Developing Student Employability: A Teacher’s Guide
Are the most valuable skills the ones they already have?


Give your students the employability edge at ukcareers.ey.com/careeradvice
Our world is changing – and fast. The working landscape is transforming so that some jobs are fading away, others growing, and some roles that don’t even exist now will become familiar. Technology isn’t only redefining the workplace, but also the companies and careers of tomorrow. Just the fact that you’re holding this guide sets you apart. Like us, it means you’re thinking about the future. In particular, the future of your students.

We think with change comes opportunity. By continuing to teach your students on how to adapt their skills, keep growing and keep evolving, they can succeed within tomorrow’s workplace. We’re excited to continue to play our part in helping your students to succeed. This guide is our opportunity to work together to help students hone the skills they have, and develop new ones in demand by employers today, so they’re fully prepared for the future world of work with everything they need to succeed.

Maggie Stilwell

UKI managing partner for talent, EY
Help your pupils find their perfect blend at targetcareers.co.uk

**University blend**
study the subject you love • join societies • make new friends • experience new activities

**Apprenticeship blend**
earn money • different levels to choose from • learn on the job • add work experience to your CV

**School leaver programme blend**
gain a professional qualification on the job • earn as you learn • develop your skills • working alongside professionals • potential to also undertake university course

**Gap year blend**
travel to new places • extra time to decide what you really want to do • take a break from studying • get some vital work experience
GTI Media works in association with AGCAS to provide top quality careers advice to university students.
Employability refers to the skills, knowledge and attitudes that help people to get a job and to move between jobs. The ‘knowledge’ aspect and job-specific skills may seem the most concrete and receive the most attention – for example in terms of what qualifications are required for a particular job. However, while it’s important for applicants to meet any specific qualification requirements for a vacancy (for example subject, level of study or grades) this isn’t ultimately what will get them hired. Candidates’ soft skills, attitudes and experiences outside the classroom, combined with their level of research into the job and employer, are what make them stand out from others with similar qualifications. Employers’ recruitment processes typically focus on assessing these, to see what candidates can offer beyond the subjects and grades listed on their initial application. And given that the qualification requirements for many roles are fairly broad – for example a 2.1 degree in any subject, or two A levels at grade A* to C – there will often be a lot of eligible applicants.
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The future job market
Looking towards the job market of the future, it’s soft skills and appropriate attitudes that are likely to remain in demand, long after the market for a particular body of knowledge or technical skill has disappeared. You may have heard the term ‘fourth industrial revolution’, referring to the merging of physical and digital worlds and concurrent automation of even relatively skilled white-collar jobs. Of course, no one knows which jobs will stay, go or emerge over the next 20 or 30 years, but it seems likely that there will still be demand for workers with very ‘human’ skills such as communication or leadership while areas such as numerical or process-driven work can be automated.

First steps to employability
The good news is that many of your students will already be developing the skills they need to get hired and remain employable in a changing job market, be it through ironing out a disagreement among hockey team members or plucking up the courage to talk to prospective pupils and their parents as a student rep at a school open evening. All sorts of activities can help develop the right skills and attitudes, so, if they’re not already doing so, simply getting involved in something that interests them outside the classroom is a great first step. And reflecting on past experiences may uncover a bank of skills they didn’t know they had.

Employability matters for university-bound students
Becoming employable is a pressing matter for students who want to start work rather than go to university. However, there’s no dodging the matter for those who want to get a degree first. They’ll still need to find work eventually, and would be well advised to start building their skills as soon as possible.

Students may need to apply for internships or other forms of work experience in their first or second year of university, and find that they have to draw on experiences gained while still at school on their applications. Additionally, at university they may find that it is easier to build their employability through extracurricular activities or part-time work if they already have related experience from their schooldays – for example their chances of getting onto a university sports team are likely to be higher if they’ve already trained hard in that sport while at school. And of course employability depends on similar skills and experiences to those that will impress universities on a UCAS personal statement.

