STUDENT KNOWLEDGE EXCHANGE FRAMEWORK

Enhancing Critical Employability through Pedagogic Consultancy

CASE STUDY

Student Knowledge Exchange (SKE) Industry Live Project with Pentland Brands

Case Study

Overview

At The University of Manchester, the collaborative industry project with Pentland Brands gives undergraduate students in the Fashion Business and Technology program a unique hands-on learning experience. This project, involving 206 students—70% international and 15% from widening participation backgrounds—bridges the gap between academic learning and real-world industry applications. The goal is to develop essential employability skills in a structured, inclusive, and collaborative environment. Integrated into a final-year, optional, 20-credit unit "Fashion Business in the Digital Age," this project is crucial for developing skills directly applicable to students' final-year projects in Semester Two. The unit covers contemporary business practices, with a particular focus on how organisations manage digital technologies, highlighting their strategic importance within the context of the global marketplace.

Central to the unit is the recognition of the strategic importance of digital technologies and their potential, when managed effectively, to secure competitive advantage. The key to fully understanding the potential of digital technologies is to recognise that these technologies provide value only when implemented effectively. As such, conceptual and organisational development is supported and made concrete through extensive use of examples and case studies drawn from a range of fashion, textile, and related industries.

The purpose of the project was to:

- Increase student's awareness of current, real-world industry challenges.

- Promote an understanding of managing digital technologies in contemporary business, especially in creating valuable products and services in fashion and related industries.

- Provide opportunities to explore and connect strategic, tactical, and operational issues with digital technologies and eBusiness. This includes innovative applications in service and product design, business process management, consumer relationship management, mass customisation, virtual organisation, and extended enterprise.

- Foster an appreciation of the strategic impact of digital technologies and their role in securing competitive advantage.

SKE Impact
Building Connections

1. Building Connections, Project Set Up and Alignment

To find a suitable industry partner for our project, we turned to LinkedIn to network and connect with potential collaborators. We also invited various industry stakeholders to speak with students through our Industry Insiders programme. This initiative brings guests to engage with students, offering insights into their organisations, discussing different career pathways, and sharing internship and graduate opportunities. These events also serve as a rich melting pot of insights and perspectives, showcasing a diverse range of industry voices from SMEs to global corporations. Additionally, we leveraged our alumni network through a dedicated LinkedIn page.

Ensuring that underrepresented students have access to a diverse range of employer connections is crucial, as this fosters a greater sense of inclusion and belonging within higher education. **The importance of representation cannot be overstated** (International Student Employability, 2023). The famous quote "If you can see it, you can be it" (Billie Jean King, 1979) underscores the critical importance of representation for minoritised students, highlighting how visible role models who share their racial, and/or cultural background can inspire confidence, break down stereotypes, and affirm their identity, thereby empowering students to pursue and achieve their aspirations.

Establishing potential live projects requires dedication and persistence. Multiple emails, in-person discussions, and follow-ups are essential to ensure mutual benefit for both parties. For instance, securing Pentland Brands as our industry partner involved drafting a project proposal that went through several revisions over four months. This process included talks with various teams within Pentland, highlighting how fragmented and lengthy such negotiations can be with large organisations. While SME engagements can be more straightforward, they still require a collaborative approach to project development.

To ensure alignment with both the programme's Intended Learning Outcomes (ILOs) and Pentland Brands' business priorities, preliminary meetings were held between academic staff and industry stakeholders. These meetings facilitated the co-creation of the project framework, deliverables, and a timetable outlining key milestones. This collaborative approach ensured that the project's goals were mutually beneficial, addressing both educational and business objectives.

The project also had to adopt a cross-disciplinary approach to ensure coherence with the degree programme. Within the programme, there are four different pathways: **Fashion Buying and Merchandising, Fashion Marketing, Fashion Management, and Fashion Technology.** These pathways, while interconnected within the broader scope of the fashion industry, cater to specific disciplines. Collectively, they cover over 60 different career pathways, from supply chain management and forecasting to product development, marketing, and retail operations. Therefore, the scope of this live project needed to be broad enough to support the academic and employability skills development of each student.

SKE Impact
Project Overview

2. Project Overview

As part of this project, students acted as independent consultants for Pentland Brands, which includes well-known sportswear and fashion brands like Lacoste, Berghaus, and Speedo. Students selected one brand from the Pentland portfolio to serve as their client. They conducted a comprehensive strategic analysis of their client's current operations, requiring in-depth research into the organisation and its needs. Additionally, they performed a thorough market scan of the global landscape, examining key product, process, and business model innovations.

The task involved identifying how transformative technologies are impacting the fashion value chain. Based on their findings, students provided recommendations for applying digital technologies to improve a specific operation within their client's organisation. The goal was to enhance the brand's value proposition by digitally optimising processes in one or more of the following business areas:
- Product/Process Innovation
- Merchandising Innovation
- Business/Retail Model Innovation
- Marketing Innovation + Advanced Clienteling

Project Deliverables and Timetable
As part of the project outputs, students were required to develop a 3000-word report, which constituted 70% of the overall unit assessment weighting. To ensure that students could apply an individual and unique approach to their projects, we utilised alternative assessment methods, such as digital presentations, multimedia outputs, and prototypes. This encouraged students to employ both divergent and convergent thinking skills, crucial for tackling complex problems and fostering innovation. Divergent thinking allows students to generate creative ideas by exploring many possible solutions, while convergent thinking helps them refine these ideas to find the most effective solution (Zhanqiang, 2023). Encouraging these cognitive processes equips students with the capability to navigate ambiguity and tackle complex challenges encountered in real-world professional contexts.

These creative thinking skills are essential for originality and innovation, which are highly valued in contemporary industry contexts (Spector, M, J. and Ma, S., 2019).

SKE Impact
Project Overview

1. Project Overview

Week 1: Client Discovery Session
The industry partner facilitated an introductory session, providing students with an overview of the organisation's priorities, pain points, and opportunities. This session emphasised the alignment of business priorities with global sustainability goals, such as plans to become Net-Zero and community initiatives supporting local and global communities. This initial session not only served as a networking opportunity but also set the stage for informed research and engagement. Students worked in small groups to investigate the different brands within Pentland's portfolio, having the autonomy to select a brand that aligned with their interests. For instance, fashion technology students might choose a brand focused on materials or product innovation, such as Speedo. Workshops facilitated by unit teams and industry representatives helped students develop a suitable framework for research discovery. Students then embarked on a three-week intensive research investigation stage, leveraging market intelligence resources available through the university's library gateway and engaging in blended learning formats (asynchronous content, synchronous opportunities, and workshops).

During this period, guest speakers from tech start-ups were invited to inspire students and broaden their understanding of digital innovation within the fashion sector. This approach aligns with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasises the importance of concrete experience and reflective observation in learning. (Lorio, D, M. and Spagnoli, A., 2023)

Week 4: Industry Interim Touchpoint
After conducting background research, students engaged in an interim session with Pentland representatives, allowing them to ask informed questions and gain deeper insights into the organisation. This touchpoint was essential for refining their research directions and aligning their projects with real-world contexts.

This approach aligns with the "Meddling in the Middle" method, which encourages educators to create learning experiences that promote self-managing learners. According to Hattie and Timperley's Feedback Model (Hattie & Donoghue, 2016), clear learning intentions and success criteria help students engage meaningfully with their learning. By setting clear goals and creating an understanding of what success looks like, students can measure their progress and become more comfortable with academic risk, learning to persist through ambiguity and failure. In this environment, educators act as co-learners, facilitating low-threat, high-challenge tasks where 'failure' is seen as an opportunity to learn.

