

The Employability Challenge

Executive Summary

February 2009

Foreword

There are few more satisfying ways to spend eight hours than working with colleagues and customers to solve problems and make things happen. Work should be, and often is, much more than a way to earn a living. By working together well, individuals contribute to the productivity of the economy and success of society, improve the lives of colleagues and customers, and realise their own creative potential.

This is enabled by everyone coming out of the public employment and skills system being able to work in a team, communicate clearly, listen well, be interested and keen to learn, take criticism, solve problems, read, write and add. These employability skills are the lubricant of our increasingly complex and interconnected workplace. They are not a substitute for specific knowledge and technical skills: but they make the difference between being good at a subject and being good at doing a job.

In 2009, too few people have these skills. Business has been asking for them for twenty years. There are many initiatives underway that aim to meet this need. There is, nevertheless, a long way to go. The UK Commission wants to see two things. We want every school, college, university and training provider to treat the employability of their learners as part of their core business. We want a unified and coherent policy, assessment and funding framework that empowers teaching and training professionals to develop employability.

These things are not going to happen overnight. They call for fundamental changes in attitude: to give employability parity of esteem with academic skills, to build the ability of learning providers to work with business, to come up with assessment methods that drive funding in support of the work that needs to be done.

This document is the UK Commission's opening statement in this debate. We have started at the grass roots, by looking at what just over 200 organisations are currently doing to develop employability skills. This document boils this practice down to core principles which we hope to see developed and adopted more widely.

The theme of employability skills, however, is one to which we will return again and again. We are in this for the long haul. We are going to examine, and catalyse change in every part of the system: learners, learning professionals, institutions, employers, assessment, funding and policy. We are determined to see change for the better.



Sir Mike Rake
Chairman



Executive Summary

Introduction

Without employability skills:

- it will be more challenging for the UK economy to achieve its productivity goals
- individuals will find it harder to get and progress in rewarding work
- several important strands in UK employment and skills policy may be unachievable

The UK Commission believes that a central part of what all publicly-funded training should do is to develop the ability to use knowledge and skills in the workplace effectively. Many learning providers already do help learners develop employability skills. Many, however either neglect to teach employability skills or, for funding or capacity reasons, find it difficult to develop them. The purpose of this document is to set out an unequivocal challenge to practitioners and policy-makers, to raise the status of employability skills, improve practice in developing them, and create a policy environment in which good practice flourishes.

This document is an opening, not a closing statement. It has two perspectives. It concentrates on good practice in the individual learning environment, because that has to be the focus of action. It draws on several studies of what individual employment and skills providers do, and it includes a review of the relevant academic literature. It is not, however, aimed only at teaching and training professionals. It is for all those who are, or need to be, active in making employability skills a reality. Good practice will not flourish without a surrounding framework of policy, funding and assessment that empowers and encourages practitioners to make full use of it.

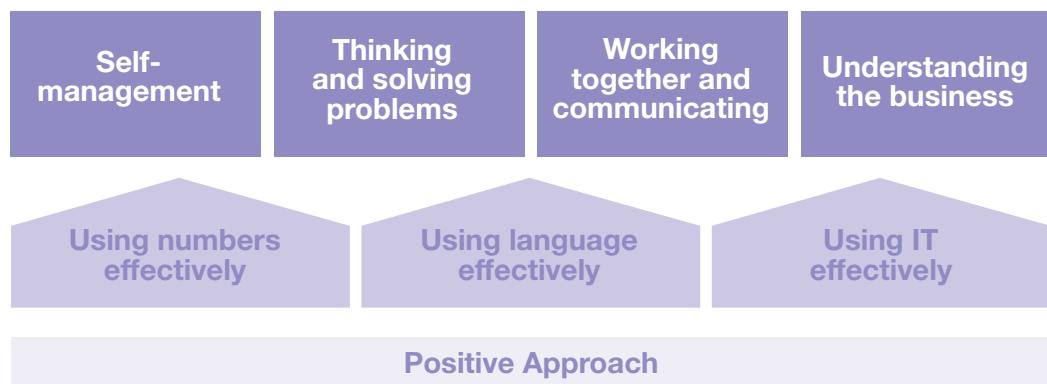
The Practitioner Challenge

The first perspective, though, is the “grass roots” practitioner perspective. We want to offer practical approaches to the question **how do people develop employability skills?** We summarise existing evidence and review the practices of several organisations in the field, including universities, colleges, schools and employment training providers. Our main aim is to provide a starting point, or some new ideas, for schools, colleges, universities and employment providers who want to improve the employability of their learners.

