



Developing employability skills – ‘the employability challenge’

Following a large-scale survey and a review of research, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) has reported on evidence which could be useful as providers continue to try and meet the challenge of better equipping learners for employment in the current economic environment.

For their research, the Commission took employability skills to be those that everyone needs to apply the specific knowledge and technical skills their particular workplace requires. They are:

- a positive approach – being ready to participate, make suggestions, accept new ideas and constructive criticism, and take responsibility for outcomes
- three functional skills – the ability to use numbers, language and ICT effectively (the ability to calculate, write clearly, operate a computer and use the telephone and other technology to communicate), and
- four personal skills – self management (punctuality, fitting dress and behaviour, asking for help where necessary), thinking and solving problems (analysing situations and developing solutions), working with others, and communicating and understanding the business (understanding how individual jobs fit into the organisation as a whole and recognising the needs of stakeholders, including customers and service holders).

The UK commission reached the conclusion that developing employability skills entailed:

- work experience – preferably work placements, but otherwise classroom experiences that simulate the complexity, ambiguity, unpredictability and consequences of success and failure present in the workplace
- opportunities for reflection and integration – learners looking at learning experiences with feedback from staff, peers and employers, and being prepared to put what they have learned into action in other situations, and
- experiential, active learning – using skills rather than simply acquiring knowledge, having an emphasis on trial and error and a clear focus on the pay off for the learner in employment and progression.

One group of trainees, for example, were helped to develop their employability skills through taking part in a ‘Dragon’s Den’ activity: It tested all the things they had learned during the week, including team working, communication and an understanding of what employers need and want. The competitive element of the activity gave these trainees little choice but to behave in a professional way.

This is not rocket science. The problem, according to the UK commission, is that these approaches are not used widely enough. Furthermore, many of the barriers to developing employability skills were not only to do with teaching and learning, but concern employer engagement. The Commission’s survey found that what helped to get employers on board included:

- determining which employers have jobs in areas where the provider has expertise and to which learners can and will aspire,
- developing a business case which details how the employer will benefit from participation
- involving the employer in the programme, for example through doing some of the training and/or providing mentoring and contributing to the design of the course and/or providing materials for it.

UKCES Case study: Developing business awareness alongside vocational skills

A construction training course was observed, with learners working towards a BTEC Introductory Diploma in Construction. The course comprised a mixture of industry specific skills and personal skills. The learners were working on a personal effectiveness unit, focusing on their aspirations, how they would describe themselves professionally, and a personal action plan to help secure employment. The tutor used group and individual discussion as well as written materials to challenge their thinking by asking for evidence, and supported each learner to develop a clearer picture of themselves as well as an action plan. The tutor gave positive encouragement to an individual who felt his age was against him – turning this into an opportunity to express how much experience and skills the person had developed. Work placements enabled the learners to hear directly from a site manager why the skills they were developing were critical to working in industry.

Take action

Could you:

- consider how to further develop your learners’ employability skills together with subject knowledge, for example by providing more hands-on learning, and opportunities for reflection, such as learning logs, or
- do more to promote employer engagement, by for example, making a business case to employers about how they could contribute to the programmes you run and the benefits of participating?

Evidence source

UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2009) *The Employability Challenge*: www.ukces.org.uk/

The commission explored international research on employability skills and surveyed over 200 organisations, including FE colleges and adult trainer providers. Twenty of these organisations participated in case studies, chosen because they had distinctive qualities and/or a strong reputation.