Funded by UK Government

Digital Tech & Creative

Dorset Local Skills Improvement Plan

Sector Focus Group | January 2024

Runway

Stage 1 Findings March 2023

South West LSIP Findings Dec 2023

LMI & Key Sector Data Dec 2023

Key Sector Focus Groups 2024 | 2025

Dorset Skills Survey Data 2024 | 2025

#DorsetSkills #ChangingSkills

Dorset LSIP Delivered by: Dorset Chamber

www.dorsetchamber.co.uk/lsip

Dorset LSIP Stage 2 Qualitative Research Findings: Digital, Tech & Creative Sectors

Produced by RUNWAY: *Headquartered in Poole, Runway is a leading independent research and UX consultancy specialising in qualitative and quantitative research, data analysis, usability testing, and prototype testing. They leverage comprehensive research methods to provide businesses with invaluable insights from their user base to enhance and develop products and services. Runway firmly believes in empowering businesses and organisations by utilising a deeper understanding of the people they serve*

Contents

Introduction

The Dorset Local Skills Improvement Plan (Dorset LSIP), led by the Dorset Chamber, is a three-year initiative aimed at aligning skills provision with the current and future needs of local businesses. Funded by the Department for Education, the plan seeks to ensure that the workforce has the right skills at the right time, focusing on health and social care, advanced manufacturing & engineering, construction, digital tech & creative, agriculture agri-tech & aquaculture, and net zero sectors. The LSIP process involves collaboration with employers, educational institutions, and other economic development stakeholders to develop a strategy that addresses skill gaps and prepares for future demands.

Stage 2 Research Aims

In stage one extensive primary data was gathered from local businesses through various methods including interviews, surveys, measures of satisfaction with skills provisions, this was analysed alongside secondary data analysis to inform the Dorset Local Skills Improvement Plan. The focus for the primary research in stage one was on businesses often overlooked in skills research, especially small companies in less populated areas, to ensure a more representative sample. This approach effectively identified skills gaps and needs across key sectors. However, pinpointing specific, detailed skill needs (granular skills) was challenging due to the wide-ranging employer perspectives. These granular skills are crucial for training providers to tailor curriculums closely to employer needs. Therefore, the objectives for the LSIP's second stage primary research with employers include:

- Identifying current & future (granular) skill needs of employers.
- Verifying whether the-stage 1 findings are-still being experienced.

Qualitative Methodology

The second stage of the LSIP continues to utilise multiple data sources. Including national and regional quantitative employment data, stakeholder and FE/HE provider engagement, employer surveys, focus groups, and comparative analysis of regional LSIPs. This report details the findings from the qualitative methodologies used.

In preparation for a new round of employer research, a comparative analysis was conducted to examine findings from LSIPs across the Southwest. This helped determine the similarities and unique aspects of Dorset's regional skill needs and challenges compared to other areas and is published separately 'SW LSIP findings'. The outcomes of this comparative analysis informed the creation of a discussion guide for sector-specific employer focus groups. Groups of

employers were presented with the findings from the stage one research and the comparative study of other LSIPs to allow discussion, validation, and refinement of the findings.

The focus group was held in November 2023. Local employers were recruited to join the focus group via social media, Dorset Chamber invitations and sector contacts. Most had not contributed to stage 1 research. Recruitment was very challenging and latterly Chamber relationships were utilised for direct approaches in order to gather a group of employers. The group who attended included small, medium and large businesses with local presence, most are Dorset Chamber members.

Key Regional Findings

A comparative analysis of South and Southwest LSIPs conducting research in the Digital and Creative sectors was undertaken. The full report "Literature Review: South and Southwest LSIP's key findings for the Digital and Creative sectors" is available on Dorset Chamber's website. The comparative analysis found the following recurring themes.