SKE Impact
Project Overview

Week 7: Formative Feedback Session
Students pre-submitted business research overviews and engaged in intensive feedback sessions with small groups of peers and academic staff. These sessions aimed to simulate a real-world business environment where stakeholders could share research findings and gather input from colleagues. The academic team informed students of the process three weeks before the sessions to ensure adequate preparation, promoting an inclusive and collaborative process.
Constructive feedback and collaborative thinking were emphasised, encouraging students to share ideas and avoid a soloistic approach, this approach is congruent with the widely accepted Vygotsky's Social Development Theory (1978), which determines social interaction to be fundamental in the development of students' cognition. By engaging in collaborative feedback with peers, students were able to enhance their critical thinking and verbal communication skills within a professional context.

Weeks 10 - 12: Report Submission, Shortlisting and Head Office Presentations,
Students submitted their final reports, which were then shortlisted based on the level of innovation, critical analysis, and feasibility of implementation. **Out of 206 reports, 40 were selected and shared with Pentland Brands.** From there, the industry partner invited **10 students** to present their findings at the head office in London.

To ensure equitable access, the department funded the travel expenses for all selected students. The research and subsequent SKE framework development highlighted the importance of the macrosystem in developing students' critical employability skills. This includes reallocating funding and resources to ensure inclusion and equal access to opportunities.

During the visit, students:
- Toured different departments within Pentland Brands to understand various operational aspects.
- Engaged with key stakeholders, gaining insights into the organisational culture and industry practices.
- Delivered professional presentations of their findings, showcasing their research and proposed solutions.
- Responded to questions from industry stakeholders, demonstrating their ability to think on their feet and address real-world challenges.

This comprehensive approach ensured that students developed their professional and interpersonal abilities. Visiting the head office meant actively participating and learning from the experience, and eliciting real-time industry feedback on their ideas. This hands-on exposure is crucial for building confidence, understanding organisational culture, and preparing for real-world industry challenges.

SKE Impact
Project Overview
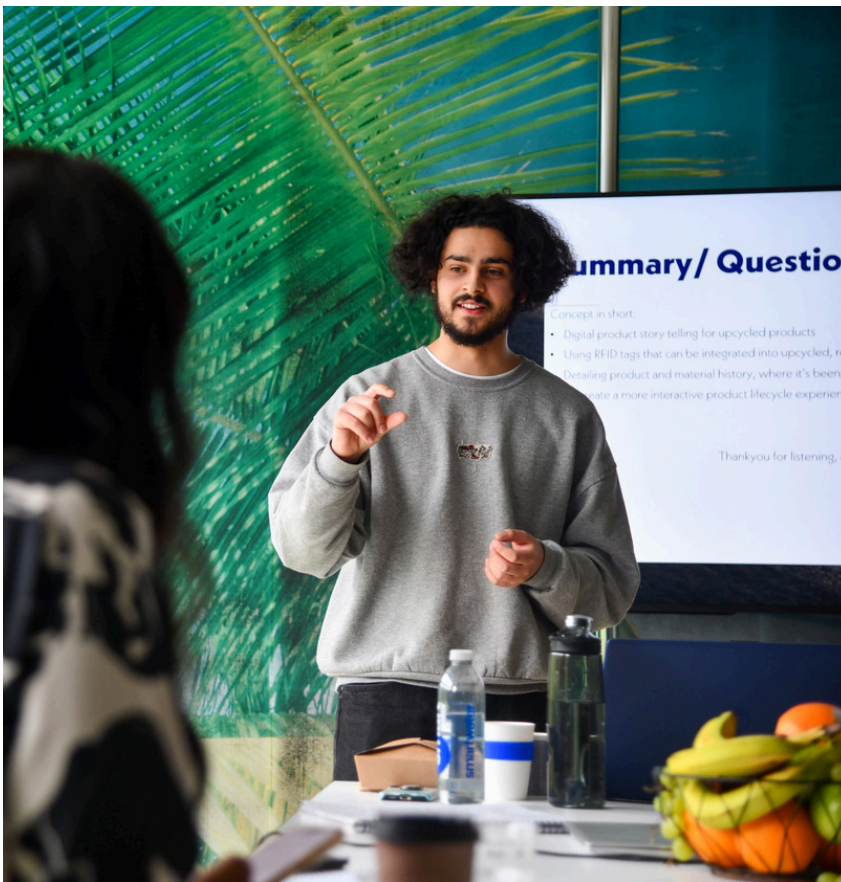
SKE Impact
Mapping Critical Employability

Mapping Critical Employability Skills Workshops Against the SKE Framework and Experiential Learning Cycle

In addition to the unit-taught content, facilitated by the unit team, students were also encouraged to take part in a curated series of skills workshops. These sessions were meticulously designed to align with the SKE Framework, critical employability model and the Experiential Learning Cycle, ensuring a comprehensive development of professional competencies essential for a future-facing industry landscape. These workshops were facilitated by several university organisational stakeholders and external organisations such as Masood Enterprise Centre, Smart Works and the employability lead.

The communication workshops focused on developing both written and spoken skills, equipping students with the ability to express their ideas clearly and convincingly. This included professional email etiquette, client negotiation techniques, report writing, and presentation delivery. These sessions were particularly beneficial for non-native English speakers. Through active participation in these tasks, students gained practical experience in applying communication theories. Continuous reflection, facilitated by peer reviews and self-assessment, enabled them to identify their strengths and areas for improvement. These reflective observations informed the formulation of new strategies for effective communication, which students then applied and refined in real-world scenarios. This iterative process enhanced their practical skills and ensured a deep, experiential learning experience.

Students engaged in problem-solving activities that focused on addressing real-world industry challenges, fostering their critical thinking skills and enabling them to apply theoretical knowledge to practical contexts. Techniques such as root cause analysis and decision-making frameworks were explored, providing students with concrete experiences in problem-solving. Reflective practice, facilitated through personal journals and group discussions, enabled students to assess their approaches and outcomes, this again fostered a culture of critical thinking.

Although the project's assessment was 100% independent, structuring and repositioning the live synchronous sessions as 'teamwork' workshops became essential due to the large cohort of students (206 students). Preliminary discussions with students indicated that final-year students were generally resistant to group work, feeling the stakes were too high to risk their grades on the contributions of others. However, recognising that collaborative working is a crucial skill in the professional world, we reframed 'group' work as 'team' work, which resulted in a more positive response from students.

SKE Impact
Mapping Critical Employability

Mapping Critical Employability Skills Workshops Against the SKE Framework and Experiential Learning Cycle ▬

These sessions were then designed to simulate workplace dynamics and develop students' interpersonal skills. By encouraging both international and domestic students to mingle—an initiative not typically fostered from the first year of the degree programme—students began to connect with peers they had not previously interacted with. This approach fostered an inclusive environment, enabling students to learn from each other and appreciate diverse perspectives.

Adaptability workshops addressed the rapidly changing nature of the fashion industry, requiring students to quickly pivot their strategies in response to new information and scenarios. This hands-on engagement provided concrete experiences in adaptability. Reflective discussions and formative feedback sessions helped students analyse their flexibility and adaptability, leading to the conceptualisation of new approaches for managing change. These strategies were then tested in real-world scenarios, aligning with both Dewey's learning-by-doing philosophy (Bradberry and De Maio, 2018), and Kolb's emphasis on active participation. Reflective observations, facilitated through continuous self-assessment and collaborative feedback, allowed students to critically analyse their individual experiences throughout the project.

The integration of AI Tools as Co-Pilots introduced students to advanced technologies such as data analytics software and machine learning algorithms. These tools helped students streamline research and analysis processes, providing concrete experiences in leveraging technology for enhanced analytical capabilities. Reflective practice enabled students to assess the impact of AI on their decision-making processes, leading to the development of new insights and strategies for utilising AI in professional settings. The practical application of these tools in real-world projects further refined their skills, ensuring they were adept at navigating the digital demands of the modern workplace.

