

# SURFACING SKILLS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF LEEDS – AN INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH



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## SUMMARY

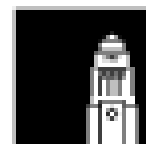
The following case study describes the University of Leeds' approach to supporting their students to recognise, understand and apply the skills that their curricular experiences afford them. It outlines the context within which the University is seeking to review and improve its curricular offer across all programmes and disciplines within its Curriculum Redefined programme.

The case study provides an insight into the value of a partnership approach through its new Surfacing Skills process and demonstrates how its development (after 18 months) is already leading to an institutional step-change within a research-intensive university. The contributors represent a cross-university partnership between academics and professional services which has enabled employer voices to be heard within disciplines that would not normally reflect their needs.

## CONTEXT

The University of Leeds is a large (circa 40k students) Russell Group University based in the North of England. It is in the top 100 universities in the world, and is structured in seven faculties (Arts, Humanities and Cultures; Biological Sciences; Business; Engineering and Physical Sciences; Environment; Medicine and Health; Social Sciences). The [University's Vision for Student Education \(2020-2030\)](#) is that it will 'provide a transformative, research-based educational experience for students from diverse backgrounds, who develop the skills and knowledge they need to succeed and make a positive impact in the world'. Working with students as partners in their learning is a key strategic priority and the University's **Student Opportunities and Futures Strategy** (its equivalent of an Employability Strategy) reflects this ambition with the following student promise:

*Throughout your time at Leeds, we will encourage you to reflect upon what success means for you now and in the future. Throughout your course experience and beyond, we will support you to develop and articulate the attributes, skills and behaviours that you need to achieve your goals and aspirations.*



The scale of the institution means that it has a complex portfolio of programmes which has resulted in inconsistent opportunities for students to explore their own aspirations and to reflect on the skills value of their degrees. The University is now embarking on an institutional curriculum change programme [Curriculum Redefined](#) which aims to develop an innovative, imaginative and sustainable approach to education and an exceptional learning experience for our students.

A central part of the institution's response to Curriculum Redefined is through embedding employability within the curriculum to ensure that all students are supported to consider what a successful and meaningful future looks like for them. Thinking about the ways in which the curriculum can support student futures is a collaborative effort. The curriculum is a space through which strategic objectives intersect. At its best, this is a space where students are given time and space to learn and reflect, where they are assessed on work which is authentic and aligned to the expectations of academic disciplines, as well as professional bodies and employers, and where students from diverse backgrounds feel they belong, can thrive, and are valued for their unique contribution.

## METHODOLOGY AND IMPLEMENTATION

The **Leeds Capabilities Framework** (CF) [see Figure 1] and the **Surfacing Skills** (SS) project are the key enablers for such a vision. Our ambition is to develop graduates who are academically, digitally and professionally literate. The SS process enables programme teams to identify, signpost, practice, assess, and provide reflection opportunities within the curriculum, complementing extra and co-curricular activities. The CF and SS are prioritised within Curriculum Redefined and a university-wide, multi-disciplinary team provides bespoke support as programme and discipline teams determine the skills profiles for their distinct areas. New Quality Assurance processes ensure skills are also embedded in all new programme proposals. We have developed resources for staff (including case studies, advice, blogs, and examples of employer indicator frameworks (skills criteria by which employers recruit graduates)), skills packs for students (explaining how their skills may be applied within the workplace), and we run regular workshops at the school, faculty, and institutional level.

