



Measuring Employability Skills

A rapid review to inform development of tools for project evaluation

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Summary

Amid concern about the numbers of 'NEET' (young people not in education, employment or training), there are numerous initiatives focusing on increasing employability among young people. 'Employability skills' focus on the personal, social and transferable skills seen as relevant to all jobs, as opposed to job-specific technical skills or qualifications. The acquisition of employability skills may be seen as a necessary first step in path towards long-term employment.

This report summarises a brief review of relevant literature undertaken to assess the potential for developing a new tool to support the evaluation of community and voluntary sector projects aiming to enhance young people's employability skills.

Much of the existing guidance reinforced a perception that outcomes need to be project-specific, rather than general. Yet, our research revealed that while exact definitions varied, there was a common group of employability skills applicable to a range of jobs, as highlighted below.

Personal	Interpersonal	Self-management	Initiative & delivery
Confidence	Social/ interpersonal skills	Self-control	Planning
Self-esteem	Communication skills	Reliability	Problem-solving
Motivation	Teamwork	Positive attitude	Prioritising
Self-efficacy	Assertiveness	Presentation	

The measurement of these employability skills to date has been rather inconsistent, however. Our detailed searches revealed that many existing programme evaluations failed to include any assessment of employability skills. Of those that did, existing survey measures and study designs were not always able to pick up changes in young people's employability skills directly attributable to programmes. There was an overreliance on 'before and after' (with no comparison group) surveys, retrospective reports and/or the use of unvalidated measures created for specific programmes.

While lack of funding may preclude the use of more robust study designs to isolate programme impacts on employability skills, at the very least, further work is needed to determine a coherent (and consistent) set of employability skills measures to be used in future evaluations. It is a poor use of limited time and resources for individual programmes to continually develop new measures that may not be accurately measuring the constructs for which they are intended. Rather, it seems a sensible next step is to agree more widely on a framework of employability skills, operationally define each component of the framework and begin to collate existing assessment tools to be piloted in forthcoming evaluations. Any survey data should be supplemented by more in-depth qualitative evaluation with young people (and other relevant stakeholders).

1. Introduction

This report summarises a brief review of relevant literature undertaken to assess the potential for developing a new tool to support the evaluation of projects aiming to enhance young people's 'employability skills': those personal, social and transferable skills seen as relevant to all jobs, as opposed to specific technical skills or qualifications. Firstly, we consider the importance of employability skills and rationale for their measurement. Next, we clarify key terms and definitions, highlight challenges in terms of assessment and evaluation, and review existing guidance and for providers. The final section of the report provides a synthesis of seven recent evaluations that included assessment of young people's employability skills. This synthesis provides live examples of some of the challenges identified in the literature review. The report concludes with a summary of the overall state of play on measuring employability skills.

1.1 Employability skills provision

Amid concern about the numbers of 'NEET' (young people not in education, employment or training)¹, there are numerous initiatives – including large-scale government programmes and small voluntary sector projects – focusing on increasing employability among young people, as well as adults. The employability skills agenda is very much intertwined with the NEET agenda.

The Department for Education (DfE), Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (BIS) work together on employability-related issues. BIS has a key role in raising skills levels and reducing the proportion of 18- to 24-year-olds who are NEET, while DWP leads on support to help unemployed 18- to 24-year-olds get back into work. DfE-funded programmes focus on young people 19 years of age and younger, and mainly aim to keep young people engaged in education and on a pathway to secure employment. In this vein, the DfE has recently piloted two initiatives, 'Activity Agreements' and 'Entry to Learning', aiming to re-engage young people who are NEET (DfE 2010). Both pilots incorporated work-related learning, basic skills development and a range of personal development activities, aimed at increasing confidence and motivation, and dealing with issues such as anger management, budgeting and literacy/numeracy.

The European Social Fund (ESF) also supports local projects for young people who are NEET. For example, a recent programme for 16- to 19-year-olds, co-financed by Central Bedfordshire Council, provided individually tailored support plans; work experience placements; help with literacy and numeracy; IT training and guidance sessions from a personal advisor covering motivation and confidence². There are also myriad voluntary and private sector providers who run programmes for young people who are, or are at risk of becoming, NEET.

¹ <http://www.education.gov.uk/16to19/participation/neet>

² <http://www.esf-works.com/projects/short-reviews/projects/402067>

1.2 Hard versus soft outcomes

Programme evaluations, contracts, and provider performance criteria tend to focus on clear-cut 'hard outcomes', presenting quantifiable data on entry into employment, achievement of qualifications, numbers enrolling on and completing courses or coming off benefits. For example, the DfE pilots mentioned above measured the numbers of young people reaching 'positive destinations' in education, training or employment. However, their evaluation also found that for many young people there were a range of 'softer outcomes' which 'demonstrated a degree of progress, albeit not a formal positive destination' concerning social or personal development (DfE 2010). While easy to measure, demonstrating achievement of hard outcomes often requires long-term monitoring and assessment.

Soft outcomes concern changes in skills, behaviour or attitudes for which there are not such obvious and clear-cut measures, but which may represent crucial steps towards being able to obtain and retain work, to further a career, and to succeed in other areas of life. When achieving paid work is the longer-term goal, measures of these soft outcomes using quantitative and/or qualitative indicators are vital to gauging the progress made by project participants and, indeed, may be necessary precursors to successful employment outcomes in the long-term.

1.3 Terminology of employability

The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) provides a useful overarching definition of employability skills as 'the skills almost everyone needs to do almost any job' (UKCES 2009). The term is not always used: some refer to 'soft outcomes' (Lloyd and O'Sullivan 2004), 'practical skills' (Dewson, Eccles et al. 2000), 'life skills', and 'soft skills' or 'character capabilities' (Margo, Grant et al. 2010) to refer to very similar sets of skills or attributes.

In later sections, we consider the skills included in various definitions. In brief, employability, with its focus on work-readiness, is favoured by industry. Other terms, such as 'life skills', may reflect a wider focus on areas such as health, housing and relationships. Use of the prefix 'soft' emphasises the contrast with traditional 'hard' data on qualifications and jobs. The term 'distance travelled' is used alongside any or all of these to refer to the progress individuals make through the course of a programme in relation to desired outcomes.

1.4 The importance of soft outcomes

As noted above, soft skills can be seen as stepping stones to securing paid employment. A recent Confederation of British Industry (CBI) survey found that employers do not anticipate everyone arriving 'job ready' but do expect young people to start literate, numerate and with good employability skills. These employability skills - including problem solving, team working and time management skills - are often considered by employers to be as important as formal qualifications. The 2010 CBI survey revealed that over two-thirds of employers reported dissatisfaction with the business and customer awareness

of school/college leavers and over half were unhappy with their time management (CBI 2010), suggesting that many young people do not possess key employability skills. Similarly, a DWP review found that even among New Deal³ participants who *did* have qualifications, many lacked basic skills and confidence (Hasluck and Green 2007).

These findings reinforce messages from reports published over the last 20 years by DWP, CBI, and Demos, an independent think tank. Employability skills are seen as important at all levels of an increasingly complex labour market, with its more dominant service sector, and stress on employee flexibility and application of learning in new contexts (CBI 1989; Newton, Hurstfield et al. 2005; Margo, Grant et al. 2010).

As the UKCES argues, although employability skills are not a substitute for specific knowledge and technical skills:

"They make the difference between being good at a subject and being good at doing a job."

(UKCES 2009)

In line with this distinction, an earlier review of initiatives supported by the ESF considered employers' perspectives on employability skills alongside those of learners and funders (ECOTEC 1998). Their report argued that recording of soft or transferable skills could better inform employers about the abilities of potential staff, enable learners to track their own progress, and demonstrate to funders the value of projects geared to increasing employability.

Similarly, research focusing on the views of training providers, funders and qualifications awarding bodies carried out by Deloitte for the UKCES noted that assessment of employability skills could be seen as a burden if done 'for its own sake', but welcomed if measurement could 'add value' by enhancing employers', trainers' and learners' understanding of their abilities. In particular, they identified potential for encouraging lower level achievers to take these areas seriously and gain confidence through acquiring recognised skills (Deloitte 2010).

1.5 Government and funders' requirements

Under the previous Labour administration, there were moves to encourage providers to evidence soft outcomes and 'distance travelled' for their project participants. Much of the impetus for this work came from the requirements of ESF programmes, such as the EMPLOYMENT initiative⁴. However, it was also

³ The New Deal (Flexible New Deal from October 2009) was introduced by the Labour government in 1998 as a programme of active labour market policies, providing training, subsidised employment and voluntary work to the unemployed. The New Deal for Young People targeted those aged 18-24 out of work for 6 months or more.