Survey Results
Measuring the Impact

Measuring the impact of the Student Knowledge Exchange (SKE) industry live projects was crucial for understanding the effectiveness of these initiatives and making continuous improvements. We deployed surveys at different stages of the project to assess the skills distance travelled and overall impact on students' professional development.

SKE Impact
Survey Development

Measuring the Impact of the SKE Project during the Pentland Project

1. Pre-Project Survey

Purpose: The Pre-Project Survey aimed to collect quantitative data on student perceptions and preparedness before participating in an industry live project. This survey assessed students' confidence in their skills, understanding of the industry, and expectations for the project.

Deployment: This survey was administered at the beginning of the project to gather baseline data.

Key Sections:
- Confidence in Skills: Assessing students' self-confidence in their employability skills.
- Understanding of the Industry: Gauging students' initial knowledge of the industry.
- Expectations and Goals: Understanding what students hoped to achieve from the project.
- Preparedness and Support: Measuring how prepared students felt and the support they believed they needed.
- Feedback and Suggestions: Gathering initial thoughts and suggestions from students.

The baseline data collected helped to tailor the project's approach to meet the specific needs and expectations of the students. It also provided a benchmark for measuring growth and development throughout the project.

2. Interim Survey

Purpose: The Interim Survey collected feedback from students at the midway point of their industry live project, assessing their experiences, reflections, and learning progress based on the Experiential Learning Cycle. This survey focused on enhancing students' professional identities and employability.

Deployment: This survey was administered mid-way through the project to monitor progress and make necessary adjustments.

Key Sections:
- Concrete Experience: Students' active engagement and tasks undertaken.
- Reflective Observations: Students' reflections on their learning experiences.
- Co-Created Feedback: Feedback sessions with industry partners and mentors.
- Abstract Conceptualisations: Development of new ideas and concepts from reflections.
- Active Experimentations: Application of new ideas in real-world scenarios.
- Leveraging Technology: Use of advanced tools and technologies in the project.

Overall Feedback and Next Steps: General feedback and future actions.

This survey provided insights into how students were progressing and where additional support might be needed. It allowed for adjustments to be made to ensure that the project remained on track and continued to meet its objectives.

SKE Impact
Survey Development

3. **Post-Project Survey**

Purpose: The Post-Project Survey measured the impact of the industry live project at its conclusion. This survey was built on previous surveys to assess the skills distance travelled, enhancement of professional identities, and overall employability. It also evaluated the broader impact on students, businesses, universities, and the wider economy and society.

Deployment: This survey was administered at the end of the project to evaluate overall impact and outcomes.

Key Sections:
- Concrete Experience: Review of the hands-on tasks and activities completed.
- Reflective Observations: Final reflections on the learning journey.
- Co-Created Feedback: Consolidated feedback from all stakeholders.
- Abstract Conceptualisations: Final development of ideas and concepts.
- Active Experimentations: Evaluation of how new ideas were applied.
- Leveraging Technology: Assessment of technology use throughout the project.
- Professional Identity and Social Responsibility: How the project influenced students' professional identities and sense of social responsibility.

Overall Feedback and Next Steps: Comprehensive feedback and recommendations for future projects.

The post-project survey captured the full impact of the project, highlighting areas of success and identifying opportunities for improvement in future iterations.

4. Industry Partner Evaluative Survey Overview

Purpose: The Industry Partner Evaluative Survey was designed to gather comprehensive feedback from industry collaborators regarding their experience with the industry SKE projects. The primary objectives were to assess the effectiveness of student contributions, understand the impact of the collaboration on both the students and the organisation, and identify areas for improvement.

When Deployed: This survey was distributed at the end of the industry live project, within one to two weeks after the project's completion, to ensure that experiences were still fresh in the minds of the participants.

Key Sections:
- Project Overview and Outcomes: Understanding the general impressions and outcomes of the project.
- Student Contributions: Assessing the effectiveness and quality of student work.
- Collaboration Experience: Evaluating the collaboration process between the industry and the students.
- Impact on Organisation: Understanding how the project impacted the organisation.
- Areas for Improvement: Identifying potential improvements for future collaborations.
- Overall Satisfaction: Gauging overall satisfaction with the project.

By employing these surveys at specific touchpoints throughout the project, we were able to develop a comprehensive understanding of the impact of the SKE project with Pentland Brands. This analysis allowed the unit team to respond in real-time to any developed issues, which led to a more effective project outcome.

SKE Impact
Outcomes and Feeback

Immediate Feedback from Pentland Brands

The immediate feedback from Pentland Brands was overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the significant impact of the students' work. Stakeholders admired the originality and practicality of the students' ideas, many of which introduced innovative perspectives the organisation had not previously considered. Such fresh insights underscored the value of integrating academic learning with real-world applications.

Pentland Brands demonstrated its commitment to these innovative solutions by deciding to implement several of the proposed ideas and offering graduate positions to several outstanding students. This outcome not only validates the project's effectiveness in equipping students with the skills necessary to tackle real-world challenges but also underscores its alignment with industry needs, showcasing the direct link between academic exercises and professional opportunities.

Student Feedback

Student feedback was equally enthusiastic, emphasising the inclusive and professional nature of the project. Students particularly valued the structured support they received throughout, which facilitated their engagement with real-world industry challenges. The collaborative environment fostered through teamwork workshops allowed them to refine their interpersonal skills and build confidence.

Many students described the project as a transformative experience that significantly enhanced their employability, providing them with practical skills and a deeper understanding of industry dynamics.

This positive feedback highlights the critical importance of SKE experiential learning and industry engagement in higher education, demonstrating how such projects can bridge the gap between academic theory and professional practice.

Survey Results
# Measuring the Impact

Industry Project Survey results

This section provides a detailed analysis of the student experiences and outcomes from participating in the live SKE industry project with Pentland Brands. The data is derived from three surveys conducted at different stages of the project: pre-industry, interim, and post-industry. The analysis focuses on students' confidence in skills, engaged activities, learning experiences, feedback, and the overall impact on professional identity and employability.

SKE Impact
Visualisations and Insights

1. Confidence in Applying Theoretical Knowledge
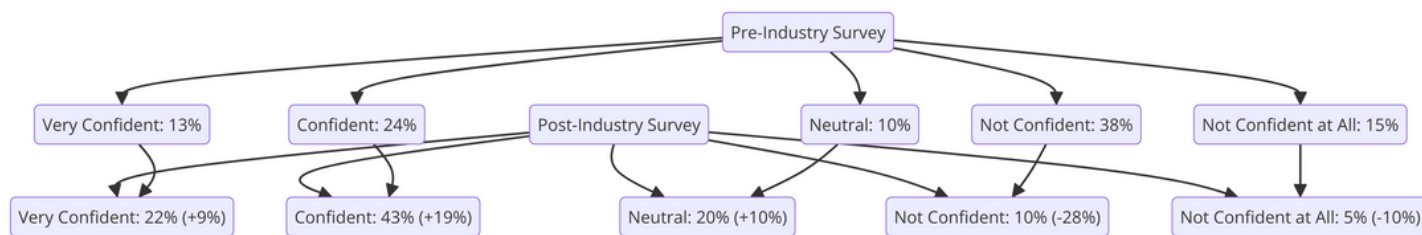
The data show the changes in confidence levels of individuals before and after industry experience.

Detailed observations

Very Confident
- Pre-Industry: 13% Vs Post-Industry: 22%
- **Change: +9%**

There is a significant increase in the percentage of individuals who feel very confident in applying theoretical knowledge after gaining industry experience. This suggests that practical exposure helps boost high confidence levels.

