

# Gearing up for Professional Practice: Enhancing Soft Skills for IS Project Students

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## ABSTRACT

Industry project students often find the interview/initial contact with their project sponsor daunting, as for many students this is their first encounter with a potential IS/ IT employer. The final choice as to who completes a project is with the sponsor, and if students fail to impress, they can find it difficult to secure a project. The types of skills that students struggle with are mainly soft skills, research conducted in 2002 confirmed the importance of these in the workplace. These soft skills included: nine interactive skills including listening, interpersonal and attire and ten motivation skills including self confidence, enthusiasm and initiative.

The culmination of the research was the development of a pilot pre-employment module. The aim of the module was to give students exposure to the requirements of the 'recruiting' employer including the recommended interview behaviours, personal presentation and documentation they would encounter and use as part of the recruitment process. This was offered to all final year IS degree students in September 2002. The module was received enthusiastically by the students and after reflection, the potential for assisting industry project students was identified.

The module was re-offered in 2003 in a modified version and this paper examines the development of the first and second iterations of this pre-employment module. Flowing from the research findings, curriculum issues have been identified for future implementation.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Soft skills are becoming increasingly important to employers and there is a lack of information on how employers identify these skills or how graduates should portray them during the pre-employment phase. There is also limited information on which soft skills are of most relevance to the IS industry so that they can be identified to graduates to help them to prepare for employment. Previous research by the authors went some way towards identifying which soft skills are important. It was evident from the research that identifying soft skills at the interview is challenging for an employer. This, therefore, poses a challenge for the graduate to display appropriate soft skills during the job interview.

The previous research (Snell, Snell-Siddle & Whitehouse, 2002) highlighted that an intensive pre-employment module would be helpful needed for final year degree students to assist them in meeting the requirements emphasised by employers. As a result a pilot pre-employment module was developed for delivery in 2002. Based on evaluation and feedback from the

students who took part in this first iteration, a modified module was developed and delivered in 2003.

This paper will firstly report on the development, implementation and delivery of the initial iteration of the pre-employment module and the reason for its success. In 2003 a modified pre-employment module was offered to project students prior to their interviews with sponsors. The outcome of this delivery is also reported on in this paper.

As well as curriculum issues identified as part of the development of the module, the paper also discusses the implications of linking the pre-employment module as an integral part of the course requirements for the I399 Industry Project Unit.

## 2. FIRST ITERATION 2002

Development and delivery of the pre-employment module took place in October 2002. The research carried out assisted in the content of the module. It was a full day programme held off site, run as a professional seminar rather than the traditional lecture style situation. Students were provided with an information pack which included resources from each of the sessions and an evaluation form. Morning tea, lunch and afternoon tea was provided as an effective strategy to keep the students motivated throughout the day. It also encouraged relationship building during the breaks, not only with their peers but with the presenters who came from industry.

Content of the module included background research data, CV preparation, interview skills, employment agreements, personal presentation and recruitment information from an agency. Following is an outline of the soft skills incorporated within each of the sessions offered in the module.

### Background Research Data

To frame the module content, a presentation was given to students of previous research (Ganzel, 2001; Gurusinghe, 2000; Moss & Tilly, 1996; Snell, Snell-Siddle & Whitehouse, 2002) that identified the importance of soft skills to employers and in particular which soft skills they valued most.

### CV Preparation

The need for effective documentation as highlighted in the research was covered in this session on CV preparation, which also incorporated the importance of the covering letter.

### Interview Skills

The interview skills session involved the participation of leading industry representatives who shared their requirements of potential employees. The session

began with brief presentations by industry on what they look for when interviewing, focusing on soft skills. This led into a mock panel interview session where each student was interviewed for a graduate position. Feedback was provided to the student group at the end of the panel session. This was challenging for the students but was evaluated by them as the most successful part of the programme as they found it close to a real life experience. The session gave them a chance to practice their listening, interpersonal, stress tolerance, self confidence, initiative and enthusiasm skills. Feedback from the industry representatives was given in all of these areas.

### Employment Agreements

UCOL's Human Resource Manager presented this session. The aim of the session was to provide students with self confidence regarding these topics before having to go out into the workforce. Content included the Employment Relations Act 2000, negotiating employment agreements and their rights and obligations as employees.

### Recruitment Agencies

A consultant from a local recruitment agency gave a short presentation on the role of agencies, what they look for in job candidates and how students can utilise their service. The majority of students had not used agencies in the past and were under the false impression there was a charge to use the service. Gaining this information opened another job search avenue for them.

### Personal Presentation

A consultant was bought in to advise students on how to present themselves effectively in the workplace. The session included details on dressing to suit your build and colouring and what constituted corporate dress. The presenter reinforced comments mentioned throughout the day about the importance of a good first impression, grooming, attire and general communication.