⁴ ESF funds are distributed through 'Co-financing Organisations' (CFOs): public bodies (eg the DWP) which bring together ESF and domestic funding for employment and skills so that ESF complements national programmes. Providers must monitor and evaluate their programmes in accordance with current guidance. See for example: http://readingroom.lsc.gov.uk/lsc/SouthWest/ESF_Evaluation_guidance.pdf

seen by the government as more broadly applicable to demonstrating achievement and supporting learner progression in relation to non-accredited qualifications (Butcher and Marsden 2004). In 2003, the then Learning and Skills Council (LSC) indicated their intention to incorporate RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement in Non-accredited Learning), which involved assessments before, during and at the end of programmes, into the Common Inspection Framework for further education, work-based learning and adult and community learning provision – and also to explore its extension to school and college performance tables (LSC 2003).

In line with the LSC's drive to recognise soft outcomes, the relevant inspectorates across the UK⁵ do now consider providers' performance in developing students' employability skills, including those concerning behaviour and attitudes (Deloitte 2010). Since September 2009, the Ofsted common inspection framework has been aligned with Every Child Matters⁶ outcomes, and for FE and skills providers the outcome 'improvement in economic and social wellbeing' is focused on employability, including soft skills such as communication, commitment, teamwork and problem-solving (Ofsted 2011).

In spite of these requirements, hard outcomes still dominate reporting frameworks. For example, while current guidance for Welfare to Work services and Work Programme providers signals a new focus on 'personalisation' (i.e. tailored support for individual needs), there have been moves to minimise paperwork and prescription in terms of how that support is provided, and reporting requirements for payment by results are focused tightly on entry into and retention in employment⁷. Providers are also obliged to supply Jobcentre Plus with Exit Reports for participants, summarising training undertaken and recommending next steps. However, at present, although they are *encouraged* to supply additional information including assessments of employability, or observed changes in attitude⁸, this is not required - far less required in any particular format.

Similarly, the Skills Funding Agency (SFA)⁹ publishes performance data on FE colleges' (and other training providers') delivery to over 16s. Providers are required to report learners' qualifications achieved, employment/ educational

⁵ In England, schools, FE providers and independent training providers are assessed by the Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted).

⁶ Every Child Matters (ECM) is a government initiative which led to the Children Act 2004, covering children and young people up to the age of 19, or 24 for those with disabilities. It aims to ensure that, through multi-agency partnership working, every child is supported to achieve five outcomes: Be healthy; Stay safe; Enjoy and achieve; Make a positive contribution and Achieve economic well-being.
<https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/standard/publicationdetail/page1/DfES/1081/2004>

⁷ Work Programme Provider Guidance Chapter 9:
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-9.pdf>

⁸ Work Programme Provider Guidance Chapter 10:
<http://www.dwp.gov.uk/docs/wp-pg-chapter-10.pdf>

⁹ The Skills Funding Agency (SFA) and the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) are successor organisations to the Learning and Skills Council (LSC).

destinations and satisfaction ratings, but not soft outcomes tapping employability.

However, in the context of budget cuts, the need to achieve 'more for less' (Audit Commission 2010) and increasing reliance on payment by results, funders may increasingly look not only for data on attendance, completion rates and destinations, but also for evidence of soft outcomes as a stepping stone towards future employment or qualifications.

As participants in Deloitte's consultation exercise suggested, if funders' assessments focus narrowly on hard outcomes, they offer little encouragement for training or learning providers to improve their own performance in developing the softer skills seen as lacking by employers. Conversely, without recognition of distance travelled there may be a perverse incentive for providers - judged and/or paid by results - to focus on less challenging clients who can more easily be found work or achieve qualifications (Deloitte 2010). To quote again from the UKCES' 'Employability Challenge' report:

"Outcomes-based funding for training is only as good as the definition of the outcomes."

(UKCES 2009)

2. Employability skills and categories

In this section we consider the skills, attributes and behaviours that have been placed under the umbrella of 'employability', drawing on reviews of practice across a range of providers. We explore the degree of commonality across these various lists before suggesting a core set of soft employability skills complete with brief definitions.

2.1 Existing definitions and skills categories

A number of Government reviews have suggested that no generic model or set of indicators for the measurement of soft outcomes can be 'fit for purpose' across all learning aims and groups of learners (ECOTEC 1998; Dewson, Eccles et al. 2000; WEFO 2003; Lloyd and O'Sullivan 2004). Likewise, an expert seminar convened by the then LSC found it impossible to devise a universally applicable set of employability skills, concluding that requirements depended on job type, industry sector and career stage (Martin, Villeneuve-Smith et al. 2008).

Certainly, there may be group-specific outcomes, for example for addicts around reduction in drug use and improvement in health and relationships. However, as the Scottish Executive's Effective Interventions Unit (EIU) points out, it is feasible to identify 'core' outcomes for employability projects that support a variety of different client groups (EIU 2009). Below, we consider the EIU skills list alongside three others from CBI, ECOTEC, and the UKCES. Each set of skills was drawn up on the basis of reviews of current practice and/or widespread consultation with employers and learning providers.

CBI (2007) and Department for Children, Schools and Families (2010)

In 2010, the DCSF-funded National Support Group for Work Experience linked their Impact Assessment Tool to the competencies set out in the CBI's Employability framework (CBI 2007; DCSF 2010). Accordingly, the 16 items on their questionnaire for learners tap eight areas:

- Skills: business and customer awareness, application of numeracy, communication and literacy and application of IT
- Personal qualities: self-management, team working, problem solving
- Positive attitude: a 'can-do' approach, openness to new ideas.

ECOTEC (1998)

In their 1998 report, drawing on a review of over 200 projects funded by the ESF EMPLOYMENT initiative, ECOTEC divided soft outcomes into three categories: attitudinal skills, life skills and transferable skills, as follows:

- Attitudinal skills - self esteem, positive regard for others, taking responsibility for own lives, confidence, motivation, attitude, self-awareness, reduced depression/anxiety, aspirations

- Life skills - social skills, attendance, time-keeping, personal presentation, personal hygiene, relevant conversation
- Transferable skills - team work, problem solving, questioning, evaluating, initiative, language skills, communication (ECOTEC 1998).

EIU (2009)

The EIU identified a set of ‘core’ employability outcomes with corresponding indicators (EIU 2009), summarising those found across projects for drug users and other disadvantaged groups (Table 2.1). They suggested four categories: personal development and social competence; basic work skills and attributes; core skills; and personal effectiveness and aptitude.

Table 2.1. EIU Examples of core employability outcomes and indicators

Types of core outcomes	Examples of indicators
Personal Development Social Competence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Confidence, self esteem • Motivation, increased feelings of responsibility • Higher personal and career aspirations • Relationships with peers and authority • (Basic) interpersonal and communication skills • Team working
Basic Work Skills and Attributes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic literacy (reading, writing) • Basic numerical skills, including ability to manage money • Timekeeping, reliability • Ability to complete forms, CV writing • Presentation
Core Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Numeracy • ICT • Problem solving • Interpersonal
Personal Effectiveness and Aptitude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Planning • Prioritising • Verbal reasoning • Numerical reasoning

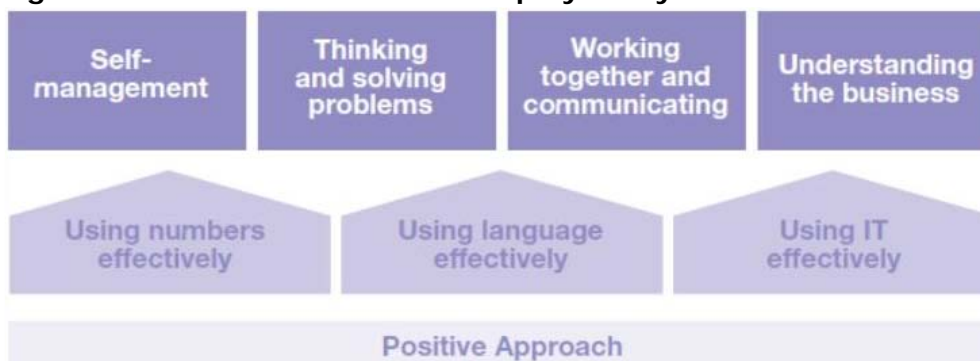
Source: (EIU 2009)

UKCES (2009)

In 2009, the UKCES reviewed definitions from over 200 sources in the UK, Canada, Australia and the United States and identified a great deal of overlap. They settled on a working definition of employability skills as set out in Figure 2.1 below.

The UKCES describes employability as having a foundation of Positive Approach: being ready to participate, make suggestions, accept new ideas and constructive criticism, and to take responsibility for outcomes.

Figure 2.1. UKCES definition of employability skills



Source: (UKCES 2009)

This 'positive approach' is seen as supporting three Functional Skills:

- Using numbers effectively – measuring, recording measurements, calculating, estimating quantities, relating numbers to the job
- Using language effectively – writing clearly and in a way appropriate to the context, ordering facts and concepts logically
- Using IT effectively – operating a computer, both using basic systems and also learning other applications as necessary, and using telephones and other technology to communicate.

