



Executive Summary: Towards a Universal Framework for Essential Skills

[A Review of the Skills Builder Framework](#)

Tom Ravenscroft & Laura Baker

Executive Summary of the Final Report for the Essential Skills Taskforce: May 2020

Executive Summary

Essential skills are a key component of employability

The importance of developing a set of essential skills for individuals to thrive in education, employment and entrepreneurship has been long documented, from the CBI's landmark 1989 report¹ through to the Taylor Review in 2017².

These are the skills which 'almost everyone needs to do almost any job. They are the skills that make specific knowledge and technical skills fully productive'.³ (UKCES, 2009)

Too often this is an area where terminology is confused and confusing. From the outset, it is important to differentiate between:

- *Knowledge*: content which can be recalled, understood and explained
- *Character attributes*: the choices individuals make, manifested as attitudes or behaviours
- *Skills*: the ability to successfully enact a repeatable process

Whilst all three are critical to employability, our focus here is on the element of skills, within which we define three broad types of skills:

- *Technical Skills*: those skills which are specific to a particular sector or role, sometimes drawing off a particular body of knowledge. These skills are not easily transferred beyond the sector or role to which they relate.
- *Essential Skills*: those highly transferable skills that everyone needs to do almost any job, which support the application of specialist knowledge and technical skills
- *Basic Skills*: these are literacy and numeracy, and basic digital skills.

The challenge of this report therefore is to identify those skills which can be classed as essential skills.

The challenge of building them

There have been efforts in the education system and around employment to build these skills more effectively. However, these efforts are widely perceived to have fallen short. After a decade of regularly reviewing employers' views of those they recruit, the CBI's 2018 Education & Skills Survey still found that employers had real concerns about their employability.

At the same time, the importance of these skills is growing. Nesta's Future Skills work in 2017 highlighted that the skills that would support a long and prosperous life in the future were those that could not be automated⁴.

This report should be cited as: Ravenscroft, T.M. & Baker, L. (2020) *Towards a Universal Framework for Essential Skills*, London: Essential Skills Taskforce

¹ Nicholson, B. (1989) *Towards a Skills Revolution: Report of the CBI Vocational Education and Training Taskforce*, CBI

² Taylor, M. (2017) *Good Work: The Taylor Review of Modern Working Practices*

³ UKCES (2009) *The Employability Challenge: Full Report*, UKCES

⁴ Bakhshi, H., Downing, J.M., Osborne, M.A. & Schneider, P. (2017) *The Future of Skills: Employment in 2030*, London: Pearson and Nesta

No single approach has ever reached a tipping point in adoption

Within our focus on essential skills, there are myriad proposed ‘frameworks’. The UKCES in 2009 reviewed dozens of such sets. Although the language varies, as we will see, there is remarkable consistency when it comes to the broad themes of what is meant by essential skills: they broadly cover interpersonal, communication, self-management, and creative problem-solving skills.

The challenge is that none of these proposed approaches have ever achieved the three critical attributes to become universally used as a framework for essential skills. Such a framework would need to have:

- *Clarity*: It must be simple enough to be useful in a range of different contexts and to be used by individuals who are not experts. It must not be easily misunderstood or misinterpreted.
- *Measurability*: It should be possible to use the Framework to reliably understand the existing skillset of individuals, and to measure growth.
- *Authority*: The Framework should be backed by evidence and by organisations who give it credibility.

Finally, to become a common approach, such a Framework would need to have sufficient widespread usage in a wide variety of settings so as to become a common language.

A universal framework would bring meaningful benefits:

- *Ensuring alignment between education and employers* in terms of the employability skills that employers actually need, and what schools understand and are equipped to build.
- *Supporting the process of recruitment* through increased transparency of skills. This would help employers to assess more accurately the competences of new recruits, who would have clarity on what they are being assessed.
- *Facilitating upskilling and reskilling within the workplace* by increasing the clarity of what progression looks like in these foundational skills.
- *Creating a common vocabulary* for schools, colleges, universities, employers and employees to use when discussing skills with one another.

Many existing approaches blend skills, characteristics and knowledge together. Some are little more than sets of broad categories which cannot support measurability. Others lack the specificity to be useful. Most are designed with a very narrow purpose. None have achieved the universality needed to really make a breakthrough in this space.