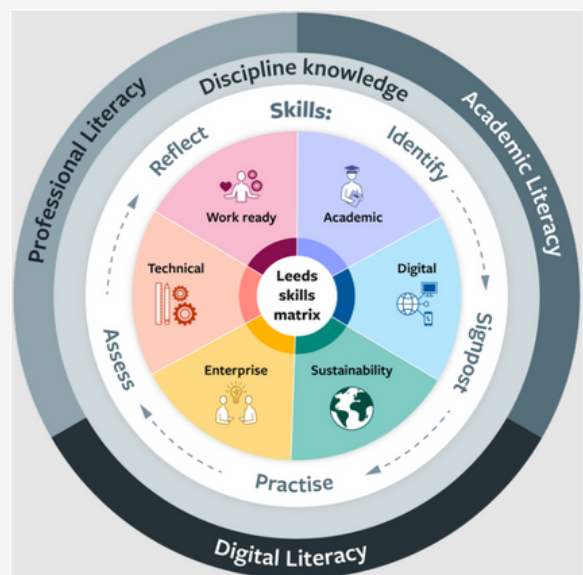
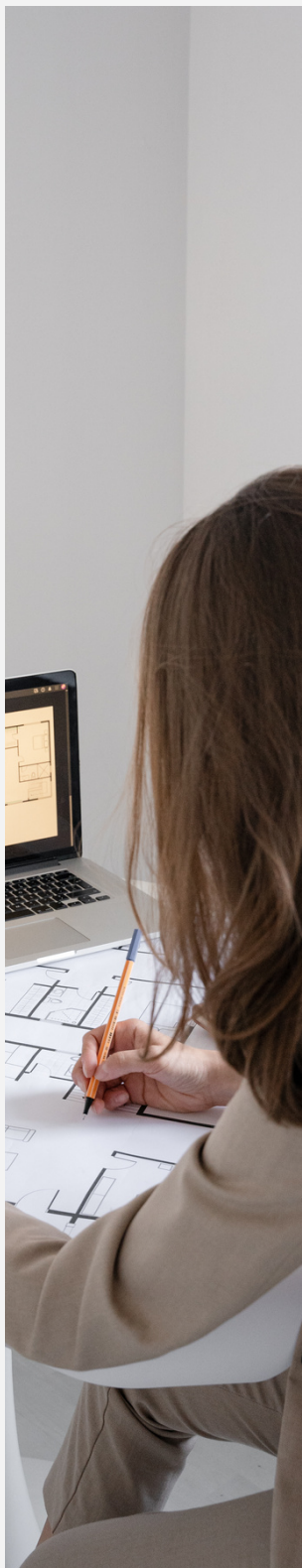


Figure 1: The Leeds Capabilities Framework



### The Capabilities Framework – The Development Process

The primary aim of the Leeds Capabilities Framework is to bring together the core complementary components of academic, digital and professional literacies (including the development of their related skills) to support curriculum design and delivery. The Framework was developed by students and staff from across the university (including Student Careers, Enterprise, Sustainability, and Library teams) to articulate the behaviours, mindsets, knowledge, and skills our graduates need to develop for their personal and professional futures. For example, if someone is ‘academically literate’, what does that mean? What is someone who is ‘digitally literate’ able to do? And if our graduates wish to be successful in the workplace, how can their educational experiences enable them to be ‘professionally literate’ and complete that transition with confidence? The framework was devised to support academic teams at Leeds to determine how those three literacies work together for their particular discipline, and how they can articulate their unique ‘DNA’ when compared to similar courses at other universities.

Whilst degrees are not just about skills, surfacing and developing them is vital for supporting students to become successful within their discipline and subsequently as confident graduates. The term ‘surfacing’ is key here: our bespoke **5-stage process** built into the Framework enables us to shine a spotlight on the skills that are already there, identifying when and where they will be developed. This is important, as graduate employers and students tell us that they often struggle to understand and articulate the skills value of degree programmes.

The inner core of the Framework is the **Leeds Skills Matrix**, a collection of transferable skills which have been ‘packaged’ into six discreet domains. This skills matrix provides a starting point for teaching staff and students to reflect upon their application and suitability for both disciplinary and individual aspirations. This is important as a degree can only support a finite number of skills. Where students require additional key skills relevant to their career futures, our university enables them to expand their skillset through our Discovery strand, as well as through a wide range of extra-curricular opportunities. Building in space for student reflection on skills as a core part of the curriculum is essential to enable these skills and skills gaps to be identified.

