Skills for prosperity

Palladium MAKE IT POSSIBLE

UKaid from the British people

APPROACHES TO DEVELOPING CORE SKILLS IN EDUCATION AND VOCATIONAL TRAINING

Work together. Learn together. Grow together.

About Skills for Prosperity

The Skills for Prosperity (S4P) programme supports the education and skills development of marginalised groups in nine countries across Africa, Asia and Latin America. By improving their work readiness, we help partner countries to have a diverse workforce with skills for the future and to drive sustainable and inclusive economic growth and poverty reduction. S4P is funded by UK aid from the UK Government and implemented by a consortium led by global impact firm Palladium. Follow S4P on Medium, LinkedIn and Twitter to keep abreast of the programme's updates and learning.

Introduction

This report has been produced as part of the UK aid-funded Skills for Prosperity (S4P) programme. S4P supports education and skills development to reduce poverty and contribute to inclusive and sustainable economic growth in nine partner countries: Brazil, Egypt, Kenya, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mexico, Nigeria, the Philippines and South Africa. The programme ambitions include targeted outcomes for marginalised groups, such as young women, people with disabilities, ethnic minorities, and indigenous groups. S4P supports the improvement of education and training systems, and aims to enhance the quality and relevance of teaching resources, to deliver transferable skills and vocational training to learners.

As the second in a series of S4P thematic reviews (the first one, "Supporting graduate transition into the job market", can be accessed here), this report presents a global review and a snapshot of how S4P is developing industry-relevant core skills through the programme's education and training activities. Approaches taken in S4P have been informed by the view that core skills are critical to the future of work and can be embedded in different forms of learning to ensure students leave their education prepared for the labour market.

The review includes examples drawn from:

- S4P Mexico - Passport to Success - a life skill curriculum
- S4P South Africa Harambee
- A college approach to embedding core skills – Afshan Baksh, S4P Hub's Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) expert
- Core skills embedded in apprenticeships – Sally Eastland, S4P Hub's TVET expert
- Embedding core skills through virtual reality training – Jane Rexworthy, S4P Hub's TVET expert

There are multiple cases of good practice in this thematic area across S4P. It is anticipated that the sharing of exemplar interventions with S4P projects and the wider network of skills and employability stakeholders will provide a platform for further knowledge exchange on the subject.

