



national union of students



Working towards your future

Making the most of your time
in higher education



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Foreword

These are tough times for graduates searching for a job after university.

This guide is intended to help students prepare. Higher education gives the opportunity to study an absorbing subject, make new friends, try new experiences – and for students to put themselves in pole position for starting work after graduation. As this guide explains, students can have plenty of fun and do a bit of good in the world while also developing essential skills.

Of course, there are no absolute guarantees in life. But it's clear that employers look more positively on students who have developed a range of practical skills and knowledge. The challenge to students is to make the most of what's available at university through volunteering, involvement in clubs and societies and work experience as well as their course – developing employability won't be achieved by passively hoping someone else will deliver it to them.

There are challenges too for universities, students' unions and businesses.

The pressure will be on institutions to show how their courses can help students achieve a return on their investment by securing good jobs.

Students' unions face the challenges of raising awareness among their members of the importance of work-related skills and providing practical support – for example through growing their volunteering programmes.

There are responsibilities for businesses too. Employers are going to have to get better at communicating skill needs, expanding opportunities for students to gain workplace experience – paid roles and unpaid internships alike – and working with universities to help them deliver courses that produce graduates with the right mix of skills.

Much of this is already underway. The challenge is do more and to do it better.




Susan Anderson

Susan Anderson
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Why should
I pay
attention to
this guide?

Higher education is a unique, potentially life-shaping experience. It's the opportunity to study your chosen topic in real depth, meet new people and make new friends. For many students, it offers the chance to build an independent life and to carve out an identity – or maybe try out several.

So it's an exciting time – and sometimes a daunting one. If you've recently started at university or college, there's a huge amount to take in and a lot of new things to get to grips with and do. You may well feel you've already got enough to cope with.

So why should you pay any attention to a guide like this?

Why are you at uni?

Just stop and think for a moment: Why did you decide to apply for a higher education course?

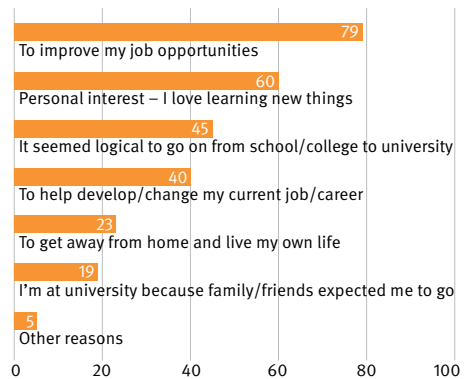
Of course, there are all sorts of reasons for people attending college or university. Most students aren't driven by just one factor. But by far the most common reason for students deciding to study a higher education course is to improve their job opportunities.

Isn't that true for you too?

Four out of five students say that improving their career opportunities is one of their reasons for going to uni (**Exhibit 1**).¹ Most students are also keen to pursue their personal interests and learn new things, while family expectations and wanting to get away from home and live their own life are also often important. But the simple fact remains that improving job opportunities is by far the most widespread reason.

That doesn't mean you ought to be sure on day one about what type of career you want after you graduate – most students don't make up their minds about that till later in their studies. Over half of students say they've thought quite a bit about the career they'd like to pursue after their studies, but they have no definite plans (**Exhibit 2**). And the reality is that many don't decide until quite some time after graduation. This is fine by employers, as most graduate-level jobs can be done by graduates of any discipline.

Exhibit 1 Why go to university?* (%)



Source: CBI/ NUS survey

* Responses to the question – Why did you decide to go to university?

Remember you're investing in yourself

But from the start of your course, you'll want to make the most of all the time, effort and money you are investing in yourself. And you'll want to feel confident that you really are improving your job opportunities during your time in higher education.

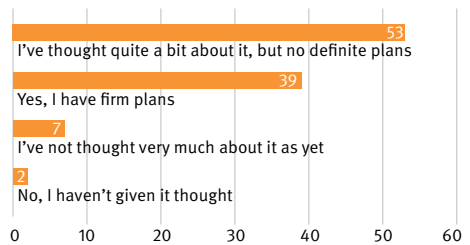
So how can you do that, particularly if you haven't yet made up your mind about the type of career you'd like? The good news is there are a range of skills and capabilities that virtually every employer is looking for in potential recruits. Businesses call them 'employability skills'.

Employability skills give you a head start

If you can develop these – and build up the evidence to show you have them – it'll put you in a strong position for the future to pursue a career in whatever field you eventually select. And it'll make it easier to move into another field of work later, if you want. Of course, there are no absolute guarantees of your success, but having the right employability skills and the evidence to back these up will give you a head start at a time when there are more and more graduates competing for career openings. You can see the skills as essential building blocks.

You want to be in the best possible position when you start your working life after higher education. So it makes sense to think ahead now, as you'll be surprised just how quickly your time at uni passes.

Exhibit 2 Thought about a career?*



Source: CBI/ NUS survey

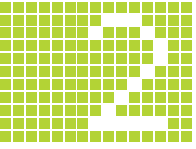
* Responses to the question – Have you thought about the type of career you'd like to pursue once you've finished your studies?

“A much broader set of possibilities have emerged whilst at university than I had originally hoped for. Great!”

Student comment¹

Top tips

- Spend a few moments thinking about why you're taking a higher education course. Your future job opportunities are likely to be among your main reasons
- Whatever line of work you eventually take up, there's a range of skills and capabilities – employability skills – that virtually every employer is looking for. Use this guide and your careers service to check out what these are
- Your course can help you develop lots of the right skills, from time management to communication and teamworking, but it can only do that if you take an active part in the process. Don't just sit back and wait to be taught
- Your university or college careers service can be a great resource. Make contact and start exploring what's available early on
- There are lots of opportunities outside your course to gain skills in ways that are enjoyable and worthwhile. Options include getting involved in the students' union, helping run a club or society, volunteering in the community, taking part in university life and gaining workplace experience – have a think about what might appeal to you and find out what's available
- Don't try to pack all the activities that might interest you into one or two semesters or terms. You can spread them over your time in higher education. But don't wait too long to make a start
- When you come to apply for jobs at graduation, it's going to be much easier if you've thought about and recorded your activities and evidence of developing your skills as you go along. You'll also learn much more along the way.