Confident
- Pre-Industry: 24% Vs Post-Industry: 43%
- **Change: +19%**

The largest increase is seen in the confident category, indicating that many individuals move from lower confidence levels to a more confident state after industry experience.
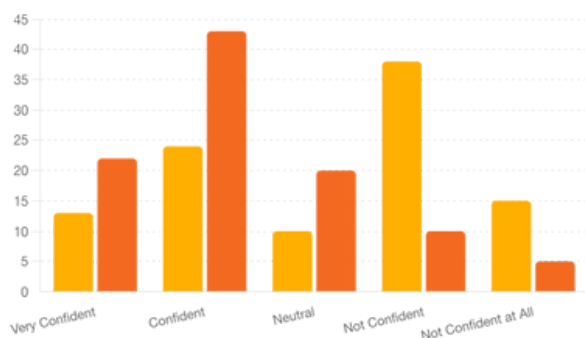
Neutral
Pre-Industry: 10% Vs Post-Industry: 20%
Change: +10%
There is also a rise in the neutral category. This may indicate that some individuals who were previously not confident have moved to a neutral stance after some industry exposure.

Not Confident
Pre-Industry: 38%. Vs Post-Industry: 10%
Change: -28%

There is a significant decrease in the percentage of individuals who are not confident. This is a positive outcome, showing that SKE industry engagement significantly reduces the lack of confidence.

Not Confident at All
Pre-Industry: 15% Vs Post-Industry: 5%
Change: -10%
 The percentage of individuals who are not confident at all also decreases notably. This further supports the idea that practical experience helps mitigate extreme lack of confidence.

The data show significant changes in the confidence levels of individuals before and after industry experience, with notable improvements across all categories. Those who felt very confident increased from 13% to 22%, and those who felt confident rose from 24% to 43%, indicating that practical exposure significantly boosts confidence in applying theoretical knowledge.

The neutral category also saw a rise from 10% to 20%, suggesting that some previously less confident students gained a more balanced view post-exposure. Conversely, the not confident category dropped from 38% to 10%, and those not confident at all decreased from 15% to 5%, highlighting that industry engagement significantly reduces lack of confidence.

This overall improvement is especially impactful for minoritised and international students, who often face additional barriers to industry engagement. The SKE project's practical exposure and direct industry interaction effectively enhance students' confidence and preparedness for the job market.

SKE Impact
Visualisations and Insights

## 2. Skills Confidence Pre and Post-Industry Project
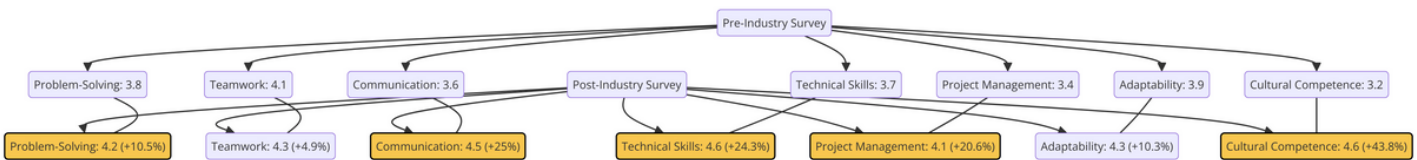
The data reveal significant improvements in confidence ratings for various skills between pre and post-industry experiences. Problem-solving skills increased by **10.5% (from 3.8 to 4.2),** indicating a noticeable enhancement in students' ability to tackle complex problems after industry experience. Teamwork saw a modest increase of **4.9% (from 4.1 to 4.3)**, suggesting a slight improvement in students' ability to work effectively in teams, which is crucial for collaborative environments.

Communication skills experienced a significant boost of **25%** (from **3.6 to 4.5)**, greatly enhancing students' ability to communicate effectively, a fundamental skill for professional success. Technical skills improved by **24.3% (from 3.7 to 4.6)**, demonstrating significant enhancement in technical competencies, essential for modern industry roles.

Project management skills increased by **20.6% (from 3.4 to 4.1)**, indicating better project management capabilities, a key critical employability skill.
Adaptability skills saw a **10.3% increase (from 3.9 to 4.3)**, suggesting that industry experience helped students become more adaptable, a vital trait in dynamic work environments.
Cultural competence had the highest improvement of **43.8% (from 3.2 to 4.6)**, significantly enhancing students' ability to work effectively in diverse cultural settings, an increasingly important skill in globalised workplaces.

Overall, the industry experience led to improvements in all listed skills, with the most notable increases in communication, technical skills, project management, and cultural competence, highlighting the value of practical industry exposure in boosting these essential skills.
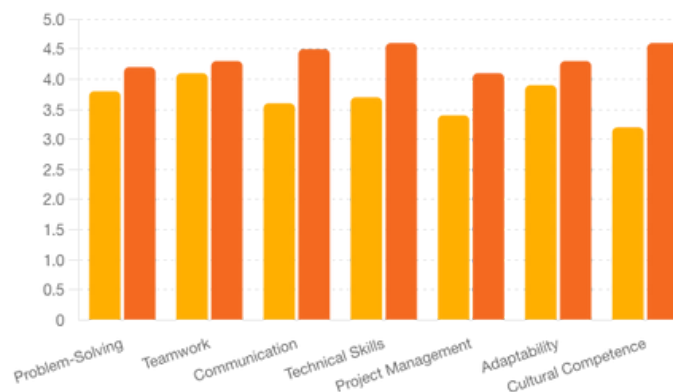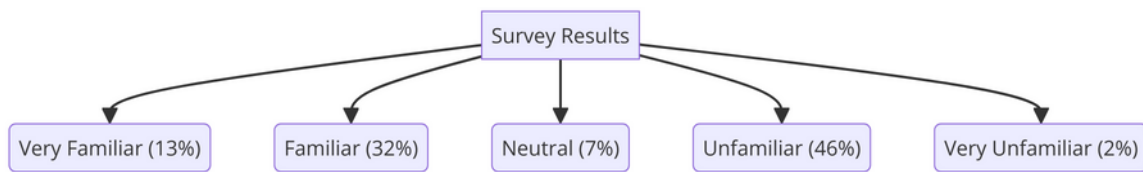

Overall, the industry experience led to improvements in all the listed skills, with the most notable increases in communication, technical skills, project management, and cultural competence.

SKE Impact
Visualisations and Insights

3. Familiarity with Industry Trends and Challenges

The data indicates that students have varying levels of familiarity with industry trends across the Fashion Buying and Merchandising, Fashion Marketing, Fashion Management, and Fashion Technology programmes.

Specifically, **55%** of students are either unfamiliar, very unfamiliar, or neutral about these trends, while **45%** feel familiar or very familiar. This underscores the critical importance of understanding both micro factors, such as customer preferences, competition, and supplier relationships, and macro factors like economic conditions, technological advancements, political/legal regulations, and social/cultural dynamics.

Within the context of a fashion programme, this research highlights the necessity for students to develop both hard skills (e.g., technological proficiency, strategic thinking) and critical employability skills (e.g., adaptability, cultural competence). Fostering global citizenship ensures that students can transfer these skills across various sectors, which is vital for lifelong career success and economic sustainability.