- **Digital and Creative Cross-sector Skill Needs**: The review highlights a significant gap in digital skills across businesses in the South and South West of England. Essential digital skills needed include general IT and office systems literacy, data and security needs, digital marketing, and project management.
- **Transferable Skills**: The importance of transferable skills like interpersonal skills, problem-solving, critical thinking, project management, and leadership skills was stressed. These skills are crucial across various business sectors and were frequently viewed as important as specialised technical skills.
- **Specific Skill Needs in Digital and Creative Sectors**: In the digital sector, there's a high demand for software engineering and programming skills, expertise in AI and automation, cloud computing, cybersecurity, and digital design skills. In the creative sector, there's a need for lighting and sound production, digital marketing, artistic and animation skills, technical backstage, set design skills, and film & TV production capabilities. Future digital skills such as data science, data visualisation, and cybersecurity are also emphasised.
- **Employers Proposed Solutions**: Suggestions include more engagement between employers and skills providers, development of flexible short modular courses, improving sector diversity, and providing financial support for upskilling employees. For freelancers, accessible CPD opportunities are recommended.
- **Digital Sector Business Context**: There is a consistent problem in recruiting talent for the digital sector across the South West. Challenges include rurality, housing deficits, competition with London for talent, and low awareness of digital roles. Employers

struggle with navigating the skills system, attracting and retaining talent, and adapting to rapidly changing sector needs.

The above findings were found in stage one for the Dorset Local Skills Improvement Plan as well as other LSIPs across the South of England and thus can be considered robust. The above findings were developed into a discussion guide for the November 2023 focus group and then explored in greater detail with Dorset employers.

Dorset Skills Gaps in Digital and Creative Sectors: Focus Group Findings

Skills Required to Grow the Capability of the Sector.

Applied Technical Skills

There is a sentiment that digital and tech courses emphasise method or technical skills rather than the outcome of these skills. Participants expressed a desire for educational institutions to focus more on real-world problem-solving and less on rote learning or specific technical skills. They suggested that teaching methods should encourage critical thinking, adaptability, and teamwork, which are more aligned with the realities of modern workplaces.

The group proposed that courses should concentrate on project execution as a more effective way to showcase a person's abilities during job interviews. Projects not only teach students teamwork and deadline management but also better simulate the modern workplace, aiding in the transition from education to employment.

> *"... If you want something tangible.... teach them project work, teach them to work as a team."*

Fluid Technical Skills

In seeming contradiction to the above points, later in the focus group, employers recognised the need for technical skills but stressed the particular skills taught did not matter as long as they solved the particular problems required. On this point, one participant made the analogy of building bridges, stressing that how the bridge was made was not relevant.

> *"We just don't want people to be set on learning a certain type of technical skills. If you're going to be building bridges, you might as well have a lot of people who know*

> *how to build bridges, the way by which you build the bridges, we couldn't care less, because that's evolving really, really quickly. But please don't train people who have no idea how to build bridges, and then tell them that the employers will train them, we will expect people to come out and be able, but yeah, what language they use, we couldn't care less".*

Here we see the implication that skill sets need to be present, fluid and adaptable, but not specific. It is clear there is an expectation that employers come with some form of skill set that can be *adapted* to the digital sector.

Depth of Thinking and Promoting Students to Think Critically

For employers, what was most important in education was teaching true depth of thought and providing students with challenging situations to learn from.

> *"Ruby on Rails, PHP, that's the wrong focus. It is not necessarily the course content. It's how you challenge the students along the two, three years, whatever. Yeah. It is about short projects, team projects, bigger projects, and then for them to be able to come to the interviews that actually I've worked on this project, this is by myself, this is what I did."*

Following on from the above perspective, another participant recognised the need for a base level of technical skills but stated that it was the application of technical skills that really mattered.

> *"Take the engineer, you need to be able to do the maths to make sure the boats not going to sink, yeah, we're all keen on that…But your career is going to be largely related to that bit in the middle, which is the engine room of thinking. That's the adaptability, that's the thing that will enable you to work effectively in multi, multi-functional teams and things where you can bring critical thought and thinking and challenge and creativity."*

It is critical to note that, when discussing depth of thinking, employers were clear this was not the same as soft skills,

> *"There's not actually a great shortage of lovely people who are personable in a team, but the depth of thinking that sits there and the acceptance of challenge. And that I think is what is different, and I'm not sure they would describe that as sitting in the soft skills space*."

