

Employability Skills in UK Economics Degrees?

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<https://www.economicsnetwork.ac.uk/research/employability>

Economics Network Special Session, DEE2019

Assuming an economics department wants to embed employability skills in an undergraduate degree,

What should they do?

What can they learn from others?

Why are we looking at this?

**Teaching Excellence
and Student Outcomes
Framework:**
Subject-level pilot guide



1. Policy priority -
but employment outcomes not
input to skills development

UK universities + Add to myFT

UK economics graduates lack required skills, study finds

Universities failing to equip them with the ability to think critically

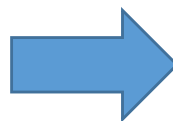
Chris Giles, Economics Editor JULY 26, 2018

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2. Right to reply -
criticism of economics education in
the context of graduate skills



**Developments in
Economics Education
conference 2017**



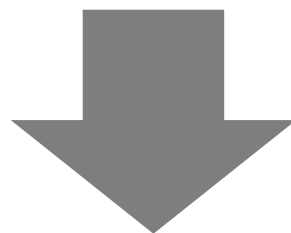
3. Move conversation forward -
positive about what is being done,
realistic about challenges and
practical suggestions on what next

Literature

Employer Surveys
(2012, 2015, 2019)

Survey of economics
departments (2019)

Focus groups – employers, alumni, students and academics



1. Are there gaps between the skills employers seek and observe in UK economics graduates and the skills that UK departments prioritise in their degrees?
2. How do UK economics departments embed the development of employability skills in their undergraduate economics degrees and how effective are the approaches used?
3. What challenges need to be overcome to improve the development of employability skills in UK undergraduate economics degrees?

A graphical/descriptive indication of how economics degrees are doing as of 2018/19 and food for thought for further discussion

1. Small sample (39/95 econ departments)
2. Narrow/leading definition of employability
3. Issues with interpretation of questions
4. Biased answers to questions
5. Selection bias

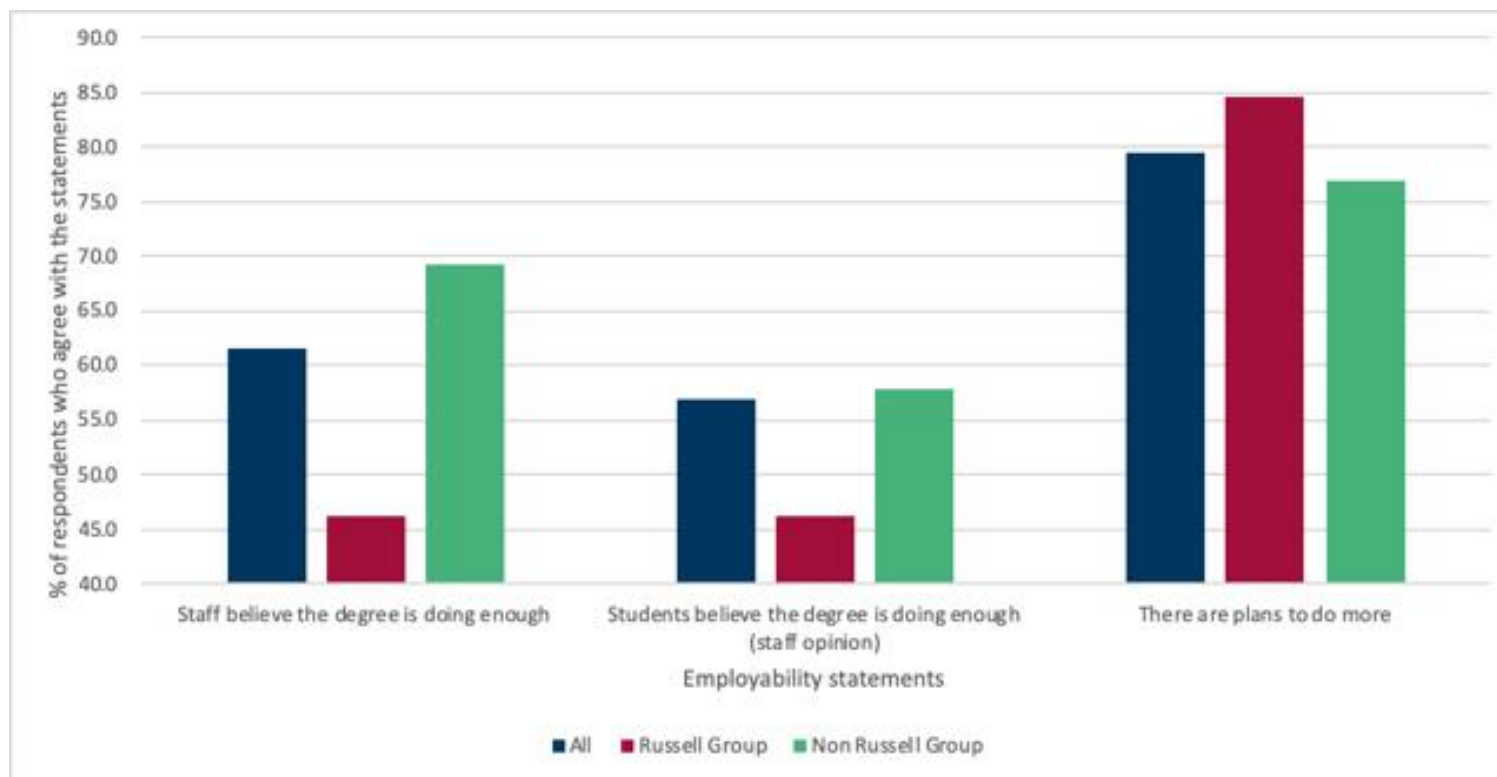
1. Are there gaps between the skills employers seek and observe in UK economics graduates and the skills that UK departments prioritise in their degrees?

