Breaking Stereotype in the Development of Employability Skills Using Flexible Learning and Pedagogical Tools: A Multiple Study of Business Schools

Habib, A

School of Innovative Leadership and Strategic Management; The Academy for Advance Studies (TAAS), UK

ahabib@taasltd.com

Abstract **-** *The study sought to explore students' and teachers' perspectives on the development of 21st-century employability skills for business students in four different countries through flexible learning pedagogical tools and approaches. Notwithstanding the notable successes recorded in the field of flexible learning over the years, some people are still wondering about the effectiveness of these teaching and learning tools when compared to students being on campus for studies. This study helps to establish the importance of flexible learning pedagogical tools in the development of employability skills for students in business schools across four different continents. The current study argues that flexible learning pedagogical tools should be paid more attention to by higher education providers to encourage and deepen students' learning experience in business schools.*

The study has shown that some pedagogical tools are more effective in the flexible learning environment than the traditional universities, due to the level of acceptability by the students and academics sampled for this study. Moreover, the use of pedagogical tools such as lectures, class debates, group projects, case studies, internships, technology-embedded tools such as smartphones or iPads, multiple-choice tests, essay tests and term papers were found to be effective and fit for purpose by most of the participants. They linked the level of effectiveness to the employability skills they offer along with factors such as students' preferences, learning styles, prior learning, motivation, academic choice based on their previous experiences or willingness to deliver certain pedagogical tools, assessment methods, learning cultural aspects and the backgrounds of both academics and students along with where the learning is taking place. It identifies the key tools used within a flexible learning environment such as lectures and especially videos of lectures uploaded on Moodle for the students to access at any time and anywhere (accessibility of learning materials).

The study findings revealed role play, case studies, class discussion, group projects, guest speakers, internships, MCQs/essays/term papers, reading, and homework were efficient post-COVID learning in fostering 21st-century employability skills for business students. Also, due to the flexible nature of teaching and learning technology embedded tools such as social media, mobile devices, games, and simulation are becoming more and more popular and adopted by various academics in their teaching pedagogy. The effectiveness of the learning and teaching tools relies on the employability skills undergraduate students develop during their studies. Most of the students and academics sampled for this study were satisfied with the delivery of the course delivery and the level of employability skills developed from them. The main challenge of educators is to identify the key link between pedagogical tools and employability skills they develop and utilise to promote 21st-century graduate skill sets.

The current research project confirmed that the flexible learning approach leverages the benefits of pedagogy and learning technology to offer an engaging, educative, and bespoke learning experience that assists business students to realise their potential. It is recommended that learning providers construct and evaluate learning infrastructures, policies, and practices to provide inclusive and accessible learning opportunities that promote successful learner engagement and belonging, to guarantee a positive experience in business schools.

1. Introduction

With a growing focus on flexible learning and how it could effectively contribute towards the development of undergraduate employability skills in business schools. This paper provides an analysis of the most effective pedagogical tools to develop 21st-century employability skills. The was data collected from the business schools in the United Kingdom, Germany, Pakistan, and Canada by using the template analysis designed for this study. The research provides both students' and academic perspectives in the context and the results help the other business schools around the world to adopt these pedagogical tools to develop the employability skills for their undergraduate business students.

1.1 Objectives of the research

Learner and teacher perspectives on the effectiveness of current pedagogical tools and their contribution to 21st-century skill development.

2. Methodology

The research follows a case study design via three phases of data collection. Phase one enabled the researcher to review documents such as the module handbook, scheme of work and lesson plans related to the delivery of each module to assess the suggested pedagogical tools and skills the course could offer the students. In the second stage, students' perspectives on the effectiveness of pedagogical tools used in their degree were evaluated, using Qualtrics and SPSS. The questionnaire-based survey assessed the perspective and satisfaction of undergraduate students with the pedagogical tools, interaction with academics and skills development in various countries. In phase three, interviews were conducted with the relevant academics teaching these undergraduate courses to understand their perspective on the use of these pedagogical tools and their effectiveness in developing key employment skills. To analyse the data, a coding frame or template was designed as the use of the template enables the researcher to use a priori themes (King & Brooks, 2017). For this study, an initial coding template was developed and tested for the pilot study which helps to analyse the data collected from individual cases to answer the objectives set out for this study, while linking to the literature.

3. **Review learner and teacher perspectives on the effectiveness of current pedagogical tools and their contribution to 21st-century skill development**

One of the main reasons for carrying out this study was to understand the students' and teachers' perspectives on the effectiveness of various pedagogical tools within flexible learning which can support students in developing the employability skills they require. According to Traxler (2018), it is critical to have the ability to make the lecture, which is already very cost-effective, more interactive, and flexible. As Traxler (2018) further illustrated, enabling flexibility helps students acquire employability skills and an emphasis on problem-solving, teamwork, and real-world situations makes learning more authentic and open-ended. The study found similarities and differences in the choices of students and academics in terms of which tools allow for skill development. These effective tools are discussed in detail concerning the literature currently available on them.

1) *3.1. Lecture*

The lecture is the most traditional and practised pedagogical tool in various business schools. The tool helps to deliver the main concepts of the topic by the academic. The current study from four different universities shows the effectiveness of lectures through the perception of students and academics.

a) Students' perspective

The survey from the four business schools shows that the students still seemed to prefer lectures and lecture notes in the UK, Pakistan, and Canada. On the other hand, German students found the tool ineffective and academics from all universities showed a mixed response regarding the effectiveness of this tool. Table (01) below shows the students' choices made within each country regarding this tool.

