



Smarter World, Smarter Work

An Ibec campaign

Future ready: improving graduate employability skills



Foreword

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How we work is changing.

Globalisation, rapid digitalisation, changing lifestyles and new consumer preferences mean jobs and careers are being transformed. And the pace of change is accelerating. This brings great opportunities, but also risks.

The new world of work is both more exciting, but also less predictable. To address this, public policy must focus on investing in an individual's employability rather than maintaining roles that will eventually become redundant. It must prioritise an inclusive and lifelong approach to skills development. Flexibility, resilience and an appetite for learning must be ingrained in what we teach and how we teach it throughout the education system.

This paper highlights the needs for employers, educators and government to work together and identifies practical recommendations to make this happen. This work is part of Ibec's Smarter World, Smarter Work campaign. The campaign looks at how work and the labour market is changing and sets out an ambitious vision for our economy and our society. Crucially, it identifies what action we need to take now if we are to reap the rewards and avoid the pitfalls.

Ibec, on behalf of Irish business, is engaging in a substantial lobbying and communications effort for Smarter World, Smarter Work to ensure that the position of business is understood, championed and implemented.

It is a broad agenda, which includes some very difficult economic and social challenges, but if we make the right choices the rewards will be huge. Irish business must lead the way.



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Recommendations

The world is changing rapidly, often at a faster pace than planning allows for. Technological advances, coupled with shifts in the world's economic structures, changing demographics, and global integration mean that the world of work is almost unrecognisable to that of a decade ago and the pace of change shows no sign of waning. Preparing Ireland and its people for a changing future requires harnessing the interdependent stakeholders of educators, Government and business. The alignment of strategies and collaboration of all partners and stakeholders is key to success and to make Ireland, as the National Skills Strategy: Ireland's Future aspires, "a place where the talent of our people shines through".



Call to education institutions: The curriculum offers a catalyst for innovation and the best opportunity to embed employability skills development into the teaching, learning and assessment experience for students.

Key recommendations for education institutions

1. Develop an institute wide policy to foster employability outcomes
2. Provide dedicated employability supports for all academic staff
3. Review teaching programme to consider the opportunities for employability in the curriculum
4. Increase the application of relevant and innovative assessment methods
5. Develop discipline specific employability profiles and skills maps
6. Facilitate the development of students as reflective practitioners
7. Grow and diversify work-related learning opportunities
8. Call on alumni network to support first career connections
9. Recognise external experience opportunities
10. Increase cross-disciplinary opportunities

Call to the Government: Education policy must provide leadership and scope for institutions to create and foster a culture of life-long learning.

Key recommendations for the Government:

1. HE System Performance Framework and FET Service Plans must drive change
2. Launch a specific funding call to kick-start initiatives
3. Share best practice and standardised resources
4. Position employability skills as a driver of quality
5. Standardise the process for placements and work experience
6. Support the transition between second level and third level

Call to business: Employability skills cut horizontally across all industries and vertically across all jobs, and are fully developed through connections with employers.

Key recommendations for business:

1. Be active in the classroom
2. Provide work placements and work-related projects
3. Advise on curriculum design and delivery
4. Contribute the business perspective in career clinics to help prepare students for the future

Our approach

This paper is a call for action to Ireland's educators, employers and policy makers to join forces to create new pathways to develop advanced employability skills which are required for the workplace and society of the future.

This document is based on two critical assumptions:

- A focus on employability aligns with a focus on academic values and the promotion of good learning;
- Students on well-conceived and rigorous academic programmes often have many striking achievements but, unless they can translate achievements into a language that resonates with employers, then their intellectual, social and cultural capital will not be realised.

Driven by globalisation, technological innovation and changing demographics, the nature of work, the skills for success in the workplace and the jobs of the future are rapidly evolving. To appropriately prepare for these influences, we need to take a longer-term view and consider what the future of work will mean for our economy, society, how we live and how we will work.

Introduction

Over the last decade our understanding of the “typical” worker has evolved. New roles have been created for jobs that never existed up to this point and the traditional “office” has been transformed. The advancing world of work is both more exciting and less secure. Furthermore, the jobs that will be available, and the skills that they demand, have not been fully imagined, and are difficult to predict. What is key therefore, is the capacity to continually adapt and progress using employability skills that translate to different settings. Today’s graduates need to be open to learning, and to become flexible, adaptable and comfortable with change.

This poses a real challenge for those students in education and graduates in early stage employment who are facing into a highly uncertain and constantly changing future. It also has implications for educators and employers to help prepare graduates to take their first steps into the world of work. The OECD¹ suggests that for skills to remain relevant, the domains of employment and education must work together to ensure education and learning is of high quality and has a long-term perspective. If we are to “future proof” our skills, the education system must champion the development of skills beyond, and supportive of, academic excellence to help students and graduates discover their true potential, direct their future, and spark the capacity and appetite for continuous, lifelong learning.

