Measuring employability skills

Learning from a capacity-building project

Isaac Thornton
Hannah Morgan
Miranda Phillips

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- Youth Futures Foundation is an independent, not-for-profit organisation established with a £90m endowment from the Reclaim Fund to improve employment outcomes for young people from marginalised backgrounds. Our aim is to narrow employment gaps by identifying what works and why, investing in evidence generation and innovation, and igniting a movement for change.

- Youth Futures contact details for more info about the report
    - o Dr Amanda Mackey
    - o Tintagel House

      92 Albert Embankment

      London

      SE1 7TY
    - o evaluation@youthfuturesfoundation.org

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About the research team/evaluator

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For more information about this report, please contact Miranda Phillips.

Contact details:
NatCen Social Research
35 Northampton Square
London EC1V 0AX
Email: Miranda.Phillips@natcen.ac.uk

For more information about NatCen, please visit www.natcen.ac.uk .

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Introduction

The Youth Futures Foundation aims at "creating a society where all young people have access to good quality jobs". Many programmes designed to support young people in securing good quality jobs target their employability skills. These can be defined, broadly, as a range of 'soft' skills and competencies that many employers look for and which enable a young person to thrive in the workplace. Examples include communication, teamwork, time management, and being organised. Programmes aiming to improve employability skills are varied, but might use a combination of mentoring, workshops, mock interviews, work experience, support for families, and various other activities. In order to compare approaches and identify 'what works' for improving young people's access to employment, it is important to rigorously measure the impact of programmes[1] on employability skills.

Background to these recommendations

This paper draws on learning from a capacity-building project in which NatCen worked with several organisations that run programmes aimed at helping young people to enter the workplace. These organisations were interested in measuring whether their programmes improved employability skills amongst the young people they work with. This output was not a pre-specified outcome of the project, but was created as part of a suite of learning outputs to help organisations working with young people. As a result, this paper summarises some of our observations and learning rather than aiming to comprehensively capture best practice for measuring employability skills. This paper is not intended to be the final word on measuring employability skills, but includes some considerations, hints and tips built up from experiences on this specific project.

What is included in this paper?

This paper covers some of the things to consider when measuring employability skills (whether for programme monitoring and evaluation or impact evaluations) and outlines the advantages and disadvantages of

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[1] The word 'programme' is used here, although this is sometimes used interchangeably with 'intervention', 'policy', 'scheme' etc.

different techniques. It focuses specifically on quantitative measures, that is, those which enable one to use statistical techniques to quantify the level of, and any changes in, employability skills, both in individuals and groups. There are many different types of outcome measures, including sets of questions administered in a measurement tool (such as a survey or checklist) and completed by participants or delivery staff. Outcome measures can also consist of quantitative administrative information (e.g. attendance data) collected as part of a programme's ongoing delivery and monitoring data.

'Impact evaluation' refers to methods which aim to identify the effect of a specific programme or intervention on a set of outcomes (HM Treasury 2020). Impact evaluation strategies often use counterfactual methods, such as Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and Quasi-Experimental Designs (QEDs). These seek to quantify the impact of an intervention on desired outcomes, comparing outcomes for a group of programme recipients with outcomes for a control group who did not receive the intervention, to draw inferences about what would have happened in the absence of the programme. Other evaluation methods, such as the family of Theory Based Evaluations, can also benefit from good quality measures of employability skills.

General considerations when measuring employability skills

Measures should fit your programme goals
It is important that the measures you choose or design reflect your programme goals. The best way to do this is to ensure that you have a programme Theory of Change (ToC) which clearly sets out the intended outcomes which should follow from your intervention.

In brief, a ToC describes the programme's target participants, activities, intended outcomes and ultimate impact, including details on the mechanisms by which outcomes are to be achieved. The format is typically a

diagram, giving a visual overview of these different elements, ideally showing causal links between them.

A clearly specified ToC allows you to map, choose or develop outcome measures that align closely to your programme outcomes.