Table 01 - Effectiveness of lectures

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
UK	35%	50%	13%	-	2%
Germany	13%	57%	30%	-	-
Pakistan	50%	35%	11%	3%	1%
Canada	8%	58%	35%	-	-

b) Academic perspective

The views of the academics present in this study support Millers & Metz (2013) regarding the effectiveness of this pedagogical tool, they found it useful in increasing student alertness, motivation, interest in the course being

offered, collaborative learning and the development of lifelong learning skills, all of which are important in helping students to secure their employment of choice. However, the present study also revealed that some were not so happy with the effectiveness of this tool. UK and Canadian academics suggested that the students should be offered freedom and independence in learning, and some reflected on their work, stating that they act as "*more of a facilitator rather than a dictator*". In addition, academics in the UK, Germany and Canada believed that lectures could be an important tool, but not in developing employability skills.

The academics also believed that this tool should be used in conjunction with other pedagogical tools to make it beneficial in flexible learning. Similar findings were found in studies by Mahrous and Ahmad (2010) and Titarenko and Little (2017). However, the study carried out by Mahrous and Ahmad (2010) showed that students in the UK and the USA seemed to be less in favour of lectures and required more interactive learning to accelerate their involvement and provide a wider understanding of the topic by using pedagogical tools such as class debates, group work, flexibility, and real-world exposure. This study provides similar results when compared to Mahrous and Ahmad (2010) but does not

disregard the effectiveness of lectures and lecture notes.

c) Link with the literature

From the literature, Millers and Metz (2013) were found to be in favour of the lecture to be an effective tool but other researchers such as Mahrous and Ahmad (2010) and Titarenko and Little (2017) found this tool less effective in the UK and USA.

Based on the present study, it is concluded that students in the UK, Germany, Pakistan, and Canada still prefer this tool despite the mixed reviews from the academics and the literature review. The current findings also show that this tool is more effective when used in conjunction with other tools and is deemed to be suitable for flexible learning as well.

2) 3.2. *PowerPoint and lecture notes*

The use of PowerPoints and lecture notes to support the lecture is another important pedagogical tool used by various business schools. The effectiveness of this tool in flexible learning was evaluated by examining the perception of students and academics. The findings are explained below.

a) Students' perspective

PowerPoint was found to be more effective among students in the UK and Canada when compared to students in Germany and

Pakistan. The student views on the PowerPoint tool are summarised below in Table (02).

Table 02. Effectiveness of PowerPoint

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
UK	25%	58%	13%	2%	2%
Germany	4%	30%	52%	9%	4%
Pakistan	27%	35%	29%	5%	3%
Canada	9%	64%%	27%	-	-

b) Academic perspective

Academics in the UK and Canadians support the effectiveness of this tool, which is very similar to the finding suggested by Kim et al. (2019). Academic engagement is vital in every learning situation, according to Kim et al. (2019), including face-to-face, online, and hybrid courses that involve PowerPoint presentations and lecture notes. According to academics, this tool used within the classroom or for online learning can help to improve the attention span of students, improve content recall during exams and emphasise key lecture points. The studies also showed some drawbacks of using this tool. The academics in Pakistan highlighted the importance of the tool but agreed with the German academics and students that PowerPoints are not effective in one sense as students can choose not to attend classes and skip taking notes knowing the information is available online. Kim (2018) acknowledges that higher education settings have similar drawbacks.

The effectiveness of PowerPoint is limited across learning cultures as students expressed little preference whilst academics find it more effective. A tool like lecture notes is more engaging and provides more information, allowing academics to structure the lecture rather than developing any essential employability skills. Lecture notes were found to be effective in the UK, Pakistan and, to some extent, in Canada. However, the students in Germany seem to be less in favour of this pedagogical tool, as shown below in Table (03).

Table 03. Effectiveness of lecture notes

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
UK	32%	52%	14%	-	2%
Germany	9%	39%	52%	-	-

Paki stan	47%	37%	12%	2%	1%
Cana da	9%	54%	36%	-	-

In addition, academics in the UK, Germany and Canada believed that lecture notes could be an important tool in developing skills among the students, such as communication, but that they are more effective in providing students with resources such as additional reading and support for their assessments. Academics in all countries agreed that the tool is not effective in developing employability skills among undergraduate business students.

c) Linking with the literature review

In a recent study, Teng et al. (2019) also suggested that lecture notes were not as important as soft skills development or transferability skills that are essential for employability. According to the findings of Teng et al. (2019), universities in both China and Malaysia have the potential to boost students' soft skill development for the fourth industrial revolution job market by expanding their curriculum and potentially changing their teaching and learning methods. In addition, Trelevan et al. (2014) and Robert (2018) presented a mixed review of their study and did not find any specific advantages in developing key skills among the students. The tool was found more beneficial for providing a structure during the lecture delivery.

This tool seems to be considered less effective by both students and academics and similar findings were extracted from the literature to support this. Therefore, this tool may be regarded as one that provides additional support and has limited scope for use and success within flexible learning.

3) 3.3 Class debates, group projects, case studies

Class debates, group projects and case studies effectiveness were found among the students and academics in the four business schools.

a) Students' perspective

Within the UK, Germany, Pakistan and Canada, students favoured the use of class debates and case studies.

Table 04. Effectiveness of class debates, group projects, and case studies.

