'Usemyability' (UMA). An investigation into whether an online employability skills audit can enhance students understanding of the term employability

Charlotte Beaman-Evans, Dr Val Chapman, Dr Nicholas Breeze and Will Bowen-Jones
University of Worcester
(c.beaman-evans@worc.ac.uk, v.chapman@worc.ac.uk, n.breeze@worc.ac.uk, w.bowen-jones@worc.ac.uk)

Abstract

This project was completed as part of the students as academic partners (SAPs) initiative. The project aimed to ascertain the current level of understanding surrounding students' employability skills and how they may be improved. It was expected that through the use of an online self-audit tool 'usemyability' (UMA[1]) students would be able to establish a benchmark from which to track their development across a range of 16 benchmarked employability skills. A baseline questionnaire was completed by 31 University of Worcester (UW) students to investigate their existing knowledge surrounding the concept of employability. Results suggested that students had a limited understanding of the term employability. Notably, students regarded employability as simply 'getting a job' (9 students suggested this) or 'having skills' (12 students noted this). Skills listed focussed around personal attributes (including reliability and confidence) illustrating discrepancies in what students think employers look for (attributes) and what employers actually look for (skills, literacy, being ICT efficient for example) (Archer & Davison, 2008). The UMA audit allowed students to document their skills and work experiences to date, as well as further educate students on employability skills. Students stated benefits associated with completing the UMA audit and provided relevant examples in support of this. A number of limitations to the project, including timing and length of the audit were identified by students. Further limitations identified by the researchers included the timing of the study within the academic year, low participation rates and attendance of participants on the day of the presentation of employability skills. A greater response sample is required to generalise the impact of the UMA audit on a wider scale.

Introduction

The increase in fees is putting additional pressure on Higher Education (HE) institutions to ensure that all students become readily employable graduates (Qenani et al., 2014). It is this very notion 'employable graduates' that this paper sought to explore. The notion of employability remains a relevant and current topic within HE from a range of perspectives, primarily students, academics and employers. It is anticipated that gaining employment as a graduate is a significant motivational factor for students studying at undergraduate or postgraduate level. Thomas and Day (2013) suggest that HE establishments are increasingly aligning course content to develop professional attributes in students that meet expectations of employers. There appears to be some dissimilarities in what academics are terming employability skills and what employers actually want. As an increased demand to develop such skills has prevailed within academia (Tymon, 2013) employers have proposed that students continue to lack understanding around employment and the key skills that make them employable (Branine, 2008). This results in some cases, in a lack of ability of graduates to meet employer demands.

With an increased drive from UW to embed employability skills into the curriculum, aligned with current research trends, this study aimed to establish students' comprehension of the term employability and then seek to understand if completing an online employability audit could further enhance their understanding of employability.

Method

Phase One

Eighty students (n=80) were conveniently sampled from one level five Physical Education module within the Institute of Sport and Exercise (ISES). The sample was accessible by the lead researcher through regular weekly contact, as well as ease of recruitment by communication onto the project. Participation was completely voluntary. Of the 80 students, 31 chose to participate in the study. It was not possible to determine exact participant age or gender percentages based on the anonymity of the questionnaire. In phase one of the study, students completed one Bristol Online Survey (BOS[2]). The survey was designed to ascertain the baseline level of student knowledge concerning the concept of 'employability'. Questions were set by Dr Val Chapman to investigate

---

[1] See: http://www.usemyability.org.uk/

[2] Bristol Online Survey (BOS) See: http://www.survey.bris.ac.uk/

students' current understanding on the term 'employability' (Appendix one). The questions specifically explored employability, the concept of it, the skills associated with it and how it currently fits into their degree programme. Their responses gave an insight into students existing knowledge and perceptions. The nature of the questions asked meant that there was a mixture of response types, ranging from 5-point Likert item to open questions. In order to analyse the open questions, inductive analysis, based on the identification of categories and their subsequent coding, was employed (Thomas, 2006). A systematic review of all questions asked during the first survey was conducted and findings reported to inform phase two of the study. Key results have been identified below.

Results of phase one

Significant results discussed here only;

Table 1: Categories defining students' perceptions of employability.

