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Volunteering: A viable alternative work experience for university students?

Abstract

The Covid-19 pandemic reduced the availability of work placements in commercial organisations for university students. This potentially has not only hindered the development of transferable skills and adversely impacted graduate career aspirations, but changed the nature of placements going forward. Non-profit organisations who were already suffering budget restrictions, will also have been financially affected by Covid-19 due to reduced revenue. Financial sustainability is predicted to be an ongoing issue for charities (Rao, 2021). The opportunity therefore, for charities to entice university students to volunteer to support their work, with the lure of developing individuals' employability skills, seems irresistible at this time.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the content of job advertisements for volunteer positions to determine the extent to which they specify transferable skills desired of the candidates, or state that they can be developed once employed in the post. The underlying assumption is that to attract non-related student volunteers, jobs advertisements will need to explicitly state the transferable skills resulting from the post.

The paper offers originality by conducting a content analysis of volunteer jobs and assessing the specified criteria against recognised employability skills. It concludes by challenging charities, students and universities to embrace the opportunity for students to develop transferable skills by volunteering by modifying current practices.

Keywords: Covid-19, volunteering, university students, employability,

Paper Type: Research Article

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Introduction

Students work experience: An emerging problem

As a mechanism to improve student employability and address the demands of industry more effectively, a placement period with a company, has become prevalent in UK degree programmes in recent years. Indeed, some form of work-integrated learning is increasingly deemed a mandatory element during the study period while at university (Highfliers, 2019). Work placements are seen by students as valuable, not only to provide some experience of the world of work, as distinct from classroom-based learning (Walmsley et al. 2006), but also to help develop transferable skills (Paisley and Paisley, 2010). This in turn, is deemed by students to improve personal profile (Juznic and Pymm, 2011). Moreover, a period of work placement has been found to be beneficial in improving students' academic performance upon return to university studies (Jones et al. 2017; Mansfield, 2011; Patel et al. 2012). Work experience has also been found to facilitate a period of reflection regarding career direction (Thompson, 2017) and can positively impact upon career impetus post-graduation (Boyd-Turner et al. 2015; Manning and Parrott, 2018). Significantly, students who have been on a placement activity, are more likely to secure an appropriate-level position upon graduation (Brooks and Youngson, 2016).

Yet the placement process faltered due to Covid-19, with appropriate placement and internship opportunities either cancelled (Brown, 2020) or suffered restricted availability (Blackwell, 2021; Greaves, 2020). Even in more buoyant economic times, for university students, gaining an appropriate placement, at the right level of responsibility to support development of appropriate employability skills is a perennial issue (Hutchinson, 2009; Merrifield, 2017; Offord, 2015). It therefore remains questionable how students will gain

suitable work experience, not only at this time, but in the future? Taylor (2020) although describing an alternative e-based placement activity for university students, feels the time is right for a review of placements in higher education.

Student Volunteering: The viable alternative?

At the start of the Covid-19 outbreak, record numbers of people volunteered for the NHS Response Service (Butler, 2020), although volunteering in general decreased at the peak of the infection rate given lockdown restrictions (YouGov, 2020). Building on the awareness raising of volunteering that resulted from the Covid-19 crisis, and given the ongoing reduction in the availability of good placement and work positions to university students, charities could seek to recruit students to volunteer posts with the lure of providing opportunities to develop the transferable skills vital to career aspirations.