Education policy landscape driving change

The policy context is evolving too. Higher education institutions (HEIs) and further education and training (FET) providers are now required to respond to the rapidly changing skills needs of industry, and to reflect the more dynamic economy and society in which we live and work. Recent education policy initiatives, including the National Skills Strategy 2025 and the Action Plan for Education 2018, have placed employer education engagement as a central pillar. The Action Plan for Education 2018 calls on HEIs and FET providers to prepare ‘employability statements’ for each course / discipline to enhance the understanding of prospective students as to the value of the education programme. Universities and Institutes of Technology will now be measured on their performance in aligning skills development and training in association with industry, incentivised by a potential increase in the institutions’ funding allocation for targeted collaboration with enterprise.

In short, improving graduate employability skills has the potential to impact on institutions performance and will ultimately feed into the long-term sustainability of a wider range of subjects and programmes of study.

Employability skills are universally important for education, business and society. The responsibility for the development of employability skills falls to students, employers and educators alike.

1. OECD (2013) <https://skills.oecd.org/skillsoutlook.html>
2. Ibid.

Defining employability

Over the last 20 years, definitions of employability have changed from demand-led technical skills towards a broader view of graduate attributes which include generic, transversal, transferable, soft skills and life skills, coupled with subject-specific knowledge and competencies. International research amongst employers suggests that occupation-specific skills are no longer enough to meet labour market needs². The time for which knowledge remains relevant is rapidly declining and the idea of a single career with a predefined career path is outdated.

In addition to technical and specialised knowledge, a further layer of employability skills is necessary to enhance or complement the occupational-specific elements both for new entrants and for those who wish to progress in the world of work. Numerous definitions of employability exist (e.g. Dearing, 1997; Hillage & Pollard, 1998; Bowden et al., 2000; Knight & Yorke, 2003) which go beyond academic or technical skills. UNESCO³ refers to the “number of important competencies that can be learned and that everyone requires to successfully adapt to changes and lead meaningful and productive lives”, while the UK Commission (2009b, p.10)⁴ considers them “the skills almost everyone needs to do almost any job”. Drawing from these examples, we define employability as:

a set of achievements - skills, knowledge and personal attributes - that enable individuals to fulfil their potential, gain employment, be effective in the workplace and successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits the individual, the employer, the community and the economy.

Employability is not just focused on the initial transition between education and employment. It is also grounded in having an enquiring mind and an appetite for lifelong learning, something that is implicit in most definitions of employability. Employability can be viewed as helping one develop as a “capable person”. These are people who not only know their technical area or specialism but can also apply the knowledge and skills they have in varied and dynamic situations which allow them to develop their skills further. Capable people are deemed confident in their ability to:

- take appropriate action effectively;
- explain what they are hoping to achieve;
- engage successfully in life and work with others;
- continue their learning through their experiences in a changing world.

Ultimately, these are competencies and attitudes that employers are seeking.

While the focus on employability skills and their development has gained increasing attention, it remains a complex area that requires a myriad of approaches to develop the skills. In 2013, Ibec carried out a survey of employers’ views of Irish higher education. The results highlighted that while employers were generally satisfied with the range of skills of graduates, they had lower satisfaction levels with graduates written communication, business awareness and entrepreneurship skills. Over 75% were

3. UNESCO (2014) Transversal skills in TVET: Policy implications. Asia Pacific Education System Review Series.

4. UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2009b) The Employability Challenge, UK Commission for Employment and Skills, Wath upon Dearne: <http://www.ukces.org.uk/upload/pdf/EmployabilityChallengeFullReport.pdf>

confident about graduates having the academic knowledge, however, they were less confident about graduates having the right attitude and aptitude towards work.

This perspective is valuable intelligence for education institutions, whose first commitment lies with their students and graduates. As partners in this endeavor, the education institutions, employers and the Government must consider what it would take to build these essential employability skills with the same rigour that we apply to other forms of academic learning.

Employability and education values

The extent to which education institutions can or should produce ‘work-ready’ graduates is not subject to debate. Business is not the only, or indeed the primary, stakeholder in education. Clearly, the education system fulfils a vital role in society that extends well beyond the utilitarian one of satisfying enterprises’ needs for skills or research. Universities, institutes of technology and further education and training providers are obviously a vital public good, making a crucial contribution to the intellectual, cultural, social and economic well-being of the country. They have their own mission and values. However, contained within the strategic plans, missions and visions of most of our universities, colleges and further education institutions is a focus on or commitment to supporting learners to achieve their full potential.

Here lies an important area of overlap and shared concern with business. Securing meaningful and rewarding employment is a significant student goal. There is a responsibility and an increasing student demand to provide opportunities to help develop their employability skills and an understanding of the knowledge, skills and attributes that they can offer prospective employers. It can also deepen and enrich the learning experience.

Employability goes well beyond the outcome of securing initial employment and includes equipping individuals with the skills they may need throughout their lives to approach citizenship, professional and career development, while functioning successfully as an individual. The very intellectual attributes that are associated with a liberal education, for example, are the same as those that are essential for ideas, innovation and intrapreneurship in the workplace. Business may have a less elegant language around these attributes – ‘employability’; ‘competences’ or ‘thinking outside the box’ – but they reflect essential principles and values of learning and are fundamental life skills that prepare individuals to be well-rounded citizens.