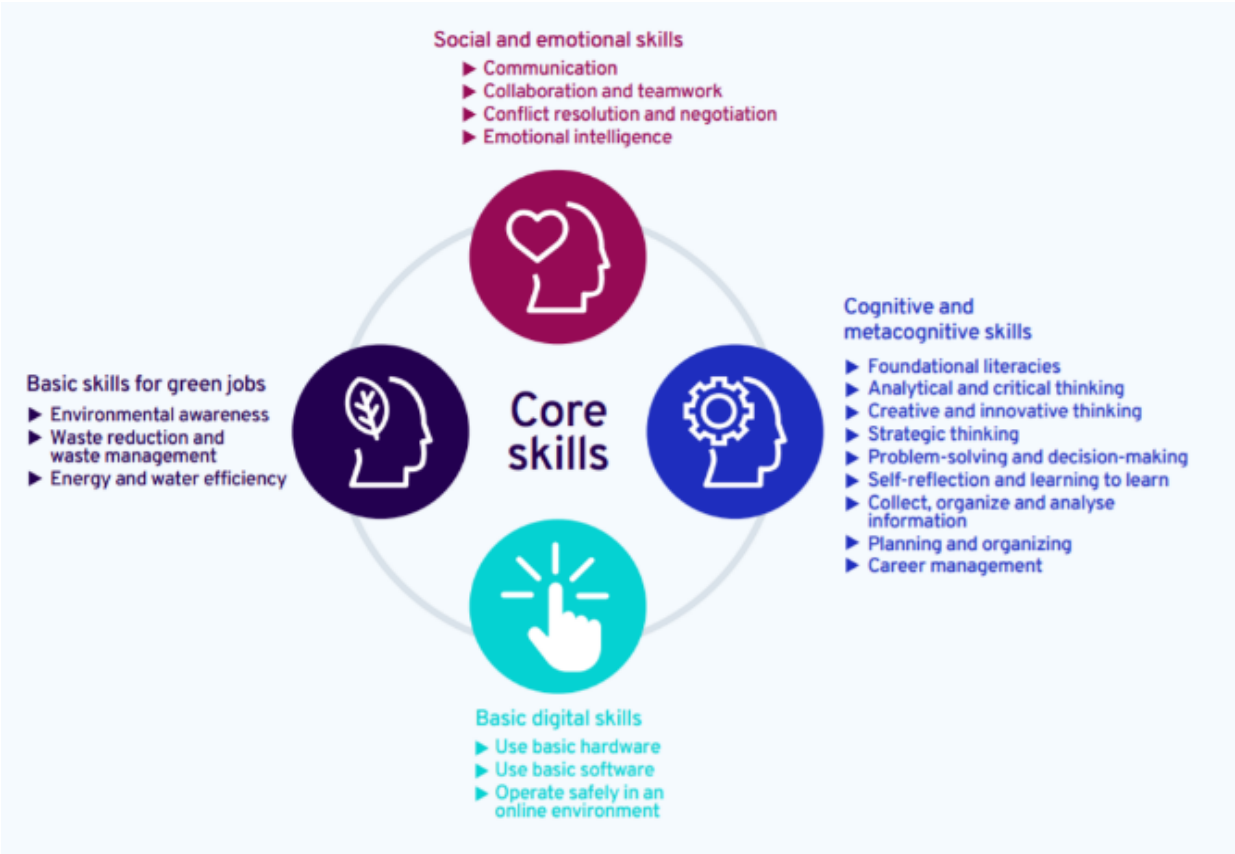
Background: what are core skills?

The nature of work and employment has significantly transformed. This has been driven in the long term by the effects of globalisation, rapid developments in technologies and changing economies and demographics. More recently, these shifts have been exacerbated by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has presented disruptions, challenges and new opportunities to the way we cultivate skills and develop our careers. A job is no longer for life and in the wake of a booming fourth industrial revolution, jobs and skill competencies will continue to evolve beyond the skills traditionally required.

In this new milieu, the importance of "core skills" in the workplace has intensified. Core skills can be thought of as the essential skills that young people need to be fully prepared for life and work in a global economy. They move beyond vocational and technical knowledge, to address ways of thinking, behaving and living in the 21st century world of work. According to the British Council, research has highlighted the gap in employers' expectations and the core skills of many job entrants.

Over the years, “core” skills have been referred to in different ways, including key skills, basic skills, generic skills, employability skills and transferable skills. In each case, they can be thought of as the critical skills and behaviours that help people prosper in today’s working world. This report recognises their value to both life and work, which is why we refer to them as “core” skills.

When considering how core skills are recognised globally, the ILO’s Global framework on core skills for life and work in the 21st century identifies the core skills needed to adapt to the future of work. It identifies 12 international frameworks for core skills and highlights that there is no coherent approach internationally that defines them. In response, they propose that the following definition and categorisation of core skills is adopted to integrate core skills in national education and training systems, qualifications and curricula.



ILO global framework for core skills. Source: **ILO, Global framework on core skills for life and work in the 21st century.**

Embedding these core skills within training will prepare job seekers to enter the workplace, equipping them to perform well at interview and in their role.

For a further breakdown of how core skills, such as numeracy and intercultural skills, are included within the ILO core skills categories, please refer to the ILO framework.

The growing importance of building core skills for employment

The report Building Tomorrow’s Talent: Collaboration Can Close Emerging Skills Gap by Workday and Bloomberg Next interviewed 200 senior-level individuals — 100 each in academia and business. It found that stronger collaboration between business and academia would effectively prepare students for employment and close the core skills gap. Addressing this through integration of industry-relevant core skills into education at every level is critical for future talent, and for the future of business, as it:

- **Builds learners’ confidence with behaviours that allow them to function effectively** because they have practiced these skills in classroom.
- **Enables students to apply core skills in practice,** in a relevant setting and with context. This also ensures the skills are being used in everyday life, meaning that when they make the transition to the workplace they continue to do the same.

