strategic Human Resource Development	**2023–2024 (55 students)**	**2024–2025 (28 students)**
The overall module grade threshold is to be above 70%	76%	89%
Distinction (Above 70%)	40%	25%
Commendation (Above 60%)	36%	64%
Pass (Above 50%)	7%	11%
Fails (Below 50%)	17%	0%

Table 1.
Final module grades.

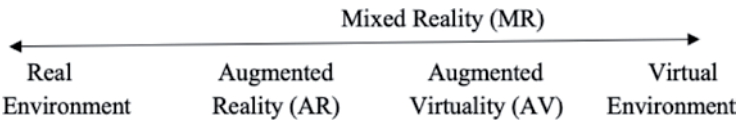

Figure 1.
Milgram et al. [101]. Augmented reality: A class of displays on the reality-virtuality continuum.

evidence requirements outlined in the standards. As part of the module's assessment criteria, students were required to reflect on the skills they developed in a consultancy role using the simulated case organisation (**Figure 1**).

4.2 Unearthing nuggets of gold from the data

We read through each reflective report randomly to develop an overall familiarity with the data. We then re-read, extracting words or phrases and coding systematically, using coding cycles [96]. This process involved tagging relevant words or phrases linked to the research question [98]. Our first coding cycle generated a list of over 20 labels; some were mentioned only once or twice, while others emerged as common themes across both cohorts. Our second cycle of coding identified commonalities, and we subsequently reduced the number of labels to nine categories. Once commonality is identified, continue coding [98]; we then worked to identify and reduce the number of categories by converging categories under suitable themes. Based on our second-level cycle coding, we continued this process until we arrived at three capstone cluster labels: apprehension, fearlessness, and enabling. Our attention was focused on the skills explicitly mentioned in the reflective accounts and on utilising conventional content analysis.

4.3 Apprehension capstone

The first capstone, apprehension, was the experience of this teaching and learning approach that many students in both cohorts had never encountered. This approach made many apprehensive and uncomfortable, taking them outside their comfort zone. There is a close relationship between apprehension and durable skills, as uncertainty or fear can be a constraining factor limiting the development of skills, particularly if self-doubt, as seen in the illustrations below, impacts self-confidence:

Student A, talked about the task size: "*When first opening the Excel document and seeing all the data, I was stunned and almost immediately lost hope in trying to make sense of the data.*"

> *Student Q had similar concerns: "I found myself in a state of self-doubt about whether I would be able to complete the module successfully."*

These two excerpts demonstrate that both students initially exhibited a deficiency in the requisite skills at the outset of the module. However, their apprehension functioned as a motivational stimulus, fostering skill acquisition and progressive development. Their capacity for resilience, an enduring competency recognised by employers [5], served as a driving force, enabling them to navigate challenges and ultimately achieve successful completion of all assigned tasks.

Analysis of the personal reflections revealed that students reported a lack of prior experience working with Excel data, which contributed to the presence of self-doubt, particularly their fear of working with Excel data. This phenomenon reflects a diminished sense of self-efficacy and, in this context, a cognitive apprehension toward data processing [101, 102]. In response to such uncertainty, students may adopt one of two distinct approaches: disengagement or perseverance through the learning process, thereby acquiring new competencies and refining their analytical skills by ongoing self-assessment [103, 104]. This observation suggests that the intrinsic cognitive load experienced by individuals was not uniform [105], as variations in their ability to engage with data, identify challenges, and formulate solutions influenced their overall learning trajectory. This exposure provided the opportunity to internalise the problems and identify ways to manage. However, it appeared that not only the data, but also the process, raised some concerns among students.

Student Q stated, "*Initially, I felt overwhelmed by the scope of the project*."

