Providers’ lack of confidence in their ability to deliver successful training in key skills, as well as many learners’ and employers’ lack of commitment to them, still combined to make the key skills element of modern apprenticeships a low priority for many . . . ‘A failure to achieve key skills qualifications was a significant cause of poor achievement of modern apprenticeships.’


**Key skills**

**teaching and assessing key skills**

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**What?**

- know what needs to be learned
- plan learning
- support learning
- assess progress
- assess learner’s work.

**Why?**

Employers value highly skills such as the ability to communicate, work in teams and solve problems. A basic level of information technology and numeracy skills is also increasingly important in many jobs and workplaces.

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**Key skills are part of all government-funded learning programmes. There are six key skills in all.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>Working with others</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Application of number</td>
<td>Improving own learning and performance</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information technology</td>
<td>Problem solving</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Key skills specifications are published by the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) and available at levels 1 to 4. The specifications are in three parts:

- Part A – what you need to know.
- Part B – what you must do.
- Part C – guidance on activities to develop skills and examples of evidence.

The key skills specifications should be read alongside QCA’s separately published guidance, which assists in the interpretation of the specifications.

Two of the key skills are mandatory in all MA frameworks, the others are optional:

- communication and application of number – mandatory, minimum level 1 in FMA, level 2 in AMA.
- information technology, working with others, problem solving and improving own learning and performance – optional, levels specified in each framework.

Despite the fact that key skills have been part of work-based learning for many years, too many providers and employers have failed to come to grips with them.
Key facts
According to the ALI, most problems with key skills were mainly caused by the fact that:

- key skills were undervalued by many employers, providers, and learners
- key skills training was not related closely enough to learners’ area of learning
- key skills teaching and assessment were frequently introduced into learners’ programmes at too late a stage.

How?
Know what needs to be learned
There’s a simple cycle of learning that works for any skill. The key skills units are divided into three parts, and each part links to a stage in the cycle.

Everyone has a ‘spiky profile’ in most skills, and key skills are no exception – people do some things better than others. It’s important to identify early on which specific skills in Part A of the key skills units individual learners need to improve.

After this it’s possible to work out whether the learner:

- is not familiar with the skill at all – they have never learned it (though someone might have tried to teach it), so they need to start from the beginning
- is partly familiar with the skills – they learned it in the past but have either forgotten it or were never confident about it in the first place, so they need some teaching to become familiar with the skill again
- has got the skill but can’t use it consistently to the required standard – in which case they need practice to become perfect.

The first part in this process – identifying the skills to work on – can be done using a good initial assessment tool. The second can only be done by direct contact with learners. It’s important to do it so that the appropriate support can be given.

There’s a close relationship between acquiring and practising skills. That’s because one of the best ways of becoming fully confident in a skill is to practise using it: acquisition and practice at some point become inseparable. From here it is relatively easy to move on to the stage of applying skills in real situations to real work tasks.

Plan learning
Key skills learning requires two kinds of planning. A broad outline plan will help to organise the learning over a period of weeks or months. This is especially useful if initial assessment shows that improvements are needed in many of the specific skills in Part A. More detailed, short-term plans can then be made for learning over shorter periods.
Short-term plans should make it perfectly clear:

- which skills are to be learned
- how they will be taught – in what situation and context, when and where, and who will support the learner
- where the learner will go next once a specific skill has been learned.

It’s a good idea to build on strengths, so the order in which the specific skills in Part A are learned should allow learners to gain some quick wins.

Copies of key skills learning plans should be given to learners, work supervisors and all members of staff supporting the learner. If people know when a learner is learning and practising a new skill, they can look out for opportunities to help. Things almost always go better if learners are shown how to use skills in context.

It’s helpful to map out defined opportunities to integrate key skills teaching and learning as much as possible. As one training manager says:

> The mapping we’ve done allows trainers and supervisors to identify those particular opportunities to help learners with specific skills. Because we’re able to show the skills being used in a variety of situations, everyone can see how important it is.

It’s useful to know that progress in key skills can be quite slow and painstaking at the start, as learners acquire or re-acquire skills. There are no short cuts in this kind of learning. Providers, employers and learners themselves need to realise this and guard against getting impatient or demotivated. Good ways to prevent this include:

- short, sharp learning sessions aimed to achieve one thing
- plenty of variety in the kind of learning tasks given
- lots of feedback and encouragement
- tracking of progress to show that gains are being made all the time.

**Support learning**

Learners can be supported as they develop their key skills in many different ways, formal and informal, Examples of approaches that can be used to help with specific skills are:

- small group teaching, addressing a specific skill
- one-to-one tutorials away from work
- one-to-one coaching sessions within the work environment
- discussions using examples from the workplace
- using information and communication technology (ICT)
- self-study.

Whichever methods are used, some form of session plan will normally be prepared to show how each skill will be taught and linked to other skills. It’s useful to build up a bank of session plans, with guidance notes so that they can be used as a resource by trainers who are not specialists in key skills.

Sometimes learners will only need to be reminded of a skill before they are able to use it. In this case, the two main things learners need are:

- opportunities to practise the skill in different situations
- feedback to show how well they are doing.

There comes a point when learners gain confidence and are ready to move from learning specific skills to applying them appropriately and in a considered way. At this point, links between the skills should be established so they start to put different skills together.
For example, someone improving their punctuation, spelling and grammar should be given the opportunity to write complete texts, even if the texts are short. In this way, learners move seamlessly from the first part of the cycle (acquiring a skill) to the second (practising it), and then to the third (using it in context, alongside other skills).