The Skills Builder Framework

There is no perfect framework when it comes to these essential skills. The question must instead be whether we can agree on a framework which passes the three tests of clarity, measurability, and authority.

There are also inevitable trade-offs between the different characteristics – one might have to trade-off a degree of sophistication and nuance in order to achieve clarity to the normal user; measurability might mean that some broader but more subjective attributes cannot be included.

Over the last four years the Skills Builder Framework has been developed as such a framework, designed to make sense of how essential skills are progressed. It takes each of eight essential

skills, and breaks them down into sequential steps from expectations of children to a high level of mastery.

It was initially designed for use in the classroom or youth settings, as a tool to break down essential skills into teachable, measurable steps that could be used with children and young people.

During development it benefited from the input and engagement of more than sixty individuals and organisations, and was piloted in twenty settings.

The Framework is now being used in more than 700 organisations who are part of the Skills Builder Partnership: including 520 schools and colleges, 130 employers, and 50 other skills-building organisations. It has been adopted by leading national programmes including the government-backed Careers & Enterprise Company, the National Citizen Service, and endorsed by the CBI. This year, more than 250,000 children and young people will build their essential skills using the Skills Builder approach.

The Skills Builder Framework is fulfilling the three criteria for success in its context, which is to support the development of essential skills for children and young people. To be used more broadly as a framework for employability, it must also be usable beyond that, into apprenticeships, higher education and employment. This report captures the process of testing the Framework for that broader purpose.

Evaluating the Framework

For the Skills Builder Framework to become a universal tool, it must be sufficiently comprehensive to be used to support all the different stages of employability. One line of investigation is therefore to ensure that the Skills Builder captures those essential skills which can be found in four areas:

- Generic and specific employability frameworks
- Job advertisements
- Apprenticeship standards
- Graduate attributes outlined by higher education institutions

These four different lenses help to illuminate the extent to which the Skills Builder Framework is comprehensive in capturing the essential skills, highlighting any gaps.

The second perspective for evaluation is whether the contents of the Skills Builder Framework are relevant – that is, are any elements unnecessary?

Lens 1: Employability Frameworks (Chapter 3)

The goal of this part of the research was to understand the extent to which the Skills Builder Framework captures the skills and sub-skills laid out in some of the most widely cited employability frameworks:

- The six generic essential skills frameworks that were included in this exercise were: O*Net, UKCES, Personal Learning & Thinking Skills (PLTS), the CBI employability framework, Deloitte's Future Skills, and the EntreComp Framework.
- We also reviewed a sample of four frameworks used by individual organisations. These were: Chartered Global Management Accountant (CGMA) framework, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Competency Framework, Civil Service Competency Framework, and the KPMG Behavioural Capabilities.

In terms of *comprehensiveness*, we found that the Skills Builder Framework covered most of the skills called for. Some gaps were highlighted for further exploration, particularly networking, strategic thinking and client care. These were reviewed in Part 3.

In terms of *relevance*, we found that there was strong alignment between the contents of the Skills Builder Framework and what was called for in other frameworks. While not every step was called for in every framework, at least 3 frameworks called for each step, and the average match was 83%.

Overall therefore, the Skills Builder Framework is near comprehensive vis-à-vis other employability frameworks, and there is evidence for the relevance of both the eight skills and the steps that make them up. This analysis also demonstrated that the Skills Builder Framework has a higher level of detail and nuance than the other frameworks reviewed which indicates that it could be valuable beyond those frameworks previously created.

Lens 2: Essential Skills and Job Advertisements (Chapter 4)

One of the key parts of employability is being able to obtain employment. While existing employability frameworks are useful as a generalist overview, this part of the research seeks to better understand what employers prioritise when they come to actually recruit.

There is already some helpful recent work in this field – for example, from Nesta and the City of London. This gives some context as to how employers rank the different essential skills when making employment choices.

In this chapter we explored the aggregation of job advertisement data from Burning Glass Technologies to identify how those skills featured in those advertisements by employers compare to those set out in the Skills Builder Framework. We looked at the aggregated results of 4.2 million job adverts from all sectors of the UK in the previous 12 months.