Finally, these functional skills are viewed in the context of four Personal Skills:

- Self-management – punctuality and time management, fitting dress and behaviour to context, overcoming challenges, asking for help when necessary
- Thinking and solving problems – creativity, reflecting on and learning from own actions, prioritising, analysing situations, developing solutions
- Working together and communicating – co-operating, being assertive, persuading, being responsible to others, speaking clearly to individuals and groups, listening for a response
- Understanding the business – understanding how the individual job fits into the organisation as a whole; recognising the needs of stakeholders (customers and service users, for example); judging risks, innovating, contributing to the whole organisation (UKCES 2009).

Commonalities and differences across definitions

Clearly, these definitions do vary: one refers to 'confidence' and another to 'being assertive'; one to generic 'positive attitude' and another to particular mental health outcomes. However, there appears to be a broad consensus on the skills relevant to employability, albeit with variation in the degree of focus on mental health/ emotional wellbeing versus practical skills.

This report focuses primarily on measurement of personal and behavioural skills, as opposed to basic or functional skills such as numeracy, literacy and IT skills. While the CBI, DCSF, EIU and UKCES understandably consider such skills integral to employability, they could be described as on the 'hard side' of soft,

in that they can easily be assessed using standard tests. In addition, while the CBI and UKCES definitions refer to business/ customer awareness as employability skills, these are somewhat job-specific. Accordingly, the next section briefly sets out, and defines, a *generic* set of *soft* employability skills.

2.2 A generic set of soft employability skills

In this section we list, categorise and define soft employability skills which appear to be generally applicable to a range of jobs on the basis of previous practice reviews (see Tables 2.2 and 2.3).

Table 2.2. Soft employability skills and attributes

Personal	Interpersonal	Self-management	Initiative & delivery
Confidence	Social/ interpersonal skills	Self-control	Planning
Self-esteem	Communication skills	Reliability	Problem-solving
Motivation	Teamwork	Positive attitude	Prioritising
Self-efficacy	Assertiveness	Presentation	

Table 2.3. Definitions of soft employability skills and attributes

Skill/ attribute	Definition
(Self) confidence	Belief in oneself or one's own abilities
Self-esteem	A positive or negative orientation toward oneself; an overall evaluation of one's worth or value
Motivation	Interest/ engagement, effort and persistence / work ethic
Self-efficacy	Belief in one's ability to succeed in a particular situation
Social/ interpersonal skills	Ability to interact appropriately with other people, without undue conflict or discomfort
Communication skills	Ability to convey information effectively so that it is received and understood; appropriate verbal/ nonverbal communication with colleagues, managers and customers/others
Teamwork	Ability to work cooperatively with others
Assertiveness	Ability to confidently express views or needs without either aggression/ dominance / undue submissiveness towards others
Self-control	Ability to control own emotions and behaviour, particularly in difficult situations or under stress
Reliability	Attendance, time-keeping, consistent standards
Positive attitude	Keen to work, learn, accept feedback and take responsibility
Presentation	Consistently clean, tidy and appropriately dressed, with a polite and professional manner
Planning	Ability to plan tasks and monitor progress
Problem-solving	Ability to identify problems and devise solutions
Prioritising	Ability to identify and focus on priority tasks

3. Measurement and assessment issues

It was not within the scope of this exercise to survey hundreds of projects, as large-scale government reviews have done. However, a brief review of relevant literature and websites suggests that within the voluntary sector, there is still a great deal of variety in terms of the nature and quality of soft outcome measures employed for evaluation purposes. In Section 5, we provide a detailed review of measurement of employability skills in seven recent programmes. In this section, we discuss some key challenges in this area.

3.1 Validity

As noted previously, whereas hard outcome criteria may be tightly specified in government contracts – for example, with strict definitions of what constitutes ‘sustained’ employment – the soft outcomes relating to employability have generally been left to providers to monitor. However, while this should allow tailoring measures to project objectives, this approach is not unproblematic. Quite apart from the fact that this makes it more difficult to compare projects, it cannot be assumed that the resulting measures will have been designed, tested and administered in such a way as to make them valid and reliable: in other words, to ensure they genuinely assess the desired skills or attributes in a consistent and replicable way. Delivery staff may not have the time, expertise or resources to devise suitable measures. This is not simply a hypothetical problem: Lloyd and O’Sullivan reported that while project staff wished to measure soft outcomes, it was not being done systematically. They found strong demand for additional guidance of relevance to different user groups including a range of practical examples (Lloyd and O’Sullivan 2004). Similarly, Deloitte found that, from the perspective of qualification awarding bodies, the problem lay less in a lack of suitable methods for assessing personal skills than in providers’ lack of confidence in designing and using them effectively (Deloitte 2010).

3.2 Subjectivity

Subjectivity of assessors and their assessments

Deloitte’s consultation with funders and providers highlighted that learners and employers may be wary of qualifications other than those gained via traditional written tests, with the alternatives seen as unduly subjective, less rigorous and more open to manipulation than traditional tests (Deloitte 2010). As the National Support Group for Work Experience note, meaningful comparisons of pre and post (programme) data rely on clear-cut measures; soft outcomes, however, often rely on subjective assessments (DCSF 2010). There may be nervousness and a lack of understanding about the robustness and validity of tools available to undertake these assessments. Moreover, as suggested by reviews which counsel against a ‘one size fits all’ approach to measuring soft outcomes (WEFO 2003 ; Lloyd and O’Sullivan 2004), some aspects of employability can be seen as job or situation specific; as UKCES point out, ‘good teams need different personality types – so teamwork is inherently personal’ (UKCES 2009). Nevertheless, as outlined in Section 2, there appear to be a range of

employability skills which are broadly generic. Some of these – such as timekeeping – may be relatively simple to assess; others, such as social or communication skills, more challenging and reliant on assessors' judgements.

The issue of subjectivity is not seen as an insurmountable problem by Deloitte, on the basis that awarding organisations are already welcoming evidence gathered by 'non-traditional' means and considering it, in some cases, more appropriate to measurement of soft skills (Deloitte 2010). That is, in their review of assessment and recognition processes, involving desk research and consultations with providers in schools, Further and Higher Education settings and elsewhere, they found that award bodies such as Edexcel favoured individual portfolio-based assessments recording achievements in realistic scenarios. Written assignments were seen as unfair to those struggling with literacy; more generally, it was argued that assessing 'doing skills' via multiple-choice tests could misrepresent individuals' abilities. Accepted methods included project assignments, case studies, work-based assessments and performance observation. Evidence could be drawn from questions and answers, reflexive accounts, self and peer evaluation and reviews (Deloitte 2010). As stressed by UKCES, assessment approaches such as these may themselves be used to *develop* the employability skills of 'reflexive learners' (UKCES 2010).

As UKCES point out, the use of 'non-traditional' approaches to assessment need not mean a loss of rigour if guidance is sufficient to ensure "*a common understanding and application of the national standard across assessor judgments*" (p35). They describe how where tutors are responsible for assessments, as with the Scottish Qualifications Authority's 'Skills for Work' qualifications, external verification can provide reassurance about standards by auditing providers' evidence (UKCES 2010). To an extent, Ofsted could be expected to perform this role, but existing Ofsted guidance for adult learning and skills providers¹⁰ appears limited. Good practice examples on their site describe activities which *develop* employability skills – but not the tools used to *assess* them – or the criteria used by inspectors to evaluate the evidence.¹¹ However, a recent consultation on revisions to the Inspection Framework (Ofsted 2011) explicitly referred to:

'the critical importance of employability skills and progression towards sustainable employment and further learning as outcomes from many government-funded programmes, and the need to judge this alongside the achievement of learners.'

In light of this, Ofsted proposes that the revised framework, criteria and inspection methodology should – from September 2012 - place greater emphasis on direct observation of teaching, learning, skills development and assessment – and include among the assessed outcomes personal, social and employability skills. At present, while it appears that the quality of employability measures may be evaluated under the new system, is unclear what guidance, if any, will be developed for providers on this issue.

¹⁰ <http://www.ofsted.gov.uk/adult-learning-and-skills/for-adult-learning-and-skills-providers/types-of-adult-learning-and-skills-ofsted-inspects>

¹¹ <http://www.goodpractice.ofsted.gov.uk/rALaS.php>

Subjectivity of learners and their self-assessments

Some employability skills – such as self-efficacy, confidence or self-esteem – call for measures which draw on learners' own reports of their feelings and experiences. While it is not discussed by Ofsted, a key problem with evaluating impact on the basis of self-reported 'before and after' (the programme) assessments is that participants' judgements about their *initial* competencies or knowledge may genuinely change through taking part as they gain new perspective on their situation. Therefore, assessments at the end of an intervention may show little change from those at the start, whereas those involved may (correctly, perhaps) insist that they have gained a great deal. However, given that participants' perspectives on their emotions or 'internal states' are crucial, ruling out self-report measures does not solve the problem of subjectivity. Partly, issues around the validity of self-reports can be overcome by having participants complete assessments collaboratively with staff, although this clearly brings *their* subjectivity into play, not to mention confidentiality issues. There is a risk that providers may exaggerate their impact by depressing baseline scores and/or inflating exit ones if they are either scoring those taking part or assisting them to complete forms. Nevertheless as providers may be best placed to comment on issues such as timekeeping, presentation and teamwork, the challenge must be to ensure they have appropriate tools and qualitative records underpinning and illustrating any quantitative assessments of change.