Students volunteering in non-profit organisations is not a new phenomenon, and the motivation behind such activity has been subject to academic scrutiny. The resultant conclusions indicate a complex web of reasons underlying the motivations of students volunteering (Allen and Shaw, 2009; Ghose and Kassam, 2014). This is confirmed by Haivas et al (2014) in applying self-determination theory (SDT), which recognised the differing needs and therefore motivations, of the many sub-groups volunteering. Smith et al (2018) focus on person-centred aspects, such as improving self-esteem, personal well-being and life-satisfaction, and Carpenter and Myers (2011) examine altruistic factors, such as wanting to contribute to the wellbeing of others or the community. Gronland et al. (2011) take a wide perspective in examining the influence of national culture towards volunteering, while Ling and Chui (2016) focus more on the individuals themselves, finding that previous experience of undertaking community or voluntary activities , can have a positive influence regarding volunteering decisions in the future. Lee and Won (2011) indicate that a charity's mission

can be a key factor in attracting individuals, and this is extended by Gage and Thapa (2012) who highlight the need for an individual to gain a greater understanding of issues connected with the charity. Moreover, an overwhelming desire to engage with a charity's fundamental vision, can lead to an enhanced personal well-being (Stukas et al. (2016).

A number of other studies in this area have examined the impact of volunteering on individuals' learning (Edwards et al. 2001), life-skills (Anderson and Green, 2012), personal development (MacNeela and Gannon, 2014) and also employability (Barton et al. 2019; Gevorgyan and Galstyan (2016). Here, volunteering is felt to support the development of softer, transferable skills (Khasanzyanova (2017), which are demanded by employers, and thereby emphasisng the important relationship with employability.

Employability

Nonetheless, even though career was one of the Volunteer Functions Inventory (VFI) factors applied by Clary and Snyder (1999), Holdsworth (2010) found that employability and improving CV-profile was not a universal reason for university students volunteering. However, Williamson et al. (2018) in their exploration of health students' reasons for volunteering, found that students' perceived their employability credentials were enhanced as an outcome. Will students who are pursuing degrees in non-relevant disciplines, such as history, business, geography etc. also be attracted to volunteering as a means to improve employability skills? To this end, to what extent are charities geared to attracting university students on the basis of improving their career prospects? In particular, to what extent do charities direct advertising of volunteer positions towards graduates with the offer of improving their employability skills? This paper is therefore positioned in the context of employability in order to assess how charities advertise volunteering positions with the

objective of recruiting graduates to improve their respective employability skills. The paper has a twofold benefit: Firstly, to charities in highlighting the potential for recruiting graduate volunteers at a time when resources for paid staff will be scarce; and secondly, to university students to highlight the potential for improving their graduate employability skills through volunteering.

Focus of this research

Francis (2011) suggested that non-profit organisations need to revise their recruitment strategies to attract greater numbers of university students to volunteer. To what extent are advertisements for charity volunteering jobs targeting attracting university students? In particular, are the transferable skills that support individuals' employability, explicitly cited in job advertisements?

While de Cooman and Pepermans (2012) acknowledge the difference between advertised job criteria between commercial and non-profit organisations, with the latter focusing more on altruistic and extrinsic values, Feldman et al. (2006) find that providing specific information in job advertisements impacts upon potential applicants. This is particularly important in terms of softer skill requirements (Calanca et al., 2019)

The purpose of this paper therefore, is to examine the content of job advertisements for volunteer positions, to determine the extent to which they specify transferable skills desired of the candidates, or state that they can be developed once employed in the post. The underlying assumption is that in order to attract non-related student volunteers, jobs advertisements will need to explicitly state the transferable skills resulting from the post. This will provide a means for students to assess whether volunteer jobs represent a viable alternative to placement or paid part-time employment, in helping university students to develop employability skills desired by graduate employers.

The paper offers originality by conducting a content analysis of volunteer jobs and assessing the specified criteria against recognised employability skills.

Research Approach

Volunteer jobs listed on a general, UK jobs website were analysed and the specified person criteria for each job noted. This was conducted in one day. While there was 1020 volunteer jobs initially listed on the website, 389 were deemed by the web host to be duplicates and not shown. There were a number of advertisements from large, not-for-profit organisations for the same post but in different parts of the country, and therefore these were similarly discounted. Additionally, any job paying a salary was deemed to be full-time or part-time employment, and therefore not voluntary and was not included in the analysis. Jobs that required a specific skill or qualification (e.g. sports coaching award) were ignored, since these are targeting specific individuals, and trustee jobs, albeit voluntary, were similarly not included. This gave a total of 219 volunteer jobs. Only the advertisement on the jobs website was analysed – no further level of analysis was conducted, for example, of the job description or tracing back to the organisations' own website for additional information.

