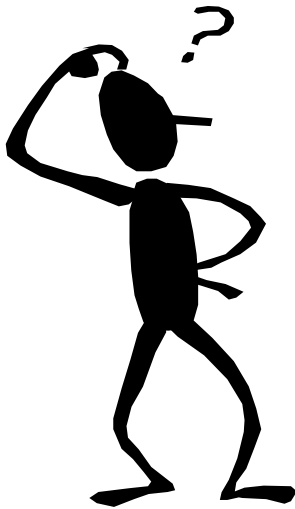


## What do employers really want?

It's not all about academic performance.

Leaving university with a good degree is important but on its own it is not enough to secure your first graduate job. No matter what the particular requirements of the job, almost all graduate employers will look for *evidence* that you have:



- a clear understanding of what factors went into your choice of where to study
- lived university life to the full and made the most of your time
- made the most of careers guidance services
- thought ahead and set yourself regular career related objectives and will continue this planning into the future
- undertaken a journey of personal development
- accomplished good quality work experience
- learned the language of employers
- researched them
- sold yourself well to them
- last, but not least, the potential to **add value** to their organisation.

**“Employability skills are a top priority for business. Over three quarters (78%) of the firms who responded to the CBI’s education and skills 2009 survey said it was one of the most important factors when recruiting graduates, along with a positive attitude (72%) and relevant work experience/industrial placement (54%).”**

Source: ‘Future fit: preparing graduates for the world of work’ (CBI/UUK report, 2009)

### ➤ So how will my qualification be viewed by graduate employers?

Employers devise their own pecking order of universities based on a mix of reputation, past experience, past performance and the university league tables. They may use qualifications as a way to eliminate or reduce the amount of graduates applying for a job. They may specifically ask for a qualification to target their recruitment to specific types of competencies.

### ➤ Your qualification is part of a wider picture

Whilst some careers require specific subject knowledge (eg engineering), a large number of all jobs advertised for graduates are open to you regardless of your degree subject. To be successful in the employment market you must recognise that degree level study, of any subject, has developed your potential to offer employers intellectual, professional/practical and transferable/key skills - see your programme specification for more information. The wider experience of being at university, however, will have also given you opportunities to take part in extra-curricular activities and to undertake work experience which will have further developed not only these skills but also other attributes valued by employers, such as self awareness and initiative. These various skills and attributes are widely known as ‘competencies’.



## ➔ Competencies

(See also the appendix for a brief description of 25 competencies collected from a wide range of employers interested in employing graduates)

Competencies are commonly defined as being “clusters of behaviours, skills and knowledge which are needed to undertake a job effectively”. In other words, they are the actions which, if done well, result in effective job performance. Think of them as including, but encompassing more than, transferable or key skills. Employer members of the Policy Forum of the Council for Industry and Higher Education have identified the key competencies they have observed in graduates who can transform organisations and add value early in their careers. They consist of:



### 1) Cognitive Skills/Brainpower:

The ability to identify, analyse and solve problems; work with information and handle a mass of diverse data, assess risk and draw conclusions.

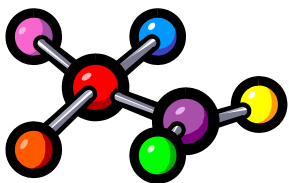


Competencies that relate to this are:

- Analysis
- Attention to Detail
- Judgement

### 2) Generic Competencies:

High-level and transferable key skills such as the ability to work with others in a team, communicate, persuade and have interpersonal sensitivity.



Competencies that relate to this are:

- Image
- Influencing
- Interpersonal Sensitivity
- Planning and Organising
- Questioning
- Teamwork/Working with Others
- Written Communication

### 3) Personal Capabilities:

The ability and desire to learn for oneself and to improve one's self-awareness and performance. Having a lifelong learning philosophy, emotional intelligence and desire to perform well. To be a self starter and to finish the job.



Competencies that relate to this are:

- Achievement Orientation
- Adaptability/Flexibility
- Creativity
- Decisiveness
- Initiative
- Leadership
- Tolerance of Stress



### 4) Technical Ability:

For example, having the knowledge and experience of working with relevant modern laboratory equipment. The ability to apply and exploit information technology.