Category	Numerical Code
Having skills	1
Getting a job	2
Meeting the needs and/or expectations of employers	3
Meeting job specification, meeting job role demands	4
Qualifications	5
Previous Experience	6
Skills to sustain employability	7
Work readiness	8
Standing out from the crowd	9

n=31

**Figure 1: Student definitions of the term 'employability'.**
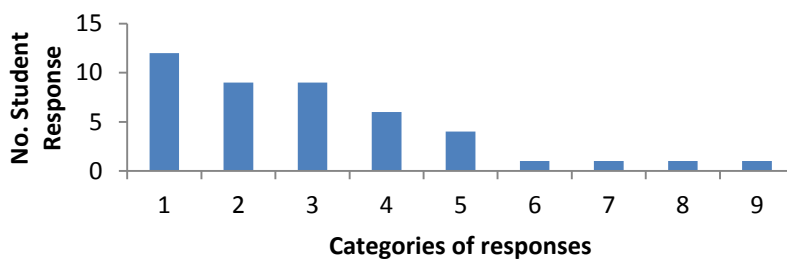
n=31

As illustrated in Figure 1, the baseline survey identified some interesting points for further discussion. Students felt that the term employability was having skills (12 students), getting a job (9 students) but rarely combined the two. An additional higher rated conceptualisation of employability was meeting the needs and/or expectations of an employer (n=9). Two students appeared to have a more comprehensive understanding of employability, recognising that it was a range of skills, capabilities and attributes that met the requirements and expectations of an employer. This was not, however, replicated throughout all student responses.

Figure 2: ISES students' conceptualisations of employability attributes

Identified Employability attributes
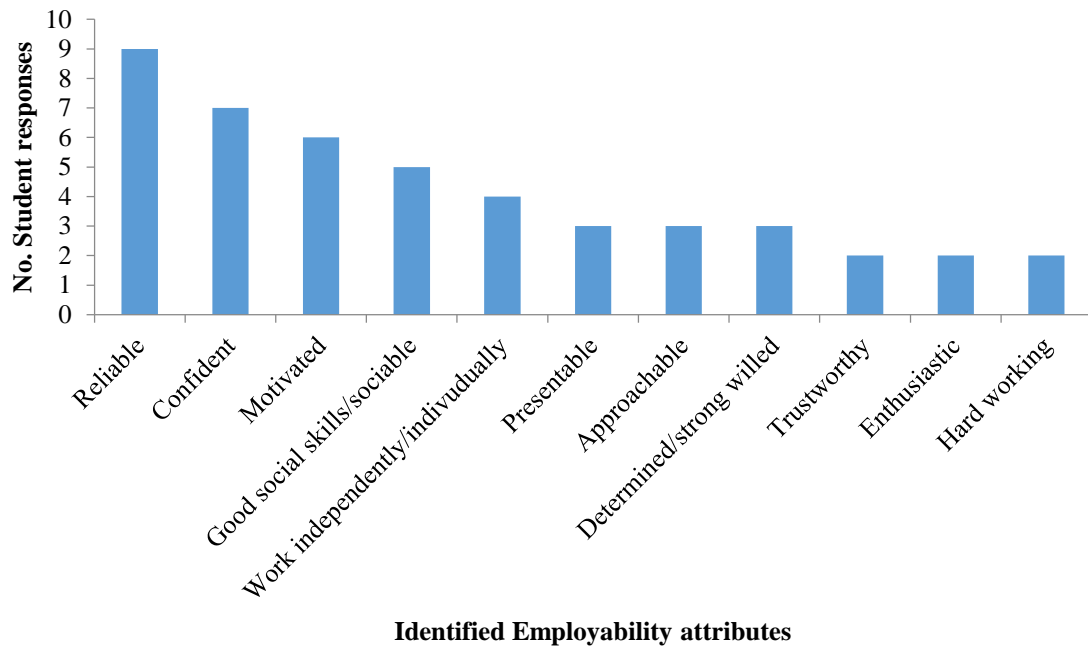
n=31

When asked to list employability skills, students provided a comprehensive list of attributes, with only some skills identified. Figure 2 illustrates that students (n=9) believed that being reliable or demonstrating reliability was a key employability 'skill'. Three students identified being 'presentable', 'well presented' and 'good presentation' as further 'skills'. The three responses were categorised into 'presentable'. The least cited attributes students presented were trustworthy (n=2), enthusiastic (n=2), hardworking (n=2) and friendly (n=2). The above 'skills' noted by students were perceived to be attributes and not skills based upon the attributes presented by Wellman (2010).