### Student reflections on skills

Alongside these initiatives, there were several developments that gave us a better insight into how our students perceived their development and mastery of skills. Firstly, the introduction of the Graduate Voice questions into the Graduate Outcomes Survey in 2019 presented the sector with a new perspective on student satisfaction. In particular, the question focusing on whether graduates were using the skills from their studies in their current roles or activities, highlighted that a large proportion of graduates (circa 30-50%) were not confident that they were. At Leeds we were interested to explore the reasons for this. Were our graduates gaining a range of transferable skills from their studies, but simply struggling to fully recognise this? And what might students need to better understand the skills they are development throughout their University experience?

At the same time, research was being carried out in 4 representative Schools: namely, the Schools of Law, Physics, Music, and Civil Engineering. This research was designed to ascertain the perspectives of our students on the importance of skills development (to both them and employers); the impact of their current degree and broader university experience on their skills development; and the extent to which they felt that key skills were being developed and signposted.

The key results below are representative of our headline findings:

- *"I recognise the wide range of skills I am developing throughout my degree programme"* - 20% disagreed with this statement.
- *"I feel confident articulating the skills I have developed throughout my academic studies to an employer during a job interview"* - 42% disagreed with this statement.
- *"Do you feel teaching staff highlight the skills you are learning throughout your course?"* - 70% responded 'no'.

It was clear from these results and the Graduate Outcomes findings that a new simple process was required to support academic teams to consider how skills could be surfaced within curriculum as they designed and reviewed their modules and programmes. The surfacing skills process was established to support this process of skills extraction and analysis. This represented a move away from twelve institutional 'LeedsforLife' skills, from which all modules and programmes previously had to select, to a new and more bespoke, active approach.



### The 5-Stage Process of Surfacing Skills

#### The Origins

Discussions were held with the careers teams at Kings College London (KCL) in early 2020 to understand their process of 'extracted employability'. This process had enabled KCL to consider how QAA Subject Benchmark statements (which already influenced the content and skills of all degree programmes) could be used as a basis for identifying and 'extracting' those employability skills that were already present in their curriculum. Their collaborative approach of working with academic teams to better understand the skills that were already being developed within their teaching and assessment, but which needed to be surfaced, resonated with the team from Leeds. As a similar research-intensive university, the KCL process was quickly assessed to be useful for shaping the ways in which we could support our students to understand the transferable 'skills value' of their degree experiences.

It was important from the outset to develop a clear and simple process that could be followed by subject teams when surfacing the skills value of their degree programmes. The process supports staff to consider the skills that are most appropriate to their discipline, using a combination of current programme specifications, the Leeds Skills Matrix (see Figure 3), Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) Subject Benchmark Statements and any relevant Professional Statutory Regulatory Body (PSRB) requirements. The process also recommends consultation with current and past students as well as relevant employers. The process was developed to be a sustainable review and decision-making tool designed to support curriculum design and delivery.