Pedagogical tool	Case	Extremely Important	Very important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
Class debates	UK	28%	61%	11%	-	-
	Germany	26%	43%	30%	-	-
	Pakistan	36%	33%	17%	5%	3%
	Canada	36%	45%	18%	-	2%
Group project	UK	25%	60%	13%	2%	-
	Germany	13%	65%	21%	-	-
	Pakistan	39%	36%	17%	5%	3%
	Canada	27%	36%	36%	-	9%
Case studies	UK	27%	67%	6%	-	-
	Germany	65%	30%	4%	-	-
	Pakistan	46%	38%	11%	3%	1%
	Canada	27%	45%	27%	-	-

As the above table shows, in Canada, students were found to be not so keen on the use of group projects but the students the from UK, Germany and Pakistan agreed on the effectiveness of the pedagogical tools.

b) Academic perspective

Academics from all business schools suggested that class debates, group projects and case study tools were found to be effective in the flexible learning environment as they provide students with an opportunity to prepare an argument, engage with a rebuttal and engage in civilised debate to learn together as part of a team despite being geographically dispersed from each other. Mahrous and Ahmed (2010) proposed a similar benefit, claiming that students find group work more interesting and beneficial if followed by prior individual preparation, so they can learn better from each other's experiences and insights. In terms of 21st-century learning skills and looking at future entrepreneurial and managerial roles, academics suggested that incorporating case studies within the group activities allows students to understand real-life scenarios and business problems. The present findings were also supported by the studies of Mahrous and Ahmad (2010) and Johansson (2016), which

suggest case studies broaden students' learning skills and are essential in developing transferability skills.

Exploring the group project, academics in London highlighted their concerns, as students are reluctant to engage in group work, and once asked to form groups, they try to stick with the classmates they already know, which negates the basics of teamwork. Academics from Canada voiced that it is not always possible to incorporate group projects due to tight schedules and strict course outlines or the subject matter of certain courses, such as the principles of microeconomics; this was apparent in Johansson's (2016) findings. Therefore, some academics try to use alternative pedagogical tools. Academics also suggested some disadvantages, such as that not all students put the same amount of effort into group work. A risk of free-riding is a potential drawback for using the group work approach along with the fact that one-third of students say they prefer to work alone rather than in a group. This study also found similar disadvantages related to the use of group work as highlighted by Mahdi, Nassar and Almuslamani (2020) and Stenberg et al. (2019) in their studies related to group projects.

c) Link with the literature

Class debates, group projects and case studies were found to be effective tools in developing the necessary skills with or without the use of other pedagogical tools. Studies from Choi and Ro (2012) revealed that class debates were most effective in developing employability skills. Other research by Yang and Rusli (2012) and Titarenko and Little (2017) also indicated that class debates were an effective tool that helped students develop their critical thinking and higher-order thinking skills.

An investigation from Stenburg et al. (2019) related to group work in business schools also showed that students work better in groups. The group work also allows international students to develop the confidence and skills to study away from home.

The use of case studies in business schools was found to be an effective tool by Gonglewski and Helm (2010), Vega (2010) and Johansson (2016) but some researchers found it more suitable for postgraduate students (Mesny, 2013; Trejo-Pech and White, 2017; Ambrosini, Bowman and Collier, 2010). All researchers agreed that these pedagogical tools helped students to develop skills such as communication, negotiation, team building, creativity, innovation, and problem-solving.

The tools were found to be essential pedagogical tools across the various business

schools and the available literature.   These tools allow the students to practice real-world scenarios, communicate among themselves and share knowledge, which allows for a deeper understanding of topics and, in the meantime, develops various employability skills, as suggested by academics. The tool was found to be effective and useful for the flexible learning environment.

4) 3.4.   Internship

Internships allow the students to bridge the gap between the theory and the actual workplace. The tools allow the students to gain the working experience of the actual workplace by spending three to six months as an intern. It allows the student to get practical experience related to a particular industry. The effectiveness of this tool in flexible learning was examined and the following findings were concluded:

a) Student perspective

Internships are another tool found to be effective in developing key skills by students in all countries as summarised below in Table (05). The students in all business schools agreed on the effectiveness of the internship.

Table 05. Effectiveness of Internship

	Impo rtant	rtant	Impor tant	Impo rtant	Impo rtant
UK	15%	58%	25%	-	2%
Germany	13%	65%	22%	0	0
Pakistan	47%	30%	14%	4%	3%
Canada	9%	54%	27%	9%	0

b) Academics perspective

Academics across the business schools favoured the internship as an effective tool and shared their voice about how using it for both undergraduate and graduate students is not ideal. The academics in the UK found these tools to be more effective for the postgraduate students rather than the undergraduate students. However, all other academics agreed that internships bridge the gap between career expectations developed within the classrooms or online settings and the reality of employment in the real world. However, while academics in Pakistan and Canada agreed about the importance of this tool, they were not directly involved in setting up opportunities for their students.

The findings also show that the universities in Canada, Pakistan and Germany have incorporated internships in their business and

Case s	Extre mely	Very Impo	Mode rately	Slight ly	Not at all

management courses to allow students to gain essential work experience.

Some academics also raised challenges related to implementing this approach, such as insufficient internship opportunities and opportunities only in administration rather than the actual area of specialisation due to GDPR and other data sensitivity issues. A similar challenge was highlighted by the studies of Gault et al. (2010) and Mohaidin et al. (2017).

c) Link with the literature review

Studies carried out by Gault et al. (2010), Velez and Giner (2014) and Mohaidin et al. (2017) identified that students, employers, and higher education institutes can all obtain benefits from this pedagogical tool. Institutions and employers can hire inexpensive, qualified, and highly motivated labour, and students have an opportunity to work in the actual workplace, gain first-hand work experience and be placed in long-term employment. The tool was found to be effective in developing a variety of skills, such as adaptability, commercial awareness, organisational skills, leadership, data analysis, managing, problem-solving skills, critical thinking, effective communication, and resilience, which were deemed important skills by employers in the QS global survey (2018).