The discussion emphasised the importance of depth in thinking and adaptability over mere technical skill acquisition in educational and training programs. Employers and participants agree that while a foundational level of technical knowledge is necessary, the real value lies in how students apply these skills in real-world scenarios. This approach goes beyond the traditional focus on soft skills, highlighting the need for critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to work effectively in multifunctional teams. It's this depth of thought and the willingness to embrace challenges that truly differentiate successful professionals in today's dynamic work environment. Therefore, the focus of education and training should shift towards fostering these deeper cognitive abilities, ensuring that learners are not just technically proficient but also adaptable, innovative, and capable of critical thinking in diverse situations.

Advanced Problem-Solving

In the literature review of South West LSIPs, focused on the Digital sector, a skill gap in problem-solving was frequently observed. This was also the case in the focus group. Dorset employers expressed concern that current training lacks adequate emphasis on critical thinking and deep problem-solving skills. In particular, employers suggested that training seems overly focused on functional skills, leaving insufficient time and space for intensive thought.

> *"...the one thing that I did was critical thinking for the courses I did... that skill has been important to my career in terms of that right to challenge and to think differently from what is on a piece of paper."*

> *"It's definitely an issue with the apprentice, it's a really interesting one, technically brilliant. So, he's coming from, I think it's X College. And technically brilliant. But so, he'll launch into a problem and go, I can absolutely solve that. And then as soon as he hits any sort of brick wall, he'll come back to us and say, well, I can't do that".*

As problem-solving was a recurrent topic of discussion in the focus group this research allowed for a more detailed explanation of how employers understood this broad skill. The following points were how employers understood problem-solving and the most valuable aspects of the skill:

Breaking Down Complexity: Several participants stressed the necessity of being able to take complexity and break it down into manageable steps, regardless of the scale or nature of the task. This ability to dissect and address problems was seen as essential and not sufficiently taught in traditional educational settings.

Defining the Actual problem: It was noted across the group that a key dimension of problem-solving for small and medium-sized enterprises is defining what the actual problem is. It was stated often there would be a goal that needed to be achieved, and the obstructions to doing so (problems) were not always clear. For this reason, training new employees on tasks that had unclear boundaries was seen as valuable.

***Adaptability and Team Problem*-Solving:** Adaptability was closely linked to problem-solving, with one speaker pointing out that the most valuable employees are those who can confidently, intelligently, and articulately navigate and solve problems, especially in team settings. This skill was viewed as increasingly vital due to the rapid and constant changes in the workplace, especially in technical fields like programming.

The Need for Self-Learning to Enhance Problem-Solving: The integration of self-learning into work culture was mentioned as a way to foster problem-solving skills. The idea is that dedicating a portion of time to self-learning enables individuals to keep up with changes and challenges, thereby enhancing their problem-solving capabilities in a dynamic work environment.

In summary, the group identified problem-solving as a key skill in the modern workplace. Its importance is magnified by the fast-paced and ever-evolving nature of today's work environments, where traditional educational methods may not be adequate to equip individuals with the necessary skills. The ability to break down complex tasks, adaptability, confidence, and a commitment to self-learning were all highlighted as crucial components of effective problem-solving.

Importance of Interpersonal and Employability Skills

To provide a more granular listing of the technical skills needed by employers, the group moderators constantly attempted to steer the conversation toward a discussion of technical skill gaps. However, employers were reluctant to provide specific examples of technical skill gaps.

Group participants emphasised that broader non-technical skill sets were often much more important than actual technical skills, as they believed many specific technical skills were changing, becoming de-skilled, or could be taught on the job, provided the person had the right motivation.