Let's get something clear at the start – your university course matters and so does the degree result you emerge with at the end. Employers will pay close attention to these. They'll want to know what interested or inspired you about your course and what skills and knowledge you acquired while doing it – your ability to analyse facts for example, to sift evidence, develop ideas and so on.

These are qualities you'll need to be able to talk about, explain and demonstrate. This is all important, but employers are also interested in how effective you can be in the workplace. That's where employability skills come in.

As we said in the previous section, the good news is there's a set of skills and capabilities that virtually every employer is looking for in potential recruits. They'll prove valuable to you no matter what subject you're studying now or what line of work you decide to pursue when you leave higher education.

Employability skills underpin success in working life...

You may have heard mention in the media from time to time about skill shortages. For more than a century, there has been debate about skills – and particularly shortages of skills – in the UK. That doesn't mean employers think that graduate skills have been declining: it's that more and more jobs require graduate-level competencies.

Much of that discussion has concentrated on 'technical skills', in other words the specific skills needed to carry out certain specialist tasks like engineering or IT systems design. Of course, specific technical skills may well be critical to your future job prospects. You may be taking a course that will help you develop some of these. But the focus of this guide is on the suite of generic employability skills that equip people to be successful in working life in any field.

...and they enable you to adapt to an unknown future

Technical skills can become outmoded if they're not regularly updated. New ways of doing things develop, technologies and techniques change, the locations across the world where it makes sense to carry out particular activities alter over time. We live in an increasingly global economy and the pace of change can only accelerate.

But whether you're studying engineering, psychology or history, employability skills will always be in demand. They certainly don't go out of date. They will ensure you'll be effective in whatever line of work you follow when you first leave higher education. And they'll continue to be valuable later in your career, enabling you to adapt to the ever-changing roles needed to thrive in a global economy.

Different words but shared meanings

If you try googling 'employability skills', you'll find hundreds of thousands of hits and an awful lot of discussion if you click through on any of the links. On the face of it, that seems pretty confusing.

While there may be a lot of different terms in use, in reality there's broad agreement on the meaning of employability skills. They are now generally recognised as an essential precondition for the effective development and use of other, more specialist or technical skills required for particular jobs. And they are a key underpin to your effectiveness at work.

Employability means more than skills

You may have been told a certain amount about employability skills while you were at school or college. Most students feel they have at least some idea about the capabilities that will be important for their future employment (**Exhibit 3**) – though sometimes that understanding isn't as great as students feel. It's certainly well worth checking out the careers service at your college or university to discover how they see employability skills. What follows is the CBI's definition – the building blocks of employability – developed in discussion with a wide range of employers and tested over the years.²

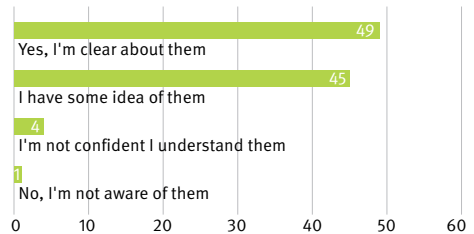
The terms 'employability' or 'employability skills' refer to a set of generic softer skills and competencies. In particular, personal attributes that can be summed up as a positive attitude are critical to being employable. A positive attitude encapsulates characteristics such as a willingness to take part and openness to new activities and ideas.

Equally, knowledge is a vital component of what makes you employable. This isn't knowledge in the sense of specific information. By knowledge we mean, for example, practical numeracy and literacy: capability to apply maths for practical purposes from checking an invoice to estimating

materials needed and the ability to structure a piece of written work logically, with correct use of grammar and spelling. IT awareness and familiarity with commonly used software is essential too. Knowledge also includes potentially more tacit awareness of matters such as the importance of customer care.

In brief, employability is best understood as: **a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy.**

Exhibit 3 Student understanding of employer requirements* (%)



Source: CBI/ NUS survey

* Responses to the question – Do you feel you know the skills that are important to employers after graduation?

So what are these attributes, skills and knowledge?

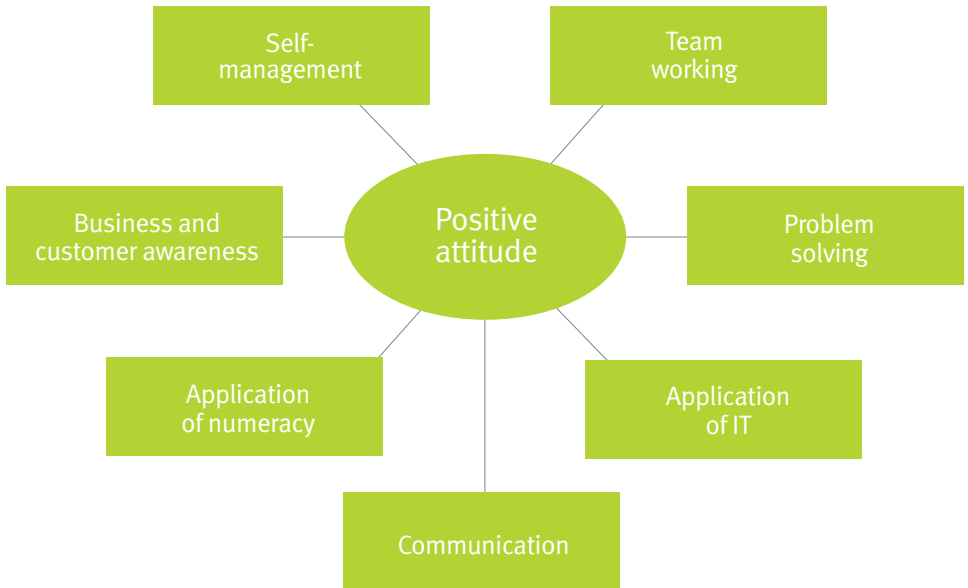
Now let's get into a bit more detail. A positive attitude is the key foundation of employability. That type of attitude involves a readiness to take part, openness to new activities and ideas, and a desire to achieve results. It underpins and links together the other key capabilities:

- **Self-management** – your readiness to accept responsibility, flexibility, resilience, self-starting, appropriate assertiveness, time management, readiness to improve your own performance based on feedback and reflective learning
- **Team working** – respecting others, co-operating, negotiating, persuading, contributing to discussions, your awareness of interdependence with others
- **Business and customer awareness** – your basic understanding of the key drivers for business success and the importance of providing customer satisfaction and building customer loyalty
- **Problem solving** – analysing facts and circumstances to determine the cause of a problem and identifying and selecting appropriate solutions
- **Communication** – your application of literacy, ability to produce clear, structured written work and oral literacy, including listening and questioning skills
- **Application of numeracy** – manipulation of numbers, general mathematical awareness and its application in practical contexts (eg estimating, applying formulae and spotting likely rogue figures)
- **Application of information technology** – basic IT skills, including familiarity with commonly used programmes.

