

# Preparing for careers

## – the skills employers are looking for

Below are the key points covered in the UCAS course step, as well as more information about the skills and knowledge employers are looking for, and how you can develop them.

### What level of skills and qualifications do employers want in the future?

- There will be an increasing demand for higher skilled workers across the world. In the UK, there will be more jobs requiring higher level skills and fewer in lower skilled employment.
- By 2022, it's anticipated that over half the jobs will be in managerial, professional, or associate professional positions, which means an increasing number of people will need to have gained some level of higher education (Level 4 or above), whether through an apprenticeship, college, or university.
- Technology will increasingly pervade every work environment. Trends in technological developments suggest that boundaries will slowly dissolve between sectors, and will change traditional modes of working. This will require continuously updating your skills to meet changing business needs.

### Does it matter what degree subject I take and where I study?

- Across the UK, employers report that it is difficult to recruit people with science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) skills, at all levels.
- 40% of employers surveyed said they preferred to recruit graduates with a STEM subject.
- 19% of employers preferred a business-related subject.

- 34% stated they didn't have any preference for a degree subject.
- Only 17% of employers said the university attended was one of their top three considerations.
- **Important:** some careers and professions do require specific degrees, subjects, or other qualifications, so always check if you have a particular career in mind before choosing your degree.

### What does it take to get hired?

- When it comes to recruiting graduates, attitudes and aptitudes are often seen as more important than formal qualifications.
- Although technical and basic skills are required to get past the initial application stage, other aspects such as personal qualities, attitudes, and general aptitudes are seen as far more critical.
- Resilience is frequently cited by employers as an essential quality for young people to have – to be able to cope with set-backs and criticism, to be motivated to overcome obstacles, and to stay calm under pressure.
- Crucial to the decision to recruit a young person is a positive attitude to work, punctuality, flexibility, verbal communication skills, and the ability to make a professional introduction.
- Nearly half of employers stated they hadn't hired a young person because they felt they didn't have the right attitude.

## So what are the skills and knowledge required?

Employer surveys continue to emphasise the need to have good key skills, transferable skills, the ability to network, and above all, the right attitude. The World Economic Forum has identified 16 core skills it sees as being critical for workers in the 21st century. These are split into the following three areas:

### Key skills

- Literacy.
- Numeracy.
- Scientific literacy.
- ICT literacy.
- Financial literacy.
- Cultural and civic literacy .

### Abilities

- Communication.
- Creativity.
- Critical thinking / problem solving.
- Collaboration.

### Qualities

- Curiosity.
- Initiative.
- Persistence / grit.
- Adaptability.
- Leadership.
- Social / cultural awareness.

## What are the skills gaps?

Recent employer surveys highlighted that a significant number of employers say graduates lack basic skills in numeracy and literacy. They say how a weakness in basic skills can affect performance in everyday tasks. For example, the ability to draw out information effectively from written texts and instructions, produce written communication, or work through calculations and make sense of numerical data. It's therefore important to continue to maintain the numeracy and literacy skills you gained at school.

Employers are also concerned that applicants don't have appropriate skills in problem-solving, communication, teamwork, analytical thinking, self-management, and resilience (able to cope with change and pressure in the workplace).

## How can I develop these skills and knowledge?

You will already have a significant array of skills and knowledge – much at a high level. It may be that you are just not aware of the skills and knowledge you have!

**Many skills are 'transferable'**, which means you can develop them in a learning, work, or social context, and use or enhance them in other contexts. They are essential skills that help people to be adaptable and flexible, and have a significant impact on everyone's ability to make a confident contribution, and cope with change, both in social and working life.

There are many transferable skills, and you will already have many of them – they can be summed up as those which help you to:

- do things independently
- know how to find things out
- think creatively
- sort out problems
- organise and manage your own work
- get on with other people and make a good contribution in a team
- show leadership

**Specific skills** are needed to do a particular job or work in a particular industry. These skills are essential in many jobs and careers. Some employers set out the actual skills needed to do a job, and cannot employ those who don't have them. They are most easily developed through vocational training, such as an apprenticeship, or vocational education, such as a foundation degree. These skills often build on each other, so you need to acquire one set of skills before moving on to the next level. They are recognised by trade and professional bodies who may provide a licence to practise or exempt young people from having to take a professional exam after they've started a job.