> *"The single biggest skill as I think we can all agree, right, if the right person walks through the room, they're confident, they've got intelligent, they're articulate, they've got sparkling eyes, looks you in the eye, shakes hands, have a*

> *discussion, break down problems, and work in teams, we're going to recruit them pretty much whatever they want to do. And, because there is no time to get comfortable in any career at the moment, we can't talk about what programming looks like in the future because it won't exist. It'll be de-skilled. And that, you know, we're already looking at the de-skilling, of software engineering itself and the actual discipline of programming to a massive degree. What we need is, is the team working the problem solving and the adaptability to know that life is going to be difficult."*

In the above extract, we see the employer valuing a person's confidence, motivation, desire to work, communication skills, and other broader non-technical skills more than specific skills. Across the room, there was broad agreement on this point, and the importance of motivation, work readiness, attitude, and interpersonal skills was omnipresent in the focus group.

Client Management and Communication Skills

The importance of communication skills with clients cannot be understated, as it was an observed skill gap in the focus group and the literature review of other LSIPs. Communication and client relationship-building skills were viewed as a common deficit across the more technical roles, such as software engineers, and programmers. Employers recognised that those who entered these technical roles were not expected to excel in communication skills, but basic communication skills greatly increased productivity. Employees who had a dual skill set of technical ability combined with the ability to communicate with clients were seen as rare and valuable assets to businesses.

When recruiting junior members of staff to web development roles, some employers stated they looked for younger people with retail experience, as it was realised that those who had already experienced working in customer-facing roles would have the communication skills to engage with clients.

> *"...we found that bringing in younger guys and girls with retail experience, actually is really, really positive. Because it just means that they can talk to people... the customer service, or customer skills, even at the techie level are really, really valuable. And that's really, really rare. So, you know that you're going to employ a certain amount that is introverted, very deeply techie, you wouldn't put them in front of a customer, that's okay. But what we find is where possible you can get that balance."*

Bridging and Blending Business and Technical Skills Gaps

Participants emphasised the importance of incorporating business and marketing skills into IT programs, advocating for a more comprehensive educational approach.

The integration of creative and digital skills appears limited, particularly in areas like digital marketing, where some overlap exists. Moreover, the necessity for marketing professionals to understand branding and design to effectively communicate with customers is a skill that's often lacking.

Many participants shared their personal experiences with courses that combined business and IT skills, highlighting the potential benefits of this approach.

To bridge these skills gaps, some participants suggested a blended approach. This would involve using both internal and external training providers, recognising not only the obvious in-house expertise but also less apparent knowledge blind spots.

> *"...we go for a blended approach... there's some stuff we have to be accredited for. We have to send engineers to Microsoft to learn stuff....we would do stuff internally because we've got people that have done that for 10 years who can probably teach our platform better than getting a third party in."*

Summary of Employer's Skill Needs

This research underscores a pivotal shift in employers' expectations toward a more holistic emphasis on skills. While acknowledging the and importance of foundational technical expertise to build from, employers are increasingly valuing attributes like confidence, communication, adaptability, and problem-solving abilities. This transition mirrors the rapidly evolving nature of technical work, where software engineering-specific skills are becoming automated or de-skilled. Thus, employers are seeking individuals who possess a foundational understanding of technical principles but, more importantly, are equipped with the skills necessary to navigate and adapt to the ever-changing landscape of the job market.

Skills Needed to Maintain Standards

Coding Fundamentals

Employers expressed that due to the rapid pace of change in programming languages, teaching only the currently in-demand languages is ineffective. Employers believed these languages will become outdated soon after students' graduate. Instead, employers desired a more macro

approach to coding, where the principles of writing high-quality code are taught. This includes the best ways to structure, reduce redundancy and optimise code.

One participant highlighted a real-life situation where an apprentice software developer didn't fully consider the knock-on impact of a seemingly simple code change.