Is there a skills gap?

Skill area	Employer priority rank - 1= top priority	Degree priority rank - 1 = top priority	Employer concern about graduate skill
Communication	2	3	HIGH
Application to the real world	1	2	MEDIUM
Data analysis	3	1	LOW
Collaboration	-	5	HIGH
Wider skills	4	4	HIGH

Note: red indicates higher priority/higher concern.

Do economics departments think they are doing enough?



Many changes are very recent/in pilot phase

Matter of focus/interpretation?

Skill area	Employer focus	Economic degree focus
Communication	Written and oral Non-expert audiences Complex material in accessible manner Summarise key messages Good listening skills	Academic Writing far more than presentations
Application	Solve policy and commercial problems Formulate research questions Develop logical frameworks Identify necessary evidence Draw critical, well-reasoned conclusions from available evidence Simplify complex ideas	'Apply economics to real world contexts' - what does this mean to academic? Little 'Solving policy or commercial problems' or 'Simplifying complex ideas to make them accessible'

Skill area	Employer focus	Economic degree focus
Data analysis	Identify, download, clean and organise data on their own Manipulate large and complex datasets Microsoft Excel proficiency Practical knowledge of econometrics (no specific packages) Programming abilities/coding skills (no specific packages) Self-teach new techniques Understand what data is inferring and be able to explain to broad audience	Work with (small) datasets provided Some Excel, but recent Econometric/technical analysis (R, Stata) Some but limited programming Present results to academic audience

Matter of focus/interpretation?

