

Fostering Soft Skills Awareness in MA Visual Effects Students:

An Action Research Project



Background

■ **Role & Responsibilities:**

- Senior Lecturer on MA Visual Effects at LCC (2.5 years), following 20-year VFX and CG industry career.

■ **Contextual Challenges:**

- VFX and CG Industry:
 - Demands both hard & soft skills, evidenced in their job posts.
 - Women remain underrepresented → need to increase self-confidence.
 - Highly competitive and unstable → need personal and interpersonal skills.
- Education:
 - Students prioritize technical output (hard skills) over soft skills in their assignments.

Rationale

■ **Why this topic matters:**

- Developing metacognitive awareness of soft skills **can improve employability and inclusivity.**
- **Change students' misconceptions** such as:
 - Only Technical skills (hard skills) will secure jobs.
 - Only hard skills can deliver high quality work.

■ **Professional Insight:**

- My 20 years of experience shows soft skills are essential for career progression in VFX.
- This Action Research can bridge the gap between academic training and industry needs.

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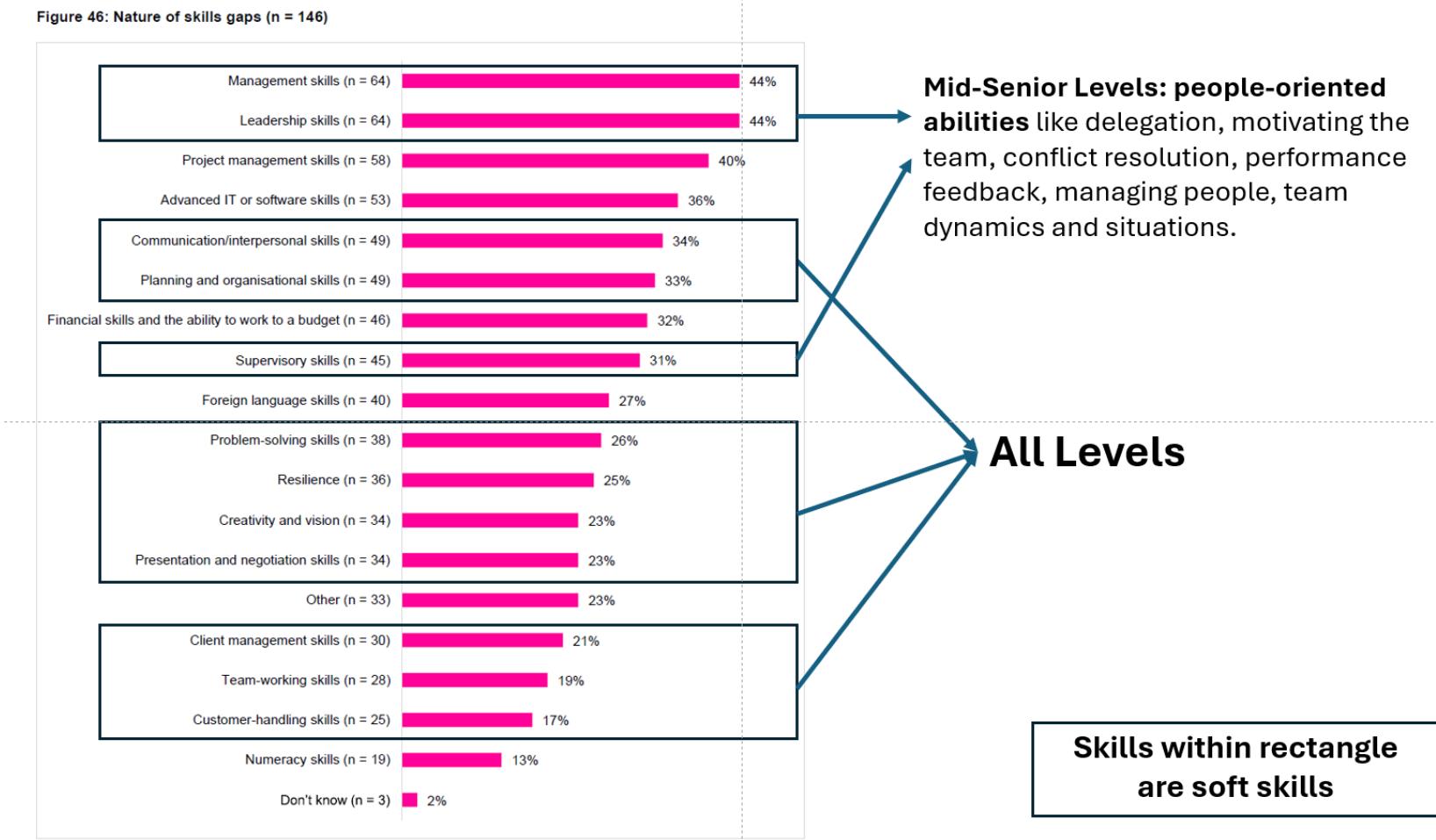
Elaborating the Soft Skills List