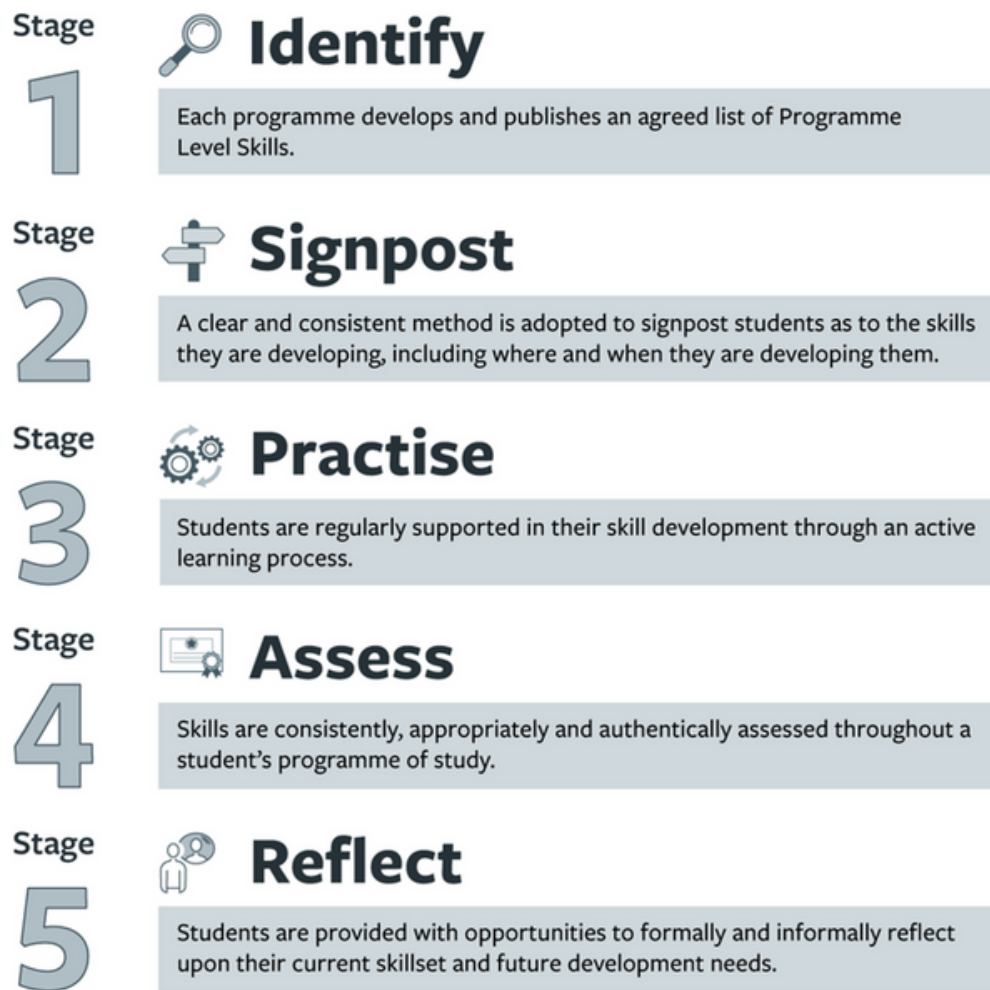
Drawing on Advance HE's framework for enhancing and embedding employability (2019), the Leeds process for Surfacing Skills adopted a 5-stage approach (see Figure 2).

Each stage requires the academic discipline area to reflect upon:

- Their current position with regards to skill identification and development.
- Their relationships with external, professional and accrediting bodies.
- The position of teaching teams in relation to programme redesign and their capacity to take on additional review and enhancement.



Figure 2: The Leeds approach to the 5-Stage Process for Surfacing Skills



So far, subject teams have approached and used the 5-stage process in different ways, according to their needs. For example, some teams spend more time focusing on Stage 1 and the disciplinary skills that are most relevant to them and the world beyond the university. The Surfacing Skills team (including staff from Student Careers) supports consultation with graduate employers, students and alumni to ensure a wide range of perspectives are involved at this review and selection stage.

Other programme teams may feel more confident about Stage 1 but are less certain about how those skills are being assessed (particularly in relation to authentic assessments). Some notice formal gaps in how they enable their students to reflect upon their skills and then proactively plan for future development. The process includes staff support and guidance information for each of the 5 stages and this support has been warmly welcomed by academic teams seeking help with their programme reviews.

## The Leeds Skills Matrix

Our degree programmes and modules are packed with a wide range of opportunities for skills development some aligned to the discipline and others more generic. Prior to adopting the Leeds Skills Matrix, the University had twelve cross-Institutional skills and attributes from which all programmes were required to select when designing programmes and modules. Our aim was to work collaboratively with colleagues across the University (see cross-institutional teams outlined below) who had an interest and expertise in certain skills domains to create a broader, more holistic, and user-friendly set of skills options for staff and students.



Figure 3: The Leeds Skills Matrix

The matrix we have developed encompasses **6 domains** which operate independently whilst also intersecting (see Figure 3). There are many skills which feature in several domains (for example 'collaboration') and this enables academic staff and students to recognise the transferability of those skills across different contexts, and their clear importance with the subject area.

