

BELS Project on Enhancing and recording students' employability skills - Autumn 2008*Report, 30th October 2008**Consultant: Jim Forrest, Forrest Associates Ltd*

The project aims were to develop a BELS Employability Framework for potential use with Work Experience in Colleges and 6th Forms in order to organise and improve 16-19 employability skills.

The objectives were to:

- Develop materials for use by students to self evaluate, plan and improve their employability skills;
- Working with Bromley College, prepare further documentation for use by students and colleges to enhance the development and integration of Employability Skills in the Work Experience Curriculum;
- Prepare guidance for employers' in order to assist and enhance the effectiveness of the Work Experience Placement;
- Present the findings of this pilot to other interested educational institutions as directed by BELS.

The consultant reviewed the latest documentation relating to the employability framework, including the CBI's list of work competencies in "Time Well Spent" (2007), the new QCA framework for Economic Well-being 11-19, the PLT skills and also John Allen's Central London post-16 employability skills framework. From this he developed the framework for a simple generic student recording format, to list examples of post-16 students' employability skills shown during their work experience from college or 6th form.

The chosen skills headings were:

Communication/Literacy
Application of IT
Self Management
Practical and Technical
Positive Attitude

Application of Numeracy
Team Working
Problem Solving
Business & Customer Awareness

He developed the initial drafts in conjunction with Sheila Elliott, work experience coordinator at Bromley College. These drafts included:

- Introductory notes about the project, written for teachers (Appx 1);
- Choice of 5 new preparation exercises for use with students, to familiarise them with the skills needed for employability (Appx 2) to go alongside their general and Health & Safety preparations;
- A4-page student recording sheet for employability skill examples in some detail (adapted from CBI's list of work competencies) (Appx 3);
- Some guidance notes for the college on components of a good work experience diary (Appx 4);
- Introductory guidance page for employers who were to be involved in these placements (Appx 5);
- A debriefing sheet, after work experience, for students to plan the improvements in their weaker skill areas (Appx 6).

Initial outcomes

The first group of 10 students at Bromley College to pilot the skills recording sheets in October were a mixture of BTEC students and Level 3 Apprentices doing Business Admin placements for 2 days a week over an extended period, at a local company called Liberata. They recorded evidence of their skills at a session with their work experience coordinator and the project consultant on October 23rd. They started by handwriting their examples but they planned to move on to an electronic version to make the recording more secure and flexible.

Their handwritten responses were analysed by the consultant who noted that they all found evidence of the three CBI competencies associated with the wider key skills (teamwork, self management and problem solving) and also of some communication skills. Evidence of the other CBI competencies was thinner and varied from one student to another. The exercise raised their self-esteem and also gave them the incentive to gather evidence of other employability skills before they finished their work experience later in the year. The BELS debriefing sheet (Appx 6) would serve a purpose to this effect. They will also be encouraged to add examples of their skills shown in other activities, such as their part-time work and their courses in college, so that they can emerge from college with a skills portfolio that does them justice and is useful in their future applications for work and HE.

Sample responses from the pilot students are shown in hard copy in Appendix 7.

The college intends using these recording sheets with its next groups of work experience students, this time including the preparation exercises and the notes to the employers.

While the project was being piloted at Bromley College, the consultant was also asked to begin disseminating the ideas and materials to other colleges and schools in London South that had been linked to earlier BELS work in this field (their details supplied to him by BELS). In the space of two weeks he had a most encouraging response, with four colleges and one school inviting him to visit and give a presentation to members of staff with responsibility for enhancing employability skills.

The following institutions were visited by the consultant in this way:-

Carshalton College - 0208 544 4444	Marion Martin Visited on October 20th
Croydon College - 0208 6865700	Heather Armstrong, Sue Achesson Visited on October 29th
Orpington College - 01689 885354	Tara Holt (<i>for Katherine McMenamin</i>) Visited October 23rd
Richmond College – 0208 6078000	Rob Rudd, Dave Warnes Visited on October 24th
Holy Cross School - 020 8395 4225	Lynn Gordon Visited on Oct 22nd

Two other schools recommended by BELS were contacted but not visited (reasons shown below). Project details were sent to them for possible later consideration:-

Charles Darwin School-01959 574043 Darren Sowerbutts (*only does work-shadowing*)

Ursuline High School-020 8255 2688 Emma Day (*hub school for WRL but not involved in earlier work*)

The responses of the 4 colleges and school that were visited were all positive. All saw a potential place for this direct skills approach, either in reflecting on work experience during the next year or in other curriculum areas like tutorials. Appendix 8 (hard copy) shows details of each institution's response via their written or emailed comments.

Conclusions

- There is a clear need for opportunities for post-16 students to recognise, record and enhance their own employability skills. This BELS project gives local institutions a framework to enable that to happen.
 - The CBI checklist of work competencies provides the basis for an effective skills list for students to record their own examples of best practice.
 - The experience has left the pilot students with a clear view of their strengths and areas for skills improvement, which should enhance the quality of their CVs and improve their job and university prospects.
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Recommendations

- Consideration should be given by BELS to create a system of celebratory certificates for students who produce an effective skills record, as an additional form of encouragement to them and to promote the project.
- Links could be made between these CBI criteria for employability and the key component skills in any common accredited Awarding Body qualification for Employability.
- A forum for discussion and review of the project should be set up to involve all participating colleges and schools, in the spring, so that the project can maintain its momentum. This should include student feedback after they have used the process and also project meetings for employability coordinators.
- When the skills checksheets have stood the test of the initial trialling, BELS should consider putting them on line for direct student use through affiliated colleges and school sixth forms.
- A longer term investigation should research on the impact of this process on students' later success in finding jobs and in applying for university places.