



# The Skills Imperative 2035

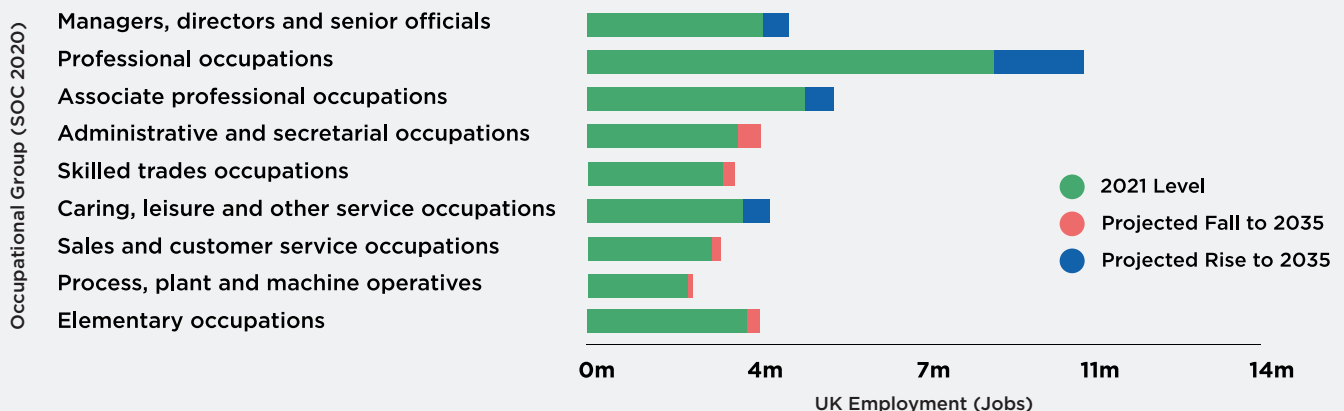
## A Summary for Schools

**Over the past five years, NFER has been working on The Skills Imperative 2035: Essential skills for tomorrow's workforce, a research programme funded by the Nuffield Foundation, involving a comprehensive analysis of how job and skill requirements are likely to change in future.**

This Research Bite highlights the key essential skills identified in the report and explores what schools can do to support the development of these skills, and also the recommendations we have shared with policymakers.

Above all, technology is driving change in what jobs exist, and what skills are needed to do those jobs. Technology not only means that machines can automate some tasks, it also creates many new types of work, skills and ultimately jobs. It has effects on both productivity and economic growth and the distribution of jobs across the economy. Researchers have tended to find that technological developments over the last century have replaced workers doing more basic, routine-based tasks, whilst augmenting (i.e. expanding) work for those with other skills, at least in the short- to medium-term.

### Employment levels and predicted change in The Skills Imperative 2035 employment projections



As shown in the graph, job growth is expected to be in high-skilled occupations, whereas most other occupations are likely to decline.

New data on the jobs market suggests that the labour market is changing in the way we predicted, but the pace of change has accelerated significantly in the last three years, with some groups declining three times as much as anticipated.

The Skills Imperative 2035 makes a major contribution to our understanding of these essential employment skills and how to better value, develop, and support them. Through a carefully planned and sequenced data-driven research programme, it has projected future skills demand from a labour market being transformed by technological development; codified the skills most likely to be critical; assessed the supply of - and shortfalls in - these skills across the population and among specific groups; and analysed the determinants of young people's skill development and the implications for the formal education and training system, lifelong learning, and beyond.

**Josh Hillman, Director of Education, Nuffield Foundation**

# The Six Essential Employment Skills (EES)

Our research identified six skills which will be vital for workers across the UK to succeed, even more so in 2035 than today, all of which depend on each other.



## Communication

The ability to express ideas clearly and interpret the meaning of others with accuracy. It involves speaking, listening, writing and presenting in ways that avoid misunderstanding. At higher levels, it means tailoring messages to different audiences, balancing precision with persuasion, and ensuring nuance is not lost in digital or cross-cultural settings. As routine tasks are automated, the value of human interaction will increase. By 2035, communication will remain indispensable: it is the channel through which knowledge is shared, trust is built, and complex work is coordinated.



## Collaboration

Working with others in ways that create enduring relationships and achieve shared goals. It is not just dividing tasks, but weaving together diverse perspectives, skills and motivations into a common endeavour which is better than can be achieved working alone or in isolation. Effective collaborators build trust, sustain commitment over time, and resolve conflict without damaging relationships. As work becomes increasingly networked and multidisciplinary, the ability to forge strong partnerships will be central to progress. By 2035, collaboration will be a defining skill: those who can nurture long-term cooperation will enable innovation, resilience and shared success.



## Information literacy

The ability to evaluate and use information to make sound decisions. It requires weighing evidence, testing arguments, and judging credibility in a world where data and opinions are abundant but not always reliable. At higher levels, it means not just locating facts but discerning their quality, spotting flaws in reasoning, and defending conclusions with confidence. As artificial intelligence generates ever more information, the capacity to question, filter and validate will be crucial. By 2035, information literacy will distinguish those who can navigate complexity from those overwhelmed by it.

Our research showed that there are already widespread shortages of these skills, that skills development is cumulative and that gaps emerge early and widen over time - meaning a strong early foundation of these skills is vital.