Mentoring as a tool was found to be effective by the students in all business schools and the academics also shared the same perspective as the students. Despite some of the drawbacks, the tool was found to be one of the most effective for 21st-century learners in a flexible learning environment, as it allows students to practice what they have learned and become familiar with the actual workplace.

5) 3.5.   Guest speakers

This tool allows the students to acquire industry-related information or experience directly via the person who represents a certain industry or occupation. The effectiveness of this tool for flexible learning was examined in four different business schools and the findings are presented below:

Students' perspective: This tool was considered less effective by students in all countries. Table (06) below provides the summary of the results which shows that this tool was found more important by students in Germany than those in the UK, Canada, and Pakistan.

Table 06. Effectiveness of guest speaker

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important

UK	15%	46%	35%	2%	2%
Germany	9%	35%	52%	4%	0
Pakistan	22%	37%	29%	9%	3%
Canada	18%	36%	36%	9%	0

a) Academic perspective

However, academics in the UK, Germany and Canada offered a very mixed assessment as some believed that the tool allows the students to get first-hand experience of the industry and the various roles they can embark on even before starting their jobs. In contrast, some academics seem to disagree with the effectiveness of this tool and prefer internships.

The study also found that information provided by the guest speakers allows students to better prepare for job interviews, boosts confidence and allows for networking opportunities. The tool allows students to develop skills such as industry knowledge and organisational skills.

b) Link with the literature

Fawcett and Fawcett (2011) and Schumann (2019) assert that guest speakers are an effective pedagogical tool. However, the literature also suggests certain conditions need to be fulfilled before the implementation of this in the class. Rebie et al. (2013) highlighted that the learning culture and learning styles play an important role in the expectation and perception of the international and domestic elements for this tool to be effective.

The tool was seen as less effective by the students and provoked a mixed response from the academics for this study. The findings from the literature (Schumann, 2019; Snowden & Halsall, 2014; Riebe et al., 2013; Fawcett & Fawcett, 2011) show that the tool was effective for students' future employability. The findings related to current studies linked more closely to Mahrous and Ahmed (2012) where research shows that students might not take guest speakers seriously and perceive them as more of a fun or recreational activity and, therefore, may not benefit from them. The tool was found less suitable for a flexible learning environment.

6) 3.6. Mentoring

Mentoring, like internships and guest speakers, allows students to bridge the gap between academic training and real-world business skills and helps them develop training and managerial skills.

a) Students' perspective

The students from the UK, Germany and Canada seemed to favour mentoring as summarised below in Table (07). However, students in Pakistan do not seem to be in favour of this tool. The table below provides the students' opinions according to their country of study.

Table 07. Effectiveness of Mentoring

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
UK	18%	57%	22%	3%	-
Germany	52%	39%	8%	0	0
Pakistan	43%	38%	17%	2%	1%
Canada	18%	45%	27%	9%	0

b) Academic perspective

In terms of academics, only the faculty in the UK considered mentoring to be a useful tool, whereas those in Germany, Pakistan and Canada believed that mentoring as a tool is more effective for postgraduate students and not effective for undergraduate students. The various benefits discovered in this study are similar to those discovered in the research of Pleschova and McAlpine (2015) and Spence and Hyams-Ssekasi (2015).

The data collected from the interviews with academics showed a mixed response. Most academics were in favour of this tool as it helps to develop skills such as communication, self-efficacy, resilience, teamwork, life-long learning, and critical thinking. However, some academics from the UK and Pakistan believed that mentoring should be done at a postgraduate level as students became more experienced and aware of their professional journey. In addition, some drawbacks of mentoring at the undergraduate level were revealed, as it is a tool that is very time-consuming, and universities might have limited mentors within the chosen career path. These findings were also supported by Spence and Hyams-Ssekasi (2015) in their research. Some academics also mentioned that pedagogical tools such as case studies and group work were more effective when compared to mentoring undergraduate students. Overall, the tool was not supported by many academics at an undergraduate level.

c) Link with the literature

The studies carried out by Pleschova and McAlpine (2015) and Spence and Hyams-Ssekasi (2015) favoured the use of mentoring as an effective pedagogical tool but Spence and

Hyams-Ssekasi (2015) also highlighted some of the drawbacks which limited the scope and use of this pedagogical tool as discussed earlier.

The tool was favoured by the students, but the academics seemed to be more reluctant in its use at the undergraduate level. Academics preferred other tools such as internships and group projects more suitable for business and management students at the undergraduate level. The effectiveness of this tool in flexible learning was found to be limited as the academics perceived other tools that met the student's needs at the undergraduate level to be better.

7) 3.7. Roleplay

The tool allows the students to assume the role and carry out various tasks or actions assigned either in pairs or groups. The findings are summarised below.

a) Students' perspective

This tool received a mixed response from the students. The students in Germany and Canada seemed to find this tool effective but the UK and Pakistan students found this tool to be less effective, as shown in table (08) below.