Some students rose to the challenge, acknowledging and demonstrating strong self-efficacy and resilience by drawing on their own resources. For student 8, the initial magnitude of the task was accepted as a challenge and a learning opportunity; they stated:

> *"At the beginning of the module, I was overwhelmed by the vast amount of data thrown at me. It felt like a tsunami of spreadsheets, names and numbers. However, the more I dealt with the data and stopped being fearful of it, the easier it was to understand and manipulate. The case study not only helped me deal with data but also overcome my fear of numbers. It also shone a light on the real-life working world of HR."*

Student 8's account highlights the learning scope of how their frame of reference moved from being initially overwhelmed to "I can do this." They demonstrated the durable skill of analytical thinking by breaking down the complex problem into manageable components; this strategy facilitated the moment beyond their initial fear by enabling them to make decisions based on their appraisal of the situation and self-assessment [104]. For Student 10, being exposed to the challenge of someone who had never studied Human Resource Management (HRM) before, took a similar approach:

> *"Before taking this module, I thought that the payroll department's Excel sheets were the only place where data was used in HR. I had no idea there was such a wide range of opportunities just waiting to be explored."*

These illustrative quotes suggest this was the first time many students had been exposed to a 'dark side' case study and the challenges they faced. However, many students also emerged with a common theme of seeing it as a learning opportunity, arising from a sense of fear, as they faced a challenge they had never experienced before and in such depth.

Student 53, took a different perspective:

> *"This was unlike the conventional 'bright side' cases; this was a 'dark side' case study deliberately riddled with faults and omissions, presenting a challenging scenario. Therefore, embracing this unfamiliar territory turned me into a curious detective, always seeking answers in hidden cracks, fostering intellectual growth."*

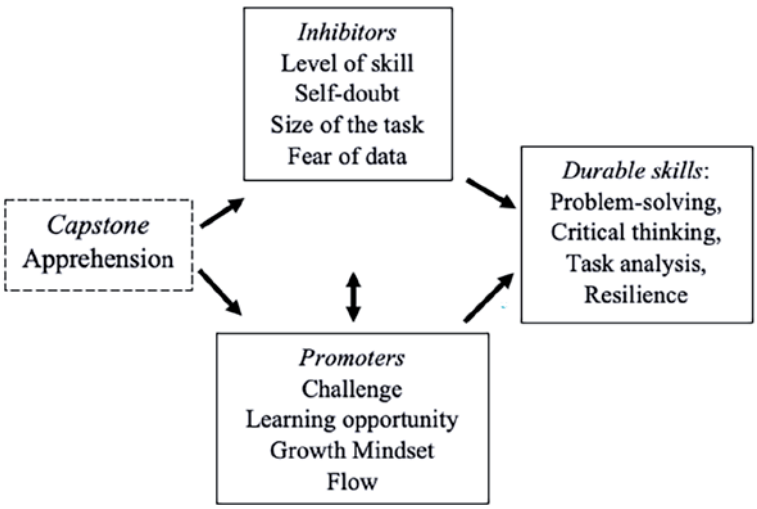

Figure 2.
Apprehension, as a capstone, indicates inhibitors and promoters of durable skills that have been developed.

When encountering this set of demanding tasks, some students experienced a phase of cognitive entropy, in which the influence of inhibitors (**Figure 2**) outweighed their capacity for self-assessment. Consequently, they encountered difficulties in evaluating both the challenges presented and the competencies they had previously developed throughout their learning trajectory, indicative of an absence of 'Flow.' In contrast, Student 53 demonstrated a consistent state of flow from the outset, recognising the presence of inhibitors yet strategically engaging with promoters. By adopting a growth mindset from the outset, they effectively navigated the challenges, resulting in a more adaptive and resilient learning experience. After the initial exposure and challenges were explained, students progressed to the next stage and began to tackle the assessment tasks.

4.4 Fearless capstone

Under the second capstone, fearlessness, students gained confidence as they progressed beyond apprehension. This process involved identifying tools and strategies to transition from hesitation to self-assurance, embracing the mindset of "I can do this." By leveraging promoters, they developed essential skills, indicating that those who initially struggled had now achieved a state of flow by using the skill they were developing along their cognitive pathway (**Figure 3**).

