

Are undergraduate accounting students developing transferable skills that meet stakeholder needs? An international study

Jane Towers-Clark

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on the transferable skills of accounting undergraduates and explores whether undergraduate accounting students are meeting the current needs of stakeholders as well as looking to future needs. It reports on perceptions from an accounting graduate perspective and from the perspective of higher education institutions, employers and professional accountancy bodies. The analysis and evaluation of transferable skills is undertaken within the framework of globalised accountancy education. The thesis reports on the triangulation of results from a quantitative on line survey into graduate perceptions with findings from a qualitative study of other stakeholders using semi-structured interviews. My study has a global perspective, with recent graduates being surveyed from a global population and with interviewees representing global institutions and institutions from the UK, Singapore and Australia. This thesis intends to assess whether or not stakeholder needs are being met and, if not, how any deficiencies can be addressed.

Although my thesis is primarily about transferable skills, I have also included in my findings current perceptions on the relative importance of technical skills versus transferable skills. Technical skills are subject-specific knowledge skills and transferable skills are generic skills which have transferable qualities to the industry in which the graduate works. They also report on transferable skills where there continues to be an expectation performance gap evidenced by differing stakeholder perceptions on including emotional intelligence and resilience, as well as the importance of definitions in stakeholder perceptions. It highlights those skills that are expected to become more important for employability, such as IT skills, considering factors that may influence the relative importance of these skills, such as the size of the employer firm. The main contribution of this thesis is a review of the current transferable skills of accounting graduates and whether they are meeting stakeholder needs, with recommendations as to how to reduce the expectation performance gap for stakeholders and insights into how to future proof transferable skills in the medium term. The thesis also highlights evidence of the development of professionalism as a differentiating factor for the accounting graduate in a competitive employer-driven global market place.

Key words: Accounting; graduates attributes; stakeholder perceptions; transferable skills.

Declaration

I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is entirely my own and the thesis presented is the one upon which I expect to be examined.

Signed: 

Date: 22nd September 2015

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Thank you firstly to my supervisor, Dr Jacek Brant, who for the majority of my time under his supervision was Head of the Department of Curriculum, Pedagogy and Assessment. His having a similar role to me at my university meant that I enjoyed a level of empathy that enabled me to manage my studies, and his level of professionalism was more than I could have wished.

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Word count

The word count is 1,995 words for the reflective statement and 45,242 words for the thesis, excluding the list of references and appendices (8,871 words) and including footnotes, glossary, tables and diagrams. The appendices only include material which examiners are not required to read in order to examine the thesis, but to which they may refer if they wish.

Acronyms

ACCA	Association of Chartered Certified Accountants
AICPA	American Institute of Certified Public Accountants
CBI	Confederation of British Industry
CIMA	Chartered Institute of Management Accountants
CIPFA	Chartered Institute of Certified Public Accountants
E and Y	Ernst and Young
HE	Higher Education
IAAER	International Association of Accounting Education Researchers
IEASB	International Accounting Education Standards Board
IASB	International Accounting Standards Board
ICAEW	Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales
IES	International Education Standard
IFAC	International Federation of Accountants
IFRS	International Financial Reporting Standard
IFS	Institution-Focused Study
IMA	Institute of Management Accountants
ISA	International Standard on Auditing
IT	Information Technology
PWC	Price Waterhouse Coopers
QAA	Quality Assurance Agency
UCAS	Undergraduate Courses at University and College

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Reflective statement

Undertaking a professional doctorate: The Grand Tour

'I keep six honest serving men they taught me all I knew, their names are what and why and when and how and where and who. I send them over land and sea, I send them east and west but after they have worked for me I give them all a rest' (Kipling, 1902)

Within this statement, I am seeking to show the professional relevance and significance of the doctorate to me and to show my intellectual trajectory, showing how I got to where I am today, incorporating my development as an academic and a professional. I include the reasoning behind my embarking on the professional doctorate, and how my ideas have evolved since arriving at the Institute of Education leading to the accumulated work of my thesis.

I see my doctorate not as a single journey but as a series of interlinking journeys that combine overall to create a 'Grand Tour'. Each of the journeys contains aspects with different themes, but they all have a common core of intellectual transformation. Some of these journeys were through known territory and others were ventures into the unknown. Each single journey has built up a rich tapestry of knowledge and experiences culminating in my final thesis. My undertaking of the Doctorate in Education (International) enabled me to move from a position of perceiving myself as a professional accountant working within academia to that of a professional academic and professional accountant. The five and a half years that it has taken for the transformation has been matched by a similar movement in my job roles, moving from senior lecturer to programme director to the Head of Department of Accounting, Finance and Economics at a UK higher education institution. Without the route towards doctoral level qualification, it would have been difficult for me to make this professional career transformation.

Why did I start the international doctoral programme?

I embarked on the international doctoral programme for a variety of reasons which were linked to my own professional development. I work for the Business School of a UK higher education institution and the current higher education landscape has the inherent expectation that all academic staff will be qualified to doctoral level. This is partially driven by the necessity to publish, partially by public expectation, and partially, for those working with Business Schools, by the drivers of external accreditation bodies where numbers of

doctorally qualified staff are used as one measure of success for validation purposes. I was expecting that I would enjoy an intellectually rigorous course provided by field experts and that I would engage with a widely varied, international, educationally informed peer group. I also expected to build on my credibility as an academic. Furthermore, I wanted to be fully informed of what it meant to be of an academic doctoral standard and to be able to impart this knowledge onto others.

What I was expecting of the doctoral ‘Grand Tour’: My academic and professional journey.

The four taught course journeys.

Foundations of professionalism and International Education

I expected the Doctor of Education EdD as a professional doctorate to give me an appreciation of key issues and debates surrounding professionalism in modern life. The Foundations of Professionalism module did this by exploring the development and nature of the challenges faced by education professionals in the twenty first century. Brian Cunningham’s core text ‘Exploring professionalism’ (Cunningham, 2008) provided an excellent scaffolding for considering such topics as critical incidents and ethics in professional life. I undertook my assignment on how Browne’s Report (Browne, 2010) on funding English Higher Education might impact the professionalism of accounting educators. This investigated a potential fundamental change in government policy towards cost sharing that would impact both staff and students working in my area of accounting higher education. I placed my critique within the framework of accounting education because I anticipated increased interest from academics, students and employers as the effects of increased loans turn into a reality of increased student expectations, increased student debt, and ways that employers can help to mitigate student loan costs in the future. Browne’s 2010 report has indeed since proven to have had a profound effect on students and academics and the accounting education landscape. It ultimately led in England to an increase in student fees to £9,000 and the move towards a more student consumer based narrative, but more fundamentally for UK HE providers of undergraduate degrees, it has expanded alternative routes to gaining accountancy qualifications including the resurgence of apprenticeship routes, creating a more competitive accounting HE environment. It is an area still of fundamental interest to me and was a theme running through my semi-structured interviews for my thesis with employers expecting certain levels of professionalism from accounting graduates. As Kermis and Kermis reflect in their 2011 paper, ‘a case can be made that accounting educators have a responsibility to help students prepare to make the transition

... to contributing members of a professional service team' (Kermis and Kermis, 2011: 1) It is also an area of interest to those within professional bodies so I sent my Foundations in Professionalism paper to one of my professional body interviewees as they were seeking to develop a stronger sense of professional identity for students by working with learning providers for students studying through a private provider route.

As I was taking the International version of the Doctorate, the International Education course was of particular relevance in exploring the different understanding of 'international' and global inequalities within education. For the assignment of the International Education course, I considered student aid through the lens of cost sharing policies and explored its implications from a global perspective building on my reflections from my Foundations of Professionalism paper on the Browne report. I analysed what effect the student aid structure and cost sharing policies would have at global and national levels with an international comparative perspective.

Methods of Enquiry I and II

The Methods of Enquiry I course was organised to cover three key themes: research design, writing in research and ethics. My assignment was entitled 'to what extent do skills developed in undergraduate accounting students meet stakeholder needs? A case study approach' and I used my assignment to frame a research strategy and outline of research methods. The research question was formulated from a comment made within the Browne Report that I studied in the Foundations of Professionalism course that graduates were lacking the skills that employers were seeking. I sought to reflect on my ontological position, my epistemological approach and my methodology and to give myself a structure and timeframe for the Methods of Enquiry II course, my institution-focused study (IFS) and ultimately my thesis, as my focus throughout the courses was on transferable skills and undergraduate accounting students were a common thread throughout my work.

In Methods of Enquiry II, I was expecting this course to provide me with an understanding of the processes of research and the skills required to undertake research, to include the formulation of research questions, how to design research, sampling and an appreciation of how to analyse data, including using key tools such as SPSS and NVivo. My assignment developed a survey questionnaire to gather data on whether undergraduate accounting students perceive they have the skills to meet employer needs. My paper focussed on moving the ideas formulated in Methods of Enquiry (MOE) I into a pilot survey. It enabled me to focus on the development of the questionnaire, a skill that could then be used not only in the IFS and the thesis but would be a useful tool for any future research that I undertake. For

me, key learning points were the importance of planning and piloting studies with great care, and an improved understanding of BERA requirements (BERA, 2011). By this time, I was juggling my new role as head of department with my ongoing programme lead role and my doctorate. I had initially thought I would undertake the survey and analyse the results whereas I ended up with the more manageable approach of piloting the survey in Methods of Enquiry (MOE) II with the IFS becoming the focus of the survey and results analysis.

All aboard for the IFS

In my IFS, I developed and expanded research undertaken in MOE I and MOE II with the purpose of triangulating results with my thesis enquiry. Entitled 'Do undergraduate accounting student perceive they have the attributes required of being an accountant?' it looked at student perceptions and analysed data gathered using the survey I developed in MOE II. The survey data and results were analysed within a quantitative framework using SPSS. For my own professional development, I used the IFS to focus on two areas of skills development: critical enquiry and quantitative analytical techniques, improving my critical reading and writing skills supported by Wallace and Wray's (2006) seminal text. I presented my IFS results at the Higher Education Research and the Student Learning Experience in Business (HERSLEB) conference at the University of Melbourne in December 2013. My paper entitled 'Undergraduate accounting students: prepared for the workplace?' was published in May 2015 in the Journal of International Education in Business. Publication involved reviews and resubmissions and an engagement with the journal submission process - a useful learning experience.

Riding the interview rollercoaster

My thesis expands my IFS enquiry including a broader stakeholder approach within a globalised context using qualitative analysis approaches and triangulating with my IFS results which took a student perspective. My thesis 'Are undergraduate accounting students developing transferable skills that meet stakeholder needs? An international study' continues the theme of transferable skills in accounting students and I use semi-structured interviews to gather data. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) refer to the emotional dynamics of an interview journey. This started with my anti-positivist enthusiasm stage when I felt strongly engaged with the process, this being the first time I had undertaken interviews for research purposes, seeking to gain an in depth qualitative perspective on the area of transferable skills development. I have since gone through the interview quoting phase and the working phase of silence, culminating in seeking within the thesis to provide the voice of my interviewees.

If I were to start the journey again, what would I do differently?

There are two fundamental questions which I have considered as a reflective practitioner (Schon,1983) and these are, first, whether I should have undertaken the doctoral journey much earlier in my career and secondly, whether I should have chosen the Doctorate in Education route as compared to undertaking a PhD. I shall not attempt to answer the question of when in my career I should have undertaken doctoral level studies, but the question of a Doctorate in Education versus a PhD is a useful one that I will seek to address. I knew when I applied to do my doctorate that I would have to juggle many personal and professional aspects of my life and that my professional life was going to become more demanding because I was due to take up a role as a programme director of an accountancy undergraduate programme that would involve extensive UK and international travel. I needed a route that would be structured, that would have discrete periods of time of intensive study, that was carefully scaffolded to support me with discrete assessment points and that was internationally recognised as being of an excellent standard. The route I chose I hoped would fulfil what was a demanding set of criteria and I feel that all these criteria have been more than met. So, would I undertake this route if I were to make the choice again? My answer is a resounding yes. The professional doctorate has given me the scaffolding required not only to build on my academic skills but also to engage in activities to create a rounded academic. It has unlocked the portal to a wealth of academic activities including writing abstracts, conference presentations, writing academic journal articles and acting as a mentor within the Aurora programme and it has made me an avid reader of relevant texts and articles on my chosen subject to achieve my goal of becoming a professional academic and a professional accountant.

(1995 words)

Chapter 1: A case for investigation

In this chapter I consider how globalisation has affected the role of the accountant and I introduce my investigation into the current expectations of the transferable skills of accounting graduates. I look at the contribution of my study in terms of how it will make an impact on the knowledge base in the subject area of transferable skills development in undergraduate accounting students and put forward the problem statement that my thesis seeks to address, namely whether students are developing transferable skills that meet stakeholder needs. I look at how my thesis sits in terms of professionalism and my own professional context and consider how the overall structure of my thesis has been undertaken to best take the reader through my thesis.

1.1 Introduction and background for the study

1.1.1 Globalisation and the accountancy profession

Over the last 20 years, accountancy has become a truly global profession, as embodied by the existence of several global professional accountancy bodies and organisations. The International Federation of Accountants (IFAC), which is the leading global organisation for the accountancy profession, supports the development, adoption and implementation of international standards for accounting education, ethics, and audit and assurance as well as public sector accounting. IFAC has 175 members in 130 countries representing approximately 2.84 million accountants. It supports four independent standard-setting boards, the International Auditing and Assurance Standards board which publish the International Standards on Auditing (ISAs), the International Ethics Standard Board for Accountants, the International Public Sector Accounting Standards Board and the International Accounting Education Standards Board (IAESB). International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRSs) are developed by the International Accounting Standards Board (IASB) (www.ifrs.org, 2015), whose mission is to develop globally accepted, high quality, enforceable standards for the reporting of financial information.

In terms of the education of accountants, the IAESB has the role of developing education standards for the pre-qualification education of accountants. The IAESB develops uniform guidelines for education, training, and continuing professional development. National professional accounting organizations are required to consider these educational standards while formulating their educational systems. The IAESB developed and approved International Education Standard 3 (revised) which became effective on July 1, 2015. This standard, known as IES 3, is for initial professional development with reference to professional skills (IES 3, Initial Professional Development – professional skills (Revised))

2014). IES 3 is addressed to IFAC member bodies, with the IFAC member bodies having the responsibility to ensure that Initial Professional Development meets the requirement of the IES (IES 3, 2014). IFAC member bodies are therefore required to prescribe the learning outcomes for professional skills. Accountancy professional bodies are professional membership organisations or associations that promote, develop and support accountants (ICAEW, 2015). The International Association of Accounting Education Researchers (IAAER) has the mission of promoting *“excellence in accounting education and research on a worldwide basis and to maximise the contribution of accounting academics to the development and maintenance of high quality, globally recognised standards of accounting practice”* (IAAER, 2015).

IFAC provides the international framework for the transferable skills for professional accountants and integrated within this is IES 3. IES 3 prescribes the learning outcomes in relation to professional skills for those seeking to become professional accountants and refers to these skills as being the intellectual, interpersonal, communication, personal and organisational skills as well as the professional values and ethics and attitudes that are relevant to professional competence. The IES addresses member bodies of the IFAC and member bodies are required to ensure that the professional development requirements meet those of IES 3. In addition, it is intended that IES 3 may be ‘helpful to educational organisations, employers, regulators, government authorities and any other stakeholders who support the learning and development of aspiring professional accountants’ (IES 3, 2014:4). The globalisation of the profession and the framework provided by the International Education Standards has meant that accounting education can be undertaken on a global basis with suitably qualified accountants able to work trans-globally. Students of accounting can study to reach the accepted professional level via a wide range of routes including higher education institutions, private learning providers, and self-study and embedded employer/university schemes, with these forms of study taking place anywhere in the world and the student able to learn via online, blended and face to face methods.

The accountancy professional bodies referenced in my thesis are all IFAC member bodies and, as such, they are required to ensure they meet the requirements of IES 3. In order to meet these requirements, accountancy professional bodies within their competency frameworks have prescribed transferable skills. The graduate accounting students whose perceptions inform my thesis study are all ACCA (Association of Chartered Certified Accountants) registered students. ACCA is a global professional accountancy body who *“offer business-relevant, first-choice qualifications to people of application, ability and ambition around the world who seek a rewarding career in accountancy, finance and*

management" (ACCA, 2016). ACCA seeks to strengthen the global accountancy profession using the application of consistent standards as a base. In order to do this, they work with the global bodies including IFAC. ACCA have 178,000 members and 455,000 students in 181 countries. My thesis is set within this context of a global profession where there is mobility of the workforce and the need for graduates to have transferable skills to meet employer needs.

1.1.2 The role of the accountant

The early part of the 21st century has seen a significant shift in the traditional role of the accountant and the skills that are required of them continue to evolve and develop with ever more technological advances. Over the last decade the role of the accountant has changed to meet the needs of the modern workplace. De Lange et al (2006) refer to significant change in the global business environment and the part that an accountant plays within this environment as well as the range of technical and transferable skills that are demanded of accountants. Watty et al (2012:1) refer to 'global markets, technology and heightened focus on public interest imperative of accounting information' as being some of the driving influences affecting the modern role of the accountant. Accounting educators are seeking to provide both the technical and transferable skills that would be expected of an accountant as well as the transferable skills that will be expected by employers. Graduating students are expected to have a mix of subject specific skills as well as transferable skills to aid them in gaining employment (Morgan, 1997). My thesis will focus on this important subject of transferable skills development of accounting students and whether these are meeting the expectations that stakeholders are setting.

1.1.3 Higher Education and transferable skills

The 2010 Browne report considered how the English higher education system might secure a sustainable future (Browne, 2010). It was the outcome of an independent review of English higher education funding and the associated student finance. The report, entitled 'Securing a sustainable future for higher education' (Browne Report, 2010), sought to ensure that teaching in higher education within England is 'sustainably financed' so that England can compete in a global education market. The report is set within the context of a widening of participation of students in English higher education, with 45% of 18 to 30 year olds entering higher education and the HE system having a reputation for quality teaching, as witnessed by England having four of the global top 20 universities and 15 of the top 100 (ibid). It is set against a background of UK current public spending cuts, the expected increase in the level of unemployment within the UK public sector and the ability of non-English higher education institutions to compete with English institutions.

Within this report, Browne commented that some graduates lack transferable skills such as communication, entrepreneurial and networking skills and an understanding of how businesses work. In 2012, the CBI Education and Skills Survey (CBI, 2012) referred to the need to produce graduates that not only have intellectual skills but also transferable skills that are effective in the workplace. According to Harvey et al (1997), 'a degree might be necessary but employers are looking for a range of other attributes when employing and retaining a graduate'.

1.1.4 Transferable skills and accounting graduates

Transferable skills can be defined as those skills which are transferable by nature and that are suited to the industry in which the graduate works (De Lange et al, 2006). They are those that "may be specific having qualities of transferability and general characteristics" (De Lange et al, 2006:366) and have more recently been referred to as attributes (Watty et al, 2012). Within the subject of accounting education, the area of transferable skills development has been criticised over a number of decades with transferable skills development being an area of considerable interest to accounting educators (Stoner and Milner, 2010). The criticisms in the 80s and 90s led to assessment strategies within accounting education being transformed so that they aligned with what at the time were perceived skills requirements which sought to meet employer needs (Gardner et al, 2005).

Albrecht and Sack (2000), in their seminal study in Accounting Education of 'Charting the Course Through a Perilous Future', found that transferable skills ensure proficient graduates enter into the accounting profession. Albrecht and Sack's paper proposed that accounting education may not survive the future and that it had to change in order to maintain its relevance. The authors foresaw the changes that were going to take place in the business environment with the impact of technology and the globalisation of business, recommending that the current educational model was too content focussed and that students needed skills development in order to become successful professionals. This paper was written 15 years ago. Although accounting education has survived during this period, there has been a move towards alternative forms of accounting education away from the traditional undergraduate accounting programme, with an increase in apprenticeship routes (Carrington Crisp, 2014). Also, transferable skills development continues to be of key importance to graduates in terms of their employability, employer expectations and professional body competency requirements (CBI, 2012).

Ascertaining which skills are considered transferable is difficult (Jones, 2010), as is the definition of those skills. Transferable skills may be different dependent on whether they are being considered in the context of the workplace or academia (Marginson, 1993), there being no definitive list of transferable skills. Within accounting education, good practitioners are cited as requiring good communication skills (Borzi and Mills, 2001) and the ability to work well in a team (Johnson and Johnson, 1995) and the importance of interpersonal skills is seen as increasing (De Lange et al, 2006). According to Stone et al (1996), accounting graduates need to have experience of business information systems including conceptual knowledge, general software skills plus problem solving and analytical skills.

There is also the debate as to whether these skills are truly transferable from one context to another with context specific learning (Jones, 2010). Watty et al, (2012) put forward the argument that a discipline's epistemology and culture will shape that discipline's skills and attributes and this argument is supported by a number of authors including De Lange et al, (2006) and Awayiga (2010) who focussed on the perceptions and development of the skills of accounting graduates. For the purposes of this thesis I take the perspective proposed by Jones (2010), in that the transferable skills I consider are those that are relevant to an accountant being embedded within the content of the discipline, that they are tacit in nature and that the transferable skills are such that they may overlap. The specific transferable skills and their definitions are considered in detail in Chapter 3.

1.2 Contribution of the study

This thesis explores transferable skills within the context of accounting undergraduate students from the perspective of whether or not they are meeting stakeholder needs with transferable skills being those that are embedded within the context of the discipline. These skills are set within the disciplinary context of IES 3 as discussed in section 1.1.1 'Globalisation and the accountancy profession'. There has been a substantial amount of literature into the development of transferable skills (or 'generic' skills) within the framework of accounting education in countries such as America, Australia, Ghana and the United Kingdom, including those by Albrecht and Sack (2000) De Lange (2006), Milner and Hill (2008), Jackling and Keneley (2009), Bui and Porter (2010) Stoner and Milner (2010) and Awayiga (2010). In contrast, there has not been a study that has captured the perspectives of a global student body at the same time as gaining perspectives from global accountancy bodies and global employers. Also, there is a paucity of literature set within the International Education Standard framework that takes the wider stakeholder perspective. IES 3 was revised in 2014 and this study fills a gap in the literature by using the international framework

of accountancy education and revised IES 3, taking a global stakeholder perspective from those of students, higher education institutions, professional bodies and employers and looking at the current transferable skills of undergraduate accounting students within this international context. It considers if these stakeholder needs are being met and also what is expected of students in terms of skills for the future. The study builds on my IFS that I undertook as part of my Doctorate in Education. My IFS looked at current student perceptions within an international student body of accounting students across the globe, of whether their studies had prepared them for the global workplace as accountants, considering the strengths and weakness of their transferable skills base. By looking at the broader stakeholder perspective, I seek in my thesis to determine whether the personal transferable skills that students gain in their studies meet the needs of the different stakeholders.

My research in this thesis provides a current picture of students' perceptions as to whether they are prepared for the workplace by their undergraduate accounting study in terms of transferable skills. I provide recommendations to enhance accounting academic programmes and future continuing professional development provision by highlighting areas of current concern by students entering the workplace.

1.3 Problem statement and theories of skills development

My thesis investigates whether undergraduate accounting students are developing the skills to meet stakeholder needs and this is set within the global context of accountancy education.

The following are the research sub-questions which help me answer my key research question:

- What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?
- Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?
- What do stakeholders perceive will be the key changes in the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?
- How could the key skills which require better development be improved in undergraduate accounting students?

This thesis seeks to consider the wider stakeholder perspective on the area of readiness for work in terms of transferable skills. Looking at the stakeholders who would be engaged with

the development and engagement of graduates, I considered the perspective of the higher education institution, the professional body and the employer. According to Gammie et al (2002), the relevant stakeholders include employers, students and the programme team. My study has a global perspective, with students being surveyed from a global population for my IFS and with interviewees representing global institutions and institutions from the UK, Singapore and Australia. More details on the survey and interviewee population are provided in Chapter 3.

The accountancy profession and its associated learning, both academic and professional, is set within a global community of learning and therefore I use the educational theory perspective provided by Lave and Wenger (1991) that learning and teaching are situated within a community of practice and that learning is a social construction. This conforms to my ontological position on the nature of reality where I consider the theory of knowledge in relation to transferable skills development to be situated within communities of practice. Within the context of accounting education, the communities of practice will include both the academic and professional context as I consider these to be intrinsically linked; this is explored further in section 1.4. The professional bodies and higher education institutions all input to the community of practice and these are in turn influenced by employers. Professional bodies, such as the ACCA and ICAEW, have developed skills or what are often termed 'competency frameworks' and universities have in turn developed transferable skills' requirements which reflect the mission and vision of the university.

1.4 Professional context of my thesis

The traditional view of professionalism is located within an Anglo-American framework and takes the view that a professional is someone who has specialist knowledge, with public standing, working towards the good of the people, with a clear code of conduct and operating within a self-regulatory framework (Lunt, 2010). I consider that this study is set within two professional contexts; both have the broader context of being within accounting education, but one is within the context of higher education and the other is within the context of a professional accounting education setting.

1.4.1 Higher education and professionalism and the professional accountant

As referred to by the late Professor David Watson in his foreword to 'Exploring Professionalism' (Cunningham, 2008), universities and professionals have always enjoyed a relationship that is intimate with the professions and this holds true for the accounting profession and higher education. Indeed, higher education is seeing the application of extended professionalism (Hoyle, 1974), whereby what is taught in lecture theatres is

constructively aligned to the university's mission and goals; methods used within this context are compared with practice seen at other universities within England and more globally. The internationalisation strategy that is seen in universities (often driven by the requirement for accreditation by recognised bodies) means that a high value is placed on professional collaboration, again from within the university, but also looking to the wider global HE sector.

The UK has 97 universities with accounting and finance programmes (Completeuniversityguide, 2015); these programmes often have exemptions, dependent on their content and focus, from one of the UK's five professional accountancy bodies. Accounting sees alignment to the professional bodies (institutes) mentioned earlier. Staff are expected to read professional literature extensively and courses in theory are incorporated within the programme structure. The recent focus on research funding has meant many higher education lecturers are expected to undertake research and non-teaching professional activities such as membership of one of the higher education academy subject centres or Special Interest Groups which are used to bring collaborative learning within subject areas.

The five professional accountancy bodies are the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW), the Association of Chartered Certified Accountants (ACCA), the Institute of Chartered Accountants Scotland (ICAS), the Chartered Institute of Management Accountants (CIMA) and the Chartered Institute of Public Finance Accountants (CIPFA). The professional bodies have skills requirements embedded as part of their qualifications; for example, the ICAEW has seven ladders of progress which include within them the skills of communication, team working, decision making, consideration and problem solving (ICAEW, 2015). The ACCA has a competency framework which includes leadership & management, strategy & innovation and professionalism & ethics (ACCA Competency Framework, 2015).

It is common in the UK for students to study both for professional accountancy qualifications and undergraduate degrees simultaneously and this may be undertaken within higher education institutions or more recently with private providers. The UK accountancy profession is based on open access and it is not a degree-only profession.

1.4.2 The professional perspective of my thesis

The work I have undertaken as part of this thesis triangulates with the study I undertook for my IFS. The programme for which I am programme director has an international cohort of students and is a collaborative provision with the UK University I work for and a global

professional accountancy body. My IFS looked at undergraduate accounting students who undertake their study in conjunction with a professional body. The professional accountancy body that these students are studying with is considered to be 'the global accountancy body' for professional accountants and prides itself on opening up the accountancy profession to students from all backgrounds. As at February 2015, the professional accountancy body has 170,000 members and 436,000 students in 180 countries. The programme is seeking to develop students to be part of an international accounting community by including an international curriculum and the student body reflects the global nature of the programme.

The programme studied in the IFS is available exclusively to students from the global accountancy body and students work towards their degree at the same time as working towards their professional accountancy qualifications. The programme on which the students were surveyed is an innovative programme which was launched in 2000 and which currently has around 260,000 students opted in to the programme and which has graduated over 14,000 students since its inception. The students are based all over the globe with highest concentrations in the UK and the Far East. Students who register with the professional body are automatically registered with the UK higher education institution. Students are required to pass their fundamental levels modules, to complete a professional ethics module and to pass a research and analysis project. Transferable skills and subject specific skills are embedded within the fundamental level modules, within the professional ethics module and within the research and analysis module.

The accounting programme on which the students were surveyed is designed to develop the necessary accounting knowledge base that would be expected of a UK undergraduate accounting student as well as the associated transferable skills. In order to ensure that this is the case, the knowledge and skills are referenced to the UK Quality Assurance Agency (UKQAA) Accounting Benchmark statement which was issued in 2007 (which is currently under review) and to the QAA framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland. It also has the skills embedded required by the university-wide policy on transferable skills, with the programme specification mapping these transferable skills. This is common policy with many universities (Keneley and Jackling, 2011). In my IFS I investigated the perception of these undergraduate students as to whether they had developed the transferable skills within their programme of study to meet employer needs.

For higher education institutions, accountancy education is a global phenomenon with the teaching of International Financial Reporting standards and International Standards of Auditing. Therefore, my study sought to be framed within the context of higher education

institutions that reflected this global content and, therefore, higher education institutions in the UK, Singapore and Australia were sampled.

The professional bodies needed to reflect the global nature of accountancy education and, with this in mind; I selected professional bodies that were global in nature. Two of the bodies have headquarters in the UK and one in Australia. All these professional bodies accept relevant graduates i.e. those that have undertaken accountancy undergraduate qualifications plus they accept non-relevant graduates. Employers of students have a global presence, there being four large global accountancy firms who employ accountancy and other graduates, namely Ernst and Young, KPMG, Deloitte and Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC). Two of these employers were interviewed as was another large UK employer. Students can transfer globally when within such organizations. This thesis seeks to gain this international stakeholder perspective on the consideration of transferable skills of accounting students.

1.5 Organisation of Thesis

The key purpose and focus of my thesis is to take a current and forward looking perspective on the transferable skill sets that are expected by stakeholders of accounting graduates. I consider whether there have been changes to these transferable skills sets, what the current expectations are and how these may change over the next five years. From this, I make recommendations as to how the transferable skills of accounting students can be better developed. This can then be used to inform accounting higher education educators and other stakeholders in their teaching and learning of accounting students.

My thesis is organised to take the reader through my study of transferable skills development by accounting students and the perceptions of stakeholders as to whether they meet expected stakeholder needs. Following on from this chapter looking at the setting of the study both from a broader educational perspective and from a professional context providing the rationale for my study, in chapter 2, I undertake an extensive literature review seeking to critically evaluate the literature that looks at the issues of transferable skills. My literature review (although primarily set within the context of accounting education) also considers the broader literature in relation to communities of practice. I include a review of the literature on transferable skills within the accounting education context as well as the definitions that are used within this context. There is also a literature review of the issue of conflict management set within a broader context. In chapter 3 I look at the methodology and methods used in order to investigate the perceptions of different stakeholders in relation to the transferable skills of accounting graduates. I also consider in this chapter how the work I

undertook in my IFS was able to be triangulated with the data from my semi-structured interviews. Political and ethical issues that needed to be considered for my thesis are also addressed in this chapter. A large part of this chapter is given over to considering how the semi-structured interviews were designed and implemented, explaining the what, why, when, how, where and who of this undertaking. In chapter 4 I analyse the data gathered from the semi-structured interviews which have been collated using a thematic approach of data coding and analysis as used by Miles and Huberman (1994). In chapter 5 I discuss my findings and seek to make sense of the outcomes of my coding and analysis of the interviews. In chapter 6 I make concluding remarks, linking back to my research questions and show how my thesis makes a contribution to the field of study. I also consider not only the implications of this study in terms of recommendations, the possibility of future study and dissemination of findings, but also the limitations to be taken into account when reading this study. Finally, I consider the implications for my own professional knowledge, practice and development of undertaking this thesis. I have also included appendices which I considered worthwhile as supplements. These were not crucial to my thesis, so I consider my thesis would still make sense if they were not included.

