

The Role of UK Universities in Preparing the Management Consultants of the Future

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Abstract

This article focuses on the rapidly changing UK management consulting industry and the role of UK universities in helping to equip their students with the skills needed to make them more work-ready and employable for this competitive profession.

Determining the future skills management consultants will need is complex because of many factors, including the growing importance of Artificial Intelligence and the impact it is having on the consulting industry. To optimise the prospects for students who are looking to enter the profession, universities must be responsive and adaptable to this evolving industry. There are many challenges associated with this, including how to forecast future skill requirements in such a dynamic industry and then tailor course curricula accordingly.

This article sets the scene for future research in this area which will be completed during 2026. The research findings, conclusions, and recommendations will form the basis of a paper that will be submitted to this journal in 2027.

Introduction

UK-based university graduates looking to start or progress their careers as management consultants face challenges. Among these is the need to develop the skills required within this highly competitive profession. As noted by Inside Careers (2017), management consulting is an attractive career option for many graduates, so competition for places can be tough. This raises questions for universities with management consulting and related courses that must adapt their curricula to equip graduates with the skills that are valued within the consulting industry. However, this is not easy given how quickly the industry is changing both in terms of client requirements and consultancy practice.

This article explores the following:

- The meaning of 'skills' within the context of management consulting.
- The management consulting industry context, including the future of the profession and the skill sets the next generation of consultants will require.
- The role universities play in helping students develop their skills. While universities are not a panacea for skills development, they have a critical role. This is particularly the case with specific management consulting degrees and other pathways into the profession such as MBAs and postgraduate and undergraduate management, business, accounting, finance, economics, and other courses.

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Skills and The Management Consulting Industry

Even though the topic of management consultants' skills is on the radar of consultancies, professional bodies, and texts (Silacheva, 2019), there are different definitions, perspectives, and interpretations. This could reflect the diversity of the profession with so many types of clients, client requirements, and consultants. However, seeking clarity over terminology is important as without this, how can universities support their students with skills-based learning and development? The following is a useful definition provided by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (2012, p. 12) which includes the role of initial and ongoing learning:

'Skills (or competences) are defined as the bundle of knowledge, attributes and capacities that can be learned and that enable individuals to successfully and consistently perform an activity or task and can be built upon and extended through learning.'

Digging deeper, there have been attempts to classify different skills. This includes a distinction between 'hard' and 'soft' skills which has been discussed in both the academic and practitioner literatures (e.g., Strang, 2023; The British Academy, 2021; Biggs, 2018). Hard skills (sometimes referred to as technical skills, as they relate to

technical competence) are necessary to 'do the job'. Hard skills vary according to the business function and industry. For example, a sport sector strategy consultant will require a different set of hard skills to complete their projects (e.g., project management, market analysis, competitor benchmarking, financial modelling, and report writing) than a digital transformation consultant (e.g., technology, data analysis, and business process skills). Soft skills, on the other hand, comprise personal and interpersonal skills (and behaviours) such as communication, leadership, problem-solving, teamwork, resilience, emotional intelligence, ethics, and professionalism. Many soft skills are transferable across different consulting contexts. For example, communication is critically important for all consultants (Newton, 2019).

Given this, while there might be similarities, there is no single set of hard and soft skills shared by all management consultants. Each consultant requires their own skill set. This is important for university students to understand, as they can analyse and identify their own developmental needs for careers in consultancy (Biggs, 2018).

The UK Management Consulting Profession

Identifying the future skills required within the profession is complicated by its rapid growth and transformation. The Management Consultancies Association¹ estimated that UK consulting fees were £20.4 billion in 2024 (Consultancy.uk, 2025). This represented a growth of 134% on the £8.7 billion fees earned in 2014 (Management Consultancies Association, 2016). UK consulting fees are forecast to continue to grow, at least over the short-term, by 3.6% in 2025 and a further 7.8% in 2026 (Management Consultancies Association, 2025). The reasons behind this growth include increasing client demands for digital technology-based advice and support related to Artificial Intelligence, cyber security, and business transformation, as well as increased fee income generated by UK-based consultants working on international engagements (Management Consultancies Association, 2025). This is not just a UK phenomenon. There has also been fee growth across continental Europe, particularly following the end of the COVID-19 pandemic (European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations, 2025²).

