



EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

At a glance

KEY MESSAGES

- Employability skills are a set of broad skills, including communication, problem-solving and teamwork. They are regarded by employers as very important – technical skills alone no longer suffice for people entering and advancing in the workplace.
- An operational definition of ‘employability skills’ is needed to reduce industry and VET practitioner confusion associated with the term. Learners would also benefit from clarification.
- The most significant development since 2002 is the embedding of employability skills into training packages, although disagreement remains over whether employability skills should be embedded at the qualification or unit of competency level.
- Teachers are uncertain about how to teach and assess employability skills. Professional development programs could help to ensure that teachers are equipped to teach these skills.
- Consistency continues to be an issue in assessing and reporting employability skills. Appropriate methods such as integrated assessment and descriptive reporting are required.

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INTRODUCTION

In a competitive workforce it is not just having the right qualification or technical skills that will land an individual a job; it could very well be their interpersonal skills. How someone communicates is often the first impression an employer has of a possible worker. Yet, it is precisely communication skills that employers feel applicants are most lacking (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011).

In line with modern economies, workplaces are constantly changing and as a result employers are looking for employees who are adaptable and who have skills beyond the technical (Maxwell 2010). For example, a survey of CEOs found that 33.1% of employers consider employability skills to be the most important factor when employing graduates, whereas only 19.2% rated relevant work experience above employability skills (Australian Industry Group & Deloitte 2009).

This *At a glance* builds on the material on employability skills¹ in the earlier NCVER publications, *Defining generic skills* (NCVER 2003a) and *Fostering generic skills in VET programs and workplaces* (NCVER 2003b), and draws on the 2002 Employability Skills Framework developed by the Australian Chamber of Industry and Commerce and the Business Council of Australia. In addition to considering developments in the areas of teaching, assessing and reporting, this paper looks at how employability skills are delivered and examines the arguments underpinning each of the approaches.

DEFINING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

The Australian Chamber of Industry and Commerce and Business Council of Australia define employability skills as ‘skills required not only to gain employment, but also to progress within an enterprise so as to achieve one’s potential and contribute successfully to enterprise strategic directions’ (2002, p.3). Their framework identifies eight main employability skills. These are:

- communication
- teamwork
- problem-solving
- initiative and enterprise
- planning and organising
- self-management
- learning
- technology.

Despite all the attention these eight skills have received, there is still no operational definition that trainers can use when designing curricula and assessment tools. This deficiency leads to this set of skills being poorly understood by VET practitioners (Australian Flexible Learning Framework 2009), not to mention learners.

Although called ‘employability’ skills, the abilities encompassed by these skills have broader application, being relevant to a variety of tasks in daily life, education, the labour market, social networks and interpersonal relationships. Having well-developed employability skills can also be an advantage in a fluid economic climate – they can help individuals to prosper and cope with change (Callan 2003). Employability skills tend to require a high order of mental complexity since they involve an active and reflective approach to life. In this sense, they are multi-dimensional, comprising ‘know-how, analytical, cultural and communication skills, and common sense’ (Allen Consulting Group 2006, p.12).

¹ This *At a glance* refers to ‘employability skills’, as it is the term preferred by industry and used most frequently in the literature. Other common terms include generic skills, key competencies, transferable skills, core skills and soft skills.