Educational programs must bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, particularly benefiting minoritised and international students by enhancing their readiness for diverse professional environments and reinforcing their roles as adaptable, globally-minded professionals. This preparation is crucial for graduates to not only understand industry trends and challenges but also to navigate and influence them effectively, ensuring they are equipped for success in an evolving global market.
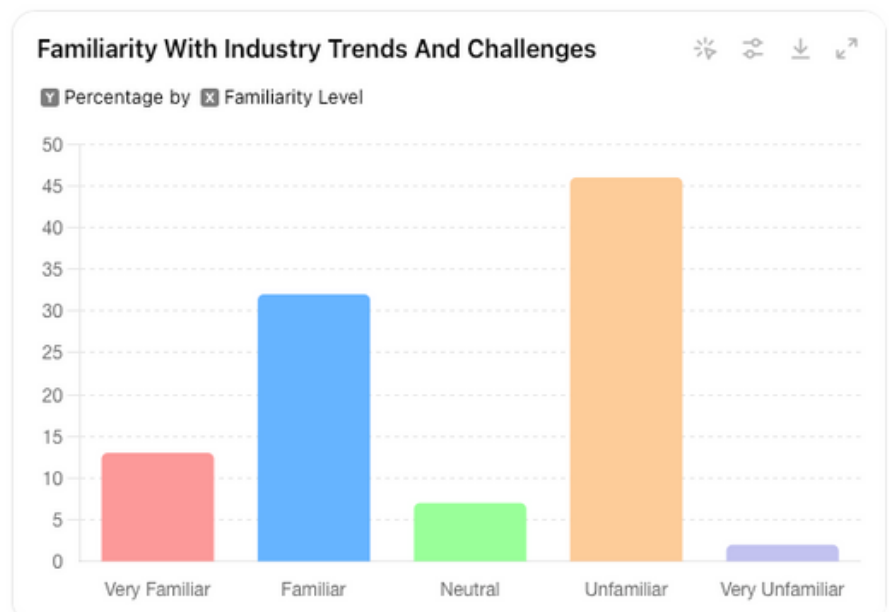
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The data indicates that:
Very Familiar: 13%
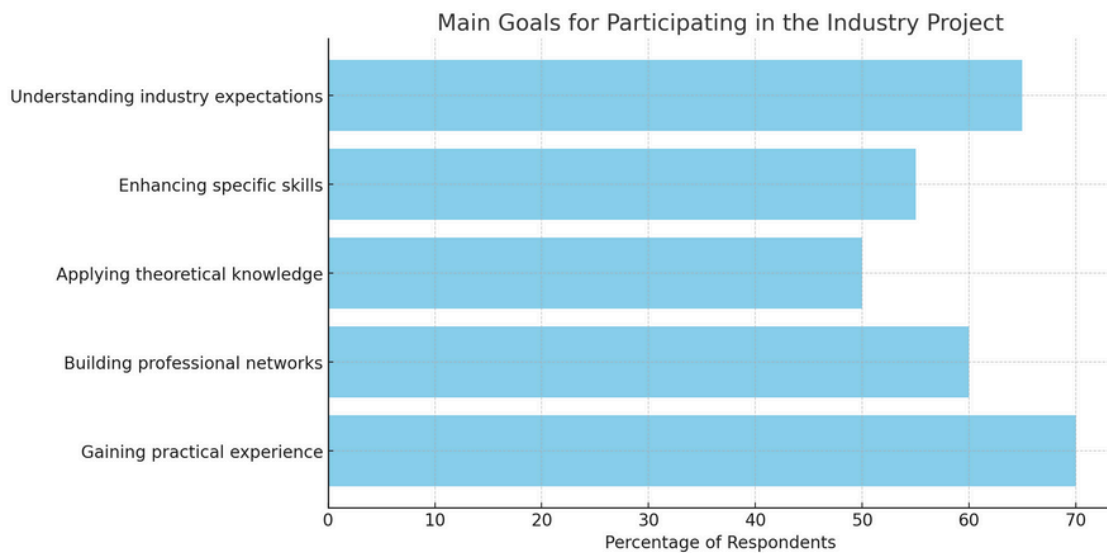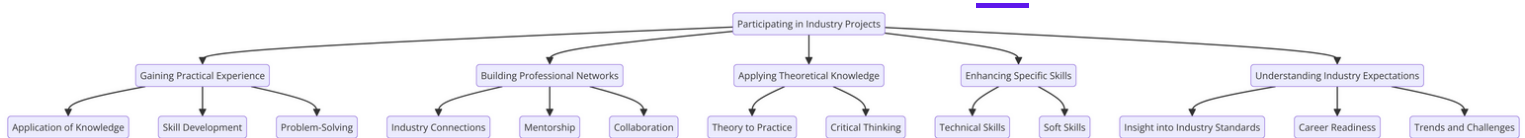Familiar: 32%
Neutral: 7%
Unfamiliar: 46%
Very Unfamiliar: 2%

SKE Impact
Visualisations and Insights

4. Main Goals for Partipating in The Industry Project

Main Goals for Participating in the Industry Project

The high enrollment rate (98%) in the "Fashion Business in the Digital Age" unit demonstrates that students are keen to gain practical experience through integrated live projects. Students were aware of the live industry component months in advance, underscoring their eagerness to engage with real-world industry scenarios.

SKE Impact
Visualisations and Insights

5. Level of Preparedness
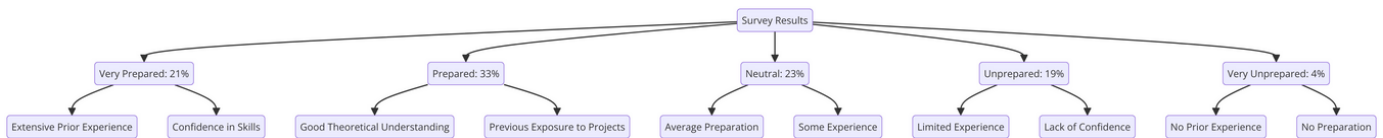
The findings from the survey on student preparedness for the project indicate varying levels of readiness among students. Specifically, 21% felt very prepared, 33% prepared, 23% neutral, 19% unprepared, and 4% very unprepared. Factors contributing to preparedness included extensive prior experience, confidence in skills, a solid theoretical understanding, and previous exposure to similar projects. Proficiency in technical skills, effective communication, teamwork, problem-solving abilities, and industry-specific knowledge were identified as key contributors to feeling prepared.

The survey highlighted that minoritised students felt the least prepared due to a lack of prior industry experience, underscoring the need to address their unique challenges and leverage their cultural currency.

The recommendations involved incorporating more practical project-based learning, internships, and industry-relevant scenarios into the curriculum. Additionally, initiatives to boost student confidence through presentations and competitive opportunities, as well as providing targeted mentorship and support for minoritised learners, were suggested. Strengthening connections with industry stakeholders via networking was also highlighted. Furthermore, the emphasis on developing soft skills was recognised as crucial. Acknowledging and appreciating the cultural knowledge and experiences that diverse students bring was identified as key to fostering an inclusive and empowering learning environment. By implementing these strategies, educational programmes could better equip students for successful careers in their chosen industry.
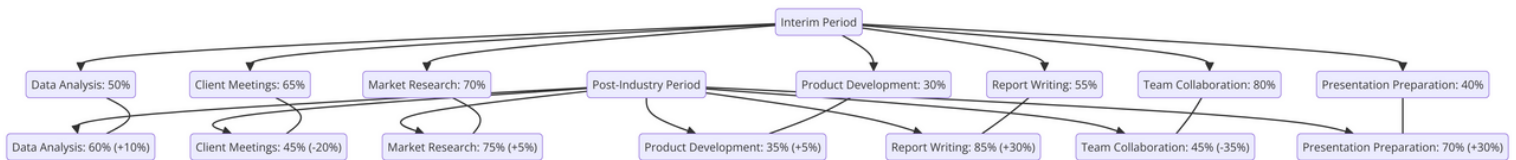
Very Prepared: 21%
Prepared: 33%
Neutral: 23%
Unprepared: 19%
Very Unprepared: 4%

SKE Impact
Visualisations and Insights

6. Engaged Activities (Interim and Post-Industry)

The findings reveal shifts in student participation in various activities after industry exposure:

The findings show that post-industry, students demonstrated increased engagement in activities such as data analysis, market research, product development, report writing, and presentation preparation. This suggests that industry experience enhanced their focus on analytical tasks, documentation, and presentation skills. On the other hand, there was decreased engagement in client meetings and team collaboration, suggesting a shift away from client-facing roles and collaborative efforts, possibly due to a more individual-focused approach in post-industry tasks.

