

THE QA COMMONS

EMPLOYABILITY FRAMEWORK
DEVELOPMENT



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INTRODUCTION

The QA Commons was established to narrow the gap between higher education and employment by ensuring all postsecondary students are prepared for the changing world of work.

The QA Commons offers a comprehensive and integrated framework that prepares graduates for success in the workplace. This framework is centered on a set of evaluative criteria and includes eight **Essential Employability Qualities (EEQs)**. The EEQs represent the knowledge, skills, abilities, and experiences that are applicable to most work-based professional environments. As described further below, the EEQs address those specific areas identified by employers as needed most, and most lacking in new hires. They are not industry or discipline-specific, but are intended to be applicable to most work-based, professional environments.

Founded in 2016 with a grant from Lumina Foundation, the adoption of the name “Commons” was intentional to serve as a resource for all of higher education. The EEQ framework is a public document intended for the common good. The products and services of the QA Commons build on this framework, but others are encouraged to use it in order to best advance the success of their graduates.

EEQ DEVELOPMENT

The EEQs were developed through thorough and extensive research followed by a year-long co-design pilot project.

Peter Ewell, President Emeritus of the National Center for Higher Education Management Systems (NCHEMS), Bill Plater, Provost Emeritus at Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis, Marianne Boeke of NCHEMS, and Melanie Booth of the QA Commons, led the research project. The work began with a review of existing studies drawn from national associations serving postsecondary education, foundations, governmental associations and academic research. Additionally, data from Burning Glass Technologies, which collects key hiring criteria from millions of job recruitment announcements, were examined.

From these resources, the QA Common extracted a set of draft EEQs and reviewed them with a wide group of employers and industry associations. In addition, the EEQs were vetted by multiple academic and policy leaders.

Through this early vetting of the EEQs there was a strong view that any review of a program needed to incorporate support and engagement of employers, students and alumni, which has led to the development of the five EEQ CERT categories described below.

THE EIGHT EEQS

The EEQs are often described as “soft skills.” As such, they are too often denigrated in the academic world as “not academic” or simplistic. Multiple surveys of employers, however, reflect that soft skills are seen as equally as important as “hard” or technical skills.^{1,2,3} As one employer put it, “We hire on the basis of technical skills but fire, or fail to promote, on the lack of soft skills.” These EEQs are natural extensions of program learning outcomes in academic and technical areas, adding to these outcomes applications in work-related settings. While the EEQs are stated as generic skills and qualities, they are best identified, scaffolded and demonstrated in the context of the discipline when they will need to be applied.

The eight EEQs are:

1 Communication

Expressing ideas and information coherently and appropriately in a variety of modes; demonstrating competence in engaging with those from different cultural backgrounds.

2 Thinking & Problem-Solving

Exercising initiative in applying critical thinking skills to identify and address complex work-related problems.

3 Inquiry

Investigating problems by reviewing, evaluating, verifying, citing, and applying information from multiple sources.

4 Collaboration

Engaging with teams, working effectively with others, seeking a range of points of view, and being willing to modify perspectives.

5 Adaptability

Approaching new or unfamiliar work-based situations and uncertainty with agility and openness.

6 Principles & Ethics

Acting equitably and with integrity and honesty, with a strong sense of fairness and respect for individuals, groups, and diverse communities.

7 Responsible & Professional

Carrying out responsibilities consistently, persistently, and reliably; maintaining appropriate confidentiality..

8 Learning

Adopting new tools, technologies, and strategies to work more efficiently to analyze work-based situations and make decisions..

Full definitions of each EEQ can be found [here](#).

THE EEQS IN THE CONTEXT OF OTHER FRAMEWORKS

The QA Commons' EEQs are one of many [OTHER SKILLS FRAMEWORKS](#), such as those by the National Network of Business and Industry Associations, the Department of Labor, National Association of Colleges & Employers (NACE), the Association of American Colleges & Universities (AAC&U), the US Department of Education, and many others.

The EEQs deliberately focus on those skills most commonly used in employability skills frameworks and cited by employers as most needed. ***As stated by employers: "We hire on "hard" (technical or academic) skills, but too often fire on the lack of soft skills."*** Programs working to achieve EEQ Certification can use other frameworks in the development of their portfolios.

It is worthy of note that, amongst all of the competencies, Communication, Teamwork/Collaboration, and Critical Thinking/Problem Solving are the three skills that are most frequently referenced across all frameworks. However, these very qualities are also the most problematic in that different proponents use the same words to mean the quite different things. The QA Commons has sought to bring clarity to the meaning of widely used terms so that they can be understood by employers, academics, and students in the same way through the fuller explanation of what the qualities mean in preparing graduates for employability.

As well, through the EEQ Certification process, QA Commons is reviewing in depth whether the program is demonstrating these EEQs in the proficiencies of *all* learners. Thus, this goes beyond an individual badge in one or more areas, as is most common, to focus on entire programs and all students, thus assuring employers that any graduate of the program has demonstrated proficiency in each of the EEQs. This is a high bar and one that distinguishes the EEQ CERT from any other employability recognition.