Finding out more
See page 6 to discover ten popular skills employers seek, page 10 to read about different types of experience that can help students develop their employability and workplace understanding, and page 16 to find out how to showcase them in applications and interviews. Plus on pages 14 and 15 you can read about how two recent EY employees developed relevant skills while at school or university, and why they are important in their jobs. You can also find more extensive information about employability, skills and recruitment on the TARGETcareers and TARGETjobs websites, and lots of helpful resources on the future of work on the EY website. ☞
Soft skills – aka transferable skills – are high on employers’ wishlists. Testing for these skills typically plays a key part in the recruitment process, whether students apply as school leavers or as graduates.

Employers usually devise a list of skills required for a role, then use application form questions, assessment centres and interviews to assess whether candidates possess them. Some will be job-specific, but many are broader soft skills – this is particularly the case for roles aimed at those starting their first job.

Crucially, recruiters look for evidence that candidates do possess the skills that they claim to have. In some cases this will be tested directly – for example giving candidates a group exercise to complete together to test their communication and teamwork skills. But in others they will need to give specific examples of times when they have displayed these skills. As such, making students aware of this as far in advance as possible will give them the time they need to build their skills and fill any gaps.

Lists of skills sought vary from employer to employer, but the ten outlined below are very popular ones to include. Also see the box on page 9 for an example of a specific employer’s requirements – in this case EY.
1. Communication
Even in technical jobs, good communication skills are vital, both to be understood and to come across as professional. Written and spoken communication skills are assessed at different stages in the recruitment process. Employers will look out for decent spelling and grammar in candidates’ online application forms, and at interview they’ll want to see that they are capable of expressing themselves. If applicants are invited to take part in an assessment centre, the group exercise is typically a test of how well they can communicate as a member of a group: can they take what other people are saying on board and also offer their own contributions?

Lots of activities can help students to improve their communication skills – performing and public speaking are obvious examples, but a part-time customer-service job or volunteering with children or old people will help develop their ability to communicate with different people and age groups.

See page 16 and the TARGETcareers website for advice on how students can present their communication skills in the best possible light in applications, interviews and assessment centres.

2. Teamwork
There are all sorts of different roles that people can play within a team while still making a vital contribution. Students may already have examples of times when they have worked together with others as part of a team, such as during a part-time job, project work at school or involvement in team sports. Encourage them to reflect on how they helped their team to succeed, whether that was through encouraging others, organising matches, coming up with fresh ideas or monitoring the team’s progress and alerting everyone else to potential problems. This could give them great examples that they can use on application forms or at interview.

3. Negotiation and persuasion
Students may feel that they’ve never had the chance to try negotiating, but that’s not necessarily the case. Perhaps they’ve sorted out a conflict within a team, successfully negotiated a better deal or a discount on a purchase, won somebody over, persuaded their parents to let them study a particular subject or found a compromise solution to a problem. They may be reassured to know that it’s not about fitting a ‘tough negotiator’ image – negotiating involves being able to see somebody else’s point of view and calls for a flexible attitude. If they have good communication skills and are a good listener, they are part of the way there.

If students need further opportunities to develop their negotiation and persuasion skills, any team activities are likely to provide opportunities to do so – for example team sports or drama. A part-time job as a sales assistant could be particularly helpful for students interested in careers that draw heavily on these skills. >>
4. Problem solving
Employers seek candidates who can take a logical, analytical approach to working through a problem and can see it from different angles. Group exercises may be used at an assessment centre to test this. For example, candidates might be invited to read a case study that sets out the problems facing a particular business before discussing a range of possible solutions. There may also be questions about times when candidates have solved a problem – either individually or as part of a group – on application forms or at interview. Again, most extracurricular activities are likely to throw up problems that need to be solved. Personal projects can also be a great source of examples – for instance if students are teaching themselves programming languages or doing up an old car or bike.

