
EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS for Law Students

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Understanding employability skills

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INTRODUCTION

*In an uncertain job market, skills are your best security.*¹

The title of this book is *Employability Skills for Law Students*; but what do we actually mean by this? As a law student you will undoubtedly gain many practical, personal, interpersonal, and professional skills throughout your degree. The purpose of this book is to help you to:

- Understand the different type of skills employers are looking for when recruiting graduates
- Identify the skills which you will build by studying throughout your law degree, and participating in extra-curricular activities
- Take positive action to develop and add to your personal skills portfolio during your time at university
- Demonstrate effectively to employers the skills and attributes you possess, which will make you stand out from other graduates.

This chapter will begin by setting out our approach to the subject and then looking at the term 'employability skills' both in general and in the context of legal studies. After this, it will move on to explain just why these employability skills are so important and why you should take every opportunity to develop them throughout your time at university. Having set the scene, it will next give you a brief overview of some of the possible career pathways that can be pursued with a law degree before getting you to start thinking about the skills that you already have and spotting any gaps that might need to be addressed.

This chapter will be a valuable foundation for the rest of the book in helping you to understand what is meant by employability skills so that you can begin to understand why they are important and how you can develop them throughout your study of law. Remember that you are not just studying law to get a degree but to get a job and you need to be aware of what you should do to maximise your chances of getting the one you want. Overall, this chapter explains how this book will help you to emerge from your three or four years of study with the best chance of entering your chosen field of employment in an increasingly competitive market.

1. Donna Dunning, 'Top nine transferable skills' (2010) <<http://www.dunning.ca/blog/top-9-transferable-skills/>> accessed 19 July 2012.

Our approach

We have constructed this book around three key themes:

- **Maximising opportunities to develop skills.** Throughout this book you will find a variety of ways in which you will be able to develop your ‘transferable skills’. These are generic skills that are equally applicable in a whole range of careers, such as problem solving skills and IT skills. Throughout your law degree you will grow these skills which will be useful across a range of different jobs and industries, not just those which are directly related to law. In essence, these are the skills that make you attractive to employers, and you should take every opportunity to develop them during your time at university.
- **Demonstrating skills to obtain employment.** As well as developing your skills to enable you to seek out job opportunities and successfully negotiate the appointment process, you will also need to demonstrate those skills to potential employers. This book will cover the process from the initial application form or CV, through to the face-to-face assessment at interview or assessment centre, so that you come to the attention of suitable employers and maximise your chances of getting the job you want.
- **Applying skills in the workplace.** Finally this book will cover the development and application of the particular skills that will ensure you are able to carry out the requirements of your desired job in a proficient and professional way; such as advocacy skills for working at the Bar or legal research skills for employment in academia.

The book is designed for *all* law students, regardless of their chosen career path or the stage of their university life. It is never too late to start developing your employability skills. Indeed, you should be developing them continually throughout your working life as it is virtually certain that you will change jobs at some stage between graduation and retirement and the skills you demonstrate to get your first job will be supplemented by those that you acquire throughout your career. So, you should not panic if you are not in your first or second year—there are still practical steps that you can take in order to enhance your skills and thus your prospects of success in the world of work. Your skills development will be more effective if it is done in a systematic way which this book is here to support.

Defining ‘employability skills’

The term ‘employability skills’ means different things to different people. For some, it means everything that is involved in getting a job, for others, it is little more than interview technique or writing a good CV. For us, employability skills are those that make the link from learning to earning.

There are two formal definitions of employability skills that are widely adopted in higher education. The first is found in a report published jointly by the National Union of Students (NUS) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI):

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.²

2. Confederation of British Industry and National Union of Students, ‘Working towards your future: Making the most of your time in higher education’ (May 2011) 14 <http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI_NUS_Employability%20report_May%202011.pdf> accessed 19 July 2012.

This definition focuses on applying employability skills in the workplace. However, as previously explained, we think that employability skills go further than that, since they are also needed to obtain employment in the first place: you cannot be effective in a workplace without a job! Moreover, it does not focus specifically on graduate jobseekers. This second definition, from the Enhancing Student Employability Co-ordination Team funded by the Higher Education Funding Council for England includes these two missing aspects and is more in line with our view of employability skills:

A set of achievements—skills, understandings and personal attributes—that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy.³

Therefore, employability skills can be considered to be a range of skills and capabilities that virtually every employer is looking for in potential graduate recruits and an essential precondition for the effective development and use of other, more specialist or technical skills required for particular jobs. They are also a key underpin to your effectiveness at work.⁴ However, since every employer is seeking such skills, you need to take every opportunity to develop your employability skills so that you can maximise your prospects of success in an increasingly competitive job market by demonstrating those skills to employers. Exploring these themes of development and demonstration of skills is the primary purpose of this book.