Exhibit 4 overleaf puts these elements together to show the building blocks of the employability model.

Exhibit 4 **Employability is...**

A set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace – to the benefit of themselves, their employer and the wider economy.



Doesn't every graduate have these employability skills?

The vast majority of graduates certainly have many of these capabilities to some extent. But they're not universal and not everyone has them to a high degree. When asked about how satisfied they are with the skills of their graduate applicants and recruits, employers report some notable shortfalls (**Exhibit 5**).

Looking at business and customer awareness, for example, you'll see that 44% of employers say they are not satisfied with levels of awareness among their candidates and recruits and just 5% are very satisfied. Even in areas like use of IT, basic numeracy skills and literacy/use of English, some employers report attainment gaps.

If you want to stand out from the crowd, it really helps to have these skills developed to a high level. They'll almost certainly be something employers will be testing as part of a selection process. Remember, they underpin success in your working life. So looking to the future, you'll want to develop them as far as you can and be able to back that up with evidence.

How am I meant to get all these skills?

Your time at college or university is a great opportunity to build up these skills. And don't worry – it's not the dreary, hard graft you might think.

In the next two sections we'll take a look at the help that can be available to you as part of your studies and at what you can gain through other routes during your time in higher education.

Exhibit 5 Employer satisfaction with graduates' employability skills (%)

	Very satisfied	Satisfied	Not satisfied
Business and customer awareness	5	50	44
Self-management	8	68	25
Teamwork	9	71	20
Problem solving	11	70	19
Basic literacy/use of English	18	65	17
Positive attitude to work	17	68	15
Basic numeracy skills	20	70	9
Use of IT	33	62	5

Source: CBI education and skills survey 2011³



These days it's not possible to make many generalisations about higher education. Each college and university is distinctive and every course has its own approach. That's why it's so important to select the course and institution that's right for you and your area of interest. But one thing all higher education courses do have in common is that they should help develop your powers of thinking and analysis. And they should give you lots of scope to gain knowledge and skills that will prove valuable later in your working life.

There's plenty of help available

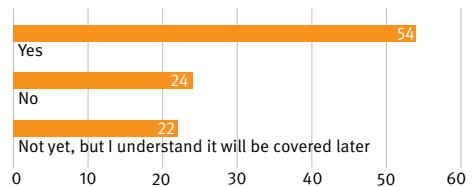
Nowadays colleges and universities are well aware of just how important it is to help you and your fellow students shape up your employability skills. Over half the students we surveyed said the importance of employability skills for their future career prospects has been explained to them (**Exhibit 6**). What's more, colleges and universities are responding by putting in more effort and resources. They – and students' unions – are also trying to get the message through to students in lots of different ways (**Exhibit 7**). There's plenty of assistance available and you shouldn't feel hesitant about asking what support you can access.

But it's up to you to make the most of what's out there. Don't just sit back and think that developing employability is something that's done to you.

“I enjoyed many opportunities that I've taken during my time at university and gained lots of experience and this gave me more insight into many other possible careers that I haven't considered before.”

Student comment

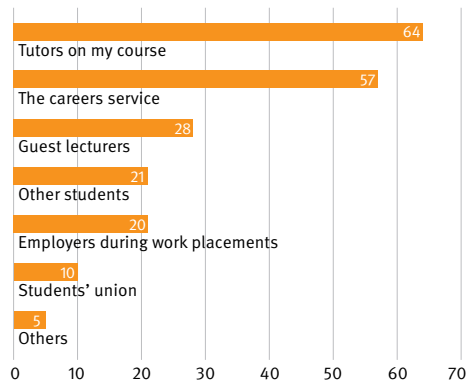
Exhibit 6 Importance of employability skills explained?* (%)



Source: CBI/ NUS survey

* Responses to the question – Has the importance of employability skills for your future career been explained to you during your time at university?

Exhibit 7 Who explained them?* (%)



Source: CBI/ NUS survey

* Responses to the question – If yes, who explained them?

So let's start with your course – after all, that's central to your life in higher education. You're not only studying your chosen subject – and it should be one that fascinates and inspires you provided you've made the right choice – but it's a great means of acquiring lots of those skills that matter so much to employers. And that's the case regardless of the subject you're studying.

Make the most of your time

If you manage your time well, you'll find you have more of it. That may sound odd, but it's true. The better you organise your time for studying, attending lectures and other course activities, the more of it you'll have left over for social life and other things you want to do. And we all need a balance of activities in our lives.

The fact is that managing time, prioritising and deciding how best to allocate your energies are central to effectiveness at work. Your course gives you an ideal opportunity to get plenty of practice in those self-management skills.

Work smarter, not harder

In the workplace, employers are keen to see people working smarter rather than harder – delivering good outcomes rather than working long hours. That means making sure your efforts are focused effectively on the things that matter, preparing properly and getting easier tasks done right first time. It also means learning from experience to improve your performance.

Your course is a great chance to build up habits that'll stand you in good stead throughout your working life. So, for example, time spent in a lecture is wasted if you haven't done the preparation work. And what you learn in lectures will sink in a lot more if you re-read your notes within a day or two. It's all about being properly organised – working smarter.

Keep on communicating and co-operating

There are plenty of opportunities on your course to develop the communication and team-working skills so valued by employers. Whether you're taking part in seminar discussions, working with other students on lab experiments, or simply asking questions about points that crop up in lectures, a higher education course gives lots of scope for you to shape up your oral communication skills, how you work in a group and how you interact with other people. In the workplace, in almost any job, these are critically important and they're skills that employers look for in recruits. Employers recruiting graduates are looking for good team players in the early years (don't expect to lead the organisation from day one).