HISTORICAL TIMELINE

Box 1 Timeline

<p>1985 Karmel Committee <i>Quality of education in Australia: report of the Review Committee, April 1985</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looked at the quality of education in Australia • Students should be prepared for both education and employment by attaining skills
<p>1991 Finn Review <i>Young people's participation in post-compulsory education and training: report of the Australian Education Council Review Committee</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looked at the importance of young people developing key competencies so that they have both specific skills for the job and flexibility • Need strong grounding in generic skills and transferable skills
<p>1992 Mayer Committee <i>Key competencies: report of the committee to advise the Australian Education Council and Ministers of Vocational Education, Employment and Training on employment-related key competencies for post-compulsory education and training</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developed a set of seven key competencies: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collecting, analysing and organising information - Communicating ideas and information - Planning and organising activities - Working with others and in teams - Using mathematical ideas and techniques - Solving problems - Using technology • Recommended three performance indicator levels • Recommended assessment in multiple contexts • Recommended reporting at individual and aggregate levels • Key competencies began to be incorporated in competency standards
<p>1999 Australian Industry Group <i>Training to compete: the training needs of Australian industry: a report to the Australian Industry Group</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Looked at the hard skills and soft skills that need to be developed prior to recruitment
<p>2002 Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry & Business Council of Australia <i>Employability skills for the future</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Evaluated progress of key competencies initiatives • Conducted an extensive review of other generic skills schemes • Conducted two surveys of industry and employer views of required skills • Defined employability skills • Developed Employability Skills Framework
<p>2005 National Quality Council</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provided endorsement of employability skills being made explicit in training packages • Replaced Key Competency Framework with the Employability Skills Framework
<p>2007 National Quality Council</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Endorsed the use of descriptive reporting • Employability skills summaries for training package qualifications to be made available on internet

Source: Allen Consulting Group (2006); National Quality Council (2008); NCVET (2003a).

EMBEDDING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS IN TRAINING PACKAGES

There are two main options for the formal introduction of employability skills into VET sector programs – either embedded in training packages or kept separate from the technical and vocational skills. The disadvantage of a separate approach is that learners may not see the value of employability skills if they are removed from their industry context (Cleary, Flynn & Thomasson 2006). Embedding them in training packages means that they are integral and tailored to the industry-endorsed competencies. Learners being able to see the relevance of the skills to workplaces is central to their embracing them.

The National Quality Council's 2005 endorsement for employability skills to be made explicit in training packages provoked debate over how they should be embedded. There had previously been some criticism about the way this was done, with teachers in particular sceptical about whether students were really gaining the skills needed to be employable in a range of jobs in different industries (Callan 2003). The Allen Consulting Group (2004) had argued that incorporating employability skills consistently across training packages could help ease this criticism, since they would demonstrate the relevance to the workplace, whatever the industry.

What are employability skill statements and summaries?

The Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (2008a, 2008b) has released guidelines describing each of these. The statement provides an overview of the employability skill facets of a qualification in terms of day-to-day application, also listing the skills needed for the occupations concerned and containing examples of their application. The summary describes the employability skills requirements at the qualification level and should be consistent across training packages. It also assists trainers and assessors to ensure that they have included industry expectations in their learning and assessment strategies. The use of employability skills statements and summaries can help to provide consistency in how the skills are embedded into training packages.

In response to the National Quality Council's endorsement, Cleary, Flynn and Thomasson (2006) developed a resource for individuals who provide training and assessment in the VET sector. In this resource, they recommend the use of an employability skills statement and summary in all training packages. Since then the 11 industry skills councils have adopted this approach as they review and replace existing training packages. In 2006 the Key Competency Framework was replaced by the Employability Skills Framework and the provision of employability skills statements and summaries is now standard practice, with the summaries individualised to the particular industry. Generally, under each qualification the employability skills and their facets are listed in an employability skills summary. The facets, which make up each of the skills, have been modified to reflect the needs of the particular qualification. The National Quality Council has developed a website which contains the summary pages for each training package (<<http://employabilityskills.training.com.au/>>).

Box 2 provides an example of how the communication skills needed for the Certificate I in Work Preparation (Community Services) and the Certificate I in Active Volunteering have been embedded in the training package. Box 3 shows the difference in communication skills required for the Certificate III in Community Services Work and Certificate III in Active Volunteering, compared with the certificate I.