The content of the volunteer job advertisements were assessed against employability skills, to provide a quantitative measure of the number of mentions or references for each skill. Skills criteria demanded by graduate employers were listed by QAA (2019, p.5), Totaljobs (2020) and confirmed by numerous academic works (see for example, Pan and Lee, 2011; Saunders and Zuzel, 2010; Wellman, 2010; Wilton, 2011). The list of 12 employability skills criteria used for this study are:

- Communication
- Collaboration/Teamworking

- Interpersonal working/Networking/Negotiation/Empath
- Problem-solving; Leadership
- Organised/Self-management/Ability to work under pressure
- Confidence; Managing ambiguity/Willing to learn
- Resilience/Perseverance/Flexibility
- Analytical/Critical thinking skills
- Innovative/Enterprising/Entrepreneurial/Creative
- ICT literacy/Digital Media literacy

Allowance was made for semantic differences for each skill criteria and flexibility in what might be included, for example, communication could include verbal, written, telephone etc.

Findings

Job advertisements were initially grouped into six categories, as displayed in Table 1. From the 219 voluntary jobs advertised, nearly 42% were in ‘care and support services’. This category includes jobs such as mentoring, health care support, independent visitor, wellbeing and family support. A quarter of the jobs were in the ‘retail/shop/events’ category and included jobs such as, jobs include retail or sales assistant, kitchen helper, café assistant and event support. This is an important category, since retail is a typical sector for recruiting students to work part-time. Voluntary jobs that fall under the ‘general management’ category accounted for 17% of the total jobs advertised, which denotes the third largest job’s category in the job advertisement. This category includes jobs such as team leader, admin support, outreach or marketing assistant, project assistant and recruiter. Meanwhile both transport and education/learning category contributed a small number of the total voluntary jobs advertised with 5%. Education/learning jobs included teaching assistant, education trainee and

facilitator, while the transport category, mostly included jobs associated with vehicle driving and delivery.

[Table 1 – insert here]

Among the 219 voluntary jobs advertised, 92 (42%) did not explicitly indicate any transferable skills (Table 2). Emphasis in these advertisements was more on detailing the vision and scope of the respective charity, or providing a description or list of duties attached to the post, leaving the potential applicant to determine whether they had the necessary skills to perform that job effectively. There was one charity, advertising a retail position that specified nine listed criteria, while in contrast, a total of 36 (16%) advertisements, only had one skill mentioned. A further total of 27 (12%) jobs mentioned two employability skills and the remaining jobs (n=60) mentioned skills/attributes ranging from three to five. This is an interesting finding and could indicate voluntary jobs are focusing more on benefits, to beneficiaries or the community (Volunteer Scotland, 2020) and less on the skills needed by the volunteers. This could however, mean volunteer posts are less attractive for students to get involved in volunteering, especially where the need to maximise transferable skills to aid graduate career aspirations is of utmost importance.

With only 58% of the voluntary jobs advertised highlighting the required relevant skills, it seems that non-profit organisations are potentially placing less importance on promoting to, and attracting, students. The twelve employability skills were further analysed, to identify any association with the voluntary jobs.

[Table 2 – insert here]

Matching voluntary jobs with employability skills

The descriptive analysis results (see Figure 1) show that communication is the highest employability skills with 21.1% mentioned in voluntary jobs. This is probably to be expected,

given the majority of jobs advertised were in ‘care/support services’, but also recognises its importance for voluntary jobs across all categories, including ‘management’ and ‘retail/shop/event’ (see Table 3). The collaboration/teamworking criteria was also considered important with 12.9% of all mentions from the 219 jobs advertised and was especially cited (n=18) in the ‘retail/shop/event’ category. The need to be able to work collaboratively in a team reconciles to the nature of charity work which typically requires a number of client interventions by different people and agencies, together with the support of colleagues.