5. Leadership
Very few new starters will be given a management role immediately, whether they join as school leavers or graduates. But employers often look for leadership potential, even if it’s not needed straight away. Students don’t have to have been captain of a sports team or head boy or head girl to convince employers that they’ve got what it takes. Being involved in team activities and being a good team member can indicate the potential to be a good leader. For example they may find themselves needing to motivate others, delegate tasks or keep others on track to meet a deadline, all of which will give them good examples to use on application forms or at interviews.

6. Organisation
Employers are interested in how candidates keep their lives in order, prioritise when they are under pressure and remember deadlines and commitments. Recruitment processes sometimes include an exercise designed to simulate a busy working day with multiple demands on candidates’ time, or questions about how they organise themselves and juggle commitments under time pressure. Students can give themselves a head start by reflecting on how they currently organise themselves and whether there are any techniques or technologies that could help them improve this. Having regular commitments outside of school hours can also help develop students’ organisational skills, as they’ll need to find effective ways to juggle these with homework and revision.

7. Perseverance and motivation
Employers want to know that candidates will stick at something when the going gets tough. It helps if they have an example of a time when they had to deal with a setback, or committed to a challenge and seen it through. Sport, music, drama or dance activities outside school could all be good examples of this, as could caring for animals, fundraising or holding down a part-time job while keeping up with their studies.
8. Ability to work under pressure
Students’ academic records will give employers some idea of whether they can cope with stress – but so will any sporting, work or performance-related achievements. Activities such as taking part in competitions or matches, working in a busy environment such as a restaurant, performing in front of an audience or public speaking all provide good examples of being able to deliver the goods while under pressure.

9. Confidence
No one wants an interview candidate to swagger in through the door, but a bit of confidence will help them along. Students will feel more confident at interview if they’ve kept a copy of their application to read through beforehand and thought ahead about the kind of questions that might come up. It will help if they’ve spent some time researching the employer and its competitors, too. It’s highly likely that at some point they’ll be asked why they have chosen to apply, and it will be much easier for them to come out with a self-assured answer if they’ve done a thorough job of finding out what the role involves.

10. Commercial awareness
Students applying for jobs with businesses can put themselves in a strong position by understanding what each business depends on to make a profit. Even if they’re applying for a public sector position, it will help them to have some understanding of the financial constraints the organisation is working under.

A good way to develop commercial awareness is simply to take an interest in what businesses and organisations do and how they work. If students apply for apprenticeships or other vacancies, encourage them to find out about the employers, for example by checking out their websites and finding out what reputable news sources have to say about them. Who are their customers and who are their competitors? They don’t have to become an expert but having a basic understanding will give students confidence and help them to come across as well-informed.

EY’s future skills
All employers seek slightly different skills, though they tend to relate to the above themes. As the working world changes, so do the skills employers need from their people. Here are five of the most important ones EY thinks you’ll need.

Cognitive flexibility
Being able to quickly shift your thinking from one concept to another. Reading a lot and seeking out new experiences can help develop this.

Emotional intelligence
Empathising with others and managing one’s own feelings. Maintaining a level head, self-control and a positive outlook.

Complex problem solving
Being able to respond to something complex with accuracy and sound judgement. Assessing what is and isn’t important.

Creativity
Looking ahead, innovating and seeing things in different ways. Able to challenge the status quo.

Collaboration
Working well with others and embracing different styles and approaches. Being socially and culturally aware.

Find out more at ukcareers.ey.com/futureskills.
It’s not just formal work experience placements that can help students increase their employability. There are lots of options that can help them gain the confidence and skills that employers seek, and get a better feel for what they enjoy and the careers that might interest them. They may already be taking part in some of these activities without realising how beneficial they can be.

Options for gaining experience include:

- **Formal work experience placements.** Often up to a week in a location arranged by a school or independently. Typically unpaid, this is an opportunity to learn about the world of work.

