

# 11 Enabling students to articulate the value of language skills in an ever-changing work environment

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## Abstract

This paper shares some of the findings of an evaluative research project funded by the Leeds Institute of Teaching Excellence (Brown et al., 2018). The project explored the value of ‘Broadening’ as part of the Leeds Curriculum and the value of language learning in the context of Institution-Wide Language Provision (IWLP). The paper focuses on the data gathered from interviews with employers and presents the findings around employer expectations of graduates and their perceptions of the value of language skills and cultural awareness. It considers how to enable students to articulate the knowledge, skills, and experience gained during their undergraduate journey. It identifies the value of language skills beyond linguistic competence and maps this to employer expectations. It proposes an end-of-module reflective task for any language module to enable students to articulate their personal ‘brand’ based on their knowledge and social capital, thus evidencing the breadth of their employability.

**Keywords:** employer expectations, personal ‘brand’, language learning, employability.

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## 1. Introduction

The Leeds Curriculum has three elements: Research-based Learning, Core Programme Threads, and Broadening. ‘Broadening’ is described in this context as encouraging students to “broaden their intellectual horizons outside or within their subject areas” (University of Leeds, 2019, n.p.) through taking Discovery modules (offered institution-wide) and fostering participation in extra-curricular opportunities made available to them (University of Leeds, 2019). Our project explored student and employer perceptions of the value of Broadening in terms of developing knowledge, skills, and attributes and how this helps students become well-rounded graduates. It also explored student and employer perceptions of the value of language learning and cultural awareness as developed by students across the institution through taking language Discovery modules.

## 2. Methodology

Twenty-five students and 15 employers were interviewed. The employers were selected based on existing contacts (Leeds University Business School, Alumni) and were from UK-based organisations, operating at local, national, and/or international level, across a range of industry sectors. Data collection was via semi-structured interviews. Informed by a developmental utilisation-focused approach (Patton, 2008; Saunders, 2012), the method used to analyse the qualitative data was inductive analysis rooted in grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2015). This was followed by a systematic process of coding which revealed key categories and sub-categories emerging from the data.

## 3. Findings

### 3.1. Building a brand

A key category that emerged from the data is the idea of building a brand, i.e. students developing their ‘brand’, which includes their academic and personal

experience (Brown et al., 2018). The interviews revealed that a student’s discipline is just one part of the jigsaw for an employer – “[t]he discipline is not important, especially if the student demonstrates the necessary attributes” (Brown et al., 2018, p. 20). With the exception of specific roles and professions, for example Food Science and Law, little emphasis was placed on the discipline. More important is the breadth of the individual’s knowledge and skills, their motivation, and their life experience (see Table 1). The student’s ability to articulate their identity in terms of their choice of pathway, i.e. the modules they had chosen to study, their motivation, and their passion was found to be critical to employers.

### 3.2. Knowledge and social capital

Table 1. Building a brand – key categories and sub-categories emerging from data analysis in the project

Knowledge	Social capital
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lifelong learners</li> <li>• Breadth of interest/knowledge beyond the core discipline</li> </ul> <p><b>Attributes</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A strong work ethic</li> <li>• Willing to learn new things, take on new roles and be adaptable/flexible</li> <li>• Transferable skills</li> <li>• Breadth of experience</li> <li>• Motivated and passionate</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Emotional intelligence</li> <li>• Able to build rapport and work with others</li> <li>• Self-awareness</li> <li>• Agents of change – able to influence and shape an organisation and show leadership</li> <li>• Resilience</li> <li>• Intercultural awareness</li> <li>• Interconnectedness – networking</li> <li>• Values-driven – cultural fit</li> <li>• Commercial awareness</li> </ul>

This key category is composed of two sub-categories: knowledge and social capital. Knowledge – defined as a broad interest and a willingness to learn new things – is increasingly important to employers. With rapidly developing technologies and a changing work environment, graduates need to have a variety

of skills and demonstrate flexibility and a willingness to take on new roles. Social capital – defined as the ability to build relationships – was identified by some employers as a crucial characteristic and one that can predict an employee’s success at work. [Table 1](#) shows a breakdown of the sub-categories that emerged from the data analysis. As it is not possible to know which roles will be needed in the future, graduates need to be flexible and adaptable, able to work across disciplinary boundaries and across roles in an organisation.

## 4. Discussion

All the employers interviewed perceived Broadening, whether in academic terms or via extra-curricular activities, as very valuable: “in a competitive market, anything that can give students extra skills and additional knowledge to their degree is positive” (Employer Interviewee 4). However, while there was an acceptance that language learning was valuable, it was not seen as essential by all employers. Of those who did value language skills, one employer in the recruitment sector reported that a premium is paid for graduates with fluency in another language; another mentioned seeking graduates with two languages when recruiting for the role of buyer; a third commented that language skills might be the differentiator when placing graduates with clients ([Brown et al., 2018](#), p. 22). It was clear from the interviews that there are more opportunities for graduates who have language skills and they are regarded favourably as being very deployable.

The findings highlight a gap between recent publications such as *Born Global* ([British Academy, 2016](#)), *Celebrating Skills in the Arts, Humanities and Sciences* ([British Academy, 2017](#)), and *Languages in the UK* ([British Academy, 2019](#)) and employer awareness. These publications provide the arguments as well as the facts and figures in evidencing the need for language skills not only for employability purposes but for society generally. It was surprising that some employers seemed unaware of the opportunity cost of employees not having language skills. This might reflect a limitation of the employer sample, being mainly drawn from UK-based organisations.

Therefore, mapping the knowledge and skills developed via language modules with employer expectations responds to this gap in knowledge by helping students to appreciate the added value of language skills and by providing employers with evidence of being well-rounded, transnational, highly employable graduates.

Below is an example of an end-of-module reflective task designed to help students map and articulate their knowledge and skills as part of developing their brand. In addition to outlining roles and responsibilities on their curriculum vitae, identifying the skills they have developed makes it easier for employers to see the student's articulation of their social capital and this helps differentiate the individual.

### **Reflective Task**

Looking at the items listed under 'knowledge' and 'social capital', which ones have you developed as a result of taking this language module? Think about your academic and personal development.

- **Breadth of interest:** Studying X was a complete contrast to [core discipline]/further developed my knowledge of...
- **Willingness to learn new things:** Studying X shows that I have the confidence to try new things and to learn in a way that is different to the learning for my discipline.
- **Transferable skills:** I used my knowledge/experience of X when...
- Learning about X has made me realise that.../has developed my awareness of... /has broadened my understanding of...
- The group task/presentation...
- The experience of X has developed my confidence in.../my ability to...

- **Showing resilience/commitment:** While it was not easy to..., I...
- **Showing initiative:** For the group task, I took the lead on...
- **Developing my emotional intelligence:** While working in a group, I realised that...
- **Intercultural awareness:** From studying X,...

## 5. Conclusion

Students should be encouraged to develop their personal ‘brand’ through their academic and personal choices. They need to articulate the added value of their language skills and cultural awareness. Similarly, staff need to make visible in the curriculum the knowledge, skills, and attributes developed via language modules. An end-of-module reflective task is a useful way of enabling students to reflect on and articulate the broader benefits of the module. There is work to do to ensure that more employers are aware of the multiple benefits of employees who have language skills and the added dimension which this affords any organisation. Engaging in dialogue with employers will help ensure that the curriculum is relevant and the skills and attributes developed continue to meet the diverse needs of an ever-changing work environment.

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