



# Implementing employability skills frameworks in schools

Learning from the  
CREATE framework

November 2019

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# Introduction

This resource provides information on best practice for implementing Employability Skills Frameworks in schools.

Employability is a complex and contested concept (Suleman, 2018), with multiple actors (employers, institutions, policymakers, teachers, and parents) interpreting and contributing to a multidimensional definition. Employability Skills Frameworks are a way of attempting to define, categorise, and systematise the skills and attributes that contribute to this complex definition of employability and identify skills that are important in the world of work. In school contexts, Employability Skills Frameworks should provide strategic approaches to supporting young people to develop these relevant skills and ways in which that development can be monitored and assessed.

A range of frameworks are available to schools and these frameworks can be deployed in a variety of ways. When developing the Studio School Model, The Studio School Trust developed its own Employability Framework known

as CREATE. The aim was, in part, to create a feature unique to the Studio School model, but also to combine the best aspects of different frameworks available at the time (notably the RSA's Opening Minds competences, and the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority framework). However, although the CREATE Framework was originally conceptualised as a core feature of Studio Schools, the research behind this resource has found that not all Studio Schools have been able to implement the CREATE framework as originally envisioned. Many have either been creative in implementing it, deployed it partially alongside alternatives, or moved away from it completely to another framework. The reasons behind these different forms of engagement with CREATE have included, but are not limited to, a need for uniformity across MATs, archaic language of the framework, and complexities associated with of being a new school in a harsh, competitive educational landscape.

## Employability skills

This resource, therefore, aims to support schools in the implementation of Employability Skills Frameworks by sharing examples of best practice and potential pitfalls, regardless of which framework is used. It is not meant to be prescriptive in nature, and serves as a starting point for Studio Schools, and other schools with a similar interest in employability skills development, to reflect on their current practices.

### *Who is this resource for?*

This resource is primarily aimed at principals and members of the senior leadership team who are involved in strategic approaches to school planning and management at Studio Schools. The resource is based on practice we observed in Studio Schools so will be particularly relevant to Studio Schools interested in reflecting on the way in which they implement employability skills frameworks. However, the resource is also very relevant to any specialist school focused on the development of employability skills as well as mainstream schools interested in introducing employability skills frameworks into their work to develop a deeper and more embedded approach to employability.



### *Background Research*

This is an evidence-based resource that has been developed from research undertaken by the Skills, Knowledge and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) Research Centre at Oxford University Department of Education (Robson, Randhawa and Keep, 2018), funded by the Edge Foundation. This research specifically examined Studio Schools and how the different schools across the Studio Schools Network implemented Employability Skills frameworks as part of their aim to provide an innovative and skills-based model of education. The main skills framework used by Studio Schools is the CREATE Framework, which was specifically developed for Studio Schools. However, many schools in the study used additional or alternative frameworks or had even developed their own. Therefore, this resource offers generic guidance on best practice whatever skills framework is deployed.

The research project had three phases: document and policy analysis and interviews with key architects of the Studio School model and the CREATE Framework; a questionnaire sent to all schools in the Studio School Network focused on the different approaches schools took to developing employability skills in their students; and in-depth case studies of five schools, where interviews were undertaken with principals, a wide range of members of staff, students, and employer partners, in order to understand the messy realities of developing employability skills in students in real school contexts.

The published report highlighted a range of challenges schools face in implementing employability frameworks, along with a discussion of the pitfalls and examples of best practice we had observed in the case studies. This resource provides a short and accessible summary of those findings.

The full report can be found at: [http://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/create\\_final\\_report\\_december2018\\_1.pdf](http://www.edge.co.uk/sites/default/files/documents/create_final_report_december2018_1.pdf)

We are extremely grateful to all the schools and individuals who participated in this project. The work would not have been possible without their generosity and support.



## Best practice

The research highlighted **five key** aspects of best practice when implementing employability skills frameworks in schools: **strong leadership; clear ownership; meaningful partnership; integrated practice;** the need for **continuous training**. However, it is important to remember that these key aspects are overlapping and closely related to each other, and whilst we have separated them into different categories, their influence on each other is very tangible. Best practice and successful deployment of any innovative employability skills framework comes from schools working across all five aspects holistically.