Example: wellbeing

A youth organisation has an intervention which is aimed at increasing young people's mental wellbeing. The programme consists of a number of different activities for participants. The primary outcome from these activities is 'improved mental wellbeing'.

In this case, an appropriate outcome measure would be a wellbeing scale (a set of questions that ask about different aspects of wellbeing, which together give a mental wellbeing 'score'). There are a number of validated scales to choose from, including the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Wellbeing Scales – WEMWBS[2].

Activity	Outcome	Outcome measure
Workshops on different aspects of wellbeing	*Improved mental wellbeing*	*WEMWBS wellbeing scale (self-report, measured at start and end of programme)*

Selecting established measures

When selecting an outcome measure for monitoring or evaluation, it is generally best to use well-established, validated, and standardised measures. Broadly, you want the measures you choose to have been widely used in your target population before, and to have had their validity and reliability[3] established using statistical techniques. An advantage of using measures that have been widely used in the target population is that they can aid the

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[2] https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/sci/med/research/platform/wemwbs/about/
[3] Validity describes how accurately a measure captures the outcome of interest. Reliability describes how consistently a measure assesses the outcome (over time, within and across individuals, etc.).

generalisability of your findings. Findings from validated measures can be more readily transferable or generalisable to other settings and populations.

For programmes focusing on young people's employment, you will need to consider whether the measure is suitable for the specific group you are working with (e.g., EET or NEET, school age or 18+).

While standardised measures offer many benefits, it is also important to select a measure which fits your purpose. Specifically, it should be appropriate for your target group (e.g. in terms of age, language/readability, key competencies and so on). It should also be relevant to the content of the programme being delivered. For example, if your employability programme does not contain any content relating to CV-writing, measuring CV-writing skills in the outcome measure is likely to be inappropriate.

This guide identifies a number of existing measures relating to employability skills amongst young people. One relevant resource for identifying relevant measures is the Journey to Employment (JET) framework (Copps and Plimmer, 2013). This is a framework designed to help organisations that work with young people to understand and measure the impact they have on a young person's journey to employment. The JET framework is a wide-ranging resource, which has been put together with input from experts and includes a large number of existing measures mapped against different employability skills/outcomes.

Making use of existing data

One advantage of using well-established measures is that data is likely to have already been collected from other groups (e.g. national population estimates or data from other similar programmes). You may be able to compare the data you collect with this existing data to give you useful insights. For example, you might ask your programme participants questions on attitudes to work or job search taken from a well-established study such as the Longitudinal Survey of Young People in England (see LSYPE 2017). This would enable you to compare the results of your programme participants with the population from the LSYPE data.

While this can be useful, it is important to understand the data you are comparing to and how similar the sample participants are to your sample. For example, the LSYPE is made up of a cohort of young people born in the years 1999 and 2000 so may only be useful if your beneficiaries are of a similar profile.

Designing new measures

Striking a balance between standardisation on the one hand, and situational appropriateness on the other, can be challenging. In some cases, you will need to design a brand-new measure which is fit for purpose for your target group and programme. In other cases, you may need to make minor tweaks to the wording of an existing measure. While designing a new measure can achieve a better fit with your aims, it can also be a resource-intensive process. To decide what is best, consider whether suitable measures already exist for your desired skills and target population, how much time and capacity you can devote to designing/modifying measures, and the need for standardisation and generalisation beyond your sample. Some existing measures have the advantage of being validated, meaning that you can be confident that the measure actually measures what it intends to. This is not an easy thing to achieve, even for an experienced researcher, so if validated measures exist that are relevant to your programme, it is often better to use those rather than developing new ones. It may also be more difficult to generalise the findings from a new measure or to situate findings within pre-existing evidence.

Measures for impact evaluation

When selecting an existing outcome measure or designing a new measure for use in an impact evaluation like a RCT or QED, it is important to ensure that your measure could also be administered to a control group of individuals who have not completed the programme. Consequently, explicit questioning about the programme being implemented (e.g. "did the employability programme improve your time management skills"), should be avoided when you are aiming to make comparisons with a control group.