> *"...in coding, if you make a change somewhere, it can have ramifications in lots of different places as well."*

For these reasons there was agreement across the group that rather than focus on specific programming languages, it was more practical to teach students what constitutes high-quality programming. As the below participant explained this point

> *"As a coding... building a product that where you've got, you know, a calculation here, that's going to be used in a put in a program here, here, here, and here, you don't build it five times you build it once. And then you flag it from the one. Okay, so those principles of coding are really important. Not necessarily, like you said, the actual code that they use, they can learn C sharp with, with respect to make it move across to something else."*

It is notable that in the literature review of other digitally focused LSIPs, the rate of change was also mentioned as a key challenge to training staff, as training often becomes out of date quickly. This perspective was implicit in employers' feedback in the focus group. Employers' desire for a fundamentals first approach to teaching programming was so employees possessed transferable skills that mitigated frequent changes in the sector.

Self-teaching, Continual Learning, and Adaptability

Curiosity and adaptability are crucial in the workplace; with self-learning being a key skill for employees. While this has always been central to software development, it's now vital in areas like digital marketing, data, and AI use.

This is especially true for those in smaller companies, where employees often fill multiple roles. The concept of the 'T-shaped person' -one with diverse skills- was highlighted. However, this may make it challenging for individuals to specialise in a single area.

Some emphasised the importance of reflecting on and documenting experiences as a form of self-learning and knowledge sharing.

> *"...we ask them to write a wiki for the next person to share, and actually the fact that they maybe just got lucky with a fix, for them to write a bit of a wiki...they've had to learn a bit more to be able to articulate it better."*

Barriers to Upskilling

Differentiation and Quality Assurance Between Learning Providers

Employers feel the quality of training providers varies greatly, and many offer subpar services. The market is crowded with numerous vendors competing for attention, often prioritising price and distribution over quality. The group emphasised the importance of finding high-quality training providers, as mediocre training can lead to wasted time and money. They mentioned that distinguishing between good and bad vendors is challenging without recommendations. with low awareness of which organisation accredits which course, one participant suggested creating a 'Checkatrade'-style body to accredit and rate the vendors.

> *"10 years ago, when I was leaving 15 years when I was even college...that's how you make money...it was highly paid. Now, there seems to be loads of people that run e-learning or coaching development. What's good, what's bad?"*

> *"...you can buy an E-Learning course for 50 quid on Groupon. But how good who is? Who is accrediting?"*

Employers also recognised the difficulty faced by training providers in finding high-quality teachers. Finding teachers in the digital sector was highly challenging, as people "are paid far less than they could possibly earn in industry".

Hybrid Working

Participants expressed that before COVID-19, it was easier for newcomers to learn quickly in an office filled with people compared to the post-COVID period where many teams are fully remote or hybrid.

However, this viewpoint was countered by numerous participants who pointed out that a generation of people in a post-COVID world prefer remote working due to its compatibility with a flexible lifestyle.

Some participants noted that certain roles, such as customer support teams, function better when everyone is in the same room. On the other hand, more intensive work, like software engineering, may be better suited to remote working.

> *"There's this dichotomy…because the thing that people value most…flexibility and the freedom to work from home. But it's the very thing that makes it difficult for them to really, truly learn skills. And so, these two forces are working in opposite directions,"*

> *"…even between those teams, we're seeing much better collaboration and it's kind of like It's been proving our business just by putting all of those people in the same room."*

Educational Excellence

Some employers perceive that current exam results do not clearly distinguish between excellent, good, and poor grades, as they did 20 years ago. This leads to a concern that individuals are receiving grades that would have been lower in the past, pushing the cohort towards mediocrity rather than promoting excellence.

Another participant pointed out a larger societal and possibly generational issue. They mentioned that it has become challenging to question individuals with high grades, as these individuals consider themselves beyond critique.

> *"…twice as many people come out with a first from university than did 20 years ago? Did everybody get twice as intelligent? now they've put in layers and layers of A-star, star, star. If people performing average are told that they are doing brilliantly, then we've seen an erosion."*

Apprenticeships Day Releases

Several participants in the discussion shared their concerns about the current practice of setting aside a single day for all apprentices to be absent from work for training. They noted that this approach can leave smaller businesses particularly vulnerable, as they often depend heavily on their apprentices for day-to-day operations. As a result, these businesses can experience significant disruption on the days when apprentices are away for training. To address this issue, employers suggested shifting toward online training programs. They believe that online training would offer much greater flexibility, enabling apprentices to complete their training at times that are less disruptive to the business.