Based on 3 Sources to elaborate the list

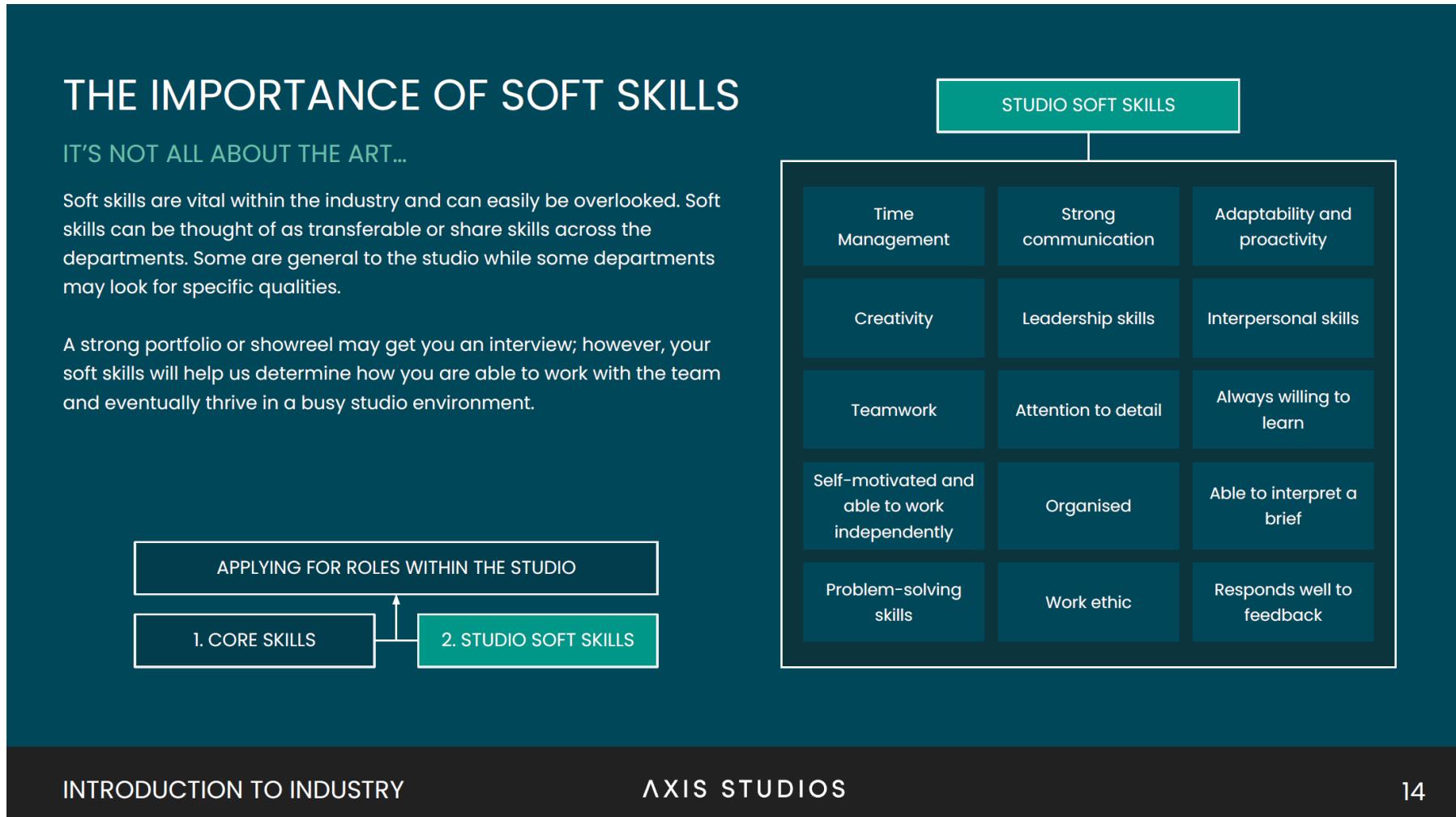
- **Source 1: Annual ScreenSkills Assessment (2018–19). These are the skill gaps in the industry:**

Figure 46: Nature of skills gaps (n = 146)



Based on 3 Sources to elaborate the list

▪ Source 2: Axis Studios – Education Outreach Booklet (2024).



Based on 3 Sources to elaborate the list

■ Source 3: The Core Skills of VFX Handbook (2025)



The Core Skills of VFX Handbook 2025

15 CHAPTERS FOR FUTURE VFX TALENT

Collated by Saint John Walker with contributions from over 100 VFX contributors



Professional Etiquette in the Industry

Alongside the above areas there's the professional etiquette to working in any industry, not just VFX, that will help students integrate into the working world. These factors and others might not be known to students who are focussed on working towards getting marks and not always quality, that extensions to deadlines are always possible or still don't know if VFX 'suits' them.

Take personal ownership of absolutely everything. Your relationships in the office (good and bad), the quality of your work, your timekeeping, your learning, your approach and your ego. With humility, passion and a strong work ethic, you will succeed.

