Key skills for developing employability
This booklet is designed to help teachers adopt teaching styles that promote key skills and enable students to see the relevance of their studies to the world of work. It provides examples of approaches to teaching key skills that can help students to develop their employability.

Definitions of ‘employability’ vary, but most highlight two main ways that individuals can realise their employment potential:
- initial preparation for employment
- active management of career development.

Employability is not just a ‘one-off’ preparation for work. It is important to be able to cope with change, and to create and seize career opportunities after the initial entry into the world of work, so individuals need to develop the skills to manage their continuing career development, including transitions.

The National Skills Task Force recognises the following key skills as 'essential for (both) the initial and continuing employability of individuals.' (DfEE 1999):
- communication
- application of number
- information technology
- working with others
- improving own learning and performance
- problem solving.

Specifications have been developed in each of these six key skills with certification available for successful candidates at key stage 4 and post 16. The Key Skills Qualification recognises the achievement of the first three key skills, at any level or levels, and key skills are now integral to a wide range of qualifications and programmes. For additional information about key skills, and copies of the specifications and guidance material, please visit the QCA website: www.qca.org.uk/keyskills

Employers recognise the importance of key skills in helping students to develop as independent, self-aware learners. Key skills enable students to make informed career decisions and to take advantage of opportunities in their adult and working lives.
Key skills are important to employability because they can help students to make connections between school or college and the world of work. They develop students’ ability to manage their own career development, and are of direct use in carrying out careers research, making applications and attending interviews.

Improving own learning and performance aims to develop independent learners who are clearly focused on what they want to achieve and able to work towards targets that will improve the quality of their career decisions, learning and performance at work.

Working with others aims to develop the ability to organise and carry out tasks, with minimum supervision, and work co-operatively with others to meet individual responsibilities and achieve shared objectives.

Problem solving aims to develop the ability to tackle problems systematically, for the purpose of working towards their solution and learning from this process.

Communication aims to develop the ability to apply skills in oral communication, reading and writing, in ways that are effective and appropriate to purpose and context.

Application of number aims to develop the ability to interpret and present numerical and graphical information, and carry out calculations, to meet the purpose of an activity.

Information technology aims to develop the ability to use IT resources to find, explore, develop and present information (text, images, numbers), to meet a purpose.
Initial preparation for employment

Three broad aims have been identified for careers education and guidance:
- self-development
- career exploration
- learning about career management.

Key skills can contribute to each of these aims, as part of preparing young people for employment.

Self-development

Students can learn how to apply the key skills of improving own learning and performance and communication in:
- reviewing learning from managing previous transitions
- analysing their values, styles and abilities.

Improving own learning and performance: eg review progress to identify what they have learned about themselves from making a transition from key stage 3 to key stage 4.

Communication: eg contribute to discussions about how they have managed transitions

Career exploration

In exploring career opportunities, students can learn how to apply the key skills of information technology, communication and application of number in:
- using a variety of different information sources efficiently and critically, and organising information to research, clarify and review career options open to them.

Information technology: eg carry out effective searches and explore information on the Internet, CD-ROMs and/or databases to help them think about career opportunities.

Communication: eg select and read relevant materials, and summarise information on career opportunities; discuss options.

Application of number: eg interpret numerical data on labour market patterns, presented in charts or graphs.
Learning about career management

Career management includes teaching students how to apply the key skills of improving own learning and performance, working with others and problem solving in:

- identifying their career needs and priorities
- making plans and decisions about their future learning and work
- taking action to improve their chances
- managing change and transition.

**Improving own learning and performance**: eg provide accurate information to help set targets that reflect their needs and priorities; take responsibility for their own learning by using a careers plan and seeking support from others to help meet targets; review progress.

**Working with others**: eg work cooperatively with others, organising own tasks to meet their responsibilities, exchange information on progress and agree ways of improving work with others to help achieve their shared objectives.

**Problem solving**: eg in considering a transition (a problem), identify suitable ways of improving their chances (options for tackling the problem, and associated risks); plan and think through options, changing their plan when needed, and explain their approach.
As well as preparing students for initial entry into work, it is important to develop their skills in ways that enable them to actively manage their career development in the future.

Students may have the ‘know how’ (knowledge of self and career opportunities, and techniques) to make informed careers decisions within a supportive environment. But to what extent are they being equipped to make successful transitions beyond school or college? Can they move from a situation where others prompt them to action, to being self-directed, able to take the initiative and negotiate opportunities for themselves?

Can students turn ‘know how’ into effective practice?

To turn ‘know how’ into effective practice requires students to apply their skills in ways that suit their particular purpose and context, ie deploy thinking skills, interpersonal skills and personal qualities in managing their career development.