While recognising the challenges of 'before and after' measures, it is also the case that relying solely on retrospective assessments is problematic, in that memories may be inaccurate – even in relation to hard as opposed to soft skills. There is also a real risk of (unintentional) bias whereby participants exaggerate the gains made by retrospectively devaluing their initial skills, abilities or attributes. Therefore, regardless of whether retrospective assessments or 'before and after' designs are used, and whether participants, staff, or both are involved, there is an argument for providing 'concrete' descriptors for each point on a scale, so that responses are more 'anchored' to real-life experience, as opposed to gut feeling at the time about whether young people for example, score 5 or 7 out of 10 on a rating scale.

3.3 User-friendliness/ workability

Providers seeking to measure employability skills can, in theory, choose from among numerous different ways of collecting data, including:

- baseline and subsequent interviews with learners/assessors
- self-completion questionnaires
- personal journals
- tests
- portfolios
- staff assessments/ reviews
- numerical scaling to track progress (i.e. rating perceived skills from 1 to 10 at baseline, exit and possibly points in between)
- recorded observations of learners applying skills in work-based scenarios
- commercially developed tools (see below).

For the most part, however, questionnaires, interviews and observations of learners engaging in relevant tasks are used to assess soft indicators. Although some tools, such as the Rickter Scale and Outcomes Star, as detailed in the next section, *look* different, in practice they involve repeat measurements on a series of scales.

There are a number of issues affecting providers' choice and use of evaluation tools. In some cases, for example, it may be inappropriate to involve vulnerable beneficiaries in a baseline self-assessment exercise because of concerns around intrusiveness, deterring engagement or interrupting service delivery (WEFO 2003).

More generally, it is clearly desirable that tools are easy to administer and meaningful to participants, adding to, rather than disrupting service delivery.

Another, perhaps more pervasive, problem relates to funding. A survey of 600 ESF Objective 3¹² projects found that, after lack of appropriate methods, the most commonly reported barrier to measurement of soft outcomes was resource constraints (WEFO 2003). In line with this, a National Support Group for Work Experience report, summarising the development of their own tool for providers, describes some of the tensions between taking a rigorous approach to measuring impact and ensuring feasibility of administration within available budgets (DCSF 2010). For example, they opted for learner self-assessment, while acknowledging that gains in skills are subjective and that a triangulated approach involving teachers and parents would be preferable. They also rejected a 'before and after' design in favour of a single retrospective form to limit demands on staff.

In relation to funding considerations more generally, many providers will have limited resources to devote to evaluation. In light of this, it makes little sense to waste money reinventing the wheel in relation to measuring outcomes – what resources providers *do* have for evaluation would be better spent gathering robust data which can be used to measure and benchmark achievement and inform practice.

¹² Under the Structural Fund regulations for 2000-06, Objective 3 programmes were those supporting the adaptation and modernisation of education, training and employment policies and systems.

4. Limitations of existing guidance and tools

4.1 Learning from existing reviews

Government departments have made several attempts to promote best practice in the use of soft outcomes or employability measures (ECOTEC 1998; Dewson, Eccles et al. 2000; WEFO 2003; Lloyd and O'Sullivan 2004). Rather than providing a 'generic model' of measurement or substantive guidance about indicators, these reports have set out methodological principles and practice examples to aid project staff in developing their own measures. For example, in their review for the DWP, Lloyd and O'Sullivan recommended that systems for measuring soft outcomes satisfy five principles, as follows:

1. Identify barriers to learning/personal development
2. Focus on variables that can lead to changes in behaviour
3. Be reliable
4. Include multiple variables and sources of information to achieve an even balance of indicators
5. Be relatively cheap and simple to administer (Lloyd and O'Sullivan 2004)

In their 2003 guidance, the Welsh European Funding Office (WEFO 2003) set out four key components of soft outcome monitoring systems:

1. A set of target indicators
2. A scale or profiling system
3. Baseline assessments and subsequent reviews to assess progress
4. A system for analysing and reporting results.

Through its examples, if not explicit recommendations, the WEFO report steers projects towards using young people- and staff-report scales (i.e. with five-point numerical ratings or labels such as 'needs improvement' to 'no work needed'). While they provide an Appendix with example items from funded projects, they do not list or endorse suitable indicators – simply advising that staff compile a list addressing each area of their work and decide for themselves the appropriate balance between comprehensive coverage and ease of completion. Although they advise that quantitative data be reported to funders with comments on its validity, they provide no guidance on assessing validity or on accessing validated tools. Similarly, the Ofsted Database currently provides a 'good practice example' focused on measuring soft outcomes and distance travelled for JobCentre Plus participants, but 'good practice' is seen to lie in the way the provider¹³ involved staff in developing indicators relating to support needs in various areas¹⁴ - the actual measures are not described.

¹³ The Intraining Support Centre

¹⁴ Ofsted Good Practice Database: learning and assessment:

<http://www.excellencegateway.org.uk/page.aspx?o=C36FD6D8-9AA5-4D36-A101-8AA44003CBC4>

In contrast, the UKCES has urged a more concerted effort on the part of policy-makers, funders and awarding organisations to develop and refine methods to capture the qualitative and personal aspects of employability skills, stressing the need for rigour and credibility for learners, tutors and employers. Although they acknowledge the importance of flexible methods in assessing personal skills, they stress that practitioners need the information and confidence to choose and use appropriate tools (UKCES 2010).

4.2 Learning from existing practice and tools

Accreditation bodies and business practice

Recent reviews conducted by and for the UKCES have considered current practice across a wide variety of providers and found that businesses have tended to put more emphasis than colleges and learning providers on systematically assessing the employability of new staff, for example using standardised measures during recruitment (UKCES 2009).

Existing commercially produced measures

The WEFO report notes the existence of commercially-developed tools, but does not identify or endorse any such measures. The Charities Evaluation Services' 'Monitoring and Evaluation Resource' guide (Begum, Ellis et al. 2010), while directing readers to tailor systems to their own needs and follow general guidance (Dewson, Eccles et al. 2000; WEFO 2003), does mention a few of these, including the 'SOUL Record'¹⁵, produced by the Research Centre, City College Norwich. A short paper produced by the Centre (Anderson 2008) describes the SOUL Record alongside other relatively well-known tools including the Outcomes Star¹⁶, SpiritLevel¹⁷ and the Rickter Scale¹⁸. Brief details of these four tools – and their costs – are set out in Appendix A. Notably, the websites for these commercially produced tools boast impressive client lists and brief user testimonials, but no specific information about results of using the measures, in terms of outcomes for service users, reliability or validity.

Setting aside these important issues, a brief look at these measures suggests that the Outcomes Star for Work and Learning (See Figure 2 below) may have potential for adaptation into a tool that covers each key area of employability. Currently, the accompanying notes show that the focus in all seven star areas is on job-seeking, whereas a more rounded focus on soft outcomes could cover employability skills in more depth. Key strengths of the Star include simple ten-point scales, with descriptions anchoring each point to steps on a model of change and worksheets encouraging recording of qualitative evidence.

