# Student Transitions: Example of transitions practice

**Title**: The Professional Skills Curriculum: Developing employability skills in students at the University of St Andrews

**Transition(s) the practice supports**: Transition to employment and transition from pupil to professional

**Abstract**:
The Professional Skills Curriculum is a co-curricular programme open to all students at the University. Students engage with a suite of topics on skills employers value, and the topics are delivered through one of three formats: lectures, online workshops and practical skills sessions.

**Description**:

**A: Background**
*Before completing this, I had a very limited understanding of organisations and how they function. Now, at the end, the professional world does not seem anywhere near as mysterious or intimidating as before.*

The Professional Skills Curriculum (PSC)[1] was launched as a collaboration between the Centre for Academic, Professional and Organisational Development (CAPOD) and the Students' Association in 2010/11 as a way to help students develop a range of professional skills to aid them in their professional lives, and ease the transition from University to employment. Over the past four years the PSC has expanded significantly and now several hundred students engage with the programme each year.

**B: Structure**
The skills topics on offer originally derived from a framework published by Target Jobs.[2] The original categories of communication; commercial awareness; teamwork; negotiation and persuasion; problem solving; leadership; organisation; perseverance and motivation; and confidence now contain over 30 individual skills topics.

The skills topics are delivered in three ways:

1. **Lectures** (presented at breakfast, lunch or in the early evening): These hour-long sessions tend to focus on theories or models underpinning the professional skill, and include small group discussions.

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[1] http://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/students/careermatters/professionalskills/
[2] https://targetjobs.co.uk/careers-advice/skills-and-competencies

2. **Online workshops:** These are released throughout the academic year. The online workshops were created using free software (xerte) by a group of students, and feature interactive activities and video content.

3. **Practical Skills Sessions:** These two-hour sessions focus on the practical skills related to the professional behaviour and give participants an opportunity to practise the skill and receive constructive feedback on their performance.

### C: Incentivisation

Students are able to dip into the PSC as little or as much as they wish, however deeper engagement is encouraged through the issuing of a PSC 'passport' – a booklet that allows them to keep track of workshop attendance, their learning, and wider extra-curricular activities.

Students have their passports stamped for attending a lecture or practical skills session, or for completing an online workshop. When students amass 8 passport stamps in a single academic year they are invited to submit a reflective essay, outlining what they have gained from the PSC programme. The student then receives a certificate and has their achievement listed on their degree transcript.
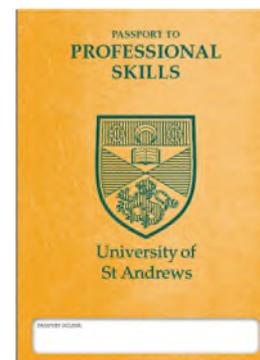
### D: Staff & community engagement

Staff from across the University contribute to the PSC in a number of ways. Colleagues from a range of support units within the University contribute lectures, including HR (Valuing Diversity), IT Services (Writing for the Web), Careers (Being Enterprising) and Student Services (Wellbeing). In recent years colleagues from across the Sector have also contributed including Edinburgh Napier University (Influencing Others) and Duncan of Jordanstone College of Art and Design (Poster Design).

A key external collaborator on the PSC has been the University's local Officers Training Corps (Tayforth OTC). Army reservists and cadets have run a 6-module 'leadership in practice' course under the practical skills strand of the PSC. These workshops provide an opportunity for Army cadets to develop their facilitation and feedback skills, whilst simultaneously developing student participants in elements of leadership, planning, time management, personal impact, communication and followership. A development for next year is to offer spaces on these OTC-led practical skills sessions to graduate trainees in SMEs across Fife.

### E: Student engagement

Students are involved in the design and delivery of the PSC, as well as being participants. Each year a small team of student volunteers work with CAPOD to develop the programme. There are currently volunteer interns covering social media, poster design and distribution (2), film and digital media, employer link (2) and OTC link (2). Students were also responsible for developing the online workshops offered as part of the programme.

In terms of participation, there are approximately 300 students engaging with the PSC each year. In 2013/14, 72 students completed 8 or more workshops and gained a PSC certificate (a 90% rise on the previous year). In academic year 2014/15 the number of social media likes on facebook[3] increased from 300 to 650+ as word of the programme spreads.

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[3] https://www.facebook.com/ProfessionalSkillsCurriculum

**F: Employer engagement**
In the past year, the PSC has begun to expand in this area by reaching out to graduate employers. Several graduate employers are now interested in delivering a lecture or workshop as part of the programme. A new employer blog[4] has recently been created to demonstrate their support for the PSC and allow them to highlight the professional skills important to them.

Finally, the programme has been endorsed by the Institute of Leadership and Management (students can choose to pay for ILM membership) which provides an element of quality assurance for graduate recruiters.

**Student benefits**
The reflective essays submitted by students who complete 8 or more workshops over the course of an academic year are reviewed, and reveal that students derive benefits from the PSC in 5 main areas:

1. Improving participants' success in recruitment processes and internships.
*"Thanks to the Professional Skills Curriculum, I managed to receive a job offer from a multinational company, headquartered in London. It is an adventure I am very excited about and I am absolutely certain that participating in the PSC played a vital role in my success."*

2. Enhancing participants' performance in academic activities.
*"This talk [engaging others] demonstrated the importance of both what you say and how you say it. I found myself practicing some of these tricks during a presentation that I gave at a conference and at another I delivered to my department just a few weeks ago. This lecture in and of itself was worth my participation in this curriculum and helped me to be more comfortable with and confident in my ability to express myself."*

3. Increasing professionalism in student clubs and societies.
*"The ideas discussed helped me to professionalise the way our committee runs – previously it had been very informal and unorganised, but I was able to make things more formal and as a result I believe that our committee has been able to drive the club forward and leave it in a much better place than it was in before."*

4. Developing participants' self-awareness and reflective skills
*"It is clear that this course has allowed me to grow and learn more than I thought possible. Going through this program has allowed me to gain a much broader understanding in regard to the wider workplace and techniques to utilize in life. I have learned here how to be more effective in how to express myself, how to think for myself, and how to find the answers to the things that I don't know."*

5. Increased confidence about entering the workplace, post-graduation, and in pushing themselves forward whilst at University.
*"The workshop on professional conduct has helped to clarify what might be expected of me in the workplace and has helped to mitigate some of the anxiety that I feel about transitioning from university into the workplace. I had previously done a bit of reading on workplace issues and skills, but not approached it in a systematic way. These workshops have provided me with a structured opportunity to improve my knowledge of the workplace and how to become a valuable and productive member of an organisation."*

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[4] https://pscemployers.wp.st-andrews.ac.uk/