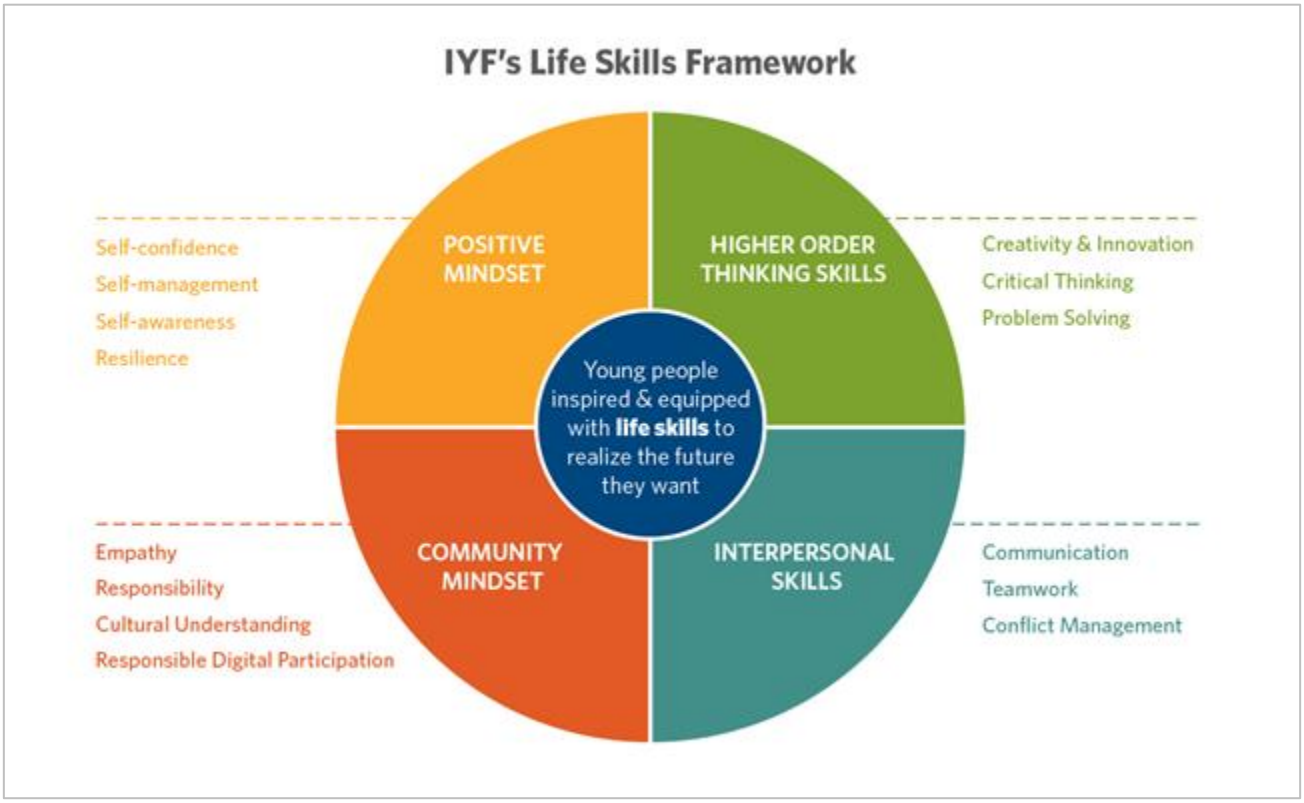
- **Develops the learner to be socially and culturally ready for work** and for life, so they are not just technically able, but are a rounded person.
- **Increases their likelihood to progress on the career ladder** with core skills that come naturally to them and ensures that they can perform well.
- **Increases important transferable skills** that support them for future job transformation into a new or changing role.
- **Can be assessed** in a safe environment of the classroom.