Relevant thinking skills include reasoning, information processing, enquiry and evaluation, and being creative and enterprising. Critical reflection is also important, to help students make connections between situations, and to think through similarities and differences. This will help them decide when to rely on learning from past experience and when new learning is required.

To become and remain employable, interpersonal skills are crucial. These include the ability to communicate their own ideas and needs, seek out advice and information, maintain support networks, negotiate how objectives may be achieved, and use feedback constructively. Personal qualities such as persistence, reliability and positive attitudes to work are also important.

Are students able to take the initiative?

Many students have experience of work through part-time jobs, as well as work experience and community placements. Students can be encouraged to use these opportunities to show they can take the initiative in:

- learning about career development in employment
- identifying how key skills are used in a work environment, and applying them appropriately
- managing transitions, eg in changing part-time jobs, in moving between school/college and the workplace.

As part of these experiences, key skills can provide a way of measuring ‘distance travelled’ by students in becoming more self-reliant and active learners capable of managing their own career development. There are key skills units at five levels, structured so that students are required to take increasing responsibility for deciding how they will apply their skills to...
suit different tasks, problems and situations, including seeking feedback and support for themselves when needed.

Thinking skills and interpersonal skills and qualities are integral to this process. For example, in applying their key skills students need to ask questions, put forward ideas, analyse information, check, monitor and evaluate their work, explain what they are doing, and show they are capable of meeting their responsibilities and can work cooperatively.

**How can students be supported in ‘putting it all together’?**

Key skills have an important role to play in developing students’ ability to manage their own career development. But, in the early stages of encouraging personal autonomy, teachers and other supporting adults may need to:

- provide carefully structured opportunities for developing these skills
- provide a supportive environment in which students can develop confidence in applying them.

*‘If we want learners to learn meaningfully, to think flexibly and to make reasoned judgements, we cannot suppose that they will do this from a content-based curriculum alone. We must make clear what we mean by these better forms of thinking and then set out to teach them directly.’*

Carol McGuinness, 1996
This section suggests some approaches that have been found particularly helpful in developing key skills, as well as in promoting effective learning in general. Where the focus is on developing employability, it is useful for the activities and examples used to be related to the world of work. For example:

**Showing the relevance of key skills to the world of work**

Effective teaching of key skills for employability needs to show the relevance of these skills to the world of work. Within classroom-based subject teaching, teachers can highlight how a particular key skill is applied in an employment context related to their subject. Within work or community experience programmes, debriefing activities provide an ideal opportunity for students to exchange views on the relative importance of key skills in different employment settings.

**Modelling key skills for employability purposes**

Teachers can play a significant role in modelling the effective application of key skills for students. For example, they may:

- demonstrate how they themselves are using particular skills in their work
- use video clips of people at work and/or examples of work to explain how the key skills assessment criteria are being met, so students can recognise the standards to aim for
- provide opportunities for students to assess video clips and/or examples of work for themselves, and to suggest improvements.

**Carefully sequencing the teaching of theory and practice**

The knowledge and techniques underpinning a particular key skill may need to be taught discretely, but there should also be planned opportunities for practical application, so as to reinforce learning. It is helpful if teachers include different methods of learning within their subject or vocational area, so as to engage students with different learning styles. Where relevant, they should also provide scope for applying key skills within their assignments. Systematic variation in tasks is useful so that students can see how, and to what extent, their current skills can be applied in new and unfamiliar tasks, including those met in wider work and community contexts.

**Actively involving students in their own learning**

Students must be actively involved in their own learning if they are to develop effective key skills for longer-term employability. This includes both teachers and students using the assessment of key skills for the purpose of learning.
Approaches that support the active involvement of students include:

- teaching students how to set targets that aid self-directed learning
- giving students precise feedback, so they can see how they have been doing, and also how to improve
- encouraging students to engage in self-assessment and reflection, using recording techniques to aid this process.

These approaches are supported by use of Progress File, a personal development and planning tool for managing own learning and transitions. Progress File materials can assist the development of the key skill in improving own learning and performance (as well as other key skills) by explaining, for example, what is meant by target setting, and offering a variety of practical examples and exercises for students to practise such skills. For more information about Progress File, please visit website: www.dfee.gov.uk/progfile/index

Target setting can be related specifically to career goals, but teachers can also build in general opportunities for students to develop such skills within subject or vocational lessons. For example, some of the learning objectives in schemes of work could be expressed as targets, and students could be allowed some time in lessons to plan aspects of the work and engage in self-assessment, feedback and review processes, perhaps in pairs or small groups.

Other approaches that encourage active learning include:

- setting problems and tasks that challenge students to think for themselves
- providing opportunities for collaborative work
- using a wide range of contexts for promoting the acquisition of strategies for learning key skills.