Subjective vs objective measures

An additional challenge is finding a balance between subjectivity and objectivity. While it is important and valuable to gain an understanding of young people's own perceptions of their employability skills, these perceptions may be biased for a number of reasons. Young people may over- or under-estimate their competencies in different domains. Indeed, they might have a different understanding of what 'employability skills' are in comparison to programme stakeholders. For impact evaluation, more objective measures, selected with a specific and clearly articulated definition of employability skills in mind, are favourable. More subjective elements may be best captured using qualitative measures as part of an implementation and process evaluation or within routine monitoring.

Reducing respondent burden

Another consideration is balancing the desire to comprehensively measure the outcomes of interest with avoiding undue burden on participants and staff. It is generally best to use the quickest and simplest possible measure which enables full assessment of the aspects of employability skills which you are interested in examining. Doing so should help ensure that you measure what is important while minimising the risk of missing data, non-completion, and drop-outs[4]. It is hard to have a universal rule, but for surveys, for example, try to avoid more than 10-15 minutes in completion time.

How will data be collected?

One factor to consider is how, and in what context, the data will be collected. For example, do programme participants complete the measurement tool and/or do staff (e.g. mentors)? Is the participant alone when completing the tool? Is the measurement tool completed on paper or online? Does measurement involve a practical exercise? Who will see the responses? How much time and money does the process consume?

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[4] Missing data refers to not having data for a specific respondent or measure. Data could be entirely missing for a respondent due to non-completion. Data could be missing at the item level due to respondents skipping certain measures that they do not want to answer or dropping out before completing all of the measures.

The most appropriate strategy is situational/context-dependent and will need to balance ethical and pragmatic considerations with data collection trade-offs. Data collection may also be restricted by resource issues, for example face-to-face data collection can be much more resource intensive than an online survey. The mode of data collection can have implications for resourcing, costs, planning and coordination burden. Some populations may be harder to access with traditional methods so may require much more intensive efforts to obtain the data that you need.

Issues around social desirability, where young people may feel that they ought to present themselves in a favourable light, either to conform with social norms or programme expectations, may emerge. This can be especially problematic when responses may affect access to a service or job opportunity.

Types of measurement

There are a range of different types of measures which can be used to assess employability skills. These include, but are not limited to:

- Self-report of skillset before and after the programme

- Self-report of change in skillset after the programme

- Assessment undertaken by another person (about the person participating in the programme)

- A test of skillset

- A checklist

This section goes into more detail on each of these approaches, noting advantages and disadvantages and highlighting examples.

Self-report of skillset administered before and after the programme

This involves participants reporting their own level of employability skills in various domains at multiple points in time (e.g. before and after an employability programme). This is typically undertaken through a self-completion questionnaire, with participants rating themselves on some form of scale. For instance, statements might be phrased as follows: "How would you rate your communication skills?". Responses are then coded/scored, and an overall score (most usually a mean or total) is generated indicating an individual's overall skill level. The standard deviation (SD) and range of scores can also give an idea of variability in scores.

One such tool is the Academic Employment Skills (AES) scale, a self-completion measure which was designed to assess people's skills with regards to drafting, problem-solving, teamwork, supervision/direction of others, and use of new technologies (as used by Baumann et al., 2014). It comprises six items, each of which respondents rate themselves on a four-point Likert scale ranging from (1) "not very good" to (4) "excellent".

Other examples of self-reported measures can be found in the JET framework (Copps and Plimmer, 2013). This includes a measure from the evaluation of the National Citizen Service pilots. The question asks: "How do you feel about the following things, even if you have never done them before?" and uses a

five-point scale ranging from "very confident" to "very unconfident". The different measures include "meeting new people", "putting forward my ideas", "getting things done on time" and other skills relevant to employability. The scales have been used with 13 to 18 year olds, so may be suitable to use with younger programme participants and those new to employment. Other questions included in the National Citizen Service evaluation may also be of interest and can be found in the Technical Report (Matthews et al 2021).

For measuring softer skills, skillsbuilder.org contains a framework of skills that may be relevant to employability and could be used to develop questions around different employability skills. This website includes tools that help individuals and organisations to benchmark skills and to track progress so this could potentially be a useful resource.