S4P approaches to developing core skills trainings

Core skills can support training activities in different ways, reflecting learner needs and variations in country and sector contexts.

S4P Mexico - Passport to Success - a life skill curriculum

As part of the Skills for Prosperity project in Mexico, the International Youth Foundation (IYF) designed the Passport to Success (PTS), a life skill curriculum that equips young people with a range of core skills that will help them stay in school and acquire the education, professional skills, employment readiness, and confidence they need to succeed in life and in the workplace.



IYF's Like Skills Framework. Source: **IYF, Passport to Success website**.

As a standalone programme for core skills, the PTS is an example of how core skills can be taught without changing the curriculum of the technical subject. They identified 14 critical life skills that fall within four domains, guided by the principles established in their gender, equity, and social inclusion policy.

PTS places special emphasis on preparing youth for the workplace. Participants receive assistance in developing a career plan to guide them as they chart their course to a productive future.

The PTS curriculum contains over 80 modules, including 30 core lessons, focused on personal development, problem solving, healthy lifestyles, workplace success, entrepreneurship/skills for professional growth and service learning (whereby students learn theories in the classroom and apply them in practice through voluntary work in the community). Two tailored curriculum tracks — employability and entrepreneurship — allow for a customised experience for groups of youth with different career goals. The benefits of the programme include:

- Encouraging students to remain engaged and enrolled in educational institutions.
- Improving the school environment and student-teacher interactions, stimulating student engagement and motivation.
- Helping teachers empathise with their students and understand their environment.
- Engaging young people in their lessons, to encourage motivation and participation in class.

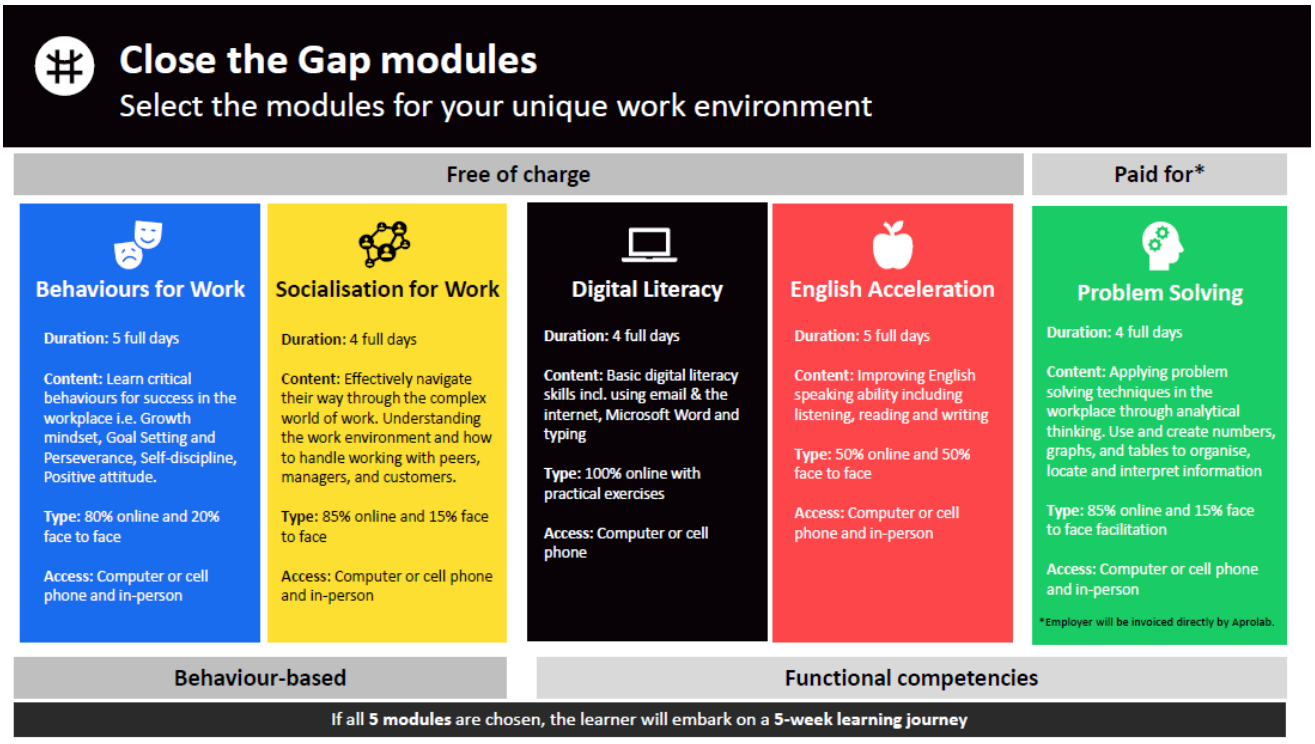
Speaking about the benefits of the programme, an employer commented: “What I like most about the youth who received this training is their calm attitude, their ability to listen and to act responsibly. Today, these are really very important qualities that we are looking for among new recruits”.