We found that the essential skills laid out in the Skills Builder Framework are consistently called for by employers across all educational and experience levels. This is a helpful indication that what employers are actually recruiting for is in line with the employability frameworks previously reviewed.

However, one limitation with deeper analysis is that it is unclear whether the absence of a skill being mentioned is because it is implicitly assumed to be held. There is also an absence of granular data that allows a deeper understanding of what the expectation of ‘good’ looks like with regard to these skills.

Therefore, while this piece further corroborates the essential skills which employers expect, direct engagement with employers will be important to better understand the expectations that employers attach to these broad skills when recruiting.

Lens 3: Essential skills and apprenticeships (Chapter 5)

One area which does have greater promise for building a more nuanced understanding of essential skills are the apprenticeship standards. Apprenticeships are a growing development route – both for young people entering the workplace for the first time, but also for those who are upskilling or reskilling.

Each apprenticeship is underpinned by a standard, developed by employers, which outlines the skills, knowledge and behaviours that individuals are expected to be able to demonstrate to

successfully pass the apprenticeship. These are therefore a potentially helpful source of insight as to employer expectations around essential skills.

Currently, these standards are not in a format that lends itself to easy aggregation and analysis, so the approach was to take ten of the most widely used apprenticeship standards, and to analyse any references to the essential skills. In doing so, we can see the extent to which the Skills Builder Framework is comprehensive and relevant in this area.

We found that in this context the Skills Builder Framework continues to be near *comprehensive*, with ten sub-skill mentions that are only partly addressed by the Skills Builder Framework. Most of these are consistent with those already highlighted by the combination of employability frameworks reviewed in Chapter 3 and the job advertisement data in Chapter 4.

There is greater variety in the individual apprenticeship standards in the extent to which all of the sub-skills outlined in the Skills Builder Framework are *relevant*. We should also expect that the level of mastery required in each essential skill will vary according to job role and responsibilities, and the level of the role.

There are some indications that on average higher level apprenticeship qualifications require higher steps on the Skills Builder Framework, and that the relative importance of essential skills varies by role in an intuitive way. Exploring these areas in greater depth would require a much more comprehensive dataset though.

Finally, this work has highlighted that a universal framework for essential skills is likely to be valuable in the context of apprenticeship standards – both to make more explicit those expected skills which are often only implicit, and to add a helpful level of detail to what can otherwise be very broad skill types.

Lens 4: Higher Education and Graduate Attributes (Chapter 6)

The final lens that we wanted to bring to the question of whether the Skills Builder Framework could act as a universal framework was that of higher education. Particularly, to understand the extent to which the Skills Builder Framework could be used in the context of universities and higher education.

Universities and higher education institutions increasingly set out the broader development goals for their students through statements of outcomes known as graduate attributes. We will review a sample of these graduate attributes created or used by universities both in their careers departments to support employability, and those that link to success in higher education.

To achieve this we initially included three reviews of graduate attributes. This included all attributes listed in reviews from the Higher Education Academy (HEA), the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education (QAA).

We then reviewed eight individual frameworks as examples used by individual higher education institutions. These were: Aberdeen University, Bath Spa University, Cambridge University, Oxford Brookes University, Glasgow University, University of the Arts London, University of West Scotland and the University of York.

In line with our approach in Chapters 3 and 5, we compared from two different perspectives:

- *Is the Skills Builder Framework comprehensive?* That is, does it include all of the skills and sub-skills which were referenced in the graduate attributes?

- *Is the Skills Builder Framework all relevant?* That is, to what extent are the skills and sub-skills referenced in the Skills Builder Framework also reflected in those other graduate attributes? As higher education is focused at higher levels of qualifications, we might not expect explicit mention of earlier steps.

We found that the Skills Builder Framework is *comprehensive* in including those skills and sub-skills identified in the comparator graduate attribute frameworks. Some gaps in the Skills Builder Framework were identified, most notably skills associated with management of self and task (professionalism, time management, efficiency) as well as some which are intuitively aligned with higher education, like being able to challenge and defend different perspectives.