And then there are those essays, dissertations and other written assignments. You'll want to use them to show what you've learned about the subject, but also keep in mind just how much good presentation, correct spelling and proper use of grammar help. Once you move into working life, sloppiness on those aspects can undermine confidence in what you're saying. Get them right now and you'll keep them right for the future.

Don't knock the assessments

Assessments are an important chance in themselves to learn skills – as well as boost your degree results. If you think taking exams just proves whether or not you're good at passing them, think again. In an exam, for example, you have to select, analyse and present facts structured in a logical argument under pressure – just the type of skills needed in lots of work situations. And a practical assessment or seminar presentation can show how you approach an issue, using logical thinking, evaluation of evidence and capacity for problem solving.

Have a think about it

That's really a small taste of how your course can help you develop your employability skills.⁴ Once you start thinking about it, you'll see just how much of what you're doing can feed into developing the type of employability capabilities listed in the previous section.

Do remember though, you have to play an active part in the process. Reflecting on your activities, thinking through what went right and why, what went wrong and how your performance might have been improved, learning the lessons of experience – it will all help you make a success of your time in higher education and your subsequent working life. If you can do that, then even what can seem at the time like disasters during your time in higher education can become really positive experiences.

Building work-linked skills into the curriculum...

So far, what we've been talking about is the tacit development of employability skills through your studies. But many colleges and universities are now going further and starting to make work-related skills and experience an explicit part of their courses. Some are even overhauling every one of their programmes of study to ensure employability skills and work-related learning are built into them (as for example at Birmingham City⁵ or Portsmouth university – see **Exhibit 8**).

The increasingly explicit emphasis on employability is a welcome development for employers. And it's a big attraction for many students, making it much easier to see how their studies can relate to future job opportunities and careers.

Exhibit 8: University of Portsmouth – Employability is everybody’s business

At the University of Portsmouth, increasingly close links have been forged between careers advisers and the academic faculty as part of moves to ensure the development of employability skills is embedded in all learning, teaching and assessment.⁶ The university is now going further, so that all courses approved or re-approved in future will need to demonstrate how they foster employability.

Key elements of the university’s approach include:

- Every careers adviser is linked to an academic faculty and they spend

time there regularly, delivering to students as part of the academic programmes

- The university has built up a careers and recruitment service that operates on a commercial basis, placing hundreds of students into part-time work during their courses, as well as helping graduates find work and providing the full range of careers service support
- Every programme of study is being reviewed to ensure that employability skills and work-related learning are built into them by 2012.

There are different ways in which development of employability skills and awareness of what employers are looking for can be built into higher education programmes. On a growing number of courses now, you may find yourself studying – and perhaps being assessed on – an employment skills module (the professional skills module at Gray’s School of Art is a good example – see **Exhibit 9**).

... and offering a taste of the workplace

Maybe your course goes further and includes live workplace experience as part of the package. Sometimes this can involve a whole year being spent away from university on a placement, as for an example at Robert Gordon University (**Exhibit 10**). In other cases, it may be a much shorter period (for example, at Leeds Trinity University College most placements are for a few weeks – see **Exhibit 11**).

Exhibit 9: Gray's School of Art – **Crafting professional skills**

In many people's minds, art schools are not traditionally associated with developing the skills needed to handle the practicalities of working life. But for students at Gray's School of Art, part of Robert Gordon University, these skills are very much part of the programme.⁷

Around a third of the 750 students study fine art, with the remainder on a range of design and craft-based courses, such as fashion, textiles, digital and graphic design, and three-dimensional design (including glass, ceramics and jewellery). Over recent years the school has put increasing emphasis on helping students not only develop their creative skills but also their awareness of career-linked skills.

For design and craft students that approach is enhanced by a module specifically focused on developing professional skills and relating those to potential career pathways.

The topics covered range from CV preparation and interview techniques to personal marketing and intellectual property and copyright issues. A number of separate outputs are used for assessing students, including preparation of a CV, a folio based on an existing project worked up to presentation standard, and an interview or presentation at which students have to pitch themselves or their folio and ideas to a panel of professionals from the creative industries.

Whatever the length of the placement, that kind of workplace experience is enormously valuable if you're fortunate enough to have it built in to your course.⁸ It gives you the chance to develop your employability skills, to observe them in others and to see why they matter so much. The experience can also help you greatly in deciding on a field of work you might want to take up after graduation – or one you might want to avoid!

Your careers service can be a great resource

Whether or not your course includes any type of work placement, one thing you can be sure about is that you'll find a wealth of resources to help you at your college or university careers service. But it's up to you to make use of it. For example the careers service may well run mock assessment

Exhibit 10: Robert Gordon University – **University/student partnership essential for workplace success**

The exceptional track record on employment achieved by graduates from Robert Gordon University is based in part on the transferable skills embedded in programmes of study and the work placements taken up by the vast majority of students.⁹ But the university also emphasises the two-way nature of the process, with students expected to work hard at making the most of the opportunities available to them.

Key elements of the university's approach include:

- Over 90% of the university's courses include an extended period of assessed work experience
- Before they start the work placement, most students take a professional skills module to help prepare them, delivered jointly by the university careers service and faculty members
- The university and the student association have worked together to develop a volunteering programme, with accreditation available to participants linked to a national award scheme
- The university sees its extensive engagement with employers as central to success.

centres, with a focus on testing your employability skills. This can give you a taste of what a real assessment centre will be like and help you identify skill areas needing improvement.

Don't leave it till the end of your degree course. Make contact and start exploring what's on offer at an early stage. That way you'll be able to make the best use of all that's available to help you.

“Going on a placement year changed my expectations of work-life.”

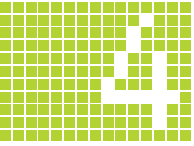
Student comment

Exhibit 11: Leeds Trinity University College – A taste of the workplace on every degree course

Professional placements form an integral part of every undergraduate degree course at Leeds Trinity University College.¹⁰ So whether students are studying vocational subjects such as journalism and business or more traditional subjects such as history and psychology, they get a taste of work related to their specialism as an integral part of their course. Reflecting this professional emphasis, well over 90% of students graduating from the college gain employment or move on to further study within six months, giving the college one of the highest graduate success rates in the country.

Key elements of the college's strategy are:

- Placements are managed by the Employer Partnership Office, which bridges the line between the academic faculties and student support services
- All undergraduates are normally required to do at least two work placements during their degree course
- Their performance in placements is assessed as part of their degree mark and students must perform satisfactorily in the work-related module to progress to the next year's studies.