Universities are an important springboard for consultants looking to enter the industry, either as junior consultants or more experienced hires. Practicing management consultants come from a wide range of educational backgrounds, including postgraduate or undergraduate degrees in business, management, and other subject areas. Consultants are also entering the profession from a widening range of universities. For example, the percentage of new consultant joiners who attended one of the Russell Group universities dropped from 71% in 2011 to 30% in 2024 (Management Consultancies Association, 2025). Furthermore, the profession is widening access by recruiting apprentices and school or college leavers, reflecting a drive to improve inclusivity and diversity (Management Consultancies Association, 2025). Universities are therefore only one of the pathways into the consulting profession, albeit an important one.

¹ The Management Consultancies Association is the UK's trade body for management consultancies. It comprises membership from consultancies of different sizes and types, including the "Big 4" accountancy and consultancy firms (PwC, Deloitte, KPMG, and EY), medium-sized firms, and smaller consultancies.

² The European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations represents the interests of fourteen national member associations from across Europe, including the UK's Management Consultancies Association.

Universities looking to support the development of their students' management consulting-related skills face the twin challenges of: (1) the diversity of the industry, its client base with differing requirements of their consultants, and a wide range of consultants specialising across different business functions, sectors, and geographies; and (2) the growth, evolution, and change of the profession, which makes the forecasting of future skill requirements difficult, particularly over the long term.

The Future of the UK Management Consulting Industry

As mentioned previously, the Management Consultancies Association (2025) suggested that the growing fee income of UK-based consultancies during 2025 and 2026 will be due to increasing client demands for defence, cyber security, and digital services. At the pan-European level, Alfred Harl (Chair of the European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations) noted the ongoing demand for digital services but also highlighted a growth in environmental sustainability services by stating the following (European Federation of Management Consultancies Associations, 2025, p. 3):

'The challenge of the digital transformation and the green transition, together with the uncertainties in the international scenario, are fostering companies' requests for consulting support especially in the areas of Sales & Marketing and Technology.'

Although there appears to be consensus around digital technology's role in influencing change within the management consulting industry, there is a gap in the academic literature which examines how the roles of consultants and their skills are changing in line with this (Cerruti, Tavoletti and Grieco, 2019). Research to examine the drivers of consulting industry change and the impact on future skills by 2030 was undertaken by the Centre for Management Consulting Excellence in 2018. The research was based on a mixed-method approach, incorporating interviews, an online survey, and events to collect insights from consultants, clients, and academics. The research was published in 2019 (Centre for Management Consulting Excellence, 2018). It was found that the key drivers of change were cyber security, Artificial Intelligence, self-employment, Big Data, globalisation, Internet of Things, and robotics. Table 1, below, provides a summary of the implications on the future skills required. This suggests a focus on hard (technical) skills, although some soft skills and professional behaviours are also highlighted. The study also found that 'timeless consulting skills' such as senior relationship management and change management, will remain essential in 2030. Although this research offers a valuable and insightful contribution by linking the future of the industry with the evolving skill requirements of consultants, it is seven years out of date at the time of writing this article.

Table 1: Consulting Skills for 2030

Driver of change	Examples of implications for future skills
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Cyber security	Technical skills such as evaluating cyber security needs, proposing strategies and investments, business process improvements, and information management architectures. Consultants will need to be able to help their clients make decisions in complex regulatory and legislative contexts.
Artificial intelligence	Technical skills including the ability to understand and interpret what the machine learning is doing. Data quality and data structuring will be key themes. Consultants will need to be able to advise on ethical and accountability issues.
Self-employment	With the independent consultancy market becoming increasingly competitive, consultants will need to be effective at both selling and delivering projects. This requires strong networking skills and how to build trust in a social media world.
Big data	Technical skills to be able to advise on investments in big data such as the management, interpretation, and usage of data. While there has always been a role for consultants who are innovative in finding and using data to create valuable information, with the democratisation of information, the skills required are shifting more in the direction of data analytics or at least knowing how to exploit data analytics.
Globalisation	With consultancies and their clients becoming more digital and virtual by 2030, geography will be much less important than it is currently. Consultants will need language, communication, and cultural skills to succeed in a global environment.
Internet of Things	Gives more opportunities for consultants to connect with clients and their supply chains. This has implications for developing client relationship management skills.
Robotics	Clients will want human consulting support in framing the questions and advising humans on how to use the knowledge.