If you are a runner or in a similar junior position, and want to be Producer for example, be the best runner you can and show you've absolutely understood what's needed and deliver it. If you're always trying to be two steps ahead and not trying to be the best at the role you're in at the time, you can miss essential information, relationships and tools that will be helpful to you at later stages in your career.

Be on time both for work and to meetings, dailies, reviews. Communicate clearly and regularly and when you can, ahead of time.

Know when to escalate if you need help or have questions. Work collaboratively and listen to other's input.

Have respect for others at different stages of their craft. Understand that you're working as part of a team and how your input contributes to the effectiveness and efficiency of the whole team.

Support your team in both the good and challenging times - they will support you in turn.

Be engaged; ask questions, take notes, be pro-active, do self-research.

Time management and workload and workload tips

Use simple tools like to-do lists, digital calendars (e.g. Google Calendar), or project management apps like Trello or Notion to stay organised.

Break work into manageable tasks and set realistic deadlines.

Don't be afraid to ask your lead or Production or your manager to help you prioritise when things feel overwhelming.

Look for internal time management workshops or online courses (e.g. on Coursera, LinkedIn Learning, or YouTube).

Advice for students managing stress and building resilience

Stress is natural, but it shouldn't be constant. Techniques like mindfulness, breathing exercises, and journaling can help manage daily stress.

Don't ignore how you're feeling—talk to a colleague, your Head of Department, HR or a Mental Health Advisor.

Try using wellbeing apps (e.g. Headspace, Calm, or Moodpath).

Step away from your desk regularly—take short walks, stretch, eat away from your screen.

Don't skip your lunch break, and aim to have a clear end-of-day routine that separates work from personal time.

Soft Skills Passport

STEM
related

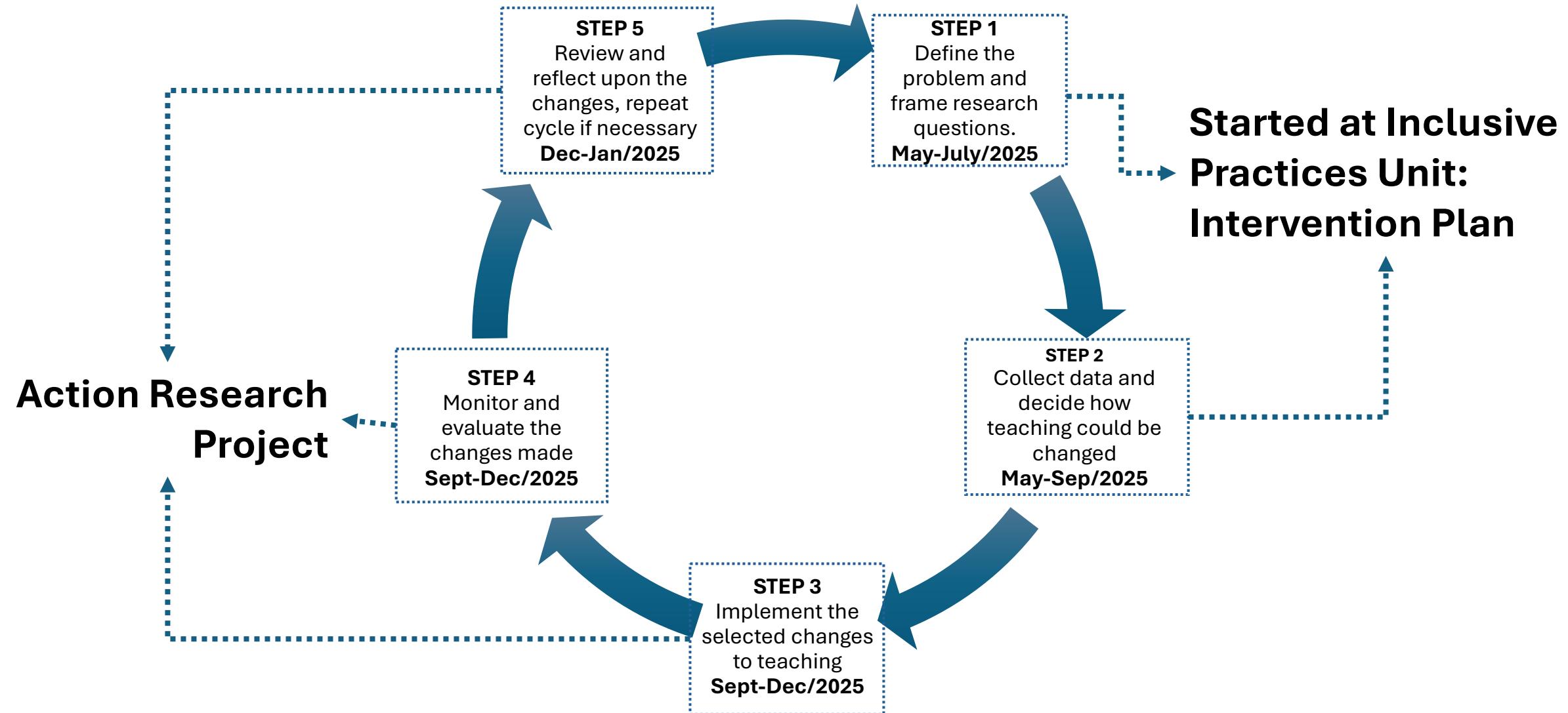
	Soft Skills	Week 10/11	How I Used This Skill (Evidence / Reflection)
1	Problem-solving and debugging	<input type="checkbox"/>	
2	Technical Engagement	<input type="checkbox"/>	
3	Attention to detail	<input type="checkbox"/>	
4	Feedback receptiveness	<input type="checkbox"/>	
5	Adaptability	<input type="checkbox"/>	
6	Communication/interpersonal	<input type="checkbox"/>	
7	Team-working	<input type="checkbox"/>	
8	Initiative and self-starter	<input type="checkbox"/>	
9	Creativity and vision	<input type="checkbox"/>	
10	Time management	<input type="checkbox"/>	
11	Resilience	<input type="checkbox"/>	