S4P South Africa – Closing the gap on work readiness for marginalised youth

As a youth employment accelerator and not-for-profit social enterprise, Harambee are leading on one of the Skills for Prosperity programmes in South Africa. Their Close the gap activity is aimed at skilling marginalised young people for income-earning opportunities.

The programme aims to reduce misalignment between the skills young people have and those needed to succeed in the workplace. Designed specifically for young people who have not had any or much work experience, they have run different iterations of the programme including one aimed at junior artisan assistants. This consists of a three-month skills programme which is run at a TVET institution coupled with six-month work experience, helping to embed the core and technical skills. They also offer a full apprenticeship programme that starts with a “leadership base camp” and consists of an eight-week module, with four of those weeks spent away from home in a training camp environment. This intensive approach has better equipped participants with work-ready core skills as they enter their apprenticeship.

Having run these interventions on behalf of employers, Harambee has been piloting new ways to grow their solution at scale and aims to link all young people to basic online work-seeker support and opportunities. They are also enabling and empowering employers to run “Close the Gap” interventions themselves by delivering train-the-trainer and facilitator programmes. The online modules they offer include behaviour based and functional competencies, as can be seen in the figure below.



Close the Gap modules. Source: **Harambee, Close the Gap.**

The Harambee S4P project team in South Africa highlight two key considerations when running work-readiness programmes:

- **Engagement and buy-in.** Buy-in at senior levels of industry, education, investors and key stakeholders involved in work-readiness programmes is important, but engagement at ground level is equally critical. It is important to work closely in partnership with those that will be running the interventions. One of the most powerful ways to get engagement across all levels is to be telling the stories of young people these interventions are aimed at.
- **Adopting a learner centred approach.** There are barriers and gaps that exist for individuals that are not the fault of young people themselves. Understanding those gaps and catering interventions to the young person in terms of access and capabilities is essential. Telling the story about real people that showcase their experiences, gaps, challenges and barriers faced through broken systems is a powerful way of demonstrating how an intervention can help close the gap and make impactful change.

Expert insight: whole college approach to embedding core skills

To effectively prepare young people for work, Afshan Baksh, Learning & Development (L&D) specialist and TVET expert for S4P believes that colleges need to take a whole organisation approach to the development of core skills. Afshan worked for Harrow College for six years as the lead for developing higher education, teacher training and international programmes and projects. Her experience from working with colleges around the world has helped her identify a six-step approach to embedding core skills.

Afshan Baksh, L&D Specialist and TVET expert for the S4P Hub

Core skills development cannot happen in silo. For young people to truly develop core skills they must firstly understand what they are, the underpinning theory behind their importance, and more importantly, how to practice the skills in a variety of settings.