Chapter 2: Literature review

In this chapter I provide a definition of transferable skills and I then look at the theory of skills development, considering situated learning and communities of practice. I review the literature that engages with transferable skills and I examine what is known about this within the context of accountancy education analyzing whether I consider this should be seen as discipline-specific. Following on from this, I evaluate the literature that studies which transferable skills are relevant in the context of accountancy education and how these can be defined. I look at the literature surrounding the transferable skills of interpersonal, oral/written communication skills, IT computing, analysis and critical evaluation, problem solving, team-working, statistical, practical research, career planning and interviews, time management and organization and self-reflection. These transferable skills were determined from the work I undertook in my IFS as to be the key current transferable skills for accountants. A summary of the key studies and transferable skills within these studies are tabled in Appendix IX. I go on to look in detail at the transferable skills of professionalism and ethics, conflict management and emotional intelligence as key themes. I then finish the chapter with a consideration of stakeholder engagement.

There are many routes through to the professional accountancy community. For example, in the UK, students may undertake accountancy at university and then train as an accountant within an organisation. Alternatively, UK students may enter accountancy firms directly from school, with there being a recent resurgence in the UK of school-leaver apprenticeship routes. By comparison, in Australia, accountancy is a graduate-only profession. For the context of this thesis, I reference the route and investigate the acquired skills of undergraduate accounting students into the accountancy profession.

2.1 Defining transferable skills

In order to explore the area of transferable skills, I first want to define what I mean by a transferable skill within the context of this thesis. Transferable skills are normally associated with the context of higher education, where they are often referred to as 'graduate attributes', whereas 'competencies' are often associated with professional bodies (Willcoxson et al, 2010). Higher education has outcome-based functional behaviours and professional bodies specify input competency-based standards. 'Transferable skills' is a term that is often used interchangeably with terms such as 'graduate attributes', 'generic skills', 'employability skills', 'generic attributes', 'soft skills', 'non-technical skills', 'graduate skills' and 'competencies', and, as such, I shall use it within these contexts (Watty et al, 2012). I shall use the definition

cited in Tempone et al (2012:43) that “*transferable skills* are intended to be the qualities that prepare graduates to meet the demands of being lifelong learners and agents for social good, and ready for personal developments in conditions of uncertainty and rapid global change”. Employability skills sit within *transferable skills* (Tempone et al, 2012), as the definition of *transferable skills* encompasses that of active citizenship as well as a graduate’s ability to obtain and remain in work.

2.2 Theories of skills development and their application to accountancy education

Relevant to my thesis is the argument put forward by Bloom et al (1956) that higher order skills are able to be separated out and put into a form of developmental hierarchy. Bloom recognised six levels of learning moving from the lower order levels of knowledge and comprehension up to application analysis and thesis and then finally evaluation. In my thesis, I have worked with these being separate skills, although, as noted by Jones (2010), they are often interlinked. I discuss taxonomies and hierarchies further in section 2.8 Taxonomies and hierarchies.

Lave and Wenger (1991), in their seminal work ‘Situated Learning: Legitimate peripheral participation’, provided the educational theory perspective of situated learning that learning and teaching are situated within a community of practice. Learning is a social construction taken from developmental cycles of communities of practice, the gradual process of becoming a professional practitioner in your subject, whereby a newcomer to a community transforms into a master (ibid). Learning involves the co-construction of knowledge which takes place in the situation it is applied in, so the development and learning of transferable skills can take place within the programme learning environment, whether this be an online community environment or within the workplace. Lave and Wenger (1991) give the perspective that learning and teaching are situated within a community of practice. Applying this to the community of professional accountants, engaging students in the professional community as early as possible to support their professional behaviour and their teaching and learning within the community could help address perceived weaknesses. In my thesis, I take this fundamental assumption that learning is situated and that learners engage in a community of practice. The community of accountants has a clear identity which is closely tied to those in the community having professional membership of an accountancy body. Accountants are both members of the community and agents of activity, with trainee accountants desiring to become fully qualified accountants and practitioners, with the training of accountants being integral to the practice of accountancy. The identity of being an accountant means that knowing is part of the growth and transformation of that move towards being a practising accountant and is located in the relationship between

accountancy trainees and practitioners, how they practice, the artefacts that they use in their practice and the social organisation of their practice. Accountants are members of professional accountancy bodies who will have their own community of practice, situated in the social world which can be situated within a country boundary or can have a global configuration. Also key to my thesis is the idea that learning is not only an individual process, but also a social knowledge construction (Lave and Wenger, 1991); learners will engage with the meaning of knowledge through both these individual and social processes. In their study of collaborative discovery on online information systems assurance course, Borthick and Jones (2000) suggest that, instead of simply having lectures, learning events can be designed for newcomers to legitimately participate in authentic social practice. This also emphasises the importance of disciplinary culture on teaching and learning practices. The studies by Trowler and Cooper (2002) and Jones (2014) both refer to the importance of disciplinary culture in formulating teaching and learning practices and this is relevant to the place of transferable skills in the education of accountants. As per Jones' discussions around transferable skills, there are a number of implicit assumptions in relation to the learning of these skills 'the fundamental assumption..... is that learning is situated and that learners involve themselves in a community of practice or enquiry' (Jones, 2014:16). Making meaning is both a social and individual practice and learners therefore engage within their own context and within the social knowledge construction. Springer and Borthick (2007) found that learners in the process of completing authentic accounting tasks could help to identify the practice of accounting by participating in the 'social justification of belief that characterises professional practice' (Springer and Borthick, 2007: 9). Conceptualisation of generic attributes as part of teaching and learning is situated within this learning construct (Jones, 2010).

2.2.1 The importance of transferable skills

Accounting undergraduate students will learn both transferable and technical skills relevant to the accountancy profession and it is the transferable skills that I research in this thesis. Universities (De Lange et al, 2006) and professional accountancy bodies such as the ACCA (ACCA competency framework, 2015) and the ICAEW (ICAEW professional development, 2015) have developed skills frameworks, or what are often termed 'competency frameworks' in the context of professional bodies. These include both technical and transferable skills and reflect the philosophy of the educational institution or professional body.

My thesis focuses on transferable skills, but the juxtaposition between transferable and technical skills is an important one and therefore I do make reference to this in my thesis. Morgan (1997) refers to the awareness that acquisition of technical skills over-rides the

acquisition of transferable skills, but my thesis observes that there has been a shift to transferable skills over-riding technical skills. This is evidenced by Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) who refer to the shift in emphasis to transferable skills becoming more pronounced and this is supported by the results in chapter 4. Also, Awayiga's (2010) previous studies have found that employers are primarily satisfied with graduates' technical knowledge but they feel that they are lacking transferable skills. This all highlights the importance of transferable skills in the development of accounting undergraduate students and it is these important transferable skills that my thesis investigates.

The importance of transferable skills is also highlighted by Browne in his 2010 report (Brown, 2010) into the English higher education system, where he comments on students lacking the transferable skills of communication, entrepreneurialism, networking skills and an understanding of how businesses work. The CBI Education and Skills survey in 2012 (CBI, 2012) referred to graduates needing not only the intellectual skills, but also the transferable skills that are effective in the workplace. The CBI 2012 paper is useful as it defines the terms used, something which is not clear in many studies. It looks at employer satisfaction with transferable skills and reports that one in ten employers report shortcomings in basic numeracy skills, 15% are not satisfied with the standards of literacy, 23% are not satisfied with graduates' problem solving skills and 25% do not find that team working skills meet their expectations. If I use the definition given by the CBI for team working skills: "respecting others, co-operating, negotiating, persuading and contributing to discussions" (CBI, 2012: 32), then this reflects both what I found in my IFS about students' concerns over conflict management and comments made in Chapter 4 by the interviewees about students' ability to negotiate. Around a quarter (24%) of employers were found to be concerned about graduates' limited career awareness and this ties in with comments made in my interviews by employers of accounting graduates. More than a third (37%) of employers felt that students should have more work experience and 47% of employers expressed dissatisfaction with graduates' business and customer awareness. The CBI 2012 report also proposed that these shortfalls should be remedied through a partnership approach involving students, higher education institutions and employers. Importantly, this report has transferable skills as the most important factor considered when recruiting graduates and highlights the importance of ensuring that these skills are understood and developed in students.

Stuart Pedley-Smith from Kaplan UK produced a white paper in 2014 entitled 'Graduate recruitment, learning and development' (Pedley-Smith, 2014) which included a section on what competencies employers are looking for. The vast majority (73%) of respondents said

effective communication, 64% chose numeracy and 61% said they are looking for a team player. The competency least valued was technical knowledge. A study in June 2014 entitled '21st Century Leaders', jointly published by the Chartered Management Institute, the Quality Assurance Agency and the Association of Business Schools found in terms of key skills that employers are looking for communication skills (67%), problem solving and critical analysis skills (48%) and team skills (47%), but 65% said that UK graduates lack the interpersonal skills needed to manage people.

A report by Carrington Crisp in November 2014 (Carrington Crisp, 2014) entitled 'See the Future' 2014, looked at the views of employers and senior academic and professional staff in business schools on key trends in business education. Their key findings were that 'technology changes everything', which ties with comments made in chapter 4 by interviewees of the importance of technology and which I discuss further in this chapter when looking at IT skills. The report also makes reference to the increase in apprenticeship routes, making particular reference to the development of degrees with the Big Four Accountancy firms: Ernst and Young, Price Waterhouse Coopers (PWC), KPMG and Deloitte. This report also commented on the strong academic capabilities of graduates but that they demonstrated little evidence of professional skills, and there was a desire to have students who had studied ethics, leadership, governance, innovation and change management.

2.3 Skills: discipline specific or not?

Lave and Wenger (1991) proposed that learning takes place within communities of practice and that learning involves the co-construction of knowledge within a social and physical environment. I am also arguing that Lave and Wenger's (1991) situated learning model of learning can be applied to this programme, with the programme enabling the social environment for a community of practice of accountants. Transferable skills, and the development of skills as part of teaching and learning, are situated within the conceptual framework of social constructivism with accounting undergraduates developing their transferable skills as part of a professional accounting community of practice – the undergraduate accounting students are the newcomers.

There has been a considerable body of work over recent years into transferable skills or what has been more recently referred to as 'attributes' (Watty et al, 2012). There continues to be a debate as to whether transferable skills are best defined within the discipline or whether they are trans-disciplinary. The arguments in favour of discipline-specific skills is supported by work undertaken by Gammie et al (2002) into personal skills development in

the accounting curriculum and by De Lange et al (2006) who looked at accounting graduates' perceptions of skills. De Lange et al (2006:366) refer to transferable skills as those that 'may be specific having qualities of transferability and generalist characteristics'. Awayiga (2010) looked at both the knowledge and skills development of accounting graduates in Ghana. Jones (2010) argues about the significance of the disciplinary context in relation to transferable skills in accounting. For the context of this thesis, the operational definition of transferable skill proposed by Jones (2010) is also useful, namely that transferable skills that are relevant to accountants are those taught within the discipline and embedded within the content and that there is limited transferability to other contexts. They are often of a tacit nature and there may be overlap between different transferable skills. For my thesis, I consider that transferable skills are discipline-based from a scholarly and professional practice perspective and that teaching and learning should be developed from this perspective. In my thesis, it is the development of transferable skills within accountancy undergraduates which I investigate.

Watty et al (2012) put forward the argument that skills and attributes vary between disciplines as it is the discipline that shapes these as they are part of the discipline's epistemology and culture. Watty et al (2012) make the argument that, on graduation, accounting graduates should have the skills to become a professional accountant, this being a vocational subject area and, therefore, those skills for accounting graduates are best defined within accounting.

2.4 Which skills?

Defining which skills

There is no definitive list of transferable skills, either generally or within the discipline-specific context of accounting, but a number of studies look at the development of transferable skills both from a general skills development basis and from a more specific accountancy-focussed basis. The ascertainment of what skills are required is considered difficult as is the defining of those skills and transferable skills may be different depending on the context in which they are being considered. This could be the workplace, academia or their professional context (Marginson, 1993). Morgan (1997) considers the transferable skills required by accounting graduates to be: willingness to learn, team working, communication skills, problem solving, analytical ability, logical argument and the ability to summarise as being fundamental to undergraduate academic foundation. A seminal work in the area of accounting education which looked into accounting education and, as part of this, the development of transferable skills was Albrecht and Sack's (2000) study 'Accounting Education: Charting the Course Through a Perilous Future', where a list of 22 transferable

skills were ranked which aligned closely to the AICPA Vision Study and its Core Competency Framework by the IMA in 1995 and 1999 Practice Analyses and with other academic research into accounting education. The skills listed in order of importance by participants in the Albrecht and Sack (2000) survey were analytical critical thinking, written communication which was separate to oral communication, computing technology, decision making, interpersonal skills, continuous learning, teamwork, business decision modelling, professional demeanour, leadership, risk analysis, measurement, project management, customer orientation, change management, negotiation, research, entrepreneurship, resources management, salesmanship and ability to speak a foreign language. Borzi and Mills (2001) refer to communication skills that could include oral expression, listening skills and writing skills. Gardner et al (2005) refer to the issues of problem solving, teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills as those of concern and that accounting education over emphasised technical ability to the detriment of other skills. De Lange et al (2006) included communication, team work, leadership, problem solving, analytical and interpersonal skills. Another key problem is the transferability of these transferable skills. Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) found that students were aware of employer expectations in relation to communication, analytical, professional and team work skills, with both employers and students as key stakeholders reporting that essential non-technical and professional skills and attributes are not being developed sufficiently in university accounting programmes. Wider studies included the CBI and Universities UK (2009) who put forward a list of nine graduate employability skills and attributes (transferable skills) which included self-management, team working, business and customer awareness, problem solving, communication and literacy, application of numeracy, application of information technology, positive attitude and entrepreneurship/enterprise. In Australia, the Partners in Education Transformation Project on Transforming Education considering 21st century skills (atc21s.org, 2010) showed an initial result of transferable skills of creativity/innovation, critical thinking/problem-solving/decision making, learning to learn, communication, collaboration, citizenship, life and career, personal and social responsibility, information literacy, information and communication technology, as being transferable skills that are relevant to current graduates. Stoner and Milner (2010) looked at the skills of time management, modelling (problem-solving) and learning to learn within the context of a UK undergraduate accounting degree and raised the issue of 'threshold concepts', these being key concepts that transform a learner's understanding of a discipline when mastered. Importantly, they refer to "movement towards relativistic ways of thinking that could be seen as an essential prerequisite for both lower and higher level employability skills." Awayiga et al (2010) looked at the issue of skills development within a developing nation considering analytical/critical thinking, communication skills, professional demeanour, intellectual skills,

computing technology, interpersonal skills, personal skills, organisation and business management skills and technical and functional skills. Jones (2010) refers to the transference of transferable skills from one context to another as being problematic due to learning being context-specific.

Employability

When looking at transferable skills within the accountancy discipline, there have been a number of studies, including those by Stone et al (1996), Borzi and Mills (2001) and Gammie et al (2002), which looked at the need to gain skills which will enhance employment prospects and which refer to the 'skills gap' at the employer graduate interface. They looked at a particular strategy to facilitate the development within an undergraduate degree and used a stakeholder theory approach looking at current provision compared to best practice. They support other studies which highlight that it is in the development of 'softer skills' that employers felt there was room for improvement. From this study, they also found that students felt ill equipped in the transferable skills and, from their surveys with business schools, they found that best practice for development of these skills includes professionally produced videos to teach interview skills, role plays, mock interviews, visits by employers, focus groups for applications and career planning, plus there was a central theme of skills development within the current programme.

Areas of weakness in accountancy courses

De Lange et al (2006) replicated the earlier study by Matthews et al (1990), seeking to identify areas of perceived weakness in current accounting courses, with the paper highlighting the focus of universities on preparing students for professional accounting accreditation exemptions rather than preparing them for transferable skills development. The study format was similar in its nature to my IFS, and ties in with the comments made earlier in this chapter that students are not meeting expectations in terms of transferable skills development. It reported that there needs to be greater emphasis on transferable skills development which agrees with other reports such as that referred to earlier in this chapter by the CBI 2012 that it is not meeting employer expectations, but it also goes further and highlights that it is not meeting student expectations which resonates with the findings from my IFS results. This study also raises the issue of computing skills development which is also highlighted by my interviews in chapter 4 as being an area requiring greater emphasis.

The ACCA's Performance Objectives (2015) refer to the transferable skills of self-management, effective communication, and the use of information and communication technology. The ICAEW has seven ladders of personal development which outside of

technical competence include communication, team working, decision making, consideration, adding value and problem solving (ICAEW Professional Development, 2015)

The study I undertook for Methods of Enquiry II looked at the development of a survey questionnaire to look at the perceptions of accounting students' skills development and this then fed through into my IFS. As this was an institute level investigation, I used the Undergraduate Accounting Programme Specification for the programme acting as a case study for the IFS to inform my understanding of which skills might be listed to inform the research. In common with many universities, there is a university-wide policy on embedding transferable skills (Keneley and Jackling, 2011) into the programme specification. The skill sets within the programme are also referenced to the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA): accounting benchmark (2016) and the QAA framework for higher education qualifications in England, Wales and Northern Ireland (2001). The programme specification includes oral communication, IT skills, analysis and critical evaluation, problem solving, written communication, practical research skills, information gathering and referencing, independent and self-managed learning and self-reflection.

I used a thematic approach to transferable skills, using the academic and professional literature detailed above and, as part of my Methods of Enquiry II study, I refined the themes into a list of 12 transferable skills. These skills were included in the student skills survey and this list plus ethics was included within the semi-structured interviews as detailed in Chapter 3 of this thesis.

The transferable skills listed were those of interpersonal, oral communication, written communication, IT/computing, analysis & critical evaluation, problem solving, team-working, statistical, practical research, career planning & interview, time management & organisation, and self-reflection, with professional ethics being added to this list as a result of the outcomes of the IFS survey. The purpose of creating this list of current skills which are developed within the programme was to provide a framework for students to respond to in terms of student perceptions which were measured via an online survey to indicate students' perceptions of the importance of these skills. The list was then further used in my semi-structured interviews in the form of a prompt after other questions had been asked.

2.4.1 Interpersonal, oral and written communication skills

Morgan (1997) looks at the importance of communication skills required by accounting graduates from practitioner and academic perspectives and found that practitioners assign high importance to the preparation of working documents and the skills of active listening.

Constructive participation and one to one communication are important oral communication skills. Morgan recommends the adoption of a portfolio approach for skills similar to that undertaken by professional bodies when assessing the competencies of trainee accountants. Good accounting practitioners are cited as requiring effective communication skills (Borzi and Mills, 2001) and team-working skills (Johnson and Johnson, 2005), but it was found that there was significant communication apprehension (Borzi and Mills, 2001). Gardner et al (2005) focus on oral and written communication skills within the context of accounting education and the levels of apprehension by students in relation to this. De Lange et al suggest that the importance of interpersonal skills is increasing (De Lange et al, 2006), although this was further sub-categorised into written and oral communication skills. Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) refer to the reinforcement of the view that oral and written skills are considered to be the two most important skills, supported by earlier studies such as those by Morgan (1997) and De Lange et al (2006). Ballantine and Larres (2009) investigate how to ensure graduates possess interpersonal and communication skills through the use of group work, considering which form of group work is most useful and recommending the use of cooperative learning. Milner and Hill (2008) refer to accounting graduates lacking in communication and problem solving skills. Bui and Porter (2010) also found that employers from all accounting firms wanted students to have a sound base of accounting principles and concepts as well as communication, teamwork and interpersonal skills and that there was high value placed on the accounting graduate having a personality that fitted with the culture of the firm, which resonates with my findings in chapter 4. Bui and Porter also reference the difference that accountancy firm size makes in terms of employer expectations with the Big 4 firms seeking 'well developed analytical, critical and creative thinking skills and oral presentational and writing skills' (Bui and Porter, 2010:45) and that the technical skills were of less importance compared with smaller and medium sized firms where technical skills and communication skills were perceived to be of greater importance.

2.4.2 IT/computing, analysis & critical evaluation, problem solving, team-working, statistical, practical research, career planning & interview, time management & organisation, and self-reflection

According to Stone et al (1996), accounting graduates need to have experience of business information systems including conceptual knowledge, general software skills and problem solving and analytical skills. Albrecht and Sack (2000), in their seminal study, asked participants about the technology skills which they believed new accounting graduates should have and the key skills they highlighted were related to spreadsheet software, word processing software, Windows, World Wide Web and presentation software. Johnson and Johnson (2005) refer to the importance of team working. Awayiga (2010) undertook a study

in Ghana and found in their context that spreadsheet skills were the most important, which built on earlier studies such as that by Albrecht and Sack (2000) which found that accounting education lags behind business in terms of developments. It also suggests the need for industrial attachments which resonates with comments made in the semi-structured interviews in Chapter 4 which refer to the importance of placements. This paper also raised the important point that accounting education could be construed as a global problem, with accounting education facing similar problems whether in the developing or developed world. The report by Carrington Crisp (2014) raises the issue of the importance of technology and this resonates with the interviewee comments in chapter 4 which raise concerns over whether student skills in IT are keeping up with business needs, in particular with that of systems IT skills.

2.4.3 Professionalism and ethics

The image of professional accountants acting in the public good has been affected over the last fifteen years by some high profile accountancy scandals such as the collapse of Enron in 2001, which led to the public questioning the behaviour of accountants. This led directly to the removal of accountants/auditors Arthur Andersen, who subsequently lost their license to audit in the United States, which led to their dissolution. Self-regulation within the profession responded with increased regulation of accountants and financial reporting requirements in the form of, for example, the Sarbanes Oxley Act. These corporate collapses increased demands for accountants to have better ethical awareness, with ethics perceived by the public, accountants and accounting students as being an important attribute (Fatt, J.P.T., 1995) in terms of moral reasoning and the making of ethical decisions (De Lange et al, 2006). The profession of accountancy has historically conformed to the traditional view of professionalism located within an Anglo-American framework. This takes the view that a professional is someone who has specialist knowledge, with public standing, working towards the good of the people, with a clear code of conduct and a self-regulatory framework (Lunt, 2010). Professionals are informed by this code of conduct, behaving in an independent and ethical manner and there are clear barriers to entry with the barrier being high and leading, with all of the above, to ensure the professional is well respected and receives above average financial remuneration.

Many of these historical features of a profession continue to resonate within the accountancy profession; all institutes have a code of ethics and an overriding international ethical code provided by the International Federation of Accountants. The profession in the UK is self-regulated with the Conduct Committee of the Financial Reporting Councils providing: “oversight of the regulation of accountants and actuaries” (Conduct Committee, 2015). The

IES 3 requires students in their advanced level of competency to have proficiency in “making judgements on appropriate courses of action drawing on professional values, ethics and attitudes” (IES 3, 2014). The IES 4 (2015) covers ‘Initial professional development: Professional values, ethics and attitudes’ and refers to ‘the professional values... defined as the behaviour and characteristics that identify professional accountants as a member of a profession’, these include professional scepticism and professional judgement, ethical principles and commitment to the public interest. In a study by Kavanagh, employers ranked ‘Ethics, fraud awareness and professionalism’ as a top five attribute (Kavanagh et al, 2008) and in Carrington Crisp’s 2014 report entitled ‘See the future’ (Carrington Crisp, 2014), employers were asked to rank by importance subjects which students should study as part of a business degree and ethics was one of five subjects ranked by more than three quarters of respondents as being important or very important. It was also ranked as a key requirement by students in the Carrington Crisp “See the future’ 2013 study. ACCA, the largest global accountancy body, has held core values since it was founded in 1904 which include “integrity: we act ethically and work in the public interest, treating people fairly and honestly; we encourage the same from others” (ACCA mission, 2015). To reflect the perceived importance by all stakeholders in my thesis, ethics is one of the 17 transferable skills that all semi-structured interviewees were asked about and it is detailed as an a priori code in chapter 3. The importance of ethics and the wider context of professionalism are highlighted by interviewees as detailed in chapter 4.

2.5 Emotional intelligence and Conflict management

One area raised by employers in chapter 4 is that students do not appear to understand the expectations of the workplace. There is an interesting study by Hyndman (1994) carried out in Ireland about ‘occupational reality shock’ which students experience due to the gap between their expectations and the actual experience of practising. It was suggested that this led to excessive staff turnover, low morale for those in accounting practice and the inability of accounting firms to attract the best graduates. Hyndman refers to the possible over-emphasis on technical and micro computer skills and under-emphasis on verbal, written and interpersonal skills. This partially resonates with my results in chapter 4, with the exception of the micro computer skills which are highlighted in my results as being an area that within today’s job market requires increased emphasis. The recommendations of the study by Hyndman are the provision of realistic information by employers and better and timely performance evaluation, plus realistic time budgets for jobs, with time management training provided by employers which may all still be relevant in today’s job market.

Ken McPhail (2004) refers to the growing interest in emotion in critical accounting literature. He raises the issue that the dichotomy between reason and emotion cannot be sustained and that “emotions are central in all rational decision making processes”. He does not support Weber’s contention (McPhail, 2004) that emotion will create disorder compared to rationality which will bring order. McPhail attempts to clarify the different stages of emotional intelligence with a pyramid of development moving upwards from emotional awareness to emotional applications to emotional empathy to emotionality, as shown in figure 1.

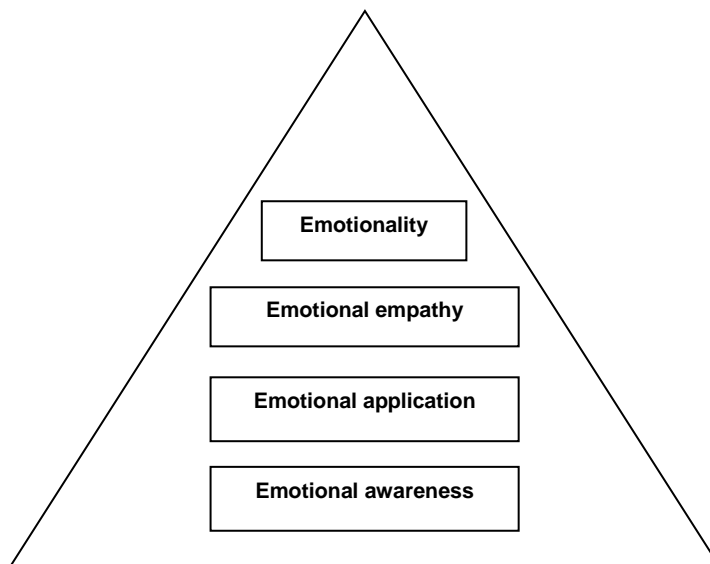


Figure 1: McPhail’s (2004) stages of emotional awareness.

He advocates that emotional intelligence is a discrete category of intelligence that can be learnt in the same way as verbal or rational intelligence. His application to accounting education was within the context of an ‘Accounting and Business Ethics’ module and was founded on the concept that emotional development is related to the capacity of an individual to learn from their emotional and social experience.

Humphrey (2007) uses the term ‘emotional intelligence’ as a collective to include emotional literacy and emotional competence, and believes that the more an individual has developed their emotional intelligence the better their decision making should be. He suggests that it is the ability to draw upon key personal social and emotional attributes in order to adapt effectively to a given social context.

Humphrey (2007) defines the different levels proposed by McPhail as follows:

1. Emotional awareness: the awareness of one’s own emotions and ability to identify them correctly.

2. Emotional application: the ability to identify which emotions are appropriate in specific situations.
3. Emotional empathy: the ability to enter into the feelings of others.
4. Emotionality: the level of emotional self-awareness used consciously to guide decision making.

In chapter 4, where emotional intelligence is highlighted, I have sought to set it within this framework.

DiGregorio (2008) refers to the need for accountants to be able to successfully resolve interpersonal conflicts which have arisen for a variety of reasons, including where organisational policies are deemed to be unfair, where micromanagement is taking place, resulting from issues relating to diversity and where people bring personal problems into work. DiGregorio (2008) looked at conflict resolution skills for new staff accountants and auditors, looking at helping students learn and apply conflict resolution skills. This article makes the point that, unlike technical skills, people skills may not be covered within formal training programmes. This agrees with the results of the interviews detailed in chapter 4 where interviewees refer to a student only receiving conflict management training if their team/group work has conflict issues, which means these are not formally built into the undergraduate programme. DiGregorio uses a case study setting to develop conflict resolution skills.

Ballantine and Larres (2009) investigated the use of cooperative learning to enhance students' interpersonal and communication skills as compared to simple group learning. They found that attitudes to skills' enhancement were significantly more positive for those engaged in cooperative learning except in the case of conflict resolution. They attribute this to those that were engaged in cooperative learning having improved verbal communication, listening and tolerance skills which in turn reduced conflict within the group. This highlights the development of skills that are then able to be used to reduce the instances of conflict and to deal better with conflict situations which do arise.

Although there are not many studies in conflict management within accounting education, the professional bodies do recognise its importance. The ACCA has a Student Accountant Technical Paper on conflict management and the accountant as a project manager (ACCA, 2011). This engages the reader in evaluation of group behaviour and potential conflict within a group. It also refers to a useful analytical tool developed to assess whether team conflict is being approached positively or is becoming unhealthy.

Nicholls et al (2012) refer to the increasing recognition of emotional intelligence as being important for professional career success and this is supported by the results of my thesis in chapter 4. Nicholls et al (2012) also highlight the skills related to emotional intelligence, citing those of organisational commitment, public speaking, teamwork and leadership. Nicholls et al (2012:75) conceptualise emotional intelligence as being “either the ability to perceive, understand, use and manage emotions, or as constituting a list of identifiable traits that would make one more successful.” Nicholls et al (2012) looked at the use of emotional intelligence tests in their study and their potential impact on the hiring process for accounting students, though this practice has not yet been noted in large accountancy firms.

The CMI 2014 reported that nearly two thirds of employers surveyed considered that UK graduates lacked the skills required to manage people and that ‘their main complaint is that candidates may appear well qualified on paper, but in practice they are unable to handle difficult conversations, deal objectively with different personalities and situations’ (CMI, 2014:16). One of the key themes that emerged from student survey comments from my IFS was that of conflict management. Also, another theme which emerged during the semi-structured interviews was that of emotional intelligence. ICAEW, in their professional development ladders, (ICAEW professional development, 2015:2) include communication under which students have the goal of being able to ‘...use persuasion to change another’s point of view, whilst demonstrating an understanding of their views’, an example being ‘managing adversarial situations’.