How do
I help
myself?

Your course and the support directly available to you at your college or university will help you develop your employability skills, as we saw in the previous section. But if you're serious about making the most of your time in higher education, there's a lot more you can do. It'll not only help you stand out when it comes to applying for jobs at graduation, but there's plenty to enjoy and make your life at uni much more satisfying.

There are lots of opportunities available

It's easy to feel overwhelmed when you first start in higher education. No one could describe freshers' week as relaxing and there's so much to get to grips with.

But don't panic. You don't have to do everything at once. And you don't have to rush into things. It's worth taking a bit of time to find out about the opportunities available – you'll find there's no shortage of them – and to decide what you're most interested in doing. At the same time, don't be too restrictive about what you consider trying – after all, you're not committing yourself for a lifetime. And you might just find new interests and aptitudes you never knew you had.

Your time at college or university is the chance to learn about yourself, your interests, and your strengths and weaknesses just as much as the opportunity to learn about the subject you've chosen to study. And it's a time when you can develop those skills that'll stand you in good stead throughout your working life.

“Becoming a sabbatical officer made me open my eyes to other skills that I didn't think I had and alternative job opportunities that I had not thought of.”

Student comment

So let's briefly look at the main avenues open to you to help yourself.

Getting involved in the students' union...

At every college or university, you'll find there's a students' union, though the exact name for it varies across institutions. If you've started your course, you're likely already to be well aware of it. But have you thought about how it operates – and the scope there could be for you to get involved?

The students' union is there for you! It represents you and your fellow students at university. So it makes sense to learn more about it. The union exists to improve students' experience of university. It promotes students' interests, provides welfare services and manages entertainment/social services such as clubs and bars. Your student union may also run shops and catering outlets.

One of the best aspects of the students' union is everything you spend there gets put back into student services and helps make the place better for you. Everyone wins! But that doesn't happen by magic. The students' union is a membership organisation. It needs priorities and policy set, its operations managed and lots of different activities co-ordinated and delivered day after day. You could be part of it.

There are plenty of different roles in the students' union, as **Exhibit 12** outlines. All of them can help you develop your skills for working life, whether its customer and business awareness and teamwork as part of the bar staff team or communication, problem-solving and cultural awareness skills in an elected post.

Exhibit 12: The many varieties of students' union roles

There are broadly three types of things you can do in a students' union when you're looking at ways to be involved. You can be employed by the union to do paid work, you can get engaged in their activities, or you can be elected and start your own activities and become a student leader.

This outline describes the difference between each group to help you see what's for you! If you're even slightly hesitant, then the best way to think about it is this: if you think time flies when you're having fun, when you're having the time of your life, if you blink, you'll miss it. That's the difference you can make to your time at university when you're involved in your students' union.

Employed roles

Many students' unions operate bars, gig venues, shops and other types of commercial services that they employ students to run. In the first instance, you should look on the website or pay the union a visit. By asking around, you

might land yourself paid employment on the doorstep!

Bar staff, shop assistants, gym instructors, admin assistants, promotions assistants, kitchen staff and loads more.

Depending on the role, there are many trade-specific skills you could learn. If you work in a gig venue, for example, you could learn all about promotions, sound checks, gig bookings and performance routines, so look at each job independently. But there are generic skills you can get too. You gain an understanding of customer service, working to deadlines, health and safety compliance, communication skills, team working and more.

Engaged roles

If you're not wanting to be the person who takes a leadership role but instead you want to learn first, try being involved in a society, sports club, volunteer group or a union campaign. This way, you can get to

see what the union has to offer, enjoy yourself and make new friends whilst remaining loosely committed in case it's not your cup of tea.

Member of a society, sports club, volunteering group, campaign team, promotions team, student media team (newspaper, television station or radio station) and lots more.

Just by getting involved, you increase your knowledge, awareness and skills base. Whether it's attending social events that increase your ability to communicate with new people, build your confidence and learn about different cultures or you're taking part in a sports team which enables you to learn about playing in a team environment and the importance of positive attitudes and relationships – you will gain from the experience.

Elected roles

Every students' union has a range of elected positions which you can be involved in, from students who are paid full-time to represent all the

students in the university to those who want to help run a specific society – in order to get somewhere, try getting elected.

Society president, club captain, treasurer, secretary, committee chair, subject class representative, social secretary, entertainments officer, council representative, student representative, student media co-ordinator and more!

Depending on the types of roles you're interested in you can gain experience in running a society, organising events, handling a budget, fundraising, managing people, engaging members, campaigning, influencing and lobbying. In turn, you'll develop your skills in many areas including in leadership, communications, finance, management, dealing with a diverse range of stakeholders, project management and delivery. And in some cases you'll be able to develop your cultural awareness of others.

... and in clubs and societies

You'll find a club or society catering for virtually every interest (and if you don't, maybe you should start one). But don't just be a passive member. Getting involved is what helps you build skills – and make new friends and have fun. All those different roles – treasurer, chair, secretary, publicity manager and more – need to be filled by someone for a club to function. If you get stuck in, you'll get more out. And that'll include developing your skills in ways you can subsequently demonstrate to potential employers.

Contributing to community life...

Many students want to give something back to the community or make a difference to those less fortunate. The beauty about volunteering is that there really is something for everyone. If you want to get involved in a project throughout the year you can, or if you just have a spare few hours now and then and you want to use it for something more worthwhile than watching daytime TV, there's no shortage of possibilities. Check them out with your students' union.

What's more, there can be spin-offs for your future. Volunteering is one of the buzzwords for recently graduated students looking for work. The fantastic variety of volunteering projects available provides a great way to expand and develop those key skills employers are looking for – and it doesn't mean toiling away for hours on end in a charity shop,

unless of course you want to. As just one example, there may be scope to offer coaching support for after-school clubs (see UP for Sport – **Exhibit 13**).

... and to university life

Every college and university has faculty boards and committees where the student voice needs be heard. These are not simply talking shops – they're forums where decisions get taken that can have a real impact on your fellow students and future students. Roles like this are also a great chance to add to your skills through activities that can include:

- Identifying student issues and needs on your programme of study
- Attending committee meetings to act as the student voice
- Finding effective ways to feed back the outcomes of meetings to other students
- Keeping the students' union updated on any issues that need to be taken up at higher levels.