Where possible, colleges should take a holistic approach to skills development and create environments which allow students to apply the skills they are developing. This could be a simulated working environment, such as a training restaurant or office. Where such facilities do not exist, it is important to be creative in providing trainees with opportunities to develop skills in alternative ways.

Here are six tried and tested tips gathered from colleges around the world:

1. Develop a culture of real work behaviours that focusses the student on developing employability qualities, attributes and enterprise skills.
2. Develop a mechanism for capturing and recording employability skills development, for example, “an employability passport” where students receive acknowledgement when they achieve milestones in their development.
3. Maximise the use of employer networks to support the development of core skills for students.
4. Timetable events throughout the academic year to signpost and capture employability enhancement opportunities.
5. Promote and identify employability skills with students in classes.
6. Consider a “flipped classroom” approach with group-based, interactive activities that allow the student to take the lead on learning with guidance from the teacher.

Core skills embedded in apprenticeships

In several of the S4P projects, apprenticeships are an important component. In the UK, apprenticeships are structured to provide the combination of technical and core skills that employers are looking for. In 2014, new employer-defined apprenticeship standards were introduced in England in response to the Richard Review of Apprenticeships (2012), replacing existing apprenticeship frameworks.

The standards raise the quality of apprenticeships by responding to the needs of employers, who know what they want from their employees. They describe what knowledge ("know it"), skills ("show it") and behaviours ("live it") an apprentice will need at the end of their apprenticeship.

The standards break down the criteria for each section of the job role, as shown in this snippet of the Hospitality team member standard.

Section	Knowledge and Understanding (Know it)	Skills (Show it)	Behaviours (Live it)
Customer	Recognise customer profiles in hospitality and how customers have different needs	Use clear and engaging communication to establish a good rapport with customers and ask relevant questions to determine their needs	Use own initiative and have confidence in determining customers' needs

Snippet of Hospitality team member standard. Source: **Institute for Apprenticeships & Technical Education website.**

Apprenticeship standards are job-focused, not qualification-led. Having the behaviours explicitly outlined alongside the skills and knowledge means that an apprentice develops the core skills throughout the apprenticeship through their learning on the job. This is assessed at the end to prove that they can carry out all aspects of their role. This type of experiential learning enables them to face and learn from challenges in a safe environment, supported by tutors and workplace mentors.

Professional standards are starting to follow a similar approach, using knowledge, skills and behaviours to set out the areas in which an individual should be competent to perform their role, taking into account core skills.

As the key facilitators for the development of the apprenticeship standards for hospitality, retail, travel and aviation in the UK, People 1st International built on this to develop the Service Operator professional standard in 2020. The standard sets out criteria on how to work safely in service environments beyond COVID-19 and includes the required knowledge, skills and behaviours, helping employers to check that they have trained their employees to a consistent standard. The standard was used to develop the content of WorldHost COVID Safe Service. This training programme, which supports staff in keeping customers and colleagues safe beyond COVID-19, has been used globally, including in Indonesia.

Growing core skills through virtual reality training

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an explosion in the use of digital learning, enabling people to continue learning new skills, upgrade existing capabilities and complete mandatory compliance training. There is an opportunity in the S4P countries to consider some of the innovative ways of delivering core skills through immersive training.

Virtual reality enables students to grasp theoretical concepts faster and in greater depth than traditional learning and enhances the learning process with content that is interactive, engaging and made more fun by incorporating gamification. Learning using virtual reality is commonly called v-learning.

Virtual reality training specialist Titan highlights one of the key benefits to businesses of training through virtual reality as being the ability to encapsulate a wide range of core skills and sector specific training all in the same headset. It also offers other wide-reaching benefits:

- It speeds up the learning process.
- It is cost effective: Once a course is developed, the costs of rolling it out at scale are minimal, as it removes the need to hold repeat courses and potentially hefty venue fees.
- It has productivity benefits: There are material indirect cost savings from minimising downtime through to increasing productivity by having better trained and proficient employees.
- It is efficient: Virtual reality offers the potential to deliver critical learning in less than a fifth of the time it takes to train someone in a traditional format.