We also, however, want to pose a challenge. In preparing this document we heard complaints along the lines of “our institution is different – we can’t do that – it’s not our role – somebody should make this happen – it’s not as simple as that”. Many cited the apparent unwillingness of employers to co-operate as a stumbling block. We also met learning providers of all kinds who recognised that in a competitive and globalising labour market, their duty to students has to go beyond teaching specific knowledge and vocational skills. Despite resource constraints, they put time and money into building relationships with employers, structuring teaching around activities, and creating an institutional culture of employability. They make employability part of their core business.

The UK Commission is firmly on the side of this second type of learning provider. It is against complacency and a preference for staying in the comfort zone. If this message is welcome to everyone, then somebody has misunderstood it. We do not think that what is happening at the moment is good enough. We want to see change. Although that change has to be empowered and encouraged (and not impeded) by policy, funding and assessment, it has to *happen* at the level of individual schools, colleges, universities and employment training providers.

For the purposes of this document we take employability skills to be those set out in the diagram below:



We expand on this definition in Chapter 1, which also sets out why employability skills are so important to the UK. In keeping with our focus on what needs to happen in the learning environment, however, we do not wish to be over-prescriptive about definitions. There are many good ones: they all overlap. Regardless of how employability skills are defined, **the challenges in helping people develop these skills are the same**.

The evidence from the existing literature (see Chapter 1) supports the broad conclusions from our survey of just over 200 organisations. It is a conclusion that, we expect, will not come as a surprise to many experienced teachers and trainers. In broad outline, developing employability skills entails:

- **experiential action-learning**: using skills rather than simply acquiring knowledge, placing emphasis on trial and error, and with a clear focus on the pay-offs for the learner in employment and progression
- **work experience**: a work placement in an actual business, or an authentic classroom simulation based on a real workplace
- opportunities for **reflection and integration**

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 explore in more detail how to make this happen. Chapter 2 is about the most important aspect of employability skills: employer involvement. Getting employers involved transforms training. It is, however, often done badly, or not at all. This chapter discusses:

- the **pay-off for the provider** in involving employers, including:
 - understanding of the training need
 - motivation for learners – a workplace makes the training relevant and the goals believable

- an optimised learning environment that creates pressures, ambiguity, consequences for good or bad work
- improved chances of progression into work
- a better chance of attracting funding in the current and developing funding world
- identifying and **approaching employers** using:
 - background research to determine which employers have jobs in areas where the provider has expertise and to which students can and will aspire
 - dialogue to uncover areas for potential co-operation
 - investment in long-term relationships based on empowering the employer and a genuine wish to listen and inform
- developing a **business case** that articulates how the employer will benefit from participation, examples of which might include:
 - a reliable source of candidates with the skills they need
 - increased workforce diversity, and access to untapped talent pools
 - improved retention by targeting local residents for recruitment
 - increased motivation for staff who enjoy passing on their skills
 - development opportunities for managers or potential managers
 - improved perception by community and customers
- the **limitations of Corporate Social Responsibility**: it may not last, and philanthropic motives may dilute the very “realness” that the provider needs to get from the business
- the need to treat employer involvement as an important and challenging specialism, requiring **investment in capacity-building** and resources

Chapter 3 is about what institutions as a whole need to do to transform practice and outcomes. Making employability skills a reality means many institutions and professionals moving out of their comfort zones. This calls for a whole-institution approach, ambitious vision, courageous leadership, and investment in staff and capability.