**Problem-based learning**

Using a problem-based approach to learning is helpful in developing key skills in general, such as the application of number and information technology, as well as the specific key skill of problem solving. Students need to be presented with problems of an appropriate complexity that will stretch them, but not undermine their confidence, so they can think through possible options and try out different techniques for tackling them.

**Collaborative work**

In developing the key skill of working with others, it is helpful to build in opportunities for students to work in pairs and small groups, so they are encouraged to discuss their ideas, explain their reasoning and learn from each other. This way of working also provides scope for developing other key skills, particularly communication and problem solving.
Making links across subjects and with the world of work

Key skills need to be related to the context in which students are learning if they are to be meaningful to them. But longer-term employability requires the ability to adapt, so it is also important that students learn to make connections, for example, between subjects across the curriculum, and between school or college and the workplace.

Progress File has been found to be helpful in making these connections. With support from teachers, tutors, careers advisers or mentors, students are encouraged to identify how they are using key skills in different situations and to reflect on their approach.

Links with employers can be used in a variety of ways to broaden students’ horizons and enrich learning of key skills for employability. For example, a mock interview programme can often be run on company premises to include completing application forms, producing a CV and learning how to present evidence of key skills in different types of interviews. Industry visits can include discussions between employers, teachers and students, focusing on key skills of relevance to that sector, which will inform work back in the classroom. School-industry events, simulations and enterprise projects can involve mentors from local businesses in setting problems and working alongside students to highlight business applications.

Putting it all into practice

A planned approach to developing key skills for employability could encourage students to take responsibility for making links for themselves between the world of work and what they are learning in school or college. The purpose of the next section is to stimulate discussion, reflection and the exchange of ideas about how such approaches can be used in developing these skills in individual lessons and more widely.
Examples of practice

As part of general studies, groups of four students are given opportunities to work together on tackling a problem posed by a local company. Students are supervised by their general studies tutor, but are expected to take responsibility for planning, carrying out and reviewing their project work, seeking advice and support when needed from other subject teachers and a local industry adviser who meets with students on a weekly basis. At the end of a four-week period each group is required to make a formal presentation on project outcomes and on what they have learned from the process.

The projects enable students to gain an insight into problems faced by business and make links with their own subject interests in exploring these problems. During the projects students record their use of key skills in working with others, problem solving and communication, and include examples of how they have applied these skills in making their presentations.

Working with others: students show they are able to plan complex work with others, agreeing objectives, responsibilities and working arrangements; establish and maintain co-operative working relationships, agreeing changes to achieve the agreed objectives; and review work with others.

Problem solving: students show they are able to explore a complex problem, come up with three options for solving it and justify the option selected for taking forward.

Communication: students show they are able to contribute to a group discussion about a complex subject, and make a presentation, using at least one image to illustrate complex points.

To develop staff and student familiarity with key skills, subject departments have agreed to focus on one key skill per week during the autumn term. During this time teachers are asked to provide at least one opportunity for developing the nominated skill in a way that is relevant to their subject area, and students record in their student planners how they have applied the skill in their course work. In tutor time, students exchange examples of the range of applications of these skills across the curriculum, and discuss the wider relevance of these skills to career development and adult life in general. They are encouraged to take some responsibility for identifying further opportunities for developing and applying key skills.

All six key skills: students show they are able to apply these skills in a wide range of contexts across the curriculum.

In careers lessons, the teacher models use of Progress File on performance appraisal in employment. During these lessons year 10 students use Progress File materials to learn how to set SMART targets and identify the skills and knowledge they have developed through their subjects and wider experiences. Students apply the key skill of improving own learning and performance in setting targets and planning for their own career development. The evidence they collect is used as the basis for reflection and for developing a personal statement. This helps them to prepare for meetings with their tutor in which academic and personal development targets are set and reviewed, once a term, and to see the relevance of these processes to the world of work.

Improving own learning and performance: students show they are able to help set learning, personal and career targets with an appropriate person and plan how these will be met. They take responsibility for some decisions about their learning, using their plan and support from others to help them meet their targets. They review progress with an appropriate person and provide evidence of their achievements.
New PSHE assignments have been introduced to do with developing self-awareness and understanding of own motivations, building a self-help team and revising for examinations. The assignments involve students in setting targets, putting plans into action, reviewing progress and logging achievements. Students are encouraged to use IT in improving their own learning and performance, and to learn how to develop and maintain a support network of other students, as well as adults. There are lessons on the theory of motivation and learning styles, including practical exercises, and opportunities are identified for putting learning into practice in other areas of the curriculum. Teachers have discussed ways of catering for different learning styles within lessons by adapting their teaching styles.