NACE
Career Readiness Competencies



AAC&U
Essential Learning Outcomes



Nat'l Network of Business & Industry Associations
Common Employability Skills



Lumina Foundation
Connecting Credentials



Lumina Foundation
Degree Qualifications Profile



Strayer University
Soft Skills



Laureate Professional Assessment
Core Competencies



Partnership Skills for 21st Century
Framework



Burning Glass Higher Education Forum
Essential Learning Outcomes



DOE Office of Career & Tech Ed
Employability Skills Framework



Federation for Advanced Manufacturing Education
Six Professional Behaviors



Australia Department of Education
Employability Skills Framework



University of Kent
Employability Skills Frameworks



Illinois State University
Essential Employability Skills



Univeristy of Glasgow
Edge Employability Skills

CATEGORY/CRITERIA DEVELOPMENT

Given the emphasis on work-readiness, the QA Commons team also researched how best to ensure that the program operated with appropriate support from institutional departments, such as career services and institutional research, and engaged employers, alum^{1,2,3} and students effectively. Serious gaps were found in each of these areas, and employers particularly expressed dissatisfaction with advisory committees and the awareness of faculty of the major changes in the workplace. The EEQ CERT process, therefore, is intended to integrate these internal services and external relationships into a unique integrated and comprehensive framework for demonstrating employability.

The five key areas (Categories) are:

1 EEQ Graduate Preparation

EEQ Certification is designed to validate that students have gained proficiency in employability skills.

2 Career Support Services

Endorsement of programs' integrating career services throughout the program and tracking the results.

3 Employer Engagement

Employer engagement is vital to ensuring career readiness. While employer advisory boards are important for occasional advice, they are rarely sufficient. Employers seek deeper engagement that is substantive, relevant and utilized.

4 Student & Alumni Engagement

Incorporation of alumni engagement is essential. Similarly, student involvement and self-assessment are needed to provide students confidence in their preparation for the workplace.

5 Public Information

Program-specific information on completion rates, average loans, graduate careers, and salaries published in public forums empowers and informs students and parents about career pathways and opportunities.

THE EEQ PILOT

Once the EEQs and Categories were drafted and organized into the EEQ CERT process, there was a need to field test them as a proof of concept. Twenty-seven programs from 14 institutions agreed to participate in a co-design process, to take the EEQs and five Categories^{1,2,3} and work with them, toward the development of a self-assessment whether an evidentiary portfolio could be produced. These pilot programs served over 25,000 students and were diverse in their disciplines, degree levels, delivery models, faculty profiles, institutional types, accreditation, student demographics and locations. This intentional diversity allowed the QA Commons to test the EEQ CERT process across multiple educational contexts, to identify possible value-propositions for different kinds of programs, and to learn from the variety of disciplines, fields, and approaches represented. Over the course of a year, these programs provided feedback, leading to several revisions in the descriptions and process.

Twenty six of the 27 programs submitted sample self-assessments, which were thoroughly and systematically reviewed by the QA Commons team in relation to the five Categories and a corresponding rubric. The portfolios were then analyzed in aggregate to:

- Identify key strengths in programs' efforts to prepare students for employability.
- Identify needs and areas for improvement in programs' preparation for meeting the Category criteria.
- Collect, recognize, and disseminate promising practices.
- Identify actionable steps that can be taken at both the programmatic and institutional level.
- Revise and refine Categories and criteria for Certification, evidence, indicators, guidance, and verification and validation processes.
- Create a certification process (EEQ CERT).
- Address the key EEQ pilot research questions.

A report on the findings of this pilot is found [here](#).

INITIAL IMPLEMENTATION OF THE EEQ CERT PROCESS

In 2019-20, the QA Commons partnered with the Kentucky Council on Postsecondary Education (CPE), to undertake the first official cycle of the Employability Self-Assessment and EEQ Certification process. This effort was part of the goal of CPE to demonstrate the effectiveness of the system's responsiveness to employer needs in the State, and to recognize the QA Commons as an important assurer of the quality of the preparation of graduates for the workforce. Three community colleges and three universities each selected three programs seeking EEQ Certification. External reviewers were recruited and trained, and program evidentiary portfolios reviewed, leading to detailed feedback reports of strengths and areas in need of improvement. As of May 2020, the QA Commons Board officially [certified 13 programs](#).

CLOSING

The eight EEQs and five categories were developed in tandem, creating a complete package for multiple stakeholders - state agencies and higher education systems, academic and workforce programs, apprenticeships, employers and students. The QA Commons believes the EEQs are best instilled by their being embedded in existing curricular and co-curricular courses and activities, scaffolded from entry level to proficiency/mastery over the course of the learner's enrollment. This approach assures greater depth of achievement of the EEQs and demonstrated ability to apply them in a work related setting, differentiating the process from a one-time course or soft-skills assessment.

As the QA Commons continues to work with new programs and institutions, it will continue to refine, develop and evaluate the EEQs and Categories. As of Spring 2020, the QA Commons is offering the [EEQ Suite of services](#) to interested programs throughout the country. The suite includes the Employability Self-Assessment, Action Planning and Advisory, EEQ Certification, and a Faculty Employability Fellows program. In light of the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on higher education and the workplace, the QA Commons has also developed new approaches to support institutions and programs to demonstrate readiness for the workplace.

REFERENCES

- 1 Bauer-Wolf, Jeremy, 2019, [Survey: Employers Want 'Soft Skills' From Graduates](#), Inside Higher Education.
- 2 Bolden-Barrett, 2019, [Soft skills top employer wish lists, despite automation's rise](#), HR Dive.
- 3 Wilkie, Dana, 2019, [Employers Say Students Aren't Learning Soft Skills in College](#), Society for Human Resource Management.



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