Competencies that relate to this are:

- Technical Application
- Technical Knowledge

### 5) Business and/or Organisation Awareness:

Having an appreciation of how businesses operate through having had (preferably relevant) work experience. Includes an appreciation of organisational culture, policies and processes through organisational understanding and sensitivity. The ability to understand basic financial and commercial principles



Competencies that relate to this are:

- Commercial Awareness
- Financial Awareness
- Organisation Understanding

### 6) Practical Elements - Vocational Courses:

Critical evaluation of the outcomes of professional practice; the ability to reflect on and review own practice; participate in and review quality control processes and risk management.

## Example of a competency used by the Welsh Government

### ➤ Leadership

Giving purpose and direction to ensure people are motivated and inspired to deliver change and the vision and values of the Assembly

### ➤ Level 1 (possible entry level to the organisation for many new graduates)

#### Effective staff:

- Take responsibility for contributing to the achievement of the team's goals
- Use initiative to find solutions to problems
- Act with integrity, honesty and fairness, respecting and valuing diversity
- Take responsibility for own and others well-being
- Participate in special projects and wider corporate work eg buddying and helping others
- Respond positively and flexibly to change

#### Effective staff do not:

- Sit back and let others take a lead
- Always moan without suggesting solutions
- Tolerate unfair discrimination
- Act irresponsibly or without regard for others
- Just stick to doing their job
- Resist change at all costs

### ➤ Competency frameworks

Competency frameworks are collections of competencies that are linked together, ideally without much overlap, that describe what is important in a job. Employers use them to define a clear and comprehensive set of skills and qualities that are valued within the workforce and which can be used when recruiting, promoting, appraising and developing members of staff.

According to the Association of Graduate Recruiters (AGR), the hardest to find are:

- Commercial Awareness
- Leadership
- Project Management

To be successful in dealing with competencies, you must reflect upon and develop an understanding of the following:

- What competencies you have
- How you have obtained them
- What you can offer as evidence of your competencies
- How your competencies might be applied and evidenced in new situations

Try this exercise designed to improve your understanding of competencies and how you can meet them. In this instance, we are using Commercial Awareness as an example.

### ➤ Commercial Awareness

Definition: Understands the economics of the business. Understands the business benefits and commercial realities from all stakeholder perspectives (customer, supplier, employer, employee, shareholder etc.).



People who are good at this:

- Demonstrate breadth of awareness of business knowledge (eg recognises issues in finance, sales, marketing)
- Show consideration of such business implications as increased revenue/profit, decreased expenditure, increased productivity, improved company image and market share
- Identify new business opportunities
- Take commercial constraints into account
- Are able to analyse financial trends (eg revenue, profit, productivity) and forecast accordingly
- Show an awareness of commercial activity
- Show an awareness of competitive products and services and market trends
- Identify ways to reduce costs

### ➤ How do I know if I have got this competency?

Consider the following questions to help you to reflect on and provide evidence for this competency. Write down brief (and honest) statements that address one or two of the questions below. Your statements can be from ANY aspect of your life. Do not write more than 100 words for each answer.



- Consider a commercial activity you have been involved in, either paid work, voluntary work, participating in fundraising and so on. Think about the issues you have come across and how these might influence the wider activity. Consider whether you look at this from one perspective, eg monetary, or do you take other elements into account such as marketing and selling and how these influence each other?
- Have you ever identified a business opportunity? How did you go about it? What did you consider?
- How would you go about developing a business plan for eg getting a job? Do you consider the commercial constraints that might be applied when looking at salary?
- How could you analyse financial trends (eg income, spend, surplus, deficit) and forecast accordingly when setting your personal budget?

Then read your answers and, being as objective as you can, identify what your strengths are and record these. Begin with:

**I feel skilled and confident in.....**

Then identify any learning and development needs and/or what you should do differently. Begin with:

**I need to develop my skills and confidence in.....**

If you have little or nothing to write about, think about opportunities when you could start to do this or to do it better. Start to write with:

**I could start to do this or do this better if I.....**

Now think about what the consequences will be for your future employment if you do not demonstrate this competency. Begin your statement with:

**If I don't do this, the risk will be.....**

**Now review the learning and development needs you have identified, prioritise them and seek out opportunities to develop this competency. Record this activity in your PDP.**

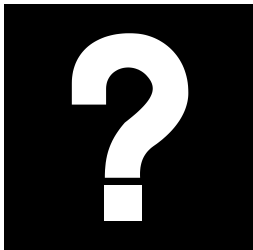
Taking this systematic approach will help you to become familiar with what is required in competency based interviews and assessment.