Students adopted various coping strategies to manage anxiety, including seeking guidance from peers and tutors or utilising LinkedIn for learning. A structured approach to problem-solving, prioritising tasks, managing commitments, and breaking work into smaller, manageable segments proved to be a valuable, durable skill. Teamwork was particularly beneficial for students who found data analysis challenging, as it fostered collaboration and enhanced overall comprehension. Furthermore, the study highlighted its role in overcoming cultural barriers and promoting inclusivity within the learning environment.

As Student L indicated: "*Working with peers from diverse backgrounds provided me with fresh perspectives on challenges and solutions*."

Teamwork also helped students gain more confidence. Several commented that they would usually sit around in groups and not contribute or get involved; however,

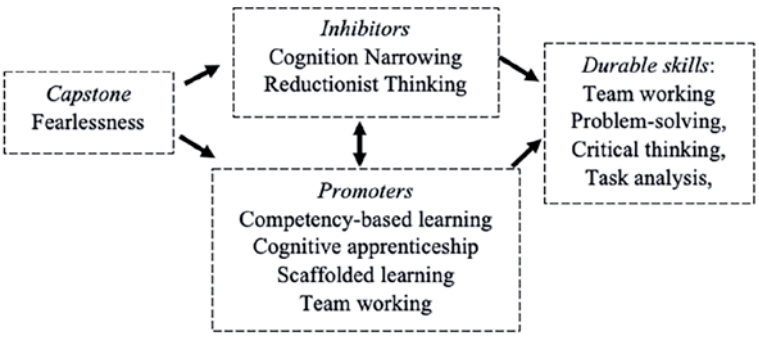

Figure 3.
Fearlessness, as a capstone, indicates the inhibitors and promoters of the durable skills that have been developed.

with the assessment tasks being different, they could not afford to sit back. They needed to have a presence and contribute to discussions. Student 1 commented:

> *"I improved my cooperation and communication abilities by engaging with colleagues to analyse challenges and develop solutions. Working together created a culture where accepting constructive criticism was valued, opening my eyes to new ideas and enhancing my learning."*

Student 1, was comfortable working in teams; however, Excel data appeared challenging. This encounter prompted many students to seek free introductory Excel courses in the library or online, in search of learning opportunities to overcome the barriers. This forced students to become self-directed learners, overcoming challenges through competency-based learning by focusing on skill acquisition and continuously self-assessing Student T, wrote:

> *"I felt like I was missing something crucial because I kept getting stuck. I initially tried to manage everything at once, which only increased my stress levels. I was able to accomplish this by dividing the work into smaller parts. I concentrated on one aspect at a time rather than attempting to do everything at once."*

Other students highlighted their drive and determination, which was sparked by the creative teaching approaches adopted by the teaching team. These approaches enabled them to view solutions to challenges from different perspectives, including Game-Based Learning (GBL), video inclusion, puzzles, quizzes, and industry speakers. The first assessment task was submitted in week four of the program. Marking was completed very quickly to build student confidence from their feedback before submitting their summative task two.

4.5 Enabling capstone

In the third capstone, *enabling*, students uncovered latent themes within the case study through meticulous exegesis, demonstrating durable skills, exemplified by critical thinking and problem-solving skills (**Figure 4**). Adaptive learning concepts were evident in the reflections, as each student approached the tasks and deployed or developed appropriate skills. We noticed different skills, behaviours and attributes from a myriad of different experiences.

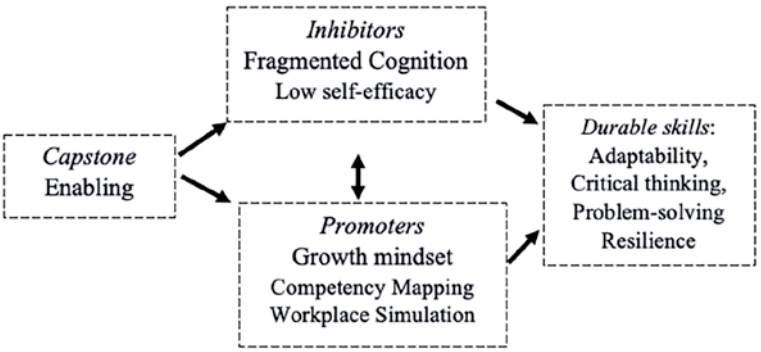

Figure 4.
Enabling, as a capstone, indicates inhibitors and promoters of the durable skills that have been developed.

