

# Paving the way from key skills to functional skills

## 3 Functional skills and employability



SUPPORT PROGRAMME

enhancing skills  
for life and work



# What is on the skills agenda?

The Leitch report, published in December 2006, has put skills for employability firmly on the education and training agenda:

**‘In the 21st Century, our natural resource is our people – and their potential is both untapped and vast. Skills will unlock that potential. The prize for our country will be enormous – higher productivity, the creation of wealth and social justice.’**

Leitch Review of Skills. *Prosperity for all in the global economy – world class skills* (HM Treasury 2006)

Leitch identified that our economy needs the following skills in addition to specific vocational skills and qualifications at every level up to Level 4 and above:

- literacy
- numeracy
- teamworking
- communication.

The Review has set **challenging targets** to meet the skills gap by 2020, including:

- 95% of adults to achieve functional literacy and numeracy
- more than 90% of adults to be qualified to at least Level 2
- 1.9m more Level 3 attainments
- raising the number of apprentices to 500,000 a year
- more than 40% of adults to be qualified to Level 4 and above.

## The role of 14–19 education and training

The Leitch Review focused on adult skills but the report also recognises **the vital role of education for young people**. The development of functional skills as a key component of the reforms in 14–19 education and training will make a major contribution to meeting Leitch’s targets. Three functional skills qualifications will be available: **English, mathematics, and information and communication technology** (ICT).

# What are functional skills?

These are qualifications in English, mathematics and ICT that are being developed from Entry level to Level 2; Level 3 may follow. They will provide a platform for the development of employability skills needed by young people and adults.

**‘Employers and educators have identified these skills as vital for enabling young people and adults to have the practical skills to succeed in further learning, employment and life in modern society.’**

*Functional skills – your questions answered (DfES 2006)*

Functional skills qualifications will be:

- available as **free-standing qualifications** for learners aged 14 and over
- a mandatory component of **specialised Diplomas**
- **linked to GCSEs** (functional skills at Level 2 will be required for an A\*–C grade in English, mathematics and ICT)
- an integral part of the new **extended project**.

Assessment will be through a ‘mastery’ model, which requires candidates to be competent in all aspects of the skills. Assessment methods will suit a wide range of learners and contexts.

The timetable for introduction is:

- January 2007 – trials of standards and assessment models
- September 2007 – two- and three-year pilots in more than 500 centres across a range of contexts
- September 2009 – functional English and ICT available
- September 2010 – functional mathematics available.

It is expected that, in time, functional skills will replace the key skills of Communication, Application of Number and ICT, and also *Skills for Life* qualifications. They will then provide **a single ladder of achievement from Entry to Level 3 that is available to all learners in all sectors.**

# What is employability?

For an individual, employability means the broad range of skills which he or she needs to secure and keep a job, and to progress in a career.

‘**Threshold employability**’ describes the skills needed by learners to start a job and get on the first step of the ladder.

For this, individuals need to have foundation levels of:

- literacy, numeracy and ICT
- vocational competence and knowledge.

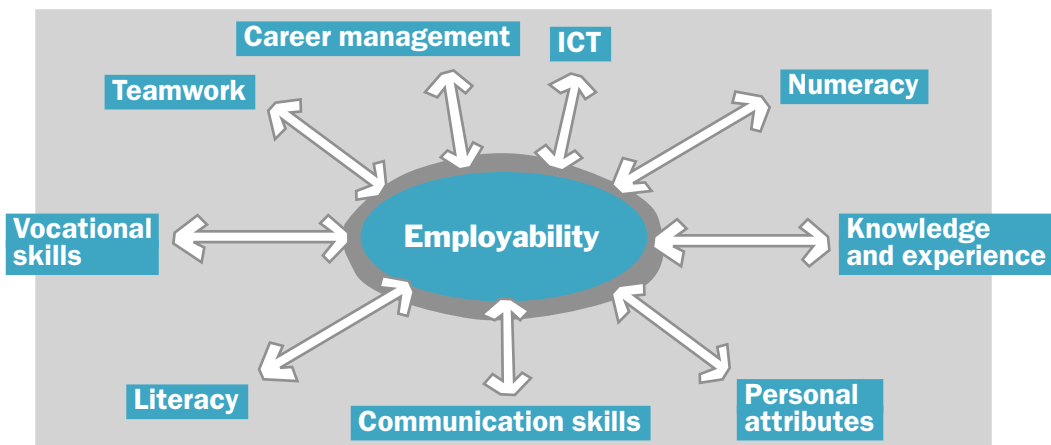
Once on the job ladder, employees need further skills and attributes for ‘**sustainable employability**’. These are skills to help them stay in employment and progress through a career. Examples include:

- increased vocational competence
- career management
- motivation to continue learning for life.

There are other skills and attributes which help to bridge the gap between threshold employability and a sustained career. These are:

- communication
- knowledge and experience
- teamwork
- positive attributes, eg punctuality, commitment and honesty.

The diagram shows some of these employability skills.



# What is the role of employability in the 14–19 curriculum?

Employability is already part of the 14–19 curriculum and can be supported and accredited by *Skills for Life* and key skills qualifications. All of the six key skills develop skills and knowledge which are necessary for employment, such as: reading for meaning; working together; carrying out and checking calculations; using ICT; personal development; solving problems.