This skill was followed by ICT/digital literacy (7.9%) which was mostly mentioned in the ‘management’ category jobs (n=10). The remaining were interpersonal/networking (7%), organised/self-management (7%) and confidence (6.7%). These top six employability skills identified in this study confirm previously cited employability skills research (CBI, 2019; QAA, 2019). Consequently, the results highlighting employability skills, suggest that university students would benefit from working as a volunteer, in order enhance their transferable skills, such as confidence (Hirst, 2000), especially at the current time, when the number of placements are potentially reduced due to the ongoing pandemic situation. Moreover, in a recent survey by The Confederation of British Industry (CBI) ICT/Digital literacy was among top 3 skills highlighted by businesses (CBI, 2019). This could similarly be relevant to third sector organisations that are moving towards e-business in order to remain competitive, especially since this skill was mentioned 8% in the ‘management’ category of jobs advertised. This again, might be attractive to student’s volunteering, since these volunteer posts could help develop ICT skills and therefore support their career progression and aspirations.

The descriptive analysis interestingly revealed that some skills, although deemed important for commercial businesses (CBI, 2019), were less mentioned in voluntary job advertisements. This includes leadership (2.3%), which was only mentioned in the job category of

‘management’ (n=7) and ‘retail/shops/events’ (n=1). Leadership was not mentioned in any other job categories, including ‘care/health services’. Skills such as numeracy (n=5), time management (n=1) and problem-solving (n=5) were also scarcely mentioned. This could suggest that the third sector could contribute less towards supporting university students in developing their key employability skills of leadership, numeracy and problem solving. This might as a consequence, restrict future graduate opportunities, especially where employers seek those particular criteria.

[Figure 1 – insert here]

Other than the twelve employability skills used in this study, a further ten skills were repeatedly cited in the advertisements, such as passionate/dedicated (n=19), energetic/enthusiastic (5.3%), reliable (4.4%), compassionate/helpful/friendly (1.2%) and trustworthy/honesty (1.8%).

The passionate/compassionate criteria clearly demands that applicants should care about the charity and ‘buy-in’ to its work, and similarly, the need to be “enthusiastic” reflects the strength of desire of an applicant to support the charity in its activities. Moreover, these attributes indicate the quality of positive traits and behaviour that are recognised as best skill practices in health and care services (Skills for Care/Skills for Health, 2013) rather than recognisable employability skills that university students would seek to develop.

The mention of ‘reliability’ together, with being “dedicated”, similarly refers to the need for applicants to be committed to the volunteering activity. One of the problems associated with managing volunteers is the lack of commitment (Warburton et al., 2017), and clearly this attempts to pre-empt any problems prior to application. Surprisingly, given that the majority of posts advertised required direct connection to clients/customers, that the need for customer service/focus skills only received 15 mentions. Perhaps, ‘customer service’ suggests a more

commercial approach, rather than the empathetic approach typically demanded in the third sector?

The lack of specifying skills such as problem-solving, analytical skills and being innovative suggests that post-holders will not be required to think creatively to solve presented issues, either because of the nature of the job itself, or that post-holders will need to adhere to tightly established procedures. However, most client-facing roles will invariably bring novel problems, that will require creative solutions to overcome, again leaving potential applicants to make the link themselves, between the job and necessary skills required to perform it effectively.

There was an acknowledgment that potential candidates would possibly not be knowledgeable about the charity or its mission or the specific requirements of the job, hence the number of mentions for "willingness to learn". This could also be an attempt to attract as wide a number of applicants as possible, recognising that individuals not previously employed in the third sector, may have skills to bring to the role.