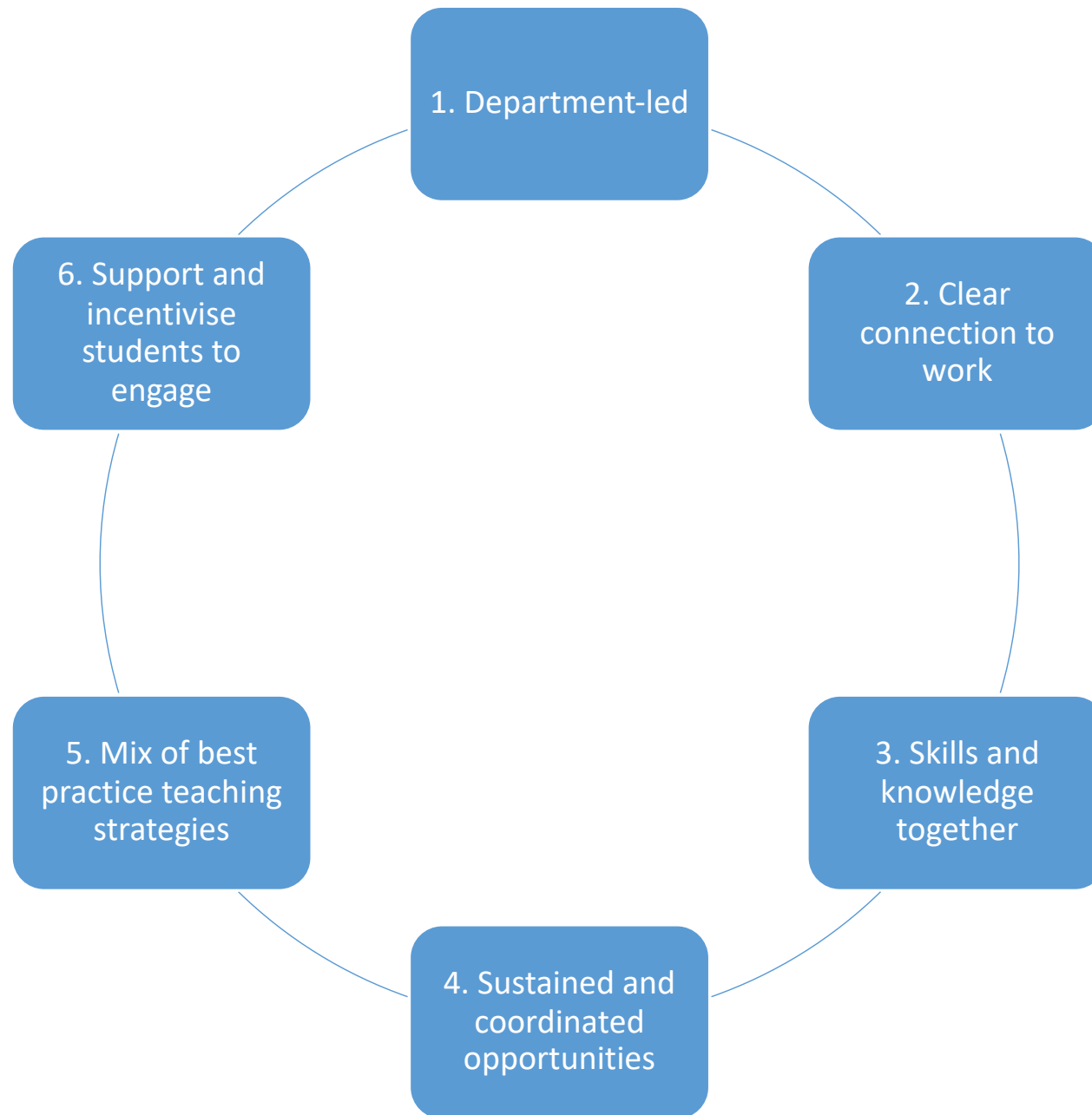
Skill area	Employer focus	Economic degree focus
Collaboration	Work in teams with people from variety of specialisms Strong inter-personal skills Adaptability	Little formal focus in degree, particularly with non-economists Students may work together in 'black economy' of collaboration
Wider Skills	Appreciation of how to learn Flexibility Resilience Independent thinking Proactive Creativity and imagination Loyalty Time management Tenacity	Independent thinking Time management Implicit – not explicitly built in