> *"...at one point decided they were going to send everybody all on the same day, which made it very difficult for us as a business because we literally lost the workforce."*

Developing Skillsets

Apprenticeships

The participants in the focus group shared a variety of experiences and perspectives regarding apprenticeships, emphasising both their successes and the challenges they faced. Many speakers shared successful experiences with apprenticeships; highlighting how these programs have been instrumental in the growth of their businesses. They discussed employing apprentices in fields such as marketing and software development and commended the progression of apprentices into more senior roles within their organisations.

However, some participants observed a decline in the quality of recent apprentices, attributing this to the impact of COVID-19 on personal development and work readiness. They described these apprentices as "fragile" and "lacking in confidence," a situation they believed resulted from missing out on critical development during lockdown periods.

Again, significant emphasis was placed on the importance of adaptability and problem-solving skills in apprentices. Employers noted the rapid pace of change in the workplace, and highlighted the need for employees who can quickly adapt and think critically.

The shift to more remote working environments was cited as a particular challenge for apprentices. In these settings, apprentices struggled to absorb company culture and learn from others, which hindered their overall development. The value of self-learning and curiosity in apprentices was also a point of discussion. Employers viewed these traits as essential for keeping pace with technological advancements and adapting to new challenges.

Overall, while there are positive views on the value of apprenticeships, concerns about recent societal changes, like COVID-19 and the shift to remote working, were evident. There is a strong call for educational reforms that better align with real-world business needs, focusing on adaptability, problem-solving, and self-learning to ensure the effectiveness of apprenticeship programs.

Teaching Workplace Applicable Skills

The theme of academia versus vocational or practical skills was a prevalent topic during the session. Many group members discussed how classrooms could better reflect the business

world. Techniques like gamification were seen as effective ways to foster teamwork and prepare individuals for the workforce.

> *"...we need to break the class up into groups, make it competitive, and then see which group wins – life is like that in the real world."*

Following on from the above dialogue, there was an extended discussion about the application of theoretical knowledge to practical workplace problems. It was stated the problems and exam questions that students worked through often had little resemblance to the types of problems faced by smaller digital businesses. The whole group felt that teaching students using well-designed problems set by employers in the digital sector would result in better training outcomes.

Impact of Training

There's a common belief that training doesn't have to be expensive, however, the focus group rejected this perspective. Many acknowledge that the cost of training materials, time spent off-site, time for debriefing, and implementing learnings mean that the course cost is just one component. For this reason, all employers were more interested in the impact rather than the cost.

> *"...they might they may well be more expensive. But what is the worst for me? Is mediocre. And saving the money?"*

> *"...somebody's spending all that time out of the office and coming back a bit better...was that good value training?"*

Training Providers Must Champion Excellence and the Concept of 'Winners and Losers'

These employers are actively seeking out training providers who not only excel in their field but also share a common value system. Employers champion those who are the best in their cohort, fully acknowledging that at least half of the group may not meet the set standards and will inevitably fail. Such employers understand and accept this outcome as a part and parcel of the natural process. They recognise that in any competitive scenario, there will be winners and losers.

> *"...celebrating true excellence at the centre of what they do, and that excellence is defined as something that by definition 50% of the course can't achieve."*

Training Customer Service and Problem-Solving Skills First

One participant suggested starting training with the development of customer-facing skills. Then, move apprentices to problem-solving tasks and technical aspects. This approach accommodates developers who are naturally introverted and may not embrace all aspects of the training. By imparting customer skills, apprentices can immediately contribute to customer projects and gain exposure to the commercial side of business operations.

Participants favour employability skills such as industry-specific problem-solving, which they deem more valuable than generic coding skills.