Although 'care/health services' was the most job category found in the advertisements, the overall number of total skills mentioned (104 mentioned) was similar to the 'retail/shop/event' category (79 mentions) (see Appendix 1 for further details). This suggests that university students who are volunteering in 'retail/shop/events' and 'management' could possibly gather as many skills as those volunteering in 'care/health services', with volunteering in 'education/learning', 'legal/finance' and 'transportation' type jobs being of less value in terms of skills developed

[Table 3 – insert here]

Future orientation?

In addition to the job advertisements specifying required skills for the volunteer post, there were 25 advertisements which stated that the volunteer posts would develop transferable skills, help respective CVs or support transitions into employment. Yet, these advertisements were typically vague with regards to what skills might be developed. In addition, only 7 advertisements out of those 25, stated the specific skills that could be developed or enhanced once in post, mainly focusing on improving communication skills. In addition, only two advertisements mentioned that the post might be attractive to students, and therefore, seemingly not a current explicit target group for volunteering posts.

Conclusion

Akingbola (2020) warned that the adverse impact of Covid-19 will reduce already stretched resources of non-profit organisations. This is in addition to the already predicted worsening future financial position of third-sector organisations, with budget cuts impinging on service provision (SNVO, 2019, CPWO, 2020) and predictions of financial difficulties in the future (Rao, 2021). The opportunity therefore, to utilise student volunteers should become irresistible for charities. As Cnaan et al (2011) suggest, non-profit organisations should seek to recruit new volunteers by reconciling voluntary activities with individuals' career opportunities. To embrace this however, will require significant changes for all stakeholders involved. The greatest challenge to convincing university students that volunteering is a viable replacement to placement or part-time employment, will be in respect of the lack of income, since research has indicated that students work primarily for the financial gain (Crockford et al. 2015; Richardson et al. 2009). This will therefore, not only need charitable and volunteer organisations to more aggressively target students with job advertisements written specifically for them, but require students to take a more long-term outlook, to focus on the prospective graduate career, rather than short-term earnings.

On this basis, it is likely, that students will select the volunteering jobs that will develop the most transferable skills, to improve their graduate job prospects and match career aspirations. Charities will need to be mindful that university students will volunteer to obtain employability skills and not because of a connection with charitable aims. To this end, charities should seek to support students in this endeavour. The starting point in this, will be to identify the skills, traits and behaviours that could be developed through the volunteering post and explicitly promote this. Yet most volunteering jobs viewed in this study either described the mission of the respective charity and the needs of the client group, or listed job-related tasks in great detail, without stating necessary skills. Advertisements are seemingly prioritising a detailed job description more than a person specification. A more balanced approach will be necessary, combining job-oriented and person-oriented approaches, in order to attract the appropriate talent to the organisation (Beardwell and Thompson, 2014). While several advertisements cited that the post would allow the incumbent to develop new skills, they failed to precisely specify what skills could be developed. It is the lack of specificity regarding skills that can be developed, that is currently lacking in volunteer job advertisements. Job advertisements, even volunteering ones, need to compete for the attention of potential applicants and stimulate a response from individuals to apply (Armstrong and Taylor, 2017). Students will therefore, need employability skills to be more explicitly stated in volunteering jobs, in order to be attracted to them.

Even though university careers departments will encourage student volunteering, it has been long felt that universities have neglected the voluntary sector (Palmer, 2015) and therefore the opportunity to connect and work with charitable organisations, in order to support the development of students should be considered. researchers seek that universities take a more strategic approach to the volunteering activities of students (Darwen and Rannard, 2011), together with a greater alignment of charities activities with students' expectations

(Holdsworth and Brewis, 2014; Paull et al., 2017) and the respective skills and interests of the students themselves (Hallman and Harms, 2012).