Questions for discussion

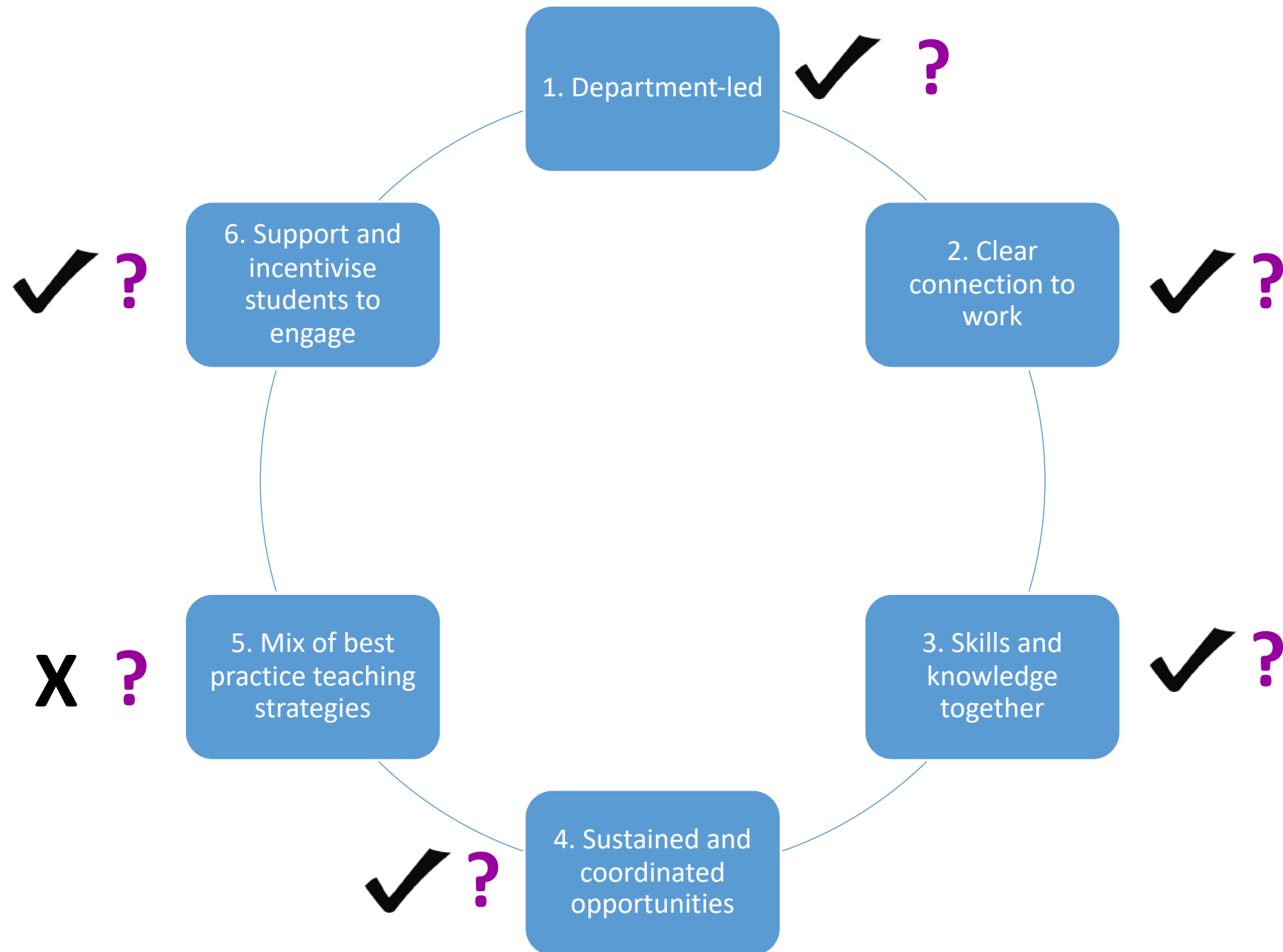
1. Is the gap inevitable?
2. How can academics move away from (narrow) academic-focus?

2. How do UK economics departments embed the development of employability skills in their undergraduate economics degrees and how effective are the approaches used?