The attributes given were frequently associated with character and personality traits, which could be linked to the predominantly practically-based career pathway of the response sample. Figure 2 illustrates that there appears to be a difference between what employers look for (Archer & Davison, 2008) and what students' think employers look for. Key skills that employers look for when recruiting new graduates consisted of integrity,

numeracy, literacy and analysis and decision making (Archer & Davison, 2008). Attributes as identified above by the student participants', were not readily acknowledged by employers in the British based employability report published by Archer and Davison (2008).

It is difficult to determine where skills end and attributes start. Therefore further research was required to investigate this. The Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning at the University of Nottingham in collaboration with the South West Skills Learning and Intelligence Module at the University of Exeter (2007) suggest a number of generic employability skills and place them into meta-categories, taking into consideration both skills and attributes required for employability. With this in mind the data was revisited and the following categories were devised. This approach aimed to map the students' responses within these categories (see Table 2). Most responses were aligned to category 4.

Table 2: Meta-categories of generic employability skills

Category	Meta-category	Associated Skills
1	Fundamental Skills	Such as literacy, using numbers & ICT
2	People-Related Skills	Such as communication skills, interpersonal skills, influencing skills, negotiation skills, team working skills, customer service skills and leadership skills.

3	Conceptualising/thinking skills	Such as managing information, problem solving, planning and organising skills, learning skills, thinking innovatively and creatively and reflective skills.
4	Personal skills and attributes	Such as being enthusiastic, adaptable, motivated, reliable, responsible, honest, resourceful, committed, loyal, flexible, well presented, manage own time, deal with pressure.
5	Skills related to the business world	Such as innovation skills, enterprise skills, commercial awareness, business awareness.
6	Skills related to the community	Such as citizenship skills.

(Source: The Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning at the University of Nottingham in collaboration with the South West Skills Learning and Intelligence Module at the University of Exeter [2007])

The one key 'skill' that most (15) students did acknowledge, that wasn't identified as an attribute, was effective communication; this was also acknowledged by Archer and Davidson (2008) who found that 86% of employers look for this as a key skill. A comprehensive list of employability skills from a global perspective was reviewed by Tymon (2013) where emerging or common employability 'items' were acknowledged. These included, (across all spectrums), communication, suggesting that students' are clear in identifying one key skill but there was little depth to the students' knowledge surrounding this, justifying the need for phase two of this study.

Phase one of this study probed into an area which suggested students have a limited understanding of the term employability and the skills which make them 'employable'. This is hardly surprising when the plethora of research available fails to identify an exclusive list of skills, attributes or traits but moreover suggests it is a combination of all of the aforementioned (Kreber, 2006; Andrews & Higson, 2008; Cumming, 2010). Previously conducted research on employability suggests putting an exact definition on employment with a subsequent list of factors that make you 'employable' should be expressed with caution (Harvey, 2005; Yorke, 2004).

Phase Two

Phase two initiated the launch of the employability skills audit (UMA). The audit was launched after data had been analysed from phase one. The employability skills audit aimed to enhance students' understanding of the nature of employability, associated employability skills and how they may be improved. Additionally the audit enabled students to establish a benchmark from which to track their development across a range of 16 employability skills (Appendix 2). Students who completed the audit in full (2 students) were invited to an interview. Interviews were semi-structured lasting no more than 20 minutes, with each student. The interviews with one male and one female student were conducted via the telephone with Dr Nicholas Breeze. Responses were coded accordingly using the audio analysis tool (AAT). Emerging themes were established and responses categorised into the following:

- **Enhancement:** Perceived enhancement of knowledge of employability skills as a result of being involved with this employability project.
- **Institute of Sport and Exercise science Employability (ISES):** Students perception of how the ISES does or could increase student understanding of employability.
- **Limitations:** Identified issues from the students regarding the current study.
- **Personal Development:** Perceived personal development of involvement with the study and proposed plans to use knowledge gained from participation within the study.

Of the identified themes, enhancement, personal development and limitations were paramount in monitoring the success of the UMA employability profile and the impact it could have on developing student's awareness of employability skills.

Enhancement

Students were able to identify a range of ways in which they felt this study had enhanced their understanding of the employability skills. Students identified that both the audit and the presentation were beneficial in increasing their own awareness, knowledge and personal understanding of employability skills. Some examples of student responses have been outlined below, verbatim.