Education should attract, excite and develop graduate talent for the future. The idea that achieving and front-loading education for a young person who uses this knowledge in a 30-40-year career has long passed. Skills can quickly become outdated and outmoded. Increasing competition and organisational restructuring have eroded the traditional definition of the ‘job for life’. Therefore, individuals need to think of employability skills as those skills and qualities required to ensure they remain and flourish in the labour market. Graduates must emerge from college with a set of technical skills and be prepared to continuously learn and upskill. Employers are

recruiting the talent who have demonstrated the ability to learn new skills to advance their career, which shows they have the capacity to learn and are open to new ideas. While they might have the appropriate skills today, graduates must also be able to acquire the skills they need to stay relevant tomorrow.

This obviously has implications for pedagogy, the learning environment and assessment, but at its root involves instilling the value of learning, and that it is a lifelong process, from the earliest possible stage.

Widen the pool of opportunity

Different disciplines develop different ways of thinking and learning. Meta-cognitive strategies can help students understand the way they are learning and thinking about their subject.

Certain occupations require subject-specific expertise from new entrants. However, in other instances, employers are less concerned with the subject studied and more interested in general capability with graduate recruiters open to hiring talent from outside their core sector to ensure diversity of thought and application.

Some employers report that the appropriate levels of educational accomplishment will get a candidate an interview, however their demonstration of employability skills gets them the job. This employability challenge is not about replacing academic rigour or standards but focusing not only on what is taught but how the subject is taught and assessed. This requires education institutions to provide students with the understanding of the relationship between their discipline and employability competencies, and the language to communicate their knowledge, skills and attributes in a way that potential employers will recognise and value.

This helps graduates when seeking employment, but also helps the employers' understanding of the nature and potential of a wide variety of subjects. While grades and qualification types have tried to bridge the gap to give organisations a clearer idea of what skills potential employees have developed, they tend to be limited in the 'people analytics' metrics that human resources departments prefer. This language around knowledge, skills and attributes will help employers cast a wider net when searching for graduate talent.

Students need to understand the importance of employability skills from the beginning of their programme of study. In this way they can foster and develop a culture of progression and lifelong learning which acknowledges that a qualification alone is no longer sufficient. The onus is on students not only to acquire the skills but also to be able to articulate those they have developed during their course, in part-time work or extra-curricular activities. Education institutions must support students to recognise their own personal, academic and career development achievements through this lens.

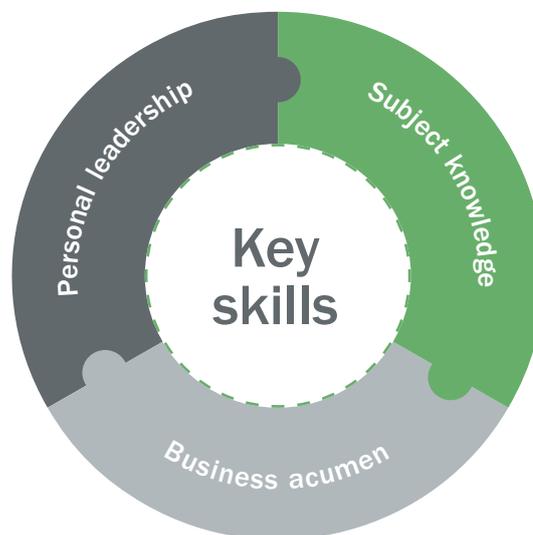
What are the key employability skills

Ibec's previous skills development work focused on enhancing opportunities for entrepreneurial thinking in education and highlighted the characteristics of an entrepreneurial mindset, which constitutes a set of personal skills, attributes, behavioural and motivational capabilities which can be used in any context – social, work and leisure.⁵ Building on this, our recent work with Irish and international employers identifies the key skills that graduates can gain through learning and should be encouraged through the curriculum. To inform this piece of work, Ibec sought the views of employers who recruit recent graduates. While academic qualifications were often the first box to be ticked during the screening process, ultimately their interest veered towards more general attributes and performance.

The main characteristics and competencies they sought included:

Personal leadership

- Self-awareness and belief that they can make a difference
- Ability to reflect and improve
- Self-worth – focus on life, personal feelings and motivation
- Creativity, curiosity and innovation
- Initiative and intuitive decision-making
- Capacity to make things happen autonomously
- Ability to deal with ambiguity



Business acumen

- Business and customer awareness
- Creative problem solving
- Strategic thinking
- Networking
- Team working

Subject knowledge

- Understanding subject knowledge
- Application of numeracy
- Communication and literacy
- Logical and analytical reasoning
- Application of information technology
- Modern languages and intercultural awareness

As the above demonstrates, most people trying to list the 'skills' of employability end up with long – and lengthening – lists. This point was well made by Bennet⁶ almost two decades ago:

'The discourse on generic skills, and all its variants, is confused, confusing and under-conceptualised ... Allied to the above is evidence of the lack of a common language of skills between higher education and employers.'