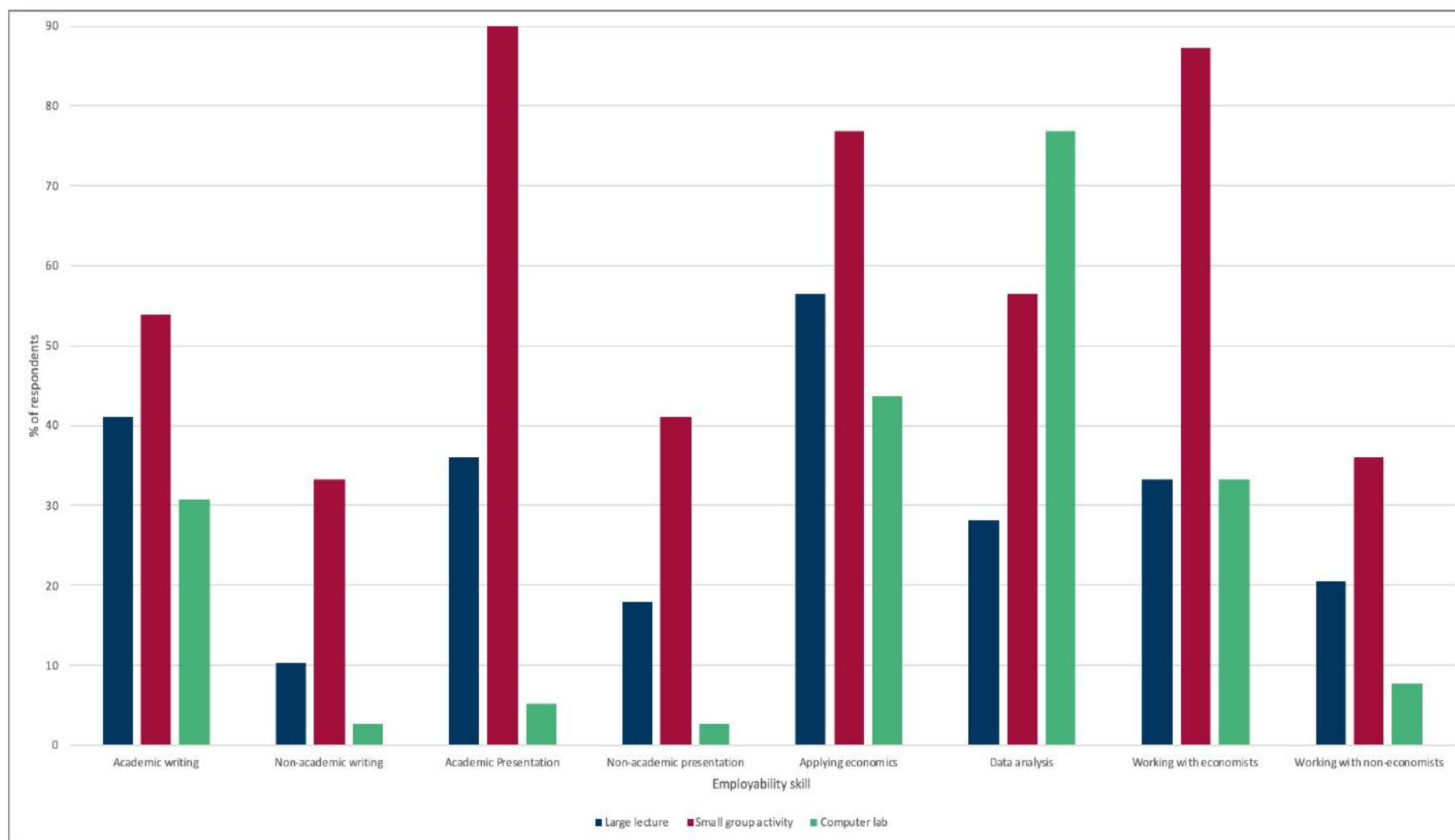
Criteria for effective skill development?