Student 7, saw the tasks as very challenging with a lot of data, at the end of the module, this student now has a different perspective:

> *"The integration of data, information and analytics opened my eyes to the power of evidence-based decision-making. In a data-driven world, this knowledge is an asset for making informed choices that contribute to organisational success. This skill set is not only relevant but also essential in my professional growth."*

Another successful strategy identified was the differences between students interpreting operational and strategic challenges and arriving at workable solutions. This highlighted the flexibility of many students, who were open to new ideas and fresh perspectives. As the quote below succinctly illustrates, most students navigated through each stage of the process, encountering challenges, finding solutions, and acquiring valuable knowledge and skills that will take them toward their chosen career paths. Student 8 wrote:

> *"I continued to work through each little piece of data. The case study did not only help me to deal with data and start to overcome a fear of numbers. It also shone a light on the real-life working world of HR. These challenges have better prepared me for when they occur in my future working life."*

After initial apprehension, students emerged more prepared to meet the challenges of employment, commenting that the experience was both transformative and transformational. They felt more confident working with different data types, considering problems from various angles, applying systems thinking, and producing funded solutions. A main takeaway for students was the application of theory informing practical solutions.

4.6 Sketching the triangulation of capstones: What picture emerged?

Our synthesis of the content themes under each capstone suggests that as students engage with the challenge and immerse themselves in the task, they navigate the learning process via one of two distinct routes (**Figure 5**) and add to their own skill set. The cognitive pathway they adopt was shaped by their current skill level, influencing how efficiently they process, refine and develop their skills. Cognitive pathways support

Figure 5.
The two cognitive trajectories taken by students.

the idea that durable skills develop through experience, with repeated engagement strengthening cognitive connections. It aligns with the argument that game-based learning (GBL) fosters problem-solving, critical thinking, and adaptability, making skills more automatic and transferable [106, 107]. For students following route two, we propose that their progression toward competency and confidence was slower, primarily influenced by the inhibitors outlined in (**Figures 2, 3**, and **4**). Conversely, students who took route one demonstrated a higher initial skill level, enabling them to achieve flow and competence more rapidly. Furthermore, our analysis suggests that students exhibiting a growth mindset reached the enabling stage more quickly, allowing them to engage deeply with tasks earlier in the process and identify them as learning opportunities.

One important observation was the levels of explanation that students adopted in their reflective reports; many students employed a reductionist approach, drilling down into specific details by reflecting on events and actions. This cognitive narrowing appeared to help the students stay focused on the skill they needed to develop. In the reflective accounts, there was evidence that students adopted a holistic stance by focusing on the whole experience; this cognitive broadening facilitated the appraisal of multiple perspectives and produced diverse solutions that demonstrated several durable skills [100, 104]. Furthermore, our analysis identified crossover points between inhibitors and promoters, indicating that students become more engaged in their learning and experience increased confidence and skill level development. We noticed a shift in tone from uncertainty to confidence in the tasks, highlighting numerous positive takeaways regarding skill development. Many students reported that they had not previously experienced working on a single case study over an extended period or at this level of complexity and with different data types, indicating that this was a challenge at the level-three difficulty across all dimensions (Appendix B). It is suggested that participants in a case learning experience are always constrained by time to read, analyse and discuss the case [52].

For us, the level of commitment to the tasks was commendable among all students; their reflections indicate a learning journey that transformed them from feeling anxious, with a sense of 'I cannot', to one of 'I can', resulting in a significant learning experience. Student 19, delivers the final poignant message:

> *"The module has been a pivotal experience in my academic and professional journey. It has equipped me with the knowledge, skills, and perspectives necessary to thrive in the complex and ever-changing landscape. The practical applications, real-world*

simulations, and forward-looking approach of the module have enriched my learning experience and provided me with a solid foundation for my future endeavours."