2.6 Stakeholder engagement

An important decision in considering whether undergraduate students are developing transferable skills is who is best placed to consider what skills are needed. In their study, Stewart and Knowles (2000) highlight the need to satisfy a range of stakeholders beyond employers. Stewart and Knowles (2000) take the wider stakeholder perspective considering the need to satisfy a range of stakeholder perspectives in the analysis of the development of transferable skills. Gammie et al refer to this in their 2002 paper (Gammie et al, 2002). In chapter 3 I show the pre-eminence of employers in undertaking this role and this is recognised in Gammie et al’s paper. Gammie et al (2002) also refer to the importance of appreciating that employers will also want the graduates to be as job ready as possible and that the more HE offers to prepare students the more employers will require. In Gammie et al’s work (2002), the relevant groups identified were graduate employers, placement employers, students (current and those on placements), current provision elsewhere and the course team. Kavanagh and Drennan (2008) consider the perspectives of two major stakeholders, these being students and employers and reflect on the perception gap

between employers and accounting graduates and that employers are expecting graduates to be job ready. This resonates with the results that I set out in chapter 4. Milner and Hill (2008) refer to a tripartite of interested parties with reference to the skills debate, these being accounting's academia, the accounting profession and higher education funding bodies. Ballantine and Larres (2009) argue that cooperative learning at tertiary level can facilitate the development of interpersonal and communication skills and by reflecting working practices can aid the transition from full-time study to work. My results show that, in 2015, employers want graduates to be as job ready as possible and this is discussed more in chapter 4.

2.7 Performance Perception Gap

There is a perceived mismatch between the transferable skills that the accounting profession expects and that of the accounting graduate (Bui and Porter, 2010). A variety of factors contribute to this gap including the tension between employers wanting students who are ready for the workplace and academics seeking to develop intellectual skills. Bui and Porter developed a framework for this expectation performance gap made up of an expectation gap, a constraints gap and a performance gap (figure 2).

This structure looks at the expectation performance gap from an accounting educator and employer perspective and, in my thesis, I will seek to apply this to the broader stakeholder in a contemporary context.

In their 2010 study, Bui and Porter (Bui and Porter, 2010) argue that the 'expectation gap' between employers and accounting educators is primarily a result of inadequate communication between the two parties. In relation to the 'constraints gap', they suggested this could be reduced by reducing the constraints, with constraints being inadequate resources and promotion criteria. The performance gap could be narrowed by improving accounting lecturers' teaching skills and by raising the profile of teaching as compared to research.

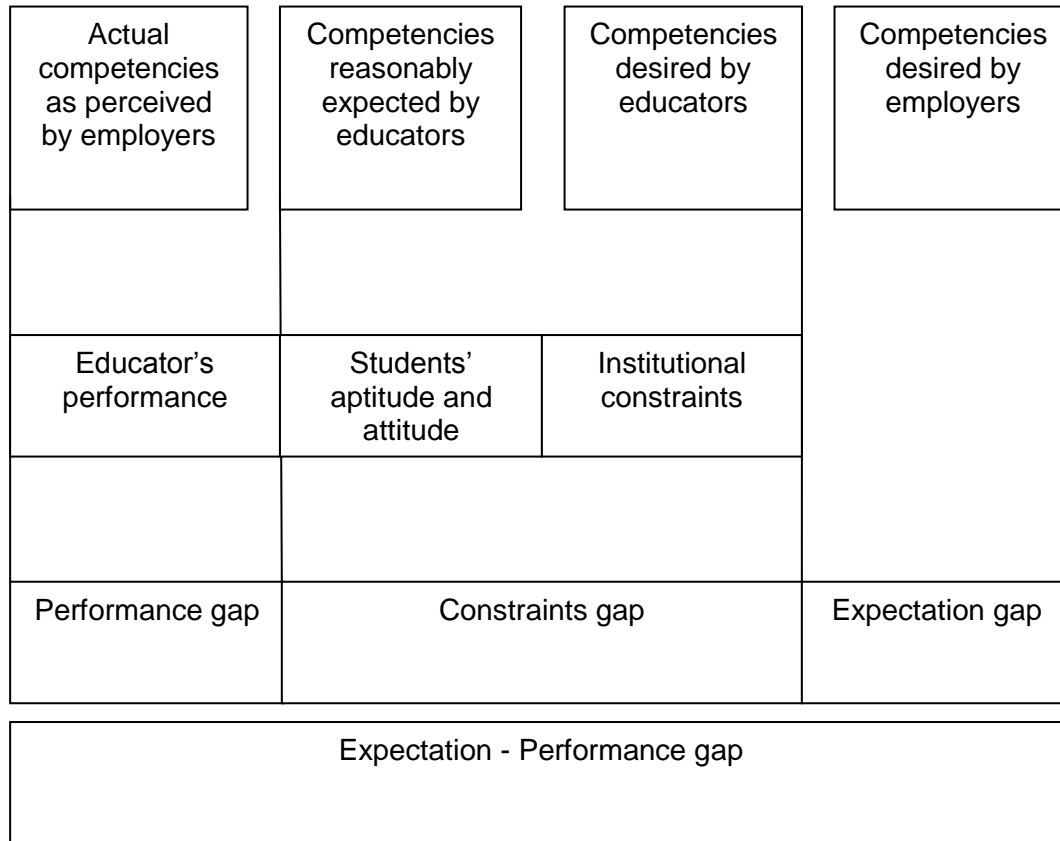


Figure 2: Bui and Porter (2010) Hypothesised structure of accounting education's expectation performance gap

2.8 Taxonomies and Hierarchies

Bloom's taxonomy is a classification system of the learning objectives that are set for students, with three domains of objectives: cognitive, affective and psychomotor. Within each of these domains, there are different levels of skills. For my thesis, I consider this taxonomy firstly in the context of the cognitive domain where objectives relate to the development of the skills of knowledge, comprehension and critical thinking. The hierarchy of learning outcomes moves from lower order to higher order, from knowledge to comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis and evaluation. I also consider in my thesis the affective domain where skills describe emotional reactions, looking at awareness and growth in attitudes moving from responding to valuing, organising and characterising. Keneley and Jackling (2011:608) detail how categorisation 'brings us closer to a common understanding' and how ICAA/CPA Australia adopted a hierarchy of transferable skills. This splits transferable skills into cognitive skills and behavioural skills. Cognitive skills are then split into routine skills, analytical /design skills and appreciative skills. Behavioural skills are

split between personal and interpersonal skills. All these skills are required for accounting graduates. The IFAC in IES 3 Initial Professional Development – Professional skills and IES 4 Initial professional development states: Professional values, ethics and attitudes have foundation, intermediate and advanced levels of proficiency for learning outcomes, with descriptors for designing professional accounting education programmes. In my thesis, I seek to synthesise Bloom’s taxonomy with the professional body hierarchies to understand the taxonomy of skills utilised within accounting undergraduate programmes.

Chapter 3: Methodology

A detailed investigation of why I undertook this study is given in chapter 1 of my thesis. I then provided a detailed understanding of the conceptual and theoretical understanding of the phenomena being investigated - the 'what' of the study - in chapter 2 of this thesis. In this chapter I explain the methodological design I use in my thesis and how my methodology informs the methods I use. I start by explaining my epistemological and theoretical perspective, then move on to the methodologies that work within this perspective, focusing on the mixed methods approach. I then look at my data collection strategy and how I applied it to ensure that I had the most suitable approach for my study. I then consider political and ethical issues and finally I look at how I processed the data and evaluate how I undertook the data analysis and interpretation.

3.1 Ontology, epistemology and theoretical perspective

A researcher has a research philosophy which considers how they perceive knowledge will develop and what the nature of that knowledge is (Saunders et al, 2012). A researcher's position in regard to their research philosophy is based on the way a researcher views the world and this affects the way they investigate knowledge, how the research question is positioned, and how data and information is collected (ibid). The design of my thesis and the methodological approaches I have taken are informed by my research philosophy. Epistemological and ontological views, research methodologies, research methods, and research ethics are the key elements of the research process identified by Crotty (1998). Ontology relates to the structure of knowledge, the nature of reality, considering the way that the world operates. Epistemology looks at the theory and nature of knowledge, its origin and so what is acceptable knowledge in a field of study (Saunders et al, 2012). When considering research philosophy, epistemology and ontology enable a researcher to understand the way in which the study of a particular field may be approached. Dichotomies are often described, such as positivist vs. interpretivist, positivism vs. social constructivism, quantitative vs. qualitative. Research in the area of social sciences does, I consider, require a combination of the philosophy of science and its positivistic approach and the philosophy of social science and the use of an interpretivist approach. Realism enables me to believe in the existence of objects independent of the mind (Saunders, 2012), as opposed to idealism whereby only the mind and that contained within the mind exist (Crotty, 1998). Realism is normally aligned to positivism and a scientific approach to the development of knowledge (Saunders, 2012). In my thesis, I have taken a realist ontology and an interpretivist epistemology, thereby applying scientific realism to social systems and supporting my approach to the study of social structures and systems. In the case of my research,

transferable skills can be situated within wider social structures and systems. So, for example, in the case of what triggered the perception that conflict management is not perceived as well developed and then what mechanisms affect this perception, working on causality.

My IFS considered the experiences of students whether these were real, actual or empirical and situated these within wider events and the meta level of mechanisms. I analysed these experiences using empirical and experimental methods, using both quantitative and qualitative approaches to data collection, looking at the events that may have triggered the experience and the real mechanisms affecting this. I worked on the assumption that there is causality, although realising that this causality may not always be clear. For my thesis, I triangulate quantitative data from my IFS with that of qualitative data from my thesis through the use of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders of the student learning experience. This mixed methods approach enabled me to gather and interpret data to answer the research questions I posed in Chapter 2. This mixed method approach enables me to triangulate results, which according to Barbour (2001), aims to answer a research question by using more than one method of data collection thereby addressing the issue of internal validity.

My research perspective is based on the premise that transferable skill sets can exist and that we can study and develop notions in relation to these and that students can learn these skills within their undergraduate environment of study.

3.2 Research methods

Methodologies consider how a researcher should proceed in their research and methods are the techniques that are applied. Accounting commonly falls within the subject area of business and management research, with surveys and interviews being methods commonly used within this field of social research (Coffey and Atkinson, 1996). My research questions seek to understand perceptions of stakeholders in relation to whether students have the transferable skills to meet employer needs, so the study seeks to gain an insight into their attitudes and opinions and, as such, interviews are useful in supporting the purpose of my research.

3.2.1 Mixed methods

In this section, I look at my use of a mixed methods approach and consider the triangulation of quantitative research from my IFS with qualitative research in the form of semi-structured

interviews as a research strategy. I also explain my use of semi-structured interviews within this thesis.

Coffey and Atkinson (1996) found that different forms of analysis enable investigation of different facets of data and in turn enable different social versions to be constructed. This can enable the production of a rich and varied analysis by providing a layer of complexity, in terms of my wider thesis, considering the interaction between higher education, professional bodies, employers and regulatory bodies that are fundamental to the discipline and its professional practice. In my thesis I combine a quantitative approach to data collection and qualitative research approaches within a single research project thereby using a mixed methods approach (Denscombe, 2012). A key feature of the mixed-methods approach is ensuring that there is triangulation between the methods to ensure there is a link between the data sets. Also, a facet of the mixed method approach is that of a practical approach to the research problem, known as pragmatism, which is compatible with the critical realist approach.

By using quantitative methods to survey a large student body on their views of their transferable skills and by triangulating the data obtained from this with the outcomes of semi-structured interviews with stakeholders, I seek to compare and contrast the results of these approaches to corroborate the information gathered. According to Denscombe (2012:141), the 'use of more than one method can enhance the findings of research by providing a fuller and more complete picture of the thing that is being studied'. By choosing mixed methods for my thesis, I complement the use of a closed question questionnaire of students with the semi-structured interview of stakeholders who engage with a student's education. The research design I used was sequential studies with the quantitative study taking place first as part of my IFS and the qualitative study following on from this and being informed by the quantitative study. The disadvantages of a mixed method approach can be that the cost and time of the research increases (Denscombe, 2012), that the researcher has to develop the skills to use more than one method and that findings may not corroborate one another. I took a purposive sampling approach selecting interviewees that I thought would provide me with informative data. I felt that the development of the skills to conduct both types of research was important for my own professional development, given that I work within higher education where I am expected to have a working knowledge of both quantitative and qualitative techniques. Within my thesis, I focus on the suitability of interviews as a basis for qualitative research, but the research outputs are triangulated with data from my IFS which used quantitative methods in the form of an online questionnaire.

Quantitative methods: use within my Institution-Focused Study

The most common instruments used in surveys are questionnaires. I considered a questionnaire the most efficient way of gathering data to answer the research questions for my IFS which were of a more descriptive or explanatory nature as recommended by Saunders et al (2012). I was seeking to look at the attitudes and opinions of students and the use of questionnaires enabled me to identify and describe variability in different phenomena. I determined that an internet questionnaire would be the most useful method of data collection, using the internet and an email questionnaire via survey software, as it would enable the collection of large amounts of data from a wide population and it would be highly economical. I surveyed 2,200 students using a survey questionnaire and was able to collect the data for each student being surveyed in a standardised format, with all those being surveyed receiving the same questionnaire in the same format, thereby enabling me to more easily compare the responses for all the respondents. By collecting data via the email questionnaire, I was able to use the statistics package SPSS to summarise data results and to manipulate the data to look at relationships between variables. Also, as I was using a sample of students, by using a survey it was possible for me to be able to generate data results that could represent the whole population when it would not be possible for me to survey the whole population of around 14,000 students who would be eligible to take part.

Qualitative methods: use within my thesis

Interviews are a suitable method for gaining insights into people's emotions, opinions, feelings and experiences, with the ability to gain an in-depth perspective (Denscombe, 2012). The feasibility of this collection method needs to be taken into consideration, so, in the case of my interviews, I had to be sure that it would be possible to gain direct access to the prospective interviewees and that the costs in terms of time and travel that would be incurred were affordable within my personal budget. There are different typologies of interviews, but the main interview types include structured interviews, semi-structured interviews, unstructured interviews, one-to-one interviews, group interviews, focus interviews and internet interviews. I chose not to use structured interviews as these are used to collect quantifiable information (Saunders et al, 2012) and I was looking to gain qualitative data from the process. Obtaining qualitative data is best served using semi-structured and unstructured interviews.

3.2.2 Interview approach: semi-structured interviews

I chose to use a semi-structured interview as there were particular themes that I was looking to investigate, whereas unstructured interviews would have been non-directive and it would have been the interviewee's perceptions driving the interview. Saunders (2012) states that

managers are more likely to agree to be interviewed than to complete a questionnaire, enabling them to reflect on their perspective and to gain feedback as to how the data gathered will be utilised. Therefore, establishing personal contact with respondents provided me with more opportunity to gain managerial perspectives. Using a semi-structured interview also enabled me to ask questions that were complex and open ended.

Within my thesis, I sought to build on data that I had collected as part of my IFS which I obtained from a student survey. According to Saunders et al (2012), data collected as part of a survey may not be as comprehensive as those collected by qualitative research methods and, as such, they are best used as part of a multi-method approach. They may give breadth of data but can lack the depth of data potentially achieved by using qualitative methods. The choice of interviews was made to provide the depth that the survey results had not provided. The type of questioning and the discussions that evolved meant that this was best captured using audio-recording; in my case this was a Dictaphone. I considered that audio recording would provide me with the data to answer my research questions, and the use of a small Dictaphone was practical as I was going to be in a variety of locations in different parts of the world and it was affordable. The use of audio recording is often considered less intrusive than video recording (Gibson and Brown, 2009), although the negative aspect of using audio recording is that gathering of non-verbal communication is limited. Using a Dictaphone also meant that it was easy to transfer the recording onto a computer, although the quality of recording is not as good as that from mini-disks.

3.2.3 Interaction between researcher and participants

Interviews can be conducted on a one-to-one basis, or in a small group such as a focus group. I chose to undertake one-to-one interviews to gain an in-depth perspective from one individual at a time; such interviews are normally conducted face-to-face. The benefits of one-to-one interviews are that they are easy to arrange (Denscombe, 2012), the opinions within the interview are only those of one person, the interview in this form is relatively easy to control and transcription is much simpler with only two people speaking. Wherever possible, I chose to undertake the interviews face-to-face, but resolved that if this were not possible then I would undertake a telephone interview. However, in the end I undertook all 16 interviews face-to-face. The methodologies I used, which were a survey questionnaire initially followed by interviews, align with my wider research philosophy of a realist ontology and interpretivist epistemology in that it adopts a methodology incorporating quantitative and qualitative data collection.

3.3 Methods of Data Collection

Within this section, I evaluate the data collection strategies and the stages of data collection I adopt within my thesis.

3.3.1 Data collection strategy

I systematically planned the interviews using a seven stage process as described in Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) to support the quality of the knowledge gained from the interview interaction. These stages are: thematising, designing, interviewing, transcribing, analysing, verifying and reporting. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) illustrate, there are no standard procedures or rules for conducting an interview. There are, however, standardised approaches and techniques to enable scaffolding of the interview process. This lack of standard procedures enabled me to use my knowledge, skills and intuition in my chosen field to follow openings and areas of potential interest.

3.3.2 Thematising

Thematising is the formulation of research questions and the theoretical clarification of the theme being investigated (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2009). This equates to clarifying the purpose of the study (the 'why') to give an understanding of the conceptual and theoretical understanding of the phenomena being investigated (the 'what') and then detailing the methodology (the research design or the 'how'), which, in my case, is an interview study. In my interviews, I was seeking to answer my overall research question of whether undergraduate accounting students were meeting the skills expected by stakeholders within a globalised context, by utilising the interviews to gain their perspectives on my research sub-questions:

- What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?
- Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?
- What do stakeholders perceive will be the key changes in the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?
- How could the key skills which require better development be improved in undergraduate accounting students?

3.3.3 Interview question design: scripting the interview

As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) recommend, I needed to set the stage for the interview and ensure that I had suitable questions. The semi-structured interview seeks to obtain real

world interpretations of phenomena that the interviewee has observed. I put forward a set of themes that I sought to cover and suggested questions, with the possibility then of follow up depending on the answers that the interviewee gave. The themes developed were based on my experience of the topic of transferable skills within the accounting education discipline, from relevant literature and from discussions with my doctoral supervisor. The questions were ordered to start with two core questions, followed by questions on transferable skills including a more in-depth question on conflict management, then finishing with questions on employer feedback of transferable skills, a question on what the interviewee would like to change in terms of skills development and a final question on whether they had any further comments to make on the subject area. A more detailed discussion of the questions is provided below and a list of the questions I developed for higher education institutions and learning providers (Appendix III), professional bodies (Appendix IV) and a list for employers (Appendix V). The reasoning behind the development and use of each question is given below.

3.3.4 Questions 1 and 2: core questions (for stakeholders)

Question 1: *How many new student members do you have entering the workplace each year? How many undergraduate accounting students do you have gaining accreditation from your professional body examinations each year?*

Question 2: *What proportion of new student members go into accountancy jobs?*

I started with two core questions which would cover the number of graduates the interviewee currently had graduating each academic year from their undergraduate accounting programme in the case of the higher education institution. This question was varied depending on the context, with the professional bodies being asked how many student members they had entering the work force each year. The second question asked what proportion of their graduates went into accountancy jobs in the case of higher education institutions and what proportion of new student members went into accountancy jobs for professional bodies. I then needed to signpost the introduction of questions relating to transferable skills. Therefore, after the first two questions, I explained that I wanted to explore the strengths and weaknesses of transferable skills that accountancy students gain ready for employment. I explained what I meant by transferable skills in that these were skills that were generic in nature within the context of the industry in which they work, and explained that this did not refer to technical accounting skills. I gave examples of technical accounting skills so that it was clear to the interviewee what I meant by this terminology. At

this point, I also explained the work that I had undertaken in relation to the student perspective for my IFS.

3.3.5 Question 3: Transferable skills

Question 3: *What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of your new student members in terms of transferable skills when they enter the workplace?*

Question three was posed to ask what they perceived to be the strengths and weaknesses of their students in terms of transferable skills. I was seeking to find from this if there are key skills that graduates are lacking when they enter the workplace. I wanted this to be a question that was open ended, whereby I had no influence on the skills that the interviewee was raising and I did not prompt the interviewee at this point in time. I was looking to follow up with questions about what they meant about terms used and whether, if needed, they could provide examples. After question three was answered, I wanted to gain an insight into the list of transferable skills that students had been surveyed on in my IFS. To meet this aim, I showed the interviewees the list of transferable skills that students had been questioned on as part of the IFS for my Doctorate in Education. I asked the interviewee if they could consider the importance of the different skills in the list and where they considered students to be strong and where they felt students were relatively weak. I did not direct interviewees as to how they should attempt to answer this question in order to keep the question as open as possible. I did consider producing cards with each of the skills on in order for interviewees to place them into groups, but decided to have the less structured approach of the list which they could refer to.

3.3.6 Transferable skills list development

I undertook a student questionnaire design as part of the Doctorate in Education Methods of Enquiry II course. This questionnaire was designed to achieve the goal of understanding what transferable skills students perceived as important and whether these skills were developed within their programme of study. The questionnaire included ranked questions on a list of transferable skills; for example, IFS Question 8: *“For each of the following transferable skills indicate whether these skills were very well developed within your programme of study. For example ‘do you consider that interpersonal skills were very well developed within your programme of study? Please answer on a strongly agree to strongly disagree scale”*.

There is no definitive list of transferable skills and I therefore developed the list that I used by referencing previous academic work and papers on transferable skills. This included reference to the CBI and Universities (2009) transferable skills of ‘self-management, team

working, business and customer awareness, problem solving, communication and literacy, application of numeracy, application of information technology, positive attitude and entrepreneurship/enterprise'. The Partners in Education Transformation Project on Transforming Education considering 21st century skills (2010) listed the skills relevant to current graduates as 'creativity/innovation, critical thinking/problem-solving/decision making, learning to learn, communication, collaboration, citizenship, life and career, personal and social responsibility, information literacy, information and communication technology.'

I also looked at skills which were specific to accountancy graduates as being fundamental to undergraduate academic foundation, including Morgan's (1997) accounting graduates' transferable skills list of: willingness to learn, team working, communication skills, problem solving, analytical ability, logical argument and ability to summarise. I also referenced De Lange et al's (2006) skills list of communication, team work, leadership, problem solving, analytical and interpersonal skills and the ACCA's Performance Objectives (2015) transferable skills of self-management, effective communication, and the use of information and communication technology plus the skills mentioned by Awayiga et al (2010) and Gammie et al (2002). I also referenced the UK Undergraduate Accounting Programme Specification which includes oral communication skills, IT skills, analysis and critical evaluation, problem solving, written communication, practical research skills, information gathering and referencing, independent and self-managed learning and self-reflection. The skills from the sources detailed above were refined to form 12 themes as part of my Doctorate in Education Methods of Enquiry II study and these were then used in my IFS. My IFS highlighted a weakness of not including 'ethics' or 'ethical understanding behaviour' as a skill which had been referred to in other studies such as that by De Lange et al (2006) and which students referred to as a separate skill. Therefore, the list was expanded from an original list of 12 to the list of 13 transferable skills detailed below:

- Analysis and critical evaluation
- Time management
- Problem solving
- Interpersonal skills
- Oral communication skills
- Written communication skills
- Team working
- IT skills
- Self-reflection
- Statistical skills
- Practical research

- Career planning and interviews
- Ethics

3.3.7 Ranking of skills

I could have asked the interviewees to rank the skills. However, the original IFS had not been designed to use results to give average mean rankings for the purpose of ranking skills as was seen in the seminal Albrecht and Sack study (2000), so I considered that this would not be a primary function of the study. What I did do was to ask which skills the interviewee felt were strongly developed by students and which were not.

3.3.8 Questions 4 and 5: change in relation to transferable skills

***Question 4:** Do you think that there has been a change in the transferable skills expected of your student members and what do you perceive these changes to be?*

***Question 5:** How do you think the expectations of employers will change in the short to medium term in terms of expectations of graduate transferable skills?*

Question 4 was included to gain an insight into what changes stakeholders perceived there had been in terms of expectations of students in their transferable skills and was followed by Question 5 which looks at whether stakeholders perceived there would be changes in the short to medium term in relation to expectations.

3.3.9 Question 6: conflict management

***Question 6:** Conflict management is an issue that students raise in their views of skills preparation for the workplace. What experience (if any) do your students gain in dealing with conflict management within your syllabus/framework?*

Question 6 asked about the particular issue of 'conflict management and what experience students gained in dealing with conflict management within their programme. The reason that this question was included was that my IFS included an open ended question in the online survey: 'what other transferable skills do you perceive would be useful for your current role?' In relation to this question, 140 responses were returned and these were categorised as follows (Towers-Clark, 2015):

- Interpersonal skills
- Oral communication and written communication skills
- Analysis and critical evaluation skills
- IT/Computing Skills
- Self-reflection skills

- Other transferable skills

For the purpose of the in-depth semi-structured interviews, I used the list of transferable skills provided to students which had included the skills of: Interpersonal skills, oral and written communication skills, analytical and critical evaluation skills, IT/computing skills and self-reflection skills. Therefore, I had already included as part of the interview questions about these skills. I therefore wanted to follow up on the 'other transferable skills' which students had raised. These 'other transferable skills' were deemed to be skills which could not be allocated to the transferable skills already listed. In my IFS, one area of interest raised by students was *conflict management*. This was variously described by students and included:

'Handle complaints' 'disturbance handling' 'management and Human resources' 'Reconciliation skill' 'client relationship / negotiation / selling skills, more skills involved in the tactical or strategic management', 'Deal with obstacles and crises',

Greater perception of conflict management was provided by one student:

I think the ability to resist pressure is also important for my current role, since the work I performed is subject to many pressures in respect of budget completion as well as much higher living cost due to the continually growing inflation. I should develop my capability to relieve such pressure to minimize the impact of such adverse effect on my daily work and life, learning how to constantly smile with challenge and frustration.'

'I believe that the above mentioned skills are the most important that every professional must have. In addition, to the above I wish to improve the pressure enduring skill in tough tasks, persistence of nature and win win approach while dealing with clients or other concerns.

Towers-Clark, Institution-Focused Study

I felt that the particular area of interest of conflict management raised by students would be of interest to investigate further and so I included the question 'conflict management is an issue student's raise in their views on skills preparation for the workplace. What experience (if any) do your students gain in dealing with conflict management within your programme?'

3.3.10 Questions 7, 8 and final question: Employer perspectives, further changes and any further comments

Question 7: *What feedback do you gain, positive and negative from your employers in relation to the transferable skills of your new student members?*

Question 8: *If you could influence change what would you most like to change in relation to the development of skills for your new student members?*

Question 9: *Do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the topic of transferable skills?*

Question 7 was introduced to determine what feedback employers had provided to the non-employer stakeholders by asking 'what feedback do you gain, positive and negative from your employers in relation to the transferable skills of your accounting graduates?' Question 8 was included to gain perspective into the influence of change and to take an alternative approach and triangulate to question 5 which related to short and medium term expected changes to transferable skills by employers, but also to provide an open ended question on skills development. The final question, question 9, was included in case there were any areas that had not been covered that the interviewee wanted to speak about. The question was: 'Do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the topic of transferable skills?'

3.3.11 Pilot study

The role of a pilot study is to act as a small version of the main study. The key purpose is to determine if there are any technical issues in relation to data collection as well as looking at whether questions are unambiguous and participants are able to understand them (Gillham, 2007). It enables reflection and re-design of the interview schedule if necessary. The pilot study supports the development of valid and reliable questions. For the purpose of the pilot study for this research study, a member of staff of my own higher education institution was selected. This person was an academic closely engaged at a senior level with the undergraduate accounting programme and was also my research mentor. The interviewee was provided with the same information as the interviewees would be in terms of a consent form, the participation information sheet and the list of questions. The interview was held in my office and I informed the interviewee that the interview would be audio taped.

Following the pilot study, I determined that I needed to provide a more detailed explanation of what I had undertaken as part of my IFS. The reason for this is partially to explain to interviewees that students had already been studied using a questionnaire as it was clear that the student perspective would be useful. Also, it enabled me to explain that some of the questions were developed as a result of this study.

A second key change to my interview technique as a result of the pilot study was that I determined what needed to be followed up on the third question which covered the strengths and weaknesses of graduating students when they enter the workplace by providing a list of transferable skills to which the interviewee could refer. Rather than in the pilot study where the interviewee had to self-determine their perception of transferable skills throughout the interview, for the main study, I provided the interviewee with the list of transferable skills detailed in 3.3.5 instead. This meant that after question 3 all interviewees were asked to reflect on the list of skills and comment on whether they perceived their students to be strong or weak in these areas. This enabled me to gain a richer level of data.

3.3.12 Interview sampling strategy

The selection of interviewees was based on non-probability sampling, which means using a sampling technique where the chance of probability of each case being selected is not known (Saunders et al, 2012); this was used for both the pilot study and for the choice of interviewees in the main study. The interviewees were chosen because they had a particular contribution to make and, as such, purposive sampling was used. It was a heterogeneous sample with my choices of interviewee being such that all were considered to be knowledgeable in the subject area of skills for accounting undergraduates. Being a purposive heterogeneous sample, the likelihood of the sample being representative was low. This type of sampling is considered to be useful in research where key themes are sought to be revealed. With purposive sampling, I needed to use my judgement to select cases which I felt best met my research objectives.

The title of my IFS was *'Do undergraduate accounting students perceive they have the attributes required to be an accountant?'* My IFS surveyed 2,200 recently graduated students from a UK higher education institution, with 357 students responding (a 16% response rate). The sampling for this was homogenous sampling using on-line survey tools (Towers-Clark, 2015).

My thesis research question is **'Are undergraduate accounting students developing transferable skills that meet stakeholder needs?'** The semi-structured interviews were seeking to look in depth at the research sub-questions.

- What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?
- Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?

- What do stakeholders perceive will be the key changes in the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?
- How could the key skills which require better development be improved in undergraduate accounting students?

I was seeking to take a stakeholder perspective on the transferable skills of accounting undergraduates. I considered who the stakeholders were for accounting undergraduate students, as discussed in Section 2.6 of my thesis and for the purpose of my study I considered that the sample needed to include academic institutions, professional bodies and employers. The students selected from my IFS were an international student body and, as I am undertaking the International Ed D, I sought to provide an international perspective. For each of the stakeholder groups, I sought to reflect the global nature of the accountancy profession.

I selected six higher education institutions from the UK, Singapore and Australia. There were a number of reasons that I selected these countries – all are countries where there is a long established tradition of accountancy education, for the UK and Singapore there was a significant student presence from students I surveyed for my IFS and all are countries which were easily accessible to me in order to be able to undertake face to face interviews. I used a convenience and purposive sampling for these institutions. The universities were chosen on the basis of established contacts or where I would be able to access a suitable contact. I was purposive in the countries I selected and in the type of institution I wanted to include in my sample as I wanted all to be universities which offered large undergraduate accounting programmes. I selected four institutions from the UK where I had contacts with the heads of accounting departments, one from Singapore, where my supervisor was able to provide a contact with a senior member of staff and one from Australia, where I had contacts with senior staff within the institution. The institutions included three post-92 UK Universities, a UK Russell Group University, one of the four Singaporean State universities and an Australian University. In each of Australia and Singapore, I undertook two interviews at each institution as I wanted to make the most of my visits whilst in these countries as I am based in the UK and therefore I was time-limited whilst in Singapore and Australia. The interviewees I selected were those who were currently or had recently been in senior positions in relation to the education of accountancy students at these universities, ranging from Heads of Departments of Accounting, to Associate professors to Accounting Subject Co-ordinators. I made contact with the higher education interviewees through a range of routes including contacting those who attend the Committee for Departments of Accounting and Finance in the UK of which I am a member, institutions I had previously worked with in

the UK and Australia, and through my supervisor at the Institute of Education in order to gain access to Singaporean interviewees. Interviewee contextual data for all higher education interviewees is provided in Appendix VII. I coded each interviewee in order to maintain their anonymity and Table 1 details the interviewee code, the location of the interview and the job status of the interviewee.