## Organising, planning and prioritising

This is about turning intention into action. It involves setting clear goals, designing workable plans, and sequencing tasks so that objectives are met on time and within constraints. It is also about coordinating the efforts of others and ensuring that resources are aligned and momentum is maintained. At advanced levels, it means balancing competing priorities, anticipating obstacles, and adapting plans without losing sight of the bigger picture. By 2035, when work is likely to be more fluid, fast-paced and project-based, those who can organise, plan and prioritise effectively will provide the structure that enables progress.



## Problem solving and decision making

This involves identifying and understanding challenges, generating options, and selecting the best course of action under conditions that are often uncertain. It requires logic and creativity, evidence and judgement, and the ability to balance short-term needs with long-term goals.

At higher levels, it means tackling complex, ambiguous problems in an ethical and empathic manner, when there may be no single right answer, and being accountable for the choices made. In the workplaces of 2035, the human capacity to diagnose and decide will remain indispensable.



## Creative thinking

This is the capacity to generate fresh ideas and apply them in ways that add value. It involves looking at challenges from new angles, experimenting with different approaches, and combining perspectives to create something original. At its strongest, it means moving beyond familiar solutions, challenging assumptions, and finding innovative paths forward in collaborative settings. As information multiplies and problems grow more complex, creativity will be even more vital, not just for novelty but for progress. In 2035, those who can think differently will drive innovation, adapt to change, and unlock opportunities that others may overlook.

# Considerations for schools

We spoke to school and college curriculum leaders, plus experts from independent organisations, to explore how schools and colleges currently support students to develop these essential employment skills (EES) alongside the core curriculum. We also asked what they would like to see change in the future and how they can be further supported.

**We know that many school leaders are already supporting students to develop their EES by:**

- Integrating EES across their curriculum.
- Offering separate skills-focused lessons or seeking to develop these skills through enrichment, speaking and listening opportunities, and careers education.
- Responding to the needs of their students, for example by supporting disadvantaged students to develop these skills through enrichment opportunities.

We work in an area which has quite significant deprivation and unemployment, so we do a lot with our students to try and move their employment skills. We have four pillars at our school...we have ambition, excellence, pride and community and all of those pillars feed into [students'] personal development tracker... which ensures every child has an opportunity, for example for a leadership experience.

**A curriculum leader from a school serving a low-income community**



[EES] needs to be referenced and explicitly taught and given space [in the curriculum]... it's really important because we're not producing people who have got the skills to go forward into the workplace and do today's jobs, let alone the jobs not even invented yet. We need to make it serious through the national curriculum what we expect in terms of skills development.

**School curriculum leader**



Throughout this research, various barriers to developing EES were identified, as detailed in the main report.

## **Solutions to overcoming these barriers in schools include:**

- 1 Supporting EES development as part of a schools' ethos and culture, and the language used by leaders, teachers and students.
- 2 Looking across the curriculum and identifying opportunities where EES can be developed further.
- 3 Monitoring students EES development systematically using a common skills framework.
- 4 Providing opportunities for careers education and work experience when age-appropriate, and enrichment activities designed to support students' broader social, personal and educational development.
- 5 Integrating enrichment activities into the school day where possible, to increase their accessibility to disadvantaged children.

We have a lot of vulnerable learners with bad attendance. But they really enjoy enrichment activities, and it helps their attendance...

**School leader**



Many schools use Skills Builder's framework and tools for developing young people's essential skills. Senior leaders from the Careers and Enterprise Company also emphasised that essential skills have already been embedded in their careers education guidance, resources and training, including the equalex framework for work experience, the Future Skills Questionnaire, and training for school Careers Leaders.



## Considerations for Policymakers: A Lifelong Learning Approach

Meeting the future skills challenge will require a cradle-through-career approach - strengthening support in the early years, tackling inequalities in schools, creating routes into jobs, and rebuilding the adult education and training system to deliver growth that benefits everyone. This is particularly important for the most disadvantaged in our society.

NFER has shared the following recommendations for policymakers to consider.



### Stage 1 - Birth to Five

- Expand family support, targeting the most disadvantaged
- Support disadvantaged families to access high-quality early years education and care (ECEC)
- Strengthen the early years workforce



### Stage 3 - Education to Employment

- Incentivise closer cooperation between educators, government and employers
- Incentivise FE and HE providers to place a greater emphasis on students' EES
- Evaluate tools for assessing EES, monitoring and addressing students' skills gaps, and helping students to reflect on the development of their EES
- Cultivate a clear and coherent network of high-quality vocational and technical pathways into growth occupations
- Increase participation in literacy and numeracy beyond age 16



### Stage 2 - School Years

- Acknowledge EES development as a vital part of education and articulate how it sits within a knowledge-rich curriculum
- Promote a common skills framework and assessment tools, whilst training teachers on how to develop EES within and beyond the curriculum
- Expand access to enrichment activities, particularly for disadvantaged pupils
- Increase the share of education funding targeting disadvantaged pupils and lower-performing schools
- Invest in further research on EES measurement and development



### Stage 4 - Adulthood

- Reinvigorate the adult skills system, with a step change in funding and a focus on retraining workers
- Ensure employers' HR and management practices accurately assess, utilise and develop their workers' skills

This summary is based on NFER's [\*\*The Skills Imperative 2035: Creating a system of lifelong learning to provide the essential skills for tomorrow's workforce\*\*](#) report, written by Luke Bocock, Michael Scott and Jude Hillary, November 2025, and funded by the Nuffield Foundation. To read the report in full please go to the publications section of our website.



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