Perhaps the profile of charitable organisations as a whole needs to be raised in universities? Here, charities could be a rich source of organisational case studies for students to apply learning within their respective disciplines, rather than using commercial businesses and textbook-based case examples. Simon (2019) suggests an online platform to inform students of volunteering opportunities, and certainly this would at least highlight available positions. While managing volunteers is notoriously challenging, the commitment of students should be enhanced if they feel they are benefiting from the activity in gaining employability skills. A method of formally recording those skills and embedding the learning process within the degree programme in the same way as placements are currently treated, will probably be necessary. However, it could be that volunteering becomes an additional activity rather than a replacement for placement, since it has been found that even a short period in-company can be beneficial in terms of individuals' skills development (Thompson, 2017). It may be useful for charity managers in charitable to undertake short coaching/mentoring courses to better accommodate student placements.

This study was undertaken to challenge current thinking, not only as a result of the Covid-19 situation, but to challenge existing assumptions of students and the perceptions of university-non-profit organisation relationships. It also has an orientation to the future, to raise employability skills of future graduates by exposing them to a broader range of organisations, not just the usual large, commercial enterprises. It does however, raise questions that will require further research, particularly, what are the perceptions of students, whether charities want large numbers of university students volunteering and whether they could manage them effectively, and if universities have the resources and systems to network, and manage, a

portfolio of third-sector organisations given they too will be stretched in the current circumstances, as the UK emerges more fully from the pandemic scenario.

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Appendix 1: List of total skills mentioned based on type of jobs

Employability Skills	Care/ Support Services	Retail/ Shop/ Event	Management	Education/ Learning	Legal/ Finance	Transport	Total
Communication	29	15	16	4	4	4	72
Teamworking	8	18	11	4	3	0	44
ICT/Digital literacy	9	4	10	1	2	1	27
Interpersonal working/ Networking/ Negotiation/ Empathy	11	4	6	1	0	2	24
Organisation	8	3	9	1	2	0	23
Confidence	6	6	7	1	3	0	23
Passionate/Dedicate	8	8	2	1	0	0	19
Energetic/Enthusiasm	7	6	1	3	0	1	18
Reliable	5	5	1	2	2	0	15
Customer service	3	9	2	0	0	1	15
Resilience	2	4	1	3	2	1	13
Leadership	0	1	7	0	0	0	8
Managing Ambiguity	1	2	2	0	2	0	7
Trustworthy	1	5	0	0	0	0	6
Prob Solving	2	2	1	0	0	0	5
Numeracy/Budgeting	0	3	1	0	0	1	5
Neat/Attention to details	1	4	0	0	0	0	5
Innovative	1	1	1	1	0	0	4
Helpful/Friendly/Compassionate	1	2	1	0	0	0	4
Time Management	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Sensible	1	1	0	0	0	0	2
Analytical	0	0	0	0	1	0	1
Covid-free	1	0	0	0	0	0	1
Total	105	104	79	22	21	11	342

List of Tables and Charts

Table 1: Type of voluntary jobs

	Frequency	Percent (%)
Care/Support services	91	41.55
Retail/Shop/Event	55	25.11
Management	37	16.89
Legal/Finance	14	6.39
Transport	11	5.02
Education/Learning	11	5.02
Total	219	100

Table 2: Employability skills mentioned in job advertisements

Number of skills mentioned	Care/ support services	Retail/ Shop/ Event	Management	Legal/ Finance	Transport	Education/ Learning	Total
0	45	23	10	5	5	4	92
1	18	5	5	4	2	2	36
2	13	5	6	0	3	0	27
3	11	11	4	1	1	1	29
4	2	5	6	1	0	3	17
5	4	3	4	2	0	1	14
7	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
8	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
6	0	2	1	0	0	0	3
9	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Total	93	55	36	13	11	11	219