Table 1: Higher education institution interviews

Interviewee code	Location of interview	Participant information	Accounting graduates
HE1	HE Institution, UK	UG Accounting Subject Co-ordinator	100 per year, with about 70% going into accountancy related jobs.
HE2	HE Institution, UK	Head of Department, Accounting and Finance	120-150 per year, with 70% going into accountancy related jobs.
HE3	HE Institution, Australia	Lecturer, School of Accountancy, previously Head of International programmes	300-400 graduating students per year, with 90% going into the accountancy profession.
HE4	HE Institution, Australia	Co-ordinator co-operative education programme	300-400 graduating students per year, with 90% going into the accountancy profession.
HE5	HE Institution, Singapore	Academic Director, MSc Accountancy Associate professor	700 per year with 80% going into accountancy related jobs.
HE6	HE Institution, Singapore	Assistant Director Undergraduate career services	700 per year with 80% going into accountancy related jobs.
HE7	HE Russell Group Institution, UK	Head of Department, Accounting and Finance	120-140 students, with 80-85% going into accounting training schemes and 15% going into Masters education, finance and general

			management roles. 45-50 on school leavers programme with Big 4 firm.
HE8	HE post-92 Institution, UK	Head of Accountancy Programmes: Accounting, Accounting and Finance, Accounting and Economics	250 graduates with 200 accounting and finance graduates each year and 40 international students. Students are generally not employed by Big 4 firms as they lack UCAS points. Employed by smaller accountancy firms or industry

I selected three professional accountancy bodies. The reason these were selected was that they all have a global presence in terms of their student body and employers. Two of the global professional bodies I selected have their headquarters in the UK and one has their headquarters in Australia. Of the two bodies based in the UK, one also has offices in Singapore. All interviewees were senior members of staff within these organisations and I interviewed two people in each of the UK based accountancy bodies. I was able to gain access to these professional bodies through my role as programme lead for a collaborative provision with one of the UK professional bodies, through contacts at my own higher education institution as well as being a member of another of the professional bodies in the UK. I gained access to the Australian professional body through my contacts in Australia where I previously worked for an accountancy firm. Interviewee contextual data for all professional body interviewees is provided in Appendix VII. I coded each interviewee in order to maintain their anonymity and Table 2 details the interviewee code, the location of the interview and the job status of the interviewee, with all interviewees being senior members of staff within the professional bodies.

Table 2: Professional body interviews

Interviewee code	Location of interview	Participant information	
PB1	Global professional	Education Manager	5,000-7,000 new student members with 26,000 enrolments each semester.

	body UK		Requirement for undergraduate accounting degree. All have to be in accounting or finance role to gain qualifying experience.
PB2	Global professional body London	Executive Director, Learning & Professional Development	5,650 new student members in 2014
PB3	Global professional body UK	Head of Client Relationships	5,650 new student members in 2014
PB4	Global professional body London	Qualifications Development Manager	455,000 student members
PB5	Global professional body London	Head of Professional Development	455,000 student members

I selected three employer firms; two of these were Big 4 Firms who are large global employers of accountancy graduates and one is a UK national employer. I was provided with contacts for these employers through one of the UK-based professional accountancy bodies and through contacts from an ex-colleague who is a partner of a Big 4 firm. Interviewee contextual data for all employer interviewees is provided in Appendix VII. I coded each interviewee in order to maintain their anonymity and Table 3 details the interviewee code, the location of the interview and the job status of the interviewee. All interviewees were extensively involved and experienced in the recruitment of graduates for accounting positions within their firms.

Table 3: Employer interviews

Interviewee code	Location of interview	Participant information	
E1	Big 4 Accountancy Firm	Head of Student Recruitment	Employs around 1,100 graduates each year across the UK, around 50% have accountancy undergraduate or accountancy related degrees.
E2	National UK employer	Graduate/School Leaver Recruitment and Professional Training Specialist, HR Service Centre Manager	70 graduates and 8-12 school leavers, minority have a relevant accountancy related degree.
E3	Big 4 Accountancy Firm	Director	600 – 1,500 each year, minority have a relevant accountancy related degree.

In total, I conducted 16 interviews for my thesis, as against Saunders' (2012) minimum recommended sample size for semi-structured interviews of 5-12. Therefore, I consider that 16 interviews is a good sample size when set against this recommended range. Purposive sampling is not considered to be statistically representative of the overall population (Saunders, 2012).

3.3.13 Interview logistics

I needed to be sure that it would be possible to gain direct access to the prospective interviewees and that the costs in terms of time and travel that would be incurred would be reasonable. I approached potential interviewees by email, with an initial email asking whether they would be willing to be interviewed and I explained the nature of my research, including its objectives and that the interview would take about 45 minutes. In terms of costs to get to the interview venues, in particular those that were overseas, I organised the interviews, where possible, to coincide with visits for other work purposes. I travel to the Far East and Australia in relation to work and I therefore organised the interview schedules in

Singapore and Australia around these visits. Visits within the UK were less costly and, where possible again, I arranged them around other work commitments. Once the interviewee agreed to be interviewed, I organised a date and time that was convenient to the interviewee. Prior to the interview, I emailed all interviewees copies of the Participant Information Sheet, the questions that I would be seeking to answer and the consent form.

3.3.14 Conducting the interviews

The interview stage had to be set so that the interviewee would provide me with their view on students' transferable skills and their readiness for the workplace. As Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state, the first few minutes are important as the interviewee needs to be in a position to feel confident talking to the interviewer. I also felt that this was the time to indicate the academic expectations of the interviewer. I was therefore careful to show due respect to the interviewee, to be an attentive listener, and to be enthusiastic and interested in their answers. I sought permission from the interviewees to audio-record the interview. Once this had been signed, I explained to the interviewee that I would start the recording. The final question for the interview was 'do you have any further comments that you would like to make in relation to the topic of transferable skills?' and the tape recorder was then turned off. Once the interview had been completed, I confirmed again to the interviewee about sending them the transcript. I recorded the contextual data for each interview which took place; this information is provided in Appendix VII. This included data on the location of the interview – the organisation and the global location, the date and the time that the interview took place, the setting of the interview, including whether the room was noisy or quiet, the background information on the interviewee including their role and an immediate impression of how the interview went.

3.3.15 Data quality issues

I needed to consider issues of data quality in terms of reliability, bias, generalisability and validity. The semi-structured interview is non-standard in its nature and this raises the issue of reliability in terms of whether alternative researchers would find similar results (Saunders et al, 2012). Within the context of my research, it was intended that the results would reflect the reality at the time of the research and would be investigating complex in-depth discussions into transferable skills of accounting graduates and, as such, would not be intended to be repeatable. In terms of bias, there are three potential forms of bias (Saunders et al, 2012), namely interviewer bias, interviewee bias and participation bias. Interviewer bias is where the interviewer comments or displays certain non-verbal behaviour in response to the interviewee causing the interviewee to respond in a particular way. Interviewee bias is the bias of the interviewee towards the interviewer and could be due, for example, to the

interviewer lacking credibility in the eyes of the interviewee. Participation bias refers to the nature of the organisational participants who agree to be interviewed. In order to overcome these forms of bias, I ensured that I was well informed on my subject area of transferable skills. One of the benefits of undertaking the Doctorate in Education is that I built on my knowledge levels within the subject area of transferable skills over the period of my doctorate. I used the Methods of Enquiry I and II and my IFS to investigate the student perspective on whether they had the transferable skills to meet employer needs/be an accountant; therefore, I had read extensively in this area before undertaking my thesis. I ensured that I provided a participant information sheet (see the section below on 'Responsibilities to participants: participant information sheet & consent form'). I ensured that the interview location was suitable, with most interviews taking place at the office of the interviewee. I dressed professionally for interviews as the interviewees were all related to the accountancy profession. I ensured that I had opening remarks about the nature of the research, its potential dissemination and why I was undertaking the research. I had detailed lists of questions which I sent to the interviewees in advance (see section 3.3.2 Interview question design: scripting the interview). I was aware that I needed to demonstrate listening skills and show I was attentive and to use open ended follow up questions. I was careful to ensure that my Dictaphone was working and that it had fresh batteries, and checked during the interview at intervals that the recording light was still on.

The issue of generalisability of outcomes from qualitative research relates to whether the research is applicable in other settings. My study cannot be used to make statistical generalisations (Saunders et al, 2012) as this is a small sample. The data is being triangulated with data from my IFS. Validity relates to the extent to which the researcher was able to access the interviewee's knowledge and experience. A high level of validity can be achieved by developing appropriate questions, following up with probing questions and investigating themes with the interviewee. As mentioned in relation to reliability, validity was aided by the development of appropriate interview questions with further details in section 3.3.2 Interview question design: scripting the interview.

3.4 Political and ethical issues

I had to take ethical considerations into account in relation to my thesis, considering the persons due to be interviewed, the UK higher education institution that I work for and the partner in the collaboration that is engaged with my higher education institution.

3.4.1 Ethics Approval

I was required as part of the doctoral process to make an application for ethical review and approval before data collection could commence for my thesis. I completed the Institute of Education, University of London, Ethics Approval for Doctoral Student Research Projects Data Sheet and sent this for approval by an Advisory Committee. A copy of the approved Ethics Approval form is given in Appendix VI. The form I submitted contained the information that the research involved human participants and that these participants would be a source of primary data, in the case of my thesis, through interviews. I stated that the human participants were all adults and that they included accounting employers, accounting professional bodies and higher education providers of accounting education. The form also included that the research methods I would use for the thesis were interviews and a review of literature. I also included a summary of the planned research including the purpose of the research, its aims, my main research questions and my research design. I am employed by a UK higher education institution and because I had already obtained Ethics Approval from the Institute of Education I was not required to undertake further ethics approval from my own institution.

3.4.2. Responsibilities to participants: participant information sheet & consent form

I introduced the interview by going through the participant information sheet which the interviewee had been sent in advance. Details of the participant information sheet are given in Appendix I 'Participant Information Sheet'. This gave the study title 'are undergraduate accounting students developing skills that meet stakeholder needs? An international comparative study'. I explained my position as study investigator – this included the positioning of myself to the interviewee and reflected that I have been undertaking my Doctorate in Education at a different higher education to the institute where I am employed as an academic. I explained that the funding was provided by Oxford Brookes University by whom I am employed. The interviewee was given details of the different participants which included higher education institutions (from the UK, Singapore and Australia), professional bodies (global, UK-based and Australian) and employees of global accountancy firms. I explained the purpose of the study and the procedure of the interview and that the participants had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. I went through details of anonymity explaining that their identities would remain anonymous, the use of the data explaining that the data would be used for the purposes of this research and storage of the data explaining that data would be stored securely. I provided them with details of how to contact me. I informed them that I would provide them with the final report so that they would be able to see this in draft format and that they could opt out at any point in the process. The

data from the interviews, although not destroyed, is kept on a secure password-protected server to which only I have access.

I then required the interviewees to sign and date a consent form (see Appendix II), which showed them the study title and that the study was compiled by me, asked them to confirm that they had read and understood the participant information sheet, confirmed that they consented to being recorded and established that the data would be confidential, but could be published providing identified information was not disclosed. After this, interviewees agreed to take part in the study. Copies of the signed consent forms were counter-signed by me and were filed and stored in a secure location. Anonymity was guaranteed by coding all the stakeholders' identities. There were three different types of stakeholder interviewees - higher education institutions (7), professional bodies (5) and employers (4) - with each type of stakeholder being given a coding of HE, PB and EE respectively. Where comments were made after I had stopped the interview recording, I did not use these comments for research purposes as I considered that the interviewee would see the switching off of the recorder as being the end of the interview process and that they would therefore assume any subsequent comments to be 'off the record'.

3.4.3 Responsibilities to educational professionals, policy makers and the general Public

For the purposes of confidentiality, I elected not to disclose the name of any of the stakeholders interviewed and not to disclose any of the names of the institutions whom the interviewees work for. I detailed the stakeholder type and job title of the interviewee. Although I did not require further ethical approval from the UK higher education institution which employs me, it was necessary that I obtain approval from my employer and the professional accountancy body with which I work, to undertake the research. I gained approval from the Dean, Business Faculty of my institution and from the professional accountancy body with whom I work collaboratively before any of the interviews took place. For the dissemination of results I needed to give consideration to the perception of competence by the professional body, including the element of self-review as a result of reviewing professional body documentation and the current programme specification. When reviewing compliance with current Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) requirements, I needed to give consideration to the relationship with the regulatory body and any influence that the results may have on reviews or inspections by the QAA and the effect that this may have on the awarding UK University and professional body. I also needed to consider the effect on institutional politics of the results of the analysis, and power relations that this may have

within the institution, as well as any effect that the results might have on the external perception of the UK University and the associated professional body.

3.5 Data Processing, Analysis and Interpretation

3.5.1 Data processing and transcription

All interviews were audio-recorded and a transcription was made of all the interviews. I decided that I would undertake the transcription of the interviews myself within the time frames I had available and beyond this, that I would pay a touch typist to transcribe the audio-recordings. Due to work time constraints, I transcribed two interviews and paid for the remaining transcriptions. In order to maintain anonymity and security, I coded the file on a USB stick and provided this to the transcriber. The USB stick was then returned to me with the transcription. I annotated the file with pauses/tone information and checked the file for accuracy. I ensured that the interviewee and interviewer were clearly defined in the transcription. The transcription recorded exactly what was said and by whom and also provided information on the tone in which the information was provided and the participants' non-verbal communication. The non-verbal communication was recorded in the contextual data set. I had determined that I would not send a copy of the final transcript to the interviewee. Each interview recorded on the Dictaphone was downloaded onto my computer and saved in a separate file with a filename that ensured confidentiality and anonymity were maintained, but which was known to me. A copy was kept on a separate USB stick which was kept in a different location to my computer. As I had used semi-structured interviews, I included the question number at the start of each question which was listed.

The transcription process which I undertook was time consuming with every 45-minute interview taking several hours to transcribe. Once I had completed the initial transcription, which was done by playing short excerpts of the interview and then typing these up, I then replayed the interview and added notes and annotations to the transcript, which supplemented the field notes that I had taken and which included the ambience of the interview and how confident the interviewees were. I used an unstructured transcription method (Gibson and Brown, 2009) providing identification of the person who was speaking and with punctuation and use of colloquialism to critically reflect the transcription. Where necessary, I made changes to wording to show what was meant to be said rather than what was actually said in order to achieve fair representation of what was said. I sought to ensure that the interviewee was not misrepresented and that, where possible, contextual nuances and checking were not lost in the translation. I regularly went back to the original data to ensure that the data had not been misheard or misrepresented.

3.5.2 Qualitative data analysis

As mentioned in the **Data coding and Analysis**, as suggested by Miles and Huberman (1994), I created an initial list of codes which were based on my IFS.

In analysing the data from the transcripts, I was seeking to take a large amount of qualitative data and identify key themes and patterns, develop theories based on these and draw conclusions from them (Saunders et al, 2012). In order to do this, I coded the data. Coffey and Atkinson (1996:27) describe coding as being a “range of approaches that aid the orientation, organisation, retrieval, and interpretation of data”. Miles and Huberman (1994) explain that the coded data retrieved can be combined and differentiated to enable reflection and interpretation of the data set. In order to do this, I identified categories or themes that I could see in the data. I then attached the data from the transcripts to the different categories, coding them in this way. I then sought to develop further analytical categories to seek out relationships and patterns within the data and to then draw conclusions from these. I used this thematic analysis to analyse the data in terms of commonalities, differences and relationships (Gibson and Brown, 2009) looking for examples of each of these general sets.

When seeking to derive the initial codes, Strauss and Corbin (1998) suggest that the codes can be derived from three key routes, either through emergent terminology that arises during the analysis process, or through terms used by participants, or through terms used in the existing literature. I decided to do as suggested by Miles and Huberman (2014) and create an initial list of codes which were based around the data I had gathered from my IFS. More detail of how this was then developed is shown in section **3.8 Data Interpretation: Development of coding**. I also looked for emergent coding from the interviews. The goal of the coding was to enable retrieval of data under the same codes, using indexation of data texts; Coffey and Atkinson (1996) describe this as a ‘code-and retrieve’ procedure. I decided to use a manual style for this rather than use a computer software package such as N-Vivo. I marked up the texts manually with highlighters and coloured pens using the codings, each of which was allocated a different colour. I then allocated numbers to sections of text so that I could easily retrieve the location of the quote. I saw this as a way of transforming the data I had gathered to seek to answer my research questions. As with Coffey and Atkinson (1996), I saw the coding as both data reduction and data complication. As I gained different themes, I went back to the interview transcripts to review again if other interviewees had referred to particular themes. My interviews were carried out over a period of about six months and this made the later interviews much easier to code as I was aware of the themes that I might anticipate seeing. The coding enabled me to have a fresh perspective on the data collected, allowing me to interpret the data. At this point, I needed to interrogate the data and to then generate meaning from it (Denscombe, 2012). The data had to be re-contextualised and

displayed so that meaning could be derived from it. Miles and Huberman (2014) argue that it is this displaying of data that is key to analysing and deriving meaning from it. I determined that I would seek to do this using a diagrammatic method looking for themes and patterns.

3.6 Data Interpretation: Development of coding

According to Gibson and Brown (2009), there are two types of coding, a priori coding and empirical coding, with the a priori coding being those codes which were defined before the data was examined. In the case of my thesis, the list of transferable skills in 2.2.5 was used as a list of a priori coding; these were then supplemented by the themes that were developed from my IFS, namely :

- Other transferable skills which were sub coded into: *Entrepreneurship, management, conflict management, Decision Making, Mentoring*
- Technical accounting skills related comments
- Non accounting skills related comments; for example, these could be '*learn a foreign language*' or '*understand legal documents*'

This a priori coding enabled me to seek to answer my sub-questions around perceptions of transferable skills by starting with a distinct list of skills that had been investigated from a student perspective and which I could triangulate with data from the interviews, as well as answering my question on whether skills were meeting employer needs.

- **What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?**
- **Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?**

Empirical codes are those which are generated by the data that you have gathered (Gibson and Brown, 2009). Within my thesis, I sought to generate empirical codes through the exploration of the data. This took the form of a subsection of one of my a priori codes or they emerged as a distinct unforeseen code. The approach was one that I took in relation to the qualitative analysis of students' responses in my IFS and was used on the narrative recorded from my semi-structured interviews. Factors which I took into account when developing the empirical coding included if something occurred more than once or if there was intensity of feeling by the interviewee. I kept a log of coding decisions for the project. The empirical coding was more directed to answering my research sub-question on:

- **What do stakeholders perceive will be the key changes in the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?**

This was because these were more likely to be codes that had not been extensively used or perhaps had been given priority in previous studies/literature as they were forward looking. I also searched for responses from interviewees which could be coded empirically for skills development to seek to answer my research sub-question:

- **How could the key skills which require better development be improved in undergraduate accounting students?**

3.7 Hypotheses and Causality

Once I had coded my data, I linked the different codes, both a priori and empirical, to make conceptual and theoretical coherence. As per Miles and Huberman (2014), I applied the theoretical frameworks that I discussed in chapter 2 to the information, bearing in mind that these theories might not be applicable to my data. An example of this is one code that developed in my interviews (detailed in Chapter 4 of my thesis), that of work placements enhancing the skills of students. I then linked this to Lave and Wenger's (1991) theory on Communities in Practice, which I discuss in chapter 2. In doing this, I was looking to make meaning as described by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) so making a deeper and more critical interpretation of the text in the transcript.

Chapter 4: Data analysis

In this chapter I present my data analysis explaining how the data I gathered was analysed and coded. I look at my analysis from the perspectives of the different stakeholders which formed part of my study: students, academic institutions, employers and professional bodies and consider their perspectives on the skills debate. The triangulation of my IFS results from the student perspective and my semi-structured interviews for other stakeholder perspectives benefits the wider study by providing a means of validating the results of both studies. Triangulation also provides a fuller picture by offering a wider stakeholder perspective and aids in providing different perspectives thereby enhancing the validity of my data (Denscombe, 2012). It also means that my results are not tied too closely with either the survey or the semi-structured interview method used to collect my data.

My overall research question was to consider whether undergraduate accounting students were developing transferable skills to meet stakeholder needs and in my thesis I seek to answer my four research sub-questions:

- **What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?**
- **Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?**
- **What do stakeholders perceive will be the key changes in the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?**
- **How could the key skills which require better development be improved in undergraduate accounting students?**

In section 4.1, I look at the data from my IFS which captures the student perspective using an on-line survey which includes quantitative and qualitative data. I triangulate the results from the student perspective later in the chapter with the results from my semi-structured interviews. This then enables me to see, from a student perspective, the perception of transferable skills for the twelve core skills surveyed and build on being able to answer my first research question '**what is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?**'. In section 4.2, I build on the transferable skills referenced in section 4.1 by expanding the original student survey skills data to include skills which emerged from the qualitative element of the student survey. I develop the 12 skills into 17 a priori codes which I use for the analysis of my interviews. I review how the coding was developed from my semi-structured interviews and I investigate the a priori codes determined for the perception of current skills in section 4.3 and the emergent codes

in section 4.4. enabling me to develop a comprehensive picture of transferable skills of accounting undergraduates and answer my first research question **‘what is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?’** and second research question **‘Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?’**. I go on to analyse the results of perceptions into how transferable skills have changed over recent times in section 4.5 and I finish the chapter with section 4.6 which presents and analyses data on expectations of how transferable skills may change over the next five years in order to answer my third research question **‘What do stakeholders perceive will be the key changes in the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?’**.

4.1 Student Perspective

The results from this section are used to consider what students’ current views are in relation to the importance of transferable skills in order to be able to answer my first research question **‘what is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?’** It does this by developing a list in order of perceived importance by students of 12 transferable skills. My IFS undertook an online survey of 2,200 recently graduated students from an undergraduate accounting programme and considered to what extent their current skills meet their perceived skills requirements. The role of the programme, which is based in one of the UK’s leading new universities known for its excellence in teaching and innovation as well as its industry links, is to train students to be part of an international accounting community. The programme is global in both its student body and its international accounting curriculum. Responses were received from 357 students (16%). Females made up 38% and males 62% of the sample, with the majority of students aged between 20 and 30 (75%) (Towers-Clark, 2015).

The demographics of the place of residence are shown in Diagram 1:

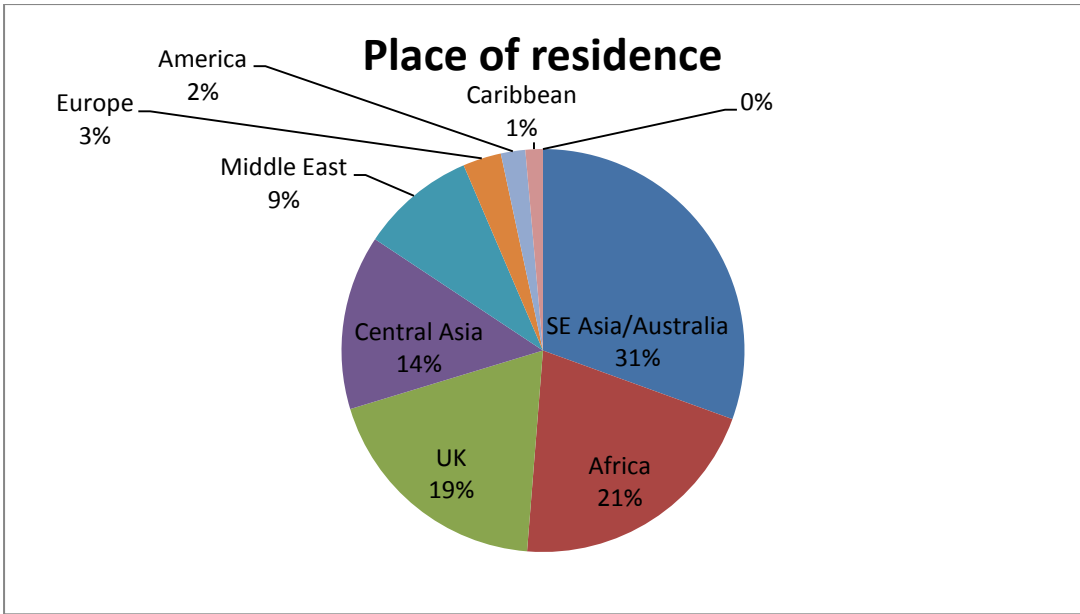


Diagram 1: demographics of place of residence (Towers-Clark, J., Institution-Focused Study, 2013)

I analysed skills by comparing the perceived importance of skills by the students and the mean level of perceived skills development within the programme. The second set of means looked at the development of skills within the programme and asked students to consider whether the skills were very developed by studying for the undergraduate accounting programme. The results of this analysis are given in Table 4.

Table 4: Perceived skills development: importance and development within programme.

	Importance mean	Programme mean
Analysis and critical evaluation	3.76	3.67
Time management	3.71	3.47
Problem solving	3.68	3.29
Interpersonal skills	3.61	3.16
Oral communication skills	3.59	3.08
Written communication skills	3.59	3.68
Team working	3.50	2.49
IT skills	3.48	3.31
Self-reflection	3.45	3.46
Statistical skills	3.27	3.19
Practical research	3.18	3.63
Career planning and interviews	3.16	2.62

Source: Towers-Clark, J., Institution-Focused Study (2013)

The results of my survey highlighted the skills that students perceived were most important to accountants: analysis and critical evaluation skills (3.76), time management (3.71) and problem solving skills (3.68) which were in line with previous studies such as those by Kavanagh et al (2008) and Awayiga et al (2010). Skills that students perceived as being less important were career planning and interviews, and practical research skills with these having the lowest mean importance (3.16 and 3.18 respectively).

I undertook paired sample t-tests to look at the difference between the skills important for being an accountant and those developed within the programme. Particular skills that students perceive as important, but which are not well developed within this programme were team working, oral communication and interpersonal skills. Career planning and interviewing skills, though considered less important, were also considered less developed within the programme. The skills students perceived as being well developed within the programme, but which were not considered as important, were those of practical research skills and written communication skills, though these may be affected by the nature of the programme.

My survey gathered qualitative data by the inclusion of an open ended question asking 'what other transferable skills do you perceive would be useful for your current role?', the responses to which were analysed using textual analysis. My results showed that transferable skills not formulated strongly in the programme were leadership and motivational skills, entrepreneurship, management and conflict management skills, decision making and mentoring. These skills were used to inform questions for my semi-structured interviews and I included them in the a priori coding for my interviews.

4.2 Development of coding: semi-structured interviews

This section builds on the transferable skills list in section 1 which were the original skills set that students were surveyed on. It adds to this list of skills further skills which were raised in the qualitative questions of the student survey. I did this in order to gain a wider skills set to better study the broader stakeholder perspective in order to better answer my first research question '**what is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?**'. I also then built on the a priori code list with emergent themes from the interviews.

In order to analyse the data from my semi-structured interviews and seek to answer my second research question **‘are the current skills of accounting graduates achieving or not achieving employer needs?’** I used the following 17 a priori codes:

- Analysis and critical evaluation
- Time management
- Problem solving
- Interpersonal skills
- Oral communication skills
- Written communication skills
- Team working
- IT skills
- Self-reflection
- Statistical skills
- Practical research
- Career planning and interviews
- Ethics
- Entrepreneurships
- Management and conflict management
- Decision making
- Mentoring

I developed these pre-established codes from my original listing of transferable skills used for the survey of students in my IFS as described in Section 3.3.5 of my thesis. I then supplemented these skills as detailed in Section 3.8 of my thesis from the outcomes of my IFS. I started with 12 transferable skills that students were questioned on in their survey and supplemented this with five transferable skills that emerged as themes from the coding of the qualitative data gathered from student comments, bringing the total to 17 a priori codes. The five topics included were ethics, entrepreneurship, management and conflict management skills, decision making and mentoring. These a priori categories enabled me to develop sub-categories and I triangulated the data obtained from the students detailed in section 4.1 to the data from the semi-structured interviews. When working on the a priori coding, this generated higher themes within this level of coding: expectation performance gap, skills development, definitions, employability, professionalism and course design which also tied in with some of the themes developed from my emergent themes.

Beyond the a priori codes, emergent themes came out of my interview data. There were two main categories to these emergent themes. The first category was the perceptions of

stakeholders in relation to the importance of technical versus transferable skills. My thesis investigates transferable skills, but it is important to note that there is a broader perspective of technical versus transferable skills and data emerged from the semi-structured interviews that I coded to this theme. I categorised the technical versus transferable skills theme into four sub-themes of employability, course design, student learning preferences and the conceptualisation of 'right fit' which is further analysed in section 4.4. The second category was emergent themes relating to transferable skills. I categorised this data into clones/conformity, emotional intelligence, educational level, practical experience, personal presentations, international students, resilience, class sizes and extension of university.

I divided the 16 semi-structured interviews into stakeholder types and comments supporting the coding of the data were reported in accordance with their stakeholder type and their country location. These were denoted as follows: eight higher education interviewees as HE1-HE7, five professional body interviewees as PB1-PB5 and three employer interviewees as E1-E3. These were then further denoted by location: Australia (Aus), Singapore (Sing) and United Kingdom (UK) and Global (Glo).

4.3 Current skills: a priori data analysis

These next sections seek to answer my first two research questions as to '**what is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?**' and '**are the current skills of accounting graduates achieving or not achieving employer needs?** I start by looking at each of the 17 a priori codes (detailed in section 4.2) in sections 4.3.1 to sections 4.3.16. I then go on to look at each of the emergent codes in sections 4.4.1 to 4.4.10 in relation to the debate between the importance of technical versus transferable skills, clones/conformity versus independence, emotional intelligence, school leavers versus graduates, the importance of placements, personal presentation, international students, resilience, class sizes and the extension of university. These sections provide a clear view on current stakeholder perceptions which is seeking to answer my first research question and also the key issues that stakeholders perceive in relation to whether the skills are meeting employer needs which is seeking to answer my second research question. With this in mind I have included subsections of '**Current stakeholder perceptions of skills**' and '**Meeting the needs of employers**'.

4.3.1 Analysis and critical evaluation

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

I found that analysis and critical evaluation is considered by different stakeholders to be strong as this is perceived to be a core role of an accounting graduate. This was evidenced

by examples from my interviews from higher education, professional bodies and employers. This triangulates with what students perceive as being important for accountants as well as what they perceive they have developed, with the highest mean score for importance of 3.76 and the highest mean score for development within the programme of 3.67. Ten students commented on these skills as being useful in their current role and students included them in the 'other transferable skills' even though these skills are designed to be evaluated and assessed within the programme. Comments included:

"problem solving skills should be very useful because it's quite easy to identify the problem but to find a solution to overcome is quite difficult."

"Being able to well explain accounting issues to bosses with little or no accounting knowledge. Developing new own ways of solving accounting issues rather than being complacent."

Meeting the needs of employers

When asked about their perceptions of students' ability to analyse and critically evaluate, examples of responses are:

'analysis and critical evaluation they are strong' HE5Sing

"there's an expectation that they do a tremendous amount of analysis and use their analysis tools that they've used" HE3Aus

"quite good at analytical and critical knowledge" PB3Glo

With the link being made by employers as to this being a significant part of the role of being an accountant.