5. Ibec (2015) Entrepreneurial Education: Policy recommendations to deliver the skills needed for the workplace of the future.
6. Bennett, N., Dunne, E. and Carré, C. (2000) Skills Development in Higher Education and Employment. Bucking: Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press

Bridgstock’s 2009⁷ model of employability, offers a more conceptual model of graduate attributes for employability which stresses the importance of career management skills. Bridgstock argues the case for a more connected, tripartite approach to developing employability skills, rather than graduates possessing generic skills listed by employers at any one point in time.

Figure 1. Conceptual model of graduate attributes for employability including career management skills.⁸

Career management

International management of work, learning and other aspects of life through reflective, evaluative and decision making processes

■ Career management skills



7. Bridgstock, R. (2009) The graduate attributes we’ve overlooked: enhancing graduate employability through career management skills. Higher Education Research and Development. Volume 28, Issue 1 Feb 2009.
 8. Ibid.

This element was supported during the Ibec research, when an experienced graduate recruiter presented an interesting perspective on how their organisation attracts and retains highly talented graduates by offering “an all-inclusive buffet of opportunity but it is up to the person to select which options that interest, excite, and match their skills the most, otherwise they will be less successful in our organisation throughout their careers.”

The skills of career management highlight how people must be able to identify skills strengths and deficits for themselves, and continue to learn and evolve to ensure they are well placed to take advantage of new and future opportunities.

Bridgstock’s work builds on the original Knight and Yorke (2003)⁹ USEM model of employability which proposes four integrated components of employability, that remain fundamental and core to any employability initiative:

- U**nderstanding of subject matter and how organisations work;
- S**killful practices, be they academic, employment and life in general;
- E**fficacy beliefs that reflect the learner’s notion of self and the possibility for self-improvement;
- M**etacognition which encompasses strategies for learning, thinking and problem solving.

The strongest influence on learning is assessment. But, as York and Knight have pointed out, the problem for the assessment of achievements that make strong claims for employability is that many of them defy precise measurement. They suggest that students’ claims of achievements (and hence employability) be reported in two ways: through academic transcripts, which are part of a student’s progress file and which describe achievements that the institution is prepared to warrant or certify, and through portfolios derived from personal development planning and reflection.

While this is not a new concept, social media and technology platforms are changing the parameters of how people and organisations interact and operate. Students need to know how to harness the power of social media to shape their online presence and demonstrate their skills in a modern, relevant way.

9. Yorke, M. and Knight, P.T. (2006) Embedding employability into the curriculum. Learning and Employability. Series 1 No.3 Higher Education Academy

Key policy recommendations to harness the potential of all partners

There is evidence of innovation and new practice emerging from an employability and enterprise-related perspective in Irish higher and further education institutions today.

However, there appears to be no one co-ordinated and consistent approach that offers students and graduates the opportunity to develop, utilise and promote the skills and experiences they have attained. Similarly, there is no consistent approach to help students to adapt their skills to suit changing situations and tasks. There are distinct connections between employers and institutions at touch points like careers offices, placement co-ordinators, research and innovation offices and various advisory groups. Unfortunately, very often these different parts of the system are not communicating, resulting in a lack of direct employer input to inform and support teaching and learning activity.

To successfully develop and integrate employability skills into the curriculum requires a multi-stakeholder approach between educators, employers and students. Crucial to its success will be further engagement and collaboration with cross-institution staff, working within the environment of the eco-system¹⁰ and the general labour market.

Theme 1 Key recommendations for educators and Higher Education and Further Education and Training Institutions

There may be a temptation for institutions to stick to the ‘safe’, easily quantifiable activities, such as extra-curricular activities, and bolt-on or stand-alone careers support.

Many of the employability skills that can be gained within an academic curriculum are already in place but need to be explicitly cited in module objectives and signposted to learners what learning outcomes are being developed. This offers the catalyst for curriculum innovation.

10. This includes the Department of Education and Skills, the Higher Education Authority, Solas, Qualifications and Quality Assurance Ireland, the Irish University Association, the Technological Higher Education Association and Education and Training Boards Ireland.

Recommendation 1:

Develop an institute-wide policy to foster employability outcomes

Champion:

President of institution, college principal

A targeted, institution-wide policy, driven by senior management, will provide the impetus and relevant detail of this educational concept. It will give focus and direction to enable staff to recognise, categorise and label where skills associated with employability arise within the academic programmes and modules and offer relevant criteria for assessment. This approach retains the academic rigour and independence associated with detailed subject knowledge, while empowering staff to shape employability learning to suit the discipline.

Senior leadership commitment will help to ensure that relevant financial and human resources are allocated to developing employability skills to match the ambitions of the institutions.

Recommendation 2:

Provide dedicated employability supports for all academic staff

Champion:

Vice President for Academic Affairs and FET college principal

The challenge of supporting academic staff to embed employability into their curriculum can be significant. While the willingness is there, some may not know where to start. Support must be provided directly to the faculty or department to construct the appropriate approach to curricular development relevant to its discipline and institution, and develop a model of best practice of how mainstream programmes can incorporate and embed employability.