To further support how virtual reality can be effective as a training tool for core skills, Titan highlights some real-life examples:

- PwC conducted a study of virtual reality designed for core skills training. Selected employees from a group of new managers in 12 US locations took the same core skills training designed to address inclusive leadership in one of three learning modalities: classroom, e-learn and v-learn. Virtual reality learners were four times faster to train than in a classroom and over 2.5 times more confident to apply the skills learned after training.

- US telecom giant Verizon used virtual reality learning to train call centre employees for phone conversations with angry customers. Using virtual reality enables the learner to picture the customer on the other end of the line, creating empathy for that customer. 96% of participants came away feeling much more confident about having difficult phone conversations, and better able to picture a customer on the other end of the line as a real person in need.

Whilst virtual reality training might appear to be high cost and out of reach for those without significant resources and budget, it is a rapidly evolving space for skills learning, and should be paid attention as its impact is evaluated.

Reflections

It is clear from the examples given from the S4P projects in Mexico and South Africa and the global examples presented in this report that core skills are at the forefront of developing a competent and skilled workforce for the future. This can be seen across different geographies and contexts, and in line with the fast-shifting nature of work.

It is expected that S4P investment will support the achievement of better employment outcomes for learners. Piloting innovative approaches to embedding core skills into curricula and creating standalone activities for core skills development is a vital part of this ambition. Importantly, it addresses barriers between education and industry, the latter of which commonly comment that students are not work ready, owing to a lack of core skills. The Chartered Management Institute report Work-ready Graduates: Building Employability Skills for a Hybrid World highlighted that whilst all students need to develop employability and career management skills, nearly 80% of employers believe graduates are not work-ready on entering the employment market.

While the presented S4P interventions are all still in progress, we have identified three key areas of reflection for consideration when designing and delivering core skills training:

- **Recognise the importance of core skills as work skills.** Employers expect young people leaving education to be work ready and armed with the critical skills they need to communicate, proactively solve

problems, work effectively as part of a team and progress in their role. Embedding core skills into training activities avoids learners potentially missing important skills that will prepare them for real world performance. To effectively embed core skills with contextual sector relevance, teachers and trainers need a solid understanding of the expectations of the workplace. Therefore, their exposure to employers and different work environments can be helpful.

- **Consider how feasible it is to make changes to the existing curriculum.** In some environments, making changes to the curriculum is not always an option. Where it is, lesson plans, assessment approaches and teaching resources will need to be rewritten to support a more project-based approach to embed core skills from a framework, such as the ILO global framework for core skills. In the case where the curriculum cannot be changed, taking a programme such as the Passport to Success solution and adding it to the curriculum as additional modules and contextualising it to the sector is an alternative way of delivering core skills alongside vocational training. In either scenario, teachers and trainers will need to consider the dynamics of the classroom to get the best out of students in group activities, understanding their behaviours and styles of learning.

- **Acknowledge that the delivery style needs to change.** Fully embedding core skills into training activities requires a change to the way in which training is delivered. Giving students the opportunity to engage with and build their core skills in the classroom means a move away from lecture style delivery and a move toward group-based, interactive activities. These allow the student to take the lead on learning with guidance from the teacher. Adopting the “flipped classroom” approach means that this type of competency-based learning can increase student engagement and lead to better learning outcomes. Students undertake online lectures, self-learning and research outside of the classroom and work on higher-order thinking skills during class time. To enable this or other forms of delivery such as virtual reality training, teachers or trainers themselves are likely to need training or support to transition to alternative forms of delivery.

About the authors

Jane Rexworthy is a TVET specialist. Her role as Executive Director for People 1st International includes delivering strategic and operational skills and business support in over 40 countries. She has over 15 years’ experience in sector skills councils and over 15 years in industry.

Sally Eastland is a TVET expert for the S4P Hub and is the curriculum and quality assurance expert manager at People 1st International. She brings over three decades of experience in TVET and industry, both nationally and internationally.