Box 2 Example of an employability skill embedded into the CHC08 Community Services Training Package: certificate I level

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS	FACETS ADDRESSED: Industry/enterprise requirements for this qualification include the following facets:
Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listening to and understanding <i>work instructions, directions and feedback</i> 2. Speaking clearly/directly <i>to relay information</i> 3. Reading and interpreting workplace related documentation, <i>such as safety requirements and work instructions</i> 4. Writing to address audience needs, <i>such as work notes and reports</i> 5. Interpreting the needs of internal/ external clients <i>from clear information</i> 6. Applying basic numeracy skills to workplace requirements <i>involving measuring and counting</i> 7. Establishing and using networks 8. Sharing information (<i>e.g. with other staff</i>) 9. Negotiating responsively (<i>e.g. re own work role and/or conditions, possibly with clients</i>) 10. Persuading effectively 11. Being appropriately assertive (<i>eg. in relation to safe or ethical work practices and own work role</i>) 12. Empathising (<i>e.g. in relation to others</i>)

Note: If a facet is not needed, then it has a line through it or, if additional words are required, then they are inserted in bold italics.

Source: Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (2009, p.3).

Box 3 Example of an employability skill embedded into the CHC08 Community Services Training Package: certificate III level

EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS	FACETS ADDRESSED: Industry/enterprise requirements for this qualification include the following facets:
Communication	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Listening to and understanding <i>work instructions, directions and feedback</i> 2. Speaking clearly/directly <i>to relay information</i> 3. Reading and interpreting workplace related documentation, <i>such as safety requirements and work instructions</i> 4. Writing to address audience needs, <i>such as work notes and reports</i> 5. Interpreting the needs of internal/external clients <i>from clear information</i> 6. Applying basic numeracy skills to workplace requirements <i>involving measuring and counting</i> 7. Establishing and using networks 8. Sharing information (<i>e.g. with other staff</i>) 9. Negotiating responsively (<i>e.g. re own work role and/or conditions, possibly with clients</i>) 10. Persuading effectively 11. Being appropriately assertive (<i>eg. in relation to safe or ethical work practices and own work role</i>) 12. Empathising (<i>e.g. in relation to others</i>)

Note: If a facet is not needed, then it has a line through it or, if additional words are required, then they are inserted in bold italics.

Source: Community Services and Health Industry Skills Council (2009, p.8).

Differences remain about the best way to incorporate employability skills into training packages but embedding them at the qualification level is the option favoured by the industry skills councils. As Cleary, Flynn and Thomasson (2006) suggest, this option enables assessment of an individual's underlying knowledge at a given level to ensure they have the appropriate skills before proceeding to a higher qualification level or a job.

Other commentators, such as the Allen Consulting Group (2006) and Cushnahan (2009), argue that employability skills should be embedded at the unit of competency level in training packages, as this is the level at which trainers teach and assess. This approach may mean additional work for trainers and assessors as they will be assessing both employability and technical skills. The onus would be on training package developers to ensure these skills are written coherently and comprehensively into training packages. An alternative option might be a composite model which describes all employability skills at the qualification level and embeds individual employability skills in specific modules.

TEACHING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

There are three important issues to consider when looking at how employability skills are taught. These are how well they are understood by teachers, the impact this has on students, and whether there is a role for employers.

VET teachers often begin teaching after having worked in a particular industry; yet, these teachers are also expected to teach employability skills to learners, and it is inferred that they already possess the skills and knowledge to teach them. The minimum qualification these days for VET teachers is the Certificate IV in Training and Education. Its predecessors, the Certificate IV in Assessment and Workplace Training and the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment have been criticised for their inadequacies in the area of employability skills (Clayton 2010; Cushnahan 2009; Smith 2010; Virgona et al. 2003). It is likely therefore that teachers with these qualifications may not possess the knowledge or understanding required to teach employability skills (see Box 4 for a case study of trade teachers).

But what about the new minimum qualification? It is yet to be determined whether this issue has been appropriately addressed in the Certificate IV in Training and Education, but early reviews suggest that the basic content of the certificate is the same (Forward 2010), which means that employability skills and their teaching will continue to present a problem. Having current knowledge of employability skills appears to be at issue, and may be overcome by the provision of professional development programs for teachers that focus on the nature of employability skills, their role in the curriculum and their assessment.