Table 08. Effectiveness of role play

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
UK	26%	51%	20%	3%	-
Germany	13%	56%	30%	-	-
Pakistan	32%	38%	17%	7%	3%
Canada	18%	45%	27%	9%	-

b) Academics' perspective

Academics from different business schools seem to offer a mixed response. Some academics seem to favour it but only for some subjects within business modules such as accounting or human resources. Some academics also linked role play with games and simulation. In contrast, academics from Germany and Pakistan seemed to be reluctant to its use within an online setting. The academic from Pakistan who was teaching online mentioned that "the need was never felt to use it as other tools such as group discussions were enough". Other academics from Germany and Canada seem reluctant to use this pedagogical tool due to time restrictions and limited use of certain subjects. However, UK academics agreed with the

effectiveness of these tools when used in conjunction with games, other simulations, or social media platforms, as highlighted in the research of Russell and Shepard (2010). A further perceived problem highlighted by the academics related to role-playing in activities where the participant receives feedback from the other participants is that data collected suggests that it was debatable whether the feedback was congruent with the anticipated outcome. Overall, the academics from the UK agreed its effectiveness as a formative assessment tool, but not for employability.

c) **Link with the literature**

Russell and Shepard found the tool to be effective when supported by technology based on a simulation builder, as part of LMS or linked with social media platforms for a more cost-effective role-play experience for the students. Kettula and Berghall (2012) also found among marketing students that this tool was an effective supplementary tool that allowed the students to practice real-life scenarios. However, some drawbacks were suggested by the researchers and the effectiveness of this tool was found to be limited despite its ability to deliver employability skills such as critical thinking, teamwork, problem-solving, adaptation and conflict management.

The tool seems to be effective for students, but academics seemed to be reluctant to use this tool, either due to the nature of the module being delivered or the time restrictions during a semester. The effectiveness of this tool within a flexible learning environment seems challenging and requires more sophisticated infrastructure and further training for both students and academics, even post-pandemic.

8) *3.8.   Technology-embedded tools*

Technology-embedded tools, such as smartphones, tablets social media, games and simulation were researched for this section. The findings from the UK, Canada, Germany and Pakistan show the effectiveness of this tool and its suitability for flexible learning below.

a) Students' perspective

The students found this tool effective in Canada and to some extent in Pakistan and the UK. Students in Germany seem to find this tool less effective as shown below in Table (09).

Table 09. Effectiveness of Technology tools

Cases	Extremely Impo	Very Important	Moderately Impor	Slightly Impo	Not at all Impo

	rtant		tant	rtant	rtant
UK	39%	34%	19%	6%	2%
Germany	13%	39%	43%	4%	0
Pakistan	46%	40%	11%	1%	0
Canada	54%	27%	9%	9%	0

b) Academics perspective

On the other hand, academics seemed to be convinced that its use is beneficial for students' engagement with the outside world and for class engagement on topics such as marketing, but not suitable for all business and management courses and that these social media apps mostly distract the students once they start using them.

Academics in the UK and Canada also explained some advantages of the use of smartphones and a tablet in that, within a multicultural classroom, these tools allowed students to translate an idea or work in their native language. The academics in Germany and Pakistan also highlighted the benefit of using WhatsApp groups to provide more personalised support to students based in remote areas or who require further support. In addition, academics who supported the tool

highlighted the key skills that help students to develop, such as communication, team building and creativity. Studies from Gikas and Grant (2013) and Piotrowski (2015) support this and conclude by stressing that technologically embedded tools have disadvantages within higher education.

In terms of social media, the academics showed a mixed response and reluctance in its use. The main reason identified was the distraction in learning as students might start using Facebook and Instagram for personal chats and other non-academic purposes. However, an academic from Canada and the UK used Twitter successfully while teaching an e-commerce and social media-related course and found it to be an effective tool. However, the academics from the UK, Germany and Pakistan were reluctant and showed their resistance towards the use of this pedagogical tool. These findings are similar to those identified by Gikas and Grant (2013).

Games or simulations play an important role, especially games related to small business start-ups. The UK academics suggested that games were really useful for students who struggled with certain parts of business, such as accounting or statistical numbers. The academics also suggested that the games allow the students to look at the practical side of

accounting rather than the theory and most of the students use these games to develop a good understanding of the topic. As a result, the findings of the academic support research from Malaquias et al. (2018) and Vos and Brennan (2010) that the feedback on these was always positive. The academics stressed the need for them to act as a facilitator rather than as a traditional teacher so students can have the freedom to use their initiative and develop skills such as communication, critical thinking, problem-solving and organisation. Some academics also raised concerns related to the use of games and simulations as their effectiveness was hard to predict in the real world. This was concluded by da Silva (2019), along with the assertion that gamification on its own is not sufficient for learning goals.

Overall, the academics believed that this tool does not provide any employability skills and should be used based on module requirements as it mostly results in distracting students from actual learning. However, in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, the interviews conducted in Pakistan and Canada show that, due to issues of connectivity and distance, academics started to engage with social media technology such as Twitter to communicate with the students but that they were still reluctant due to the security issues, GDPR and organisational resistance, and thus limited their interaction to Moodle platforms (VLE, Canvas) provided by the university.

c) Link to the literature

Gikas and Grant (2013) and Piotrowski (2015) investigated mobile devices, social media and recent data from Pillay and James (2013), Vos and Brennan (2010) and da Silva et al. (2019). All agreed with the effectiveness of these pedagogical tools but raised their concerns related to security issues, cost, steep curve of learning, and achieving unbiased advice about the suitability of these pedagogical tools.