### STRONG LEADERSHIP

#### *Leaders in Schools*

Both successfully introducing and implementing employability skills frameworks in schools requires strong leadership from the principal or head teacher of the school and the wider senior leadership team. Although the importance of employability skills and ensuring students are 'work ready' is often emphasised by policy makers, employers and practitioners, the raft of accountability measures that schools face (from Ofsted, Progress 8, the EBacc, pressures from Multi Academy Trusts (MATs) etc.) tend to place emphasis

on the 'academic' aspects of education. In the face of this, meaningful implementation of employability skills frameworks in schools requires leaders to have an unwavering belief in the value of a wider curriculum and the importance of developing students' employability skills for their wider working lives.

Our research showed that meaningful engagement with employability skills is still seen as highly innovative within the English schools. In educational contexts, innovation requires strong leaders to carry staff members with them, convince parents, and justify the innovation to MATs or the Department for Education.



While criticality and flexibility are important features of leadership, if schools are to maintain their unique identities and ethos in the face of increasing accountability measures and marketisation, a firm belief in the distinctive vocational offering is essential across the whole of a school's leadership team. When facing challenges, the path of least resistance is almost always a move towards mainstream schooling models, traditional pedagogic approaches, and a core focus on academic outcomes. Strong leadership is required to make the decision to take the harder, distinctive path and support staff in doing so. This is particularly important when employing new leaders after foundational members move on: a clear understanding and commitment to the model and its core parts (particularly selected employability frameworks) are essential.

#### ***Leaders in MATs and wider administrative structures***

Our research has also highlighted the critical importance of having leaders in MATs who understand the Studio School model, or any innovative approaches that their member schools are attempting to implement. In the academised context in which all schools now operate, this strength of leadership within the central administration of a MAT is essential if innovation is to be promoted, broader models of schooling that go beyond purely mainstream approaches are to be included in MATs' portfolio of schools, and school leaders are to be supported.

#### ***National Leaders***

At the same time, our research highlighted the importance of having adequate funding for national leaders that can represent membership schools' interests with policy makers, provide guidance, support school leaders as they navigate challenges and maintain distinctive institutional identities, and develop relevant, centralised programmes of training.

#### **Leadership in the MAT**

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One example of leadership that has particularly stood out was the creation of a strong partnership with the MAT network via the participation and representation of the Studio School on the MAT's leadership team. Being a part of the team allowed for the Studio School's voice to have equal representation within the MAT structure, and allowed the Principal to make the case for maintaining the Studio School's unique identity and employability framework within the framing of the MAT's priorities. This representation of the Studio School within the MAT's leadership structure prevented a top-down approach to the development of employability skills where the Studio School would be 'forced' to follow the MAT's approach only, and allowed the Studio School to maintain its own unique ethos.

#### **Mission Creep**

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In our research, one of the Studio Schools had found themselves drifting into a mainstream model of education within two years of opening. This was reflected in changes not just in choice of subjects, but also via the erosion of elements of the Studio School model such as the longer school days, and a move away from project based learning.

'Because the trust are academics, we're academics, and we're a Studio School, we're both and we're different and that's our battle' (Vice Principal, Studio School). In order to win, or at least not lose, this battle, the school had taken a strategic decision to adopt a schooling approach for the 'academics' that would be recognisable and acceptable to the MAT, not holding firm to their belief in the strengths of the Studio School model.



### CLEAR OWNERSHIP

The implementation of employability frameworks (such as CREATE) involves multiple stakeholders (students, parents, employers, staff). All stakeholders should have a sense of ownership of the framework and its implementation in order to ensure meaningful engagement. However, it is particularly important to empower students to take ownership of the framework used in the school, in turn taking ownership of their own skills development. As highlighted in our research, this was how the implementation of the CREATE framework had originally been conceptualised. Students were meant to be treated as the true owners of the employability skills that they want to develop in themselves, work with mentors, advisors, and employers to develop them to different levels of expertise.

However, supporting students to take ownership of the framework was something that many of the schools in our study seemed to struggle most with. We found confusion around ownership between the different stakeholders, with students often excluded from critical conversations about their own skills development and disempowered from engaging with employability frameworks in a meaningful way. This led to a disconnect in the deployment of the employability skills model within schools and, with confusion around ownership, a real risk that none of the stakeholders would take ownership of the employability frameworks or responsibility for their implementation. At one school, for example, the development of the skills was owned by the Personal Coaches (a feature of the intended framework). However, the students themselves had very little appreciation and understanding of employability skills and so the language of skills used in the employability skills framework of the school was alien to them. The Coaches found themselves having to dilute the language of the employability statements, taking away students' sense of ownership in the tool.