Types of employability skills

Just as there is no set definition of employability skills, there is no definitive list of what types of skills are included within the term. However, there are several skills that are commonly listed as key to overall employability. These include:

- Self-management
- Team working
- Problem solving
- Application of information technology
- Communication
- Application of numeracy
- Business and customer awareness.

You will see from this list the general nature of these skills. They are good examples of *transferable skills* which can be equally well applied to non-law as well as legal careers. For example, a barrister and a human resources manager will both be required to understand the needs of their clients and a solicitor and a management consultant will both benefit from a methodical approach to problem solving.

3. M Yorke, 'Employability in higher education: what it is – what it is not.' (Learning and Employability Series One, ESECT and HEA, 2006) 8 <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/tla/employability/id116_employability_in_higher_education_336.pdf> accessed 19 July 2012.

4. Confederation of British Industry and National Union of Students, 'Working towards your future: Making the most of your time in higher education' (May 2011) 8, 11.

These transferable skills can be categorised under a number of broader headings:

- **Practical skills:** such as literacy and numeracy, problem solving and use of IT
- **Personal skills:** such as self-management, professional, and ethical behaviour and organisational skills
- **Interpersonal skills:** such as team working, written and verbal communication, customer service, and networking.

Although you may not yet realise it, not only will you have some of these skills already but you will also have the opportunity to develop them further during your studies as well as being able to add new skills to your portfolio.

Practical exercise: transferable skills

Think about the transferable skills listed in this section and how they might apply to a 'traditional' career in law as a barrister or solicitor.

By way of example to get you started, literacy and numeracy will be important to a barrister as they will need to draft accurate skeleton arguments and legal opinions that are precise and grammatically correct (literacy) and they will also need to submit invoices and deal with their accountant or the Inland Revenue (numeracy)!

- Compare your answers with those provided on the Online Resource Centre.

Practical legal skills

As well as these transferable skills, you will appreciate that there are, of course, specific practical legal skills that you will need in your portfolio, particularly if you are pursuing a career in one of the traditional legal professions. Therefore, we can add a fourth category to the list from the previous section:

- **Professional skills:** such as legal research, legal analysis, drafting, negotiation, and advocacy.

If you are planning a career in a part of the legal profession—or even considering it as a possibility—then it is obvious that you will need to develop the skills that will enable you to find, understand, and use the law in a work environment. However, if you do not intend to enter the legal profession but are studying law out of general interest as a good starting point for any number of non-law careers, these legal skills will still be useful to you in impressing potential employers. This is because these legal skills are simply more general skills that you will learn in a subject-specific context. To put it another way, you will learn how to conduct legal research as part of your law degree but if you take away the law focus then you have learned how to organise and carry out an effective research plan that enables you to identify and locate relevant information. This research proficiency can be deployed in any number of non-law settings. Similarly, advocacy and negotiation skills may seem to have a particular relevance to law but are really just different methods of oral communication that will be valuable to you irrespective of your career path. So whatever your career plans or your ultimate destination, legal skills will be an important part of your skills portfolio.

Skills acquired from legal study

The Higher Education Academy has produced a list of the skills that a graduate with an honours bachelor's degree in law will have. This is based on the benchmark for law produced by

the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) which describes the nature and characteristics of the law programme together with the attributes and capabilities that those with a law degree should have demonstrated.⁵ The QAA stipulates that, by the end of a law degree, students should be able to:

- Demonstrate an understanding of the principal features of the legal system(s) studied
- Apply knowledge to a situation of limited complexity so as to provide arguable conclusions for concrete actual or hypothetical problems
- Identify accurately issues that require researching
- Identify and retrieve up-to-date legal information using paper and electronic sources
- Use relevant primary and secondary legal sources
- Recognise and rank items and issues in terms of relevance and importance
- Bring together information and materials from a variety of different sources
- Synthesise doctrinal and policy issues in relation to a topic
- Judge critically the merits of particular arguments
- Present and make a reasoned choice between alternative solutions
- Act independently in planning and undertaking tasks
- Research independently in areas of law not previously studied starting from standard legal information sources
- Reflect on own learning and proactively seek and make use of feedback
- Use English (or, where appropriate, Welsh) efficiently in relation to legal matters
- Present knowledge or an argument in a way that is comprehensible to others and which is directed at their concerns
- Read and discuss legal materials, which are written in technical and complex language
- Use, present and evaluate information provided in numerical or statistical form
- Produce word-processed essays and text and present such work in an appropriate form
- Use the World Wide Web and email
- Work in groups as a participant who contributes effectively to the group's task.