In terms of *relevance*, the majority of skills and sub-skills either fully or partially align: with 71% (42/59) of Skills Builder sub-skills identified in over half of the University graduate attribute frameworks. Only three (5%) were not explicitly stated.

Generally, the Skills Builder Framework is more detailed than those skill descriptors in the graduate attribute frameworks. This is particularly evident across the 'Creativity' and 'Listening' skillsets which demonstrate a weaker alignment.

Synthesis and key insights

Overall, this first stage of work gave greater confidence that the Skills Builder Framework has the potential to be extended into use into employment and to act as a universal framework.

One of the critical changes that was needed was to broaden the language to make it relevant beyond the educational context and to ensure it resonates in other settings.

In terms of relevance, we found that although creativity and leadership were less well represented through the different lenses that we applied they were still present. There were no sub-skills without representation in the analysis. As such we will not be looking to remove any parts of the current Skills Builder Framework.

Beyond the skills themselves, we also found that there were calls for earlier steps in employment than we had originally hypothesised. This was particularly highlighted in the apprenticeship standards. As such, the universal framework should be for the full range of skill steps.

In terms of comprehensiveness, the terms that were missing from each area were aggregated. In light of the gaps or omissions that have been highlighted, there were four possible approaches to resolve these: deciding they were not material; adding a new skill alongside the current eight in the Skills Builder Framework; adding additional skill steps; or changing or expanding some of the steps to fill these gaps.

For some of the omissions, it was felt that broadening the language and examples that were given in the Framework would fill the gaps.

The ideas of adding an additional skill or additional skill steps were discussed but dismissed.

Instead, the decision was made to adapt the existing Framework through changing some of the wording in the steps and replacing a couple of them so that all the gaps were explicitly filled. At the end of this process, we have an expanded version of the Skills Builder Framework with the potential to be used universally.

Testing with employers

Having created an updated version of the Skills Builder Framework, the second phase of the research was to further test and evaluate this Framework with employers. This was vital to ensure that the Framework was not only intellectually robust, but also practically useful.

A series of five roundtables were convened across the country, including more than thirty individuals. These individuals were deliberately chosen to represent a wide range of sectors and perspectives on the Framework and its potential usefulness. Attendees included HR professionals, line managers, recruitment specialists, apprenticeship managers and employability trainers.

Each roundtable was structured around several key questions:

- What works well out of the Framework as presented?
- Is the Framework comprehensive and relevant?
- Is the language in the Framework appropriate and accessible?
- What is the pattern of expectation around the level of competence in essential skills according to role or seniority?
- How do you currently assess and develop essential skills?
- How could the Skills Builder Framework be useful to you?

Overall, we found that participants regarded the proposed Framework as able to provide clear guidance on how to build the eight essential skills step by step. The proposed Framework was celebrated as a catalyst to 'level the playing field' for candidates and employees from disadvantaged backgrounds throughout all phases of employment.

Generally, the language used in the Framework aligned with employers' expectations for apprentice, graduate and entry-level roles. Variances in terminology and the linear progression of some skills were discussed in depth and several recommendations were made. For senior leadership and management roles the latter steps for each skill were deemed appropriate, with some potential changes to language.

Fifteen potential use cases were identified, spanning recruitment, skill assessment and professional learning and development. These expanded upon the initial ideas of the authors and reflected a real enthusiasm from participants to put the Framework into action.

Suggestions were also made about additional materials that could help to implement the Framework. These tools and resources included a detailed handbook for employers to understand how to build the skills themselves, self-assessment and reflective tools, and resources to support implementing the Framework to support the recruitment process.

Final adaptations: A universal framework

This second phase presented fifteen recommendations for further changes. Most relate to language changes, although there are some minor additions which have also be made.

One significant change was the decision to shift from a focus on pure ability captured by the 'I can' statements to instead focusing on 'I do' statements. This reflected the shift of focus of the Universal Framework from supporting and structuring learning and progression in the skills, to ensuring that they those skills are practically used and applied in employment and wider life.

With these changes, it is possible to present a final Universal version of the Skills Builder Framework. It is designed and tested to work beyond compulsory education, whilst maintaining the critical links back into how the Framework is already being applied in its current form.