Dedicated supports must also include professional development opportunities for academic staff. Development sessions can build communities of common practice within institutions. Curriculum audit sessions should be facilitated so cross-discipline staff share best practice, ideas, resources, identify gaps and potential collaborative opportunities. Continuous professional development for staff may result in increased student engagement, as staff can demonstrate an understanding of enterprise and the learning and assessment process associated with it. Secondments and placements to workplaces outside of academia may be a powerful form of staff development. Academic or student support staff who share a recent first-hand experience of how a discipline is applied in the world of work can surcharge a students' learning. Additional benefits may accrue for the institution as relationships develop.

The FET Professional Development Strategy (2017-2019) includes significant commitments to increase the sector's capability through relevant, targeted professional development. This should provide the opportunity and resources to embed employability development as a key element in the professional development provision for teachers.

Recommendation 3:

Review teaching programme to consider the opportunities for employability in the curriculum

Champion:

Head of department and programme leads

The close relationship between employability skills, attributes and competencies needed to be an effective learner means that many curricula will already support development of these qualities through a range of activities, assessments and teaching practices. It is important to consider the study programme as a whole, rather than focus on individual, module elements. Employability outcomes arise from a programme of interrelated modules that integrate theory and practice, supported by work-based learning. Programme review may highlight what is working well and where the potential for enhancement exists. The embedded employability skills development must be engaging, integrated and explicit.

Recommendation 4:

Increase the application of relevant and innovative assessment methods

Champion:

Dean for Teaching and Learning, department head

Assessments that help students to identify and then present their achievements effectively are invaluable. Moving away from the conventional assessment of learning approach where students become overly geared towards preparing for tests, to more novel approaches focussed on assessment for learning and that encourage a greater degree of self and peer assessment.

Modes of teaching and assessment must raise awareness not only of the student's own skills and experience but also help them to become familiar with the language and terminology of employability. Understanding the reason why an assessment or activity is structured in a particular way can reassure the learner that there is a real value in undertaking a more novel or challenging type of assessment.

Recommendation 5:

Develop discipline specific employability profiles and skills maps.

Champion:

Dean of Teaching and Learning with programme leads

An employability profile identifies skills that can be developed through the study of a particular discipline, through subject benchmarks and learning outcomes. These skills can then be mapped against key employability skills, competencies and attributes highly valued by employers. A sample profile is presented in Appendix 1.

Employability profiles can provide discipline specific confirmation including evidence from learning outcomes of the work-related skills developed from a programme of study, summary of academic knowledge taught, skills mapped against competencies identified by employers and a list of typical career paths related to degree disciplines. The profiles can also provide more generic information including a glossary of competencies, terms and descriptive criteria and indicators used by employers, and reflective questions designed to stimulate students' awareness of skill development and achievement.

Dedicated profiles are more valuable than employability statements as they are more interactive, 'living' documents. In addition, detailed profiles can communicate more effectively with employers, in a common language, the skills that students have developed with specific subjects.

Recommendation 6:

Facilitate the development of students as reflective practitioners

Champion:

Student body supported by educators

Students must be made aware of the importance of employability skills, what they entail and how best to develop them if they are to have an early opportunity to engage fully in their own lifelong skills development. This can be assisted by inputs from lecturers, career guidance and employers to highlight how graduate talent is recruited and valued within organisations. Reflective learning should be encouraged as part of the student experience to determine how students identify, recognise and articulate the skills learned within a specific module or programme of study.

The opportunity to self-select material, course work, project / team partners, based on a personal assessment of their talent, abilities and resources enhances the latent employability skills. Through this exercise, students employ problem solving and conflict management skills, schedule and plan project activities while gaining a greater depth of contextualised subject knowledge. The appropriate assessment model should encourage the student to reflect on, identify and classify these skills and provide the language to articulate them.

Recommendation 7:

Grow and diversify work-related learning opportunities

Champion:

Careers Director

A key target of Action Plan for Education 2018 is to achieve a 25 percent increase in the number of students undertaking a work placement or work-based project, to enhance supports for learners to make informed career choices. To realise this ambition and broaden the opportunities to more students across different disciplines, institutions are required to move from a reliance on traditional forms of work-based placement to more diverse forms of work related learning. Placements in certain fields that might be difficult to obtain, for example, community groups, SMEs, public sector experience, can be re-enacted on campus and delivered through project work.

Key policy recommendations / continued

Students should also be encouraged to use their own enterprise activities to fulfil the work-based elements of the programme, which in turn encourages an entrepreneurial mind-set.

Recommendation 8:

Call on alumni network to support first career connections

Champion:

Alumni office

Recent graduates and more established alumni can provide an interesting and unbiased perspective on how their academic learning equipped them to function in the world of work. Projecting what employability means to a range of graduates, removed from the institution, can help students to understand the relevance of their skills and how they can be communicated to a potential employer. In addition, it may stimulate greater personal reflection through hearing the experiences of others and open up career opportunities possibly not considered.

