**PURPOSE OF THIS PAPER**

This paper forms part of a Department of Education, Employment and Workplace Relations (DEEWR) funded project to research, develop and implement a nationally accepted, cross-sectoral framework that will describe and measure employability skills and associated personal attributes. It provides an overview of insights gathered through the project to date, sets out a number of proposals for the content and structure of the framework and poses questions for further discussion.

The paper provides the background to a series of public consultations being conducted across the country in August 2011. These consultations are the final stage of a scoping process for the framework and will result in a set of recommendations for its further development.

The framework is intended to be a resource that can be used across a broad range of contexts. It will be applicable across industries, education and training sectors and employment settings. It will also complement the Australian Core Skills Framework (ACSF) and support the work being undertaken under the National Foundation Skills Strategy for Adults.

**WHAT WE’VE LEARNT SO FAR**

**The current situation**

Conceptions of employability skills have been around in Australia in one form or another for twenty years. Recently there has been an increased focus on these skills, both nationally and internationally, and a move towards making them more prominent and explicit in education and training systems.

There is a wide range of terms used to describe these types of ‘non-technical’ skills, including ‘generic skills’, ‘essential skills’, ‘soft skills’, ‘key competencies’, ‘transferable skills’, ‘enterprise skills’ and ‘21st century skills’. Many of the frameworks used around the world to describe these skills are also broader than those relevant to employment and include capabilities that might be described as ‘life skills’. The focus that has been adopted for this framework is the non-technical knowledge, skills and attributes required to effectively participate in the workforce.

In Australia, there are a number of existing arrangements that address non-technical skills (most of which are broader than those “required to effectively participate in the workforce”). They include a set of General Capabilities that form part of the new Australian Curriculum for schools, the Employability Skills Framework used in the Vocational Education and Training sector, differing collections of Graduate Attributes developed by universities, the Australian Core Skills Framework, a cross-sectoral framework for addressing language, literacy and numeracy skills and the Australian Blueprint for Career Development, which addresses career management competencies. The Australian Qualifications Framework, which spans all education and training sectors, captures these skills under four broad categories of Generic Skills:

- **Basic fundamental skills**, such as language, literacy, numeracy and ICT literacy skills
- **People skills**, such as being respectful to others, communication, team working skills
- **Thinking skills**, such as analytic, problem solving, synthesis, creativity and learning skills
- **Personal skills**, such as self management, cultural understanding, having a global perspective and acting with responsible, ethical behaviour.

Whilst the details of each of these frameworks vary, there is great similarity in the types of skills that they cover (which is also true of other frameworks in use internationally).
Despite widespread agreement of the importance of these skills and attitudes in the workplace, the literature highlights significant uncertainty and scepticism about teaching and assessing them in a valid and ethical way. A range of issues, including differing definitions and interpretations, differing levels of abstraction, and at the delivery end, differences in confidence in and/or commitment to teaching these skills, appear to have prevented the full integration of employability skills into our education and training systems.

From our consultations

To date, we have spoken with around 150 people, including employers from a range of industry sectors (who form the majority of those consulted), and representatives of industry peak bodies, schools, vocational education and training providers, higher education institutions, employment service providers, community organisations and relevant government agencies.

There was general agreement that although many of the skills that assist someone to gain, retain and be successful in employment may also be applicable to other areas of life, the framework should focus on the role they play in relation to employment. The consultations have also told us that a new, cross-sectoral framework could provide benefits for a broad range of potential users. Of particular value would be the creation of a common language around employability skills and the establishment of clear benchmarks for addressing them.

The consultations identified that the framework could provide a means of articulating and clarifying expectations about what is appropriate or necessary at different stages of a career in various organisations and industries, and that it might help to reinforce the value of skills that are otherwise often taken for granted. It could also provide the basis for tools and resources that could:

- assist individual job seekers and those looking for promotion to identify their strengths and areas for improvement
- assist employers (especially SMEs) with recruitment processes, workforce development strategies and support for employee development
- provide better information to those working with job seekers, to enable better matching of work and training opportunities
- support the three education and training sectors in the design of curricula/methodologies/support structures that prepare individuals for employment or further develop their employment-related knowledge and skills
- improve accountability of funded programs through measurement and reporting of outcomes.

In our discussions, many have told us that the non-technical skills most in demand by employers now are the same as those required by employers 50 years ago, and that it is simply the level of priority placed on particular skills that changes across contexts.