Chapter 4 is about specific practices in programme design and delivery that appear to work in developing employability skills. These are drawn from good practice already in use. Indeed, much of this good practice is common to a wide range of vocational training. The summary is:

- involve employers by:
 - consulting them at the design stage
 - where possible, drawing on their staff and facilities to deliver the programme, particularly for assessment and feedback
 - building a strong connection between learning and the workplace
- make the learning “real” by:
 - structuring learning around activities

- establishing, agreeing and enforcing expectations
- allowing the possibility of failure and creating consequences for good or bad performance
- making a job the end goal of the programme
- involving non-teaching staff in delivery
- building work placements into the teaching structure
- a high level of personal commitment from the trainer
- build in **opportunities for reflection** and 360° feedback, to allow learners to “own” what they have learnt (one of the most valuable transferable skills is the ability to transfer one’s skills)
- ensure the programme fits the specific learners through:
 - baseline assessment
 - involving students in shaping the programme
 - allowing flexibility and variety in the programme structure
 - providing holistic individual support to learners

Chapters 2 to 4 do not set out to be the final word on how to develop employability skills. They do, however, offer practical principles that learning providers can adopt in order to improve their students’ employability. Often, however, the challenge is not to *understand* how to develop employability skills. The development of employability skills is not complex. It is, however, difficult to put into practice; it calls for effort and commitment. Hence our challenge to learning providers. We want schools, colleges, universities and employment training providers to:

- adopt and improve existing good practice in the field
- shift resources into building relationships with employers to support employability skills
- build an institutional culture that promotes employability
- make the learning environment resemble the workplace
- invest in the capacity of their staff to develop employability skills

The Policy Challenge

Good practice only happens, however, in the right environment. Hence our second perspective is to set out some of the changes in policy, assessment and funding that will be necessary for this emerging good practice to fulfil its promise. We will return to these topics in subsequent documents, and keep returning to them until the right environment exists. We will also look in much greater detail in future at what employers need to do. These topics are not the central focus of this document, but they are central to the success of employability skills.

Our main challenges for policy makers and funding bodies is to create an environment in which learning providers put employability skills at the heart of what they do. We want to see the emerging good practice which we have begun to capture here taken up across the employment and skills system. We recognise that much good work is already underway in the field. Many individual learning providers are already working hard to develop employability skills. For this to become the norm, and for it to be done well, not half-heartedly, the environment in which all learning providers operate has to change. In particular we want to see action in three areas:

- **training:** more effort at the national level in defining, selecting and developing the distinctive personal qualities and skills that make an effective teacher of employability skills
- **assessment:** the existing structure may not be the best way to measure effective development of employability skills. Outcomes-based funding for training is only as good as the definition of the outcomes. We need, therefore, to challenge existing assessment methodologies and, if necessary, develop new approaches that reward good practice in the development of employability skills and give employability skills parity of esteem with specific vocational skills and academic knowledge
- **funding structures:** flexibility is essential to success in developing employability skills, both to vary the programme to meet the needs of individuals, and to invest in long term employer relationships that may have no immediate pay-off. Funding needs to give institutions scope to work in this way. Funding structures already allow providers to invest in bricks and mortar. They also need to encourage investment in the intangible infrastructure of community, business and social networks

Many good initiatives are underway to improve practice and policy in developing employability skills. We applaud those who have given their backing to these solutions. The problems, however, have been around for too long for anyone to be complacent or content. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills wants to see, and intends to secure, a step change in the development of employability skills in the publicly funded employment and skills system.

Launched on 1 April 2008, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills is a key recommendation in Lord Leitch's 2006 review *Prosperity for All in the Global Economy: World Class Skills*. Ours is a genuinely employer-led organisation, with Commissioners drawn from the highest levels of the private, public and voluntary sectors, supported by trade union leadership.

Our aim is to raise prosperity and opportunity by improving employment and skills. Our ambition is to benefit individuals, employers, government and society by providing independent advice to the highest levels of UK government on how improved employment and skills systems can help the UK become a world-class leader in productivity, in employment and in having a fair and inclusive society: all this in the context of a fast-changing global economy.

The Full Report and Case Studies are also available from The UK Commission. Contact us to order a copy of the report or download at our website ukces.org.uk

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