Each skills domain area was developed (and 'owned') by a different internal team, listed below. These cross-institutional teams were required to develop and submit the sub-component skills that are the most highly valued within that particular context:

- 1. Academic Skills** – University of Leeds Learning Development Team: Library Services (Academic Advisory Team)
- 2. Digital Skills** – University of Leeds Learning Development Team: Library Services (Digital Advisory Team)
- 3. Sustainability Skills** – University of Leeds Sustainable Curriculum Project Team
- 4. Enterprise Skills** - University of Leeds Centre for Enterprise and Entrepreneurship Studies
- 5. Work Ready Skills** – University of Leeds Student Careers Service
- 6. Technical Skills** – Programme/discipline teams

The Leeds Skills Matrix is a starting point for programme teams. It can support teams to identify the skills which underpin their discipline and are core. In addition, the Leeds Skills Matrix can be used flexibly, and skills may appear within different domains, with appropriate nuance. Ongoing review of skills is encouraged, as disciplines develop and priorities change. Programmes also have free rein to adapt skill definitions to suit their discipline, but they are asked to be consistent when they use this language with students.





### Academic Skills Domain

Students arriving at university will have a varied experience of academic writing, critical thinking, reflection and other associated academic skills from their previous education or work experience. Because of this, it is important that we make no assumptions about their prior skills acquisition or their understanding of academic conventions in Higher Education. The University of Leeds therefore endeavours to ensure that the skills required for successful completion of programmes are embedded into the curriculum, with opportunities for practice, reflection and improvement built into the course structure.

When determining the skills required for study in Higher Education (and when including skills in this domain), we are always careful not to genericise them. The required skills will differ for each discipline, and we work with our academic teams to consider them within their disciplinary context, social practices and genres. By adopting an academic literacies approach (Lea and Street, 1998; Lillis et al., 2015), our offer at Leeds is a more nuanced, discipline-specific understanding of the contextual and cultural shared practice of academic communication in their discipline.



### Digital Skills Domain

JISC defines digital capabilities as “the skills and attitudes [...] which equip someone to live, learn and work in a digital society” (JISC, 2022a). Our list of digital skills at Leeds directly reflects the six overarching elements of the JISC Digital Capabilities Framework. Students at the University of Leeds have access to the JISC Discovery Tool, which is designed to help them reflect on their digital capabilities and to identify current strengths and areas for development. The Library’s Learning Development Team is also expanding its offer to provide digital skills development for students, both embedded in the curriculum and through co-curricular opportunities.



### Sustainability Skills Domain

The 10 sustainability skills within this domain (and their definitions) were adapted by the University of Leeds from the [QAA Education for Sustainable Development Guidance 2021](#) (where they are referred to as ‘key competencies for sustainable development’ p.20-21). These were reviewed internally by the Sustainable Curriculum Project Team and in consultation with the Sustainable Curriculum Advisory Group. The definitions are informed by previous work and case studies of good practice from the University of Leeds. The skills list will continue to be reviewed in response to the knowledge generated through Curriculum Redefined, the [Sustainable Curriculum programme](#), and the LITE Fellowship “[Redefining sustainability in the curriculum](#)”. Defining student sustainability capabilities will be part of how we integrate sustainability across the Leeds Curriculum.



### Enterprise Skills Domain

Enterprise involves undertaking a bold or uncertain task in order to achieve an outcome which is of value to others. This typically leads to entrepreneurship and starting new businesses, to social enterprise and creating new social organisations, or intrapreneurship and developing innovative projects in existing companies. Skills in this domain are critical for developing the ability to positively engage in changing situations and for identifying new opportunities which create economic, social or cultural value, regardless of the subject studied. Enterprise is a multi-faceted approach involving the development of skills, knowledge and attributes.

The skills list within the domain was derived from [EntreComp](#) (The European Entrepreneurship Competence Framework). Academics are encouraged to treat the list as part of a holistic approach to student development along with appropriate knowledge development within and outside the curriculum, and the overarching development of enterprise attributes and mindsets.