Contextual Insights

- **Analytical and Documentation Skills:** The increase in data analysis and report writing indicates that students are now required to engage more with analytical tasks and documentation. These skills are crucial in industry for making informed decisions and presenting findings.
- **Practical Experience**: The rise in presentation preparation suggests that students are gaining more opportunities to present their work, which is essential for professional development and confidence building.
- **Shift in Focus:** The decreased engagement in client meetings and team collaboration might reflect a shift towards more independent work or a reallocation of tasks to focus on other critical areas post-industry.

These findings highlight the dynamic nature of student engagement in different activities as they transition from interim to post-industry experiences. Understanding these shifts can help educators tailor their programs to better prepare students for the demands of the fashion industry. This is particularly important for minoritised and international students who may have less prior experience and benefit significantly from enhanced industry interaction and feedback, further supporting their integration and success in professional environments.

Data Analysis: +10%
Client Meetings: -20%
Market Research: +5%
Product Development: +5%
Report Writing: +30%
Team Collaboration: -35%
Presentation Preparation: +30%
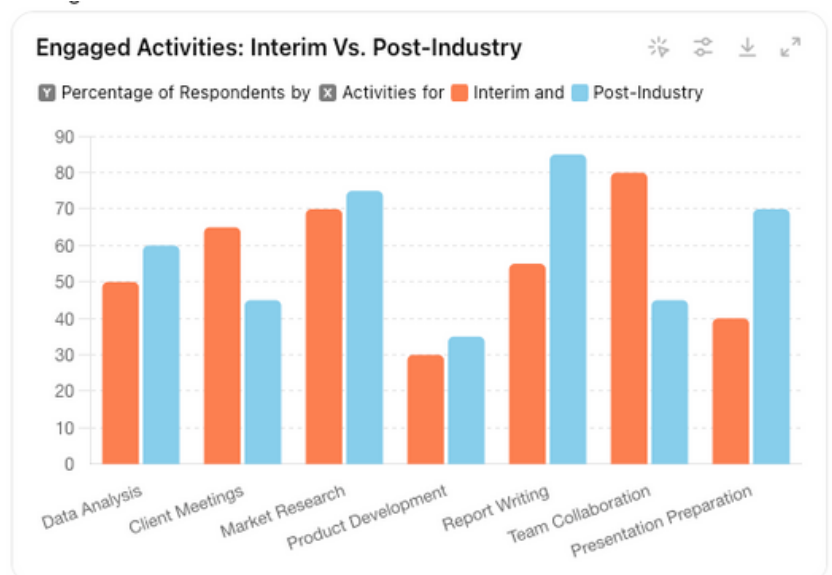
7. Significant Learning Experiences

The second interim survey administered before the formative feedback session revealed that students experienced increased challenges when engaging with the live industry project. They felt the stakes were higher and faced unfamiliarity with navigating industry environments. Understanding industry terminology was a significant challenge, with 40% of students struggling initially, increasing to 65% during the interim period due to more exposure to industry-specific language. However, post-industry, this challenge decreased significantly to 27%, suggesting improved familiarity through experience.

Meeting project deadlines was another challenge, peaking at 71% during the interim period from an initial 50%. This likely reflected the real-world project demands but decreased to 25% post-industry, indicating improved time management skills. Communication with professionals was initially challenging for 45% of students, increasing slightly to 53% during the interim period but improving to 34% post-industry, reflecting gains in professional communication skills. For international students who make up 70% of this unit's cohort, language barriers likely exacerbated these challenges, particularly in understanding UK-specific industry terminology and communicating with professionals. Similarly, minoritised students, who may have had less prior exposure to industry settings, faced unique initial difficulties in navigating these environments, largely related to levels of confidence.

Balancing project work with other academic responsibilities was a challenge for 35% initially, increasing slightly to 40% during the interim period, suggesting students were somewhat prepared for dual responsibilities. This challenge decreased to 30% post-industry, indicating better prioritisation skills. Adapting theoretical knowledge to practical scenarios was initially challenging for 60% of students, peaking at 74% during the interim period as they applied academic learning to real-world situations but decreased to 37% post-industry, indicating improved ability to bridge theory and practice.

The increase in challenges during the interim period underscores the value of the 'meddler in the middle' approach, where educators actively engage with students, guiding them whilst allowing them to grapple with real-world problems. This approach is particularly effective during this critical time as it supports students in developing autonomy and resilience.

Key challenges faced by students:
Understanding Industry Terminology:
Interim: 65% (Initial: 40%)
Post-Industry: 27%
Change: +25% (Interim) vs -38% (Post-Industry)

Meeting Project Deadlines:
Interim: 71% (Initial: 50%)
Post-Industry: 25%
Change: +21% (Interim) vs -46% (Post-Industry)

Communicating with Professionals:
Interim: 53% (Initial: 45%)
Post-Industry: 34%
Change: +8% (Interim) vs -19% (Post-Industry)

Balancing Project with Academics:
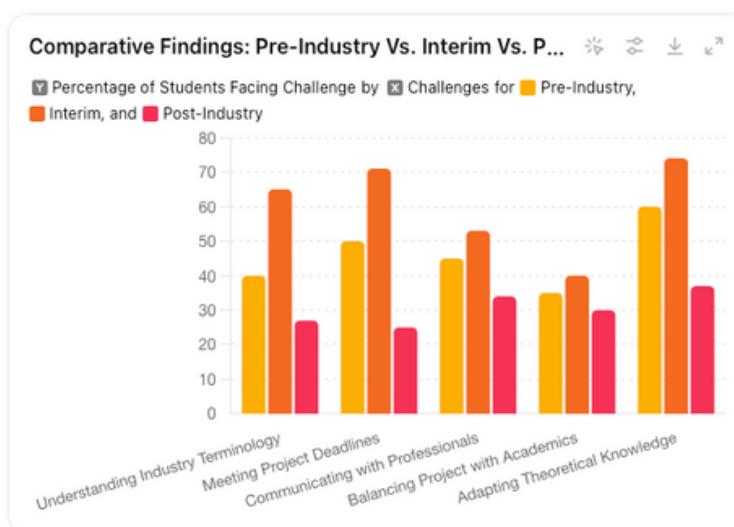Interim: 40% (Initial: 35%)
Post-Industry: 30%
Change: +5% (Interim) vs -10% (Post-Industry)

Adapting Theoretical Knowledge:
Interim: 74% (Initial: 60%)
Post-Industry: 37%
Change: +14% (Interim) vs -37% (Post-Industry)

Comparative Findings: Pre-Industry Vs. Interim Vs. P...
Percentage of Students Facing Challenge by Challenges for Pre-Industry, Interim, and Post-Industry

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7A. Significant Learning Experiences (Analysis of the Correlation Matrix)

An analysis of the correlation matrix provided deeper insights into the interrelationships between different challenges faced by students. The heatmap below visually represents the correlations between these variables across three stages: Pre-Industry, Interim, and Post-Industry SKE project., with colours indicating the strength and direction of the correlations.

This matrix shows the Pearson correlation coefficients between the different challenges, where a value closer to 1 indicates a strong positive correlation and a value closer to -1 indicates a strong negative correlation. A high correlation result indicates a strong relationship between two variables. For instance, in this data:

- The correlation between Meeting Project Deadlines and Communicating with Professionals is 0.999. This suggests that there is a very strong positive relationship between these two challenges. When students find it difficult to meet project deadlines, they are also likely to face challenges in communicating with professionals, and vice versa.