In response to the most valuable aspect of the project: 'The audit-and that was because it was personal to me, I could see what I had done to enhance my employability. The audit was the strongest point for me.' In response to the audit: 'Very helpful how you could give your experiences' and 'All the different skills and all the different aspects of those skills so you could really think about it and think about how you could improve and what examples they were.'

Personal Development

When asked how students would use the knowledge gained from participation in this project students suggested a number of ways in which they could transfer the knowledge gained into their curriculum Vitae, job applications and interviews:

> 'I will be taking it [excel document] along with me, I'll be keeping it up to date, bulking it up especially with the bits that I said I was lacking - show evidence and taking it along to interviews especially the PGCE ones as I feel they could really enhance my chances of getting a job…maybe you could post it on line with a CV, there are some online applications and perhaps linking it with one of those would be very useful' and 'I'll definitely add those skills that are in there and put them into my statement and refer to times when I have used them…Yeah and in term of interviews and things I think it will really help.'

When discussing how the students found the project, both students identified that the audit was the most beneficial aspect of the project and appeared to be highly satisfied with the benefits associated with completing the audit. Students readily identified a number of limitations, despite not being prompted specifically on this, including timing and length of the UMA audit. Such statements from the participants supported the suspected limitations felt by researchers, especially concerning the timing of the study within the academic year.

Limitations

Limitations identified may contribute for future users of the UMA audit to make it more accessible and applicable for academics wishing to embed this at modular level. Limitations identified predominantly included the timing of the session and audit and the length of the UMA audit:

> 'It was at a bit of an awkward time….If it was done like at the start of semester one maybe when no one really has much work to do then that would have been a better time….I was more focused on getting my assignments done than doing the questionnaire really.'

Proposed changes included the length of the audit;

> 'The questionnaire was very very long- the 2nd one…The hardest part was the fact like it didn't really have,

like on most questionnaires you can see how far along you're getting there's like a you've answered so many out of so many but you couldn't really tell how far along you were. I got to like the 50th question and had gone into a lot of detail and thought I'm going to be finished soon and thought I was definitely going to finish. I think if there as a time bar along the top like how far you have got then I would spread my time more equally - I didn't get to finish like the last 50 questions, or maybe make the questions shorter.'

Consideration should be given as to when the audit is implemented. This study initiated the audit at the start of semester 2; students however expressed a desire for this to be started sooner in the year. The length of the audit needs to be addressed as it requires much of the students' time. A recommendation would be to make this a longitudinal study or student task where the audit was kept open for the students full three years of study (Undergraduate) and one year (postgraduate). Another recommendation is to allow students to have open access to the audit where they can continue to add to it as a working document. This will prompt reflective practice on employability skills. Furthermore specific sessions that have addressed aspects of employability or contributed to the development of key employability skills should be readily identified and students should be signposted back to the audit to add experience and knowledge. Embedding the audit in this way will allow the concept of employability to be at the forefront of the module.

Conclusion

After completion of the audit and analysing the student interviews it was clearer to see the identified benefits; increase in knowledge surrounding specific employability skills and the development of a personal document to use in graduate interviews to evidence skills and experience gained.

Research suggests that employability is a culmination of attributes, techniques and life experience (Harvey, 2005) suggesting a specific sample of UW students initially lacked depth of understanding regarding employability awareness. The audit was shared with students to help them improve upon their knowledge and understanding by allowing them to consider areas of strengths, weaknesses and life experiences, as well as further education on what are key employability skills. Improvements were documented by the two case studies that completed the whole study.

Responses suggested that students could enhance upon skill sets further when they could visualise what they had done and where they had gained relevant experience. Additionally the audit appears to be a document that could be used to enhance their Curriculum Vitae as well as referred to and presented during interviews with potential employers. It should be noted that the low response rate does not allow for a generalisation of data and the wider impact but the valuable information provided from these case studies cannot be disregarded. This supports the need for further research in this area to fully understand the student related issues regarding employability.

