



LUND UNIVERSITY
Faculty of Social Sciences

Generic skills

The knowledge and skills generated through theoretical education in schools and universities can be classified in various ways. A distinction can be made between pure subject knowledge on the one hand and what is sometimes referred to as 'generic skills' on the other. The first of these is probably the most obvious. That one's knowledge of sociology, political science, psychology, geography and so forth improves by studying these subjects is self-evident. Nonetheless, students learn a great deal more than that through their studies. While acquiring subject knowledge, they also develop new intellectual abilities which depend less on the content of the discipline and more on its theoretical, rational and logical nature. For example, during the course of a study programme, students practise the art of thinking in an abstract and systematic way, solving problems independently, considering a phenomenon from different perspectives, analysing it using a thoroughly considered theory or method, reading and understanding texts with advanced content (in their first language or in a foreign language), searching for and evaluating information with the aim of answering a question and formulating and clarifying their arguments in speech and in writing.

These generic skills constitute intellectual abilities generated within all higher education, as has been increasingly highlighted since learning outcomes were introduced to the course syllabi in conjunction with the Bologna reform in 2007. That these skills are relatively independent of the subject content of the studies is consistent with the common scholarly basis of the different disciplines, into which students are socialised during the course of their studies. A fundamental and boundary-crossing ideological and educational consensus that distinguishes learning from religion and common sense underpins the diversity of disciplinary variety. Even though the subject specialisation plays a subordinate role, minor differences exist between the skills that various types of studies foster best. On natural science programmes, students train their

ability to make mathematical calculations to a higher degree than in the humanities and social sciences. For students in the latter subjects, exercises in the art of writing predominate in the study programme instead. In addition, since the plurality of theories and approaches is greater within humanities and social sciences, it can be assumed that students in these faculties practise viewing issues in perspective to a higher degree than students of engineering and science. Even if it is possible to detect a number of such differences, the similarities nevertheless dominate when it comes to the specific skills and abilities achieved through academic studies.

Over the years, Lund University has implemented a series of student barometer surveys and alumni questionnaires which provide increased insight into the importance of generic skills. For example, there is a significantly greater match between the abilities provided by education and the demands of professional life than people sometimes imagine. This consistency applies not only to professional training programmes but equally to academic programmes, above all due to the intellectual training in abilities such as problem-solving, logic, argumentation, methodology or written and oral presentation.

There are reasons to claim that generic skills are the most important benefit of education. Many people may well need subject knowledge in their professional lives, in particular if they are to work in a field directly related to the content of the study programme (e.g. as a social worker, upper secondary school teacher, psychologist, physician, engineer, etc.). However, *everyone* aspiring to qualified work needs generic skills. It is these skills above all which put people in a position to continue to learn independently, to keep abreast of the development of knowledge, to independently apply intellectual approaches and methods to new and previously unknown situations instead of slavishly following a manual (regardless of how complicated that manual might be). Moreover, in a changing professional life, subject knowledge often becomes obsolete before retirement, which is why, without the ability for intellectual self-development, one would soon risk losing employability in a world which demands a 'self-programming workforce', to borrow an expression from sociologist Manuel Castells.

That these abilities develop through studies is often already evident during the educational process. Innumerable students have experienced how their own

performance has gradually improved after a period in academia. Students often start off struggling to pass their examinations, but as the pieces of the puzzle gradually fall into place, their results continually improve. Once you have studied one subject, it becomes easier to tackle the next. This phenomenon is often referred to as 'cracking the academic code', a process that usually entails students understanding what is expected of them and succeeding in acquiring generic skills such as a functioning study technique and the type of reasoning and ability to formulate which are required to perform at a high level.

Even though experienced university lecturers are often fully aware of the intellectual effects of education, it is not unusual for others to misunderstand the point of academic training. Studies are then often seen as a one-way transfer of disciplinary content from the lecturer to the student, who is gradually filled with subject knowledge but otherwise not affected to any noteworthy extent. Such unexamined assumptions permeate several reports from Swedish business and industry on the relationship between education and work, in which the word *relevant* appears on every page ("relevant work", "relevant labour market", "relevant study programme" etc.). This relevance is assumed as a rule only to occur if the subject content of the study programme happens to coincide with the activities within a specific professional field, which is why these reports most often depict academia as not facing up to reality. The same delusion is aired in various student barometer surveys, where students assess links to research as inessential to their studies, since they have no intention of training to become researchers. And why should you be obliged to learn a load of theories and methods having little to do with the duties which await at work? Advertised positions for cultural theorists, queer theorists, phenomenologists, discourse analysts, symbolic interactionists, Marxists, post-modernists, post-structuralists or post-colonialists are certainly few and far between. The value of the study programmes is equally incomprehensible if one focuses blindly on subject content instead of placing the emphasis on students' learning. It is not the theories in themselves that are important, it is the intellectual abilities you develop by understanding them, learning to apply them independently and subsequently expressing one's newly acquired insights in writing and in speech. This process generates generic skills, allowing students to take charge of their own intellects and enabling them to 'self-programme' rather than merely following orders and instruction manuals.

Examples of generic skills for lifelong learning

Analytical skills

- Problem-solving: the ability to both formulate a problem and execute what is required to provide a solution
- Perspective: the ability to consider societal phenomena from various theoretical perspectives and reflect on the differences in understanding, interpretation and explanation which follow, as well as assessing the relevance of various perspectives

Communication skills

- Written presentation: the ability to communicate in writing in an effective manner in different formats and for various types of recipients
- Oral presentation: the ability to communicate orally in an effective manner in various types of presentation aimed at different audiences
- English: the ability to speak and write about abstract and societal phenomena in English

Information skills

- Information needs: the ability to realise that there is a need for a certain type of information to complete a task
- Information retrieval: the ability to effectively search for, select and process large amounts of information
- Information evaluation: the ability to critically evaluate the credibility and usability of various types of sources and material

Social and ethical skills

- Independence: the ability to carry out work duties autonomously
- Teamwork: the ability to cooperate in groups on the execution of work duties
- Ethical judgement: the ability to apply an ethical perspective both in day to day interpersonal contact and to various types of societal issues.