Figure 1: Skills mentioned in voluntary jobs advertisement

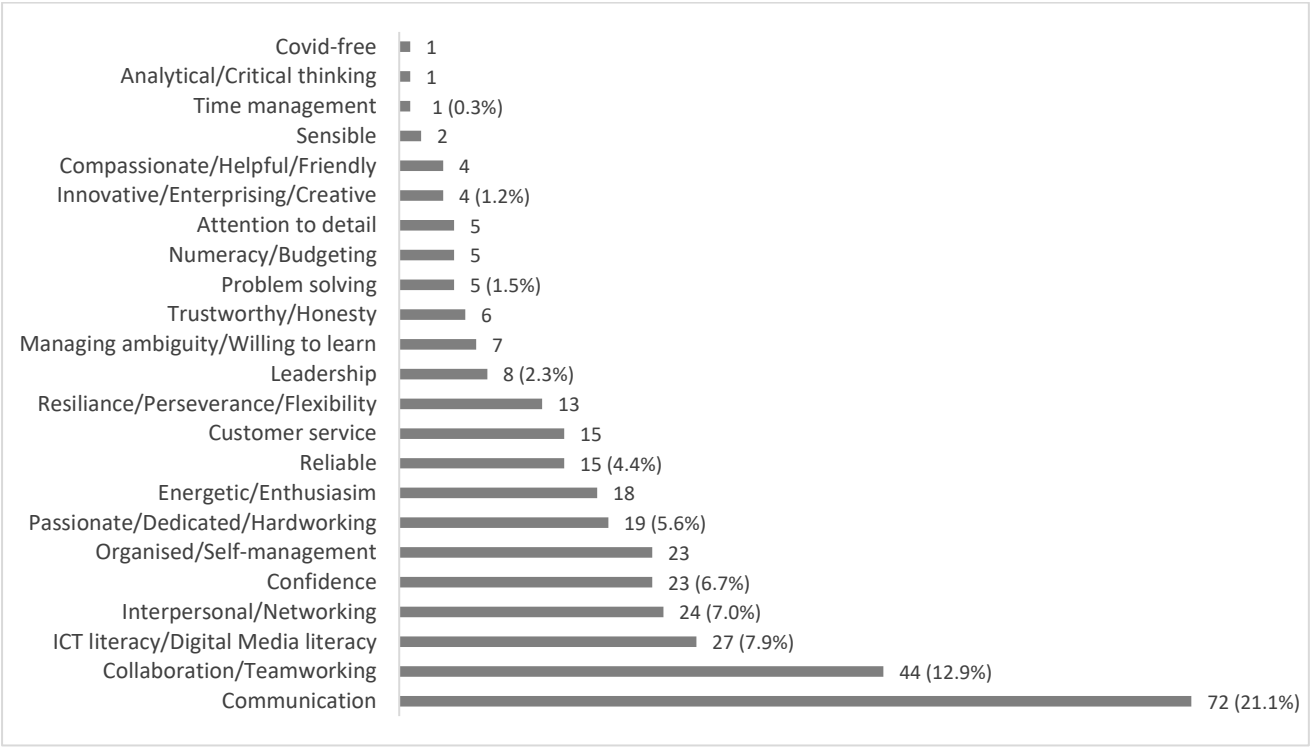

Table 3: Employability and transferable skills cited by job category

Skills	Care/ Support services	Retail/ Shop/Event	Management	Education/ Learning	Transport	Legal/ Finance	Total
Communication	29	15	16	4	4	4	72
Teamworking	8	18	11	4	0	3	44
Interpersonal/Networking	11	4	6	1	2	0	24
Problem Solving	2	2	1	0	0	0	5
Leadership	0	1	7	0	0	0	8
Organisation	8	4	9	1	0	2	24
Confidence	6	6	7	1	0	3	23
Managing Ambiguity	1	2	2	0	0	2	7
Resilience	2	4	1	3	1	2	13
ICT/Digital literacy	9	4	10	1	1	2	27
Innovative/Enterprising	1	1	1	1	0	0	4
Analytical	0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Total	77	61	71	16	8	19	252