



University of Dublin  
Trinity College



Waterford

# **What transferable skills do employers look for in third-level graduates?**

## **Results of Employer Survey Summary Report**

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## **Foreword**

This summary report forms part of a HEA-funded project (“Transferable Skills in Third-Level Modern Languages Curricula”) being jointly undertaken by the Careers Services in Dublin City University (DCU), Trinity College Dublin (TCD) and Waterford Institute of Technology (WIT). The aim of the project is to identify the transferable skills that are important for undergraduate students to develop during their time in third-level education and to design ways of improving their awareness and acquisition of the skills identified by integrating these skills into undergraduate curricula. The project will be piloted with modern language students, as the experience of Careers Services has shown that these students tend to be less confident on graduation about how they fit into the world of work compared to some of their more vocationally-oriented colleagues.

The project is being directed by a Steering Committee, composed of the following members:

**Angela Collins**, Careers Advisor, Careers Centre, WIT

**Helen Coskeran**, Germanic Languages student, TCD

**Seán Gannon**, Director, Careers Advisory Service, TCD

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# 1. Introduction

It has long been recognised that the role of third-level education is not simply to impart knowledge but to contribute to maintaining a competitive economy and also to play a valuable part in the holistic development of the person. Part of this development relates to the fostering of “transferable” or “generic” skills in individuals i.e. “*skills developed in one situation which can be transferred to another situation*”. The term “transferable skills” is interchangeable with the terms “key skills”, “generic skills”, “core skills”, “soft skills” and so on. Examples of such skills are communication skills, planning skills, multi-tasking etc. – skills that are essential not just in learning or work situations, but in all areas of life.

Recent trends in graduate employment in Ireland indicate that “traditional” positions for graduates are becoming fewer and fewer in a more competitive and ever-changing employment market. As a consequence, the range and variety of jobs and types of organisations into which graduates are now entering is becoming increasingly diverse. Graduates are now expected to be able to perform efficiently on the job almost as soon as they enter a position, utilising the many skills they have gained while in third-level education.

While some Higher Education institutions in Ireland have begun to identify particular skills and qualities that they wish their own graduates to develop during their time in third-level education, primary research in the area of the transferable skills in Ireland is limited. The findings presented in this report go some way towards producing more concrete evidence of what transferable skills Irish employers most value in the workplace and how satisfied they are with the skills of recent graduates. The report also presents some recommendations in light of its findings. These findings will ultimately be combined with findings from research with the other stakeholder groups involved in the third-level education process (students, alumni and academic staff) in order to present a more comprehensive picture of how transferable skills fit in to the third-level education system in Ireland.

## **2. Research Objectives**

The main objectives of this research were to:

- a) Identify the transferable skills that employers most value in the workplace; and
- b) Identify which skills employers are most satisfied with in terms of recent graduates' workplace performance.

Other objectives included:

- c) Ascertaining the importance of transferable skills to employers when recruiting graduates; and
- d) Determining the importance of fluency in a second language, as a skill, to employers.

The research consisted of a postal survey of employers in Ireland who regularly recruit graduates of any discipline and also of employers in Ireland who have recruited general arts graduates (including modern language graduates) in the past three years.

23 transferable skills were identified which may be considered important by employers in the workplace. A full list of these skills is included in Table 2 in the Appendix to this report.

### **3. Summary of Findings**

The main findings from this research are as follows:

- During recruitment two very important factors are the applicants' enthusiasm for the position and their personality.
- A range of transferable skills are also very important during recruitment. Work experience and academic record may be considered important to the extent that they contribute to the development of transferable skills.
- Oral communication, team work, customer service, time management, written communication and the ability to cope with multiple tasks are particularly valued transferable skills.
- Employers are very satisfied with the IT and numeracy skills of recent graduates. They are also satisfied with the highly valued skills of customer service, team work and oral communication.
- Of the skills employers are less satisfied with, the most important are time management, written communication and the ability to cope with multiple tasks, and to a lesser extent, planning and presentation skills.
- Fluency in a second language was not generally considered an important transferable skill. However, in so far as respondents had an opportunity to observe this skill, it was rated as relatively satisfactory.
- The principal methods, in order of priority use, of assessing transferable skills during recruitment are: interview, CV, reference checks and psychometric testing.
- Employers' suggestions for improving the transferable skills of students include supervised work placements and the use of industry specific workshops / case studies. Dedicated transferable skills courses were also suggested and the value of group work and presentations in academic courses was affirmed.

## **4. Commentary on findings**

In general, the findings of this research appear to be a strong endorsement of the value of transferable skills to a graduate seeking employment in today's work environment. It also appears to indicate that employers are, on the whole, satisfied, or at least not very dissatisfied, with the performance of recent graduates in the workplace, in terms of their transferable skills. However, it is important to take a closer look at the results before drawing any definitive conclusions.

### **Satisfaction with graduates' performance**

Anecdotal evidence does not fully support the finding that employers are relatively satisfied with graduates' performance in terms of some of their transferable skills. However, in looking at the size of the respondents, a significant proportion appear to be larger organisations (just over half reported having over 250 employees) who recruit large numbers of graduates on a regular basis. Organisations such as these tend to have more structured recruitment practices, indicating perhaps that they recruit earlier in the academic year, giving them a choice of graduates, targeting those who are more self-aware and better prepared for the workplace. In these cases, it may naturally lead to a higher level of satisfaction being reported than would otherwise be generally expected.