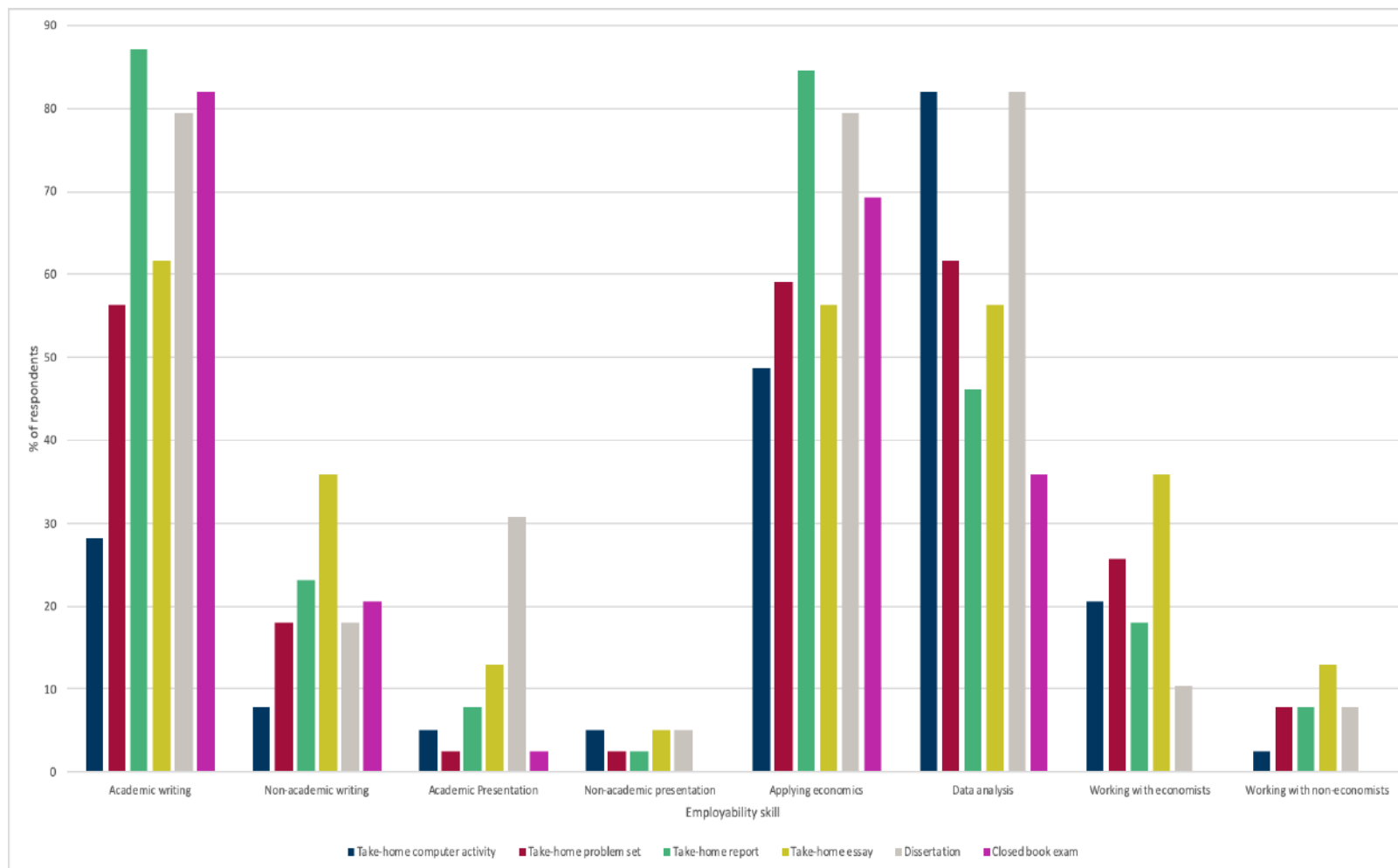
Doing okay at face value



What are students doing in the classroom?



The design of activities, and the nature of the output, matters



- Lots of academic writing, applying economics and data analysis in compulsory economics modules
- High proportion of academic writing work is summatively assessed. Reasonable proportion for 'applying economics' and 'data analysis'

Impact on skill development, and student engagement, depends on nature of assessment and whether students see the connection