- **School leaver careers fairs and employer events.** Fairs offer a chance to meet lots of employers in one go, while single-employer events give a deeper insight into one particular organisation – for example via an open evening at its offices.

- **Employer’s insight days or weeks for school leavers.** Some organisations that run school leaver programmes offer students the chance to spend a day or more seeing for themselves what working there would be like and meeting employees who have joined straight from school.

- **Extracurricular activities.** Being part of a sports team or another club or group such as a theatre group or choir. Involvement in the Scouts or Guides, or Duke of Edinburgh award scheme.

- **Volunteering and fundraising.** Students could walk dogs for an animal charity, volunteer as a retail assistant in a charity shop, help with outdoor conservation projects, collect funds or support young disabled people on activity days. You can find out more about volunteering opportunities for young people from Volunteering Matters and vInspired.

- **Competitions.** Encourage students to enter competitions in areas that interest them, for example design, writing, maths or business. They can also try their luck in the TARGETcareers School Leavers’ Challenge.
Students may already be taking part in some of these activities without realising how beneficial they can be.

- **Entrepreneurship activities.** Employers are keen to take on candidates with entrepreneurial flair, so it’s well worth students honing their skills whether or not they go on to set up their own venture. They could try the Young Enterprise Tenner Challenge or seek help from Shell LiveWIRE and apply for a start-up grant for a business idea that supports sustainable use of energy and resources.

- **Part-time jobs.** A part-time job such as working in a shop gives students customer service and time management skills and helps to develop their commercial awareness. Doing a paper round or babysitting calls for responsibility and resilience. Employers like evidence that they can be relied on to turn up when expected and stick at what they’re meant to be doing till they’ve seen it through.

- **Personal projects.** If students have designed and made something under their own steam, such as a DIY or craft project, a website or a blog, they may well have developed the problem-solving and creative skills that employers look for.

- **Positions of responsibility.** These could include being a head boy or head girl, sports captain, house captain, school council member or having a leadership or committee role in a club. Even taking prospective pupils and parents on school open evening tours and chatting to them can help build up their skills.

### How to find experience with employers

Students who have a rough idea of the types of careers that might interest them may wish to gain experience with employers. As well as internet searches and using websites such as TARGETcareers, encourage students to talk to family members and friends to see if they know of suitable employers. Local newspapers, community publications and online business directories are also useful sources of information.

Some organisations have information on their websites about work experience opportunities and how to apply for them. If they don’t, students can make contact by phone or email to say that they’d be interested in coming in for a few days’ work experience, check if this is possible and ask about the preferred way of applying. They may have an online application form, or request a CV and covering letter.

It’s important to find out who to send CVs to, how to spell the person’s name and what title to use (eg Mr, Mrs, Ms, Dr). Covering letters should be no more than one side of A4 and should state briefly why the student would like to do work experience with this particular organisation and suggest dates when they are available. They can also highlight any relevant skills or experience or go into detail about something mentioned briefly on their CV that would be likely to be of interest to the employer.
University and the alternatives

There’s a great deal of choice for students who want to continue studying beyond school or college, including opportunities to combine this with paid employment in a relevant industry.

Further study and paid work don’t have to be mutually exclusive. Find out about opportunities to join an employer on a programme combining work and study, as well as the different ways to get a university degree.

University
University study comes in a range of shapes and sizes. If students don’t fancy a typical degree based entirely on campus there are some appealing alternatives. Some courses include a placement year in industry, or occasionally an even longer amount of time. For example, Nottingham Trent University offers an option to study for a business management degree by spending two out of the three years of the course working for an employer. There are also programmes such as degree apprenticeships which involve working as a full-time employee at an organisation and studying part time – see below for more details. Plus there are plenty of FE colleges running degree courses, which offers an alternative option for students who want to stay close to home.

Apprenticeships
Apprenticeships offer a chance to work towards qualifications through an employer while earning, and have the qualifications paid for. For example, an apprentice might work in an entry-level job for four days of the week, and study at an FE college on the fifth day. They usually take one to four years to complete.