Where next

Over the course of this research project we learnt a great deal and have been able to create a final Universal Framework that already achieves two of the three objectives that we set out:

- *Clarity*: The Framework must be easily understood and usable in different settings
- *Measurability*: The Framework must allow for easy understanding of the current skills of individuals and scope for growth

The Universal Framework certainly has the potential to achieve the third objective too: that of ensuring that it has *Authority*, not least because of the engagement and backing of the organisations in the Essential Skills Task Force: the CIPD; the CBI; the Gatsby Foundation; Business in the Community; the Careers & Enterprise Company; the EY Foundation; and the Skills Builder Partnership.

To fully achieve that potential though will require a lot more work to build up a growing group of employers and higher education providers, to build the framework into standards and policy definitions, and to, over time, build individual awareness of their own skills through the lens the framework offers.

There is much to be done, but this Universal Framework gives us the foundation we need to do it – and to ensure everyone builds the essential skills to thrive.

Universal Skills Builder Framework

Version: Final, May 2020

Skill: Listening

The receiving, retaining and processing of information or ideas

Step	Statement
0	I listen to others without interrupting
1	I listen to others and can remember short instructions
2	I listen to others and can ask questions if I don't understand
3	I listen to others and can tell someone else what it was about
4	I listen to others and can tell why they are communicating with me
5	I listen to others and record important information as I do
6	I show I am listening by how I use eye contact and body language
7	I show I am listening by using open questions to deepen my understanding
8	I show I am listening by summarising or rephrasing what I have heard
9	I am aware of how a speaker is influencing me through their tone
10	I am aware of how a speaker is influencing me through their language
11	I listen critically and compare different perspectives
12	I listen critically and think about where differences in perspectives come from
13	I listen critically and identify potential bias in different perspectives
14	I listen critically and use questioning to evaluate different perspectives
15	I listen critically and look beyond the way speakers speak or act to objectively evaluate different perspectives

Skill: Speaking

The oral transmission of information or ideas

Step	Statement
0	I speak clearly to someone I know
1	I speak clearly to small groups of people I know
2	I speak clearly to individuals and small groups I do not know
3	I speak effectively by making points in a logical order
4	I speak effectively by thinking about what my listeners already know
5	I speak effectively by using appropriate language
6	I speak effectively by using appropriate tone, expression and gesture
7	I speak engagingly by using facts and examples to support my points
8	I speak engagingly by using visual aids to support my points
9	I speak engagingly by using tone, expression and gesture to engage listeners
10	I speak adaptively by changing my language, tone and expression depending on the response of listeners
11	I speak adaptively by planning for different possible responses of listeners
12	I speak adaptively by changing my content depending on the response of listeners
13	I speak influentially by changing the structure of my points to best persuade the listeners
14	I speak influentially by changing the examples and facts I use to best persuade the listeners
15	I speak influentially by articulating a compelling vision that persuades the listeners

Skill: Problem solving

The ability to find a solution to a situation or challenge

Step	Statement
0	I complete tasks by following instructions
1	I complete tasks by finding someone to help if I need them
2	I complete tasks by explaining problems to someone for advice if I need
3	I complete tasks by finding information I need myself
4	I explore problems by creating different possible solutions
5	I explore problems by thinking about the pros and cons of possible solutions
6	I explore complex problems by identifying when there are no simple technical solutions
7	I explore complex problems by building my understanding through research
8	I explore complex problems by analysing the causes and effects
9	I create solutions for complex problems by generating a range of options
10	I create solutions for complex problems by evaluating the positive and negative effects of a range of options
11	I analyse complex problems by using logical reasoning
12	I analyse complex problems by creating and testing hypotheses
13	I implement strategic plans to solve complex problems
14	I implement strategic plans to solve complex problems and assess their success
15	I implement strategic plans to solve complex problems and draw out learning to refine those plans over time