**Information technology:** students show they are able to use IT for researching and presenting their assignments, and for developing their action plan and logging their achievements. They take some responsibility for using IT for maintaining their support network through use of e-mail.

The work experience programme is used as the main focus for developing key skills, with diaries being used to support students in planning, recording and reviewing their skills. To stimulate discussion in preparing for work experience, students who went on work experience last year talk to groups, using key skills maps they completed to show how key skills related to their work activities. In planning their own placement, students complete a key skills self-assessment exercise (from Progress File) to help them think about the skills they would like to develop, and include these as targets in their work experience action plan. On placement, students are encouraged to explore the use of key skills at work and record how they have used them. As part of debriefing, students complete key skills maps that can be added to the bank and work together in small groups to prepare a presentation or display to show what they learned from their placement. In subject lessons, teachers are asked to draw on students’ experience of work to make links with the skills they are using in class.

**Improving own learning and performance:** students show they are able to set targets for developing selected key skills on work experience and plan how they will be met. They take some responsibility for decisions about how they apply these skills in work activities, using their plan and support from their supervisor to help them to meet their targets. They review progress and provide evidence of their achievements for presentation and discussion with others.

**Opportunities for developing one or more other key skills depend on individual choice and opportunities offered by the placement.**
Examples of practice

Project work is used to help students develop links with the local community, and as a means of ‘bringing together’ the application of key skills developed through GNVQ assignments. A group of students on business, media and health and social care courses organise a concert for local community groups. Course tutors support the project by offering advice, suggesting sources of funding and other expertise, and providing feedback to aid the reflection and review process. But students are responsible for working together in researching the type of event people may like, planning for access needs, raising funds, organising the venue, designing the programme and putting on the concert. As part of planning, students are asked to show how their previous learning, in terms of subject knowledge and strengths in individual key skills, such as IT, communication or application of number, may contribute to the project, and identify aspects of the work that will require new learning. Tutors build into the project schedule opportunities for self-assessment, peer-group assessment and review, and for practising how key skills evidence from the project can be used in making applications and preparing for interviews for higher education or employment.

All six key skills: students show how they are able to learn through collaborative work and apply key skills to a community context, and recognise how evidence of their skills can be used in managing transitions.

As part of GCSE maths, the teacher uses the key skills of working with others and application of number to structure a lesson on graphs. When introducing the activity, she makes links with styles of working expected on post-16 courses.

Students work in small groups to present their findings from an activity involving testing out an hypothesis. Within each group, the students discuss different types of graph for presenting their findings and try out some of these before deciding on the most appropriate for their purpose.

In reviewing the activity, the teacher asks for feedback on the strengths of each group’s use of graphs, and suggests ways that students can extend their understanding and use of graphs, as part of their homework.

Application of number: students show they are able to interpret information from graphs, carry out and interpret the results of their calculations, and present their findings using a graph.

Working with others: students show they are able to plan work, work co-operatively and exchange information on progress towards achieving their objective for using graphs.
Useful publications

Developing and recording key skills at Key Stage 4: in improving own learning and performance and working with others
DfEE (1999)

Effective learning, in research matters
Stoll, L. (Ed)
School Improvement Unit, Institute of Education, University of London (1996)

From thinking skills to thinking classrooms: a review and evaluation of approaches for developing pupils’ thinking
McGuinness, C.
Queens University/DfEE (1999)

Learning outcomes from careers education and guidance
QCA /99/329
QCA (1999)

Lifetime Learning: a consultation document
DfEE (1995)

Making employability work: an agenda for action
CBI (1999)

Managing own learning
Progress File Supplement 3
DfEE (2000)

Preparation for working life
QCA /99/384
QCA (1999)

Redefining work
Bayliss, V.
RSA (1998)

Report on teachers’ perception of formative assessment
QCA (2000)

Second report: delivering skills for all
National Skills Task Force (1999)

Understanding and sustaining employability
Hughes, M.
Learning and Skills Development Agency (2000)

Sources of information on key skills

Key skills specifications and guidance can be obtained from the QCA website: www.qca.org.uk/keyskills or QCA publications, 01787 884494

Key skills support can be obtained from the Key Skills Support Programme (KSSP) website: www.keyskillssupport.net or telephone helpline: 0207 962 1066

Further information about Progress File

This can be obtained from the DfEE website: www.dfee.gov.uk/progressfile/index.
About this publication

Who is it for? This guidance is for teachers and lecturers with responsibility for key skills or careers education, and senior managers responsible for teaching and learning in schools and colleges.

What is it about? It provides examples of approaches to teaching key skills that can help students to develop their employability. It explains how key skills are important to initial preparation for employment and for students’ ability to manage their own career development.

What is it for? It will help teachers adopt teaching styles that promote key skills and enable students to see the relevance of their studies to the world of work.

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