"I'd say analysis and critical evaluation, yes on the whole, because that is a massive part of the job" E2UK

With the ability to be more critical and to challenge linking to **professional scepticism** supported by the following examples:

"So I do think if you come in with an informed background you are slightly more ready to be challenging things and I suppose it links back to sort of the professional

scepticism training that we give them when they arrive, the fact that your job is not just about documenting what the client has done and making sure it is on file it is actually about challenging and doing the right analysis to form your own views on things, which I do think some people do get generally if they come from a related area, it takes others a bit of time I think.” E3Glo

“I would say challenging people as well, challenging with each other, challenging with colleagues, challenging of HR team as well.” E2UK

It could be that students are seeking to develop these areas more once they reach the workplace which would be supported by comments such as:

“Evaluating and designing systems in organisations” and “The skill to apply theoretical models to the modern, practical and ever-changing business environment.”

The areas of weakness that emerged from the interviews in relation to this relates to the ability of students to evaluate in terms of linking to other areas; this was shown by comments which referred to students thinking in silos:

“students tend to think of the areas in silos....they don’t make connections and links, which is quite important when you are in business....you must be able to see the links between things and adopt strategies and policies based on that” HE5Sing

“I want them to be able to synthesise, you know, at the moment we teach in silos so they do financial accounting, management accounting, tax, but they don’t look at it as an overall. The subject I don’t think is understood as an overall subject and the importance that accounting plays in society, you know, not only technical but also looking at what it is that they do and how, you know, the ethics” HE2UK

“and the second thing that they are very poor at is, I’m not quite sure how to put this, is contextualising what they’ve learned.... poor if you throw them something which is slightly odd, case study work, contextualising learning, they are very poor... They weren’t thinking sort of laterally about problems and that kind of thing.” HE7UK

And also to their level of critical thinking:

'the students that we've had come through I think struggle withcritical thinking, and I'd almost kind of call it fit for work in terms of their attitudes and their approaches, so I have no doubt with the quality of student is the same as what it was maybe ten years ago, but what we're finding is the students that are coming in are maybe very well drilled and potentially technically able in some areas but they haven't got that critical thinking about thinking right' E1Glo

"I mean one of the things that came out in research we're looking at, is the ability to forecast effectively and to deeply analyse data, is something that we've heard from different employers - that students do...have less ability to do" PB5Glo

"I think we have some students who are exceedingly good at it, but the vast majority of our students probably lack...not lack, but are weak at evaluative skills i.e. they take a lot of what's said to them as the truth and lack an ability to actually evaluate without expressing very strong opinions, so they lack a little bit of balance sometimes" HE8UK

This has also been linked to the ability to make sales to clients:

"I'm thinking on the whole critical thinking and analysis piece, they are not necessarily able to sell the services that we want to, so they are very good at delivering if a client says 'do a, b and c', that is wonderful, but the graduates aren't thinking 'okay, we can do a, b and c but if you thought d, e and f, there is something else here', 'have you thought about this', 'the numbers are pointing us in this direction', 'why don't we do this', 'how can we help you with is', 'how can we start...'" E1Glo

The emergent themes in relation to analysis and critical evaluation are summarised in diagram 2.

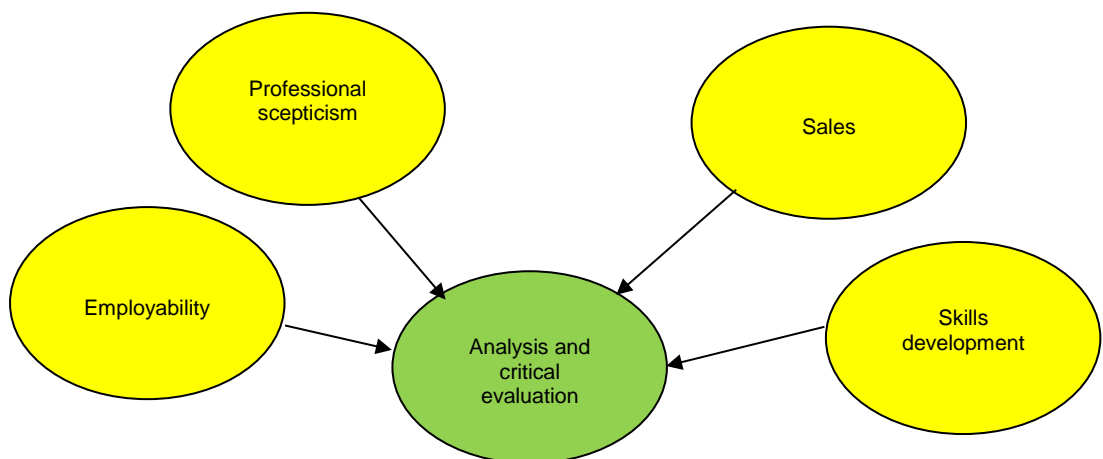


Diagram 2: Critical analysis and evaluation

4.3.2 Time management

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

For time management, this appears to vary according to the perspective of the stakeholder. This theme can be conceptualised in the **expectation performance gap** as described by Bui and Porter (2010) between students, universities and employers.

I found students perceived time management as being important for accountants as well as being something that they perceived they had developed within the programme, with the second highest mean score for importance of 3.71 and a high mean score for development within the programme of 3.47.

Meeting the needs of employers

The professional bodies who receive employer feedback and employers see this as being an area which is important but which is not consistently good:

“starting out, some students have problems with time management, they don’t understand the importance of this” PB2Glo

“Struggle to get in on time every day...., really flagging at five o’clock and expecting to go home...., not wanting to do any overtime” PB3Glo

“Placements’ negative feedback is that they are not ready in terms of some of their transferable skills in terms of their time management... they are arriving late, they’ll bring in excuses...” HE2UK

And this is supported by employer perceptions:

“if they perceive it to be important and if they perceive it in their own minds to be important then they can absolutely manage their time, it is where they are not necessarily showing empathy with other people’s time or necessarily understanding that the whole situation where those things kind of come out. So I have no doubt they can manage their time but it is exercising their judgement as to when they should be using it and when it is a critical time, when actually you need to be doing this, that is the bit for me that I think is a little bit more awkward.” PB1Glo

This is tied to the concept of **professionalism** and **the professional accountant**, with those that have undertaken placements being perceived as having had experience in the

professional environment and being more able to meet employer expectations in this area; this is shown in the example below from a UK employer:

“Time management is very varied I would suggest, we hear from the line that some trainees manage their time very well, others it is coming from university into a professional environment is quite a big jump for them, so some of our trainees have already had some work experience and they kind of had some experience of having to manage their own time whereas others have come straight into work and it is a bit more of an issue for them, so we do offer time management training and bite-size training for our trainees to support that” E2UK

Whereas the universities in which there are set time deadlines show this as being an area where students have strong skills, this may be related to self-management of time:

“if time management is about organising selves in terms of meeting deadlines and getting things done by the course requirements, most students are very good at that’ ‘perhaps picked up in secondary school” HE4UK

‘time management they are strong’ HE5UK

“I think the other thing that they are good at is, it sounds very trite, but it is kind of presentism, they do turn up for stuff, they do stuff, they engage and that kind of thing.” HE7UK

Although one HE interviewee did appreciate that coping with the timing of exams could be an indicator of time management skills:

“And time-management is an interesting one because if you spoke to most of our students, they'd probably say they're okay at it. It's difficult to demonstrate, I found that a difficult one to actually be able to demonstrate whether they're good or bad at it, but for example, we find that they attain less well in exams at the end of the exam period than they do in exams at the beginning of the exam period. Now to me that indicates that they haven't thought about how to manage their time over the period of revision, for example” HE8UK

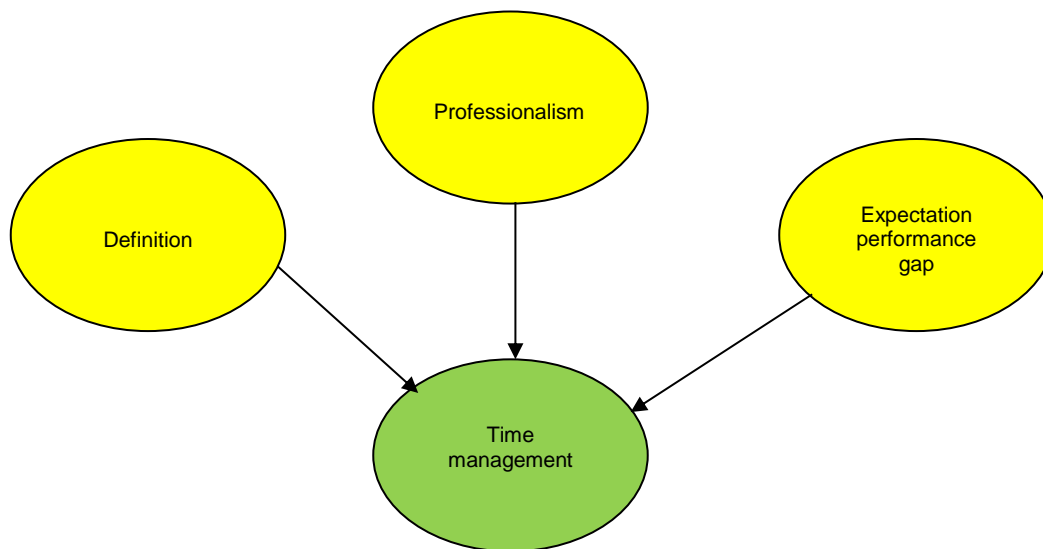


Diagram 3: Time management

4.3.3 Problem solving

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

This was also a skill that was considered important by employers and they related it to the interview process of meeting the levels required for interviews:

“Problem solving... is quite good is one of skills they are looking for in their interview process” PB3UK

“Problem solving is one that we test really strongly in the recruitment stage perhaps unsurprisingly... , it is always the area that recruitment actually challenges the hardest because they say if they are not, if they are not showing that now, we do worry about them in their professional exams” E3Glo

Equally, problem solving with a mean score of 3.68 was perceived by students as being important for their role as an accountant.

Meeting the needs of employers

Problem solving was recognised by the professional bodies and higher education institutions as being something that students were good at if it was a simple problem, but that they struggled with at a higher level, so further development of higher level problem solving is required. This agrees with other studies such as work by De Lange et al (2006). This can be conceptualised in Bloom’s taxonomy of learning and is encompassed within the development of problem solving skills.

“they are very good at it when the problem is easy and straightforward’ In terms of complex problem solving... struggle until they become familiar’ ‘with some guidance they can develop those problem solving skills” HE4Sing

“...and the dealing with the unstructured problems or things they haven't come across before and applying what they know to something, a situation they haven't seen before.... Applying techniques to unstructured problems and seeing things in a different way and applying something they know from over here to a different type of scenario. Again, can be problematic” HE8UK

This is a perception that is also held by employers:

“there is a lack of flexibility and adaptability to apply that to different scenarios and that self-awareness, although they understand what they can do, they are not necessarily understanding how they can do it in a different scenario and that for me is the key” E1Glo

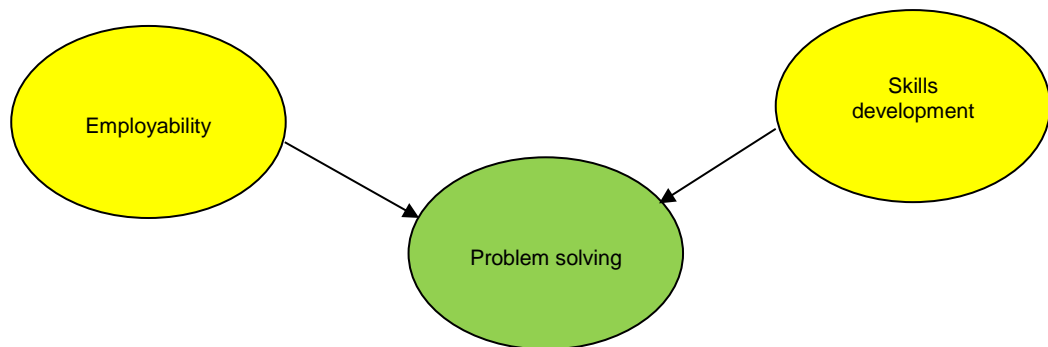


Diagram 4: Problem solving

4.3.4 Interpersonal skills

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

I found that there was a smaller amount of discussion from interviewees on interpersonal skills and this may be due to my lack of providing a **definition** as I found that **emotional intelligence** came as an emergent theme from stakeholders. Where it was mentioned, it was considered by higher education institutions as being of great importance, as in the example:

‘probably one of the most important things they are going to have when they actually go out into the workplace’ HE4Aus

Student results appear to recognise that this is a key area of importance with a mean score of 3.61, but students also acknowledged that this is an area where they are not as developed, with a score of 3.16.

Meeting the needs of employers

There was a need for graduates to have a higher level integrated approach:

“....being more holistic in your thinking and more integrated in the way you think about business and also, I mean, the ability to manage other people and lead other people. Including people outside your organisation, because there's increasingly, you know, different structures with, you know, shared services and outsourcing and you have to manage other organisations which becomes a huge challenge.” PB5Glo

However, this was linked to students lacking in professionalism:

“Although communication skills tend to be generally quite good, they kind of lack a little professionalism in the way they may put themselves across.” HE8UK

With students showing confidence in their ability to present:

“But actually, generally a majority of students are confident to stand up, they're confident to present their findings and again it's something we concentrate on, we make sure we build that through the three years of the programme and they get lots of opportunities.” HE8UK

It is also a skill that was referred to as being affected by background and social class:

“So I think interpersonal skills, I think there is an effect of social class, I do think that if you've got the social links or the networks that we find some of the guys that come here who are just able to hold their conversation with partners incredibly well and others maybe haven't got those links and haven't built up that kind of cultural social network and they struggle with it a little bit more...”E1Glo

A global professional body also referred to interpersonal skills as being the weakest skills looking from a professional environment perspective:

“...the weakest of them would be the interpersonal skills in terms of within a professional environment as opposed to your ability to communicate with people in general” PB1Glo

And this was also referred to as one of the skills that is developed later in university programmes:

“Encouraged in courses towards the latter period” HESing

Students' written responses in relation to skills which could fall into the 'interpersonal skills' area highlighted one weakness of my questionnaire in that a definition of interpersonal skills and what could be included within this category was not given to students, and was therefore subject to student interpretation. The areas that could fall into the category of interpersonal skills were not necessarily skills that would be covered by the programme. Therefore, although they might be perceived as 'interpersonal' in nature, students perceived skills such as leadership and motivation as being skills that would be useful in their current role, but whose development is limited within the programme. Included below are skills that were coded within the theme of interpersonal skills:

Leadership and motivational skills were commented on by 13 students (11% of students that commented) referring to this, and were linked with other skills such as mentoring and entrepreneurship.

One student also commented on the importance of motivational skills:

“One that might be very useful as we all are human beings and not machines is 'motivational skill'. Something that is so crucial however underestimated. Without adequate motivation, one can't sustain or unable to do work effectively or at their best. Knowledge sharing is also something that needs to be fully mastered as many are not doing so to gain synergy from all professions. Pooling of knowledge could levitate the performance of the organisation indirectly.”

Confidence skills. Eight students commented on the importance of being confident, which is a skill that could be considered an interpersonal skill. It is a skill that would be expected to be gained whilst working towards the programme as both interpersonal and communication skills would be expected to improve student confidence. Comments made in this area were:

“Confidence - manifesting as confidence that I will be able to learn a subject even when it looks daunting and impenetrable at the outset. Whether this confidence is misplaced or not, having it helps to get through the difficult subjects.”

“To build up confidence by working in a formal environment, how to communicate with people and work under pressure.”

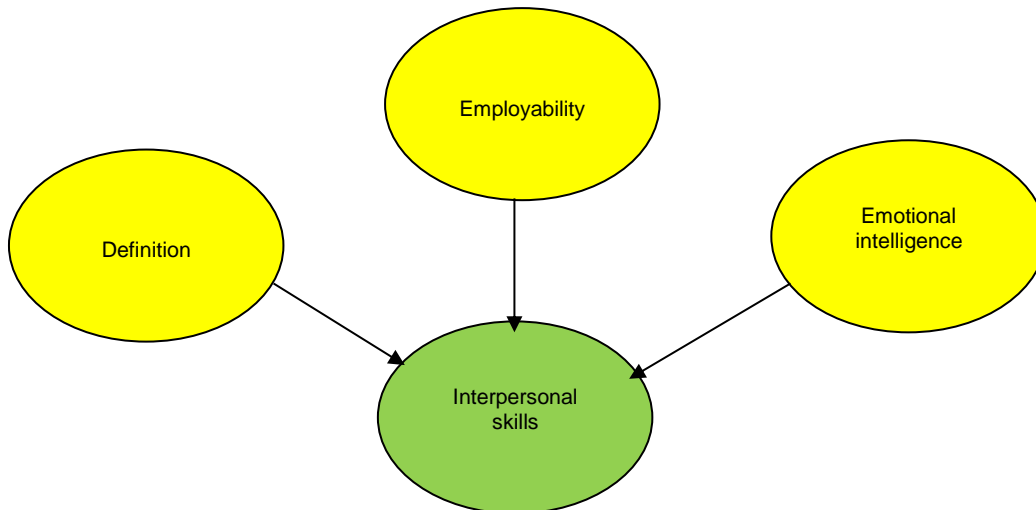


Diagram 5: Interpersonal skills

4.3.5 Oral communication skills

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

Oral communication is a skill that universities consider important and which is included in their **course design**. It is also a skill recognised by employers and professional bodies to be a key transferable skill by universities:

“we emphasise a lot on communication and presentation.... so during the course of their three years they will be doing a lot of presenting... there is a lot of participation” HE5UK

“They (*the employers*) feel that communication is very important... the candidates must speak with enthusiasm and confidence” HE6UK

“no matter how smart you are, if you don’t voice your opinions....if you can’t go out and get business you’re never going to progress far in your career” HE5UK

“.....it comes down to, you know, students’ communication skills. You know, their ability to, well as you say, to communicate clearly and persuasively, to negotiate well, to...and to be concise and effective, you know. And it's these things that businesses feel are very important, they want people to make effective decisions, they want them to communicate very clearly, either to their, internally or to their customers or clients, and to actually have those interpersonal skills.”PB5Glo

Oral presentation is also seen in the context of being able to **sell services** to clients:

“ I suppose the biggest factor at play in that regard is audit rotation and EU audit reform and the fact that all of us are going to have to be better at sales.... it is not just all about your technical capability, you have to be able to build relationships with clients, you have to be able to go out and sell things, you have got to be able to be credible in a presentation environment for example” E3Glo

Students showed that they saw the importance of this as with both oral and written communication skills showing scores of 3.59, but with oral communication skills reported by students as not being as well developed with a score of 3.08.

Meeting the needs of employers

Higher education and professional bodies raised this as a key weakness for employers with an **expectation performance gap** for this skill:

“The weaknesses that we see in almost all of our graduates, and I’ll come back almost ... is an inability to discuss, present, argue, present a case, that kind of thing” HE7UK
“....it comes down to the communication, the ability to interact and work with others. Employers really do want people with strong communication skills.....The skills so, communication, written and verbal, their ability to engage with the team, to work with the team, to contribute to the business and also personal effectiveness so that developing that self-awareness that is so important if you’re transferring from university and can say and do anything into a professional environmentcommunication is just so critical and I’d love to see universities find a way in the early years to equip people for the physically standing up and presenting because it’s really quite awful when you have to watch someone several years into a career just doesn’t know that skill when they, you can tell, they shake, they stumble over their words, they’re asked a question they lose their track and I think those are the sorts of things, not just for the

individual, but also for the profession to be seen as beyond just someone you want to put in the back room with a calculator and let them go for it.” PB1Glo

“I mean in my own experience the biggest weakness is the ability to communicate. So this is feedback from employers. So the...I don't think there's any question that the students are technically ready. You know, they've had all the technical knowledge. But they're not...I mean, you know, when I myself went to '*Big 4 firm*' in Singapore, they're not able to communicate, you know, in writing or orally well. So it's the communication skills that are probably flagged as the number one.” PB4Glo

“...I think just saying the word “presentation” to students scares them, I see some just have a natural gift and I see others I know that they are wishing the floor would open up and swallow them” PB1Glo

From the employer perspective, they see it as an area that students can develop:

“Presentation skills I think is something that they can develop, we don't expect them to come in and be polished presenters” E2UK

And this is an area where there is mention of differences between local and **international** students and the variation in relation to **language skills**:

“there is a huge difference between local kids and international kids....I am not sure we do a real fair job in helping them develop their language skills” HE3Aus

“...we find with a lot of our students is they don't come in with very good English language skills. Irrespective of whether they may be English-speaking students and therefore we have a big push throughout the three-years programme to try and get those skills to graduate skill.” HE8UK

Students in their written responses referred to specific oral and written communication skills:

“Oral communication skills and written communication skills are vital in my current role as I relate with quite a number people” “Presentation Skills” “time management and communication skill with each other.”

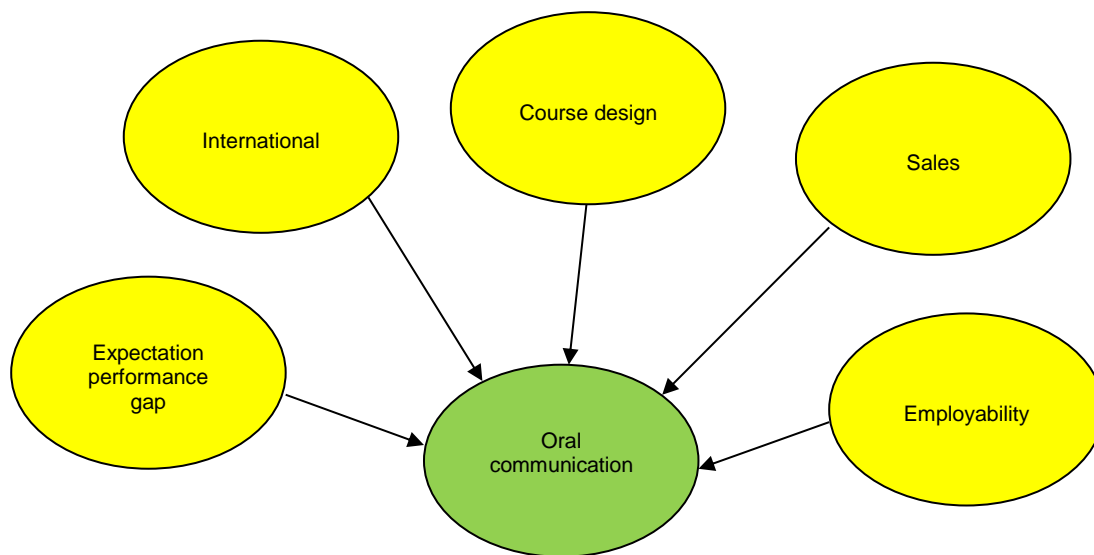


Diagram 6: Oral communication skills

4.3.6 Written communication skills

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

As noted in 4.3.5, students gave the importance of written communication as 3.59 indicating their perceived view on written communication as being important, plus they perceived this was an area that was well developed with a mean score of 3.68.

Feedback from employers and professional bodies reflected this being an area where investment had to be made:

“I have to say the written communication skills. I would love to be able to find a way to bring in something or provide an opportunity not just as a part of their practical experience requirement, and also not as part of their assessment but provide a way for people to gain those written communication skills like sort of an agenda to their studies and their experience so, I don’t know how it would look, but I think it’s an area where you can make such a difference to how someone presents themselves by improving those written communication skills. If you can get it down in writing and sound good you’re 80% of the way there.”PB1Glo

Meeting the needs of employers

There was also feedback in relation to the application process of students with students’ written communication being described as poor.

“I think drafting and writing skills is something we have to invest quite a lot of training in which still surprises me given that we are recruiting very intelligent students, but sometimes the level of written communication is quite poor.” E2UK

Professional bodies were critical of graduates’ written skills expecting this to be developed within the university setting:

“Used to review quality of applicants in application process, writing skills are ‘slap dash’” PB3Glo

“...employers are always saying “can’t you do something about their written communication?” PB1Glo

4.3.7 Team working

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

I found that team working is seen as an integral part of the **course design** by universities:

‘They do lots of projects in teams so that is part and parcel of the training, being able to work in teams’ ‘ they are strong’ HE5UK

“We work on their team building activities”

Meeting the needs of employers

This appears to be an area where student **learning preferences** have influence. Higher education institutions perceive this as an area that, although important, is one that students dislike:

“they hate most the fact that we have made them work in teams... and yet it is probably one of the most important things they’re going to have when they actually go out into the work place” HE4Aus

“Team working - I think like any group of 20-22-year olds, they find it difficult.” HE8UK

This may be related to the assessment related to group work:

“They hate being assessed on group work.”

Among students, team working was one of the areas that the paired sample t-test showed was perceived as deficient in that this was seen as an important skill that was not well developed within the programme.

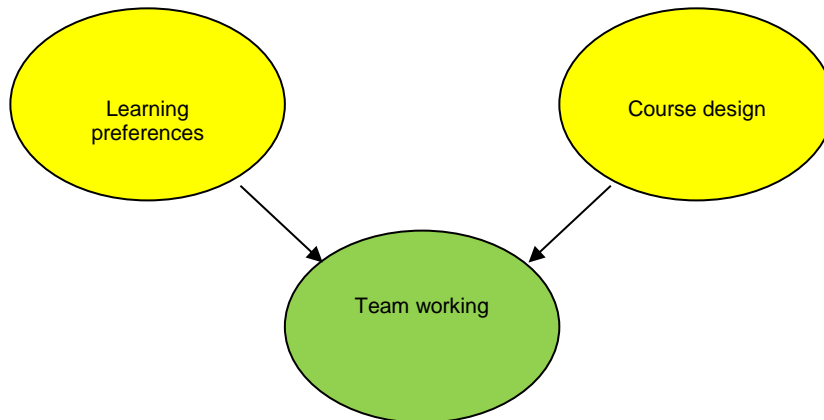


Diagram 7: Team working

4.3.8 IT skills (literacy)

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

This was considered to be an important skill by employers and professional bodies.

IT literacy, from a student perspective, did not appear highly ranked in terms of mean score and also was not an area highlighted as being deficient in the programme.

Nine students commented on the further development of IT skills. These included comments such as “*Strong use of IT skills i.e. Excel, not just able to apply the basics*” and “*Further IT and analysis skills*”. It would appear that, although students see these skills as being developed, they recognise that these skills need to be further developed after graduation and are an area for continuing professional development.

Meeting the needs of employers

I found that this is a skill where there is a dichotomy between students and employers. Employers report back to professional bodies that students perceive themselves as IT literate, but they are not reaching expected employer standards so this is another area where there is an **expectation performance gap**:

“one of the complaints I get from big employers is that students claim they are all IT literate but they are not. They don’t know how to use Excel and they don’t know how to

use the systems and that is one of the biggest complaints because we all assume part of the generation they can use computers but the answer is no.... that's where they need training". PB2Glo

"IT skills are crucial, there is always room for improvement there, but firms or professional bodies will provide extra training" PB3Glo

Universities tend to consider that students' skills are strong:

'they come to us with strong IT skills already so we just build upon that' HE5

"there is an expectation that the students basically look after themselves with regards to IT" HE6

And in terms of computer literacy, this was considered to be more innate now than it may have been for previous generations:

"yes certainly my team are far more computer literate than I will be ever. It is just more innate I suppose in what they do now" E3Glo

I found that there appears to be a growing awareness of the greater expectations of employers:

"IT literacy which you can do a spreadsheet and use word-processor and that kind of stuff we are changing away from that, that is not now IT literate so we are now looking at, we are working with IBM so we are training students in SPSS for statistical analysis, we are looking at creation and querying databases so we are working with a software company in *X City* where they create a large SQL database of transactions that they can.. and they are writing SQL queries, that kind of stuff which is what is now being seen as IT literacy. The ability to put a spreadsheet together is not, that is school leaver level skills now, so I think that kind of IT literacy. The other thing in terms of IT literacy that seems to be important, and we have talked to employers about this, and with developing our programmes to cover this are things like information governance, physical security, physical storage, the integrity of transactions' processing, that kind of thing which is ... they need a bit more than what we think of as IT skills." HE7UK

“I mean so I would expect all students to have really excellent IT skills, but I don't think that's the reality. I mean at the moment they're not being tested through the exams completely, are they? But they will be, that will change.” PB4Glo

4.3.9 Self-reflection

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

Self-reflection may not be as strong in university programme design and this may be due to the difficulty of grading and **assessment**:

“gone in circles... that seems to have disappeared from our courses. I am not sure of the reasons but probably one of the reasons is it is too hard to mark because it became very subjective” HE4.11Aus

“Self-reflection certainly not, they really really struggle with that, it is one of their graduating modules they have to do a reflection on their development over their degree time and they really struggle.” HE7UK

And it is also linked to maturity:

“and I think actually to me it sort of really links to their sort of education, their maturity in terms of, it's quite a mature position to say 'actually I'm not very good at something'. And I think a lot of our students aren't very good at saying 'I'm not very good at something’ HE8UK

Meeting the needs of employers

Self-reflection in terms of self-awareness is seen to be weak by the professional bodies and employers:

“Self-reflection is a problem as is self-awareness and the impact of their behaviour on others and how they come across” PB2.9Glo

“Self-reflection, I don't think they are particularly good on that if I'm honest, I don't think they are particularly good at receiving feedback. I think it kind of comes in a little bit into that kind of critical thinking and applying it to themselves.” E1Glo

“the strong students academically have always done well and have always been told that they are very good and then come into a professional environment where they do

have a lot to learn and sometimes that can be a little bit of tension there in getting trainees to accept some of that feedback.” E2UK

This definition of self-awareness in relation to the impact of behaviour on others may tie in the recurring theme of emotional intelligence.

Self-reflection for students was not shown as an area of high importance for students with a mean of 3.45 and development within the programme was not highlighted as being an area of deficiency with a mean score of 3.46. Additionally, it was only commented on briefly by students as being useful for their current role.

4.3.10 Statistical skills

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills and meeting the needs of employers

This was referred to by one professional body as being dependent on whether it is a relevant or non-relevant degree.

“where they have an accounting and finance degree they normally have reasonable statistical grasps” PB2Glo

Statistical skills were not of high importance to students with a mean score of 3.27 and they were also not highlighted as an area of deficiency with a score of 3.19.

4.3.11 Practical research

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills and meeting the needs of employers

Comments on practical research were less common, but when discussed this was viewed in a positive light by employers:

“the feedback we get from the line is that a lot of the trainees we bring in are good if not better in terms of their research skills than some of the researchers and analysts we recruit as well, so that is certainly a strength.” E2UK

Practical research skills were not highlighted by students as being an area of importance with a mean score of 3.18, but these skills were considered to be an area that was well developed with a mean score of 3.63. The paired sample t-test showed that this was a skill that was well developed in comparison to its perceived importance.

4.3.12 Career planning and interviews

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

Career planning and interviews was a skill set that needed to be subdivided as there were contrasting views on the two elements. The reason for this split is the more defined nature of the 'interview' skill, so interviews can be practiced and students can get 'good' at interviews, or aptitude test. This is a perception held by all stakeholders.

Students perceived this to be an area of low importance with it receiving the lowest mean score of 3.16. It was also considered to be an area that was low in terms of development within the programme with a mean of 2.62.