Most learners need to be taught the value of checking their work by using another method, particularly when working on number skills. Re-reading, editing, spell-checking, reverse calculation, estimation and rounding up or down are all ways of checking work is accurate and sensible. Learners should be shown when work is inaccurate and in need of adjustment or correction, so they get into the habit of looking self-critically at their own work.

**Assess progress**

Learners’ progress should be assessed at every stage of the cycle:

- Acquiring a specific skill – is it used accurately and correctly?
- Practising skills – are the right skills used in the right way, and are the results accurate and correct?
- Applying skills – are the skills applied correctly in a range of contexts?

Assessing like this is called formative assessment, or assessment for learning. Its purpose is to check that learning has happened successfully and move learners forward to the next thing.

At some point, a judgement has to be made as to whether or not a learner is producing work to the standards set out in the key skills specifications and guidance. If they have progressed to this point, it is time to assess their work as evidence (summative assessment). At this stage, learners should be:

- competent with all specific aspects of the key skill
- capable of deciding when to use specific skills
- able to talk with confidence about the skills they have learned
- able to describe how and why they would use them in a variety of situations.

**Assess learners’ work**

Key skills in communication, application of number and information technology are assessed through a combination of portfolio evidence and an externally set and marked test. The other three, sometimes known as the ‘wider’ key skills, are assessed through portfolio evidence only. Learners with certain other qualifications are exempt from the test, although to gain the key skill they normally have to produce portfolio evidence to the required standard.

Part B of the key skills specifications say what learners should be able to do, by making good use of the skills in Part A. It's essential to make a clear judgement about the work learners put forward as evidence against both Parts A and B. The two questions to be asked are:

- Does the learner’s work demonstrate that they can do the things listed in Part B?
- Is the work up to the standards described in Part A?

If the answer is ‘Yes’, the learner is ready to be entered for the relevant tests. Some preparation specifically for the tests is helpful, e.g. going through test questions so learners can get used to what they are like.

At this point, learners may also be ready to produce work for the portfolio of evidence. It is essential that the work put forward as evidence should demonstrate all the points listed in Part B. It is not necessary for the work to cover all the specific skills listed in Part A.

It may help to adopt the idea of a work-in-progress file for key skills, to differentiate it from the final portfolio of evidence. Only work that has been assessed as up to standard should be included in the final portfolio. Evidence must be signed by the learner and assessor to confirm the authenticity of work, with other contributors being acknowledged where appropriate.
Key skills portfolios should demonstrate quality, not quantity. Work should be carefully selected as evidence to show that the standards have been met. There is no need for any other work to be included. However, it's important that the work is annotated by both the learner and assessor to show:

- how it has been done – to show that it is the learner’s own work, done as part of a meaningful activity
- that it has been assessed as meeting the standards.

At this point, the portfolio is ready for internal verification and external moderation by the awarding body. It is essential for assessors and internal verifiers to examine portfolios in order to establish an accepted standard. Whilst it is the assessor’s decision as to whether the work is up to standard, verifiers and moderators must be able to see how the decision has been made and agree with it.

**Where and when**

The process of developing and integrating key skills should start right at the beginning of the programme. Learners should know from the recruitment and selection stages that key skills are an integral part of the framework. At induction they should be introduced to the relevant key skills in more detail.

There’s no single pathway for key skills learning, because every individual has different needs and will learn at their own pace. Instead, providers must have the ability to create appropriate pathways for each learner, making use of opportunities to learn on and off the job.

**Case studies and examples**

**Integrating key skills**

One large national provider has succeeded in integrating key skills learning and assessment with other aspects of learning programmes. The process starts with a ‘skill-scan’ of each learner’s current and future job role to identify opportunities for them to develop the skills at work. Learners, employers and provider staff get a list of the opportunities. Learners then keep a log of how and where each of the skills on the list was learned in context.

The provider has appointed one specialist tutor for communication, one for number and one for IT as part of the central team. They prepare learning sessions for small groups and individual learners. The session plans all contain clear indications pointing to the purpose and use of each skill in context. Where possible they incorporate workplace tasks. The specialists also train other trainers and assessors to use the session plans and add ideas of their own on how to make them more relevant.

Over time, the provider has sought to engage employers more closely with key skills. Working closely with employers, the specialist tutors have identified a wide range of situations and tasks during which learners can develop key skills. These situations also provide opportunities for learners to produce good quality evidence for their portfolios.

Learners are involved as well. At the start of their programme, learners and employers together develop a job description in which their responsibilities are clearly defined. Aspects of the role are mapped across to key skills, so learners can see from the start how the skills will be used in their work. Each time the job changes, new aspects of their role are mapped again to the key skills.
Resources

- Key Skills Support Programme (2003) Success in Key Skills: Products and services for work-based learning. (Learning for Work)
- Key Skills Support Programme (2002-03) Good Practice Guides. (Learning for Work)

The Key Skills Support Programme aims to help providers improve the quality of key skills provision and support the preparation of young people for the key skills qualifications. The programme is managed by Learning for Work in the work-based route, and offers:

- publications and resources – realistic and practical approaches and ideas
- training and development for managers and staff
- information, news and advice.

See the website below for details.

Stay in touch

- www.keyskillssupport.net
- www.qca.org.uk

Checklist

- Do you know which key skills, and at what levels, are included in your learners’ MA frameworks?
- What initial assessment tools does your organisation use to identify specific areas of key skills that individual learners should improve?
- Do you use the information to produce a broad plan for learners to develop their skills?
- What is the process for agreeing short-term plans with learners to help them learn specific aspects of the key skills?
- What methods are used to support learners in their key skills?
- Who provides the support?
- How do you make the judgement that learners are sufficiently confident with their key skills to produce work that may be considered as evidence?
- How is their work assessed and what is the process of quality assuring assessment decisions?
- What constitutes a good key skills portfolio?