2

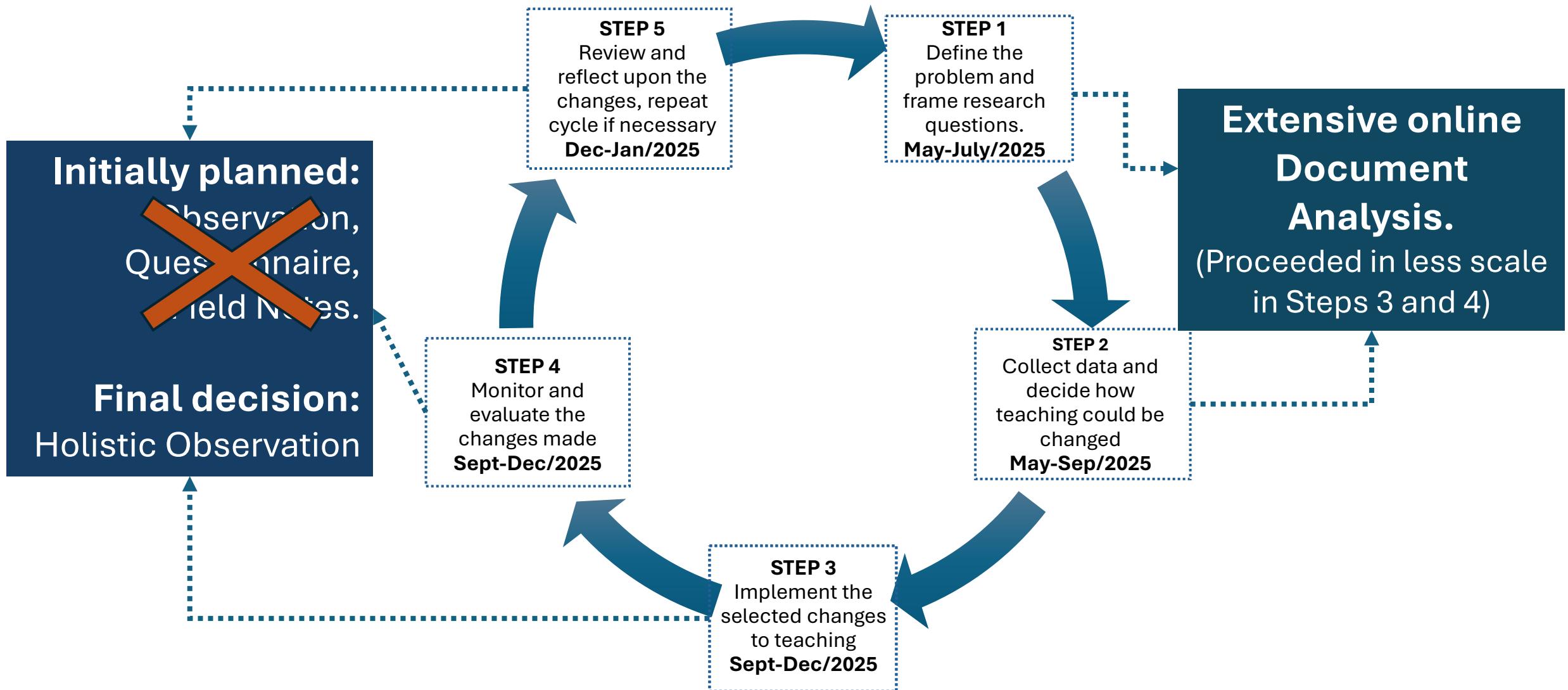
Action Research Plan



Action Research Cycle



Research Methods



ARP Cycle Schedule: Steps 3 and 4 only

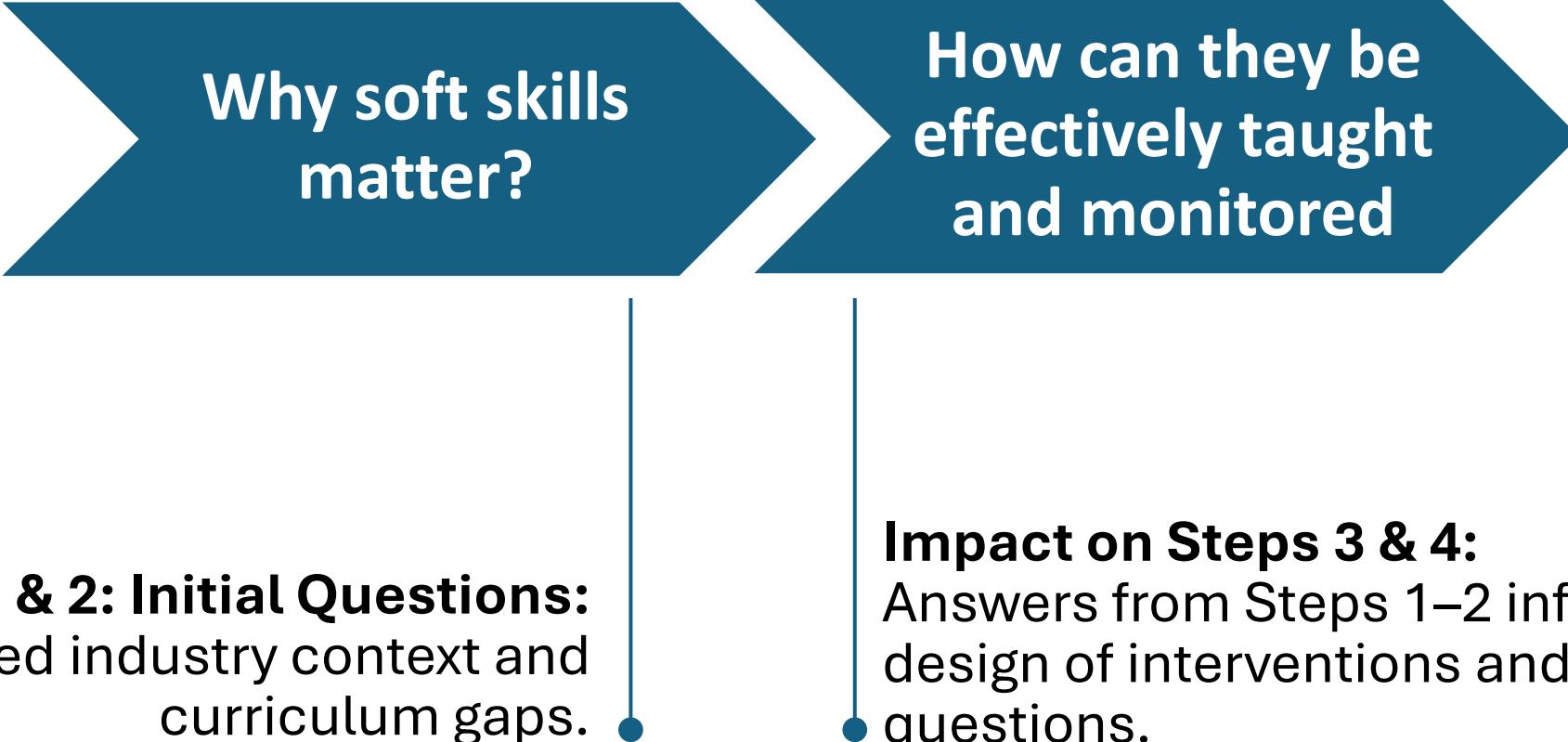
- Workshop introducing Soft Skills
- Introduction of in-class Unreal Engine project: building a 3d Environment

- In-class project: Pre-Production Presentation

Stages	Sept Week 4	Octo Week 1	Octo Week 2	Octo Week 3	Octo Week 4	Nov Week 1	Nov Week 2	Nov Week 3	Nov Week 4	Dec Week 1	Dec Week 2	Dec Week 3
Stage 1: Awakening Stage	●	●										
Stage 2: Acknowledgement Stage			• Flipped Scaffolded classroom • Students to work on their projects • Padlet Journalling, Soft Skills Passport and Reflective Blogging									
Stage 3: Reflection Stage4: Discovery											●	Conclusion

- Formative Assessment
- Final Project Presentation
- Final Soft Skills Workshop with ARP Qualitative Data Gathering

Steps 1&2 Findings Shapes Research Questions in Steps 3&4



Why soft skills matter?

How can they be effectively taught and monitored?

Steps 1 & 2: Initial Questions:
Explored industry context and curriculum gaps.

Impact on Steps 3 & 4:
Answers from Steps 1–2 informed the design of interventions and evaluation questions.