Source: Author's summary of the findings of the research undertaken by the Centre for Management Consulting Excellence (2019). Their report provides an explanation of each driver of change and the implications on the skills which consultants will need by 2030.

The speed of change within the profession suggests further horizon scanning is needed to assess future drivers. For example, since the completion of the above study, the application of Artificial Intelligence within consulting has progressed rapidly. Artificial Intelligence software tools are helping some consultants perform routine tasks (e.g., project management, research, and data analysis). There are of course ethical issues associated with the use of Artificial Intelligence for consultancy projects which must be considered.

Predicting what the profession will look like in five – let alone ten – years' time is extremely difficult. You only have to consider the growth and impact of Artificial Intelligence over the past three years to wonder what the next three years might

bring. However, attempts should be made by universities to ensure their courses are as relevant as possible.

The Role of Universities in Skills Development

There has been a debate about the role of higher education and whether it should be a means to an end by helping students get worthwhile employment or an end in itself by developing intellectually well-rounded individuals (Tight, 2023). While acknowledging this important debate, it is outside the scope of this article other than noting that the debate might be particularly relevant in business and management subject areas where employability outcomes are often key to student expectations (e.g., students studying a management consultancy or other business/management course to gain employment as a consultant).

Many universities promote the skills students will learn and develop on their courses. In some cases, this approach is aligned with employability models such as the CareerEDGE model of graduate employability which was developed by Dacre Pool and Sewell (2007). This model is intended to enhance student employability through: (1) career development learning; (2) experience (including work experience); (3) degree subject knowledge, understanding and skills; (4) generic skills; and (5) emotional intelligence. More generally, the British Academy conducted research which examined the issue of developing work-ready skills from the perspective of the universities and their curricula. They found the following (The British Academy, 2021: p. 43):

'While different institutions placed varying levels of emphasis on different skill sets, they largely encompassed similar groupings of soft skills (leadership, critical thinking and intercultural/global fluency) and hard skills (data analysis, digital technologies and languages).'

However, research suggests that employers think many graduates leave higher education without having the requisite skills to be work-ready. The Chartered Management Institute (2021) found that 80% of employers believed graduates lack core employability skills such as self-management and motivation, digital communication, creating a digital brand or profile, and networking effectively. They suggested that this skills gap should become even more apparent in an increasingly hybrid and digital workplace. Their report suggests that universities should embed these and other relevant skills at the start of their courses, enabling students not only to develop them but also to demonstrate and sell them to prospective employers. While many university business and management schools are already doing this through skills-based learning objectives and pedagogical approaches such as experiential learning including problem-solving scenarios, group projects, work placements, and industry-relevant assessments (e.g., consulting reports and mock client presentations), the findings of the Chartered Management Institute research suggest that more can be done.

What does this all suggest? Universities offering management consulting and related courses need to be agile with curricula that respond and adapt - as far as is practicable - in line with the dynamic nature of the industry. Students also need to have the opportunity to tailor their learning and development needs around their skillset requirements. This should then enhance their employability.

The Proposed Research

Within the above context, research will be conducted to answer the following questions:

1. What skills will management consultants need in the future to be successful?
2. How can universities design and deliver curricula that will help their students develop these skills to make them more work-ready and employable?