There is an official national framework for apprenticeships, which sets out the level of qualification associated with different levels of apprenticeship. Employers can claim grants for offering apprenticeships and the system is overseen and regulated by the government.

There are currently four levels of apprenticeship: intermediate, advanced, higher and degree. They all involve a work-based learning programme and lead to nationally recognised qualifications.

Intermediate apprenticeships are level 2 qualifications and are equivalent to GCSE passes at grade A* to C. Advanced apprenticeships are level 3 qualifications and are equivalent to A level passes. Higher apprenticeships lead to qualifications at level 4 and above. Level 4/5 is equivalent to a higher education certificate, higher education diploma or a foundation degree (the first year of a degree).
Degree apprenticeships involve gaining a university degree while you work (level 6 – bachelors degree – or above). It’s a great way to get a degree and extensive workplace experience while avoiding university debt, though on the flip side the course will be chosen by the employer and participants will need to balance work and study.

To get onto a higher apprenticeship or degree apprenticeship students will normally need a level 3 qualification such as A levels, an advanced apprenticeship or NVQ level 3. They’ll also need to have a level 2 qualification such as an intermediate apprenticeship or five good GCSE passes (grade A* to C).

**Sponsored degrees**

There are two types of sponsored degree. One is effectively just a different, older name for a degree apprenticeship – that is, a programme on which an employee will work for their employer, study for a degree part-time and have their tuition fees paid for them.

The other is an arrangement by which an employer provides limited financial support to students who have gone to university in the normal way and are studying a subject that relates to the employer’s business. Typically the student will complete work placements with the employer during university vacations, and may need to work for the sponsor for a minimum period after graduation. This form of sponsored degree is most frequently provided by engineering companies.

**School leaver programmes**

The term school leaver programme is quite generic. It describes programmes that combine earning and learning – and with tuition fees covered by the employer – but there is no need for the content to fit a particular framework. You might see the term used to describe a scheme that is technically an apprenticeship, or as a catch-all for all earning-and-learning opportunities open to school leavers. However, in practice it is quite often used by employers in accountancy and related areas who take students after their A levels or equivalent and put them through an extensive programme of work and study designed to qualify them as chartered accountants. These are frequently attractive propositions, as participants tend to end up with the same professional qualifications in accountancy that graduates joining the organisation would work towards – and in some cases at a younger age. Programmes tend to last around five years.
I’m in my second year of the five-year business apprenticeship programme at EY, working towards the ACA chartered accountant qualification. I knew I wanted to work in finance and gain the ACA qualification, and that this is the same qualification that graduates take. By the time I’m 23 I’ll have finished the programme and will be eligible for an assistant manager position, whereas graduates the same age will be several years behind. So it made sense to start work straight away, avoid university debt and get extra years of experience.

I have 15 exams in total and have a few weeks off work at a time to go to college and learn the content for each one. I also attend courses on topics such as client interaction, coaching new starters and using relevant software. I have support from a buddy in the year above who can help with exams, and a counsellor who helps me tailor my career path.

My job
In assurance, I work with clients to confirm that all of the balances in their financial statements are not materially misstated, whether this be through error or fraud. I’m based in Canary Wharf and spend about 40 per cent of my time there and about 40 per cent on clients’ sites conducting audits. My main clients are in Windsor, which I commute to, and in Birmingham and Stoke-on-Trent, which typically involve a week away staying in a hotel. I spend around 20 per cent of my time in training, either in college in London or on courses in different parts of the UK.

Analysing and organising
To work in audit you need a good eye for detail and cognitive flexibility, which is a key skill EY seeks. You need to be able to analyse things and not accept them at face value – if a client has committed fraud then it is likely to hide this. It’s also important to consider whether there is a better approach to a particular task and discuss it with someone more senior if you think there is.