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Steps 3&4 Summary



Steps 3 and 4: Research Questions and Findings

1- Effectiveness of Gradual Implementation of Soft Skills in Term 1:

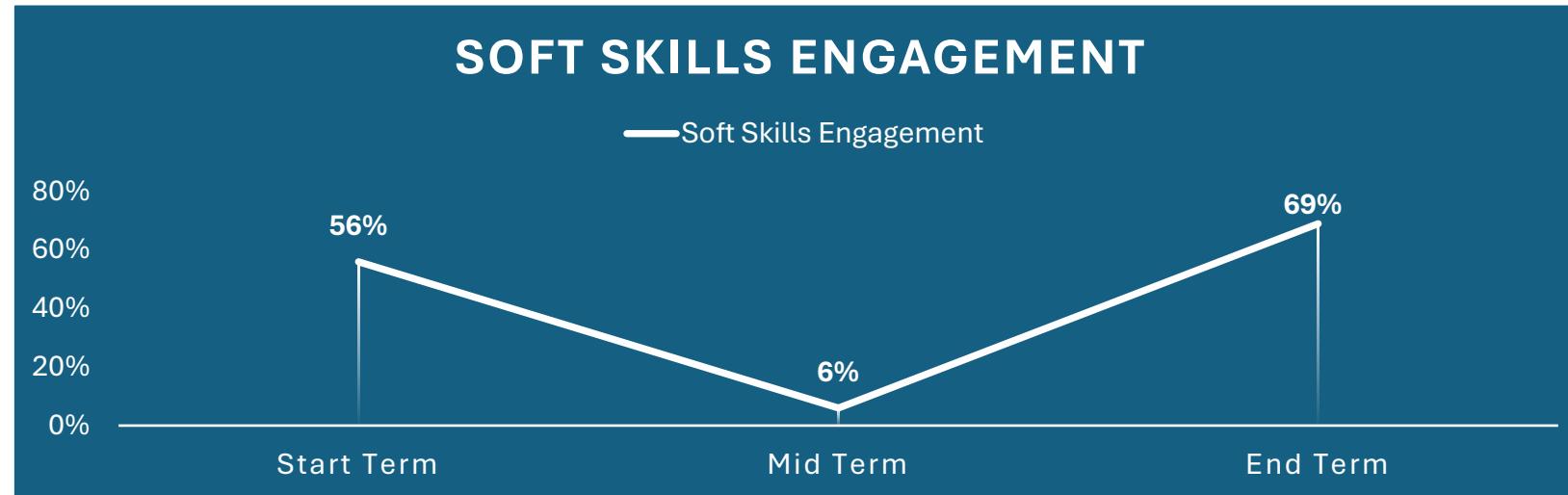
- Scaffolded flipped classroom works ? **Ineffective.**
- Reflection channels for Soft Skills usage works ? **Mixed success.**

Worked ?	Reflection Channels	Success ?
	Introductory and Final Workshops	Yes, as long as it's compulsory and outside of deadlines.
	Soft Skills Passport	No. Only 1 used correctly.
	Padlet Journalling	Partially. They need “incentive” such as compulsory deadlines.
	2 project presentations	Yes. Very good for accountability
	Blog	Partially, only for my class, disregarding others.

Steps 3 and 4: Research Questions and Findings

1- Effectiveness of Gradual Implementation of Soft Skills

Soft Skills engagement only increases close to assignment delivery.



Conclusion:

Gradual implementation should span at least 3 Terms, not just Term 1.



Steps 3 and 4: Research Questions and Findings

2- Does identifying and applying STEM-related soft skills improve:

- Quality of work and work performance ?
Promising but one term is insufficient for deep impact.
- Engagement when soft skills is applied ?
Only for assessment, when required.

Conclusion: Long-term integration is essential to evaluate students' quality work, engagement, and performance.



Steps 3 and 4: Research Questions and Findings

3- Students' Perceptions of Soft Skills

- **Metacognitive Knowledge:** What students know about soft skills and their importance.

Majority understands importance, but precise identification is weak.

- **Metacognitive Regulation:** How they plan, monitor, and evaluate soft skills in learning and teamwork.