Although practising management consultants have degrees from a wide range of disciplines, the focus of this research will be on postgraduate and undergraduate business and management courses³ given the following:

- The Centre for Management Consulting Excellence (2024) identified 11 UK-based Masters' level degrees with management consulting / consulting / consultancy in the title. In addition, there are many business and management courses – at both postgraduate and undergraduate levels – which offer consultancy modules as a core component or elective option, including consultancy-style projects or work placements.
- Business and management are the most popular subject areas in UK Higher Education accounting for 595,620 students, or 21% of the c. 2.9 million total undergraduate and postgraduate students in 2023/24 (Higher Education Student Statistics, 2025). The subject area includes postgraduate and undergraduate courses in general business and management, marketing, human resource management, finance, accounting, and sector-specific management courses such as travel and tourism. The subject area has also grown as the number of students increased by one-quarter between 2021/22 and 2023/24 (Higher Education Student Statistics, 2025).

The proposed research methodology is summarised in Table 2, below.

Table 2: Proposed Research Methodology

Element	Approach
Research aim	To explore how UK universities can prepare graduates to be more work-ready and employable within the future UK management consulting industry.
Research design and approach	Following a review of the UK and international management consulting skills and university curriculum development literatures, qualitative research will be completed. This will involve semi-structured interviews to gain in-depth views and insights from industry professionals.

³ Business and management encompass undergraduate and postgraduate subject areas such as business studies, management studies, accountancy, finance, marketing, and human resource management. Also included are sector-specific courses such as tourism management (British Academy, 2021).

Participants	The following will be invited to participate: - Representatives of UK management consulting industry trade bodies and networks. For example, the Management Consultancies Association, Chartered Management Institute, Centre for Management Consulting Excellence, and the British Academy of Management's Consulting Network. It will be important to understand if these organisations are conducting any similar research, as well as get their input into this study. - Representatives of UK-based management consultancies – such as Partners and Directors - to gather their views on the future services they will need to provide for their clients and the implications this will have on the skill sets of their consultants. - Deans and other senior academics responsible for UK-based postgraduate degrees in management consulting, MBAs, and other business and management courses which include consultancy modules. Their thoughts on the challenges and opportunities associated with adapting their curricula to ensure their students are work-ready and more employable will be explored.
Sampling strategy	A purposive sampling strategy will be used. Participants will be selected for their relevant knowledge and experience. Management consultants will be invited based on their involvement in developing consulting services. Academics will be selected due to their curriculum design responsibilities.
Data analysis methods	Interviews will be analysed using thematic analysis. The findings will be compared and contrasted with the existing literature. While generalisation of the findings will not be possible (due to purposive sampling), the analysis seeks to generate practical and actionable insights and recommendations for universities.
Ethical considerations	Given the researcher's role as a practicing management consultant, this requires ethical management. Participants will be fully informed of the researcher's background, the academic purpose of the study, and the confidential nature of all data collected. Informed consent will be obtained, and data will be anonymised.
Output and impact	The output will be a paper submitted to the Management Consulting Journal. Not only should the outputs of this research be of interest to universities, but it could also be of value to: (1) the recruitment practices of management consultancies (to inform recruitment strategies and ensure that new joiners - whether they are in junior or more experienced roles - possess relevant skills); (2) the learning and development teams of management consultancies (to inform the design of internal professional development programmes, ensuring that these reflect evolving client demands); (3) individual management consultants (to

	support ongoing personal and professional development by highlighting future skill requirements); and (4) Chartered Management Consultant Award (it could provide additional evidence to enhance the Chartered Management Consultant Award Competency Framework ⁴).
Timescales	Key stages of the research will be the literature review, participant selection and recruitment, data collection, thematic analysis, and preparation of a paper which will be submitted to this journal in 2027.

Conclusions

The UK management consulting industry is exciting and dynamic, but it can also be highly competitive to find employment. This article has laid the foundations for future research into the skills which graduates should develop to make themselves more employable, and the critical role which will be played by universities in assisting with this.

If you are a representative of a management consulting trade body or network, management consultancy, or university business school and are interested in participating in this research, please contact the author.

⁴ Developed by the Chartered Management Institute and the Management Consultancies Association, the Award is a UK professional accreditation to set and uphold standards in the management consulting industry. It involves three progression stages (Foundation, Applied, and Chartered) with each representing a level of expertise and responsibility. The Framework is based on consultants having various technical, soft, and professional skills. A review of the Framework takes place every three years. The Framework is the basis for evaluating the Chartered Management Consultant Award.

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