Assessing and reporting employability skills of **senior secondary students**

Gabrielle Matters describes a study, undertaken with David Curtis, that has developed a new picture of how senior secondary students' achievement of employability skills across Australia might be assessed and reported.

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It is now widely recognised that the skills and knowledge that students need for life and work beyond school are much more than proficiency in the traditional '3Rs.' As Australia's economy continues to evolve in response to technological developments and the need to compete in a global market, the nation needs a highly skilled and flexible workforce. Apart from the basic skills of reading, writing and numeracy; a broader range of skills and knowledge is now essential for students to make an effective transition from school to work. This includes knowledge in scientific literacy, ICT literacy, civics and citizenship and *employability skills* (including planning and organising; teamwork; initiative and enterprise; self-management; and learning).

But while employers and educators alike acknowledge the importance of employability skills, their formal recognition has been hindered to date by the lack of appropriate methods for assessing and reporting on skills of this kind.

Six years ago, the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry (ACCI) and the Business Council of Australia (BCA) report, *Employability Skills for*

the Future drew attention to the need for young people to develop a range of general skills that are important in the workplace. That 2002 report identified an Employability Skills Framework consisting of eight key skills:

- communication that contributes to productive and harmonious relations between employees and customers
- teamwork that contributes to productive working relationships and outcomes
- problem solving that contributes to productive outcomes
- initiative and enterprise that contribute to innovative outcomes
- planning and organising that contribute to long-term and short-term strategic planning
- self-management that contributes to employee satisfaction and growth
- learning that contributes to ongoing improvement and expansion in employee and company operations and outcomes; and
- technology that contributes to effective execution of tasks.

Each of the key skills was further defined by a number of facets which illustrate specific applications of each skill. Facets are elements of each

skill that employers have identified as important, with the specific mix and priority of facets being job-dependent. One of the facets of communication, for example, is 'reading independently'.

ACER chief executive Geoff Masters took the discussion further in his 2006 report *Australian Certificate of Education: Exploring a way forward*. He recommended that priority be given to developing and recognising the eight employability skills identified by ACCI and BCA. He also called for further investigation into ways of assessing employability skills in the final years of school.

Those recommendations prompted the former Commonwealth Department of Education, Science and Training (DEST) to commission ACER to investigate the most effective ways of assessing and reporting on the employability skills of senior secondary students.

Objectives and activities

Our study was undertaken between July 2007 and January 2008. During that time there was a change of government and the new Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) became responsible for the initiative. The current Minister for Education, Julia Gillard, released *A Study into the Assessment and Reporting of Employability Skills of Senior Secondary Students*, in mid-October 2008.

The study's objectives were:

- to identify and consider appropriate methods for the assessment and reporting, on a nationally comparable basis, of Year 12 students' achievements in relation to eight specified employability skills;

- to ensure that the proposed methods for assessment and reporting were valid, reliable, objective, feasible, usable and nationally comparable; and

- to ensure that the proposed methods of assessment and

reporting recognise employability skills already embedded in curriculum and pedagogy.

Our main task in this project was to evaluate options for assessing and reporting each of the eight employability skills against five criteria, and to recommend a preferred approach.

As an adjunct to this project, the University of Western Sydney conducted a survey of employer satisfaction with the eight skills and how employers currently assess them.

The study was overseen by an advisory group, comprising employers and representatives of parent organisations, school systems including teachers and leaders, and Australia's three peak business organisations, ACCI, BCA, and the Australian Industry Group.

Identifying and evaluating possible approaches

The study began with an analysis of existing assessment models in secondary schools, vocational education and training, and higher education institutions in Australia and overseas and identified seven approaches for more detailed evaluation:

- common assessment tasks;
- embedded development and assessment;
- portfolio construction;
- self-assessment;
- standardised assessment/testing;
- teacher-generated task (including performance assessment); and
- teacher-group assessment (judgments by groups of teachers from different subjects).

Other approaches were canvassed but were not taken further because they were considered unfeasible in a school context.

Each of these seven approaches was then evaluated in terms of its validity, reliability, objectivity, feasibility, and usability. The various approaches had

particular strengths and weaknesses. None of the methods satisfied all the criteria, pointing to a need for compromise with a combination of approaches.

Three assessment methods – standardised testing, common assessment tasks and teacher-group judgment – rated well on at least several of the evaluative criteria and appear to provide a basis for valid, reliable and fair reporting of achievement. As such they were selected for more detailed examination.

A further criterion of 'backwash effect' was also considered in reviewing the possibilities. This is the influence, positive or negative, of the chosen assessment method on curriculum and teaching/learning. Of the three suggested approaches, one – common assessment tasks – emerged as the preferred approach. This method meets the criteria at least as well as any other while at the same time being the most likely to have positive 'backwash effects' on teaching and learning because it is capable of providing immediate feedback and therefore is most likely to lead to gains in students' understanding and application of employability skills. Because of the need to maintain test security, standardised tests provide fewer opportunities for feedback. And there would be limited opportunity for feedback to students in the case of teacher-group judgment, which occurs after a sustained period of observation.

Our study proposed three described levels of performance – Advanced, Creditable and Basic – for reporting each employability skill, with the possibility of an 'ungraded' result where evidence is lacking. We also proposed two ways of reporting: a simple listing of results and a visual display that would highlight skills.

Conclusions

This study showed that assessing and reporting on employability skills in a way that conforms to the hallmarks of

educational measurement, such as validity and reliability, is a complex task that would place a high – perhaps unrealistic – demand on schools. Nevertheless, the development of employability skills is too important in assisting students to make the transition from compulsory schooling to the workforce for an effort not to be made. Our findings suggest that compromise may be required. No single approach will provide an adequate assessment of all eight employability skills. Indeed, different facets of each employability skill may require different approaches.

Further information

Further information is available in the report *A Study into the Assessment and Reporting of Employability Skills of Senior Secondary Students*, by Gabrielle Matters and David Curtis. The report is available from the Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations website at www.deewr.gov.au/employabilityskills ◼

A new picture of **employability skills**

A new picture of how senior secondary students' employability skills might be assessed and reported emerged from this study. The picture has six components:

1. Three suggested assessment approaches, standardised testing, common assessment tasks and teacher-group judgment, all of which are open to implementation;

2. One preferred approach, common assessment tasks, selected on the basis of its perceived positive effects on curriculum and teaching/learning;

3. A technique for assessment that involves a two-stage process for arriving at a grade for reporting;

4. Performance levels and facet standards for use in the assessment process;

5. A mechanism for reporting individual student results; and

6. A format for representing results on a student report.