The tool, despite having some drawbacks and unwillingness among academics towards its use, seems to provide an alternative platform for communication in the flexible learning environment. The advantages of this tool are still limited, but during COVID-19, it seems a good tool for helping the institution engage students outside of classrooms. The effectiveness of this tool within the cross-cultural environment at this point is hard to assess, as some institutions don't allow the use of tools other than the Moodle platform or other in-house software.

9) 3.9. *Virtual learning environment (Moodle/Blackboard)*

Virtual learning environments (VLE) such as Moodle, Canvas and Blackboard were selected

to review the effectiveness of these tools with the various business schools. These pedagogical tools are most commonly used to manage the course content, review assessments, report and most importantly provide a blended learning environment. The findings from the current study related to the effectiveness of this tool are explained below.

a) Students' perspective

Students in the UK and Canada found VLE as a very important and effective pedagogical tool. However, in Germany and Pakistan, the students seemed to be less in favour of this tool's effectiveness. The students' opinions from all universities are provided below in Table 10.

Table 10. Effectiveness of VLE

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
UK	21%	64%	15%	0	0
Germany	4%	30%	35%	26%	4%
Pakistan	18%	37%	30%	15%	4%
Canada	-	54%	27%	-	-

b) Academic perspective

Academics believe that the tool provides employability skills such as communication, teamwork working and technical skills. On the other hand, academics in Germany and Pakistan found its effectiveness limited and considered it to be more suitable for document storage. The interviews revealed that the tool provides benefits for both students and academics as it allows them to practice creativity, generate or allow innovative material formation, offers flexibility of assessment and, most importantly, provides a flexible environment for students to learn. However, it was found that additional features, familiarity, and training for both students and academics were needed to ensure its wider use within the flexible learning environment.

Some academics also suggested that it helps the academics to publish announcements, facilitate discussion, monitor forums, give class quizzes and reading material, upload additional learning material, access student performance, provide quick feedback on students' work and evaluate their assignments. For students, it also allows them to engage and interact with students beyond the classroom, download learning material and upload assignments.

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c) Link with the literature

The study by Jackson (2017) supports similar findings from a single case study. The study identified the use of "MOODLE as a learning platform and its contribution in promoting flexible teaching and supporting actions through CPD to help teachers to develop different learning and assessment outcomes which are flexible in nature for students" (Jackson, 2017, p193). Tarun (2019) and Aljawah (2019) also found virtual learning tools effective and suggested that they allow the students and academics to interact better via discussions and other available on-demand features such as video lectures, course contents, MCQs, automatic grading and other reporting and analysing features.

The tool was found to be an effective pedagogical tool within some business schools as it allows students to access all the essential resources for their course. Furthermore, academics can use the platform to communicate and provide support or communication easily within the flexible learning environment. Overall, students seem unsure about the effectiveness of this pedagogical tool but academics found it as a useful learning platform. The various features of this tool provide numerous benefits to both students and academics and despite not directly linking with employability, is an effective and suitable tool for flexible learning. However, academic staff require further training to benefit from its features.

10) 3.10. Multiple choice questions, essays, and term papers

MCQ, essays and term papers are used mostly as a part of the formative or summative assessments within the business school. The effectiveness of these tools within the various business schools is shown in the following results.

a) Students' perspective

Multiple-choice questions (MCQs), essays and term papers were found to be effective by students within Pakistan and Canada. However, students in the UK and Germany were not convinced of the effectiveness of this tool, as summarised below in Table (11).

Table 11. Effectiveness of MCQs, Essay and Term Papers

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly Important	Not at all Important
UK	17%	40%	17%	15%	10%
Ger	4%	39%	43%	8%	4%

man y					
Paki stan	53%	34%	9%	2%	1%
Cana da	9%	54%	18%	18%	0

b) Academic perspective

Academics within the UK, Germany, Pakistan, and Canada gave mixed reviews of this tool. Some academics considered it not to be appropriate for undergraduate students and believed it was more for Level 3 (B-tech) or postgraduate students. Other academics in Canada found MCQs to be a good formative assessment. The academics who supported MCQs in Pakistan and Canada also believed that, in HE, multiple-choice questions help to expand and enhance student knowledge regarding a subject and allow for wider learning and the opportunity to review multiple topics as students do not know where the questions will come from. Therefore, it helps students to develop deeper subject knowledge and self-efficacy.

In terms of essays and term papers, the UK and German academics strongly believed that this tool was the main source of assessment at the undergraduate level and, therefore, effective for students in developing their skills. However, the academics also suggested that this tool shouldn't be used as a primary source of assessment. Academics also suggested that this tool allows the students to research and write about certain topics which develop their critical thinking, communication, and team-building skills (group work).

The academics in Pakistan and Canada, unlike the UK and Germany, use the North American education system where the emphasis is on shorter assignments and project-based group or individual work. Therefore, the academics believed that students should be given more freedom to demonstrate their academic ability. In addition, academics in Pakistan were concerned about the intermediate and poor writing skills of the students and they limit the use of this tool to formative assessments so that students can become confident with written communication skills. Similar concerns were voiced by the academics who deal with international students in the UK, Germany, and Canada and, therefore, this suggests that essays or term papers should not be the only assessment tool.

c) Link to the literature

These findings, a study carried out by Mahrous and Ahmed (2010) found that overseas students favoured MCQ tests compared to long essays due to their limited English language ability within the Middle Eastern context.

Butler (2018) also suggested that multiple-choice tests are likely the most popular sort of assessment in education and much study has been devoted to finding best practices for utilising them to measure learning.