However, it is important not to lose sight of the fact that there were a number of skills highlighted with which all responding employers have a lower level of satisfaction yet regard as particularly important – time management, coping with multiple tasks and written communication - and it is recommended that particular attention be paid to these skills in third-level education.

### **The importance of transferable skills in the recruitment of graduates**

It appears to be an interesting finding that when recruiting graduates, employers value transferable skills third highest from a list of nine factors, valuing these skills more highly than academic record and relevant work experience. It can be argued that the reason for the poorer performance of factors such as academic record and work experience may be that they are more valued as a means for evaluating transferable skills. That is, academic record and work experience may only be considered important in so far as they reveal the transferable skills of students and are not intrinsically valued in and of themselves. In addition, one third of the organisations surveyed for this research were companies who state that they recruit graduates of any discipline. Given that transferable skills were rated significantly higher than specialist

knowledge at the recruitment stage, this statement is therefore supported by the findings of this research.

### **Assessment of transferable skills during recruitment**

The findings here indicate that the primary methods used are interviews, CVs and psychometric testing. However, it can be argued that transferable skills are difficult to formally assess using these methods, as assessment normally implies some sort of test or examination. Therefore it would indicate simply that these are the top recruitment methods used by companies which can really only provide anecdotal or superficial evidence of a graduates' level of transferable skills, apart from their written or oral communication skills.

It is recommended that the findings in this report be considered in light of some of the issues raised above. A more wide-ranging study of employer perceptions would provide more conclusive evidence of the importance of and satisfaction with transferable skills (for example surveying a larger number of employers from a wider variety of industry sectors) but these findings go a significant way towards endorsing the value of encouraging the development of these skills in third-level students.

## 5. Recommendations

Based exclusively on the findings of this research the following are some recommendations for Careers Services and academic staff of third-level institutions.

- Careers Services should continue to make students aware of how highly valued transferable skills are during the recruitment process and work, in conjunction with academic staff, to develop those skills that employers most value – oral communication, team work, customer service and time management.
- In conjunction with academic staff, Careers Services should also identify ways of developing those skills which employers regard as important but with which they are least satisfied – time management, coping with multiple tasks and written communication.
- The implementation of “soft skills” courses for students in third-level education was a recommendation made by many respondents. Given the time constraints and workload that many students and academic staff are under, among many other factors, this may not be possible. Instead it is recommended that the development of transferable skills take place through the natural teaching of academic courses, supplemented where necessary by guidelines and information on the skills involved.
- Careers Services should continue to encourage all students to apply for vacancies which are advertised for graduates of any discipline, as the value of enthusiasm and transferable skills over specialist knowledge and relevant work experience has been borne out by the findings of this research.
- Academic staff should incorporate more group work and presentation work as part of their course assessments. Team work and presentation skills (communication) are highly valued by employers and presentation skills in particular are rated quite low in terms of satisfaction levels. This was also a recommendation made directly by many of the respondents.
- Where possible, the benefit of work experience should be recognised as part of any academic programme, in particular for the value that it provides in terms of personal development and development of transferable skills in particular.

# **APPENDIX**

**Table1:** Average ratings of how important different factors are in recruitment

<b>MOST IMPORTANT</b>	
Enthusiasm for position	1.18
Personal qualities/Personality	1.36
Transferable skills	1.63
Potential for advancement	1.86
Good academic record	1.99
Relevant work experience	2.18
Specialist subject knowledge	2.45
Personal interests	2.50
Any other work experience	2.50
<b>LEAST IMPORTANT</b>	

**Table2:** Ratings of transferable skills in order of importance and level of satisfaction

IMPORTANCE			SATISFACTION	
1.	Oral communication	1.32	IT skills	2.66
2.	Team work	1.08	Numeracy	1.64
3.	Customer service	0.97	Oral communication	1.19
4.	Time management	0.89	Customer service	1.08
5.	Written communication	0.79	Team work	0.93
6.	Coping with multiple tasks	0.63	Information management	0.88
7.	Problem solving	0.61	Research skills	0.52
8.	Managing one's own learning	0.44	Analytical ability	0.32
9.	Planning	0.44	Problem solving	-0.14
10.	Decision making	0.42	Managing one's own learning	-0.24
11.	Presentation skills	0.40	Written communication	-0.24
12.	IT skills	0.34	Decision making	-0.34
13.	Numeracy	0.11	Presentation skills	-0.44
14.	Information management	0.07	Coping with multiple tasks	-0.49
15.	Analytical ability	-0.27	Career management	-0.54
16.	Critical thinking	-0.34	Planning	-0.60
17.	Project management	-0.54	Networking	-0.60
18.	Leadership	-0.68	Critical thinking	-0.70
19.	Research skills	-0.72	Project management	-0.75
20.	Career management	-0.81	Fluency in a second language	-0.80
21.	Networking	-0.83	Time management	-0.85
22.	Negotiation	-0.93	Leadership	-0.85
23.	Fluency in a second language	-3.38	Negotiation	-1.66