At another school, however, there was much clearer student ownership of skills development. This was provided for students through a school culture that gave them responsibility for their own skills development and explicitly placed ownership of the employability skills

## Best practice

### CREATE Passports – a practical approach

Skills Passports are one example of a practical way in which students were given autonomy over their own development of employability skills. A 'CREATE Passport' is created for each student as part of ongoing discussions with Personal Coaches, where the student captures their strengths as linked to the CREATE framework and also which skills they would like to work on. Students maintain this Passport through their years at the school, capturing any work they do on skills development, and also capturing how any work placements they may participate in helps to hone and develop the CREATE skills. Maintenance and autonomous ownership of the Passport allowed students to have meaningful discussions with employers and Personal Coaches alike.

framework with the students. This was supported through practical measures such as a 'skills passport' (described in the box), which actively encouraged this self-development and enabled students to track their progress. This enabled students at this school to reflect on the skills that they were trying to develop in a variety of settings, both in school and with employers at their organised work experience opportunities, and provided them with a language that was familiar to employers, thereby enriching not only the work experience, but also the students' understanding of what is needed in employment. It is important to note that this sense of student ownership was achieved through embedded supportive structures: strong leadership, a school culture that emphasised self-efficacy and responsibility, supportive staff who helped students to reflect on their development, and close relationships with employers.

### MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIP

Our research highlighted the need for meaningful partnerships to be created with employers to not only provide useful and relevant work placements, but to also ensure the successful implementation of an employability framework. Each school that we visited highlighted the



difficulty in creating these deep partnerships, citing employer schedules, fatigue, and lack of time as reasons why some partnerships remained superficial at best. The schools were also keen to highlight the necessity of constantly maintaining contact with employers to facilitate these deep partnerships. It is these meaningful partnerships that allowed employers to have a real voice in the development of employability skills for the students thereby ensuring relevancy of the skills being developed. On a practical level, employer partnerships and work placements for students of all ages were difficult to facilitate at the Studio Schools; schools were creative about forming and maintaining employer engagement through student projects, which allowed students to engage with employers on projects that were set by them within the

### Incentives for a meaningful partnership

Whilst one of the purposes of Studio Schools is to create students who are 'work ready', this 'benefit' is not one that employers would see immediately through their partnership with the schools. Once schools in our research had found an interesting way to incentivise employer partners such that employers received 'free advertising' and marketing for their company and services by the school branding themselves as a partner and working on key projects with them. For example, this school had partnered with the local football club, and students (who were interested in digital media) created, produced and ran a weekly highlight show for it. This show is broadcast on school TVs and on Youtube, providing additional marketing and awareness for the football club.



school itself. These projects allowed for both students and employers to learn from one another, in a manner that was less time and resource intensive for employers.

However, our study highlighted that the most important aspect of a successful partnership between schools and employers is communication. Maintaining ongoing communication about students throughout work placements is critical to ensuring the experience is tailored to specific needs and the development of specific skills. In most instances this requires a staffing structure that enables dedicated members of staff to develop ongoing meaningful relationships with employers *and* students to understand the needs of both stakeholders.

### 4 INTEGRATED PRACTICE

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Studio Schools have developed a distinctive employability skills-based schooling offer. Employability frameworks must sit at the heart of this and our research shows that this is most successful when frameworks are embedded and integrated into the whole culture of the school. This ensures that the framework sits at the heart of all school activities allowing for a deep understanding and development of employability skills for both students and staff. This enables schools to market their offer clearly to parents and employers. In a crowded educational market place, having a clear ethos with an embedded employability framework is likely to make schools stand out.

This integration of the skills framework into the school's makeup and ethos should occur via both explicit and implicit means. Explicit implementation should take place through vocational work, coaching, and work placement and the framework should form the basis of conversations and activity in these areas. Implicit implementation should take place through embedding the framework in the fabric of the school, even at a subliminal level, to signal the importance of the framework to the vocational ethos of the school. At the same time, teachers who might not be actively involved in the more vocational aspects of the school should be encouraged to reflect on building skills implicitly into their lesson plans and communicate their activities closely with coaches and vocational leads.

