# Employability Skills in the Curriculum



This document has been designed to support you with embedding employability skills into a unit. It provides specific strategies to enable these skills to be embedded into either a current or a newly developed unit plan and subsequently taught and assessed.

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# Introduction

*What is it all about?*

In a competitive, culturally diverse and increasingly internationalised workplace students can no longer assume that possession of a tertiary degree will naturally lead to employment. There has been a shift in the mindset of employers, who now seek to employ graduates with "employability" skills and attributes in addition to traditional expertise within their discipline (DEST, 2002). To support students in the development of these skills, universities now have a responsibility to create curriculum that embeds explicit teaching and learning of these skills. The skills that are considered desirable by employers have been broadly categorised in the following clusters (DEEWR, 2013):

1. Self-management
   - o Managing career and work life
   - o Working with roles, rights and protocols

2. Interacting with others
   - o Communicating
   - o Connecting and collaborating
   - o Recognising and utilising diverse perspectives

3. Getting the work done
   - o Planning and organizing
   - o Making decisions
   - o Identifying and solving problems
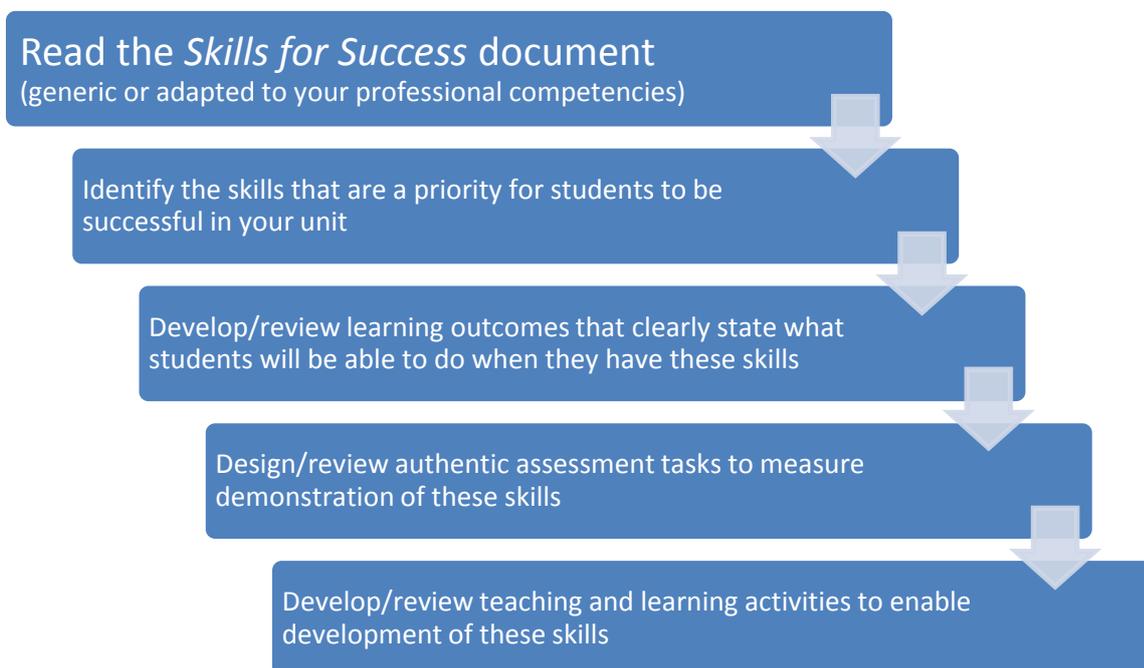   - o Creating and innovating
   - o Working in a digital world

The Core Skills for Work Framework (DEEWR, 2013) recognises that performance in each of these skill areas is context-dependent, influenced by factors such as the complexity of tasks, degree of motivation, culture and values, and self-belief and resilience.

There is no single method 'correct' method of embedding these skills into a unit. Those involved in the teaching process must consider the best means by which these skills can be learned and demonstrated by students. Not all methods will be applicable to all units in all disciplines. However, regardless of the course content, there should be multiple opportunities at both the unit and course level, to provide students with the chance to develop and demonstrate their employability skills.

# How to Embed Employability Skills

There is a strong correlation between the development of academic skills and employability skills. Many of the skills that are included under the broader banner of "employability skills" are generalised skills that are not only needed for successful participation in employment, but also for academic success in a tertiary environment.

Academic tasks that require the complex employment of knowledge, skills and understanding in unpredictable real world contexts provide an excellent vehicle for employability skill development. The following image highlights steps in the process of embedding employability skills in your unit.