Based on the present study, MCQs could be used effectively to carry out formative assessments even within the context of flexible learning and allow both students and academics an opportunity to monitor their performance or success. The essay and term papers remain the main tools for assessment within the UK and Germany, but Pakistani and Canadian universities are using multiple tools to assess students' performance, which could provide students with more opportunities to develop a wider range of skills.

The effectiveness of this tool was found to be vital, despite receiving limited support from the students. The tool could offer academics an opportunity to carry out formative assessments to regularly review the performance of the students and ascertain what is most suitable for the flexible learning environment.

11) 3.11. Reading and homework

Reading and homework are other pedagogical tool which is mostly used for assessment within educational institutions. The effectiveness of this tool was examined, and the following findings were concluded.

a) Students' perspective

Reading and homework were found to be the least favoured tool among students. Students across the UK, Germany, Pakistan, and Canada found it less suitable for developing key employability skills as shown below in Table (12).

Table 12. Effectiveness of Reading and Homework

Cases	Extremely Important	Very Important	Moderately Important	Slightly important	Not at all Important
UK	26%	26%	22%	8%	17%
Germany	26%	26%	8%	22%	17%
Pakistan	44%	38%	13%	2%	3%
Canada	9%	36%	45%	9%	0

Academic perspective Academics in the UK and Germany were also not in favour of homework and believed that if students have young families or long working hours, they

can't find the time or inclination to complete it.

Academics in the UK and Germany were also not in favour of homework and believed that if students have young families or long working hours, they can't find the time or inclination to complete it. However, academics agreed that reading is a vital part of the UK assessment system, especially at the undergraduate level, and helps students develop key skills. There was a mixed response from Canadian academics; whilst they allocate homework but believed that it is more suitable for postgraduate students due to their maturity level and ability to self-manage, whilst they considered it to be an extra burden for undergraduate students. In comparison, academics in Pakistan found this tool very effective and mentioned that they regularly allocate extra homework for students, such as research articles for analysis, so they can develop better critical thinking and communication skills.

c) Link to the literature

Mahrous and Ahmed (2010) revealed that academic reading in the UK is rated of great importance as compared to the USA and the Middle East. The UK learning system is based on reading and discussion in class whereas, in the USA, students prefer to listen to the insights of the practitioner rather than going through the theoretical framework. Further, the study shows similar results with UK academics being in favour of reading due to the UK academic writing-based system along with academics from Pakistan, but German and Canadian academics gave mixed reviews on this tool.

The effectiveness of this tool within the context of flexible learning is based on the assessment methods being used. The importance of reading and homework seems vital as it allows students to self-manage their workload and help develop key employability skills such as leadership, self-efficacy, problem-solving and vital communication skills.

4. Contribution of effective pedagogical tools in developing 21st-century skills

This research aimed to investigate the most effective pedagogical tool based on its contribution to developing 21st-century employability skills. To review the essential 21st-century skills, Part A of the student survey provided students an opportunity to select the most important employability skills. In addition, part B of the student survey provided students with further opportunities to share their perspectives about the importance of pedagogical tools in developing

key 21st-century employability skills. Similarly, the academics were asked to share their perspective related to essential 21st-century skills and were asked how they could help students foster these skills via pedagogical tools.

a) From the literature review

The literature helped to develop a comprehensive list of employability skills identified by various researchers and reports such as Kazunina et al. (2018), a QS survey by Kazunina et al. (2018), CMI Report (2018), Belwal et al. (2016) and Campbell and Kresyman (2015). As discussed in section B of the literature review, 22 employability skills were identified based on being most appropriate for 21st-century undergraduate students. The skills selected were problem-solving, team building, communication, adaptability, data analysis, resilience, organisational skills, technical skills, subject knowledge, creativity, leadership, negotiating, commercial awareness/ previous work experience, interpersonal, managing up, honest and ethical approach, career management, self-efficacy, lifelong learning, and critical thinking.

b) Students' perspective

The students from various business schools selected the following employability skills which they perceived as important for future employment and most likely to develop within flexible learning environments.

UK case - Some skills that scored high: are communication, problem-solving, team building, critical thinking, data analysis, and adaptability. None of the skills were scored low or deemed to be not useful for employability.

Germany case - Students strongly agree with the importance of resilience, adaptability, lifelong learning, team building, communication, problem-solving, self-efficacy, data analysis, negotiating and critical thinking.

Pakistan case - Students selected communication, problem-solving, honest and ethical subject knowledge, team building, life-long learning, organisational skills and interpersonal skills, leadership, technical skills, negotiation skills, adaptability, critical thinking, self-efficacy, and data analysis.

Canada case - The top skills selected were adaptability, data analysis, communication, organisational skills, subject knowledge, self-efficacy, problem-solving, and career management.

Overall, the students preferred certain skills such as communication, problem-solving, team building, critical thinking, resilience,

adaptability, data analysis, and adaptability more than other skills. The other skills that were identified as important include subject knowledge, self-efficacy, negotiation skills, and life-long learning.

In response to the question as to whether students think skill development was necessary to get the desired employment, UA- 80 % said yes, followed by UB- 96%, UC- 78%, and UD- 100%. All agreed that developing the core employability skills was crucial for finding the right job and that the correct use of pedagogical tools will help them to develop these skills during their undergraduate degree.

c)**Academic perspective**

The academics from all four business schools agreed that they select the pedagogical tools that allow the students to develop key employability skills. All academics seem to agree that communication, problem-solving, critical thinking, teamwork, subject knowledge, and technical skills are the most important tools for undergraduate students to get into their desired employment. Further skills that could be of importance for the students were data analysis, adaptability, leadership, and life-long learning.