There may well be other ways you can contribute to improving learning and teaching at your institution – take a look for example at **Exhibit 14** on the Birmingham City Student Academic Partners scheme. The great thing is to ask around and see what the possibilities are.

Exhibit 13: UP for Sport – playing the skills game

Launched seven years ago, the UP for Sport initiative forms one strand in the University of Portsmouth's programme to widen participation and raise aspirations among young people in the area.¹¹ In essence, the scheme uses sport as a means to engage with schools and local communities, while giving university students the opportunity to acquire coaching and teaching skills and directly deliver coaching to young people.

The scheme's main activity is to provide coaching support for after-school clubs, typically for a 90-minute session at the end of the school day. Student volunteers are trained in coaching skills and other generic skills to do with managing large groups of children. A typical pattern is for students to spend six months to a year gaining a coaching qualification,

during which they provide support for established coaches. Once qualified, they normally go out into schools to run one coaching session a week in ten-week blocks. The scheme covers a wide range of sporting activity, including football, rugby, hockey, netball, tennis, swimming, cheerleading and dance.

Up to 150 students volunteer to take part as coaches each year. While many participants are studying sport and exercise science or sports development, student volunteers come from every faculty across the university. As well as the coaching qualification – which around 80% of participants complete – students gain a wide range of skills and experience, from practical ones such as first aid to confidence in dealing with sometimes difficult children.

Exhibit 14: Forging student-academic partnerships to improve teaching

Birmingham City University and the students' union have teamed up to develop an innovative scheme to strengthen teaching and learning. The Student Academic Partners (SAP) scheme¹² is part of fostering a 'learning community', based on the idea of students and academic staff working together to shape improvements in course content, design, delivery, assessment and/or evaluation of teaching and learning. The scheme was the winner of the award for outstanding support for students at the Times Higher Education awards 2010.

The scheme's central aim is to enable students to work in equal partnership with faculty staff to strengthen learning and teaching development. The scheme encourages students and staff to identify educational development projects in which students can play an active role. Ideas for the projects may come from either students or teaching staff, but the general pattern is for a joint project proposal to be developed

in the form of a 500-word synopsis. If approved, the scheme funds up to 125 hours of work by participating students at £10 an hour. The pilot phase was funded by HEFCE.

In 2009/10, some 25 projects were carried out under the SAP programme. They ranged from investigating student awareness of study support and its accessibility to the design and creation of a microprocessor development system – with associated lab exercises – to help with teaching micro-electronics.

A recent evaluation shows the great majority of projects have had a positive impact on the learning experience for students as a whole. But there have also been a range of spin-off benefits. For students engaged in working on SAP projects, their participation has provided valuable professional experience, boosting their confidence in presenting themselves to future employers.

Experiencing working life

To help prepare for working life, there's nothing to beat gaining some experience of it. And a part-time job during term-time or working during vacations can give a welcome boost to your bank account.

Scanning groceries on the checkout, serving drinks behind the bar or doing the filing may not be your idea of a dream job – but it can help open doors to the career you do want one day. If you can gain experience of different kinds of work, that's all to the good. But do remember, your main focus during your time in higher education needs to be on completing your course successfully and getting the best out of it. If you're in paid employment at the same time, make sure you get the balance right – it's all part of developing your self-management.

Unpaid work experience and internships can be just as valuable – sometimes more so – in giving you insights into the world of work. They can also allow you a taste of work in a field you may feel is right for you. The experience may confirm your feelings or do the opposite. That's also a real gain: it's much better to realise that you don't want to pursue a particular line of work on the basis of a few weeks' experience than to come to that realisation years down the line, when it may be much harder to switch direction.

Use all the help available

As we said in the previous section, your college or university careers service can be a great resource, but it does need you to make use of it.

You'll almost certainly find there's a range of workshops, talks and training sessions on offer (there may also be some run by the students' union). The details will differ across institutions, but you are likely to have the chance to hear from employers about what they look for in potential recruits and to learn more about particular skill areas, such as negotiating and influencing.

Don't hesitate to draw on other sources. Family members and friends can be great sources of information and insights about the world of work and possibilities that might suit you. They'll normally be eager to help, so make use of their knowledge and networks.

How about formal recognition of employability skills?

A growing number of colleges and universities are operating accreditation schemes to recognise those students who've built up their employability skills in a systematic way (see for example the Bath Award and the York Award (**Exhibits 15 and 16**)). The schemes differ in their detail – each university currently sets its own standards for these awards – but they generally require participating students to:

- Carry out a minimum amount of work experience and/or volunteering
- Undertake a number of skills training sessions
- Put together a portfolio giving evidence of the activities and reflection on the personal development achieved.

Exhibit 15: The Bath award – recognising wider skill gains

Recognising that degree results reflect only the academic side of university life, the Bath award has been developed by the students' union and the careers service at the University of Bath.¹³ Students were keen to have some formal accreditation of what they gained from active participation in other aspects of university life, but at the same time there was a shared acceptance there had to be a relatively demanding assessment process to ensure quality assurance.

Following a pilot in the 2008/09 academic year focusing on students already heavily involved in clubs and societies, the award programme went fully live in 2009/10. Students begin by completing a skills competency framework assessment to rate their work-related skills and identify areas for improvement. Participants have to complete four elements to qualify for the award:

- A minimum of 300 hours of extra-curricular activity in the form of volunteering and/or work experience.

The volunteering can involve activity within the university – such as acting as an academic representative within a faculty or helping manage a student society – or external activity, such as acting as volunteer helper in a local charity

- Completion of at least four skills training sessions, drawing on the courses run by the students' union and/or the careers service
- Preparation of a submission bringing together evidence of activities, skills competence assessments, and short pieces of writing articulating and reflecting on their development
- Submission of a sample CV and job application, plus other exercises related to future job search.

The Bath award is currently administered by a member of students' union staff. Reflecting its partnership development, the team of assessors is drawn from the careers service, the students' union, faculty and professional services volunteers.