Such a high correlation might suggest that both challenges stem from common underlying factors, such as time management skills, organisational abilities, or the pressures of balancing multiple tasks. Improving in one area might positively impact the other, highlighting the interrelated nature of these student challenges.

This analysis is crucial as it can inform educators about specific areas where support is needed, particularly for international and minoritised students, ensuring a more tailored and effective approach to overcoming these challenges and enhancing overall student preparedness for the industry.

	Understanding Industry Terminology	Meeting Project Deadlines	Communicating with Professionals	Balancing Project with Academics	Adapting Theoretical Knowledge
Understanding Industry Terminology	1.000	0.974	0.963	0.984	0.949
Meeting Project Deadlines	0.974	1.000	0.999	0.999	0.996
Communicating with Professionals	0.963	0.999	1.000	0.996	0.999
Balancing Project with Academics	0.984	0.999	0.996	1.000	0.990
Adapting Theoretical Knowledge	0.949	0.996	0.999	0.990	1.000

Correlation Matrix of Student Challenges
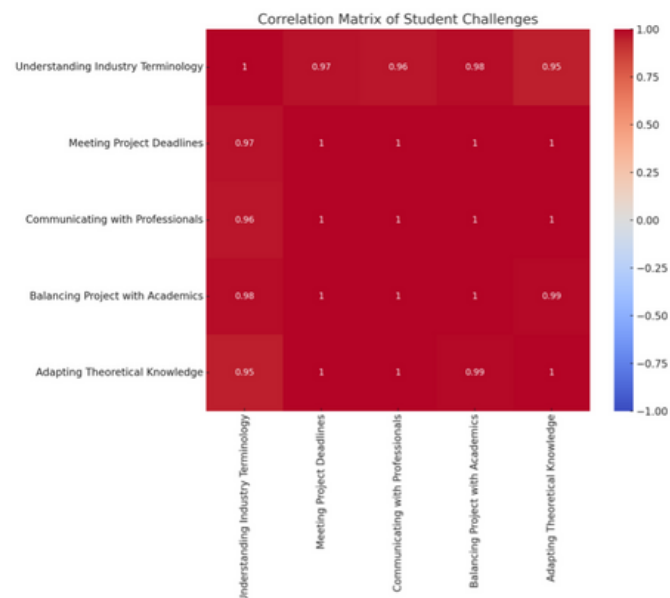
SKE Impact
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## 8. Frequency of Feedback from Industry Partner
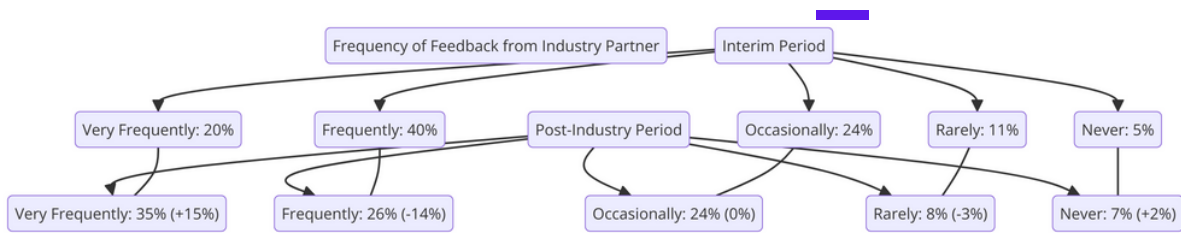
The data indicates significant insights into the frequency of feedback students received from industry partners during their interim and post-industry experiences. The findings indicate that increased engagement from industry partners in providing frequent feedback, particularly post-industry, is crucial for enhancing student preparedness.

Very frequent feedback rose from 20% to 35%, highlighting the shift towards more intensive feedback sessions.

This was especially beneficial for minoritised and international students, who often face additional barriers to industry engagement. Ensuring diverse representation and structured, ongoing feedback from industry professionals can inspire and motivate these students, demonstrating that success in the industry is attainable for everyone. The importance of effective scheduling, robust support systems, and strong mentorship programmes is underscored, as they enhance student engagement and learning outcomes. By integrating industry feedback more effectively, educators can create a more inclusive and supportive environment, empowering all students to succeed in their careers.

Changes in feedback engagement levels:
Very Frequently: +15%
Frequently: -14%
Occasionally: 0%
Rarely: -3%
Never: +2%
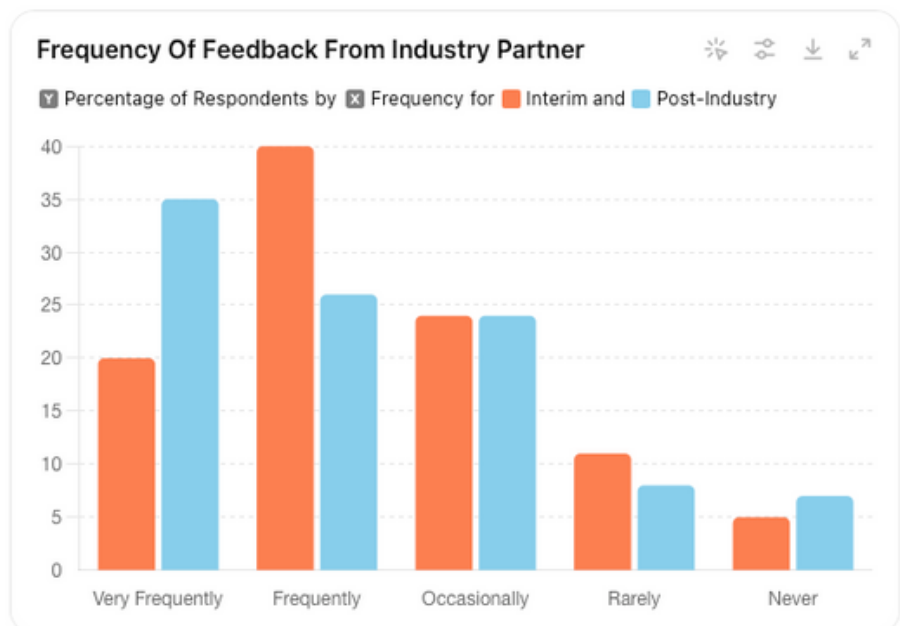
9. Feeling Prepared to Enter the Job Market
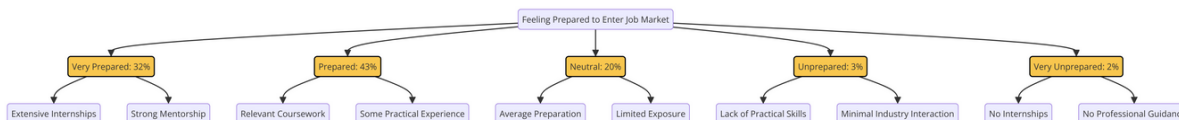
Summary of Findings

1. **High Levels of Preparedness:**
   - A significant majority of students feel either "Very Prepared" (32%) or "Prepared" (43%) to enter the job market, indicating a positive outlook on their readiness.
2. **Moderate Neutrality:**
   - 20% of students feel neutral about their preparedness, suggesting that while they may feel somewhat ready, there is still uncertainty.
3. **Low Levels of Unpreparedness:**
   - Only a small percentage of students feel "Unprepared" (3%) or "Very Unprepared" (2%), highlighting that most students feel they have received adequate preparation.