### Work Ready Skills Domain Context

Graduates have qualities which are greatly valued by employers, although over recent years various industry sources have been reporting that certain transferable and technical skills have been found to be in short supply:

*'One in five graduates not 'workplace ready'* (People Management, 2019)

*'Graduates lack work-ready skills that businesses need during Covid era'* (ISE Student Development Survey, 2021)

For the purpose of this work-ready skills domain, the University of Leeds Student Careers Service conducted desk research drawing on a range of graduate employer sources. This research provided insight into the skill areas and qualities that are most highly valued in graduate applicants. From this research 16 skills areas were identified as key entry-level skills most commonly requested by UK graduate employers. The more detailed definitions of these skills have been developed following consultation with professional staff within Student Careers. The resulting set of Work Ready Skills, and their definitions, are now available to be adapted by subject teams.

However, during the desk research process into work-ready skills, it became clear that graduates will need more than just skills above to navigate an unpredictable world, whether in or outside of work; they will also need certain behaviours and attributes that will enable them to cope with uncertain career futures and rapid change.

Indeed, it may be the case that, whilst work-ready skills can be embedded in programmes at Leeds, broader notions of qualities, attributes and behaviours are more difficult to identify, teach and assess. Despite this challenge, we believe that these skills are an important starting point when undertaking programme design and crafting learning outcomes. They may not all be 'measurable' or 'assessable' but opportunities to develop them can still be made explicit to students.



### Technical Skills Domain

This domain is left deliberately empty as it is a space for programmes to house those skills which do not feature within the other 5 domains due to their specialist and/or technical nature. This could be the mastery and use of, for example, specialist software, lab-based skills or creative techniques. Those skills may also feature within the [QAA Subject Benchmarks](#), be linked to PSRB requirements, or simply exist as a feature of the discipline at Leeds or the industry sector beyond.

### Development of a 'Brand'

The appointment of a Digital Content Creator, housed within the Digital Education Team but aligned to Student Careers, meant that a professional brand and set of digital assets could be developed to support the rollout of the Surfacing Skills Project. These included:

- Design of the Capabilities Framework
- Design of the Leeds Skills Matrix
- Development of 'skills' icons for all 50 skills across the 5 domains (to be used by degree programmes in signposting skills to students)
- Creation of 'skills packs' including new videos featuring employer and student voices
- Development of branded templates for PowerPoint and other presentation materials

### Support for Academic Teams

A key aspect of the surfacing skills project was the provision of a range of support packages for academic staff. These included:

- **Open Workshops** – a number of these were developed to introduce the concept of the Capabilities Framework; the Surfacing Skills Process; the 3 literacies (ie. digital; academic; professional). These workshops were optional for any teaching staff member but were particularly targeted at programme leaders and module tutors.
- **Bespoke Workshops** – these were co-created with subject staff who wanted a surfacing skills lens on their programme development plans. These were well received as they enabled those teams to adapt the process to suit their current position and aspirations.

- **Targeted Support** – hotspots of engagement were mapped and aligned against school and programme teams which had indicated they were interested in skills development through their Curriculum Redefined reviews. Those schools were offered bespoke support and encouraged to include elements of surfacing skills within their ongoing curriculum conversations. Often these conversations emerged through relationships with Faculty Employability Managers (employed by Student Careers).
- **Surfacing Skills Hub** – a new SharePoint site was created to be the focal point for all information and advice relating to the project. It included:



1. **Case Studies** – staff were encouraged to submit case studies of how they were already developing skills in line with some or all of the 5 stages. As the project progresses, it is anticipated that these will increase and be far more aligned with the project as a whole. The case studies are written up and available for all staff to access.
  2. **Articles and Research** – relevant examples have been curated and will be added to on an ongoing basis.
  3. **Teaching resources** - these are being curated and developed as more staff become engaged in the process. Staff are encouraged to share their teaching materials and activities, and these are supplemented with branded slides and images.
  4. **Information** – the hub houses pages of relevant advice and information on the 5 stages; the Leeds Skills Matrix; links to other relevant areas of the University.
- **Surfacing Skills Discussion Network** – a TEAMS site was established for staff to join who wanted to continue to have regular discussions around Surfacing Skills. It also acts as a communications channel for relevant activities and events.
  - **Surfacing Skills in The Curriculum Conference** – held in April 2023, this conference showcased good practice from across the University in relation to the 5 stages and the skills domains within the Skills Matrix. It was attended by over 150 academics, professional services staff and student interns. It provided a central space to celebrate the work completed to date, to listen to our students, and to also include the views of key employers.