Exhibit 16: The York award – adding value to degrees

Launched in 1998, the York award is a certificated programme of transferable skills training and experiential learning, run by the University of York in partnership with leading public, private and voluntary sector organisations. The award offers students a means to gain recognition for many valuable activities that are not formally recognised through the degree programme.¹⁴

To obtain the York award students have to plan and pursue an active programme of personal development

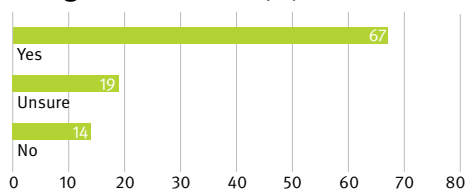
in skills that will help them succeed in life after university. It's based on a combination of:

- Skills raising through courses
- Volunteering
- Internships and work placements
- Part-time and vacation work
- Involvement in running clubs and societies.

Schemes of this kind can be a useful framework and help you stay on track. And the accreditation they give equips you with a ready-made source of evidence for you to draw on in your applications to future employers. It certainly makes sense to check out whether your college or university has anything of this kind.


While the number of institutions operating these awards is on the rise, it would clearly make life a lot easier if there were to be a nationally recognised standard which employers came to understand. It's no wonder that two thirds of students would value the chance to secure a nationally recognised record of employability skills developed during their time at uni (**Exhibit 17**).

Exhibit 17 Wanting a nationally recognised record?* (%)



Source: CBI/ NUS survey

* Responses to the question – Would you value having a formal, nationally recognised record of the employability skills you have developed in your time at university both in the classroom and in extra-curricular activities?



How do
I explain
all this to
a future
employer?

By now you'll appreciate that you've got lots of opportunities available to you to develop your employability skills through your course, through other resources available at your college or university, and through extra-curricular activities. And it should be clear that it's not all grim, hard graft.

Just as you get much more out of studying a subject that you're enthusiastic about, you'll get the most from activities you find really satisfying, whether it's playing an active part in your students' union or volunteering in a local school. But when it comes to launching into your career on graduation, you'll need to be able to explain all this to prospective employers.

Avoid the clichés

Remember that employers often receive hundreds of applications for graduate roles. Put yourself in the employer's position for a moment. How would you sift through them all to get down to a shortlist of applicants to invite for interview or to attend an assessment centre? Why would an employer pick out your online application or CV from among the rest? The reality is most applications fail at the first hurdle.

“My volunteering experiences and an unpaid internship made me firmly change my mind about pursuing a certain career path.”

Student comment

Your careers service will be able to give you lots of advice – and practical exercises – on applying for jobs and taking part in recruitment processes. But it's worth keeping in mind how you might be able to make your application stand out – and that doesn't mean producing it on lime-green paper.

An awful lot of applications are going to be very similar. They're likely to contain lots of buzzwords and phrases that have long since become clichés – ‘excellent communication skills’ for example. What can make a real difference is to be able to produce some convincing evidence that you possess and have developed those skills.

Think beyond assertions

You need to be able to present your employability skills to employers effectively. Simply making a list isn't terribly convincing. Stating that you possess excellent communication skills is a lot less powerful than explaining that during your time working for the XYZ company you had to give regular presentations to groups of up to 30 people and you had to deal politely with customer complaints and try to resolve their problems. Or that you had to persuade your fellow members of a student society committee to adopt your ideas for new activities.

The great thing is to be able to identify the skills you've gained and used in real contexts and then to produce the evidence.

Recording as you go

When it comes to making an application, it's not always easy to look back over your three or four years at uni and remember all you've done and analyse the skills it helped you develop. It's even tougher to do it in the middle of an interview.

So it's really worth keeping a record of evidence of developing your employability skills right the way through your time at college or university. It may sound a bit obsessive, but just try keeping a notebook for jotting things down. If you and some friends organise a fund-raising event for charity for example, it's worth noting how you did it, what role you played, how much you raised and so on – otherwise you're not going to be able to cite any of the detail in a couple of year's time. Having some notes means it'll be at your fingertips for when you're job hunting.

Reflecting reflection

You may think it's obvious that you can learn – after all, you're doing a higher education course. But employers will want to know that you can learn, develop and change your approach in the light of experience from all sorts of sources.

Again, there's a big difference between asserting that you can learn and change and being able to point to concrete evidence of having done so. What went wrong with something you were organising or doing? What did you learn from that? What did you do different the next time round to avoid the same problem arising? Those are the kind of questions potential employers want to hear answered effectively.

So it's not just a matter of being able to reflect on your experiences and learn from them. It's also being able to demonstrate you've used those skills effectively. It's much easier to do that if you've made some notes as it happens.

Views from students...

Careers module helped me realise what I DON'T want to do!

Exposure to the multi-cultural environment has led me to rethink where in the world I could go for work – there is so much out there for me to explore!

During work experiences, I have realised that some places I thought I would love to work at are actually not for me.

Exposure to work experience has introduced me to different ideas.

Guest lecturers have inspired interest in a field I hadn't considered before.

I got involved in student media which now looks like it will impact my future career in a direction I never anticipated.

I have been shocked into realizing how important it is to get a work placement.

I know more precisely about what I am (really) good at and about areas I can see myself working for the rest of my life.

Industrial placement gave me an accurate view of the real world of work.

Through volunteering opportunities I've realised that teaching might be the career for me.

Joining the raising and giving society has made me confident that I can pursue my chosen career choice and has made me really motivated and excited about doing so.

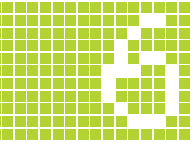
The work environment is far more competitive than I expected. I need much more than my university degree to get a decent job.

Work experience and volunteering has taught me a lot about the working world in reality.

A tutor who is also a practicing artist who talked about ways to become a commissioned artist made me think it is possible.

Society exec involvement has shown me my strengths and what I am passionate about – and that I will only work hard for what I am passionate about.

A compulsory module – career development skills – highlighted where my job interests lie and what factors in a job would motivate me the most.



By now you may be wondering where you should begin with applying all the ideas from earlier sections. It may well seem a daunting prospect. But keep in mind that you don't have to do everything, nor do you have to do it all at once. The important things are, first, to absorb the lessons of this guide and, secondly, to embark on your programme of development at a pace and in ways that suit you and are in line with what interests you.

What help's available?

As a first step, it's a good idea to do a bit of research before you rush into anything. It's the same principle you'd apply to doing a course project or an essay – gather the basic information first of all. Begin with a scan of the websites for your uni and the students' union. After that, there's nothing to beat talking to people.