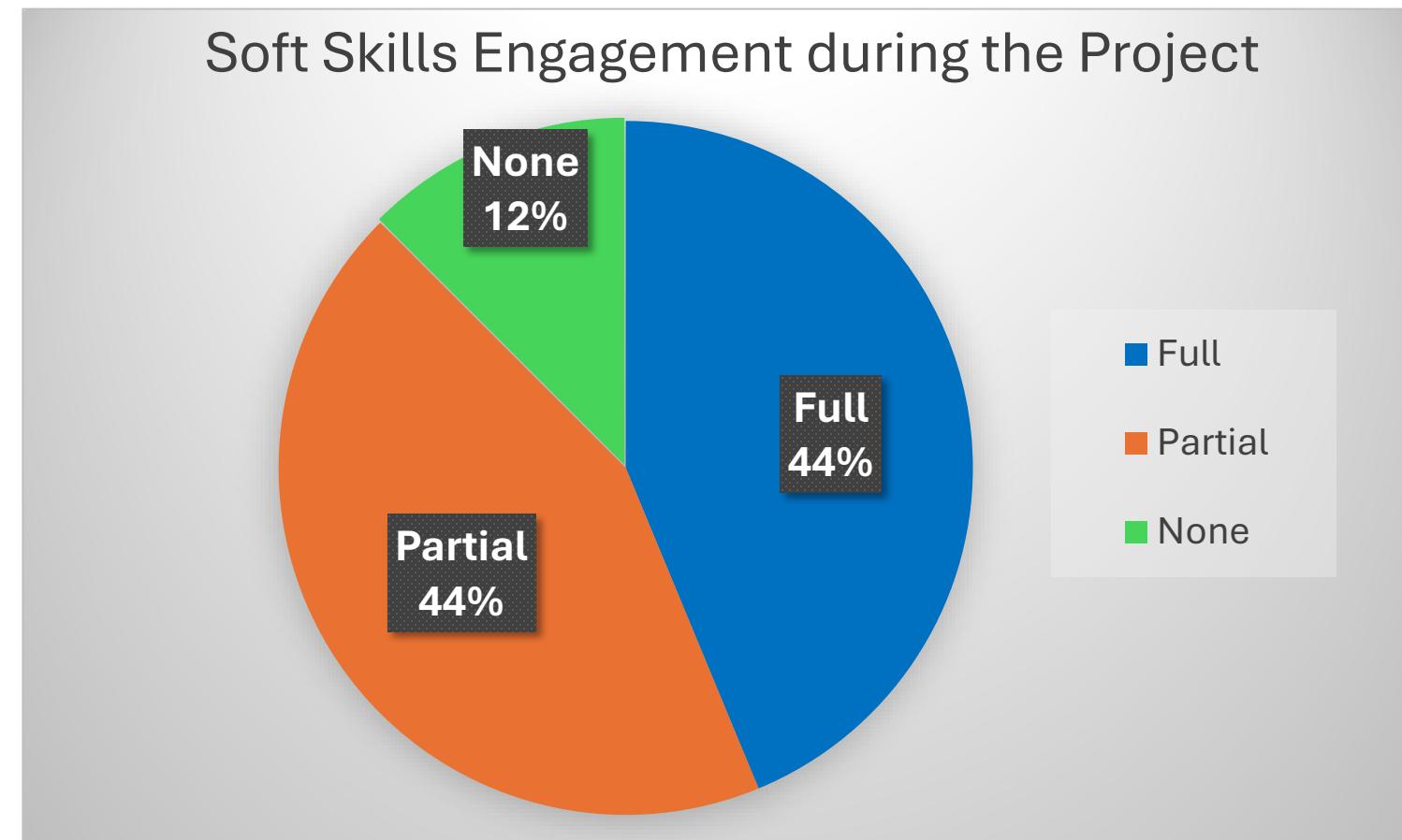
Planning and monitoring are inconsistent.



Steps 3 and 4: Research Questions and Findings

3- Students' Perceptions of Soft Skills

- Most enumerate skills only at the end of project.
- Many don't monitor the skills they chose to develop at the beginning.