Recommendation 9:

Recognise external experience opportunities

Champion:

Vice President for Academic Affairs and FET director of education

While students' extra-curricular activities are often beyond the scope of the education institutions' remit, they can, through co-curricular activities such as career development, help students to unlock the learning, recognise the significance and application of skills. Highly recognised and valuable co-curricular activities include work placements and part-time jobs; student mobility programmes such as Erasmus; and extracurricular positions that contribute to campus and community life such as community or volunteering experience, student's union or sports, cultural and social clubs.

Recommendation 10:

Increase cross-disciplinary opportunities.

Champion:

VP of Academic Affairs

The business environment is rich with hybrid teams from different functions, cultures and performance parameters. Experience in bridging this gap and exposing students to new ways of thinking is particularly helpful. Education institutions and their departments tend to remain structured on a conventional, discipline basis. While core disciplines will continue to underpin the body of our knowledge and build subject experts, interdisciplinary learning is becoming increasingly important to prepare students for a changing world.

Indeed, innovation, digitalisation and design thinking are now common threads which can link most subject disciplines. This can provide innovative extracurricular experience in interdisciplinary projects or teams.



Theme 2

Key recommendations for Government

The external environment surrounding educators, employers and students is inhabited by a broad range of Government departments, agencies and professional bodies. This environment is key to building the supporting foundations and providing the scaffolding to facilitate the development of employability skills.

Recommendation 1:

Higher Education System Performance Framework and Further Education and Training Service Plans must drive change

Champion:

Higher Education Authority, Solas

One of the key objectives of the Higher Education System Performance Framework (2018-2020) and the Further Education and Training Strategy (2014-2019) is to provide a strong talent pipeline combining knowledge, skills and employability which responds effectively to the needs of the enterprise, public service and community sectors. Institutions will be offered incentives for higher performance and better responsiveness to the needs of the economy and society in this area. This can be supported through employer engagement in areas such as curriculum design, work-based projects and guest lectures. There are already examples of good practice which tend to rely on the commitment and relationships of individuals within institutions. An over-arching framework would put this activity on a more structured footing.

Robust data is also required to help institutions to evaluate the employment outcomes of their students. The CSO's recent publication Higher Education Outcomes – Graduates of 2010-2014 demonstrates the potential of longitudinal administrative data. These outcomes are subject to a broad range of other variables such as the students' own abilities and socio-economic background, however, individual institutions should be using this type of data to benchmark their own performance.

Recommendation 2:

Launch a specific funding call to kick-start initiatives

Champion:

Higher Education Authority, Solas, Department of Education and Skills

To provide sufficient resource capacity and staff development, higher education institutions will require new dedicated funding allocation to drive the employability agenda forward. New teaching methods and innovation must be given the necessary supports and space to develop and succeed. Capital funding, which is ring-fenced and targeted at increasing employability outcomes, will be required to incentivise the development of on-campus work-related learning initiatives. The targeted funding call should support the initial development and roll-out of employability related initiatives. Over time the funding must be sustained and recurrent in order for the employability initiatives to become systemic and mainstreamed across all institutions.

Recommendation 3:

Share best practice and standardised resources

Champion:

The National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning, FET directors of education

In higher education, the National Forum for the Enhancement of Teaching and Learning can play a key role in sharing best practice and providing standardised resources on employability skills development. It is crucial that employability initiatives and skills are central to its Professional Development Framework. Therefore, the Forum's work influencing the curriculum and innovative pedagogical approaches will be critical.

Recommendation 4:

Position employability skills as a driver of quality

Champion:

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

QQI should ensure that future institution quality review and curricula modification includes a strong focus on employability outcomes and the development of key skills at appropriate levels.

Recommendation 5:

Standardise the process for placements and work experience

Champion:

Higher Education Authority, Solas

Given that many businesses are engaging with multiple institutions to support work-based learning, the Higher Education Authority and Solas should encourage the standardisation of the work-based learning process. A more structured approach, detailed in a guide for best practice and supported by a dedicated contact point in institutions would help employers to provide the most authentic and practical experience.

Recommendation 6:

Support the transition between second level and third level

Champion:

Department of Education and Skills

There needs to be greater connectivity between second and third level careers services to ensure that students are embedding skills at an early stage. The introduction of the new Junior Certificate programme is a welcome first step in the development of key skills and statements of learning, that in many ways reflect employability skills. The next phase of reform must bring the Leaving Certificate up to date, and consider how key life

Key policy recommendations / continued

skills can be developed through a variety of teaching and learning experiences which extend beyond the traditional academic examination. In addition, the development of a structured Transition Year programme that allows the student to explore a variety of interests, engage in voluntary and charitable work will solidify the development of many of the capabilities students may need in later life.

The reform of the career guidance system at second and third level should place a larger emphasis on whether the service supports students to identify their employability skills and highlight potential gaps in readiness for future work and life.

Theme 3

Key recommendations for business

Ireland's business community has a significant role to support the development of employability skills. While there is already some activity, business-education interactions are often centred on individual relationships which can be lost when individuals move on. While a "one-size-fits-all" approach may not be feasible, the development of a strategy to ensure more systematic links could improve the overall experience.

Collaboration works best when it becomes systematic for the organisations involved and becomes a core part of how education institutions and businesses think about skills development. Successful engagement between education and employer recognise the strengths and limitations of the collaborating partners and ensures that outputs meet both employer and educator needs.