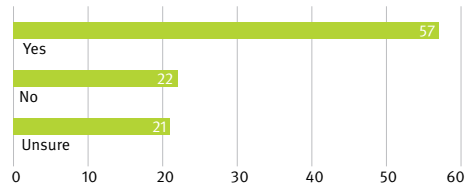
If you're not sure whether or not your course includes an employability module or perhaps even a work placement, talk to your tutors to find out.

It's worth making contact with your college or university careers service at an early stage to find out what's on offer. They'll be only too happy to explain the range of services available to help support you in developing your employability skills and – further down the line – in job search.

Make sure you check out the students' union. It's likely to run the student volunteering scheme for example.

The great thing is to ask and keep on asking till you build up a clear picture. And don't think you're alone in wanting to understand and develop your employability during your time in higher education. Far from it. Most students would like more explanation from their institution about what employability skills are and how their course helps develop them (**Exhibit 18**). And two thirds of students would like more support from their college or university in developing those skills (**Exhibit 19**).

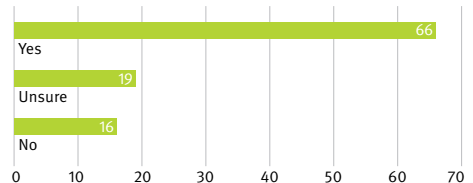
Exhibit 18 More explanation of employability by university?* (%)



Source: CBI/ NUS survey

* Responses to the question – Would you like to have more explanation from your university of what employability skills are and how your course helps you develop them?

Exhibit 19 More support in developing employability skills?* (%)



Source: CBI/ NUS survey

* Responses to the question – Would you like your university to provide more support in developing your employability skills?

Spread your activities over time

If you're on a typical three- or four-year undergraduate course, you've got a good stretch of time you can spread extra-curricular activities over. Don't try to pack everything into a couple of semesters or terms.

Remember, the course you came into higher education to study has to be your top priority. If you've chosen a subject that fascinates and inspires you, you'll want to be sure to give it enough time – and your future employers will care about how you conduct your studies and the results you achieve. You'll also want to be making friends, having a social life and following your interests in other ways, whether it's taking part in sport, getting involved in drama or music, or any of the other dozens of opportunities available.

“Hearing about the experiences of others who have previously done the course has made me consider the possibility of being self employed in the future, and realise how independent I will need to be as a craft practitioner in order to succeed.”

Student comment

Just keep in mind to make some time for the type of activities outlined in this guide. As you'll realise by now, these can be an important part of building friendships and a social life, not in conflict with it.

Reflect and record as you go

As we said in the previous section, reflecting and recording as you go will be a great help – and you'll also learn more from your experiences. This doesn't need to be an elaborate process. You're not submitting it as coursework. But when you come to apply for jobs closer to graduation, you'll really appreciate the value of having some kind of record of activities, your involvement in them, and what you learned from the experience.

It's over to you

In the end, what you get out of your time in higher education is up to you. It's a great opportunity but only you can make up your mind whether you're going to make the most of it. There's plenty of help available, but you have to decide whether to take advantage of that to assist in building up your employability and life skills.

That's the crucial building block you have to put in place first of all. So, over to you...

More information

There's a huge amount of guidance and information available to students and graduates on employability issues. The best source will be your careers service. But if you have a general interest in the field, there are three useful publications, each giving lots more sources:

Future fit: preparing graduates for the world of work, CBI and UUK, 2009 <http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/reports/00167/>

Graduate employability: what do employers think and want?, CIHE, 2008 <http://www.cihe.co.uk/category/knowledge/publications/>

If only I'd known: making the most of higher education, a guide for students and parents, Association of Graduate Recruiters, 2002 <http://www.agr.org.uk/Content/If-Only-I-had-Known>

Case studies about initiatives on graduate employability by a range of institutions can be found on the CBI education and skills website: http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/case_studies/

There's also a DVD, ***Journey to Work***, available from the Association of Graduate Careers Advisory Services (AGCAS) which shows a number of students as they prepare for life after university, http://www.agcas.org.uk/agcas_resources/212-Journey-to-Work-DVD-and-streaming-licence-#0

To access resources on the **NUS website**, go to: <http://www.nus.org.uk/en/Student-Life/Careers-Advice/>

References

- 1 A CBI/NUS online survey, promoted to students by the NUS and by a range of universities, was conducted in the period November/December 2010. Some 2,823 self-selected students spread across 71 universities and HE colleges answered at least some questions and 2,614 of them completed all questions. Among respondents, 67% were pursuing a full-time undergraduate course, with most of the remainder on full-time post-graduate programmes. The charts and student quotes in this guide are derived from the survey.
- 2 For more about the CBI's work on employability skills see *Time well spent: Embedding employability in work experience*, CBI, March 2007 <http://www.cbi.org.uk/pdf/timewellspent.pdf>
- 3 CBI/EDI education and skills survey 2011, May 2011.
- 4 For a fuller discussion and for a set of tips see the *If only I'd known* guide mentioned in the 'More information' section.
- 5 For a case study see http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability_policy/case-studies/
- 6 A fuller case study of the University of Portsmouth's approach to developing employability can be found on the CBI's education and skills website at http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/case_studies/
- 7 A fuller case study can be found on the CBI's education and skills website http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability_policy/case-studies/
- 8 Research indicates that structured work experience has clear positive effects on the ability of graduates to find employment within six months of graduation and to secure graduate-level jobs. See Geoff Mason, *Employability skills initiatives in higher education: What effects do they have on graduate labour market outcomes?*, NIESR, 2006.
- 9 A fuller case study can be found on the CBI's education and skills website http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability_policy/case-studies/
- 10 A fuller case study can be found on the CBI's education and skills website http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability_policy/case-studies/
- 11 A fuller case study can be found on the CBI's education and skills website http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability_policy/case-studies/
- 12 <http://www.birminghamcitysu.com/saps/>
- 13 A fuller case study can be found on the CBI's education and skills website http://educationandskills.cbi.org.uk/policy/employability_policy/case-studies/
- 14 More about the York award can be found at <http://www.york.ac.uk/services/careers/skills.cfm?page=3914>

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**INVESTORS
IN PEOPLE**

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