5. Discussion

Conceptually, this study examined the development of students' durable skills through engagement with a complex simulated case study characterised by multiple challenges and uncertainties. The analysis identifies five durable skills, as indicated in **Figures 2, 3**, and **4**, which are: problem-solving, critical thinking, data analysis, adaptability, and resilience. These competencies emerged as fundamental in navigating the intricacies of the simulated environment, underscoring their significance in fostering academic and professional growth, as well as preparation for employment, as discussed in the literature section.

The discourse surrounding human capital and the development of durable graduate skills underscores the concept of resilience, both in employer expectations and in the strategic initiatives of higher education institutions. Employers increasingly seek graduates who, despite potential gaps in immediate readiness, possess the foundational capabilities necessary for further skill refinement through structured talent development strategies. Simultaneously, HEIs demonstrate resilience through sustained investment and effort in employability frameworks, ensuring that graduates are equipped with the adaptive competencies required for evolving professional landscapes. However, the literature suggests that there are still gaps in the preparation of graduates entering employment.

This study has identified that resilience varied among students, and immersing them in a simulated case study at the outset of the module challenged many to step beyond their comfort zones. Some rose to the challenge with a fast start route 1 (**Figure 5**), while others took tentative steps and adopted a cautious approach, seeking guidance and support to develop the necessary durable skills route 2 (**Figure 5**).

Two key observations emerge: first, students experiencing initial self-doubt and following the developmental trajectory of route two, characterised by apprehension and low confidence, actively sought assistance to enhance their durable skills and align their competencies with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD)'s Professional Standards for HR professionals. Second, irrespective of whether students pursued route one or route two, final academic outcomes remained broadly comparable. In many cases, students following route two achieved grades that matched or exceeded those of their counterparts on route one. A recurring theme in student reflections was the notable increase in confidence, underscoring the efficacy of skill development in preparing them for future employment. This finding reinforces the importance of structured support mechanisms in promoting professional growth and enhancing employability.

This pedagogical strategy builds on the established use of case studies in business education; however, it distinguishes itself by explicitly benchmarking durable skills against the module's learning outcomes and systematically integrating them into daily teaching and learning activities through constructive alignment [32, 103]. A key strength of this approach is the intentional incorporation of durable skills into the module design, ensuring students are aware of when and how these competencies will be developed.

The case difficulty cube [52] was instrumental in calibrating the complexity of case study materials to the appropriate academic level, such as Masters coursework.

Furthermore, aligning assessment tasks with the case study enabled students to take ownership of their consultancy roles, thereby reinforcing the practical application of their learning. The deliverables for the client were directly incorporated into the assessment framework, providing authentic evaluation criteria. Analysis of summative assessment data indicates a positive trajectory in student performance, reflecting the efficacy of this approach in fostering engagement and durable skill development.

Business schools are in the middle of a neoliberal wave of funding shortfalls, declining student numbers, reduced staff numbers, and shifting student expectations. HEIs appear to be at greater financial risk due to the increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) global economic environment. Within this context, the same arguments persist with employers regarding graduates' skills [4, 7, 14, 16]. Young people entering the workforce today can expect to have an average of 12–15 jobs throughout their working lives, with new jobs occurring every 3 to 4 years [34]. Business schools invest considerable effort in extracurricular activities, including visits, trips, and business competitions; these activities, which occur outside the curriculum, can significantly contribute to students' development and employability [46]. A more concerted effort is required to build durable skills, not just perishable ones, and it all starts within the learning space [32].

6. Conclusions

This chapter highlights the tension experienced by tutors as they strive to equip students with workplace-ready skills amid persistent concerns from employers regarding the proficiency of graduates in essential, durable skills. Despite sustained efforts, a disconnect remains between employer expectations and the competencies cultivated within business school curricula. This research aimed to show that this gap could be reduced by demonstrating how targeted pedagogical strategies can enhance skill development.