Recommendation 1:

Be active in the classroom

Champions:

Industry subject experts from a range of business sectors

Students can gain powerful insights into the challenges and opportunities in the business environment when guest lectures are delivered by industry leaders. By providing access to students early in their studies graduate recruiters can convey the importance of employability skills, what employers look for and how the necessary skills can be developed.

Recommendation 2:

Provide work placements and work related projects

Champion:

Institution Business Liaison Teams and Careers Service with industry representatives

Experiential and work-based learning gives students the opportunity to put theory into practice. They learn first-hand from the trial and error process, which can highlight potential "pay-offs" for the learner. Employers need to be supported to offer placements to relevant programmes for a distinct period of time. An alternative may be to offer project themes for completion by student groups – this could be particularly relevant for SMEs who may struggle to support several placements.

Placements need to be as close to a real-life scenario as possible and have a mentor to support the placement students in gaining the most from their placement. Where placements are offered, the timing and duration needs to be reviewed as employers tend to find longer placements of greater benefit for organisation and student alike.

Recommendation 3:

Advise on curriculum design and delivery

Champion:

Industry experts

Employers should be encouraged to support institutions through the development of content for academic programmes and ensure institutions are aware of the changing skills demands in their industry. Programme and curricula review as part of an industry advisory group which would represent organisations from SME to large multinationals, could add real value to the teaching and learning experience. This collaboration will also help academics understand how employers gather evidence of competencies and skills used in the recruitment process and ensure that their programmes are responding to changing industry needs.

Recommendation 4:

Contribute the business perspective in career clinics to help prepare students for the future

Champion:

Industry talent development managers

Employers have distinct expertise in this field and should encourage graduate preparedness by offering interview skills coaching and CV preparation skills as part of careers clinics. This will help graduates to emphasise the distinct qualities they bring to various positions in organisations and identify any gaps in their skillsets. In addition, it helps graduates understand the diversity of roles within business organisation and the importance of targeting these within CVs, personal profiles and applications.



Conclusion

‘Our ambition is that Ireland will be internationally renowned for its talent, for its highly skilled and adaptive people, equipped with higher order capabilities required in the 21st century workplace and for its openness to continuous learning.’¹¹

Employability skills and attributes are the high level generic attributes that are necessary to allow Irish graduates to contribute to and thrive in a complex and uncertain future. In this future, the ability to question, collate, present and make judgements is increasingly important. It is still a challenge to equip academic staff, driven by departmental and other competing priorities, with the support they need to deliver on this graduate attribute agenda. It can also be a challenge to engage students in learning processes that require them to take more responsibility for their learning and the ability to articulate and use the attributes, unless they can see the value.

The success of the development of employability will stem from the development of institutional strategy and senior management commitment, significant innovation in the curriculum and assessment methods and empowering students to understand, recognise and communicate their learning experience relative to employability skills. Education institutions play a central role but need to harness the guidance and support of employers and the resource support from Government to deliver on this exciting new era for education.

Students, teachers, education institutions and employers need to share the responsibility of preparing future graduates through the development and communication of employability skills. Only through this multi-stakeholder approach are we likely to have individuals engaging fully in the workplace and society and fulfilling their potential.

11. Enterprise 2020 - <https://www.djei.ie/en/Publications/Enterprise-2025.html>

Appendix 1: Student Employability Profiles – a guide for higher education practitioners¹²

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12. The Higher Education Academy 2006: Student employability profiles – a guide for higher education practitioners, page 29. Rees, C.; Forbes, P; Kubler, B.

Example skills and attributes map – Philosophy

	Cognitive skills	Generic competencies
Subject benchmark indicators	The ability to identify and solve problems, work with information and handle a mass of diverse data, assess risk and draw conclusions.	High level and transferable key skills such as the ability to work with others in a team, communicate, persuade and have interpersonal sensitivity.
Articacy in identifying underlying issues in all kinds of debate.		Questioning, Listening, Interpersonal Sensitivity.
Precision of thought and expression in the analysis and formulation of complex and controversial problems.	Attention to Detail, Analysis, Judgement, Planning and Organising.	Listening, Questioning.
Sensitivity in interpretation of texts drawn from a variety of ages and/or traditions.	Attention to Detail, Analysis, Judgement.	Written Communication, Interpersonal Sensitivity
Clarity and rigour in the critical assessment of arguments presented in such texts.	Attention to Detail, Analysis, Judgement, Planning and Organising.	Listening, Questioning.
Ability to use and criticise specialised philosophical terminology.	Analysis, Judgement	
Ability to abstract, analyse and construct sound arguments and to identify logical fallacies.		
Ability to recognise methodological errors, rhetorical devices, unexamined conventional wisdom, unnoticed assumptions, vagueness and superficiality.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement.	
Ability to move between generalisation and appropriately detailed discussion, inventing or discovering examples to support or challenge a position, and distinguishing relevant and irrelevant considerations.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement.	Listening, Questioning.
Ability to consider unfamiliar ideas and ways of thinking, and to examine critically pre-suppositions and methods within the discipline itself.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement.	
Ability to conduct arguments about matters of the highest moment without recourse to insult or susceptibility to take offence.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement.	Interpersonal Sensitivity, Influencing.

