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# Skills Development in a Volatile Environment: A Systems View of Learning

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RESEARCH PAPER · SKILLS & LEARNING

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| **Purpose** | To investigate skills development required for practice in business and project management, and to present a systematic view of the learning process in a volatile environment. |
| **Methodology** | Literature review of key journals. Multiple semi-structured interviews with an industry practitioner (director of an international projects firm). Soft Systems Methodology used to organise and represent findings. |
| **Findings** | A systems diagram of the learning process identifies inputs, processing, outputs, employer roles and contextual factors. Six key practitioner insights address course design for employability, including the need for practical application, work experience, and skills in hybrid working. |
| **Keywords** | Skills acquisition, skills development, VUCA, leadership skills, team working, soft systems methodology, learning process. |


## INTRODUCTION

Skills acquisition and development is a vital activity for society. A VUCA (Volatile, Uncertain, Complex and Ambiguous) environment makes this progressively more difficult. The appropriate response to each VUCA facet is: volatility  seek stability; uncertainty  acquire a range of skills; complexity  simplify via identification of 'skills gaps'; ambiguity  gather information systematically (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014).

Failure to develop the requisite skills can lead to stagnation in key sectors, economic decline, and increased dependence on imported expertise. This paper investigates skills development in business and project management through a literature review and practitioner interviews.

## KEY THEMES FROM LITERATURE

### Current Trends in Project and Business Management

Managing complex projects requires the ability to encourage stakeholder dialogue, manage resistance through power sources, and negotiate value with stakeholders (Floris & Cuganesan, 2019). International project management increasingly emphasises societal and environmental impact beyond direct outcomes (Picciotto, 2019). Innovation requires moving from incremental to radical approaches — deconstructing existing scenarios to challenge the status quo (Furr et al., 2019).

### Hard and Soft Skills

'Hard' skills are technical and can be taught via defined courses to established standards. 'Soft' skills are people-related and must be acquired through contextual experience — often specific to a particular business environment. Individual competences broadly comprise: Intellectual (IQ); Emotional Intelligence (EI); and Self-Management (communication, organisation, resource management). Most activities require a combination of both skill types, with the balance determined by the nature of the task.

### Leadership Skills

Project managers and leaders require intellectual ability (critical analysis, strategic vision), emotional intelligence (empathy, resilience, cultural awareness), and managerial competences (resource management, conflict resolution). Three leadership types are identified: Entrepreneurs (risk-taking, strategic exploitation); Enabling Leaders (coaching, networking); and Architects (long-term strategic restructuring) (Ancona et al., 2019).

### Team Working

Four key team roles are identified: Pioneers (risk-takers, entrepreneurial); Guardians (stability-focused, historical learning); Drivers (challenge-oriented, binary judgment); Integrators (collaborative, consensus-seeking) (Johnson et al., 2017). Effective teams balance these types and ensure all members can contribute. Online collaboration skills are now essential alongside in-person team working.

### Portfolio Approach to Learning

Skills acquisition is now a career-long activity rather than a pre-employment prerequisite. The 'personal learning cloud' — personalised, multi-provider, portfolio-based — allows tailored delivery across full and part-time, virtual and in-person modes (Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019). Retention and recruitment are most effectively addressed through development, community, and purpose rather than material rewards alone (Mortensen & Edmondson, 2023).

## PRACTITIONER INSIGHTS: COURSE DESIGN FOR EMPLOYABILITY

### Organisational lens is missing

Degree courses often fail to consider the requirements of organisations. Academic qualifications should actively prepare students for practice — not just for examination.

### Basic skills are essential

People need basic professional skills such as writing emails, managing meetings and communicating in a business context. These should be assessed as part of formal qualifications.

### Work experience adds critical value

Sandwich placements, mentorships and employer access programmes allow students to gain confidence and practical knowledge of the working environment before graduation.

### Soft skills and problem-solving are paramount

Employers recruit potential and then train to specification. Candidates must demonstrate the aptitude to solve problems, communicate effectively and manage people.

### Gaps in qualifications exist

Operational risk management and sustainability are identified as important areas absent from many current programmes — both require practical, applied learning.

### Hybrid working demands new skills

Hybrid work requires trust, self-organisation and new techniques. Students must be prepared for mixed working environments before entering employment.

> "The organisational lens is missing from degrees. Qualifications should actively prepare students for organisational requirements and graduate employability objectives."

## THE LEARNING PROCESS: A SYSTEMS VIEW

Using Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland & Scholes, 1990), the research summarises the learning process as a system with inputs, processing and outputs:

| Element | Components |
|---|---|
| Inputs | Students, Tutors, Learning Technologies, Funding, Classrooms (physical or virtual), Libraries |
| Processing | The Learning Process — flexible format: full/part time, virtual/in-person, synchronous/asynchronous |
| Employer Inputs | Mentors, Work Experience, Technical Skills Training, Basic Office Skills |
| Core Topics | Leadership, Creativity, Teamwork, Risk, Contracts, Strategy, Technology, Environment, Project Management |
| Outputs | Qualified, Employable Graduates; Knowledge; Professional Competences |
| Context | Education System, Education Institute, Global and Local Environment, Society |

## CONCLUSION

The skills development process — encompassing hard and soft skills, leadership, team working, creativity and portfolio learning — is critical to organisational and societal success. The systems diagram illustrates that excellence in learning requires enhanced integration of inputs, context, outputs, topics and employer partnership. Future research should extend empirical work across a range of sectors and geographies.

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