*Skills for Life* lay the foundations for these key skills.

In addition, the whole-system reform for children and young people from birth to age 19 that is driven by **Every Child Matters** (DfES 2004) includes outcomes that require schools and other partners to focus on employability. Outcomes critical to children's well-being in childhood and later life include:

- making a positive contribution
- achieving economic well-being, including being ready for employment.

Another key development at 14–19 is that of **specialised Diplomas**. These are employer-led qualifications which will be:

**'suitable for young people who enjoy the challenge and stimulation of developing knowledge and skills in a real world environment.'**

Sector Skills Development Agency

Specialised Diplomas will extend learners' employability skills through a range of assessed learning and development activities that include:

- a focus on an economic sector
- a mandatory functional skills component
- personal, learning and thinking skills
- work experience.

The first five specialised Diplomas will be launched in September 2008.

**Employability is on the agenda before young people leave school and will continue to be a key theme of further education.**

# How do functional skills fit with employability?

Employer surveys and representative bodies, such as the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) and Sector Skills Councils, regularly list **the skills that employers look for in new recruits and employees**. In addition to the need for technical and practical skills, the National Employers Skills Survey 2005 (LSC 2006) states that the following skills are in short supply: customer handling; communication, both oral and written; problem solving; teamworking; IT; literacy; numeracy.

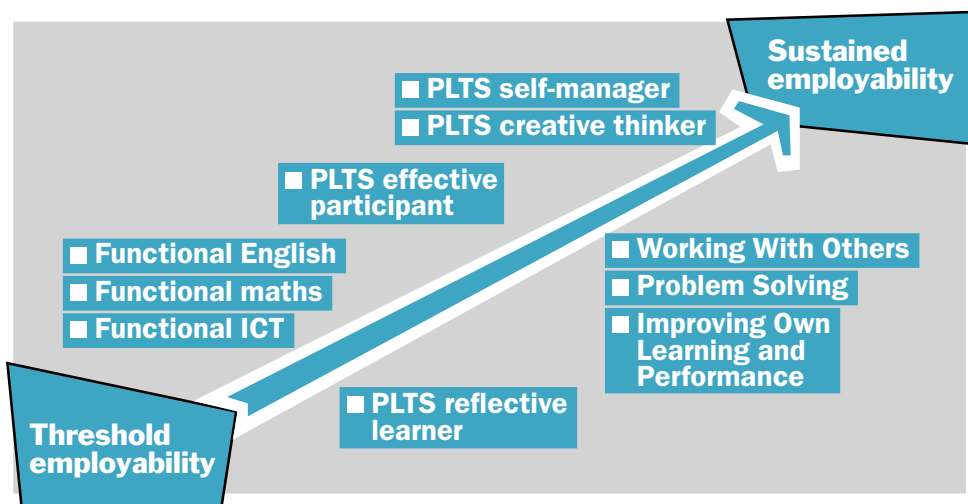
**'Weak functional skills are associated with higher unemployment, lower earnings, poorer chances of career progression and social exclusion ... The time has come to ensure that school-leavers in future have the functional skills they need for work and daily life.'**

*Working on the three Rs (CBI 2006)*

**The functional skills will meet three of the main skills gaps.**

In addition, the wider key skills, along with the new specialised Diplomas and personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS), can help meet many of the other skills shortages.

The diagram shows how the continuum from threshold employability to sustainable employability relates to these skills.



## How can we prepare?

Schools, colleges and training providers can prepare for the introduction of functional skills by **capitalising on existing good practice** in delivering the key skills and *Skills for Life*. The approaches that are already being used to create opportunities for learners to practise and develop their skills within main programmes and personalised learning programmes will apply equally to the functional skills and their aims for mastery of English, mathematics and ICT.

### **Actions which you could consider taking include:**

- **holding staff briefings** about functional skills and employability
- **identifying good practice and expertise** in key skills and *Skills for Life* which can be used to support the delivery of functional skills
- **identifying the changes needed** to current systems and processes to ensure the successful delivery of functional skills
- **planning staff development** to prepare for the delivery of functional skills
- **promoting the links to employability** in your existing key skills programmes
- **planning your strategy** to ensure that employability is a key theme in all learning programmes
- **reviewing your strategies for employer engagement** to ensure that businesses are involved in all relevant aspects of learning programmes, ie identifying training needs, contributing towards the costs of training, hosting and even delivering some training
- **using the Key Skills Support Programme** to keep up to date with developments and changes: [www.keyskillssupport.net](http://www.keyskillssupport.net)
- **using the Functional Skills Support Programme** which went live in January 2007.

The **Learning and Skills Network**, in partnership with **Learning for Work**, supports the delivery and implementation of key skills in schools, colleges, work-based learning and adult learning. We provide advice, training, information and resources to learners, teachers, trainers and managers. For more information, visit [www.keyskillssupport.net](http://www.keyskillssupport.net) or call the helpline on 0870 872 8081.

This is the third of a series of leaflets that the Key Skills Support Programme will produce in 2006–07. These leaflets will contain up-to-date information about the role of key skills in the changing 14–19 agenda. The information in this leaflet is accurate at January 2007.

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