“ often they get good at interviews as it is competitive” PB2Glo

“so they are going through the aptitude tests, they were doing okay at assessment centres”HE7UK

“we interview a lot around competences, so I think students are very good at competency interviews because they are very easy to prep for. You do all your prep beforehand. You come in and regurgitate it, but I don't think they bring themselves to the table ... so I think students are seeing that as an artificial hurdle and sort of play the game a little bit” E1GLo

Meeting the needs of employers

This is an area where students can be perceived as not putting in a great deal of effort:

“Students are 'slap dash' in their applications, show sloppiness, 'a lot of them (sic employers) say they don't feel the students have put the right effort in'. Say silly things they would expect them to have found out about students discuss in interview about when they can have a career break or how much holiday they can have, focus on their work life balance rather than the work side' 'those who have done research into the industry, into the sector will do well' relating to interview” PB3Glo

“when they got to the partner interviews for the employment, they were deemed to be not client facing, didn't have that confidence” HE7UK

In relation to career planning, professional bodies and employers considered that students did not have a grasp of this:

“I don’t think the majority of our trainees joining us have any idea of career planning. Their horizon is to get qualified and that’s all they think and that’s get to the end of the three years and get qualified then I’ll worry about it” PB2Glo

“A lot of trainees can still be fairly passive in that regard and see that it is our responsibility to develop their careers and look at what they are doing and what experience they need and what experience they’ve got and we do do some of that but, and we provide a framework and we provide training opportunities, but it is your career and it is your responsibility, if you are not getting what you want to speak up and do something about it, so I think we are moving in that direction but it is a bit of a slow journey” E2UK

“I had one girl a few weeks ago who I actually ended up rejecting and I could tick almost every single box apart from commitment to ‘*the firm*’ ...”E3Glo

“we’ve definitely got a generation there where they expect a bit more to be done for them and therefore it is the fault of the firm if they do not get the opportunities that they want and you sort of think the more you know, you could be doing more to drive that forward for yourself” E3Glo

There was also concern about the perceived lack of support on career guidance:

“you know you can research your future partner online to the nth-degree. You know you can work out the house you want to go into. You can research all of these different things, but one thing you can’t thoroughly explore is yourself and how to get into the right career” E1Glo

And this in turn leads to employers’ concerns in terms of student retention and the associated cost of this:

“I think the students that come in to E1 are not really thinking about their career, I think they are thinking ‘I want a good university on my CV’ and then ‘I want a good organisation’ and they are almost putting off their career plan until after they’ve got through maybe their *professional* studies and then they’re thinking ‘What do I do with it? Do I go into industry? Do I stay where I am? Do I move around internally?’, so, on

one hand, you could say they are actually very good at it because they are thinking 'well I'm not going to make a plan right now at 21, 22, I'm going to get some experience and some qualifications behind my back and then I'm going to go'. On the other hand, for us we find that quite frustrating to not retaining as many people as we would like and we are struggling to get that longevity. We spend a lot of money and time training them up just for them to wander out." E1Glo

There is also the difference between students who choose to undertake a placement year and those who do not:

"career planning and interviews, tremendous amount done in that area with the students who go out for the year, very little is done for the three year students"
HE4Aus

One student made reference in their written comments to interviewing techniques.

"Interview skills are skills that would often be gained by on-campus students as career offices would be available to students studying on campus. For students with this form of programme, they would not have the option to visit a careers office, but these students do consider it to be a useful skill for their role."

4.3.13 Ethics

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills and meeting the needs of employers

My results found that ethics are seen to be a core area for all stakeholders and is a feature of **professionalism** and the professional accountant:

"Hugely important, underpins all exams" PB2Glo

'probably more understood by students before they start training than it was before' 'a massive part of our qualification now', 'not necessarily the term but they might show the behaviours of an ethical person' PB3Glo

"Separate ethics training programme" PB2Glo

"....obviously code of ethics is so critical that I don't think people are unethical but I don't think that they often understand all of the grey areas of ethics." PB1Glo

This was not an area that students were given a quantitative survey of but was an area raised by six students and included the following example:

“Every professional accountant is carrying out his duties with integrity, objectivity, independence, transparency, responsibility and honesty. Ethical skills are very important for all of us, by acting ethically to our audit clients and audit firms.....”

4.3.14 Entrepreneurship, management and conflict management

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills

Conflict management, management and entrepreneurship were variously raised as issues by students, with 20 students (16% of students that commented) making comments which included:

“entrepreneurship skills” “Handle complaints” “disturbance handling” “management and Human resources” “Recognise opportunities and seeking experience so could be said entrepreneur skills”, “Commercial acumen”, “Effective decision making”, “Reconciliation skills” “client relationship / negotiation / selling skills, more skills involved in the tactical or strategic management”, “Deal with obstacles and crises”, “It would be useful for me to have management and marketing skill for my current role as an accountant”

I therefore decided in my semi-structured interviews to raise questions specifically around the skill of conflict management.

There is some recognition that this is an important skill by universities including it within their programmes:

“they (sic students) have issues in dealing with difficult clients. So one thing they are trying to do to remedy that is injecting a little more negotiating into our courses so that they have the ability to negotiate with the other party” HE5K

“I think it's something we recognise that we think is an important skill that we don't do very well as academics, and students hate.” HE8UK

Other institutions see this as being embedded within coursework elements of the programme:

“only time we would deal with that is when there might be conflict within a group in a classroom environment.... we don’t deliberately set up experiments or exercises where conflict is created and how would you handle that or what would you do differently next time around?” HE4Aus

“I think this is mainly applicable to group work. We have measures in place in managing conflict within group work situations in teams that are not functioning properly, [they] would be coached and would be exposed to a range of conflict management. However, in a way, this is by chance whether there is a conflict in the group. If they have been part of a working group, they not have been exposed to conflict and they may not feel well prepared” HE1UK

One university interview sought to define conflict management as:

“Possibly dealing with difficult line managers, more experienced colleagues, and finding their own place, and being able to deal with the different demands of different managers they have to work with and possibly even colleagues they don’t get along with”HE1UK

And this had resonance with another employer’s perception of how this could be defined:

“when sometimes they don’t get what they want as well, that is kind of the conflict that we tend to see the most, when the trainees feel that they are being treated unfairly and not getting what they should be getting and what they are entitled to.” E2UK

And the different forms that conflict could take:

“Conflict in terms of sort of the broader sense, so conflict in priorities, conflicts in people, conflict in views?.... or independence conflicts. I suppose the pessimistic side of me would potentially say it was conflict in priorities in terms of conflict management, oh people are going to expect a lot of me and I still want to have my life. I think the biggest thing we hear a lot about is work/life balance.” E3Glo

There was a recognition that different environments will have different levels of conflict that have to be managed:

“It is probably easier to avoid in a university environment than in the workplace where you are forced to work with people” HE1Sing

Meeting the needs of employers

There was the recognition that students need to experience conflict in order to be able to develop the skill:

“And we will probably talk to them all about conflict management, probably in their first year, but of course talking to them and them actually experiencing it, and therefore having to deal with it, it's going to be a very different thing. And so yes, I think potentially only those who actually deal with the conflicts, will really truly get some experience.” HE8UK

“Now, you do...we can do our best within the curriculum, both university curriculum and professional curriculum, to try and introduce such things as simulations, rich case studies, and so on and so forth, but there's absolutely no substitute for having a real conflict within a workplace, something that really is affecting you personally and your team. And it's quite hard to bring that out in a simulated environment.”PB5Glo

And there was also the perception that the ability to deal with conflict was affected by social background and strength of social networks:

“... I think there is probably something around social background there. I think those who have probably got a particularly strong network or have got strong role models or have people that have worked within this space in the past, I think they cope with it slightly better than those that may be first generation university and have come into this environment and maybe don't have that access to friends and family or parents that have worked in this environment.” E1Glo

Linked to this was the consideration that, with the need to address social mobility, dealing with conflict may become more of an issue:

“as we start to address that and start to bring in people from different backgrounds that maybe doesn't have that social capital and networks, I think that (*social mobility*) is probably going to become more and more of an issue.”

This has become more imperative in the UK with the recent release of the UK government report from the Commission for Social Mobility and Child Poverty, a qualitative evaluation of non-educational barriers to the elite professions (Ashley et al, 2015).

4.3.15 Decision Making

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills and meeting the needs of employers

Students commented on decision making skills being useful for their roles but this was not a theme raised by other stakeholders.

4.3.16 Mentoring

Current stakeholder perceptions of skills and meeting the needs of employers

Mentoring was commented on by two students, including the possibility of facilitated workshops, so using more experienced staff to support development:

“Introduction of facilitated workshops to enable students to argue out opinions on certain relevant subject matters e.g. corporate social responsibility. This will not only enhance the interactivity & sharing of ideas amongst students but also sprout new ideas which can be used for the long term sustainability of our planet”

This was not a theme raised by other stakeholders.

4.4 Current skills: empirical coding

This section looks at the empirical codes, which are those that emerged from the data which did not fall within the 17 initial a priori codes. I used this to develop a more comprehensive position in relation to my first research question ‘**what is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?**’ and to use this to answer my second research question.

4.4.1. Skills development: technical rigour versus transferable skills

Although my thesis investigates transferable skills, a theme that emerged from the interviews was the broader skills discussion around technical versus transferable skills, the relative importance of these two skills categories and the factors that influence them. I categorised this data into four sub-themes of employability, course design, student learning preferences and the conceptualisation of ‘right fit’.

Technical skills for accountants are well defined. Subject academic benchmarks, professional body syllabi and international accounting standards mean that there is a global

framework for accounting education, as discussed earlier in my thesis in Chapter 1. My review of the literature in chapter 2 discusses how transferable skills have gained more importance among employers than technical skills and this is supported by comments from the different stakeholders interviewed.

From a university perspective, technical rigour is a requirement, but the importance of transferable skills is recognised in terms of course design. It is referred to as being developed more in later years, as shown in the example:

“In the early years ...it’s still a concentration very much on the technical skills side.... and so it’s not until the final years perhaps you start to work a lot more on those transferable skills” HE4.3Aus

Universities recognise the development of transferable skills as being a key **employability** factor:

“our school is known for giving them that technical rigour, but, over time, we have been trying to build up the soft skills because employers do say that the soft skills are important” HE5UK

“Employers tell us that it is very important. Between communication skills and technical skills, they would take a candidate that has superior communication skills” HE6UK

As do professional bodies:

“I think that the days of having someone who is technically brilliant, but very dysfunctional in terms of relationships or anything else or communicating.. I think the days of being able to put those brilliant people with no social skills in a back room and let them just do what they do, those days are over.”PB1Glo

There is also the recognition that transferable skills are being focussed on by employers:

“they (sic the employer) want an overall package.... most of the people coming to them will have the technical skills, so now they are focussing a little bit more on the soft skills” HE5UK

As per McQuaid and Lindsay's 2005 employability framework, work qualification (technical skills) and transferable skills are individual factors that feed into employability. It is the balance of the technical and transferable skills that can be considered important here. Global accountancy employers working in the UK see the importance of transferable skills over technical skills. They consider technical skills can be quickly gained and, therefore, these are not fundamental to their employment of a graduate and, as a result, they will select students who have not undertaken accountancy degrees:

"They pick up the technical skills very quickly we find, which I guess is why those who haven't done an accountancy related degree do as well if not better because they are bright people and they've got the potential to learn and they pick up those skills" E2UK

"we actually find that those who have studied accountancy do less well in the professional exams than students that haven't" E2UK

Also universities in the UK and Australia recognise the ability of the employer to provide the technical training:

"To the employers, technical skills can be trained" HEUK

And professional bodies have recognised the move towards ensuring their students have the capabilities for the workplace:

"*Professional body* now have development ladders in seven areas, they are communication, team working, decision making, consideration, adding value, problem solving and technical competence, a much greater shift to looking at the capabilities of the individual to work in the work place...., driven by the firms by the employers who say this is what we need...., they said the message was technical competence was a given...., they are looking for much more rounded individuals who are capable of working with people across teams and have got proper communication skills and presentation skills... PB2Glo

"in the *Professional Body* programme is a global strategy in leadership subject and that by very nature takes them away from studying of technical accounting and such into that broader strategy and management place" PB1Glo

More than the individual technical skills, employers are looking for the 'right fit for the firm', looking for people that have potential and will get on with the team and get on with the clients. Firms are looking for the 'right fit', not the technical skills:

"it isn't the technical skills or knowledge that we are looking for as an introduction. It is certainly not the skills that employers are looking for. They are looking for the right fit for their firm, they are looking for people that have potential, and will get on with the team and get on with clients. And the technical knowledge comes later" PB3Glo

"there is a different fit, depending on the organisation even within the profession.....so the fit has to be right as well" PB3Glo

A concern also comes across that students would rather 'get on top of' the technical skills than the transferable skills:

"the emphasis in terms of the course structure has changed recently to play up the generic skills as opposed to the technical skills... the kids don't like it. They say it is a waste of their time. They have a technical area that they want to get on top of....it reduces the time that they can do to study" HE3Aus

Another influence is that of the size of the firm, with Big 4 global accountancy firms being perceived to have different requirements to other types of accountancy employers:

"they (Big Firms) won't accept people who are not ready for the world of work" PB2Glo

Big firms are where small firms were 5 years ago in terms of requiring people who are ready for work" PB2Glo

"the big firms say we don't care what you have taught them, and we will teach them anyway. But sometimes the smaller firms out in the suburbs say 'we do expect them to do this, this and this. We don't have time to teach them'. So there is a bit of a difference" HE3Aus

I also found that employers continue to have primacy in determining the skills expected of graduates. The professional bodies recognise that they are key players in their development of skills:

“driven by the firms by the employers who say this is what we need”PB2UK

“would be to increasingly meet the needs of our employers” PB2UK

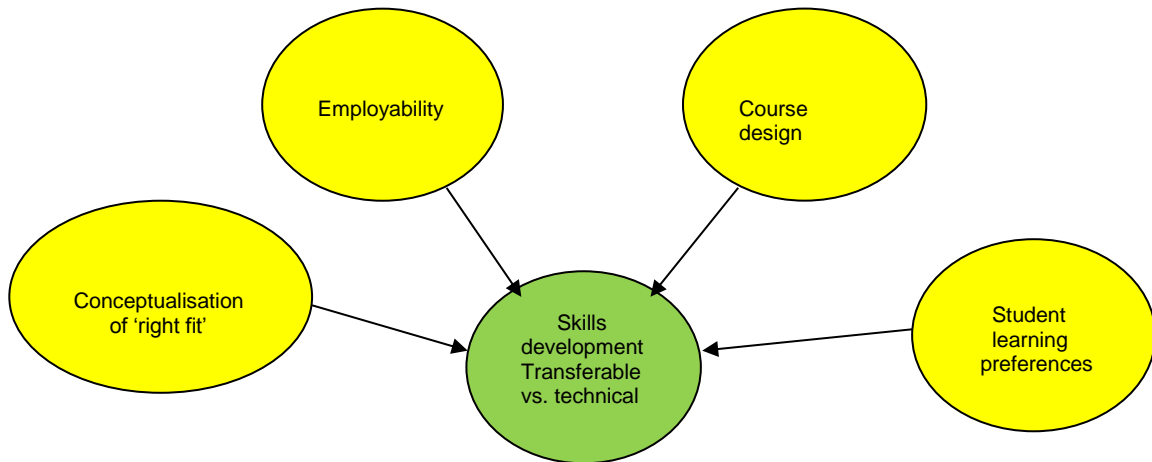


Diagram 8: Skills development

4.4.2 Clones/conformity versus independence

I found a concern that employers were creating clones and employees who would conform rather than challenge or question.

“Worried about recruiting in their own image” PB3

“one of the big concerns some have is that they end up with people who are clones and are they clones at the start or the end of the process?” PB2Glo

And there was then a challenge between wanting independent thinkers, but expecting conformity:

“Independent thinkers, but also expect conformity” PB2Glo

“self-learning we think is quite important and we are trying to build it up in students” HE5Sing

“they want people who think independently and who challenge the system” PB2Glo

The issue of the behaviour of a professional accountant and professional scepticism was also referred to:

“there is a pressure to conform and not to challenge, but it is important for a professional to be independent and to have professional scepticism” PB2Glo

4.4.3 Emotional intelligence

The issue of emotional intelligence was raised by a number of initial interviewees and I decided to include this as an individual question in further interviews in order to gain a richer perspective on it. This seems to tie in with the development of professionalism. All stakeholders seemed in agreement on this, that students came across as too self-assured:

“In general, I find that they need a bit of diplomacy. That EQ is important” HE6.1UK

“some of them complain that the job is basically very monotonous or very routine” HE5.1UK

“Cockiness, an expectation that I deserve this” PB3Glo

“expectation that I deserve this, without bringing everything else into play and having a better understanding” PB3.7Glo

“I do think there is a certain piece now where maybe it is a generation Y thing, so-called Gen-Y, the grads coming through sort of feel like they are owed something a little bit.....we have a saying that someone tells you to jump and you ask how high on your way up, whereas now I suppose the comparison would be, well they sit there and say hang on, what is in it for me, what am I getting out of this.” E3Glo

“Students refuse to do menial tasks” PB3Glo

“not all the trainees are like this but we do see and certainly I have noticed it a bit more over the last few years of trainees who come in and think the world revolves around them a little bit as well. Obviously we treat all our trainees as individuals, but you are one trainee amongst 70, so we can't give a bespoke service, bespoke training route for every single trainee. Sometimes getting them to understand that can be quite difficult as well. It is getting them to take responsibility, I think, for their own careers sometimes and their own development, getting them to understand that you own your career and your professional development, we are here to provide a supportive framework, but it is up to you to take advantage of that and drive that forward, so we do have some trainees who come in with quite a sense of, I guess, entitlement as well, “what are you going to give me?”” E2UK

“we’ve definitely got a generation there where they expect a bit more to be done for them and therefore it is the fault of the firm if they do not get the opportunities that they want and you sort of think the more you know, you could be doing more to drive that forward for yourself” E3Glo

“oh people are going to expect a lot of me and I still want to have my life. I think the biggest thing we hear a lot about is work/life balance.”E3Glo

“when can I have my first career break when they have not even had the job offer yet” PB3Glo

“employers have said students will refuse to do fairly menial tasks because they don’t think it is for them to do” PB3Glo

‘but I think also the attitude of some graduates as well has slightly changed in so much as they seem to be going to university and then thinking they are going to come into an organisation and hit the ground running and they are not necessarily as open and as adaptable to feedback, to some harsh direction, to kind of starting from the bottom.’ E1Glo

And they desired graduates to have greater self-awareness:

“Improve emotional intelligence, self-awareness, being able to manage your boss, to understand the other person’s position. I think the biggest challenge for 18-21 year olds is they think the world ascended on them. Treat bosses with respect” PB2Glo

“How do you manage your boss? Most students going into the workplace don’t realize it should be a two-way process and they expect the boss to manage them and actually it has to be a two-way process. They should be thinking about their boss’s needs....’ PB2Glo

“really flagging at five o’clock and expecting to go home” PB3Glo

“Need to be careful what they put in their emails” PB2Glo

However, stakeholders perceived this had to be set within a wider cultural context:

“when they're going out into, you know, the world of accounting now, it's not just white Anglo Saxons anymore or it's not just a group of Chinese, it can be a mixture of a group of whole different group of people and you've got to be able to work out all the different ways that these people actually work and think and do things and still get the sorts of results that you want It's a cultural come emotion sort of transferable skill that we didn't have to have before because we tended to work in very homogeneous types of pools.” HE4Aus

4.4.4 Educational level: School leavers versus graduates

Another theme that emerged was that of the difference between school leavers and graduates. The perception is that school leavers are eager to learn in comparison to the graduate; this was raised by both professional bodies and employers:

“that increasingly the employers are recruiting school leavers rather than graduates and the reason they're doing this is – started out as they are cheaper but they are not any more – the reason they are doing it is because the school leaver—this is what they say to me – they're eager to learn, they're willing to do, they don't think the world owes them a living and the converse is that is the impression graduates give – they're god's gift and they are not... within a year, a school leaver – 19 year old is indistinguishable from a 22 year old graduate and they're recruiting more and more” PB1Glo

“Three years at university makes you less aware, less willing and less eager.”
PB1GLO

“...because I found that the school leavers had much better stories and were much keener than actually some undergrads coming through” E3Glo

“one parallel I would draw is around our school leaver programme and actually now sort of just expecting more from grads in terms of they've had more time to think about it, you know, they should be bringing more to the party than some of these very impressive school leavers who are so keen and engaged” E3Glo

“is possibly more the school leavers actually than the grads would be conflict in terms of what if I don't like something, how quickly is that resolved for me? I.e. back to this whole, you know, I work for *Big 4 firm*, *Big 4 firm* owes me something. So yes this whole notion of 'I can't take holiday in January, February or March and I've asked for

this and it is not being pushed out quickly' or conflict in terms of something they want versus something the firm is prepared to give." E3Glo

'our school leavers probably come to [this] firm because they've maybe failed to get into the university they want to, they have maybe built up some resilience because they are going against the norm..... so when they come in they are slightly more receptive and open to feedback and to develop than maybe your grads.'E1Glo

4.4.5 Practical situations and placements

The importance of placements and engagement with practical situations was raised as a theme by professional bodies and higher education institutions, with those who have undertaken placements being better able to deal with practical situations:

"they are looking for people who have already worked and got experience working... have had internships" PB2Glo

'get work experience, attend business games, go to careers talks' PB2Glo

"I think the weaknesses are they have not been exposed to practical skills situations, some of them do go on and do placements which does supply these skills' HE1Sing

"The ones who do the four-year degree probably have a high level of transferable skills.... picked up during their work experience year" HE4Aus

This is also linked to those who, having been on placements, will have been better prepared for interviews as part of the placement process:

"career planning and interviews, tremendous amount done in that area with the students who go out for the year, very little is done for the three year students" HE4Aus

4.4.6 Personal presentation

Personal presentation was also highlighted as a theme. This may well tie in to levels of **professionalism**:

'turn up dressed quite scruffily' PB3Glo

'I feel that the area they are lacking is a really professional image. They must know how to dress properly. Make people have compulsory workshops for them to attend to improve their professional imaging' HE6UK

4.4.7 International students

There was some reference made to international students in particular in relation to working within different cultural groups within higher education:

"some say they absolutely loved working with a culturally diverse group on some of the projects they have done and some say it was the worst experience in their whole degree" HE3Aus

"they have learned to work with people and people from a different range of skills and cultural background so that should have prepared them to work in team work roles like audit decisions" HE1UK

"A lot of it is just the knowledge of how to behave but that might be very market-specific. I know we've had a few instances where, you know, students have just stopped going to work. But I suppose that seems very alien to us in the UK market, but it has caused quite a lot of brand damage in some markets. The actual, you know, how you behave in the workplace." PB4Glo

However, there was very little reference made to variations in skills levels. The reference below was from a higher education institution:

"Softer transferable skills are not met by a lot of our international accounting graduates" HE3Aus

4.4.8 Resilience

The theme of resilience was raised by one higher education institution:

'when we speak to employers, some of the things they raise are resilience' ' they don't really stay on very long for the job' 'they give up quite easily' HE5Sing

4.4.9 Class sizes/Resources

There was one reference made by a higher education institution in relation to having larger numbers of students and the difficulties this presents for transferable skills education:

“the larger the number of students, the more difficult it is to work on those soft skills of oral presentations and team work presentations”

4.4.10 Extension of university

One employer raised the issue of employment being seen by students as an extension of university:

“I do think a lot of them are a lot wiser to the fact that they are coming in for a qualification. They want that qualification and whatever happens after that, you know, ‘I will decide then’, I think, whereas a lot of us saw the qualification as a springboard to a career within the firm, whether or not that ends up happening ultimately remains to be seen and obviously a lot of people do leave post-qualification, but I do think now people very much see it as ‘I will get my qualification and then I will assess what I want for my life’, so in that sense, they see it as a sort of extension of university, which in many ways it is which is good and it is a nice way to do it, but I question whether they really come in sort of as hungry for all the experience they could possibly get. I don’t think they quite see everything as an opportunity in quite the way that people used to.”

E3Glo

4.5 Transferable skills changes over the last five years

This section looks at perceived changes that have taken place over the last five years in relation to transferable skills. There seemed to be the overall perception that the overall skills had not changed over the last five years, but what has changed is the emphasis on different skills, with the key shift being in IT skills:

“Shift, if any, has been in the IT area..... if I said to you that list, it would probably have been the same list ten years ago, might have been a slightly different order, if you gave it out to industry groupings.” HE4Aus

IT is also highlighted in the future expectations section later on in this chapter in section **4.6.2.**

There is also a perceived potential weakening of written communication skills:

“written communication I think has gone downhill over the last few years. We’ve really struggled with some of the written exams, people and their reports. I think technology has potentially made people slightly more lazy” E1Glo

There is the acknowledgement that the environment has become more competitive for students:

“More competitive for companies and therefore more demanding in the skills they require and, for graduates, it is more competitive for finding a job so companies can be more demanding” HE1UK

“Employers struggle to get good quality students compared to four or five years ago” PB3Glo

Stakeholders also acknowledge the move from more technical skills to transferable skills:

“Focus now on communication and presentation skills. Basically being able to deal better with clients...Focus in the past on technical skills, but now they are broadening a little.... so now they are focussing a little bit more on the soft skills” HE5UK

“to get the best jobs, you need to have a lot more than the technical skills.....I think, you know, the role of accountants has changed so the requirement to communicate and be a lot more teamy has become a lot more. And then, you know, general business acumen, awareness of the business environment, the impact and the awareness, you know, and the ability to communicate with all stakeholders and sort of, reflected in the sort of move to integrated reporting as well, isn't it?” PB4Glo

There was also mention of the widening of participation agenda:

“UCAS points not a cut off any longer for some firms, ‘trying to give opportunities to people who maybe have not blossomed yet’ ‘looking for potential rather than proven ability” PB2Glo

“Support students from disadvantaged areas” PB3Glo

In summary, employers continue to perceive that the universities are not providing what they need:

“I think there is a stand-off at the moment, I think employers aren’t getting what they want and I don’t think universities really know what they are supposed to be delivering.” E1Global

“One of the things we do constantly hear from employers is that the soft skills are the piece that is not strong.” PB1Glo

4.6 Key changes to transferable skills expected over the next five years

My third sub-question looking to answer my overall research question was:

- **What do stakeholders perceive will be key changes in transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?**

This section considers comments made by interviewees as to how they perceive there may be changes in skills requirements in the short to medium term. The first theme is a change in structure that is expected to be seen by Big 4 employers, the second theme is the change in IT requirements, third is the requirements for specific technical skills and lastly, changes in professional communication and presentation, emotional Intelligence and behavioural aspects beyond professionalism.

4.6.1 Change in structure of learning: Front loading

A structural change that is expected of employers, I found, is a compacted period of time to gain both technical and transferable skills and this raises the importance of graduates having strong transferable skills on graduation. A phrase that summarised this need was ‘ready to go from day one’, and higher education institutions recognised this need to prepare students better for transfer into work life. This can be linked with bringing graduates into the professional accountancy community of practice that I have written about in section 5.9 before they transfer into the workplace.

Professional bodies, employers and higher education institutions all highlighted the move towards front loading and that there will be greater expectations on students in a shorter period of time:

“I think the front loading effect is going to get more intense – *Big Four Firm* last year launched their intensive programme where they have students join them and they then do 14 or 15 papers in a ten-month period and also have on the job training for the soft

skills and then they expect them effectively to be able to do virtually everything a newly qualified can do after ten months' study." PB2Glo

"There will be pressure to get people doing more advanced work earlier, basic work is removed" PB2Glo

"we are thinking about how quickly they are going to be chargeable to clients which is a real kind of shift" E1Glo

"I think that employers will expect that employees are ready for the job when they arrive... ready to go from day one... we have to prepare students better for the transfer into work life" HE1Glo

"Basic work is disappearing because the computer can do it or a centre offshore can do it" PB2Glo

"I actually think that previously the employer was a lot more prepared to, you know, to train the student and to build these skills and, you know, they wouldn't necessarily...expecting quite a well-formed candidate to come to them in the first place." PB4Glo

5.6.2 IT Skills: systems

A key theme that arose through my stakeholder interviews is the expected increase in importance of IT, with the perception that IT competence is growing exponentially and that there is a need for graduates to understand data analytics, to analyse large volumes of complex data.

IT skills were raised as future skills where expectations may change over the next five years among professional bodies, employers and higher education institutions, this being a result of skills required by rapid changes in IT competencies:

"IT competence is growing exponentially with a need to understand systems, need to understand the accounting and the IT" PB2Glo

"we are becoming much more of a data driven organisation and so I imagine we would expect much more in terms of IT, statistical skills, business intelligence, more advanced IT skills" E1Glo

The higher level IT skills of data analytics were mentioned by higher education institutions in both the UK and Singapore:

'I think basically firms are changing and the nature of their business is changing...the big firms...I think they are focussing on analytics' HE5sing

"I can see the big firms focussing on analytics" HE5Sing

"this year has been the first time the big employers have been coming up saying 'we want students with much better data analytics skills, because that is where we've got demand, we have demand in that area and we are finding it really hard to recruit in that area and although you are chucking us out numerate graduates, they haven't got those sort of skill sets' and they are looking for it, so that is quite a change actually" HE7UK

"I think there will be rapid changes in IT skills. But I think IT skills have always been important. I think it's just whether it's the same IT skills. So whether it will still be an ability to deal with a Word processing document or whether an ability of sorting the Cloud, but so it may be the IT skill itself may shift, but I think its emphasis has been there and will remain. I guess it could become more important, you know." HE8UK

"big data analysis is becoming a bigger thing, isn't it? It's not being able to prepare the figures; it's being able to interpret them." PB4Glo

4.6.3 Specific technical skills

My thesis relates to transferable skills, but, interestingly, several stakeholders referred to technical skills requirements and the need for higher level achievement in these and I have therefore included my findings in relation to these. These include integrated reporting:

"Integrated reporting. Move towards selecting graduates that have a background in the business that the integrated reporting is being audited/worked with e.g. engineering – would not be an A and F student...., identifying people with a different background from traditional...., someone specific from an engineering background or a physics background ... with an understanding of the business that is being audited or worked with' PB2Glo

There is also the overall expectation that employers want everything:

“I think employers just want the best of everything now whether it’s because they have so many graduates to choose from they can actually be very picky” HE1UK

4.6.4 Professional communication and presentation, emotional Intelligence and behavioural aspects beyond professionalism

Also raised as a key theme is that of communication and presentation skills, with the ability to communicate to stakeholders of the business in a professional manner, to show business acumen, awareness of the business environment, the impact and the awareness of the impact and having the emotional intelligence to see beyond the self as discussed in section 5.4 to the higher levels of emotional intelligence as described by McPhail (2004). Emotional intelligence was raised as being an area where, perhaps not surprisingly, stakeholders perceived there could be development over the next five years:

“If I was looking forward now, there might need to start thinking about things like, I might describe it as emotional intelligence skills and they might start to come down to what you would say in the team working area, about how to actually be more able to work with differences with people” HE4Aus

In relation to communicating in a professional manner:

“...there are ways to speak to people that are appropriate in a professional setting and we do get some trainees where that is a real issue and maybe it comes back to what we’ve been talking about earlier with that sense of entitlement and not emotional intelligence.” E2UK

And to look beyond the individual and to the wider community:

“... I think to see the bigger picture as well sometimes, that decisions and policies are not made with you as an individual necessarily in mind all the time, but there is a bigger picture here of running a business and an organisation and you won’t always get what you want and decisions won’t always go your way, but it is how you manage that.” E2UK

“So I think it’s effective competences that we want to develop much more within the curriculum in whatever way we can, understanding, making people take much more...develop these leadership skills, having a much more strategic outlook and more

holistic and integrated look on the business, to help be much more customer-focused, stakeholder-focused. And that's really how I'd summarise it." PB5Glo

Finally, the theme of 'beyond professionalism' emerged, which encompasses a genuine enthusiasm for the organisation/profession and for the importance of accountants in society, re-building confidence in the profession and being the voice for good governance.