Advantages of self-report:

- Allows you to make before and after (or pre-post) comparisons to track changes in an outcome over the programme (which may or may not guide content and delivery).

- You gain an impression of young people's understanding of their own competencies.

Disadvantages of self-report:

- Respondents' impressions of their own competencies may be unrealistic and/or change over time for reasons unrelated to programme intervention. For example, young people might initially overestimate their abilities/skills/competencies but then become more realistic when they learn about the topic and identify gaps in their knowledge. This would show up as a *decrease* in employment skills pre-post, according to the measure, in the absence of a 'real' change (or even a real increase).

- Potential social desirability bias, with young people tending to respond in a way they think will be viewed favourably.

- A more 'objective' measure may be desirable for impact evaluation purposes, to evidence impact and justify funding (e.g. number of job offers received).

- Without also using a control group (through a RCT or QED), there is no way of judging whether the process of pre-testing influenced the results.

Self-report of change in skillset after the programme

This is similar to the previous option in that it is self-report, although respondents are only asked whether their employability skills *changed* in various domains after the programme, rather than being asked their absolute level before and after the programme.

For example, as part of NatCen's evaluation of the Activity Agreement Pilots (Tanner & D'Souza, 2010), participants were asked to rate their agreement with the following statements in a follow-up survey after the programme:

1. I have clearer ideas about what I want to do in the future.
2. I feel that the things I have been doing will help me in the future.
3. I feel less confident.
4. I feel more independent.
5. I feel more confident now about seeking help or advice (than I did in the first interview).
6. I feel more able to write a job application or update my CV (than I did in the first interview).
7. I feel more confident with reading and writing (than I did in the first interview).
8. I feel more confident with numbers (than I did in the first interview).
9. I feel more positive about the future, compared to previous year.
10. I feel more confident after doing my Activity Agreement.
11. I have clearer ideas about the sort of job I'd like to do after doing my Activity Agreement.
12. Taking part in the scheme has given me new skills.
13. I don't think I'm any more likely to get a job after doing my Activity Agreement.

Responses: "Agree", "Disagree", "Neither agree nor disagree", "Don't know"

The percentage of participants responding with each option can be reported. Alternatively, if you allocate numeric codes to the responses (e.g. 0 is "Disagree", 1 is "Neither agree nor disagree", 2 is "Agree"), you could take

the average and/or sum of scores for an overall assessment of the change in employability skills[5].

Questions need to be rephrased if being asked to a control group who did not participate in the programme (i.e. removing references to the programme and instead referring to parallel timescales).

Advantages of self-report after programme:

- Leaves less room for inaccurate initial impressions as questions are only asked after the programme.

- Fewer data collection timepoints reduces burden on staff/mentors and young people.

- Self-reported data collection can be less expensive and resource-intensive than asking a staff member or other person to carry out the data collection

Disadvantages of self-report after programme:

- Respondents may misremember their level of skill before the programme.

- Social desirability bias may be an issue if respondents feel pressure to say they improved.

- A more 'objective' approach may be desirable.

Assessment undertaken by another person

This strategy involves another person, for example a mentor or another member of staff involved in programme delivery, assessing the young person's skills at different timepoints (e.g. at the beginning and end of the programme). For instance, a mentor could assess the young person's capabilities in a range of domains (teamwork, communication, etc.), on a familiar and discriminatory 10-point Likert scale of 1 (worst) to 10 (best), and then at the end of the programme the before and after scores could be compared.

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[5] Items 3 and 13 are negatively worded (agreement indicates a decrease in employment skills) and so would be coded in the opposite direction to other questionnaire items.

The Triangle Consulting (n.d.) WorkStar tool operates in a similar way. This includes seven domains:

- Job skills and experience
- Aspiration and motivation
- Job-search skills
- Stability
- Basic skills
- Workplace and social skills
- Health and well-being

Each of the seven domains is assessed on a five-stage 'Journey of Change' scale, from 1 (stuck) to 10 (self-reliance).