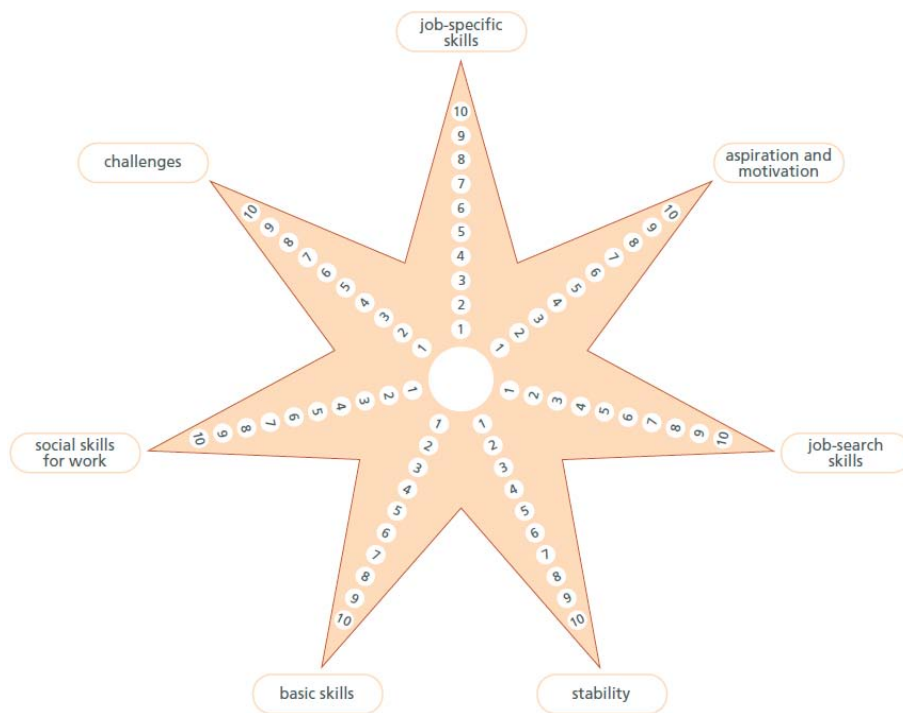
¹⁵ <http://soulrecord.org/>

¹⁶ <http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/>

¹⁷ <http://www.spiritlevel.org.uk/>

¹⁸ <http://www.rickterscale.com/>

Figure 2: The Work Star: the Outcomes Star™ for work and learning



Source:

<http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/work>

Validated measures

Within the academic literature, the few tools purporting to measure employability *as a whole* have focused on career self-efficacy, which includes employees' beliefs about their ability to obtain and remain in work and advance existing (professional) careers (Rothwell and Arnold 2007), as well as on occupational expertise and generic skills (Van Der Heijde and Van Der Heijden 2006). As Rothwell and Arnold explain, their scale was designed '*for people for whom employment in an organisation is either a current reality or a realistic prospect*'. As a result, their items, including '*If there was downsizing in this organisation, I am confident that I would be retained*', are of limited applicability to the measurement of soft skills and distance travelled among those facing greater challenges.

However, there *are* validated tools available for at least some of the individual employability skills and attributes set out in Section 2.2. Interestingly, while government guidance generally does not consider the academic literature, the Anderson paper does briefly mention CORE (Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation)¹⁹ and the much more specific Rosenberg self-esteem scale (SES)²⁰ (Anderson 2008). Unlike the commercially developed scales mentioned above, these established self-completion scales are free to use under copyright. CORE, a 34-item measure of psychological distress, is used to assess routine outcomes in psychological therapies, while the SES is a widely used 10-item measure

¹⁹ <http://www.coreims.co.uk/>

²⁰ <http://www.wwnorton.com/college/psych/psychsci/media/rosenberg.htm>

focused entirely on self-esteem. Clearly, while relevant to the more personal aspects of employability, neither would work as a comprehensive measure.

Among other potentially relevant and validated tools are the Generalized self-efficacy scale (Schwarzer and Jerusalem 1995) and the Core self-evaluations scale (Judge 2003), which covers locus of control, neuroticism, generalized self-efficacy and self-esteem.

Setting aside the impracticality of administering many lengthy scales, these measures are not designed to assess specific changes in behaviours targeted by learning/training providers. However, such measures could perhaps be drawn on to produce a more comprehensive measure of employability – possibly an Outcomes Star with a number of ‘core’ points and further optional ones.

5. Measurement of employability skills in recent programmes

In this section, we present the findings from our review of recent UK programme evaluations²¹ that included some measures of young people's employability skills. The programmes reviewed were targeted at improving young people's skills or getting them on a path to education, training or employment. Thus, improvements in employability skills were clearly relevant for each. The aim of doing this review was threefold: first, to examine the extent to which employability skills are commonly assessed in evaluations of programmes aimed at upskilling young people or improving their education, training and employment prospects; second, to examine the similarities and differences in the way that employability skills were measured in the evaluations; and third, to inform our view of suggestions for going forward given the issues and limitations highlighted in previous sections.

We first present a very brief overview of our methodology, followed by presentation of the evaluation summaries.

5.1 Programme review methodology

We conducted a range of internet keyword searches to identify existing UK programme evaluations aimed at improving young people's skills or getting them on a path to education, training or employment. Our main keywords were 'young people' and 'employability' or 'soft skills' or 'life skills'.

General searches were carried out using NCB's ChildData and Google, and specific searches were carried out in the following websites:

- DfE
- DWP
- Institute for Employment Studies
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- UKCES
- Fairbridge
- The Prince's Trust
- Education and Employers Taskforce
- Skills Funding Agency
- National Foundation for Educational Research.

Relevant evaluation reports were initially scanned and subsequently downloaded (if necessary) to determine if they included any measures of young people's employability skills. Overall, more than 30 programme evaluations were scanned, 14 were downloaded for potential inclusion in the review and seven are included here.

²¹ One of the studies reviewed was not a programme evaluation *per se*, but rather an exploration of the skills, knowledge and attitudinal development that young people gain from volunteering using data from 30 volunteering sites.

The final seven evaluations were as follows:

1. Activity Agreement Pilots
2. Fairbridge
3. Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 Year Olds
4. Northern Ireland Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NIACRO) Youth Employability Programme
5. Skills for Work
6. Volunteering
7. Young People's Development Programme.

5.2 Programme review summaries

Each of the seven programme evaluations were summarised using a structured template designed to capture the pertinent information in brief, easy to read format. One researcher completed the summaries and a second peer reviewed them for quality control. Each of the summary templates is presented below.

Table 5.1. Activity Agreement Pilots (AA)

Programme summary	<p>AA was a pilot initiative aimed at testing the effectiveness of conditional financial incentives along with intensive support and brokerage of tailored activities in re-engaging young people aged 16 -17 years not in education, employment or training (NEET) for at least 20 weeks.</p> <p>Activities focused on personal development, skill development and work-related activities. Young people received one-to-one support and advice and a weekly allowance - paid only if the young people fulfilled their weekly agreement.</p>
Target group	16-17-year-olds who had been NEET for at least 20 weeks.
Evaluation aims	The aim of the quantitative evaluation was to assess the effectiveness of AA in improving the outcomes of participants relative to a matched comparison groups of comparable young people who lived in non-pilot areas.
Evaluation design and sample	<p>The quantitative evaluation used a quasi-experimental design including surveys with young people (and their parents) living in the pilot areas, as well as young people living in matched comparison areas. The initial young people surveys were carried out approximately 12 weeks after ending their involvement with AA with follow-up surveys approximately 2 years after participation.</p> <p>AA participants were predominantly male (58%) and white (87%). Only 14% of participants had 5 or more GCSEs at A*-C. In terms of family background, 58% had parents without post-16 qualifications and 37% of parents were in routine and manual occupations.</p> <p>Compared to non-participants, AA participants were younger, more likely to be male, more likely to live at home and be single and less likely to have their own children.</p>

Measures of employability skills	<p>The first young people survey included attitudinal measures around the future, confidence and independence (all items relative to 1 year ago) including:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I have clearer ideas about what I want to do in the future • I feel that the things I have been doing will help me in the future • I feel less confident • I feel more independent. <p>At the 2009 follow-up, further items were included:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I feel more confident now about seeking help or advice (than I did in the first interview) • I feel more able to write a job application or update my CV (than I did in the first interview) • I feel more confident with reading and writing (than I did in the first interview) • I feel more confident with numbers (than I did in the first interview) • I feel more positive about the future, compared to previous year • I feel more confident after doing my Activity Agreement • I have clearer ideas about the sort of job I'd like to do after doing my Activity Agreement • Taking part in the scheme has given me new skills • I don't think I'm any more likely to get a job after doing my Activity Agreement.
Relevant findings	<p>At the time of the first survey, AA participants were significantly more likely than controls to agree that the <i>'things I have been doing will help me in the future'</i> (76% vs. 67%, respectively), fewer AA respondents felt <i>less confident than they did 1 year ago</i> (15% vs. 18%, respectively) and more AA respondents had <i>clearer ideas about what they wanted to do in the future compared to 1 year ago</i> (75% vs. 71%, respectively). The latter two findings were not statistically significant.</p> <p>At follow-up, more than two-thirds (67%) of AA participants reported that they were <i>more confident</i> after participating in AA. More than a quarter of respondents (31% and 29% at the first interview and follow-up, respectively) perceived that <i>increases in experience and confidence were benefits of AA</i>.</p>
Summary	<p>Quantitative Generic measures Young people-report Retrospective</p>

Source: (Tanner, Purdon et al. 2009; Department for Education 2010; Tanner, D'Souza et al. 2010)