Recommendations

Recommendations provided on the basis of the limitations and moving forward to implementing this into modules include:

- It should be noted that the 1st questionnaire (phase 1) administered would not be necessary if repeated. This was a piloting tool for the purpose of this study which justified the need for employment education. However should staff wish to ascertain the level of knowledge surrounding the concept of employability amongst their students this process could be replicated.
- In order to trace the enhancement of the understanding of employability skills (research project aim) there could be a direct link between the 1st and 2nd audit in some way to be able to measure this.
- The skills audit and presentation should be introduced at the start of the semester and launched immediately to allow students maximal time to work on it. The audit is therefore pre-planned and integrated into the module.

Reference list

Andrews, J. and Higson, H. (2008) Graduate Employability, 'soft skills' versus 'hard' business knowledge: A European Study. *Higher Education in Europe*. [Online] Vol. 33 (4), pp. 411-42. Available from: http://web.a.ebscohost.com.proxy.worc.ac.uk/ehost/pdfviewer/pdfviewer?sid=708245bd-cd5d-4d67-8312-8146557644c7%40sessionmgr4003&vid=1&hid=4104 [Accessed 8th June 2015].

Archer, W. and Davison, J. (2008) *Graduate Employability: What do employers think and want?* London, Council for Industry and Higher Education (CIHE). [Online]. Available from: http://www.brunel.ac.uk/services/pcc/staff/employability/?a=92718 [Accessed 9th June 2015].

Branine, M. (2008) Graduate recruitment and selection in the UK. *Career Development International*. [Online] Vol. 13 (6), pp. 497 – 513. Available from: http://www.emeraldinsight.com.proxy.worc.ac.uk/doi/pd

fplus/10.1108/13620430810901660. [Accessed 9th June 2015].

Centre for Developing and Evaluating Lifelong Learning at the University of Nottingham in collaborations with the South West Skills and Learning Intelligence Module at the University of Exeter (2007) *The Teaching, Learning and Assessment of Generic Employability Skills.* [Online] Available from: http://www.swslim.org.uk/research/ges/index.asp [Accessed 10th June 2015].

Chapman, V., Waterfield, J. and Gravestock, P. (No date*) Usemyability*. The Higher Education Academy. [Online] Available from http://www.usemyability.org.uk/ [Accessed 20th May 2015].

Cumming, J. (2010) Contextualised performance: reframing the skills debate in research education. *Studies in Higher Education.* Vol. 35 (4), pp. 405-419.

Harvey, L. (2005) Embedding and integrating employability. *New directions for Institutional Research*. [Online] 2005 Issue 128, pp. 13-28. Available from: http://onlinelibrary-wiley-com.proxy.worc.ac.uk/doi/10.1002/ir.160/epdf [Accessed 9th June 2015].

Kreber, C. (2006) Setting the context: The climate of university teaching and learning. *New directions for Higher Education.* [Online] Issue 133, pp. 5-11. Available from: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxy.worc.ac.uk/doi/10.1002/he.200/epdf [Accessed 9th June 2015].

Qenani, E., MacDougall, N. and Sexton, C. (2014) An empirical study of self-perceived employability: Improving the prospects for student employment success in an uncertain environment. *Active Learning in Higher Education*. [Online] Vol. 15 (3), pp. 199-213. Available from: http://alh.sagepub.com.proxy.worc.ac.uk/content/15/3/199.full.pdf+html [Accessed 10th June 2015].

Thomas, D. (2006) A General Inductive Approach for Analyzing Qualitative Evaluation Data. *American Journal of Evaluation*. Vol. 27 (2), pp. 237-246.

Thomas, I. and Day, T. (2013) Education for Sustainability, Graduate Capabilities, Professional Employment: How They All Connect. *Australian Journal of Environmental Education*. [Online] Vol. 29 (1), pp. 33–51. Available from: http://journals.cambridge.org.proxy.worc.ac.uk/download.php?file=%2F2205_DEF52895E0265D664CFADFD1612A2E72_journals__AEE_AEE29_01_S0814062613000141a.pdf&cover=Y&code=275698e3a792d2c8b5d589f01343f27c [Accessed 9th June 2015].

Tymon, A. (2013) The student perspective on employability. *Studies in Higher Education*. [Online] Vol. 38 (6), pp. 841-856. Available from: http://www-tandfonline-com.proxy.worc.ac.uk/doi/pdf/10.1080/03075079.2011.604408 [Accessed 9th June 2015].

Wellman, N. (2010) The Employability Attributes Required of New Marketing Graduates. *Marketing Intelligence & Planning*. Vol. 28 (7), pp. 908-930.