Advantages of assessment:

- This incorporates another opinion beyond that of the young person being assessed.
- Mentors and/or other staff have insight into the programme and desired outcomes and know the young people well (at least at the endpoint).

Disadvantages of assessment:

- This approach is heavily reliant on the person administering the measure and their subjective opinion of the young person being assessed. The conclusions they reach, and the information they draw on, will likely be based on many factors (e.g. conscious and unconscious bias, how well they know each other, the quality of their relationship, how involved they are in delivering the programme).
- Can be an additional burden on staff.
- Staff may feel pressured to show a positive change.
- This is still not a truly 'objective' measure.
- In an evaluation context, this can be difficult to replicate for a control group who may not have an assigned mentor who knows them and their skills to assess them.
- It can be more expensive and resource-intensive to task another person with collecting the data, compared to collecting self-reported data.

A test of skills

Instead of relying on people's opinions to assess employability skills, an alternative strategy is to administer tests. This might involve a pen and paper exercise where young people are tested on elements of employment-related knowledge and/or presented with hypothetical situations where they select the most appropriate course of action. It might, alternatively, involve practical elements and/or roleplay situations, such as mock interviews or group exercises.

Advantages of a test of skills:

- These methods leave less room for subjective judgements of the young person and/or programme staff, and thus might be considered more robust.

- Tests which involve practical elements can double as training exercises.

- Methods can be insightful and authentic; these more 'real' results can be linked to programme aims.

Disadvantages of a test of skills:

- Designing and administering these tests can be expensive and time-consuming.

- The quality of the test's implementation may vary in practice.

- Test anxiety may impact performance. This may be especially true of some young people.

A checklist

A less demanding alternative to a full-on test of skills is establishing a checklist of tasks/outcomes to be achieved, which together indicate strong employability skills. Such a checklist might include:

- Having an up-to-date CV,

- Attending a job interview,

- Completing voluntary experience,

- Obtaining formal qualifications.

Each item could each be scored, 1 (yes) or 0 (no), before and after the programme, to identify how many of the tasks/outcomes are achieved over the course of the programme, individually and on average.

How might a checklist work?

Imagine you are running a 6 week programme for young people aimed at helping them develop employability skills and increase confidence, and set them on the path towards getting a job. Participants attend weekly workshops each focused on a different area of employability, such as job search, writing a CV, completing a job application, practising an interview.

The participants are given course materials to complete each week, which log their experience across the course of the programme. A checklist could be incorporated into these materials so that participants can keep track of what they have achieved on the programme. This could also be collected by the programme staff to provide evidence of what the participants have completed. The checklist could include items such as "I have an up-to-date CV", "I have completed a mock interview" and could also collect information on the dates each milestone was achieved.

This would provide useful data for your organisation in terms of documenting the different skills that participants gain while taking part in the programme.

Advantages of a checklist:

- More objective than a self-report of skills.
- Can be administered before and after a programme.
- Easier to administer than a test of skills.
- Tailorable to contents of the programme and key employability skills/outputs.

Disadvantages of a checklist:

- Limited to concrete activities/experience, rather than more intrinsic qualities such as aspiration
- Need to be careful that you are capturing employability skills rather than experience (for example, simply attending a workshop is not the same as gaining the skills covered in the workshop).
- May not give a full indication of the level/quality of skills. For instance, someone can have a CV but it may not be well-written or effective.

Adapting measures for different groups

When choosing measures of employability, or developing new measures, it is important to consider the circumstances and needs of the group of young people you are working with. Some of the measures discussed in this note may not be suitable to use with programme participants, and some adaptation may be needed to make the measures more appropriate. The JET framework (Copps and Plimmer, 2013) highlights that personal circumstances, such as caring responsibilities, parenthood and not having access to the internet can affect young people's employment opportunities. The JET framework also provides advice and suggestions on how to measure these different personal circumstances and how this relates to employability.