The Australian Flexible Learning Framework (2009) suggests that teachers need to introduce employability skills in a structured way to demonstrate the relationship between these skills and their chosen field to learners; they further recommend keeping discussions about employability skills tied specifically to work tasks. Unless learners are able to recognise the importance of communication, problem-solving, planning skills etc. to finding a job, navigating around the job market and basically being 'employable', they may focus on acquiring only the technical skills they see as relevant to their chosen field.

Involving employers in training is one way to help teachers to better understand employability skills and their links to the workplace. Some of these skills are easier to learn on the job and employers are ideally placed to provide the opportunity for learners to practise in a work environment. In this way learners will rapidly recognise the importance of both sets of skills to the workplace. The result is likely to be better-equipped graduates, who understand that these are the skills that employers take seriously when assessing candidates for jobs.

Box 4 Case study: trade teachers and teaching employability skills

In her paper *Beyond Mayer: learning from delivering and assessing generic employability competencies*, Mary Cushnahan (2009) explored how trainers understand employability skills and how they approach the delivery and assessment of these skills. Cushnahan investigated these issues through interviews of trade teachers who had completed the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment and the trainers who teach the certificate.

Cushnahan's findings indicated that trade teachers who undertook the Certificate IV in Training and Assessment felt that employability skills were only briefly covered in the course and consequently they were unsure of their nature and their role. This uncertainty led to teachers being reluctant to provide training and undertake assessments on these elements, which in turn led to employability skills being sidelined.

Cushnahan found that the trainers who teach the certificate themselves needed greater clarity about the scope and content of employability skills, a situation that suggests the need for professional development for both teachers and trainers.

Source: Cushnahan (2009).

ASSESSING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

In response to the National Quality Council's endorsement, the Allen Consulting Group (2006) analysed various alternatives to embedding employability skills into training packages. In their report to the then Department of Education, Science and Training they suggested five options with their defining characteristics for assessing employability skills. These are shown in box 5.

Box 5 Forms of assessment

Generic

- Relies on the subjective judgments of trainers on a learner's employability skills.
- Are independent of the technical skills in a unit of competency.
- Lack contextualisation to industry.
- Assessment method is less applicable outside the classroom environment.

Standardised

- Is an objective form of assessment that involves the use of a special-purpose standardised instrument.
- Is comparable across individuals.
- Can be expensive to implement and maintain.
- May not convey the importance of employability skills to learners.
- Does not provide contextual information for industry.

Integrated

- Is combined with the assessment of technical skills.
- Provides industry contextualisation.
- Shows relevance of employability skills to learners.
- Needs input from industry in describing what employability skills are needed for particular qualifications.
- Employability skills will need to be embedded in training packages.

Graded

- Scores learners on their employability skills with a grade of performance.
- Demonstrates the high value of employability skills to learners.
- Works best with employability skills embedded in training packages.
- Makes little sense to grade employability skills as technical skills are not graded.

Validated self-assessment

- Collect evidence for learners of employability skills learnt and have evidence validated by the registered training organisation.
- Creating a portfolio will develop the learner's awareness of employability skills.
- Demonstrates the value of employability skills to learners.
- Not comparable across students or institutions.

Source: Allen Consulting Group (2006).

Comparison of the various options suggests that integrated assessment is the ideal approach for two reasons: individuals could be compared and the relevance of employability skills would be obvious to learners, as they are assessed in combination with technical skills. The Allen Consulting Group (2006) recommend this approach. When assessed according to their criteria of: value to learners and employers, training delivery, ease of implementation, and validity, flexibility and reliability, this was the best performer.