Yorke, M. (2004) Employability in the Undergraduate Curriculum: some student perspectives. *European Journal of Education*. [Online] Vol. 39 (4), pp. 409-427. Available from: http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.proxy.worc.ac.uk/doi/10.1111/j.1465-3435.2004.00194.x/epdf [Accessed 1st June 2015].

Biographies

Charlotte Beaman-Evans is the Course Leader for the Physical Education and Outdoor Education at the University of Worcester. Alongside this role Charlotte acts as the talented athlete lifestyle advisor to elite and talented athletes studying at the University. Before joining the University, she was previously a teacher of Physical Education in a secondary school. Charlotte is now embarking upon a career in Higher Education having recently completed her MSc in Sports Coaching Science and Post Graduate Certificate in Higher Education. A keen sports player Charlotte has played a range of sports including rugby, football and hockey, achieving international status in Rugby.

Val Chapman (PhD, MSc, Cert Ed, Dip RSA [SpLD]) is the Director of the Centre for Inclusive Learning Support at the University of Worcester. She has an international reputation in the field of Disability and Inclusion in Higher Education. She was awarded National Teaching Fellowship in 2005 and from 2006 to 2007 she held a UNESCO funded Chair in Special Education at Qatar University alongside her UW responsibilities. Val has served on a range of national committees and working parties and has published widely in books, academic journals and newsletters. She has presented at numerous national and international conferences, frequently as an invited speaker.

Nick Breeze is a Learning and Teaching Research Projects Officer in the Institute of Sports and Exercise Science at the University of Worcester, where he supports academic colleagues with research projects. His previous roles have included Teaching Fellow in Education at the University of Bristol, secondary music teacher, composer, performer and conductor. His research interests focus on learning and teaching in Higher Education, the use of Information and Communications Technology (ICT) in Education and Multimodal Research Methods.

Will Bowen-Jones is Head of Educational Development, having previously held the post of Associate Head of Institute in Sport and Exercise Science, with responsibility for Quality Assurance and Enhancement and Learning and Teaching. He is a Senior Teaching Fellow of the University and has maintained strong links with the key professional bodies in the Sector. He has been a regular presenter at national and international conferences (HEA, SEDA, HECU, HEIR, **EDULEARN, INTED and ICERI**). In recent years he has planned and led the University's annual learning and teaching conference and has been the institutional lead for a number of HEA supported, institutional projects and initiatives, most recently Changing the Learning landscape (CLL).

Appendix One: Phase one questions asked to establish understanding of Employability

Question One: Student Number
Students were asked to provide their student number in order to compare their baseline assessment with the subsequent use of the 'usemyability' web resource. The decision was taken to use the student number and not the student name in order to preserve student anonymity, as detailed in the approved ethics documents.

Question Two: What is employability?
Students were asked to explain their understanding of the term 'employability'. Students responded in an unstructured 'open' format.

Question Three: Employability Skills
Students were asked to list the employability skills that they were aware of.

Question Four: How to improve employability skills
Students were asked how they would you go about gaining or improving their employability skills that they had identified.

Question Five: Effectiveness of ISES at providing opportunities for development
Students were asked to report on how effective they thought the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science was at providing opportunities for them to develop their employability skills. Students were asked to select a description from a 5 point Likert item ranging from excellent to very poor.

Question Six: Effectiveness of ISES tutors raising awareness of employability skills
Students were asked to comment on how effective they felt tutors were in the Institute of Sport and Exercise Science in raising their awareness of employability skills.

Students were again asked to select a description from a 5 point Likert item ranging from Excellent to very poor.

Question Seven: What job would you like to have after you graduate from UW
Students were asked to state their career choices after graduating from UW.

Question 7a: What skills do you think that your employer will want you to have in order to do this job?
Students identified a range of skills that they thought employers would look for in graduates.

Question Eight: What could the University do/do more of to help you to develop your employability?
Students were asked what they thought the University of Worcester could do to help develop their employability skills.

Appendix Two: Employability Skills

16 employability skills
- Adaptability
- Commercial/social awareness
- Information Literacy
- Interpersonal Skills
- Literacy-Reading
- Numeracy
- Observation/Visual Literacy
- Oral Communication
- Practical Skills
- Problem Solving
- Self-Management
- Teamwork
- Time Management
- Using ICT
- Working under pressure
- Written Communication

(Chapman et al., no date)