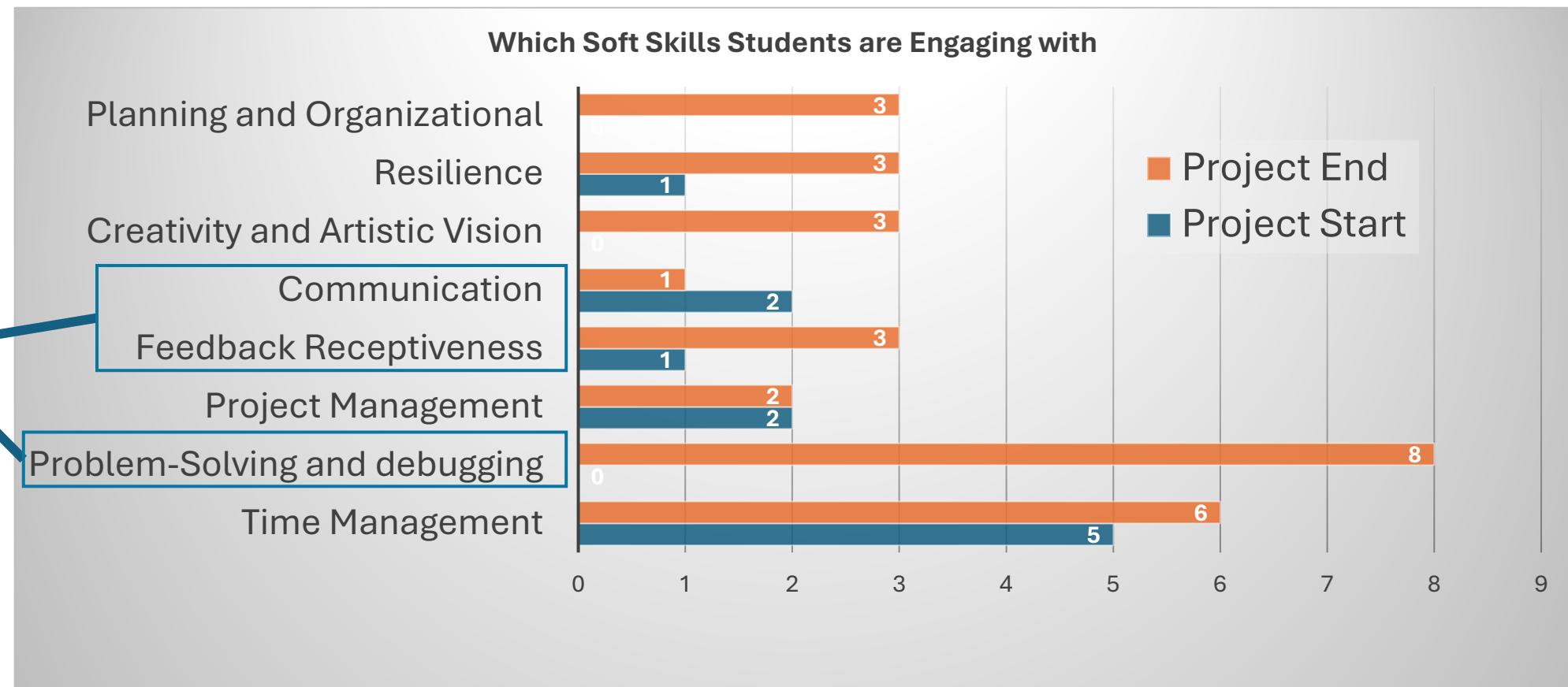


Steps 3 and 4: Research Questions and Findings

3- Students' Perceptions of Soft Skills

Chart listing main soft skills used by minimum of 3 students:

**STEM
related**



Steps 3 and 4: Research Questions and Findings

Conclusion:

Students need structured strategies to plan, track, and evaluate soft skills throughout the course.



4

Wrapping Up



Critical Reflection on this ARP

Intervention revealed both successes and limitations.

- **Ineffective:** Scaffolded flipped classroom.
- **Success:**
 - 95% of students completed projects on time (higher completion than previous years).
 - Some reflection channels can work: compulsory workshops, a soft skills list, 2 presentations, and Padlet journalling were key drivers of engagement.
 - Noticeable increase in self-reliance and resourcefulness.

Moving Forward

1- Redesign Delivery Approach

- Replace flipped classroom with optional post-class lessons.
- Make completion of in-class tasks at home mandatory with deliverables due next session to increase time-on-task.

2- Strengthen Soft Skills Integration

- 3 Extra workshops in Term 2: Project and Time Management, Soft Skills in VFX and writing blogs reflecting on Soft Skills.
- Soft Skills Reference List replacing Soft Skills passport to increase metacognitive knowledge.
- Padlet journaling with midterm deadline for uploads.

Moving Forward

3- Embed Soft Skills in Assessment & Feedback

- Require explicit mention of soft skills in Blogs.
- Include soft skills in feedback (especially mid term in Padlet), classes and tutorials.
- Use informal checklist during feedback for consistency.

4- Promote Metacognitive knowledge and Regulation as Long-Term Strategy

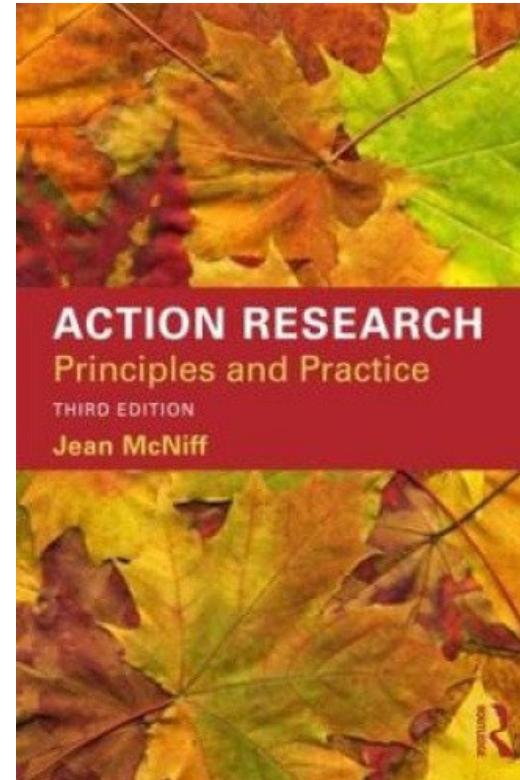
- Use examples during teaching and feedback.
- Encourage reflection across all classes (not only mine).
- Implement across all four terms.

5 Literature



Bibliography

Main book I used to guide all my ARP: McNiff, J., 2013. *Action Research: Principles and Practice*. 3rd ed. London: Routledge. [PDF e-book] Available at: <<https://www.vlebooks.com/VLEWeb/Product/Index/9780203112755>> [Accessed throughout July, August, September, October and November]. ISBN: 9780203112755.



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These helped me to write my reflective blog as well as to plan my Research Methods:

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**Thank you !
Ready for your
Questions !**