> *"...we will start with low code, we'll do the power app stuff, just really simple stuff. No code, low code... basically problem solving effectively.... bring them in, and you say, there's a problem, go away and solve it.... so those customer service skills, customer skills, starting point are brilliant for us."*

Focus Group Findings Summary

> *"Moderator: does anyone have any closing comments?"*
>
> *Employer: "I'll repeat what I said earlier, we need to sound the alarm, it's nice having nice conversations, but I think businesses need to shout and say something is not right."*

The findings from the focus group reveal a critical shift in the focus of skills development, advocating for a balance between technical and non-technical capabilities in the workforce. The research highlights the growing emphasis on adaptability, problem-solving, and depth of thought, alongside technical expertise. Employers recognise the importance of these broader skill sets, valuing confidence, communication, and teamwork as much as, if not more than, specific technical skills. This reflects the rapidly evolving nature of work, especially in fields like software engineering, where the specificity of skills is becoming less important than the ability to apply these skills in diverse, real-world scenarios.

The LSIP's findings suggest that educational and training programs should prioritise real-world problem-solving and project-based learning over traditional rote learning methods. Employers are looking for impactful training that goes beyond mere technical proficiency, focusing on the development of critical thinking, creativity, and the ability to work effectively in multifunctional teams. The need for industry-specific problem-solving skills is also highlighted, with an emphasis on employability over generic coding skills.

Moreover, the importance of customer service and communication skills, even in technical roles, is underscored. Employers value individuals who can not only solve problems but also effectively communicate and manage client relationships. This dual skill set is increasingly seen as a rare asset in the digital and creative sectors.

As the workplace continues to evolve, particularly in the wake of societal changes like COVID-19 and the shift to remote working, the LSIP underscores the need for addressing skill gaps. Solutions should align more closely with the realities of the business world, emphasising adaptability, critical thinking, and self-learning to ensure the effectiveness of training initiatives. This approach will help create a workforce that is not only technically competent but also adaptable, innovative, and prepared for the challenges of a dynamic job market.

Synthesising Stage 1, Stage 2, and Regional Findings for the Digital and Creative Sectors

Stage 2 research aimed to provide a greater level of depth to the initial findings, and establish which findings were replicated in a second round of data collection. Both research aims have been met. As seen in Table 1. below, the findings from Stage 1 employer interviews, Stage 2 focus groups, and other Southwest LSIPs are remarkably similar. The employer stated skill gaps such as programming fundamentals, interpersonal skills, client management, problem-solving, and project management have been identified in several rounds of data collection, and independently replicated by other LSIPS.

The limitations of this research also require discussion. In stage 1 of the Dorset LSIP, the Digital and Creative sectors were combined, and employers interviewed from both sectors. However, in stage 2 employer groups there was little focus on the creative sector, with the employers attending the group being exclusively from the Digital sector.

Finally, employers showed a bias towards discussing broader societal, educational, and macro issues, whereas the LSIP's objectives are to inform curriculum development on a granular level. The translation of broad skills such as 'advanced problem solving' into specific curriculum recommendations is highly challenging.

Table 1. ***(extracted from Literature review)***

Cross comparison Table of the Dorset and Southwest LSIPs for the Digital Tech and Creative Sector

Dorset LSIP findings (stage 1) (interviews with employers / Dorset LEP analysis)	Southwest LSIP findings
Skill Needs • Software development and programming skills • Fundamental programming skills • Data analysis skills • Digital design skills • Client management skills • Interpersonal skills: communication, collaboration, teamwork • Time management • Problem solving skills • Project management skills • Business Skills • Marketing skills • Flexible skillsets	**Skill Needs** • Software development and programming skills • AI and Automation • Cloud computing and cyber security • Digital design skills • Interpersonal skills: communication, collaboration, teamwork • Problem solving and critical thinking • Project management and leadership skills • Business skills • Advertising and Marketing skills • Lighting and sound production • Artistic and animation skills • Technical backstage and set design skills • Film and TV production