

## **Building Student Empowerment through Live Commercial Projects: A Reflective Account of Participants**

**Authors :** Nilanthi Ratnayake, Wen-Ling Liu

**Abstract :** Prior research indicates an increasing gap between the skills and capabilities of graduates in the contemporary workplace across the globe. The challenge of addressing this issue primarily lies on the hands of higher education institutes/universities. In particular, surveys of UK employers and retailers found that soft skills including communication, numeracy, teamwork, confidence, analytical ability, digital/IT skills, business sense, language, and social skills are highly valued by graduate employers, and in achieving this, there are various assessed and non-assessed learning exercises have already been embedded into the university curriculum. To this end, this research study aims to explore the reflections of postgraduate student participation in a live commercial project (i.e. designing an advertising campaign for open days, summer school etc.) implemented with the intention of offering a transformative experience by deploying this project. Qualitative research methodology has been followed in this study, collecting data from three types of target audiences; students, academics and employers via a series of personal interviews and focus group discussions. Recorded data were transcribed, entered into NVIVO, and analysed using meaning condensation and content analysis. Students reported that they had a very positive impact towards improving self-efficacy, especially in relation to soft skills and confidence in seeking employment opportunities. In addition, this project has reduced cultural barriers for international students in general communications. Academic staff and potential employers who attended on the presentation day expressed their gratitude for offering a lifelong experience for students, and indeed believed that these type of projects contribute significantly to enhance skills and capabilities of students to cater the demands of employers. In essence, key findings demonstrate that an integration of knowledge-based skills into a live commercial project facilitate individuals to make the transition from education to employment in terms of skills, abilities and work behaviours more effectively in comparison to some other activities/assuagements that are currently in place in higher education institutions/universities.

**Keywords :** soft skills, commercially live project, higher education, student participation

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