Read the *Skills for Success* document
(generic or adapted to your professional competencies)

Identify the skills that are a priority for students to be successful in your unit

Develop/review learning outcomes that clearly state what students will be able to do when they have these skills

Design/review authentic assessment tasks to measure demonstration of these skills

Develop/review teaching and learning activities to enable development of these skills

The key to making a difference to your students' employability, as well as their academic success, is to assess the skills that you want students to focus on and to develop teaching and learning strategies that explicitly target those skills that tend to be lacking in your overall cohort.

# Unit Design to Incorporate Employability Skills

While all employability skills are important, there are likely to be some that are more appropriately developed within the context of your unit than others. To embed these skills in your unit:

1. Check that they are captured in the learning outcomes. You may need to write a new outcome or revise an existing outcome to incorporate the skill.

2. Identify the content areas that would most readily lend themselves to development or use of your targeted skills.

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3. Consider incorporating some aspect of WIL to enhance the real-world relevance of the skills.

4. Develop assessment tasks that will give students opportunities to demonstrate these skills. Consider what will count as evidence that students' have a particular skill.

5. Design teaching and learning activities that will support students to learn and practice these skills. Encourage reflection and self-awareness of skill development.

6. Meet with tutors to ensure everyone is comfortable with how to teach and support development of the skills.

**Example**

An Engineering lecturer is reviewing a unit and, while she is pleased with most aspects of her students' performance, she recognises that many students are passing the unit without demonstrating good communication skills. The lecturer appreciates that to work as a successful member within this industry, students need to be able communicate more effectively than they do. She decides to embed communication skills into the design of her unit.

## Writing an Outcome for an Employability Skill

When writing a learning outcome, the focus needs to be on what students will be able to demonstrate. What will they do (or show, or create, or say)?

An effective learning outcome includes:

- A verb that succinctly captures what students need to do; and
- Some parameters for success

Think carefully about the verb that you use, as it should be something that can be assessed. It needs to be quantifiable and observable, with parameters set for success. For example: "the student will be able to effectively engage with new technology by writing and producing a five minute podcast", is much more specific and therefore more easily measurable than: "the student will understand how to create a podcast". In the second example, you need to give some kind of indication as to how you will know that they "understand". This is important, as you want to be able to measure a student's progress in a unit and provide clear justification for any grade they receive.

**Example**

The Engineering lecturer in the example above has decided that she wants to support her students in developing their communication skills. As there are many aspects to this broad outcome, she thinks more specifically about what aspect of communication she wants them to develop. Given how frequently those in the industry are required to make presentations and speeches, she decides the focus will be on speaking clearly to an audience. Armed with this idea she develops the following outcome.

*At the end of the unit students will demonstrate sound communication skills by giving an oral presentation using appropriate language, body language and tone.*

## Assessing an Employability Skill

At the end of the unit, you need to be able to justify, even just to yourself, the grade you assign a student. This is easier when you have developed sound assessments that allow you to determine how well a student has demonstrated a skill or knowledge. Assessing employability skills does not differ from this. You need to develop assessment points that allow your students the opportunity to best demonstrate their skill development. While a learning outcome states what students should be able to demonstrate, and the assessment task is vehicle through which students will demonstrate the skill.

One of the underlying tenets of ECU assessment is that of authenticity. Often the most useful and engaging assessments are those that require the student to apply skills or knowledge to solve a problem or complete a task that they may come across in the workplace.

### Example

In the example used earlier, the Engineering lecturer has decided that she will redevelop an assessment point to meet the learning outcome she has designed. The lecturer considers the minor assignment, which traditionally has been a written report about a computer program the student has designed. She now redevelops the assessment piece to include an oral presentation of the program that the student has designed in response to a company directive.

She invites an industry contact to attend the formal presentation session and provide feedback to the students. She also restructures the template students use for their ePortfolio task to include recording and embedding the presentation and associated feedback.

## Designing an Activity to Support Development of an Employability Skill

Once you know what skill you want your students to be able to develop, and what evidence will count in assessing that skill, you then need to think about how to create learning activities to support development of the skill. Given the common threads between the skills needed for academic success and those needed to increase employability, it is not difficult to create activities that meet the requirements of both.

Skill development is an active process. If you want to develop and demonstrate your skill in cycling it will not suffice to simply talk about it. So the activities you design to support development of an employability skill need to engage students in learning to be (cyclists) rather than learning about (cycling).

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**Example**

The engineering lecturer in our example appreciates that to work as a successful member within this industry, students need to be able communicate more effectively than they do. She designs a formative assessment activity which engages students in presenting to their peers and providing feedback to each other two weeks prior to the due date for their formal presentations. This gives students an opportunity to clarify characteristics of good oral presentations and to use feedback to improve their presentation skills before being graded.

# Summary

There are a number of skills that employers are looking for in employees. Different students will come into a unit with a different set of skills and while this is to be expected, the role of the lecturer or Unit Coordinator is to best support their skill development by creating learning opportunities.

Please contact CLD for any further assistance. (cld@ecu.edu.au)