### There's also 'transferable' knowledge

Knowledge describes facts, information, and understanding. Transferable knowledge helps people to be flexible and adaptable, and can be used in many aspects of life, learning, and work. Transferable knowledge and understanding is gained in all kinds of learning, but most where the learning is practical, work-related, and applied to a real life context.

Transferable knowledge takes many forms, but it can be summed up as knowledge and understanding of:

- good communication by speaking, listening and writing
- information technology
- report and essay writing
- preparation and delivery of presentations
- research and referencing
- data recording
- analysis and interpretation

**Finally... 'specific knowledge'** is most strongly developed by studying academic subjects. So, you will have developed a wide range of specific knowledge through the subjects you've studied so far. It's essential to the understanding and enjoyment of language and literature, mathematics and science, history and geography, art and music, technology and engineering – the things which shape the world in which we live. Knowledge underpins all learning, and is constantly changing as inventions occur, the environment evolves, and nations develop. Your 'specific' knowledge will also evolve and develop, as you progress to higher levels of education and study.

### You can maintain existing skills and develop others

in a variety of ways – not just through your education and training. These are also very relevant for you to reference in your UCAS personal statement, because universities and colleges will be looking for the wider contexts in which you have developed your skills and experience. Here are a few examples:

- **Part-time work** – develops your confidence and skills in teamwork, communication, and customer service. Turning up for work on time, and being able to handle things when it gets busy, all demonstrate you are committed and reliable. Part-time work can also help maintain basic numeracy skills if you have to handle money or work out quantities of goods.
- **Sport** – develops teamwork skills and organisational skills if you have to help arrange events. Improving your sporting skills through training requires commitment, motivation, and perseverance, which are all great attitudes that you can talk about. Writing match reports, helping manage money for subscriptions, match fees, and equipment, also give your key skills a workout!
- **Performing arts** – drama, dance, and music are all helpful for developing confidence in communication and presentation. You can develop organisation skills by helping to run a performance, or develop key skills by getting involved in writing programmes or helping to work out costs for performances.
- **Clubs, societies, and voluntary work** – organising a student debating club, acting as a treasurer for the chess club, writing for community newspapers, or acting as a mentor for disadvantaged teenagers are a few examples of the huge variety of activities you can do. These offer many ways to develop different skills, and demonstrate that you have a positive attitude.

### Is work experience important?

One recent survey shows two-thirds of employers look for graduates with relevant work experience, because it helps graduates prepare for work and develop general business awareness. Importantly, a third of employers felt that applicants did not have a satisfactory level of knowledge about their chosen career or job.

One way to gain a better understanding of a career is to organise some work experience or a few days' work shadowing with an employer. It won't give you time to develop job-specific skills, but it can develop confidence and communication skills, and provide insight into the work involved. It also shows you have motivation and commitment. Some schools, colleges, and universities may be able to organise this for you. If not, try to research and contact companies yourself.

Alternatively, you can gain relevant work experience as part of a vocational programme, such as a BTEC diploma or apprenticeship. You can also consider an internship or taking a higher education course which offers a work placement (a sandwich course). You could also consider a foundation degree.

- **Internships** can last from a few weeks to a year, and could be something you organise during a summer holiday or a year out. Depending on the type of contract, you may or may not receive a wage. They are available in many careers sectors such as business, law, marketing, engineering, and hospitality, and can give you the opportunity to gain more career-specific skills and knowledge. As they are very popular, competition for places is high, and you may need to apply early.
- **Sandwich degrees** are normally four years in length, and provide a year working in industry with an employer. Most placements offer a salary and provide a great opportunity to gain an in depth experience of work in your chosen field. On some courses, the placement will be arranged for you, while on others you have to find it yourself.
- **Foundation degrees** are vocational. They combine academic skills and knowledge with workplace performance and productivity. They focus on a particular job role or profession and are designed by employers.