I also need to be very organised. I started developing this skill at school, as I participated in netball and athletics teams and public speaking competitions, which meant that I had to prioritise my time. When I joined EY I strengthened this skill by observing colleagues. For example I noticed that everyone carried a notebook, so now I always write everything down, even if I think I will remember it.
I’m one of two graduates in the first intake for EY’s new cyber security programme. My projects can involve advising clients on how to restructure IT architecture to help them become robust against attacks, assessing a company’s ability to face day-to-day threats, looking at internal controls on staff access to systems, and helping companies adapt to the new data protection legislation and be compliant with regulations.

My current project is working for a national insurance company, conducting security assessments on third parties, to whom it outsources work, to ensure they have appropriate security controls in place. It involves travelling to clients all around the UK, spending between one and three days in each location. The project requires me to work independently – while there are others on the project, I travel to the third parties and conduct the security assessments on my own. Often I meet with a company’s chief information officer or chief information security officer, or sometimes the whole legal team! While the majority of the work is independent, there’s plenty of support, including an engagement coach on the project who makes sure you know what you’re doing.

Training and qualifications
So far I’ve taken the CIMA Certificate in Business Accounting to give me a general understanding of finance, and the COBIT 5 Foundation IT Management and Governance qualification. For the former I had an intense week of college lectures shortly before the first exam, then another exam each quarter for which I studied at home. COBIT 5 involved a two-day residential course with an exam at the end of day two.

Communication skills are key
I specialised in finance and security in the final year of my maths degree, which was useful as I needed either a relevant degree or other relevant experience to be eligible to apply. But that’s not what got me the job; EY looks for people who have the ability to communicate, whether connecting one-to-one or in a big group, and clearly articulate their point. You can learn technical skills, but if you can’t speak to people or work in a team, that’s a problem.

At university I was president of the polo club, which helped me develop these skills. As well as speaking to the team, I had to seek sponsorship from different companies and work in partnership with a polo club to use its facilities and get lessons and coaching, as the university didn’t have its own polo facilities.
Applications and interviews

Successful job applicants take care at every stage of the recruitment process to show that they are a good fit for the role and the employer.

Tackling application forms and interviews is much easier if candidates make time to understand what the employer does, identify the skills it seeks and consider why they are a good match. The advice below is written with apprenticeships and similar opportunities in mind but is also useful for university-bound students. You can find much more detail at targetcareers.co.uk.

Researching the employer
Employers usually provide information about their roles, requirements and application process on their websites. If there is a job description or person specification, this is a good starting point. It’s also sensible to do a web search to discover what other sources say about the organisation – for example if it has been in the news recently.

Justifying choices
Employers often ask variations on the following questions on application forms or at interview:

- Why have you chosen a career in this particular area? Students should think about their work experience, volunteering and extracurricular activities to help explain their career choice. What do they enjoy doing, what are they good at and how do these relate to the career in question? For example, a student applying for a software development apprenticeship might discuss a Raspberry Pi project they’ve enjoyed working on. See page 10 for more on the different types of experience that they can draw on.
- Why this employer? Candidates need to explain why the work, training and career opportunities on offer appeal to them, so good research is vital.
- Why this particular programme? Some employers offer several different schemes and may ask why a candidate has selected one over another. Applicants should be aware of all the options so they can explain their decision.

Backing up claims about skills
‘Competency questions’ are often asked on application forms or at interview. These ask candidates to give an example of a time when they have used a particular skill, for instance ‘Tell us about a time when you had to negotiate with someone’. Pages 6–9 give an overview of typical skills sought, but candidates should also research which skills the employer in question wants, to help predict questions.

When giving examples from team activities, students should write in the first person (‘I’, not ‘we’) and explain how they contributed to the team’s success. Did they help solve disagreements, organise an activity or have a specific role such as team captain? ☺️
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Futurewise student

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Angela Young, Parent

Get in touch!

If you would like to find out more about Inspiring Futures and Futurewise, please email helpline@inspiringfutures.org.uk or phone +44 (0)1491 820381

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