Skill: Creativity

The use of imagination and the generation of new ideas

Step	Statement
0	I imagine different situations
1	I imagine different situations and can say what I imagine
2	I imagine different situations and can bring them to life in different ways
3	I generate ideas when I've been given a clear brief
4	I generate ideas to improve something
5	I generate ideas by combining different concepts
6	I use creativity in the context of work
7	I use creativity in the context of my wider life
8	I develop ideas by using mind mapping
9	I develop ideas by asking myself questions
10	I develop ideas by considering different perspectives
11	I innovate effectively when working in a group
12	I innovate effectively by seeking out varied experiences and stimuli
13	I support others to innovate by sharing a range of tools
14	I support others to innovate by evaluating the right creative tools for different situations
15	I support others to innovate by coaching them to be more creative

Skill: Staying Positive

The ability to use tactics and strategies to overcome setbacks and achieve goals

Step	Statement
0	I can tell when I feel positive or negative
1	I can tell when others feel positive or negative
2	I keep trying when something goes wrong
3	I keep trying and stay calm when something goes wrong
4	I keep trying when something goes wrong, and think about what happened
5	I keep trying when something goes wrong and help cheer others up
6	I keep trying when something goes wrong and encourage others to keep trying too
7	I look for opportunities in difficult situations
8	I look for opportunities in difficult situations, and share these with others
9	I look for opportunities in difficult situations, and adapt plans to use these opportunities
10	I look for opportunities in difficult situations, and create new plans to use these opportunities
11	I identify risks and gains in opportunities
12	I identify risks and gains in opportunities, and make plans to manage them
13	I support others to stay positive, by managing my own responses
14	I support others to stay positive, by helping others to see opportunities
15	I support others to stay positive, by helping others to see opportunities and creating plans to achieve them

Skill: Aiming High

The ability to set clear, tangible goals and devise a robust route to achieving them

Step	Statement
0	I know when I am finding something too difficult
1	I know what doing well looks like for me
2	I work with care and attention to detail
3	I work with pride when I am being successful
4	I work with a positive approach to new challenges
5	I set goals for myself
6	I set goals informed by an understanding of what is needed
7	I set goals, ordering and prioritise tasks to achieve them
8	I set goals and secure the right resources to achieve them
9	I set goals and plan to involve others in the best way
10	I create plans that are informed by my skill set and that of others
11	I create plans that include clear targets to make progress tangible
12	I create plans that are informed by external views, including constructive criticism
13	I develop long-term strategies taking into account strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats
14	I develop long-term strategies that use regular milestones to keep everything on track
15	I develop long-term strategies that include feedback loops to support flexibility and adaptability

Skill: Leadership

Supporting, encouraging and developing others to achieve a shared goal

Step	Statement
0	I know how I am feeling about something
1	I know how to explain my feelings about something to my team
2	I know how to recognise others' feelings about something
3	I manage dividing up tasks between others in a fair way
4	I manage time and share resources to support completing tasks
5	I manage group discussions to reach shared decisions
6	I manage disagreements to reach shared solutions
7	I recognise my own strengths and weaknesses as a leader
8	I recognise the strengths and weaknesses of others in my team
9	I recognise the strengths and weaknesses of others in my team, and use this to allocate roles accordingly
10	I support others through mentorship
11	I support others through coaching
12	I support others through motivating them
13	I reflect on my own leadership style and its effect on others
14	I reflect on my own leadership style, and build on my strengths and mitigate my weaknesses
15	I reflect on my own leadership style, and adapt my approach according to the situation

Skill: Teamwork

Working cooperatively with others towards achieving a shared goal

Step	Statement
0	I work with others in a positive way
1	I work well with others by behaving appropriately
2	I work well with others by being on time and reliable
3	I work well with others by taking responsibility for completing my tasks
4	I work well with others by supporting them if I can do so
5	I work well with others by understanding and respecting diversity of others' cultures, beliefs and backgrounds
6	I contribute to group decision making
7	I contribute to group decision making, whilst recognising the value of others' ideas
8	I contribute to group decision making, encouraging others to contribute
9	I improve the team by not creating unhelpful conflicts
10	I improve the team by resolving unhelpful conflicts
11	I improve the team by building relationships beyond my immediate team
12	I influence the team by reflecting on progress and suggesting improvements
13	I influence the team by evaluating successes and failures and sharing lessons
14	I support the team by evaluating others' strengths and weaknesses, and supporting them accordingly
15	I support the team by bringing in external expertise and relationships