Table 5.2. Fairbridge

Programme summary	<p>Fairbridge aims improve the life skills of young people in challenging circumstances or with behaviour problems regarding communication, relationships, managing feelings, problem solving and planning. From these primary life skills, Fairbridge encourages young people to develop 'secondary life skills' in independent living, recreation, community, employability and learning. Programmes begin with a residential followed by a tailored programme of activities.</p>
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Target group	Young people with challenging life circumstances from 13-25 years.
Evaluation aims	The existing summary evaluation report of Fairbridge programmes examined changes in young people's personal and social skills, as well as whether improvements in personal and social skills increased the likelihood of young people obtaining jobs, returning to school or becoming volunteers.
Evaluation design and sample	<p>The Fairbridge evaluations were mixed methods including 'before' and 'after' quantitative assessments of young people's personal and social skills, as well as access to database records of Fairbridge participants.</p> <p>Study 1 included long-term tracking information from 318 young people (2000-2003). Study 2 tracked 59 young people (2007). Study 3 tracked 594 young people (2008-2009), as well as an examination of database records of 2,235 young people who joined Fairbridge between 2006-2009.</p> <p>Based on the database records, young people were referred from a range of different agencies including schools, youth offending teams and social services. Young men outnumbered young women three to one. Their ages ranged from 13 to 25 years, but three-quarters were aged 17 or less. Based on data from Study 2, the presenting needs of the young people included low self-esteem, low key skills, low levels of numeracy and literacy and histories of alcoholism, drug misuse and aggressive behaviour. Most young people had multiple presenting needs (i.e. three or more needs).</p>
Measures of employability skills	<p>As part of the tracking, data were collected on young people's perceptions of their personal and social skills using the 'Who are you?' quiz in which young people were asked to rate (on a 5-point scale from 'very good' to 'need to work on this') 'how good' they were at:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Letting other people know what I mean • Understanding what people are saying to me • Getting on with people • Making and keeping friends • Keeping my feelings under control • Understanding why I like some people and not others • Understanding that different people have different ways of thinking • Sorting problems out • Understanding other people's point of view • Give and take • Thinking and planning ahead • Learning from my successes and mistakes • Accepting my share of the blame when things go wrong • Thinking through what will happen to me and other people before I do something. <p>Fairbridge also piloted an 'Outcomes Star' examining communicating, managing feelings, establishing interpersonal relationships, understanding social values, understanding and identifying with others, negotiating, problem solving, planning and reviewing.</p>

Relevant findings	<p>Using data from Study 1, after 1 week, results showed <i>average personal and social skills scores</i> (i.e. based on a summary scale) were 13% higher than baseline. Overall, 70% of young people reported some improvement. At 4 months, however, average personal and social skill levels were similar to baseline levels.</p> <p>Longer follow-up data were available in Study 2, in which young people completed the 'Who are you?' quiz on six occasions: baseline, 1 week and then every 3 months up to 13 months. The results showed a gain in <i>perceived skills</i> after 1 week and a dip after 4 months, followed by a gradual increase so that at 10 and 13 months, the average scores exceeded the baseline scores. Data suggested the gains in personal and social skills were correlated with 'harder' outcomes, such as staying on in education.</p> <p>Follow-up interviews with 30 young people between a year and 18 months after their initial contact with Fairbridge showed that the majority of young people perceived that they had made significant gains in <i>confidence and in positive attitudes towards self</i>, affirming the survey results.</p> <p>The Outcomes Star was piloted in Study 3 at baseline and 3- and 6-month follow-ups. The findings suggested that scores increased from baseline to 3 months and then declined somewhat by 6 months. The main exception was 'establishing interpersonal relations', which increased at 6 months. Further, the Outcomes Star did not significantly predict changes in hard outcomes. Further piloting work was suggested following these results.</p>
Summary	<p>Quantitative and qualitative Generic measures Young people-report Before and after</p>

Source: (Astbury and Knight 2003; Knight 2010)

Table 5.3. Increased Flexibility for 14 to 16 Year Olds

Programme summary	<p>IFP was introduced in 2002 to create enhanced vocational and work-related learning opportunities for 14- to 16-year-olds who would most benefit. IFP consisted of partnerships between a Lead Partner, who was usually a Further Education (FE) college, partner schools and sometimes other providers (e.g. training providers, employers). IFP aimed to raise student attainment among participants, as well as increase their skills and knowledge, develop their social learning and increase retention in education and training after 16.</p>
Target group	<p>14- to 16-year-olds</p>
Evaluation aims	<p>The evaluation examined the effectiveness of the implementation, identified the delivery models that appeared most and least successful, evaluated the extent to which the IFP fulfilled its national aims, objectives and targets and assessed the impact of vocational qualifications and new work-related learning opportunities on young people's skills, knowledge, attitudes, attainment and post-16 progression.</p>

<p>Evaluation design and sample</p>	<p>The evaluation was mixed method and included baseline and follow-up surveys with students, schools and providers. Baseline surveys were sent to a representative sample of students in Year 10 with follow-ups sent in Year 11.</p> <p>The Year 11 students who responded to the survey were representative of peers in most respects. However, a slightly higher proportion of females, those with no special needs provision, students who were not in receipt of free school meals and students who had achieved level 5 and above at key stage 3 in English, Maths and Science responded to the Year 11 survey compared with the overall sample and respondents to the Year 10 survey.</p>
<p>Measures of employability skills</p>	<p>The follow-up student survey included questions about the impact of IFP and the students' future plans. More specifically, the questions related to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' views on taking courses away from school • Whether they missed lessons due to their IFP involvement • Their views on the qualification they were taking • Their experience of visiting an employer • Their perspectives of the impact of their IFP course on their attitude to learning and plans for the future • Their views on school and learning • Their plans after the end of Year 11 • Their perspectives on employability skills.
<p>Relevant findings</p>	<p>When asked about the impact of the IFP, just over half (54%) of all students reported that their course had helped them to learn <i>how to work with adults</i> and 47%, respectively, said that it had helped them learn <i>how to work with other young people</i> and had made them more <i>confident</i>.</p> <p>Findings revealed that students' perceived confidence in their abilities on employability skills improved from Year 10 to Year 11. Compared with when they were in Year 10, a higher proportion of students in Year 11 reported that they were confident in their ability to <i>write a CV, fill in an application form well, cope well in an interview, understand the requirements of a job, speak clearly, deal with others, deal with people in authority and use their initiative</i>.</p> <p>Young people who had visited an employer in Year 11 were significantly more likely to indicate that certain skills were very useful for getting a job compared with those who had not visited an employer. These skills included being able to <i>write a CV, speak clearly, answer the telephone properly, work in a team, deal with others, use initiative and dress appropriately</i>. These young people were also more confident in their abilities in each of the employability skills compared with those who had not visited an employer in Year 11.</p>
<p>Summary</p>	<p>Quantitative and qualitative Generic measures Young people-report Retrospective /before and after</p>

Source: (Golden, O'Donnell et al. 2005)

Table 5.4. NIACRO Youth Employability Programme (YEP)

Programme summary	YEP aimed to promote the entry or re-entry to education, training or employment (ETE) of young people aged 16-18 years who were in custody or under statutory supervision in the community. Each young person was assigned a Youth Employability Officer to help young people access ETE and address any access barriers. YEP staff developed personal plans for young people and provided support including making contact with relevant service providers, providing information and guidance on training and employment options, increasing young people's employability skills, preparing them for entry to training or employment and helping young people with disclosure of convictions.
Target group	Young people aged 16-18 years who were in custody or under statutory supervision in the community and were not in ETE.
Evaluation aims	The aim of the evaluation was to assess the validity of the YEP's approach to working with young offenders including an analysis of the YEP caseload to identify the number and characteristics of beneficiaries, the relevance of assessment, the efficacy of interventions and the influence on ETE outcomes and reconviction.
Evaluation design and sample	<p>The evaluation was mixed methods and included analysis of monitoring data.</p> <p>Based on the monitoring data collected from April 2008-December 2010, there were 515 admissions: 43% of admissions were 17 years of age and 31% 16 years and 90% were male. A third had been offending for 1-2 years. More than three-quarters (77%) were unemployed at the time of admission and 80% were on benefits. Forty-two per cent had no qualifications.</p>
Measures of employability skills	<p>Monitoring data were gathered through during the referral, assessment and review processes and was recorded in an Access database. The YEP staff also took steps to carry out 6-month follow-ups with young people who completed YEP to find out if they maintained placements, found employment and avoided further offending.</p> <p>During the assessment, data were collected on young people's perceptions of how good they were on a range of skills (each item rated on 5-point scale from 'very poor' to 'very good'):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time keeping • Attendance • How you get on with workmates • Enjoyment of work • Level of literacy • Level of numeracy • ICT skills • Communication • Working with others • Self-confidence • Self-esteem. <p>At the time of closure, the young people reported whether these skills 'increased', 'decreased' or 'stayed the same'. Data were only available for 283 young people.</p>

Relevant findings	<p>At assessment, young people had fairly positive views of their skills. Below are the percentages of young people rating their relevant skills as 'good' or 'very good':</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time keeping: 44% • Attendance: 45% • How you get on with workmates: 62% • Enjoyment of work: 45% • Level of literacy: 31% • Level of numeracy: 39% • ICT skills: 35% • Communication: 51% • Working with others: 57% • Self-confidence: 43% • Self-esteem: 40%. <p>Follow-up information revealed that the majority felt that there had been an increase or no change in these skills from admission to closure.</p>
Summary	<p>Quantitative Generic measures Young people-report Retrospective</p>