Engaging students with an award-winning case study [100] offered the necessary challenge and stretch to foster durable skill development, integrating concepts from Game-Based Learning (GBL) design [59, 64]. The findings indicate that students not only developed these competencies but also derived significant learning benefits from the immersive 'dark side' case study. Moreover, since the adoption of this approach, an upward trend in student performance has been observed, reflected in an increased proportion of higher grades within the module.

Two key recommendations emerge from this study. First, curriculum leaders and module teams should explicitly highlight when and where durable skills will be developed within the learning process, as this clarity is often lacking. Second, shifting away from merely listing skills in module specifications and instead implementing a structured skills audit would enhance quality assurance, providing a benchmarking tool for both students and faculty.

7. Limitations

This study does not purport to offer a representative account, as its findings are derived from individual reflective narratives of students. Furthermore, the reliance on a single case study inherently constrains the generalisability of the results and their broader applicability to other educational settings.

Further research is needed to examine whether similar skill development outcomes would be observed among students from non-HRM/HRD disciplines engaging with the same case study. Additionally, investigating the impact of shorter, team-based case study immersion could offer insights into alternative modes of delivery. Regardless of the case study employed, the primary focus must remain on graduates' skill development to meet the demands of an evolving workplace. Given the study's reliance on a single business school, its generalizability is constrained; future research should extend across multiple institutions to validate findings and provide a broader basis for comparison.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that no conflict of interest was reported.

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Appendix

See **Table A1**.

	Week 1	**Week 2**	**Week 3**	**Week 4**	**Week 5**	**Week 6**
Main Topics	**SHRD, Stakeholders & Training Needs Analysis (TNA)**	**Systems thinking, Knowledge Management (KM) & Data Analytics.**	**Global migration. Global talent & skills, Green HRD.**	**Design thinking and processes, HRD interventions.**	**Evaluation and Return on Investment (ROI) and Return on Expectations (ROE). Gamification and Game-based learning & AI.**	**National and Global HRD systems. Final group task.**
Skills developed						
Problem-solving & decision making	*	*	*	*	*	*
Critical thinking	*	*	*	*	*	*
Team working & groupwork related skills (e.g., resilience, patience etc.)		*		*		*
Communication (e.g., active listening & articulating information effectively)		*	*	*	*	*
Presentation skills	*	*	*	*	*	*
Digital skills & data	*	*	*	*	*	*
Commercial awareness	*	*	*	*		
Organisation and planning		*	*	*	*	*
Theory Understanding & practical application	*	*	*	*	*	*
Self-directed and research-informed learning	*	*	*	*	*	*

Note: Week 7 is a revision week.

Table A1.
Mapping of key skills into the SHRD module.

Appendix

See **Table B1**.

Analytical (Assess)	Conceptual (Apply)	Presentation (Analyse)
Difficulty Level 1—The student must be able to assess the appropriateness of the decision to the problem or issue and suggest alternatives.	Difficulty Level 1—The student should be able to apply a single, simple theory or concept to a specific case or issue without requiring an explanation in class.	Difficulty Level 1—The student should be able to analyse correctly a short, well-organised case containing no extraneous information, little missing relevant information, and presented in a single format.
Difficulty Level 2—The student must be able to assess the issues and decisions, assess causes and effects, and develop action and implementation plans using appropriate quantitative and qualitative assessment.	Difficulty Level 2—The student should be able to apply the appropriate theory or concepts or a single complex concept with some assistance or further discussion and explanation in class.	Difficulty Level 2—The student should be able to analyse correctly a medium-length case with disorganisation, medium amounts of extraneous information, missing information, and a single format.
Difficulty Level 3—The student must be able to assess the situation and identify problems, issues, and challenges, as well as the information in level 2.	Difficulty Level 3—The student should be able to apply a variety of theories and concepts. Students may require a substantial amount of assistance and explanation in class to understand the theories.	Difficulty Level 3—The student should be able to analyse within a reasonable length of time a long case which may be disorganised, contain information, and contain a substantial amount of missing information and be presented in various formats.

Table B1.
The three dimensions and three levels within each dimension of the case difficulty cube.

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