➔ **Use PDP to build up a record of your own skills development and to cross reference your examples to the competencies typically desired by employers.**

This will help you to translate your learning experiences into the language that employers use. Don't forget that the process of reflection central to personal development planning is vital to improving your ability to articulate and demonstrate the competencies you have developed. It will be invaluable when you are taking part in recruitment activities.

➔ **How do employers assess these competencies?**

Just as employers are inclined to look for similar competencies, they are likely to have many identical areas of questioning. Questions will tend to be "open" which means that they are designed to give you the opportunity to talk about your experiences and achievements. For example: Tell me about an occasion when you made a cost saving in the past. How did you choose where to make the savings? How much money do you think you saved?



Employers like to ask competency based questions. These are often "behaviour" based questions which focus on how you have handled a particular situation in the past. Be aware that questions may include a reflective element such as, "how would you do this differently now?". For example: "Thinking about a time when you did not achieve a goal or meet a deadline, what would you do differently to change the outcome?"

These questions are designed to look for evidence of your past behaviour, and your ability to learn from that behaviour, in the belief that, from this information, employers will be able to predict how you will perform in the future.

The most common areas of open questioning in a sample of large employers who were recruiting graduates, were:

- 1) Overcoming difficulties and sticking to a task
- 2) Description of the candidate's 'most significant achievement'
- 3) Teamworking and organisation of others
- 4) Reasons for applying and career interests/aspirations
- 5) Extra-curricular activities
- 6) Strategic/broad questions relating to the employer's business
- 7) Positions of responsibility and details of responsibilities
- 8) Customer service and behaviours displayed

If you are aware of the competencies that employers are looking for and you answer in a way that implies you share these same values, you will increase your chances of success.

➔ **How will employers evaluate the answers I give to questions on application forms or at interview?**

Employers frequently use highly structured approaches to analyse answers given to open questions on application forms. These tend to be based on templates which specify typical behaviours, practices or behavioural 'indicators' which provide evidence of the underlying competencies being sought. Your answers will be scored on a matrix listing all the competencies sought and then totalled. The details you provide within your answers can make the all important difference between success and failure.

➤ Here is an example for some commonly-sought competencies of the two ends of the spectrum against which candidates might be assessed:

Competency	No evidence of meeting competencies 1	All competencies met at highest level 5
Adaptability/Flexibility	Closed to alternatives. Likes to do one job at a time.	Open minded. Change oriented. Able to change roles quickly and successfully.
Achievement Orientation	Acts reactively. Doesn't fight own corner. Evidence of giving up in face of adversity.	Self motivated. Evidence of seeking responsibility and succeeding. Makes and defends own case.
Communication	Unclear, unstructured sentences. Doesn't make points convincingly. Difficult to hear. No eye contact. Defensive manner.	Clear, succinct sentences given in a persuasive and confident manner. Good use of eye contact. Open body language and enthusiastic manner.
Analysis	Takes face value. Doesn't pick up on logical steps or question premises.	Critically evaluates information given. Identifies and evaluates alternatives. Makes sensible assumptions, where appropriate.
Decisiveness	Rushes into decisions without evaluating options. Alternatively, avoids making decisions, passing responsibility to others.	Evaluates before making a decision. Consults and listens to others. Takes responsibility. Prioritises actions.
Teamworking	Prefers working alone. Doesn't support those around them. Makes only negative comments. Poor at making/influencing group decisions.	Evidence of taking different roles in a team, including leader. Supports others. Makes positive contributions throughout.

➤ More resources to help you to uncover what employers want.

- Use your Careers Service for practical help
- Attend a workshop and/or take advantage of drop in sessions with a careers adviser for a fifteen minute session or book in advance for a longer appointment
- View the AGCAS videos/DVDs on applications and interviews (links from the Download Centre of our website)
- Read and act on Aberystwyth Careers Service leaflets such as:

Making the Most of Your Time with a Careers Adviser  
 CV Checklist  
 All about Interviews  
 Networking  
 Speculative Applications  
 Work Experience  
 Finding Graduate Work in Aberystwyth and Mid Wales

# APPENDIX

## ➔ Competencies sought by employers

Employer members of the Policy Forum of the Council for Industry and Higher Education have identified the key competencies they have observed in graduates who can transform organisations and **add value** early in their careers. This list is not exhaustive.