5. *Most effective tools for flexible learning*

The present study's main aim was to identify the most effective flexible learning pedagogical tools based on their ability to develop key 21st-century employability skills depending on the perception of students and academics. The research shows that certain pedagogical tools such as lectures, class debates, group projects, case studies, internships, technology-embedded tools, multiple-choice tests, essay tests and term papers are more effective within the flexible learning environment due to the nature of learning, the environment, preferences and perception among students, skill development ability and perception of academics. The most effective tools, as identified by this research, are shown below in Table (13).

Table 13. Summary of students' and academics' perspectives on various effective pedagogical tools

Cases	Student's perspective	Academics' perspective
A-UK	Lecture Lecture notes PowerPoint presentation. Class debates Group project	Lecture Lecture notes PowerPoint presentation Class debate Group projects

	Case study Internship Mentoring Technology-embedded devices VLE – (Moodle platform)	Case study Internships Guest speakers Mentoring Roleplay MCQ, essay, term papers VLE – (Moodle platform)
B-Germany	Lecture Lecture notes Class debates Group project Case study Internships Mentoring Roleplay	Class debates Group project Case study Internship Guest speakers MCQ, essays, term papers
C-Pakistan	Lecture Lecture notes Class debates Group project Case study Internship Mentoring MCQ, essays, term papers Technology-embedded devices Reading and homework	Lecture Lecture notes PowerPoint presentation Class debates Group project Case study MCQs, essays, term papers Reading and homework
D-Canada	Lecture Lecture notes PowerPoint presentation Class debates Case study Internship Mentoring Role play, games, and simulations MCQ, essays, term papers Technology-embedded devices VLE – (Moodle platform)	Lecture Lecture notes PowerPoint presentation Class debate Group project Case study Guest speakers MCQ only Technology-embedded devices Reading and homework VLE – (Moodle platform)

The above table shows the students' and academics' perspectives related to the effectiveness of various pedagogical tools. The study shows that there are similarities and differences between the most effective tools in the perception of both students and teachers.

The delivery of successful pedagogy across different contexts relies on the provision of a structured learning environment that encourages active engagement between students and academics. This interaction depends on choices and preferences of

pedagogical tools made by both the students and the academics which allows them to develop key employability skills. The findings from this study are discussed below.

Case A – UK

Students and academics in the UK prefer pedagogical tools such as lectures, lecture notes, PowerPoint presentations, class debates, group projects, case studies, internships, mentoring and the Moodle platform. In contrast, academics seem to prefer additional tools such as guest speakers, role play, games and simulation, MCQs, essays and term papers. In terms of students, they also prefer the use of technology-embedded tools within their learning.

Case B – Germany

In Germany, both students and academics seem to agree on the effectiveness of class debates, group projects, case studies and internships. In addition, students believe that other tools, such as lectures, lecture notes, mentoring, role play, games and simulation are effective for skills development, whereas academics prefer guest speakers, MCQs, essays and term papers.

Case C – Pakistan

Both students and academics in Pakistan seem to prefer a wide range of tools such as lectures,

lecture notes, class debates, group projects, case studies, MCQs, essays and term papers as well as reading and homework. In addition, students seem to agree on the effectiveness of internships and mentoring, whereas academics seem to value PowerPoint presentations.

Case D – Canada

Both students and academics in Canada found lectures, lecture notes, PowerPoint presentations, class debates, case studies, MCQs, essays, term papers, technology-embedded tools, and the Moodle platform to be effective tools. In addition, students found tools such as internships, mentoring, role play, games, and simulations to be useful and academics found group projects, guest speakers, reading and homework to be more effective.

Despite similarities and differences in students' and academics' preferred choices for pedagogical tools and views on the provision of key employability skills such as communication, problem-solving, team building, critical thinking, resilience, adaptability, data analysis, and adaptability more than other skills, further skills which were identified as important are as follows: subject knowledge, self-efficacy, negotiation, and life-long learning. It was also found that

the students seem to be happy with the tools currently in use within their universities. The students in all cases presented expressed their satisfaction with the quality of learning they were receiving from academic staff. According to Montenegro and Jankowski (2017), it is vital to choose appropriate assessment tools or approaches that provide the best opportunity for different types of students to demonstrate their learning so that assessment results can benefit students from all backgrounds to advance our collective interest in student success in higher education. Montenegro and Jankowski (2017) showed how lecturers could employ relevant and culturally responsive pedagogies and assessments to meet the specific learning demands of varied student populations, resulting in higher achievers.

B. 6. Conclusions

This study offers some very useful findings on the use of flexible learning environments. The data collected from various universities around the world shows the effectiveness of various pedagogical tools within cross-cultural flexible learning environments and the key employability skills these tools help to develop among undergraduate business students.

The study shows that some pedagogical tools are more effective within the context of flexible learning due to their acceptance by students

and regular delivery by academics within the institution. This includes tools such as lectures, class debates, group projects, case studies, internships, technology-embedded tools such as smartphones or iPads, multiple-choice tests, essay tests and term papers. The effectiveness of these tools was found to be linked to the employability skills they offer along with factors such as students' preferences, learning styles, prior learning, motivation, academic choice based on their previous experiences or willingness to deliver certain pedagogical tools, assessment methods, learning cultural aspects and the backgrounds of both academics and students along with where the learning is taking place. The students and academics seemed to have some similar and different opinions about the effectiveness of various pedagogical tools studied in this research,

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