The idea of having a framework that is relevant across different stages of an individual’s working life, and at different levels of skill complexity, is one that seems to have resonance. Unlike many of the performance and development frameworks used in large organisations, none of the existing generic or employability skills frameworks we have examined incorporate distinctions between levels of skill. Consultations have told us that a framework which uses different levels of performance (similar to the approach adopted by the ACSF, which identifies five levels of performance in literacy and numeracy skills), would assist in measuring individuals’ progress in their development of employment-related skills. However, many also cautioned that the ability to measure individuals’ skill levels could be misused to create a barrier to employment for some, and that this should be avoided at all costs.
The question of whether attributes or attitudes have a place in the framework has created the greatest level of debate in conversations so far. There is no doubt that they are considered to be an essential part of an individual’s ability to participate successfully in employment. However, they are also very difficult to define and measure, and can be subject to considerable levels of subjectivity and bias.

Also emphasised through the consultations is the fact that a focus on ‘employability skills’ alone will not solve all employment issues. There is a wider range of factors impacting on individuals’ ability to obtain and retain a job, such as economic climate, family, housing, health and transport issues, which need to be taken into consideration. It should also be noted that while the term ‘employability skills’ is used in this paper, concerns were expressed about the potential for this to be narrowly interpreted as the entry-level skills needed to gain employment. The title of the framework is yet to be confirmed.

**OUR PROPOSED APPROACH**

A list of skills will not be sufficient to achieve the diverse range of purposes identified through our consultations. What is needed is a framework that brings together a number of concepts in a coherent way, providing a foundation of common language, definitions and benchmarks upon which different sectors can build tools and resources that will be useful to them.

Based on our analysis of the literature and consultations to date, we propose that the framework be based upon the following concepts.

1. **Developmental in nature**

   In recognition of the need for the framework to be applicable across the span of employment contexts, from someone who is at the pre-employment stage, through to someone who is highly experienced in operating in the world of work, we propose that the framework have a strong developmental aspect. Research into the ways in which workers develop their skills has shown that as an individual moves along a spectrum from ‘novice’ to ‘expert’ in a particular context (see Figure 1 below), their reliance upon rules decreases and their use of their own intuition and judgement increases. Individuals will be at different stages depending on their knowledge and experience of the context, while progress through the stages is dependent on motivation, opportunities for ‘testing-out’ the skills, the amount and nature of support and their ability to reflect on and learn from their experience.

   In line with this research, and to assist the framework in complementing the ACSF, we suggest that the framework needs to incorporate six stages of development – five levels applicable to the work environment (i.e. novice to expert), and an additional ‘pre-employment’ stage.

---

1 Drawn from the research of H. and S. Dreyfus (University of California, Berkeley), the work of Patricia Benner and further development by John Edwards of Edwards Exploration.
2. More than just skills

It is widely accepted that employability skills are context-dependent and best developed in real work contexts. This does not mean, however, that there is nothing that can be done to prepare individuals for the world of work. In fact, employers have told us that having an awareness and understanding of workplace expectations and cultures prior to commencing a job can increase an individual’s chances of retaining and succeeding in that job. This suggests that there is an awareness and knowledge component of ‘employability’.

Consultations have also emphasised the importance of attributes and attitudes in the workplace. Whilst there are challenges in trying to define and measure attributes and attitudes, it is possible to describe them in terms of demonstrable behaviour. For example, the attribute of ‘punctuality’ is an outcome of good planning, self-management and understanding of workplace expectations, all of which can be demonstrated. Attitudes can also be demonstrated, but not measured in an objective way.

We therefore suggest that the framework needs incorporate skills, knowledge and attitudes. While the skills and knowledge lend themselves to description at different levels of performance, this will not be appropriate for attitudes. They instead form an underpinning element of performance.

3. Relevant across different contexts

Based on an analysis of the elements most commonly used in approaches to non-technical skill development from across Australia and the world, we propose that the framework incorporate three broad areas of skills, knowledge and attitudes:

1. Manage yourself in the world of work
2. Work effectively with others
3. Get the job done.

These would be underpinned by a series of sub-elements (also identified through analysis of existing approaches), with descriptors of performance for each. This would enable the framework to be adapted and customised for specific contexts, which reflects the reality that not all individuals or jobs will require all of the skills, knowledge and attitudes contained in the framework, or require them at the same level.

There is often an assumption that if a skill is ‘generic’, then it is automatically transferable between contexts. Whilst the skills, knowledge and behaviours to be included in the framework will be relevant across a variety of employment settings, the literature suggests that individuals need to have a particular set of ‘learning’ skills that allow them to transfer and adapt existing skills, knowledge and behaviours to a new context. Research around the novice to expert continuum suggests that every time an individual moves to a new context they become a novice again until such time as they learn the rules of the new context. These ‘learning’ skills (e.g. the ability to reflect on and learn from experience) are an essential part of being able to adapt to new contexts. We therefore suggest that a fourth area – the knowledge, skills and attitudes to learn and develop – be incorporated into the framework and that this broadly align with the ‘learning’ strand of the ACSF.