Source: (Independent Research Solutions 2011)

Table 5.5. Skills for Work (SfW)

Programme summary	<p>The aim of SfW courses was to help young people to develop skills and knowledge in a broad vocational area, core skills, an understanding of the workplace, positive attitudes to learning and employability skills. A key element of the programme was on learning through practical experience. The courses were intended to provide progression pathways to employment, training or further learning for pupils of all abilities.</p>
Target group	<p>14- to 16-year-olds of all abilities. Evidence from the evaluation suggested that SfW tended to target students with good behaviour and attendance records and, for some courses, the necessary academic ability.</p>
Evaluation aims	<p>The main aims of the evaluation were to examine key aspects of SfW course design, assessment regimes, timetabling and delivery issues and to obtain the views and experiences of key stakeholders including pupils and teaching staff involved in the pilots.</p>
Evaluation design and sample	<p>The process evaluation was mixed methods and included telephone surveys with delivery centres and their partners at two time points, as well as case studies.</p> <p>The second telephone survey was carried out in 2007 and involved the colleges, schools and provider from the first round of interviews, as well as interviews with a new sample of 10 delivery centres that only started delivering SfW courses in the second year of the pilot. A total of 45 interviews were carried out.</p>

Measures of employability skills	<p>As part of the second telephone survey, all interviewees in schools and colleges were asked a series of closed-ended questions on their perceived impact of the SfW course on students' outcomes, most of which related to employability including whether SfW:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced students' specific vocational skills/knowledge • Enhanced students' skills/attitudes relevant to employment • Helped students to make decisions about post-school transitions • Enhanced students' ability to work with, and relate to, adults • Improved students' motivation to learn • Improved the behaviour of students • Led to higher students attendance rates at college than at school • Improved the attendance of students in school.
Relevant findings	<p>Percentage agreement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Enhanced students' specific vocational skills/knowledge: 44% • Enhanced students' skills/attitudes relevant to employment: 39% • Helped students to make decisions about post-school transitions: 44% • Enhanced students' ability to work with, and relate to, adults: 39% • Improved students' motivation to learn: 38% • Improved the behaviour of students: 32% • Led to higher attendance rates by students at college than at school: 18% • Improved the attendance of students in school: 16%. <p>Similarly, all 41 students who were interviewed (as part of the case studies) were able to identify positive impacts of participating in SfW courses including increasing their <i>skills, knowledge, confidence and awareness of the world of work</i>. Almost three-quarters said that they thought that participating in the courses had improved their chances of finding work in the future.</p>
Summary	<p>Quantitative and qualitative Generic measures Provider-report Retrospective</p>

Source: (Spielhofer and Walker 2008)

Table 5.6. Volunteering

Programme summary	<p>N/A as findings are from a research project examining the links between young people's volunteering experiences and their skills, knowledge and attitudinal development.</p>
Target group	<p>11- to 25-year-olds</p>
Evaluation aims	<p>The research explored the skills, knowledge and attitudinal development that young people gain from volunteering.</p>
Evaluation design and sample	<p>The research study was qualitative. Fieldwork was carried out with volunteers and staff from 30 projects and included focus groups with young people ($n=215$), interviews (face-to-face or telephone) with young people ($n=29$) and surveys with young people ($n=35$).</p>

<p>Measures of employability skills</p>	<p>In total, 215 young people aged 11 to 25 were interviewed, of whom 57% were female and 43% male. Approximately 20% were BME, and just over 10% were disabled.</p> <p>The interview data were coded against a framework for personal and social development skills that grouped skills under the headings of personal skills, interpersonal skills and understanding contemporary issues:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal skills included planning, taking responsibility, improving learning and performance, communication skills, problem solving, self-awareness, self-confidence/self-esteem, making decisions • Interpersonal skills included active listening, working with others/teamwork, leadership, managing relationships, negotiation • Contemporary issues included budgeting/financial management, understanding diversity, understanding society, rights and responsibilities, preparation for work <p>Raters assessed how often each different skill was mentioned in the sessions. The young people surveys focused on their perceptions of whether specific skills had gone up, down or remained the same as a result of volunteering.</p>
<p>Relevant findings</p>	<p>Analysis of the group sessions demonstrated that <i>self-confidence and communication skills</i> were the personal skills most frequently identified as favourably influenced by volunteering, followed by the interpersonal skills of <i>teamwork</i> and <i>managing relationships</i>. Data from the interviews with 29 young people revealed similar findings, although taking responsibility and problem solving were mentioned as skills gained through volunteering more frequently during the individual than group interviews.</p> <p>Based on the data from the young people questionnaires, young people perceived that <i>self-confidence and communication</i> were the most commonly improved skills.</p>
<p>Summary</p>	<p>Qualitative Generic measures Young people-report Retrospective</p>

Source: (The National Youth Agency 2007)

Table 5.7. Young People's Development Programme (YPDP)

<p>Programme summary</p>	<p>YPDP aimed to have an impact on vulnerable young people's self-esteem and to provide them with opportunities and a different outlook. YPDP comprised 27 youth projects, each of which delivered an intensive (6-10 hours per week for 1 year) holistic programme of education and support to young people deemed by professionals as at-risk of school exclusion, drug misuse and teenage pregnancy. The support offered included education (literacy, numeracy, IT, vocational skills), training and employment opportunities, life skills (e.g. communication, decision-making, goal-setting, relationships, negotiation, anger management), mentoring, volunteering, health education and advice on accessing services. YPDP was located within existing youth projects that received additional funding.</p>
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Target group	YPDP was targeted at 13- to 15-year-old young people living in areas with high rates of deprivation and teenage conceptions who were deemed by teachers, social workers and other staff to be at risk of school exclusion, teenage pregnancy and/or substance misuse.
Evaluation aims	The YPDP evaluation assessed programme impact, as well as whether the YPDP provision was in line with its aims in terms of the young people recruited, the duration and intensity of provision and the range of activities delivered to each young person.
Evaluation design and sample	<p>The evaluation included an impact study using a non-randomised, matched design, in conjunction with a detailed process evaluation. Notably, surveys with young people who participated in YPDP and a comparison group of young people were administered at three time points: baseline (approximately 2 months after joining YPDP), 9 months after joining YPDP and 18 months after joining.</p> <p>At baseline, the young people were 14.6 years of age, on average. YPDP participants were slightly more likely than those attending comparison sites to be young men, socio-economically disadvantaged (i.e. living in non-privately owned accommodation, living in a household with no one in paid work, living with a lone parent) and from a black or minority ethnic (BME) group. There were also some differences between the groups in terms of risk factors.</p>
Measures of employability skills	<p>Young people reported on the perceived impact of the programme in the following areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Working with others • Talking to people and listening • Making/keeping friends • Knowing where to go for help • Knowing what you want and how to get it • Confidence/liking self • Being prepared to get a job • Staying out of trouble • Being less angry or able to calm down • Being healthy • Getting on with teachers • Reading and writing.
Relevant findings	<p>YPDP young people were significantly more positive than the comparison young people about the impact of the programme in all but 2 of the 12 areas of perceived impacts (i.e. making/keeping friends, getting on with teachers). YPDP young people were particularly positive about their <i>ability to work with others and to talk and listen to people</i>.</p> <p>At the 18-month follow-up, when nearly all the young people had left their programme, 87% of the YPDP young people still felt that the programme had helped them.</p>
Summary	<p>Quantitative Generic measures Young people-report Before and after</p>

Source: (Wiggins, Bonell et al. 2008)

5.2 Learning from the programme review

The overall aim of the programme review was to move away from discussions about measuring employability skills to examining whether and how these skills are assessed in recent and current programmes for young people. Our review revealed several interesting findings.

First, locating relevant programme evaluations that included assessments of young people's employability skills was rather challenging. Based on our searches, it appears that measurement of employability skills is still not *de rigueur* in evaluations of young people's programmes. Indeed, it appeared that unless the programme specifically aimed to influence young people's employability skills, assessment of employability skills was not included in surveys. That is, programmes that primarily targeted hard outcomes, such as educational attainment or employment often excluded employability skills from evaluation frameworks, thereby rendering it impossible to assess whether the presence of certain key employability skills was a necessarily condition for longer-term impacts on hard outcomes.

Second, at least based on the programmes we included, most evaluations included relatively generic assessments of employability skills. It is often argued that measurement of employability skills requires a subjective, programme-specific approach. However, our assessment of the evidence suggests that while a few items may be quite specific to particular programmes, the majority of items included in the programme evaluation reviewed focus on comparable skills – even if worded in slightly different ways – including:

- Confidence
- Problem solving
- Interpersonal skills
- Communication
- Planning
- General awareness of and preparedness for working
- Writing CVs or job applications.