However, employability skills are not the easiest to assess, as some relate to attitudes and are not directly observable. Here behaviour has to be used as a proxy for attitude, and competence is based on the learner's performance of this behaviour (Virgona et al. 2003). Competency in employability skills should be assessed according to the criteria, knowledge and skills described in the unit of competency (Allen Consulting Group 2006; Cleary, Flynn & Thomasson 2006). Therefore how employability skills are written into a training package will affect how they are assessed.

Another issue with assessing employability skills is determining who should decide on the assessment method. For assessment to benefit the learner, it has to be related to the work environment. Whoever has the final say on the assessment method needs to have an understanding of how these skills translate to the workplace. Industry, the registered training organisation or teacher – each potentially has a role to play. As the eventual employer of learners, industry should be involved in the explicit specification of the assessment component, which would involve identifying risks (for example, is it a high-risk environment?), whether assessment should be done on the job, the skills needed and how the skills will be demonstrated (that is, the conditions and time allowed etc.). The approach to assessment should be consistent across industry, training organisations and teachers.

If the goal is consistency across training packages, then the assessment method should be decided by industry, but if the goal is individualised assessment tailored to workplaces or students, then the assessment method should be determined by the registered training organisations. As far as teachers are concerned, great variance in assessment methods is possible across individual teachers teaching the same unit of competency. However, such anomalies can be avoided with a range statement and an evidence guide that deal specifically with employability skills. A combined approach, whereby the industry determines a set of assessment standards but which are tailored by training organisations to client needs, could provide the consistency and flexibility demanded of the VET sector. Other factors influencing the choice of assessment include the location of the setting and the qualification level. As well as this, successful assessment of employability skills should include a clear definition, explicit information for students, acknowledgment of the student's significant role in assessment, and good guidelines for assessors (Allen Consulting Group 2004). Good assessment should also provide feedback and not be onerous (Allen Consulting Group 2004).

REPORTING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

In addition to having the ability to effectively communicate their skills in a job interview or application, being able to report the employability skills they have learnt is important for learners when they become job seekers. And for employers, reporting can improve their understanding of the employability skills delivered in training packages and assist in recruitment decisions. The Australian Jobs 2011 report points out that employers rely on employability skills when choosing between suitable candidates, particularly when there is a large number of applicants for a position (Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations 2011).

There are four main options for reporting employability skills, whereby information on the individual and the training delivered is provided. These are described in box 6.

Box 6 Forms of reporting

'Competent' or 'not yet competent'

- Indicates whether a learner has achieved competence for each employability skill.
- Does not provide any indication of the extent to which they are competent.
- Does not enhance learner's knowledge of the employability skills they have obtained.
- Is the approach used elsewhere in VET.

Levels of competency

- Provides different performance levels for each of the employability skills.
- Indicates the highest level that the learner has achieved.
- Could be mistaken as a form of grading.

Descriptive

- Uses short sentences to describe the nature of employability skills developed.
- Text could be taken from the employability skills summary in the training package.
- Provides context for the learner and employer.
- Could be difficult for reporting on learners only undertaking a unit of competency.

Portfolios

- Provides evidence of the skills acquired from training.
- Would be up to the student to maintain.
- Can be used to demonstrate employability skills to employers.
- Is based on the premise that the learner is best placed to identify the employability skills they have developed.

Source: Allen Consulting Group (2006).

Descriptive reporting is the National Quality Council's (2008) preferred option, as it provides a summary of the employability skills attained. The Allen Consulting Group (2006), on the other hand, recommends an approach that combines descriptive reporting with portfolios. They argued that descriptive reporting performed best on their criteria of value to learners, employers, and training delivery as well as ease of implementation, while portfolios would provide information to employers on the employability skills developed by the student. Since 2006 the use of portfolios has become the norm and in 2009 they were also endorsed by the Australian Flexible Learning Framework (2009). Box 7 provides an example of a skills portfolio reporting employability skills.