When working with young people who are not in employment, education or training, it may be that some of the new entrants to the programme will be quite far from the labour market and will not have many of the employability skills you are interested in at the start of the programme. Administering a checklist of more advanced skills may be intimidating and leave the young person feeling distressed that they could not answer "yes" to many of the questions. In these cases it may be worth considering collecting measures on skills only after the programme has finished, however having both baseline and endline data will likely make for a stronger evaluation design so a trade-off will need to be made.

An assessment or test of skills may also be inappropriate to administer in the case of more vulnerable groups of young people, particularly before the programme begins. A test may cause anxiety among participants and potentially lead to disengagement and young people dropping out of the programme.

It is also important to take into account the mode in which the questions are asked, and to ensure this is accessible for all programme participants. For example dyslexic young people may struggle with a written checklist, but be more comfortable answering questions asked by a mentor or member of

staff. For other participants, self-reported questions may be more suitable as it may reassure them that the answers are anonymous, and the process may feel less intrusive.

You will be best placed to understand the needs of the different groups of young people you work with, and it is important to consider their experience of the intervention when choosing how best to measure outcomes. Even simple changes, such as making sure the language is appropriate for the age/circumstances of your participants can make a difference to accessibility and inclusivity. For example, if using an existing tool which refers to peers as "students", or the other people in your home as "family members", the phrasing may need to be adapted to match your participants' circumstances. Measures should be both accessible, allowing participants to provide meaningful data, and sensitive to respondents' needs, ensuring that they have a good experience when taking part in the programme.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the most appropriate strategy for measuring employability skills depends on the circumstances. In fact, a combination of the approaches in this guidance note might be adopted. In summary, various factors should be taken into consideration, including but not limited to:

- desire for subjectivity and objectivity,

- purpose of measurement,

- rigour and type of evaluation design,

- the specific employability skills of interest,

- the characteristics of participants,

- the preferences of funders,

- cost, resourcing, planning and co-ordination,

- brevity and ease of use,

- your programme's theory of change, and

- timescales.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach, and there are always trade-offs in research. Please consult the references and recommended reading (in the Appendix) for more information.

Summary of types of measure

Type of measure	Pros	Cons
Self-report of skills - before and after	Can make pre-post comparisons. Captures young people's perceptions.	Young people's perceptions may be inaccurate or changeable. Social desirability bias. More 'objective' measures may be desirable to justify funding. Potential influence of pre-testing on responses.
Self-report - of change in skills after	Captures young people's perceptions. Avoids young people's inaccurate initial impressions. One data collection point minimises burden.	May misremember baseline skills. Social desirability bias. More 'objective' measures may be desirable to justify funding.

Type of measure	Pros	Cons
Assessment undertaken by another person (e.g. staff)	Incorporates an additional/external opinion. Staff may have insight into the programme, desired outcomes, and young people.	Potential for staff bias and subjectivity. Additional burden on staff. More 'objective' measures may be desirable to justify funding. Difficult to replicate for a control group.
Test of skillset	Less likely to rely on subjective judgements. Tests can involve practical elements/double as training. Insightful and authentic.	Can be expensive and time-consuming. Scoring involves some subjectivity. Test implementation quality may vary in practice. Test anxiety can influence performance.
Checklist	More objective than self-reports. Can be used for pre-post comparisons. Easier to administer than a test. Tailorable to programme contents.	Limited to concrete activities/experience. May not be informative about the level/quality of skills.

Appendices

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Further reading

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The Centre for Youth Impact Measurement Hub (contains a framework for measuring socio-emotional outcomes of young people, including domains relevant to employability such as teamwork, responsibility, initiative and problem-solving) https://www.youthimpact.uk/measurement-hub

The Learning and Work Institute (contains lots of resources and research which may be relevant to measuring employability) https://learningandwork.org.uk/resources/The Magenta Book (HM Treasury guidance on impact evaluation): https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-magenta-book

The Magenta Book Annex A: Analytical methods for use within an evaluation. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/879418/Magenta_Book_Annex_A._Analytical_methods_for_use_within_an_evaluation.pdf

What Works Network (website providing information on the What Works centres): https://www.whatworksnetwork.org.uk/what-works-centres/