4. Teachable, learnable, demonstrable and measurable

In order to determine which skills, knowledge and behaviours should be included in the framework, we have been developing and testing a set of selection criteria. We suggest that in order to be included in the framework, the elements must meet each of the following criteria:
Employability Skills and Attributes Framework Project – Background Paper

- able to be contextualised across a range of employment and pre-employment contexts
- able to be described and demonstrated at different levels of performance, and therefore able to be measured
- able to be taught (in the case of knowledge) or learned (in the case of skill and behaviour).

Ensuring that the content of the framework meets these criteria will assist in creating a more consistent and objective approach to addressing employment-related skills, knowledge and behaviours.

The ‘measurable’ aspect will need to be handled with care by those developing tools and resources from the framework, to ensure that it doesn’t create additional barriers to employment, or additional burdens for those charged with helping individuals to develop these skills.

WHAT THIS MIGHT LOOK LIKE

While details and specific wording are to be developed in the next stage of the project, the proposals outlined above are leading us towards some broad conceptualisations of the framework.

The framework represents only one aspect of a series of factors contributing to an individual’s ability to gain, retain and be successful in employment. Figure 2 below illustrates how the framework might relate to these other aspects. It is anticipated that details of support factors would be built into the framework.

Figure 2. Factors contributing to employment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>‘Employability Skills’</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Direct and manage your career</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Manage yourself in the world of work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Learn and develop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Work effectively with others</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Get the job done</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Core Skills (from the Australian Core Skills Framework)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Learning</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. Reading</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. Writing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. Oral Communication</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5. Numeracy</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Technical or Discipline-Specific Skills and Knowledge (from curriculum and Training Packages)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Support factors (eg. employer guidance, opportunities to develop skills)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Enabling factors (eg. health, housing, transport)

Figure 3 outlines the four proposed broad skill areas, as well as the knowledge, skills and attitudes that might be contained in each area.

We propose that descriptors of performance be developed for the knowledge and skill elements contained in the broad skill areas, with different descriptors for each of the six stages of development. We anticipate that the attitudinal elements will underpin the knowledge and skills, but will remain the same across the six stages. Figure 4 illustrates what this might look like for one element. This example is only for the purpose of illustrating the concept, as the actual descriptors would need to be developed and tested extensively in the next stage of the project.
Figure 3. Proposed skill areas and elements

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proposed Skill Areas</th>
<th>Proposed knowledge and skills</th>
<th>Proposed attitudes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The knowledge, skills and attitudes to...</strong></td>
<td><strong>(to be described across different levels)</strong></td>
<td><strong>(will not be differentiated by level)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| 1. **manage yourself in the world of work** | - Direct and manage own career and work life  
- Understand and work with workplace protocols  
- Manage own behaviour | - Willingness to manage and adapt own behaviour to address workplace protocols |
| 2. **work effectively with others** | - Understand and work with roles and responsibilities  
- Contribute, influence and lead  
- Negotiate and resolve conflict | - Willingness to recognize other perspectives and express own perspective  
- Willingness to reach agreement with others  
- Willingness to actively participate in work activities |
| 3. **get the job done** | - Plan, organise and implement  
- Make decisions  
- Recognise and solve problems  
- Develop new ideas and approaches  
- Use information and communication technology (ICT) to accomplish tasks | - Desire to establish and achieve goals  
- Willingness to try something new |
| 4. **learn and develop** | - Understand and manage self as a learner  
- Understand and apply strategies for learning | - Willingness to reflect own experience  
- Willingness to learn from others |

* This area would broadly align with the ‘learning’ strand of the ACSF, but would focus more specifically on learning in a work context.
**Figure 4. Example descriptors of performance**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Skill Area: Manage yourself in the world of work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Element of Focus:</strong> Understand and work with workplace protocols</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Pre-employment</strong> (Novice)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowledge</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skills</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Attitudes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. Does our proposed approach adequately cater for a variety of users and contexts?

2. Do you agree with our suggested criteria for elements of the framework—that is, that all elements should be teachable, learnable, demonstrable and measurable?

3. The previous page contains sample descriptions of the developmental stages of one element. Is this developmental approach a useful one?

4. Do the four proposed skill areas and their sub-elements (i.e. knowledge, skills and attitudes) sufficiently capture what is needed to gain, retain and be successful in work? Is there anything missing or is there a better way of grouping them?

5. Do you agree with our proposed treatment of ‘attributes’ and ‘attitudes’?

6. There is a hope that this framework will be applied across a whole range of contexts—education providers, small and medium employers, large companies, job agencies, and so on. How could we maximize its value and prospects for use?