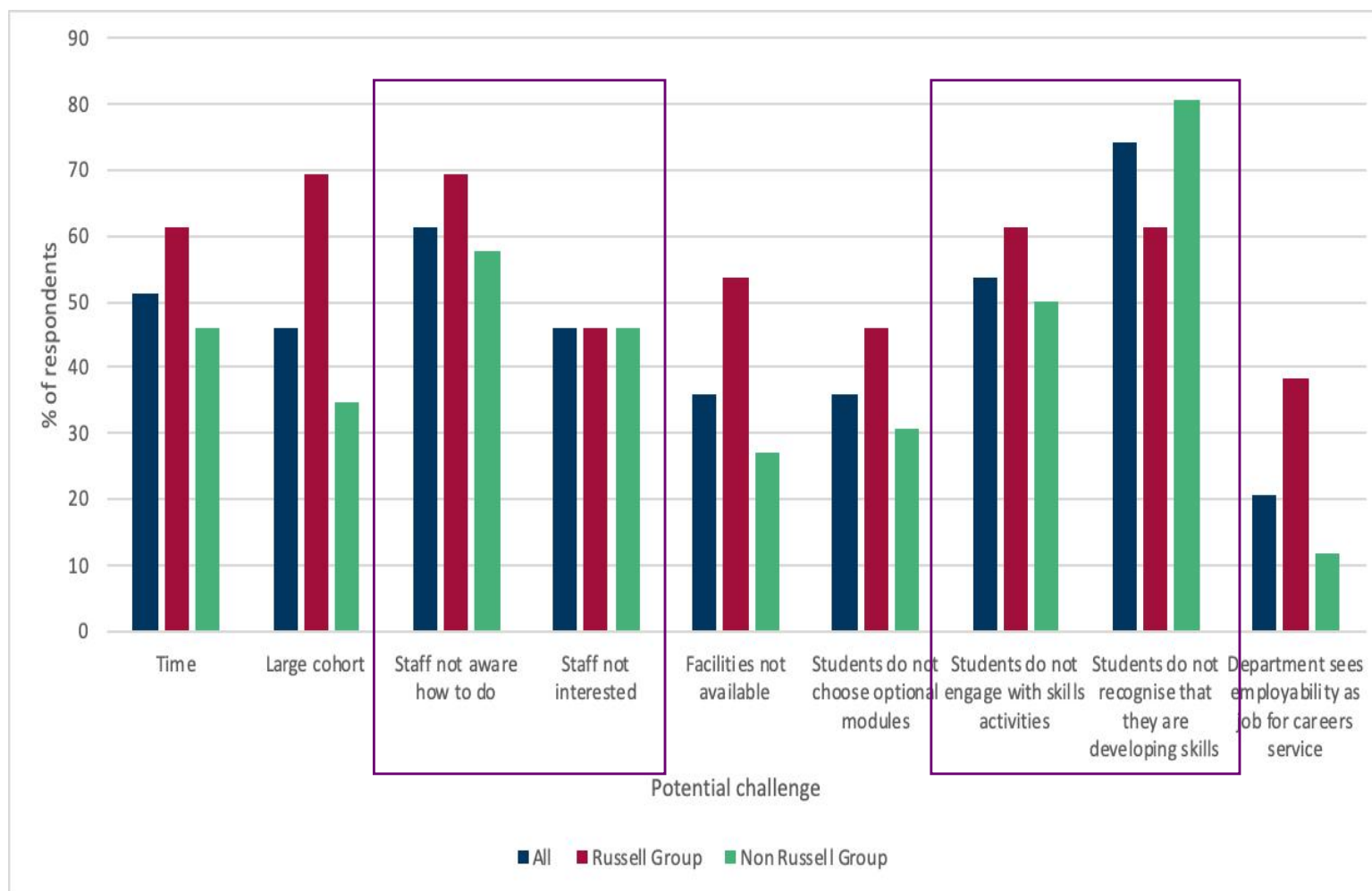
Questions for discussion

Assuming skill development is in economics modules, mix of compulsory and optional across years, and is assessed

1. How ensure students are genuinely learning by doing in classroom and in independent learning time?
2. How ensure activities and assessments reflect realities of work activities/outputs?
3. How get more of a focus on the 'under-represented' skills?

3. What challenges need to be overcome to improve the development of employability skills in UK undergraduate economics degrees?