"I think for me it is the genuine enthusiasm for what they are doing. I think this sort of just wanting to be part of it, coming into a firm that they really care about" E3Glo

"that what makes a good accountant is, you know, the objectivity or particularly in audit. But you know, generally, if something's not right, particularly in today's environment, you know they really should stand up and say and there's a lot of very good examples out there of why it's really important to be the voice of good governance" PB4Glo

Plus, there is the need to rebuild confidence in the accounting profession:

"I think the work environment, currently of course, after the financial crisis and, you know, a need to rebuild confidence in the accounting profession maybe...maybe means that there may be more focus or emphasis on things like ethical behaviour" HE8UK

Furthermore, with the potential change in working patterns comes the requirement for self-management and the ability to be flexible, adaptable and to learn quickly to meet the needs of a fast moving environment :

"Self-management could become more important as if people are having more and more people working at home, which I kind of guess we anticipated 20-30 years ago and it hasn't happened" HE8UK

"So it's the ability to be adaptable, to learn quickly and to move on" PB5Glo

However, this comes with an appreciation that this involves partnerships between employers, professional bodies and universities:

"So we would expect (*sic graduates*) to demonstrate this at work. And that is the best way to learn as far as we are concerned. It is, you know, it's almost...we call it chicken

and egg, but I think as an employer, you know, you take on somebody and you know, they have to trust that the qualifications that they've done up to then, have given them the skills and the potential to demonstrate those skills and fulfil those skills. But they have to also then take a chance to some extent or trust that these people can be employed and that when they are put to certain task, they can actually adapt to them. And that's when they start to learn. So it is a partnership. You can't have a readymade object when you take somebody on. You can go as far as you can within reason, within an environment like the university or within *professional body*, and we're striving all the time to increase our scope of assessing those transferable skills, but it's often very, very difficult given, you know, the environment we have. Or the model we operate within." PB5Glo

Some universities are adopting a competency-based approach which I discuss in chapter 1 section 1.4.1 and this was perceived by employers as addressing the employer expectation gap:

"... if every university was to apply that and there was to be some kind of competency or value framework around it then I think it will make it a lot easier for employers to see the talent that is available and also for students to get an understanding of what is expected from the employer." E1Glo

I discuss professionalism further in section 5.8 Professionalism. Also, I discuss ways of addressing the professionalism gap between what employers are seeking and what they are getting from graduates in terms of professionalism in section 6.1 Concluding remarks and recommendations.

Chapter 5: Discussion of findings

In this chapter I discuss my findings relating them to my initial theories and using the results to answer my research question of whether accounting students are developing the transferable skills that meet stakeholder needs set within the global context of accountancy education. My overall research question was to consider whether undergraduate accounting students were developing transferable skills to meet stakeholder needs and this question was set within a globalised context. I seek to answer this question by looking at four research sub-questions and I summarise how each of these questions have supported me in answering my overall thesis question.

- **What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?**
- **Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?**
- **What do stakeholders perceive will be the key changes in the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?**
- **How could the key skills which require better development be improved in undergraduate accounting students?**

The first two questions **“What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?”** and **“Are the current skills of accounting graduates achieving or not achieving employer needs?”** are discussed in detail in chapter 4 where I look at each of the 17 current a priori codes and also at the emergent themes from the student survey and stakeholder interviews to determine current stakeholder perceptions.

In this chapter, I first look in section 5.1 at answering the question **“What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?”** and refer to the skills of analysis and critical evaluation, time management, problem solving, interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, self-reflection, conflict management, communication skills, IT skills, career planning and interviews and professionalism. In section 5.2, I then seek to answer the second question **“Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?”** linking to the skills detailed in section 5.1. The findings in relation to the third question **“What do stakeholders perceive will be the key changes in the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students over the next five years?”** are discussed in section 5.3, where I

discuss the themes of frontloading, changes in IT requirements, the requirements for specific technical skills and, lastly, professional communication and presentation, emotional Intelligence and behavioural aspects beyond professionalism. The findings in relation to the fourth question **“How could the key skills which require better development be improved in undergraduate accounting students?”** are discussed in section 6.1.

I summarise in this chapter the key findings from my quantitative and qualitative study of students and my qualitative interviews with stakeholders and look at transferable skills where there were key issues raised. My IFS student survey results which gave quantitative and qualitative data enable me to triangulate with my interviews with stakeholders, representing higher education institutions, employers and professional bodies from the UK, Singapore and Australia.

In relation to the perceptions of stakeholders of technical skills versus transferable skills, I found this highlights current stakeholder perceptions of the importance of transferable skills. In Chapter 1, I explained how there is a global framework for accounting education and that technical skills are well defined and, in Chapter 2, I discussed how transferable skills have gained more importance among employers, a position which is supported by my stakeholder interviews. My results found that transferable skills are recognised as being key employability factors by employers, universities and professional bodies, but balanced against this is the perception that students would rather ‘get on top of’ technical skills rather than transferable skills. Also important is the size of the firm, with larger employers having more focus on transferable skills and smaller organisations preferring technical skills.

5.1 What is the current stakeholder perception of the transferable skills of accounting undergraduate students?

5.1.1 Analysis and critical evaluation

My results show that these are core skills with all stakeholders perceiving these as being a significant part of the role of being an accountant, with students ranking this as the most important skill for an accountant. These findings resonate with Albrecht and Sack’s (2000) study, where analytical/critical thinking was ranked highly by faculty and practitioners, and with other studies including those by Morgan (2007), Kavanagh et al (2008) and Awayiga et al (2010).

5.1.2 Time management

My results showed that time management skills are seen as an important skill by employers and professional bodies and, as with analysis and critical evaluation, this resonates with previous studies. Time management was ranked as the second most important skill by students.

5.1.3 Problem solving

I found problem solving to be a key skill among stakeholders which resonates with other studies including those conducted by Morgan (1997) and De Lange et al (2006). It was the third most highly ranked skill among students with employers linking this closely to levels of professionalism.

5.1.4 Interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, self-reflection and conflict management

This was seen by stakeholders as being a key skill for accountants which agrees with other studies as discussed in section 2.4.1 of my thesis including those by Morgan (1997), Albrecht and Sack (2000), Borzi and Mills (2001) and De Lange et al (2006). Interpersonal skills were highlighted as being the fourth most important skill by students.

5.1.5 Communication skills

Oral and written communication skills were shown by my results to be of key importance to accountants which agrees with studies discussed in section 2.4.1 of my thesis including those by Morgan (1997), Borzi and Mills (2001), Gardner et al (2005) and De Lange et al (2006), and is a key employability skill and considered by employers as important for selling services. Students perceived oral and written communication skills as being joint fourth and fifth in terms of perceived importance.

5.1.6 IT skills

Students ranked IT skills as the sixth most important skill and it was one that was raised as being of importance to employers and professional bodies. I found IT skills were also skills where there is an expectation performance gap with students and higher education institutions perceiving that students had good levels of IT skills, but with employers and professional bodies wanting much higher skills levels.

5.1.7 Career planning and interviews

Career planning and interviews ranked lowest of the a priori codes among students but this was of importance to employers and professional bodies. My results found these two

transferable skills were best separated as perceptions by employers were divergent in these two skill sets.

5.1.8 Professionalism

Professionalism came through as a core theme and I discussed earlier in my thesis higher education, professionalism and the professional accountant in section 1.4.1 and professionalism and ethics in section 2.4.3.

5.2 Are the current skills of accounting graduates meeting or not meeting employer needs?

5.2.1 Analysis and critical evaluation

I found that there is a perception by employers that students would benefit from the enhanced development of professional scepticism; in other words, being willing to challenge the results. Stakeholders also voice concerns that students think in silos, finding it difficult to make connections and links and contextualising what they have learnt. I also found that there was concern that students were unable to use their higher level skills as described by Bloom's taxonomy in section 2.8 of my thesis, so students lack the ability to deeply analyse and evaluate data. Also raised was the desire among employers for students to be more commercially focussed.

5.2.2 Time management

I found that the perception of time management and whether these skills meet employer needs varied according to the stakeholders as conceptualised by Bui and Porter (2010) in their theory relating to expectation performance gap which I discuss in section 2.7 of my thesis, with employers and professional bodies having competencies that they desire, in this case time management skills. On considering this further in terms of the interviews, it is less about the institutional and student factors that constrain accounting educators, nor about sub-standard performance by accounting educators as detailed by Bui and Porter (sic), but more, I think, about graduates' level of professionalism and prior work experience as evidenced by their not turning up to work on time, providing excuses for being late, feeling tired around 5pm and needing to exercise judgment about the use of time.

5.2.3 Problem solving

In terms of weaknesses, I found that problem solving skills showed similar results to analysis and critical evaluation skills in terms of students not achieving the higher level skills of problem solving, so complex problem solving, applying techniques to unstructured problems,

lacking adaptability and flexibility to different scenarios. This was a skill that employers sought to assess in interviews as it is seen as a key skill. I found problem solving an interesting area in terms of definitions as this is a definition that is bound within the disciplinary context as I discuss in section 2.3. Problem solving within the context of accounting is about applying techniques to accountancy problems; it is not about solving problems of personal or physical conflict which it might be seen as within other disciplines. This highlighted to me the disciplinary context of the skills debate that I am engaging in within my thesis.

5.2.4 Interpersonal skills, emotional intelligence, self-reflection and conflict management

I found this was an area that students perceived as being key importance, but in which they considered their skills were not well developed. There were fewer comments by stakeholders specifically about interpersonal skills which may have been due to my not providing a clear definition of what this incorporated. There were many stakeholder comments about emotional intelligence and student comments which could be incorporated into this category which were themed around leadership and motivational skills, and confidence skills.

I found that concerns about skills in this area were similar to those seen for time management in terms of lack of professionalism by graduates, with employers seeing graduates as finding it difficult to transfer their interpersonal skills to the professional accountancy environment.

I found emotional intelligence appeared as a key theme among higher education institutions, professional bodies and employers in that they perceive students to be cocky, lacking in diplomacy, prone to complaining, not open to starting from the bottom, lacking in self-awareness and emotional intelligence and they do not treat management with respect. They were also described as having a sense of entitlement and they are too demanding of a work/life balance. I discuss McPhail's (2004) stages of emotional awareness in section 2.5 of my thesis and apply Humphrey's (2007) definitions of the different stages of emotional awareness, emotional application, emotional empathy and emotionality, which would indicate that perceptions are that graduates are only meeting the level of emotional awareness where they are aware of their own emotions and are able to identify them correctly. They are not able to identify which emotions are appropriate in specific situations and they are unable to enter into the feelings of others in the workplace, and do not have a level of social awareness that they could consciously use to guide decision making.

My results show that self-reflection is seen as an area of weakness by employers and professional bodies in relation to transferable skills and this may be due to the difficulties of assessing and grading self-reflection, but it may also be linked to maturity and levels of professionalism in graduates and in the higher level of critical thinking that is required to self-reflect. This can be linked to self-awareness and the impact of behaviour on others which ties in with interpersonal skills and emotional intelligence.

Although I separate out conflict management within my study, for the purpose of my results I am including them in interpersonal skills as I consider that it sits as a sub-set of this. Conflict management was raised as a skill that needed developing by students, although recognised by universities as being important in order for graduates to deal with clients. My results show that this is embedded in programme group work and, therefore, it is by chance rather than by design that students might be exposed to conflict. For example, there may be measures in place to manage group work when something goes wrong in the group. There was recognition that there was no substitute for experience in this area as it is difficult to bring out in a simulated environment. There was also an appreciation of different understandings of what conflict within the workplace might mean, be it dealing with difficult line managers, more experienced colleagues, being able to deal with the demands of different managers and with colleagues with whom they do not get along.

5.2.5 Communication skills

As with time management, I found perceptions of oral communication skills to vary according to stakeholders and Bui and Porter's (2010) expectation performance gap with employers being critical of both oral and written skills. I consider this is a skill that may be affected by institutional and student factors that constrain accounting educators and/or sub-standard performance by accounting educators. Employers did recognise that, for presentation skills, this was an area that they could invest in when graduates were employed. They were less understanding about written skills not being developed at university. I found that this was, as could be expected, a skill which was commented on by stakeholders as being affected by the nationality of the student as English is the language of international accountancy and, therefore, this skill could be affected by graduates having English as their second language. Written skills were of greater concern among stakeholders, with the perception that ability in written skills has decreased over the last five years, perhaps due to the increased use of technology.

5.2.6 IT skills

I found that there is a growing awareness amongst higher education institutions that employers have different perceptions of levels of IT literacy and that this is an area that higher education institutions could work on to meet employer needs.

5.2.7 Career planning and interviews

All stakeholders perceived that interviews could be practiced and that students could become proficient at these, but employers perceive that students do not prepare sufficiently for interviews in some cases. In relation to career planning, I found that professional bodies and employers felt that students did not have a grasp of this, with graduates having short term horizons. This compares with employers who are seeking to take a long term employment perspective. Career planning was also perceived to be an area affected by work experience.

5.2.8 Professionalism

Professional scepticism was raised when referring to critical analysis and evaluation skills and the desire for graduates to challenge what they are being told, be that challenging the client or challenging colleagues, to demonstrate that they can be independent thinkers. Professional behaviour was also raised in reference to time management skills in relation to exercising judgment around the use of their time, having the empathy of understanding other people's time, knowing when time is critical. Professionalism was also raised within interpersonal and communication skills, with graduates lacking the professionalism to present themselves within the professional environment, including the way that graduates dress. It was also raised as a theme in relation to self-awareness and graduates being self-aware of their behaviour towards others and in receiving feedback within a professional environment. Ethics was seen by all stakeholders as a core skill for accountants which resonates with other studies, such as those by Fatt, J.P.T. (1995) and De Lange et al (2006).

Chapter 6: Conclusion

In this final chapter I evaluate how I have been able to address the question raised by my thesis, summarising the conclusions drawn from it and the contribution of my work to the field of transferable skills among accounting undergraduates. I reflect on the improvements I would have made if I were to repeat the study and consider the implications for further study. I look at the dissemination of my findings and, finally, I go on to consider the implications in relation to my professional role and in the broader professional context and debate surrounding transferable skills.

6.1 Concluding remarks and recommendations

My overall research question considers how to develop transferable skills in accounting graduates to meet stakeholder needs within a globalised context. When I first considered undertaking this research I considered including culture within my analysis. What I determined from undertaking my initial readings and research was that I perceived accountancy as a profession that was framed within a globalised context – I discuss this in detail in chapter 1, section 1.1 1. This is evidenced by the range of international bodies, international standards and international employers which exist in relation to accountancy, including the International Federation of Accountants, International Standards in Auditing, International Education Standards, International Financial Reporting Standards and the global Big 4 employers. It became clear to me as I undertook my interviews that there was very little mention of international or cultural differences, with the key discussion in this area relating to the language skills of international students seen within the context of English being the main language for accountancy. That therefore led me to adapt my title to looking at a globalised context. I had expected to see some cultural variation within the three countries that I selected - the UK, Singapore and Australia - but again there was little evidence of this. I found that higher education institutions, employers and professional bodies within the countries I selected reflected the global nature of the profession.

In terms of whether accounting students currently have the skills to meet stakeholder needs, the theoretical frameworks and questions I use to answer my research sub-questions (as detailed in Chapter 5), and the methodology I use, is fit for purpose enabling me to gain the evidence I require to answer my sub questions. My evidence shows that stakeholder perceptions are that graduates continue not to meet stakeholder needs in a number of core transferable skills:

“they haven't got the right skills which we've been talking about. They can't communicate really effectively, they haven't got experience of working as a team and they don't know how to behave in the workplace.” PB4Glo

Core skills that I found graduates are seen to be lacking in are communication skills, in the higher level skills of being able to make connections and contextualising what they have learned and to be able to deeply analyse and evaluate data. This inability to meet higher level skills was also seen with problem solving skills and IT skills, so complex problem solving and applying techniques to unstructured problems and scenarios and the ability to analyse large volumes of complex data using IT systems. Also, time management skills were considered not to be meeting stakeholder needs in terms of graduates' level of professionalism, ranging from being on time to work, to exercising judgment on their use of time, having empathy with the time of others and appreciating time critical points. Interpersonal skills, including emotional intelligence, self-reflection and conflict management, were also perceived to be a core area of transferable skills which were not meeting stakeholder needs; this was an area about which stakeholders were most vocal with comments made about students' cockiness, lack of diplomacy, tendency to complain, sense of entitlement, lack of self-awareness and low emotional intelligence. Graduates were perceived as not being able to identify which emotions are appropriate in specific situations, being unable to enter into the feelings of others in the workplace, and not having a level of social awareness that would enable them to consciously use emotional intelligence to guide decision making. Communication skills were also raised as core skills which were not meeting employer needs, both oral and written, with written skills being perceived as weakening over recent years. In addition, career planning was perceived as an area of weakness with graduates having short term horizons compared with employers who are looking for those who take a longer term employment perspective. Employers are also looking for graduates who they deem to be the 'right fit' although this is at odds with their not wanting clones and with the widening participation/social mobility agenda driven by government. There is also the tension seen between employers seeking conformity, but also wanting independent thinkers.

Having established transferable skills where stakeholder needs were not being met, I will now suggest ways of addressing these skills gaps, as well as looking at those skills where an expectation performance gap exists (Bui and Porter, 2010). Lave and Wenger (1991) give the perspective that learning and teaching are situated within a community of practice. Applying this to the community of professional accountants engaging students in the professional community as early as possible to support their professional behaviour and their

teaching and learning within the community could help address perceived weaknesses in professionalism, critical analysis and evaluation, time management, interpersonal and communication skills and self-awareness. Engagement in the community of practice could involve earlier registration and closer engagement with professional bodies and higher education institutions and engaging with local accounting communities. This could be through charitable accountancy schemes as are used in some universities already or engaging with local practicing accountants, for example, through business games or mentoring schemes. Ways of engaging earlier with the workplace and as a more integrated part of the degree would support being part of the community of practice; for example, through more internships and integrating compulsory placements within degrees. Integrating working with professional bodies and employers to engage students in the accounting community of practice is fundamental to improving transferable skills to meet stakeholder needs. Support would need to be provided to reduce the constraints gap that Bui and Porter's (2010) model highlights as this may be a cause of the expectation performance gap. By engaging in communities of practice, this may seek to reduce the constraints gap further by working on students' aptitude and attitude to better meet employer needs.

In terms of specific skill sets, I established from my study that a focus by universities on data analytics (as is being seen already in some universities) would support expected changes in skills requirements over the next five years, as would working on areas of professional presentation and behaviour, including emotional intelligence and responding to students' perceptions that they need support in conflict management beyond fortuitous group work, so, for example, through use of case studies and role play. It would also be useful to work on written communication skills and encouraging students to think about their career planning in the longer term, including better understanding the firms they are looking to work for.

6.2 Contribution to the field – feeding into the debate

For me, this thesis is about improving the education of accountants through the higher education system. This is set against the challenge that employers in some countries can choose and indeed prefer relevant versus non-relevant graduates and the challenge of increased competition from apprenticeship schemes. Transferable skills are key to employability and, therefore, understanding which transferable skills were not meeting stakeholder needs is fundamental to my thesis as is determining what aspects of these skills are not being met and how to address these skills in order that graduates could move towards meeting stakeholder needs. My thesis uses new data to provide a current, original, critical and forward looking global perspective on this debate and it highlights key strategies and skills that universities can engage with to improve the transferable skills of accounting

undergraduates to better meet stakeholder needs. I consider that accounting graduates having professional level skills in the areas detailed in section 6.1 would differentiate them from other graduates when they enter the workplace and would seek to move employer perceptions in favour of accounting graduates. I discuss how I will change my own practice as a result of my research in sections 6.4 and 6.6, plus how I will develop accountancy education within my own higher education institution and beyond in section 6.4. In section 6.5, I discuss the dissemination of my research for the broader accounting education community.

6.3 Constraints of the study

My thesis is part of a body of work I have undertaken over a five-year period as part of my Doctorate in Education (International); this has included four essays and an IFS. By being part of a wider body of work, my thesis is limited to 45,000 words and I have had to realise within this word count that it is not possible to be all-inclusive, holistic and complete.

My thesis, as part of my wider Doctorate in Education, develops work that I undertook in my Foundations of Professionalism course and builds on the study from my IFS. My thesis is therefore complementary to my IFS. When viewed holistically, my work is around 65,000 words and I have therefore, in total, undertaken a mixed methods approach using a large quantitative study which I have complemented with a qualitative evaluation. It can be difficult to obtain data that are both reliable and valid, but by undertaking quantitative work in my IFS, which provided me with reliable data, and triangulating this with data from my qualitative work, both from the IFS and the thesis, I was able to succeed in collecting reliable and valid data for my thesis. By building on my IFS and triangulating data from my IFS with my thesis, this enabled me to benefit from the extended time period of the IFS and thesis, thereby avoiding the potential disadvantage of a mixed method approach, which is that it takes more time to complete (Denscombe, 2012). I also sought to organise interviews around my working life as I travel extensively both within the UK and outside of the UK within my current job role. This enabled me to conduct the semi-structured interviews in the UK, Singapore and Australia at relatively low marginal cost, again seeking to mitigate the potential disadvantage of increased cost that can arise from using mixed methods (Denscombe, 2012). I used a survey study to capture student perspectives and semi-structured interviews for other stakeholders' perspectives in order to overcome a potential disadvantage from using mixed methods of data not corroborating with each other. The UK, Singapore and Australia are all countries where there is a well-developed accounting profession and where there are large numbers of accounting graduates and so, by selecting these countries, I was

seeking to ensure that I had a representative sample of a global community of stakeholders to triangulate with data from the global student body survey.

When analysing and evaluating my interviews and developing coding, I sought to ensure that I was aware of the context being used and that all data were considered in order to avoid the potential limitations of using a semi structured interview approach of my interpretation of the interviews. This being bound up in my notion of 'self' meaning that of my own identity, background and beliefs (Denscombe, 2012). This also applied to my coding where there is the possibility of de-contextualising the meaning of the coding with words being taken out of context, with the data being lost or transformed during the coding process and there is a danger of oversimplifying the explanation by disregarding data that does not fit (Denscombe, 2012).

For my survey, I received a response from 357 students out of 2,200 students (16%) surveyed and this provided me with a large amount of data which addressed what can be a limitation of surveys in terms of low response rates and enabled me to have reliable data sets to triangulate with my other qualitative stakeholder data. The survey that I undertook was piloted and relevant outcomes of the pilot used to change the survey. In terms of survey design, the survey I designed was such that it looked at student perceptions as to whether a particular skill was considered important for an accountant, using a scale. I then looked at student perceptions as to whether each skill was well developed within their programme of study. What I did not seek to do in this study was to use results to give average mean rankings for the purpose of ranking skills as seen in Albrecht and Sack's study (2000) and the study by Awayiga et al (2010). Although the survey had not been phrased as to pick up the ranking of importance of skills, I did seek, to an extent, to seek meanings from the rankings and I then triangulated this data with data from my semi-structured interviews. Through the rich data I obtained from the interview process, I was able to gain a deep insight into perceived levels of importance of the different skills and was also able to gain clarification of stakeholder understanding of terminology through the interviews. I made the decision not to use a computer based package such as NVivo for analysis and coding of my interviews as I wanted to be closer to the data and its outcomes and I used the qualitative data to provide me with the depth of data that is very difficult to achieve from a quantitative survey (Denscombe, 2012). What I also found after undertaking the survey was that it would have been useful to include 'ethics' or 'ethical understanding/behaviours' in the transferable skills list as seen in De Lange et al's study (2006). Ethics was referenced by

students in the qualitative element of the survey and for the purpose of the semi-structured interviews, all stakeholders were asked about ethics.

The survey was undertaken with a wide variety of students globally and these students could therefore have had exposure to other programmes or in-country professional bodies, thereby mitigating a potential limitation of the nature of the student population of my student survey, namely that students were providing a perspective from one specific professional accounting body and were from one undergraduate programme. I sought stakeholder views about a broad student body in terms of both professional route taken and degree type. The student population I investigated included all the student types from the survey, but the data could have been split to focus only on employed students and could then be linked to developing continuing professional development programmes to meet regional student needs. I gathered data within my IFS on continuous professional development, but chose not to make this a focus of my study as I felt it would have expanded the study beyond what was manageable within the thesis. I have clearly shown the location and situation of each of my interviews in order to mitigate against the limitation of undertaking a smaller number of semi-structured stakeholder interviews in that the data might be less representative (Denscombe, 2012) and in order to give some indication as to what extent my work could be applied more generally.

6.4 Implications for future research

The motivation for my thesis was to respond to criticism that accounting students, on graduation, were not achieving the desired level of skills that were perceived as important in their chosen field. In seeking to answer my research questions, I found that there are particular skills that students perceive would be desirable to gain from accounting programmes within my own institution, but which are not currently being developed to the level that students perceive would be desirable. Four areas highlighted as ones in which students would benefit from further development are team working, interpersonal skills, oral communication skills, and career planning and interviewing skills. Also, from a programme development perspective, I believe it would be useful to undertake further research into the skills highlighted by students as being important to their current roles, but which are not currently developed within the programme; students perceive these to be leadership and motivational skills, confidence skills, entrepreneurship, management and conflict management skills, decision making and mentoring. The wider stakeholder perspective on the importance of these skills could be used to aid the development of future programmes. In my thesis, I also took the wider stakeholder perspective and would seek to undertake changes to my programme that reflect this stakeholder perspective. I could undertake some

action research with students by seeing if student perceptions changed before and after the implementation of changes to the programme.

An area requiring further investigation that I did not address in my thesis would be to consider what accounting graduates perceive they would benefit most from in terms of continuing professional development and what factors this may be influenced by. Another element of the data which I have not focussed on, but on which I have gathered data is that of origin/place of residence and employment. Origin/place of residence could be used to ascertain if there are differences between different regional responses which could be useful in targeting specific CPD courses; for example, in team working. The study I undertook looked at all recent graduates, but it could be useful to split the data set and focus only on recent graduates who have found employment to see where their considered areas of weakness are and this could then be linked to developing CPD programmes to meet their needs in various regions.

“we are trying to do a sort of toolkit for employers...for learning providers to build the employability skills of students. And that would be one of the things we would suggest that there's some sort of group work set to try and build the sort of team-building skills.

“PB4Glo

When I first planned my thesis and considered the relevant stakeholders I wished to engage with, I considered including private providers of accountancy tuition within the stakeholder groups. I determined later on that this would expand my study beyond what I considered to be a manageable data collection load and, therefore, I decided to remove private providers from my stakeholder list.

There is an emerging body of literature on private providers, but as they are relatively new to the degree awarding market, with private entities in the UK able to secure university title in 2010, there has been limited research undertaken in this area and research into the subject of transferable skills development within private provider institutions would be an interesting area for future research. Another emerging area of interest is the recent increase in popularity of apprenticeships and the perception that students coming through this route into the accountancy profession are meeting employer needs better than accounting graduates; this would be an interesting area for further research, perhaps using a longitudinal study.

Another interesting area of potential further research came out of my interview with a global employer. As part of the recruitment process if a candidate accepts a position, there will be

up to three areas that have emerged from the interview that the candidate is informed about that they will be watched on over their first year and goals are set for these areas. It would be very interesting to try to assess whether the interview had picked up core areas and how these areas were developed over the first year of employment.

6.5 Dissemination of findings

I have sought to disseminate findings from my research whilst undertaking my doctorate. My dissemination has included conference presentations in the UK and Australia, a poster presentation and a published journal article with my intention being to reach the different stakeholders that I engage with. The aim of my thesis is to provide additions to the debate about transferable skills in accounting education and to improve and enhance the skills developed in undergraduate students so that they are better able to respond to stakeholder needs, in particular to the demands of gaining and maintaining employment. With this in mind, I am seeking to influence professional bodies, higher education practitioners and students in their development of transferable skills.

The aim is for my work to be read and to influence accounting educators who work within the higher education sector with an international reach and, as such, I have targeted conferences that engage in academic debate about accounting education in the higher education context. To support this aim, I presented a paper entitled '*Do undergraduate accounting students perceive they have the attributes required of being an accountant*' at the Higher Education Research and Student Learning Experience in Business (HERSLEB) conference at the University of Melbourne in December 2013. This was to an international audience of higher education researchers and practitioners. This led to the development of a paper entitled '*Undergraduate Accounting Students: prepared for the workplace?*' which was published in the Journal of International Education in Business (JIEB) in May 2015. I presented an emerging paper entitled '*Are accounting undergraduates developing generic skills that meet stakeholder needs?*' at the British Accounting and Finance Association Accounting Education Special Interest Group, held at Manchester Metropolitan University in May 2015. This was to an international audience of leading researchers, educators and professional body attendees in the field of accounting education. I plan to work on this paper once my thesis is completed with the intention of presenting a full paper at an IAAER conference and with Accounting Education being my target journal for publication of this article. In relation to dissemination within UCL Institute of Education, I presented a poster about my thesis at the UCL IOE Doctoral School Poster conference in March 2015 and I presented a paper at UCL IOE Doctoral Conference in June 2015.

My aim is also to influence the professional bodies' development in relation to transferable skills and, with this in mind, I presented a session entitled '*Undergraduate Accounting Students : prepared for the workplace?*' at the Oxford Brookes International Research Collaborations Conference in June 2014. This included the professional body partner for the programme which students were surveyed on and international collaborative research partners with Oxford Brookes University. Also, in relation to the professional bodies, one of the professional body interviewees asked for a copy of my published article after their interview and a copy of my essay from my Foundations of Professionalism which was entitled 'Professionalism and the impact on accounting educators of the Browne Report on funding English higher education'. I sent this to them and received the response "have now read – really interesting and very useful to [*Global Professional Accountancy Body sic*] given we are also looking at how we can make our full-time students more work ready".

6.6 Implications for my professional knowledge, practice and development

The motivation for undertaking this thesis was to respond to criticism that students, upon graduating, were not achieving the desired transferable skills levels expected by stakeholders to enable them to achieve roles in their chosen career. My thesis looks at this within the context of the community of practice of accounting professionals, this being the context of my own professional practice as I am based within accounting higher education and am a professional accountant. My thesis builds on the outcomes of my IFS which looked at the student perspective. In my IFS I sought to gain a student perspective on what skills students perceive could benefit from development within the programme with the intention of then seeking to enhance in future the development of these skills. Within my thesis I take a wider stakeholder perspective and I will use the recommendations of my thesis to further develop the programme learning outcomes and to constructively align these with the content and with assessment practice for the programme, thereby using my research to inform programme development at an institutional level.

Schon, D (1983) refers to the importance of being a reflective practitioner and reflecting on your own professional practice. The undertaking of this thesis has enabled me to gain knowledge into research methods within the social science body of literature with a specific focus on research methods for business students. I intend to use this knowledge to develop an on-line course into research methods to support the students that are learning at a distance on the programme for which I am programme lead. I consider that the results and conclusions of my thesis can be used to inform developments both within my own university, the wider academic accounting higher education community that I am part of and the

professional body community that I am engaged with, all of which will, in turn, help support students in gaining the transferable skills that are important for accountants in the workplace.

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Appendix I

Participant Information Sheet

Study Title

Are undergraduate accounting students developing skills that meet stakeholder needs? An international comparative study.