The diagram illustrates the detailed levels of preparedness among students to enter the job market post-SKE project with Pentland Brands. Key findings reveal that 32% of students felt very prepared, largely due to extensive industry exposure through internships and strong mentorship. Another 43% felt prepared, benefiting from relevant coursework and some practical experience. Notably, international and minoritised students, who often lacked prior opportunities for work experience, demonstrated significant improvement in their preparedness through the project. This was facilitated by the project's emphasis on practical, hands-on learning and direct industry interaction. Meanwhile, 20% of students felt neutral, indicating moderate preparation due to limited exposure to practical experiences. Only 3% felt unprepared, citing a lack of practical skills and minimal industry interaction, while 2% felt very unprepared, attributing this to the absence of internships and professional guidance. Overall, the SKE project significantly enhanced students' readiness for the job market, especially for those previously disadvantaged by limited work experience opportunities.

bar chart visualising the levels of preparedness among students for entering the job market:
Very Prepared: 32%
Prepared: 43%
Neutral: 20%
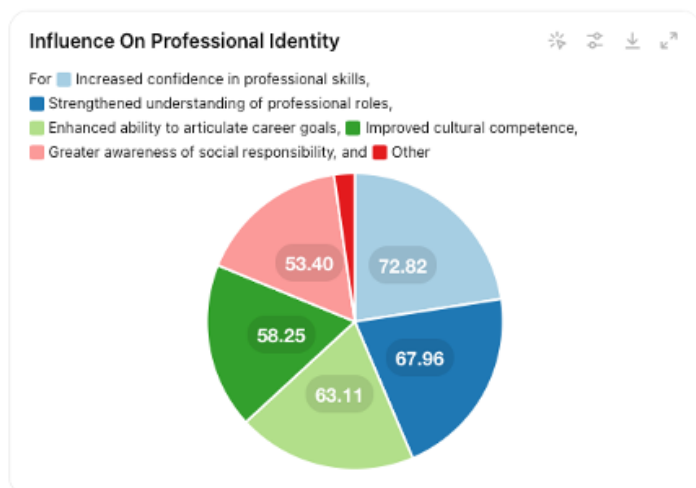Unprepared: 3%
Very Unprepared: 2%
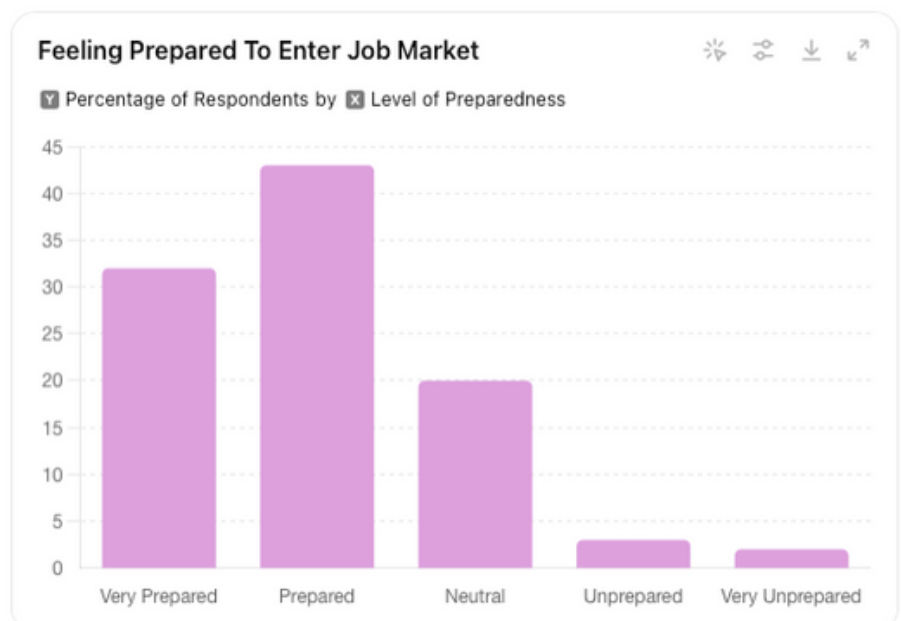
SKE Impact
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10. Influence on Professional Identity and Understanding of Social Responsibility

The survey data from the Live SKE project reveals that the project had a substantial positive impact on students' professional identity and understanding of social responsibility. Increased confidence in professional skills (72.82%) and strengthened understanding of professional roles (67.96%) were notable outcomes, indicating that practical exposure effectively boosted students' self-assurance and clarity about their career paths. Enhanced ability to articulate career goals (63.11%) and improved cultural competence (58.25%) further underscores the project's role in preparing students for diverse professional environments.

The project also significantly increased awareness of social responsibility, with 77.67% recognising the importance of ethical practices, 67.96% becoming more aware of sustainability issues, and 72.82% improving their understanding of diversity and inclusion.

These outcomes highlight the necessity of integrating practical, hands-on learning experiences into educational programs to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and real-world application, especially benefiting minoritised and international students. By fostering both hard and soft skills and promoting global citizenship, the project ensures students are well-prepared for lifelong career success and economic sustainability.

Influence On Professional Identity

For ▇ Increased confidence in professional skills,
▇ Strengthened understanding of professional roles,
▇ Enhanced ability to articulate career goals, ▇ Improved cultural competence,
▇ Greater awareness of social responsibility, and ▇ Other

53.40 | 72.82 | 58.25 | 63.11 | 67.96

Understanding Of Social Responsibility

For ▇ Recognized the importance of ethical practices,
▇ Increased awareness of sustainability issues,
▇ Enhanced commitment to community engagement,
▇ Improved understanding of diversity and inclusion, and ▇ Other

72.82 | 77.67 | 63.11 | 67.96

SKE Impact
Feedback Summary and Implications for the Development of the SKE Framework

The feedback collected through our surveys provides a holistic view of the impact of the SKE project on students' development and preparedness for the industry. The positive outcomes, particularly the increased confidence and skills post-industry experience, validate the effectiveness of the SKE framework and the experiential learning model employed. Our findings from this project have been instrumental in refining our SKE framework, ensuring it supports the development of similar activities in the future.

Drawing on Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (1996), our SKE framework approach considers the multiple layers of influence on student development. The mesosystem, which encompasses the connections between various settings, has been particularly relevant. The direct engagement with industry, such as the collaboration with Pentland Brands, created a rich, interactive environment where students could apply their academic knowledge to real-world scenarios. This hands-on experience not only enhanced their technical skills but also fostered their professional and interpersonal abilities.

The exosystem, which includes the broader context such as industry standards and market demands, played a crucial role in shaping the SKE project. By aligning our activities with industry needs, we ensured that students were not only knowledgeable but also ready to tackle real-world challenges from day one. The overwhelmingly positive feedback from Pentland Brands highlights the mutual benefits of such collaborations. The students' ability to provide fresh, innovative insights and practical solutions demonstrated the real-world applicability and value of their academic training.

In the macrosystem, the overarching cultural and societal influences are considered. We emphasised inclusivity by addressing the unique challenges faced by minoritised students, ensuring that all participants, regardless of background, felt prepared and valued. This focus on cultural currency and additional support mechanisms helped create an equitable learning environment, aligning with broader societal goals of diversity and inclusion.

The chronosystem, which considers the dimension of time, was also integrated into our framework. The continuous feedback and improvement cycle ensured that our SKE framework remained dynamic and responsive. Regular, constructive feedback from both industry partners and academic mentors provided students with timely and actionable insights, fostering a culture of continuous learning and development.

The integration of digital tools and technologies, reflective of the evolving digital landscape, was another significant aspect. By incorporating AI and other advanced technologies, we ensured that students developed digital literacy skills essential for modern professional contexts.

Building and maintaining strong relationships with industry partners were vital components of our exosystem strategy. Early engagement and clear communication with stakeholders ensured that the projects met both educational and business objectives, creating a synergistic partnership that benefitted all parties involved.

In summary, the success of the SKE project with Pentland Brands has provided a scalable and adaptable model for future initiatives. By considering the various ecological systems outlined by Bronfenbrenner, we have developed a robust framework that not only enhances student learning experiences but also aligns with the evolving needs of the industry. This holistic approach ensures that our educational programs remain dynamic, responsive, and impactful, preparing students for the professional challenges of the future.