## 3. STUDENT EVALUATION

All of the attendees were either very satisfied or satisfied with the general organisation, quality of delivery and programme content (using a five point Likert scale). When asked what was the most valuable aspect of the training day and why, students gave the following feedback:

“off the cuff interviews, good experience”

“interviewing skills and useful knowing the point of view of the employer”

“talking with industry people”

“the guest speakers as they gave an outside view into the subjects, heaps of information, very valuable”

Positive comments were also received on the CV preparation session. While there were a few one-off comments regarding sessions of less value to students (employment agreements and personal presentation sessions), generally they were all seen as relevant - “nothing was least valuable really, it was all relevant”.

## 4. REFLECTION

Feedback from students indicated that due to the large amount of information shared, the training may have been enhanced if shorter or split over two days. Based on evaluations it was proposed that the content be modified for the second iteration.

## 5. SECOND ITERATION 2003

When developing the second iteration, student feedback and researchers’ observations were considered. The interview session was retained as it was the highlight of the day for students. During the first iteration we found the interview session to have too much of a delay for students while they waited to be interviewed by the panel. It was also quite daunting for students to be interviewed in front of the whole group. Based on this it was decided to split the groups for the mock interview panel session into two. Other changes made were to reduce the delivery from a full day to a half day. The least popular sessions on employment agreements and personal presentation were removed to accommodate for this reduction in time. Following is an outline of the sessions included.

### Industry Lunch

To begin the day, lunch was provided for the students and industry representatives which enabled both groups to communicate in a non-formal setting.

### Keynote Speaker from Industry

The speaker was an IT manager from a large organisation in Palmerston North who framed the module, highlighting the importance of soft skills in the workplace and what is expected from new graduates entering and working within the workforce. This address reinforced the need for soft skills, not just for the interview but to ensure the maintenance of a successful career.

### CV Preparation

A CV consultant presented this session. It was pitched to the IS/IT industry and an overview was given of the different types of CV styles that can be used, highlighting the need for a concise CV targeted to each individual job application.

### Industry Presenters

Two industry representatives gave a 15 minute presentation on how their organisation recruits and interviews potential employees and what they look for personally when they are interviewing.

### Interview Role Plays

Students were split into two groups with two industry representatives on each panel. This ran in a similar way to the first iteration with each student being interviewed individually. The two groups gave more time for follow up questions and feedback to students. The smaller group also made it less intimidating for the students.

### Recruitment Consultant

To complete the day, a recruitment consultant reinforced qualities desired by employers that had been mentioned during the day while giving an overview of the services offered by recruitment agencies.

## 6. STUDENT EVALUATION

All of the students indicated that the module would assist them when preparing for interview’s with the I399 project sponsors. The perceived benefits included a higher level of confidence, a chance to practice, and the revelation that a lot of preparation is needed for an interview. Students were asked if they would recommend that the skills covered in the module be incorporated into the third year of the degree programme. All students indicated that they would, reasons given included that it provided students with an insight into the real world, being able to communicate with other levels of people, and covering what is expected in the workforce.

## 7. CURRICULUM ISSUES

Currently the degree has a communication paper in year one (which covers both written and interpersonal communication) and there is then no further formal delivery in this area. At this level students often don’t see the value and relevance, possibly because they are not ready for the concepts. The programme evaluations conducted each year support this view.

As a result of the research carried out in 2002, the researchers see that there is a need for more than just a one-off delivery of soft skills and that it needs to be appropriately timed and integrated within the curriculum. During year two, students work in groups to complete assessments and therefore gain valuable applied skills in teamwork. The researchers believe that it would be more appropriate to deliver interpersonal communication topics in their third year as a

prerequisite for their industry project where they can see more relevance. This unit would contain applied interpersonal communication and professional practice principles which include topics such as; negotiating and listening skills, problem solving, interview techniques, and IS relationship building. It is envisaged that the I399 Industry Project Unit move from a 40 to a 50 credit paper. Ten of these credits would be completed in semester one focusing on applied interpersonal communication and professional practice. The remaining 40 (400 hour industry based project) credits would be undertaken in semester two.

To avoid duplication of content in year one and year three, there may be a need to revise the year one communication unit to focus more on written communication.

## 8. FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The intention in 2003 is to modify the I399 curriculum to incorporate the pre-employment training as a course requirement of students' industry project unit for delivery in 2004. Attention will also be given to revising the year one communication unit to perhaps a more practical communication unit.

It is expected that after receiving pre-employment training, students will be better prepared and more successful when entering the workforce. This training has also enabled students to see the relevance of soft skills and it is hoped now that it will facilitate their progression from graduate to IS professional.

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