

Executive Summary: Understanding and Addressing the Skills Gap Between Study and the Workplace

This executive summary consolidates findings from the unified [project exploring the skills gap between university study and the workplace](#) at the University of Warwick. The project was funded by the WIHEA/IATL Education Fund in 2024/25 and led by David Molyneux (Student Opportunity) and Gitit Kadar-Satat (Psychology).

The study integrates Streams A, B, and C: Stream A focuses on student preparedness and skills development; Stream B provides a practical digital and professional skills resource; and Stream C captures employers' expectations of new graduates. Together, these insights inform Professional Services, academic departments, and wider stakeholders in strengthening employability alignment.

Purpose and Context

The project responds to sector-wide concerns about skills gaps shaped by technological change, evolving labour demands, and varying levels of student readiness. Warwick's strategic commitment to employability—embedded in its Core Skills framework and the Warwick Award—highlights the need for a coherent, evidence-led approach to bridging academic learning with workplace expectations.

Methods Overview

- Stream A: Focus groups and interviews with 19 returning placement students and a survey of 30 prospective placement students.
- Stream B: Development of a university-wide Moodle resource designed to support digital, professional, and placement-readiness skills.
- Stream C: Employer survey (15 respondents) and interviews with early careers practitioners across sectors.

Mixed-methods analysis enabled triangulation of student, employer, and practical skills-development approaches.

Key Findings – Students (Stream A)

Students reported significant growth in communication, collaboration, and resilience during placements, indicating pre-existing gaps. Confidence in basic digital tools was strong, but exposure to advanced or emerging digital skills remained limited. Students highlighted challenges in adjusting to workplace ambiguity and developing professional agency.

Key Findings – Moodle Resource (Stream B)

Stream B contributed a practical and scalable student-facing intervention: the [Career and Placement Skills Moodle Resource](#). Designed as a curated starting point rather than a full training programme, it consolidates digital skills, professional skills, and a structured placement pathway. This resource operationalises the

insights from Streams A and C, addressing gaps in digital capability, workplace readiness, and access to consistent employability guidance.

The Moodle resource includes: (1) Digital Skills development (AI, coding, Microsoft tools, LaTeX); (2) Professional Skills, including communication, teamwork, and problem solving; and (3) a comprehensive Placement Pathway that demystifies preparation, support, and post-placement reflection. Its design philosophy—supportive, practical, and accessible—aligns closely with the project’s recommendations for embedding real-world, skills-focused learning opportunities.

Future development opportunities include feedback integration, additional application-focused resources, video content, and quizzes, enhancing active learning and student engagement.

Key Findings – Employers (Stream C)

Employers prioritised transferable skills—communication, collaboration, critical and creative thinking—above technical proficiency. While new graduates demonstrate strong ethical awareness and accountability, employers observed hesitancy around taking initiative and navigating ambiguity. Digital agility, defined as adaptability rather than tool-specific expertise, was consistently emphasised.

Converging Insights

Streams A, B, and C reinforce the importance of communication, collaboration, resilience, and digital agility. Placements, structured onboarding, and accessible digital resources all contribute to narrowing the skills gap. Students and employers agree on the importance of transferable skills, while Stream B provides a practical mechanism for improving skill development at scale.

Diverging Insights

Students frequently overestimated their digital and professional readiness compared with employer observations. Employers emphasised initiative and comfort with ambiguity as priority development areas—skills students reported acquiring only through hands-on placement experience. Stream B addresses these gaps through clearer guidance, skill-building pathways, and structured self-directed learning.

Recommendations

1. Expand curriculum co-design and embed skills mapping aligned with Warwick Core Skills.
2. Integrate industry-informed, real-world tasks and reflective assessment into modules.
3. Strengthen digital agility through exploratory tech labs, Moodle resources, and supported self-learning.
4. Embed diverse alumni narratives to build realistic expectations and resilience.
5. Expand peer and alumni mentoring networks.
6. Support employers in delivering clear onboarding, mentoring, and feedback structures.
7. Enhance collaboration between academic and Professional Services teams for consistent delivery across the skills ecosystem.

Next Steps

Next steps include piloting skills-focused enhancements within final-year modules and placement programmes, aligning employer engagement activities with Warwick Award skill portfolios, and developing a cross-stream evaluation framework. The updated three-stream model offers a coherent foundation for sustained employability enhancement across the institution.