Personal capabilities	Technical ability	Business and/or organisation awareness	Practical and professional elements
The ability and desire to learn for oneself and improve ones self-awareness, emotional intelligence and performance. To be a self-starter (creativity, decisiveness, initiative) and to finish the job (flexibility, adaptability, tolerance to stress).	For example, having the knowledge and experience of working with relevant modern technology.	An appreciation of how businesses operate through having had (preferably relevant) work experience. Appreciation of organisational culture, policies and processes.	Critical evaluation of the outcomes of professional practice, reflect and review own practice participate in and review quality control processes and risk management.
Tolerance for Stress, Adaptability/Flexibility.			
Decisiveness, Tolerance for Stress.			
Organisational Sensitivity, Achievement orientation.		Organisational Understanding.	
Achievement orientation.			Professional Expertise.
Tolerance for Stress, Adaptability/Flexibility	Technical Ability, Technical Knowledge.		Professional Expertise.
Decisiveness.			
Creativity, Initiative, Achievement orientation.			
Creativity, Initiative.			
Adaptability/Flexibility.			Professional Expertise, Image.

	Cognitive skills	Generic competencies
Willingness to evaluate opposing arguments, to formulate and consider the best arguments for different views and to identify the weakest elements of the most persuasive view.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement.	Interpersonal Sensitivity, Influencing, Listening, Questioning.
Honesty in recognising the force of the conclusions warranted by a careful assessment of pertinent arguments.		Interpersonal Sensitivity, Influencing.
Ability to cross traditional subject boundaries, examining the limitations and virtues of other disciplines and practices, and recognising philosophical doctrines in unfamiliar places.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement.	
Ability to apply philosophical skills and techniques to issues arising outside the academy.		Written Communication, Interpersonal Sensitivity, Listening, Questioning.
Listen attentively to complex presentations	Attention to detail.	Listening.
To read carefully a variety of technical and non-technical material.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement, Planning and Organising.	Written Communication.
Reflect clearly and critically on oral and written sources, employing powers of imagination as well as analysis.	Attention to Detail, Analysis, Judgement.	
To remember relevant material and bring it to mind when the moment of its relevance arises.	Attention to detail, Judgement.	
Marshal a complex body of information; and to construct cogent arguments in the evaluation of this material.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement, Planning and Organising.	Interpersonal Sensitivity.
Present, in both oral and written forms, a clear and well-structured assessment of relevant considerations.	Attention to detail, Analysis, Judgement, Planning and Organising.	Written Communication, Listening, Questioning.
Develop skills in the following areas: information Technology - word-processing, e-mail and WWW, information search and retrieval, using online computer resources to access bibliographic material.		
Personal attributes that are important in the world of work that will strengthen the graduate's ability to engage in lifelong learning, and that will contribute to the wider community. These will include, the ability to motivate oneself; the ability to work autonomously; the general management of one's own work to time limits; a flexible and adaptable mind able to face new situations; ability to think creatively, self-critically and independently.		Interpersonal Sensitivity.
Professional factors		
Employment		
Work experience		

Personal capabilities	Technical ability	Business and/or organisation awareness	Practical and professional elements
Achievement orientation, Initiative, Creativity, Decisiveness.			
Achievement orientation, Tolerance for Stress, Initiative			Professional Expertise.
Adaptability/Flexibility, Creativity, Initiative.			
Organisational Sensitivity, Achievement orientation		Organisational Understanding.	
Creativity.			
Decisiveness, Creativity.			
Organisational Sensitivity, Achievement orientation.			
	Technical Knowledge, Technical Ability.		
Lifelong learning, Achievement orientation, Initiative, Decisiveness, Tolerance for Stress, Adaptability/Flexibility, Creativity.			

Acknowledgements

This policy document is the result of wide consultation by Ibec's Social Policy Unit with educators and employers across different industry sectors, disciplines and roles. Focus groups were held to ascertain the core skills employers seek from graduates; whose responsibility it is to develop employability skills; what role is played by each stakeholder and the challenges the status quo poses for all.

Ibec wants to start a discussion with business, educators, Government and students to highlight the relevance and importance of employability with these recommendations at its core. This policy document is aimed at embedding employability in the delivery of education and offers a business perspective to support academics and teachers to embark on this journey.

We are extremely grateful to those educators and employers who shared their insights and viewpoints on how together we can meet the challenges and opportunities of the changing world of work.

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About Ibec

Ibec is Ireland's largest lobby group representing Irish business both domestically and internationally. Its membership is home grown, multinational, big and small, spanning every sector of the economy. Together they employ over 70% of the private sector workforce in Ireland. Ibec and its trade associations lobby government, policy makers and other key stakeholders nationally and internationally to shape business conditions and drive economic growth. It has over 240 professional services staff in seven locations including Brussels and has 42 different trade associations in the group.

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