Study investigator

Jane Towers-Clark, ACA BSc (Hons) Dip Ed, Doctorate in Education (international) student, Institute of Education, University of London.

Jane is also Head of Department, Accounting Finance and Economics, Oxford Brookes University.

Supervisor

Dr Jacek Brant, Institute of Education, University of London.

Funding of study

Oxford Brookes University is funding Jane Towers-Clark's Doctorate in Education.

Participants in study

- Higher education institutions :UK, Australia and Singapore
- Professional Bodies: global, UK, Australia and Singapore
- Employers: global accountancy firms

Purpose of study

The purpose of the study is to investigate whether the skills that undergraduate accounting students develop are meeting the needs of a number of stakeholders. This will include investigating what skills stakeholders perceive need to be better developed, recommendations for how skills could be improved and will include perspectives on conflict management.

Procedure

A face to face interview will take place wherever possible at a suitable location for the interviewee. The interview will include some core questions and follow up questions will then be asked. The interviewee will be sent a list of key questions in advance.

Right to Withdraw

Participants have the right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Anonymity, use of data and storage of data

Interviews will be taped and transcribed. All recordings will be deleted after transcription. Transcriptions will be stored on the secure system at Oxford Brookes University. Reference to names of individuals, higher education institutions, professional bodies and learning providers will be removed to ensure anonymity

Further assistance

If you would like any further details or have questions or concerns please contact Jane Towers-Clark on 01865 485976 or jtowers-clark@brookes.ac.uk

Appendix II

Consent Form

Study Title

Are undergraduate accounting students developing skills that meet stakeholder needs? An international comparative study.

Study Compiled by

Jane Towers-Clark, ACA BSc (Hons) Dip Ed, Doctorate in Education (international) student, Institute of Education, University of London.

Jane is also Head of Department, Accounting Finance and Economics, Oxford Brookes University.

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
- I consent to my interview being recorded.
- I understand that all the information gathered will be strictly confidential.
- I understand that research data for the study may be published providing identified information is not disclosed.
- I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to taking part in the study.

Name of participant Date Signature

Name of researcher Date Signature

Appendix III

Questions for Higher Education Institutions

The interview will include the following core questions plus follow up questions.

Question 1

How many graduates do you currently have graduating each academic year from your undergraduate accounting programmes?

Question 2

What proportion of your graduates go into accountancy jobs?

Question 3

I would like to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the transferable skills that accountancy students gain ready for employment. By transferable skills, I mean those skills that are generic in nature within the context of the industry that they work, so not the technical accounting skills (such as the ability to prepare financial statements or tax computations).

What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of your graduating students in terms of transferable skills when they enter the workplace?

Question 4

Do you think that there has been a change in the transferable skills expected of students and what do you perceive these changes to be?

Question 5

How do you think the expectations of employers will change in the short to medium term in terms of expectations of students' transferable skills?

Question 6

Conflict management is an issue that students raise in their views of skills preparation for the workplace. What experience (if any) do your students gain in dealing with conflict management within your programmes?

Question 7

What feedback do you gain, positive and negative from your employers in relation to the transferable skills of your accounting graduates?

Question 8

If you could influence change, what would you most like to change in relation to the development of skills for your students?

Question 9

Do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the topic of transferable skills?

[Thank you for taking the time to participate](#)

Study investigator

Jane Towers-Clark, ACA BSc (Hons) Dip Ed, Doctorate in Education (international) student, Institute of Education, University of London.

Jane is also Head of Department, Accounting Finance and Economics, Oxford Brookes University.

A letter of consent and plain English statement accompanies the above questions.

Further assistance

If you would like any further details or have questions or concerns please contact Jane Towers-Clark on 01865 485976 or jtowers-clark@brookes.ac.uk

Appendix IV

Questions for Professional Bodies

The interview will include the following core questions plus follow up questions.

Question 1

How many new student members do you have entering the workplace each year?

How many undergraduate accounting students do you have gaining accreditation from your professional body examinations each year?

Question 2

What proportion of new student members go into accountancy jobs?

Question 3

I would like to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the transferable skills that accountancy students gain ready for employment. By transferable skills, I mean those skills that are generic in nature within the context of the industry that they work, so not the technical accounting skills (such as the ability to prepare financial statements or tax computations).

What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of your new student members in terms of transferable skills when they enter the workplace?

Question 4

Do you think that there has been a change in the transferable skills expected of your student members and what do you perceive these changes to be?

Question 5

How do you think the expectations of employers will change in the short to medium term in terms of expectations of graduates' transferable skills?

Question 6

Conflict management is an issue that students raise in their views of skills preparation for the workplace. What experience (if any) do your students gain in dealing with conflict management within your syllabus/framework?

Question 7

What feedback do you gain, positive and negative from your employers in relation to the transferable skills of your new student members?

Question 8

If you could influence change, what would you most like to change in relation to the development of skills for your new student members?

Question 9

Do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the topic of transferable skills?

Thank you for taking the time to participate

Study investigator

Jane Towers-Clark, ACA BSc (Hons) Dip Ed, Doctorate in Education (international) student, Institute of Education, University of London.

Jane is also Head of Department, Accounting Finance and Economics, Oxford Brookes University.

A letter of consent and plain English statement accompanies the above questions.

Further assistance

If you would like any further details or have questions or concerns please contact Jane Towers-Clark on 01865 485976 or jtowers-clark@brookes.ac.uk

Appendix V

Questions for Employers

The interview will include the following core questions plus follow up questions.

Question 1

How many graduates do you currently have joining you each academic year from undergraduate accounting programmes?

Question 2

I would like to explore the strengths and weaknesses of the transferable skills that accountancy students gain ready for employment. By transferable skills, I mean those skills that are generic in nature within the context of the industry that they work, so not the technical accounting skills (such as the ability to prepare financial statements or tax computations).

What do you perceive as the strengths and weaknesses of your graduate trainees in terms of transferable skills when they enter your organisation?

Question 3

Do you think that there has been a change in the transferable skills expected of graduates by employers and what do you perceive these changes to be?

Question 4

How do you think the expectations of employers will change in the short to medium term in terms of expectations of students' transferable skills?

Question 5

Conflict management is an issue that students raise in their views of skills preparation for the workplace. To what extent do you consider your graduate trainees are able to deal with conflict? What experience do your students gain in dealing with conflict management within your organisation?

Question 6

What feedback do you gain, positive and negative from your clients in relation to the transferable skills of your accounting graduates?

Question 7

If you could influence change, what would you most like to change in relation to the development of skills for your graduate trainees?

Question 8

Do you have any further comments you would like to make in relation to the topic of transferable skills?

Thank you for taking the time to participate

Study investigator

Jane Towers-Clark, ACA BSc (Hons) Dip Ed, Doctorate in Education (international) student, Institute of Education, University of London.

Jane is also Head of Department, Accounting Finance and Economics, Oxford Brookes University.

A letter of consent and plain English statement accompanies the above questions.

Further assistance

If you would like any further details or have questions or concerns please contact Jane Towers-Clark on 01865 485976 or jtowers-clark@brookes.ac.uk

Appendix VI

Sample of transcripts

Extract E1Glo

- JTC Thank you, that is really useful. We've touched on this a little bit, but do you think there has been a change in what is expected of you as an employer of graduates over the last few years. So looking back at this stage, do you think there has been a movement of what is expected?
- Interviewee I wonder sometimes whether we expect graduates to now come in and hit the ground running a bit quicker because they pretty much come in, there is two weeks of induction, actually there is one week of structural induction where they get training, core training, they meet people, various presentations, spend some time with the area they've been allocated to, but then they are straight into two weeks of college and there is an exam at the end of those two weeks and if they pass they carry on, if they don't they are out the door under our exam policy, so it is quite stressful and if they passed it then out on the line and they are expected to start, supported, don't get me wrong, but expected to be going out to clients quite quickly and I think there is maybe a bit more of that and maybe that is our resourcing position now, that our resourcing mix has changed, so trainees now represent a bigger proportion of the organisation than they used to and we deliver a lot more work now through our graduate trainees than we used to as well, so maybe expectations have probably gone up and we expect them to be effective in their roles probably quicker than we used to do.
- JTC But not necessarily on the technical side, but more on the transferable side.
- Interviewee Yes.
- JTC Okay. And in terms of going forward, so sort of thinking ahead, if you can picture in five years' time, what changes do you think you would be expecting from them looking forward?
- Interviewee It will be interesting in five years' time to look at the degrees that people have done because now with tuition fees, whether it will be much more vocational type degrees that we will see students with accountancy degrees being much more prevalent than they have done in the past because you need to start much earlier on about what you want to do. So whether we will see fewer accountancy trainees with language degrees, history degrees, English degrees than we get at the moment, so there might be a bit less diversity of degree in that respect.

JTC And in terms of skills, do you think there are skills that we either do not see a lot of now or might see of more in the future?

Interviewee I think the, what is the word, we are becoming much more of a data driven organisation and so I imagine we would expect much more in terms of IT, statistical skills, business intelligence, more advanced IT skills, I think that is something that there is going to be an expectation of that across the business as well.

JTC When I did my study of the students, I asked them about these transferable skills but at the end said to them, what else, tell me what other things you find difficult when you go into the workplace, or find easy? It was interesting because a number of students raised the issue of conflict management and having to do with conflict management in the workplace, so that is where that sort of has come from and I was just wondering to what extent you felt that your students were or weren't able to deal with conflict management and whether you then go and train them?

Interviewee By conflict management do you mean conflict in any setting?

JTC That is actually what is interesting, because they didn't say the students, so obviously one thing that would be interesting to do in the future would be to say okay is that conflict within teams, conflict with your manager, was that conflict externally or was that perhaps a lot of our students are overseas students, was it conflict within their actual work environment, physical conflict. So I don't know the answer to that, but ...

Interviewee It is quite a complex word as well. I was talking about that earlier about trainees when sometimes they don't get what they want as well, that is kind of the conflict that we tend to see the most, when the trainees feel that they are being treated unfairly and not getting what they should be getting and what they are entitled to.

JTC So conflict within the organisation.

Interviewee And to my knowledge we don't really get issues in terms of trainees' conflict with clients and that is certainly not something that I'm aware of. I'm sure there are isolated examples but it isn't something that is kind of a big issue, but it is how they manage that conflict within when they don't get what they want. That is what we tend to find, but I wouldn't say conflict management. It is not really a big issue for us really.

JTC Okay.

Interviewee We do some bite-size training on having difficult conversations, so if... because very quickly our trainees could be, within a year, could be managing

more junior trainees on audits as well, so being able to give feedback, being able to give awkward feedback as well, managing difficult conversations internally and with clients, so I think that is training that they find very useful as well.

JTC So maybe that is a good example of where they might feel that they are in a situation where it may be a conflict situation.

Interviewee So it is more around I guess managing your, managing it before it gets to a conflict situation, being able to manage those difficult conversations effectively before it becomes a conflict.

Extract HE7UK

JTC Thank you, that's really useful and that you've raised a number of the skills I was thinking of. What I am going to do now is I am going to give you a list of the skills. These were drawn from the literature and looking at various studies that have taken place. I just want you to reflect on these and sort of say which ones of these you think are ones where you feel that students are quite strong and which ones which you think, probably from your experience from feedback you're getting would be skills perceived to be a little bit weaker in students. If we just have a look at the list we have

Interviewee There is a couple I have selected, as the weakest of them would be the interpersonal skills in terms of within a professional environment as opposed to your ability to communicate with people in general. The oral communication skill, then again coming down to presenting and learning how not to waft off on a completely different track and get thrown when you get asked a question or get challenged. Risking communication skills, I have thrown out my red pen because they just keep running out pretty much. I always see the spelling and the grammar and the sentences and I never see that from anybody. I think self-reflection as well, I think a lot of the time it's viewed that silence is a bad thing. Often times silence or distancing is a very good thing because you go away, think about things, you reflect on how you're doing, how you're monitoring things, how you're managing things. What to expect of you and then come back and actually engage and think that there is a lot of that missing with people and they feel the need to feel the silence to be constantly busy, and not just to obey looking inward. This is probably what everybody said, IT skills I have put at the top because people seem to be are good with technology. Sort of overall approach and they are comfortable and they use it

in so many different ways. Everything else, I've actually put as medium, as a distance education programme where I've put a test on analysis and critical evaluation, where I've put a test in problem solving in constructive response questions, where I've put a test on statistical skills. We give them a case study in advance so they have to go through and do analysis. So we're able to test on their ability to have done research and support the things that they have said about their case. Career planning and interviews, I think people are often very good at career planning, whether they can carry out the job and can really be successful at it is a different matter. And ethics I've also put them sort of the medium, as an accountant obviously a code of ethics is critical. I don't think people are unethical but I don't think that they often understand all of the grey areas of ethics.

JTC Thank you. That's really useful. Just thinking going back to these transferable skills. Do you think there has been a change more recently about the transferable skills mix, that are, you know, expected of students and what do you perceive that change to be? When you perceive the role of the accountant has changed without doubt in the last 20 years. But I was just wondering in terms of skills do you think there has been a bit of change?

Interviewee I can actually recall working with people myself years ago who you would never let near other people. I think that the days of having someone who is technically brilliant, but very dysfunctional in terms of relationships or anything else or communicating, I think the days of being able to put those brilliant people with no social skills in a back room and let them just do what they do, those days are over. There is now a real need for the accountant to be able to present. The accountant needs to be able to work with people in legal, in marketing, in sales in a service or all of those sorts varies for people who aren't accountants. People want concise clear information, they want to collaborate and, I think, that's for a lot of accountants, that's been a real challenge not just those are now coming through and sort of fell into it because they're good with numbers and they quite like the idea of some legislation backing those numbers. I think for a lot who were already in the profession it was quite a smack in the face with a wet fish really, they had to suddenly talk to people, those adoring faces when they muttered a piece of legislation and precedent went away and you needed to be able to explain to a customer service manager why something was what it was. I think that's

probably been the biggest shift so you really do now need to be able to communicate and be able to work in a team. You need to be able to manage your own time, you need to be able to work with technology to engage through technology. And I think it's for a lot of people it's been a challenge. I think for a lot of academics it's a challenge teaching people these new skills because for a lot of them, when they worked as an accountant most of them had it some point as an accountant it was very much the brilliant person sat in the back room and you knew everything that was who you respected. And that the person is no longer there so it's that whole shift in teaching the – I'm teaching you about the numbers and about the information and now we have to take it to the next step and communicate the information and share the information with people who are not accountants and they don't care about the underlying premise of any of this. They want to know what it means to them and I think that makes it very difficult to teach and it also means that in teaching in an accounting programme, you're no longer in a position where you can just put a bit of technical stuff and it works, you have to back it up in something outside of the technical, that's created a lot of challenges as well. We certainly will put everything including plain English, all of those sorts of pieces to make sure that our materials are not just a dry technical piece and people understand why you might need to know this and how would you explain it.

Extract PB1Glo

JTC Okay, in terms of whether you think there's been a change as to what is expected of students, so looking back over five years, do you think expectations of employers have altered during that period?

Interviewee That is a really difficult question really because actually when I worked at another higher education institution I didn't have much dealing with the big four employers, not many students from here go on into those kind of roles, so I think the change I've noticed is how the people from here that are going into the *medium size firm* and *medium size firm* ... I think the expectation of those types of employers are slightly different from big four employers and that is a difference. I think over the last few years, the three, three and a half years I've been at Birmingham the recruitment team from the big four are looking for other things, they aren't taking that ... I don't know if it is because we're educating them or whether that is the available graduates or the fact that they are under-recruiting the number of graduates they target every year. But that

kind of classic extrovert confident type person, they are not the only students who are now getting jobs and I think that is a bit of a change, I think the other thing that is changing is that we are getting asked for students with different skills sets, so for example last year, this year has been the first time the big employers have been coming up saying we want students with much better data analytics skills because that is where we've got demand, we have demand in that area and we are finding it really hard to recruit in that area and although you are chucking us out numerate graduates they haven't got those sort of skill sets and they are looking for it, so that is quite a change actually, they are looking for some of these, I don't know you know, probably *Big 4 firm* is the company with the best links, but *Big 4 firm* now have this working party, data analytics for audit about the end of traditional audit and transaction based audit and they are recruiting graduates in that area with those kinds of skills, so actually our traditional accounting graduates who are numerate but not brilliant mathematicians don't necessarily fulfil those roles, so they are looking, I guess it is slightly more geeky type people for some of these roles and that is a change and they are recruiting in that area and it seems my perception is that they have a slightly different recruitment pattern for those people with less emphasis, far more put on assessment centres and aptitude tests, far less put on the partner interviews to the extent where they have some quite junior people, for some of these kind of techie roles, they have quite junior people doing from the recruitment teams doing those final stage interviews rather than senior managers from the organisation, so I think that is a change.

JTC Can we just go back to the IT skills, we know that our students, we consider them to be very IT literate, but do you think they are meeting the employer needs now or do you think that has changed?

Interviewee No, I mean the whole thing, IT literacy with you can do a spreadsheet and use word-processor and that kind of stuff is completely, we've gone ... we are changing away from that, that is not now IT literate so we are now looking at, we are working with IBM so we are training students in SPSS for statistical analysis, we are looking at creation and querying databases so we are working with a software company in *Russell Group University* where they create a large SQL database of transactions that they can.. and they are writing SQL queries, that kind of stuff which is what is now being seen as IT literacy, the ability to put a spreadsheet together is not, that is school leaver level skills now, so I think that kind of IT literacy. The other thing in terms of IT

literacy that seems to be important, and we have talked to employers about this, and with developing our programmes to cover this are things like information governance, physical security, physical storage, the integrity of transactions processing, that kind of thing which is ... they need a bit more than what we think of as IT skills.

JTC Okay, that is looking back. If you were to predict forward, and to say if I look forward five years, what are we going to need to do to meet those employer needs, what is going to change over the next five years that we can be ahead of what the employers want?

Interviewee I think that is a really interesting question, I think it is an interesting question, this doesn't seem a very good answer, and it is an interesting question because I don't think the employers and the professional bodies are thinking about this correctly at the moment. There are people at the *Professional Body* and places like that who are thinking about it, but the traditional accountancy training I'm not sure even that is producing really what employers want other than being a hurdle that all your new trainees go through. So yes, we are now thinking that our, this idea of analytics and big data and the possibilities that... which is changing the accounting profession and the way it operates, not so much here, but I don't know if you've seen all the *Professional Body* has a huge working party of academics and practitioners looking at the future of accounting and a transactions based world where you don't need to aggregate things in a way that you've done them before, you can, you don't need to look at a set of published accounts to do an audit, you can actually audit individual transactions simply following things through, I think that is what we're looking at and we're actually, this is all market sensitive, we are going to rebrand our Accounting and Finance degree as an Accounting and Data Analytics programme, and probably with the analytics taking over from the accounting and taking to break away from this idea that the accounting and finance degrees tend to be linked to professional exemptions and just say that actually that is increasingly not that relevant. It is interesting, again talking to some of the employers to what extent they are going to push everybody through professional training in the future I think is up for grabs. Certainly, I don't know whether you're talking to people, if as part of this you are talking to people who are doing apprenticeships type schemes?

Appendix VII
Ethics Approval Form

Institute of Education, University of London
Ethics Approval for Doctoral Student Research Projects: Data Sheet

Please read the notes before completing the form

Project title	Are undergraduate accounting students developing skills that meet stakeholder needs? A post 92 UK university international comparative case study		
Student name	Jane Towers-Clark		
Supervisor	Jacek Brant		
Advisory Committee members	Dr Doug Bourn (Chair), Prof David Lambert, Dr Clare Brooks, Nicole Blum, Alex Standish & Adam Unwin		
Department	Curriculum, pedagogy and assessment	Faculty	
Intended start date of data collection	August 2014		
Funder	Oxford Brookes University		
Professional Ethics code used	BERA		

Has this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee?

If your research is based in another institution then you may be required to submit your research to that institution's ethics review process. If your research involves patients or staff recruited through the NHS then you will need to apply for ethics approval through an NHS Local Research Ethics Committee. In either of these cases, you don't need ethics approval from the Institute of Education. If you have gained ethics approval elsewhere, please detail it here:

NO

Research participants

Does the research involve human participants?

- Yes, as a primary source of data (e.g. through interviews)
 Yes, as a secondary source of data (e.g. using existing data sets)
 No *Please*

explain _____

If the research involves human participants, who are they? (tick all that apply)

- | | |
|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Early years/pre-school | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Adults <i>please describe them below</i> |
| <input type="checkbox"/> School-aged children | Accounting student learning providers, employers, accounting professional |
| <input type="checkbox"/> Young people aged 17-18 | |

Unknown

bodies, higher education providers of accounting education

Research methods to be used (tick all that apply – this information will be recorded on a database of the types of work being presented to Ethics Committees)

Interviews

Focus groups

Questionnaire

Action research

Observation

Other

Systematic review

Experimental research or
intervention

Literature review

Use of personal records

Institute of Education, University of London
Ethics Approval for Doctoral Student Research Projects:
Planned Research and Ethical Considerations

1. Summary of planned research (please indicate the purpose of the research, its aims, main research questions, and research design. It's expected that this will take approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary)

Title: Are undergraduate accounting students developing skills that meet stakeholder needs? A post 92 UK university international comparative case study

Research Aims:

- Who are the stakeholders for undergraduate accounting student skills?
- What skills do stakeholders perceive need to be better developed within accounting undergraduates and how are these defined?
- How could key skills which require better development be improved in undergraduate accounting students?
- Do the key skills requiring better development by accounting students vary cross nationally?

Context

My study will build on the quantitative and qualitative results from the student survey undertaken in my IFS which used a case study approach based on the global accounting undergraduate programme at a post-92 UK university. The programme has 240,000 registered students with an international body students deriving from 78 countries. I will take a stakeholder perspective beyond the student perspective which will include employers, regulatory bodies, academic institutions and academic staff, learning providers and professional body requirements.

I will undertake semi-structured interviews of the wider stakeholder group and with a sample from a variety of international locations. My study will distinguish between international students in order to determine if there are differences in perceptions of skills development, building on a study undertaken by Keneley and Jackling (2011) into the acquisition of generic skills for culturally diverse students. Keneley and Jackling demonstrated that there were differences from a student perspective in perceptions between different cultural cohorts.

Each semi-structured interview will be between 50 and 90 minutes in length and will be face to face. I will audio record and transcribe in full interviews. Analysis will be emergent and coding will be undertaken, with themes and patterns to be identified and refined with hypothetical relationships identified.

2. Specific ethical issues

(Outline the main ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research, and how they will be addressed. It's expected that this will require approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary. You will find information in the notes about answering this question)

Political and ethical issues

I submitted Ethics Approval for Doctoral Student Research Projects: planned research and ethical considerations, to the Institute of Education as part of Methods of Enquiry II and this was approved. This was incorporated into the IFS skills survey of 1,000 BSc in Applied Accounting students. I used British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research with students engaged in the research being informed about the purpose, nature and content of the study. I will require further Ethics approval for the semi-structured interviews of the extended stakeholder perspective research.

The undergraduate accounting programme is a collaborative programme with the global professional accountancy body and I sought and obtained consent from the UK University and the Global professional body for the research project to be undertaken. Where contacts are used from these organisations for semi-structured interviews I will seek to obtain further consent.

When considering ethical approval I will take the following factors into consideration:

Student survey - students surveyed are undertaking the undergraduate academic programme and have submitted their final assignment. Voluntary informed consent (BERA, 2004) in terms of an opt in model was taken when students participated in the survey; confidentiality was ensured with information being anonymous as it would be important for students to understand that this would have no influence on their performance in the programme, and that no detriment to their studies would be made by participating in the survey. No incentives were used to encourage students to complete the survey. The sample size, of 2,000 students was sufficient to ensure that disclosure of results will not affect confidentiality and anonymity. Students were provided with the right to withdraw their information provided.

Stakeholder interviews

Semi-structured interviews will be used, in a one on one basis either in person or by telephone. Relevant approval from authorities will be obtained and participant's interests will be protected including confidentiality and anonymity, with voluntary informed consent and the right to withdraw.

Results dissemination: Consideration will need to be given to the perception of competence by the professional body including element of self review as a result of reviewing professional body documentation and the current programme specification. Where reviewing compliance with current QAA requirements consideration would need to be given as to the relationship with the regulatory body and any influence that the results may have on reviews or inspections and the effect that this may have on the awarding institute and professional body.

The effect on institutional politics on the results of the analysis and power relations that this may have within the institution would need to be considered, as would any effect that results would have on the external perception of the academic institute and the associated professional body

3. Attachments

Please attach the following items to this form:

- Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee, if applicable
- Information sheets and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research.

4. Declaration

I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethics issues that may arise in the course of this project			
Signed	Jane Towers-Clark	Date	27/6/14

Department Use

Date decision was made:

Approved and reported to FREC

Referred back to applicant and supervisor

Referred on to FREC

Signature of Supervisor: J. Brant (email)

Signature of Advisory Committee member: Douglas Bourn

Note for reviewers:

If you feel that a project raises particularly challenging ethics issues, or that a more detailed review would be appropriate, you may refer the application to the Research Ethics Coordinator so that it can be submitted to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee (FREC) for consideration. FREC Chairs, FREC representatives in your department, and the research ethics coordinator can all advise you informally, either (a) to support your review process, or (b) to help you decide whether an application should be referred to the FREC.

Appendix VIII
Interview contextual data

Higher Education Institution interviews

Interviewee code	Location of interview	Setting	Participant information	Immediate impression
HE1	HE post-92 Institution, UK	Face-to-face In office Very quiet	UG Accounting Subject Co-ordinator	Informed academic
HE2	HE post-92 Institution, UK	Face-to-face Interviewees office Very quiet	Head of Department, Accounting and Finance	Well informed Interviewee nervous at first
HE3	HE Institution, Australia	Face-to-face Interviewee's office	Lecturer, School of Accountancy, previously Head of International programmes	Long term academic with lots of student-facing experience
HE4	HE Institution, Australia	Face-to-face Coffee shop within university Relatively quiet No interruptions	Co-ordinator Co-operative Education programme	Focus on co-operative education therefore particular perspective from this angle
HE5	HE Institution, Singapore	Face-to-face Interviewee's office Very quiet	Academic Director, MSc Accountancy Associate professor	Well informed experienced academic
HE6	HE Institution, Singapore	Face-to-face Interviewee's office	Assistant Director Undergraduate career services	Student-facing well informed

		Very quiet		
HE7	HE Russell Group Institution, UK	Interview room Very quiet	Head of Department, Accounting and Finance	Well informed experienced academic
HE8	HE post-92 Institution, UK	Interviewee's office Very quiet	Head of Accountancy Programmes	Well informed experienced academic with professional accountancy provider background

Professional body interviews

Interviewee code	Location of interview	Setting	Participant information	Immediate impression
PB1	Global professional body, UK	Face-to-face Interviewee's office Very quiet	Education Manager	Well informed experienced
PB2	Global professional, body London	Office Very quiet	Executive Director, Learning & Professional Development	Very well informed – high level in organisation
PB3	Global professional body UK	Office Very quiet	Head of client relationships	Well informed
PB4	Global	Interview	Qualifications	Well informed

	professional body London	room Very quiet	development manager	in particular about transferable skills, experienced
PB5	Global professional body London	Interview room Very quiet	Head of Professional Development	Well informed experienced

Employer interviews

Interviewee code	Location of interview	Setting	Participant information	Immediate impression
E1	Big 4 Accountancy Firm	Coffee shop within firm Quiet and uninterrupted	Head of Student Recruitment	Informed and student focussed
E2	National UK employer	Interview room Quiet and uninterrupted	Graduate/School Leaver Recruitment and Professional Training Specialist, HR Service Centre Manager	Experienced and well informed
E3	Big 4 Accountancy Firm	Interview room Quiet and uninterrupted	Director	Experienced and well informed with international experience

Appendix IX
Transferable skills studies summary

Morgan (1997)	Albrecht and Sack (2000)	Gammie et al (2002)	De Lange et al (2006)	CBI and universities (2009)	Awayiga et al (2010)	atc21s.org, (2010)	BSc Applied Accounting programme specification (2011)	IES 3 (2014)	Towers-Clark (2014)
Analytical ability	Analytical /critical thinking		Analyse accounting systems		Analytical/critical thinking	Critical thinking	Analysis and critical evaluation	Apply reasoning, critical analysis, and innovative thinking to solve problems. Apply professional scepticism through questioning and critically assessing all information.	Analysis and critical evaluation
		Time management						Manage time and resources to achieve professional commitments. Undertake assignments in accordance with established practices to meet prescribed deadlines.	Time management
Problem solving	Decision making Business decision modelling Risk analysis Measurement Project management		Analyse accounting problems	Problem solving	Analytical /critical thinking	Problem solving	Problem solving	Anticipate challenges and plan potential solutions. Recommend solutions to unstructured multifaceted problems. Identify when it is appropriate to consult with specialists to solve problems and reach conclusions.	Problem solving
	Interpersonal skills		Interpersonal skills	Personal skills Self-	Interpersonal skills	Personal and social		Apply negotiation skills to reach solutions and agreements. Apply consultative skills to minimize or	Interpersonal skills

	Leadership Professional demeanour			management Positive attitude and entrepreneurs hip/enterprise Negotiation Professional demeanour	Organisati onal and business managem ent skills	awareness		resolve conflict. Solve problems and maximise opportunities. Apply an open mind to new opportunities.	
Comm. skills	Oral comm.	Oral comm. skills	Oral expression	Comm. and literacy	Comm. skills	Comm.	Oral comm.	Communicate clearly and concisely when presenting, discussing and reporting in formal and informal situations both in writing and orally. Present ideas and influence others to provide support and commitment.	Oral communication
	Written comm.	Writing in business	Written comm.		Comm. skills	Comm.	Written comm.	Communicate clearly and concisely when presenting, discussing and reporting in formal and informal situations both in writing and orally. Review own work and that of others to determine whether it complies with the organisation's quality standards.	Written communication
Team working	Teamwork	Team working	Teamwork skills	Team working		Collaboration (teamwork)		Display cooperation and teamwork when working towards organisational goals. Apply people management skills to motivate and develop others. Apply delegation skills to deliver assignments. Apply leadership skills to influence others to work towards organisational goals.	Team working
	Computing technology	Using IT in business	Computing	Application of IT	Computing technology	ICT literacy	IT skills	Apply appropriate skills and technology to increase efficiency and effectiveness and improve decision making.	IT skills
							Self- reflection	Set high personal standards of delivery and monitor personal performance through feedback from others and through self-reflection	Self-reflection
			Statistical skills	Application of numeracy	Technical and	Information literacy			Statistical skills

					functional skills				
Logical argument and ability to summarise key issues	Research	Practical research skills					Practical research skills Information gathering and referencing	Evaluate information from a variety of sources and perspectives through research, analysis and integration. Apply professional judgment including identification and evaluation of alternatives to reach well-reasoned conclusions based on all relevant facts and circumstances.	Practical research
	CV writing Career planning Interview skills	Job search skills				Life and career		Apply active listening and effective interviewing techniques	Career planning and interviews
	Customer orientation	Company culture	Social and Ethical	Business and customer awareness		Citizenship - local and global		Demonstrate awareness of cultural and language differences in all communication	
	Continuous learning						Independent and self-managed learning	Demonstrate a commitment to lifelong learning	
	Foreign language								
		Health and safety							
	Change management Resource management Salesmanship					Decision making			
					Intellectual				

					skills				
						Creativity and innovation			
			Financial modelling						
			Key accounting skills						
			Interaction with other disciplines						