It should also be noted that through the Curriculum Redefined project, a range of new key roles were bid for and secured to support the ongoing development of the programme. These roles included:

- Careers Consultant (Surfacing Skills)
- Digital Education Content Creator (Surfacing Skills)
- Academic Lead (Surfacing Skills)

## ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

We are still at the very early stages of implementation of our surfacing skills project but early indications are that colleagues appreciate the structure provided by the Surfacing Skills process. Feedback so far also reflects the process's flexibility which enables staff to think carefully about their programme and discipline's DNA and adapt the approach to the needs of their students, staff, accrediting bodies and relevant employers. The Surfacing Skills workshops have been the most populated across the Curriculum Redefined programme to date and in April 2023, 150+ delegates and 30 presenters attended our 1st internal Surfacing Skills within The Curriculum Conference.

One aim of our work is that programme teams will develop a clearer sense of the knowledge and skills outcomes they are trying to achieve for their students, whilst they work through the process of surfacing skills. Our approach has been to encourage an approach which embeds skills as part of programme learning outcomes, so that they become embedded within the curriculum. Throughout the process, we have worked collaboratively with the Quality Assurance team, the University Assessment Leads, and the teams responsible for developing competency standards to develop guidance and support for academic colleagues working on programme proposal forms. The Capabilities Framework formed the basis for this work, and colleagues were asked to describe the ways in which their proposed programmes had embedded the framework at each level of study. We provided an indicative phrasebank to help staff to develop and reflect on the ways in which this was to be achieved through teaching and assessment design.

## CONCLUSION AND NEXT STEPS

The development and implementation of the framework (which at the time of writing in 2023 is still in its early stages) is eliciting a great deal of positive engagement from academic teams from across the University. A key feature of the programme is the avoidance of one single fixed approach or 'way to do it'. The key message is that such an institutional project needs to be flexible and allow discipline teams to adapt the principles and processes to their areas as they see fit. The ability to work with the different skill domains has also enabled teams to a) appreciate the transferable nature of their discipline skills and b) to consider a broader approach to skill development, beyond that of the usual QAA Subject Benchmarks. Conversations about skills have also developed into considerations of behaviours and values. Discipline teams are also being encouraged to reflect on behaviours, attributes and values when exploring the ways in which three literacies apply to their programme design and delivery. It is too early to say whether a unified set of university-wide behaviours, values and attributes will emerge, or whether programmes will individually determine these for themselves.

The framework is evolving and will be adapted to cater for different perspectives and agendas. For instance, there will certainly be the addition of an Equity, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) component in the future. We are also considering the addition of a fourth literacy - sustainability - to the mix.

As we progress through the process, we are developing further resources and support, including:

- New teaching resources and case studies.
- A student-facing version of the staff surfacing skills hub which will be linked to an online development portfolio (Stage 5: Reflection).
- Development of an online mapping tool for skills and assessment for modules and programmes.
- Development of a student-facing online mapping tool for skills.
- Further exploration around Professional Literacy as a concept and the place of skills within this.
- Further development of a university-wide approach to experiential learning, authentic assessment and the place of skill development within both aspects.
- Professional services working with academic teams to blur the edges between the curricular/co-curricular/extra-curricular experience for students to support their life wide recognition of skill and behaviour development.

As we continue to work on Curriculum Redefined as an institution, we will gather and reflect upon feedback from our colleagues, students and graduates about the process and impact of subsequent changes. We hope that the structure and clarity of the process will empower staff to be creative in the ways in which they design and assess their teaching to support student to identify and pursue their meaningful futures.



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