Percentage of respondents who agreed challenge was a problem or significant problem



Get students to engage and recognise their skill development

- Assess skill-related activities
- Make sure skills part of assessment is worth enough credit
- Be clear on how skill is needed to do well
- Tell students what skills they are developing
- Use reflective opportunities
- Convince students that skills in degree help with career
- Explain that skills in degree help with degree performance (if true)

Support and incentivise staff to do more on skill development

- More employer-lecturer working on module materials/delivery
- Help lecturers find employer connections
- Persuade employers to devote resource
- Suggest lecturers work on areas they are most confident in (research-skills)
- Learn from other disciplines
- Value innovation in this area in promotion criteria/reward those who put in effort
- Make it a **requirement**
- Hire staff to focus on connecting degree and employability skills

Questions for discussion

1. Are these suggestions to improve student and staff engagement feasible/credible?
2. Are they enough?

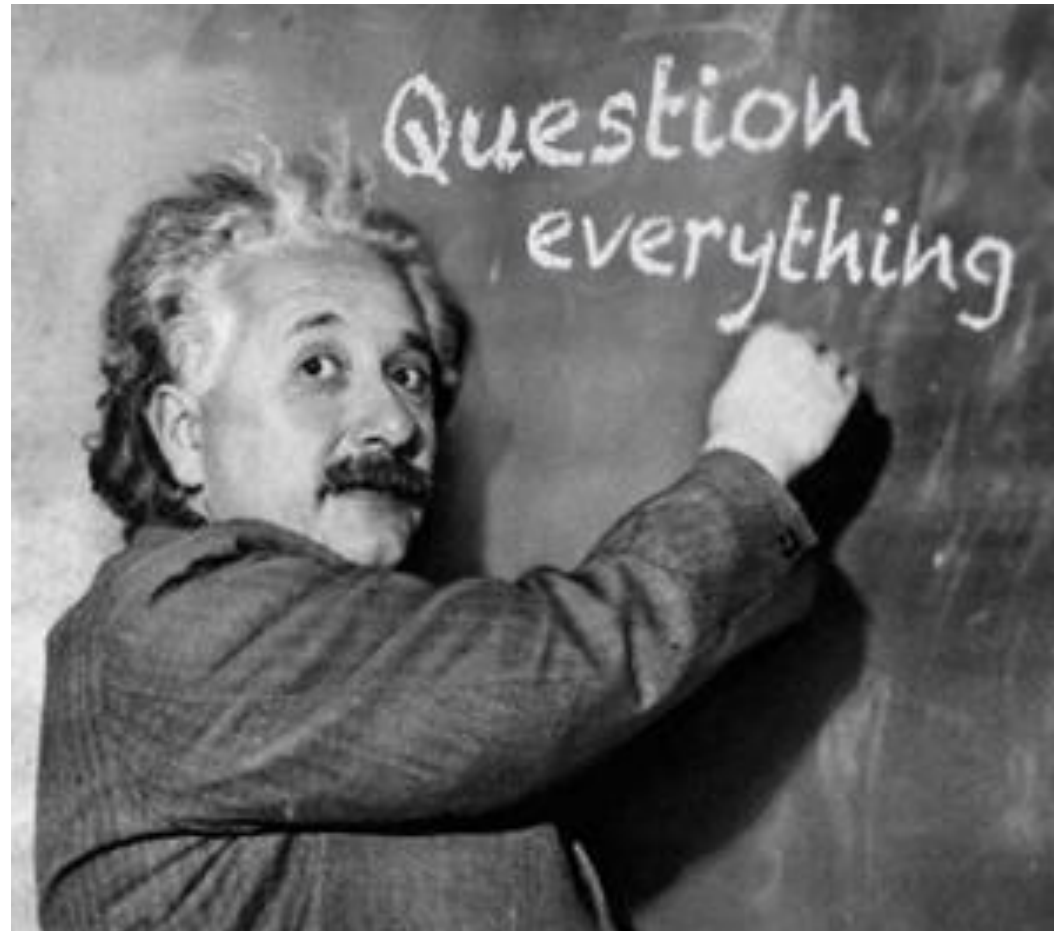
Finalise report, taking account of our discussions and any follow-on comments

Keep the conversation going

- DEE2019
- Other forum with employers/alumni/students?

Practical help for lecturers/departments willing to give it a go

- Economics Network Guide for Lecturers
- Employability Case Studies
- Talk to employers about how to connect willing employees/alumni with interested lecturers



Any further questions/comments?

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