Indeed, many of the above general employability skills align with the framework set out in Tables 2.2 and 2.3. Our view is that the more subjective, programme-specific skills can be assessed with a few additional survey items and by qualitative research.

Third, the main variation on the measurement approaches used was in terms of study design. That is, some of the programmes used 'before and after' designs, whereby young people reported on their employability skills before the programme began (i.e. to establish the baseline), as well as after a set period of time. The rationale behind this type of design is that – all other mitigating factors aside – significant changes in the survey responses can be attributed to the programme. On the other hand, some programmes chose to assess changes in employability skills retrospectively – that is, asking young people the degree to which they think the programme influenced their skills. As described in Section 3, both of these designs have weaknesses.

Notably, the studies that used 'before and after' assessments tended to see relatively small changes over time. Although we can only surmise why this was the case (not in the least that the programme did not influence young people's employability skills), it may be that young people had an inflated view of their skills at the beginning of the programme, resulting in higher than expected baseline scores, which allowed for little room for change as a result of the programme (even if the programme did improve young people's employability skills). Retrospective reports, on the other hand, are subject to respondent bias such that respondents may be invested in 'proving' that the programme was effective, thereby ensuring that their responses are favourable. In addition, several of the evaluations also collected qualitative data from young people (and others) in addition to or in lieu of surveys. By and large, these results tended to be quite favourable (regardless of the survey findings), which suggests that qualitative data may be a necessary supplement to survey data, particularly when trying to isolate nuanced programme findings that may be difficult to capture with surveys.

Finally, the review clearly pointed to the fact that the discussion of employability skills largely focuses on disadvantaged groups. Thus, it is clearly important that existing measures can accurately demonstrate acquisition of employability skills as an element of their progression towards secure employment.

6. Conclusions and next steps

There is extant guidance on measuring employability, but providers – particularly small organisations in the voluntary and community sector – may not be sufficiently familiar with either the available guidance or the skills required to identify and adapt appropriate measures for their purposes. Certainly, some specific examples from large established organisations and our review of existing evaluations indicate that measurement of soft skills remains limited, despite the weighty guidance documents issued over the past decade.

Existing guidance, for the most part, reinforces a perception that outcomes need to be project-specific, rather than general, and developed 'in-house' for each project. However, as suggested by the UKCES reviews of assessment across business and educational settings, there may be scope for learning across as well as within sectors, which mandates a more universal approach to measurement to enable comparability. Somewhat strangely, the many substantial guidance documents and reviews of practice make no mention of the academic literature on measuring various 'soft outcome' measures – or on proper testing and validation of new instruments.

As the focus of both the UKCES and Ofsted work seems to be on more formal training for learners, there may be scope for extending guidance to support organisations in the voluntary and community sector focusing predominantly on softer employability skills, and working with those for whom achieving qualifications and paid employment are longer-term objectives.

Arguably, and in line with implicit suggestions within the WEFO report, it would be simpler to suggest that all projects complete practitioner monitoring forms and participant self-report surveys, with additional qualitative work for more bespoke outcomes. Were there a set of validated tools to choose from, providers and funders could have more confidence in the evidence of impact gathered.²²

Among the next steps in the design of a common employability skills evaluation framework will be large-scale piloting of (existing and new) measures, to determine the most effective way of measuring employability skills in a survey format. Key foci include item wording and, perhaps more importantly, the structure of the response categories. Further development work is needed on how to appropriately anchor response categories to ensure that young people can accurately assess their skills at baseline and again at follow-up points.

²² Catalyst (<http://www.ncvys.org.uk/index.php?page=782>), a consortium of four organisations, is working with DfE as the strategic partner for young people. One of their initiatives aims to develop a framework for measuring impact for programmes within the youth sector. This work is outlining a model of how individual skills including communication, confidence, problem solving and the like are often the precursors of desired longer-term outcomes. To inform future evaluation activity, Catalyst is outlining existing measures that include assessments of some or all of the relevant skills. This type of desk research is desperately needed to avoid the creation of more bespoke and unvalidated measures. While this work does not explicitly focus on 'employability skills' *per se*, its outputs certainly will be relevant.

Face-to-face surveys where interviewers can ask young people questions about the interpretability and their understanding of survey items would be a helpful starting point. It may be that future surveys need to ask, for each employability skill, not only the level of skills young people possess at baseline and at follow-up, but also ask young people at follow-up to reassess their baseline skills. This would support direct comparisons of contemporary and retrospective baselines with the follow-up scores. This type of more detailed questioning may provide further data to examine discrepancies over time and how young people's views of their starting points may have shifted over time. Related to this, the wording of the items will be critical to ensure individual items can adequately capture the variability in young people's employability skills. Perhaps most importantly, further development of a measurement framework needs to involve not only those with expertise in policy and practice, but also measurement experts – those with the technical skills to anticipate and tackle the challenges involved in the design and analysis of robust survey measures.

As noted in several places in this report, any survey data should be supplemented by more in-depth qualitative evaluation with young people (and other relevant stakeholders). The inclusions of qualitative methods allows for the more subjective viewpoints and programme-specific findings to be captured. Further, the in-depth information will enable researchers to begin to understand mechanisms of influence. That is, we can determine if improvements in young people's employability skills are a necessary condition for improvements in hard outcomes, particularly in the long-term. We can also begin to understand which employability skills matter the most for whom. Existing survey evidence tells us very little about this.

Some recent reports have voiced some concern that the importance of employability skills in tackling youth unemployment is overstated (UKCES 2011; Mann 2012). Short-term programmes loosely focused on building employability skills should not be seen as the panacea for a lack of real opportunity for young people. However, this does not detract from the need for programmes to support and properly measure employability skills, in order to improve the evidence base and ensure that learners – particularly the most disadvantaged – make meaningful gains in addressing personal barriers to employment and have their progress recognised.

In closing, our rapid review of the existing evidence on measurement of employability skills for young people revealed a great deal of information and recognition of the importance of these skills. At the same time, very little of this information provided substantive guidance on how to best measure these skills. Some existing programmes have included measurement of employability skills in their evaluation frameworks, but more robust data are needed to enable more sophisticated analyses that can reveal the role of employability skills in fostering long-term favourable outcomes for young people. It seems a sensible next step is to agree more widely on a framework of employability skills (as summarised in Section 2), operationally define each component of the framework and begin to collate existing assessment tools to be piloted in forthcoming evaluations, which should include some more nuanced analyses examining, for example, which programme components are associated with young people's employability skills, as well as which employability skills are associated with relevant hard outcomes.

Appendix A

Table A. Commercially produced 'soft outcomes' tools

Tool	Key features
Outcomes Star (for work and learning)	<p>A tool for supporting and measuring change when working with vulnerable people, adapted for different groups, and underpinned by an explicit model of change. There is a version for 'work and learning', developed by Triangle Consulting with service providers and commissioners from Camden, Islington and Kensington and Chelsea, and funded by the Learning and Skills Council (LSC). There are seven outcome areas on which participants rate themselves (with support from staff). For each one, a ten-step 'journey of change' is described, with steps from '1' (not thinking about work) to '10' (self-reliance). The areas are: 1.Challenges; 2.Job-specific skills; 3.Stability; 4.Job search skills; 5.Basic skills; 6.Aspiration and motivation; 7.Social skills for work.</p> <p>Costs: Free to use in paper format. There is a charge for online and commercial use (not specified).</p> <p>http://www.outcomesstar.org.uk/work/</p>
Spirit Level	<p>A CDROM-based tool for measuring 'quality of life' for young people at several points in time (up to 50). Consists of 72 questions covering areas such as health, friendship, values and control.</p> <p>Costs: £99 for training, £15 for software; £6-10 for licences.</p> <p>http://www.spiritlevel.org.uk/</p>
The Rickter Scale	<p>An assessment and planning process based around a hand-held interactive board. Each board is made with 10 headings, with a horizontal sliding scale for each, from 0 (not happy at all) to 10 (very happy). Boards can be supplied with headings reflecting a range of issues (eg bereavement, mental health, debt management and 'employability').</p> <p>Costs: £800 for training (£100 each, minimum 8 people) plus £87.50 per board and additional costs for customisation.</p> <p>http://www.rickterscale.com/</p>
The SOUL Record	<p>The SOUL Record is a RARPA-recognised²³ toolkit for measuring progression in soft outcomes e.g. confidence, self-esteem and problem solving. It includes a range of questionnaires, worksheets and observation sheets to track progress. Outcomes for adults are divided into three areas: 'attitude', 'personal/ interpersonal' and 'practical'. For young people. Outcomes can be mapped against the five outcome areas of Every Child Matters.</p> <p>Costs: £150 for training per user (includes materials).</p> <p>http://soulrecord.org/</p>

²³ <http://archive.niace.org.uk/projects/RARPA/Default.htm>

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