Box 7 Example of communication skills in a skills portfolio

QUT Queensland University of Technology
Brisbane Australia

a university for the real world
QUT Virtual

QUT Home QUT Virtual Welcome, Kitty AskQUT Help Logout

Introduction Experiences Artefacts Resumé Academic History [Printer friendly version](#)

Experiences - Communication

Academic

PowerPoint presentation MGB309 Strategic Management
Delivered 17 April 2003

For the subject MGB309 Strategic Management we were required to work on a team project and do a final presentation back to the full class. The group helped put the content together and I agreed to deliver a series of PowerPoint slides.

Because there was so much content and a time limit of ten minutes, we also produced a handout. In our first run through we took 17 minutes. We went back and eliminated and combined slides. The second attempt went for 12 minutes. We worked out what were the critical points to present and agreed NOT to read the content on each slide - just alert the audience to the main point on each.

The final presentation was exactly on time; we received a high mark and the lecturer made special comment that we were the only group to present to the specifications.

I am sure this would not have happened without the two trial runs and help from my colleagues to sort out the key points and how to present them. Because of the good preparation I felt really confident when doing the presentation.

- It is at <http://careers.qut.edu.au/portfolio/0200040/artefacts/MGB309.ppt>

Report for MGB210

For the subject MGB210 Production and Service Management, three of us were required to undertake an investigation into *AMCOR CARTONBOARD* Petrie Mill.

Even before we started the research and collected all the material together, we decided to set out a possible Contents page and layout framework for the eventual report. This enabled us to clearly see where we were going with the investigation and it also enabled us the subdivide tasks and responsibilities.

As the material was being collected it was easy for each of us to enter it into the Report framework we

Display experiences in all skill areas

Communication
Teamwork
Problem Solving / Critical Thinking
Life Management / Life-long Learning
Technical / Professional / Research
Managing / Organising
Social / Ethical Responsibility
Leadership
Initiative / Enterprise
Committee Work

By clicking on these links the viewer can read the reflections on experiences that the student has added in relation to each graduate capability.

Source: Queensland University of Technology.

CONCLUSION

As far as the advance of employability skills is concerned, the most significant development since 2002 has been the National Quality Council's endorsement of their integration into training packages; as an essential component of training packages, these skills become recognised as important to getting a job. Their integration into training packages also signalled that teachers would have to teach them – and that learners would have to take them seriously.

The key challenges ahead lie in ensuring that teachers are equipped to teach these skills and that appropriate and consistent methods of assessing and reporting are available and utilised. Improving the ability of teachers to effectively teach employability skills will have a concomitant effect on learners: their capacity to engage with the notion of employability skills and to transfer what they have learnt during training to their future employment will be greatly expanded. The issue of consistency in reporting and assessment standards across training packages requires direct industry action – perhaps through industry skills councils. Finally, to further advance the crucial position of employability skills in today's training arena demands an operational definition of employability skills, one that can be used with equal understanding by industry and practitioners.

In attempting to address some of the issues raised in this *At a glance*, the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations has, as part of the National Foundation Skills Strategy, begun development of an employability skills framework. The aim of the Skills Strategy is to address structural issues within the national training system to improve foundation skills. This project is due for completion mid-2012, after which the framework will be implemented. It is hoped that this framework will be successful in setting consistent standards, at the same time assisting teachers to improve their knowledge and understanding of these skills, for the ultimate benefit of the next generation of learners.

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This work has been produced by the National Centre for Vocational Education Research (NCVER) under the National Vocational Education and Training Research and Evaluation (NVETRE) Program, which is coordinated and managed by NCVER, on behalf of the Australian Government and state and territory governments. Funding is provided through the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations.

The NVETRE program is based upon priorities approved by ministers with responsibility for vocational education and training (VET). This research aims to improve policy and practice in the VET sector. For further information about the program go to the NCVER website <<http://www.ncver.edu.au>>.

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ISBN 978 1 921955 29 7 web edition
ISBN 978 1 921955 30 3 print edition
TD/TNC 104.18