*See also the leaflet “Reflective Questions” (addressing each of these competencies) available in the careers library*

### **Achievement Orientation**

Maintains and inspires a results-driven approach, focuses on results and critical performance indicators.

### **Adaptability / Flexibility**

Maintains effectiveness in a changing environment.

### **Analysis**

Relates and compares data from different sources, identifying issues, securing relevant information and identifying relationships.

### **Attention to Detail**

Accomplishes tasks through a concern for all areas involved, no matter how small.

### **Commercial Awareness**

Understands the economics of the business. Understands the business benefits and commercial realities from all stakeholder perspectives (customer, supplier, employer, employee, shareholder etc.).

### **Creativity**

Generates and/or recognises how best practice and imaginative ideas can be applied to different situations.

### **Decisiveness**

Makes decisions and takes action.

### **Financial Awareness**

Understands basic financial terminology used in organisations and is able to construct and maintain simple financial records.

### **Image**

Presents a strong, professional, positive image to others at all times. This image is consistent with all people (colleagues, management and peers, customers etc.).

### **Influencing**

Influences others by expressing self effectively in a group and in one to one situations.

### **Initiative**

Identifies opportunities and is proactive in putting forward ideas and potential solutions.

### **Interpersonal Sensitivity**

Recognises and respects different perspectives and appreciates the benefits of being open to the ideas and views of others.

### **Judgement**

Determines the most appropriate course of action and draws conclusions that are based on logical assumptions that reflect factual information.

### **Leadership**

Takes responsibility for the directions and actions of a team.

### **Life Long Learning and Development**

Develops the skills and competencies of self, peers and colleagues through learning and development activities related to current and future roles.

### **Listening**

Shows by a range of verbal and non-verbal signals that the information being received is understood.

### **Organisation Understanding**

Understands the organisation's work environment, internal politics, business objectives and strategy.

### **Organisational Sensitivity**

Is sensitive to the effect of his or her actions on other parts of the organisation and adopts a mature, direct and up front style in dealing with conflict.

### **Personal Development**

Maintains an up to date personal development plan and takes action to ensure personal development takes place.

### **Planning and Organising**

Establishes a course of action for self and/or others to accomplish a specific goal. Plans proper assignments of personnel and appropriate allocation of resources.

### Process Operation

Begins, controls and concludes a complete process or procedure.

### Professional Expertise

Keeps up to date with developments in own areas of professional specialisation. Applies a breadth and/or depth of professional knowledge.

### Questioning

Uses an appropriate approach to questioning in order to gain information from which to draw conclusions and/or assist in the making of decisions.

### Teamwork/Working with Others

Builds and develops appropriate relationships with academic staff, peers, colleagues, customers and suppliers at all levels within an organisation.

### Technical Application

Has experience of using modern technology.

### Technical Knowledge

Develops and maintains a knowledge of key trends in technology.

### Tolerance for Stress

Maintains performance under pressure and/or opposition.

### Written Communication

Expresses ideas effectively and conveys information appropriately and accurately.

## Location and Contact Details



### Careers Service

Students' Union (next to the Union Shop)

Open Monday–Thursday 9am–5pm and

Friday 9am–4pm

Closed until 10am and between 1pm–2pm during vacations

Tel: 01970 622378

E-mail: [careers@aber.ac.uk](mailto:careers@aber.ac.uk)

## Careers Adviser Sessions

Experienced careers consultants are available every day - you can 'drop in' for quick queries or you can book, or be referred on to, longer careers discussions to discuss things in more depth.

**Drop in sessions (c. 15 mins) are available daily on a first come, first served basis:**

- For details of drop in times, phone the number below or see our website at [www.aber.ac.uk/careers/book](http://www.aber.ac.uk/careers/book).

To book a longer (30 mins) appointment, come and see our friendly receptionists or 'phone them on 01970 622378.

[www.aber.ac.uk/careers/](http://www.aber.ac.uk/careers/)

This information can be made available in alternative formats.

Mae'r wybodaeth hon ar gael yn Gymraeg. This information is available in Welsh.

© 2014 Careers Service, Aberystwyth University.