### Explicit and implicit implementation of the CREATE framework

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In one Studio School, the CREATE framework could be found physically present around the school in the form of posters, PowerPoint presentations on school monitors, and CREATE passports and diaries for student record. These physical manifestations placed the framework at the centre of school activities and were an overt attempt to embed it in the everyday life of the school emphasising the importance of CREATE and the development of employability skills for schools' institutional identity, making the vocational ethos and values of the school explicit to anyone visiting it (new students, parents, employers). However, at the same time, these physical depictions also acted implicitly. They could be as subtle as a colour scheme or stripes of the CREATE colours running down a wall or embedded in documentation. As such, they formed part of the subliminal tapestry of the school, implicitly, but consistently reminding everyone within it of the centrality of CREATE.

### 5 ONGOING TRAINING

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The successful implementation of distinctive schooling models and employability frameworks requires dedicated and consistent training for all members of staff. This ensures a shared understanding of the goals and ethos of the school and the framework and clear communication between staff. This is particularly important when new members of staff join the school. There must be appropriate training to ensure that they understand the distinctive aspects of the school and how to implement them. Given the fluid and messy educational market place that Studio Schools must operate in, there is a need for training to be able to react to and incorporate emerging issues and challenges. This is likely to necessitate large scale training providers with the resources and capacity to develop flexible and consistently up to date programme of CPD. Schools may therefore need to work with larger organisations, either through their MATs or through alternative employability frameworks, to ensure they have access to strong support structures and appropriate training.



# Navigating the challenges

Our research, as described in this resource, has highlighted the five core areas of best practice for successful implementation of employability skills:

- **LEADERSHIP:** Strong leadership is required at the school level, as well as at the MAT and local authority level, in order to maintain and drive innovative models of schooling that place employability skills at the centre of the curriculum. Strong leaders are instrumental in establishing innovative institutional cultures and supporting staff in maintaining these employability skills-based approaches. However, it is equally important to have effective leaders at the national level who can represent the schooling models nationally and advocate for them with policy makers.
- **MEANINGFUL PARTNERSHIP:** Schools need to develop meaningful partnerships with identified employers, and build a relationship based on open communication to ensure that the partnerships are more than superficial. This will not only ensure that the work placements for the students are tailored to their needs but will also allow for the development of specific and relevant skills.
- **INTEGRATION:** The employability framework, when adopted by a school, must sit at the heart of all the school activities to allow for a deep understanding and development of employability skills for both students and staff.
- **CLEAR OWNERSHIP:** Ownership, accountability, and responsibility for the development and implementation of the employability skills framework must be clearly defined and embedded in the management structures of the schools. Not having a clear plan and group responsible for implementation leads to confusion, ineffective deployment, and a lack of development of the desired employability skills.
- **ONGOING TRAINING:** Consistent and continuous training of staff is required to ensure that there is a shared understanding of the goals and ethos of not only the employability framework but also the innovative structures of any new school model. This



will allow for a more fluid deployment of any chosen frameworks and will allow for clear communication between staff to react to and incorporate any challenges.

However, the implementation of an employability framework does not sit in a vacuum. Schools are complex, messy social environments, embedded in local and national networks and political and economic contexts. The deployment of an employability framework in a school sits within a wider series of issues and challenges linked with the messy realities of running a school in a competitive educational marketplace with punitive accountability measures, embedded assumptions about 'gold standard' educational pathways, and limited funding.

Navigating all of these challenges is critical not just to the successful implementation of an employability skills framework, but to the successful implementation of a vocational, skills-based model of education. In the face of challenges, the course of least resistance is often to move away from innovative approaches and revert to mainstream models of schooling. Our research suggests that through strong leadership, clear ownership of skills development and progression, meaningful

partnerships, integrated practice, and strong ongoing training, challenges can be overcome and distinctive vocational approaches can succeed. However, a pick and mix approach to best practice is rarely possible and is likely to lead to an iterative dissolution of distinctive and innovative aspects of a schooling model. As highlighted above, when schools reflect on their practice, it is important to think about the five identified areas of best practice in holistic terms as part of an overall strategic approach to school improvement.

## REFERENCES

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