This list might seem quite daunting but try not to worry: it is likely that you have some of these skills already and you should remember that this is the list of skills that the QAA requires that your university cultivates in its law students so you can guarantee that there will be opportunities to develop these skills in the course of your studies. However, just because the law degree is designed to give you these skills, it is your responsibility to take the opportunities which arise to cultivate and develop them. It is not enough simply to sit back and assume that you will be sufficiently skilled to make yourself stand out in the job market. Remember that the QAA says that each law student should be equipped with these skills. You will have to take action in order to demonstrate your enhanced skills capability and really differentiate yourself as positively as possible:

5. Higher Education Academy, 'Student employability profiles: law' (September 2006) <http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/documents/employability/studentemployability/student_employability_profiles_law.pdf> accessed 19 July 2012.

I have done a number of things to make myself stand out from any other candidates who are applying for the same job. I have looked online at larger law firms to see what they are looking for in future employees and applicants for work experience. These law firms are all looking for the same qualities in an employee such as research, problem solving, team work and communication skills. In my second year module 'Legal Research and Reasoning' I enhanced and developed these skills by participating in presentations and various workshops.

To stand out more I have worked hard to make my CV look more appealing to the interviewer by doing some voluntary work and gaining some work experience. I have organised a charity football event for Overgate Hospice and I was also a marshal for their charity Midnight Walk. Last summer I worked for an insolvency company, Spencer Hayes, gaining experience in insolvency law and made valuable contacts. These contacts have enabled me to form relationships with higher management in a top law firm with offices based in the UK and overseas. I am now hoping to be accepted onto one of their graduate schemes once I have completed my law degree. By being involved in multiple football and rugby teams as well as being a student ambassador, I can demonstrate team working and communication skills to prospective employers and also show my willingness to get involved and to work.

Matthew, University of Central Lancashire

Practical exercise: building a reflective employability skills portfolio—self-assessment against QAA benchmark

As you work through this book you will find various practical exercises that invite you to reflect, review, and plan your skills development and to gather evidence that you have done so. You might find it helpful at this stage to get somewhere to keep all your employability materials together. This might be as simple as a ring binder with a set of dividers or, if you prefer to keep things electronically, a folder on your computer with various subfolders within it.

The first activity is to review your own current proficiency against the QAA benchmark skills in law. You will find a downloadable template to help you with this on the Online Resource Centre. Think about each of the skills in turn and then rate yourself as follows:

- I am confident that I can do this to a high standard
- I can do this to some degree but am aware that I could do it better
- I cannot do this at all.

This exercise will give you an initial self-evaluation snapshot of your capability in each of the QAA skills. You should repeat this exercise periodically so that you can chart your progress and skills development over time.

So far, you have discovered many of the skills which go towards making up the overall employability skills portfolio, which is shown graphically in Figure 1.1.

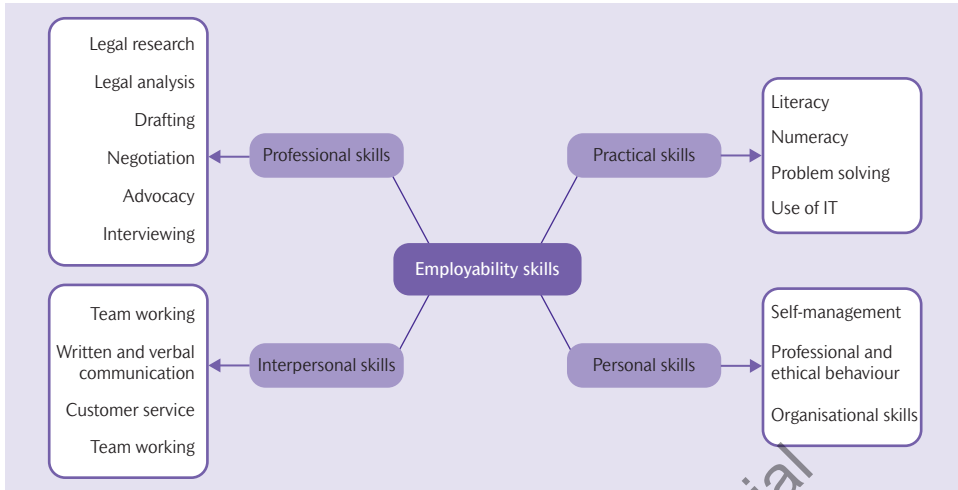


Figure 1.1 The employability skills portfolio

The importance of employability skills

While the importance of employability skills should be self-evident—they maximise your chances of getting the job you need to set you on your chosen career path desire—they are not always recognised as such by students as the following comment illustrates:

.....
 I've always been told to work hard and get good qualifications. Everyone has said that education opens doors, so the key to getting the job you want is to get as good a degree result as is humanly possible.

.....
 Sam, University of Northampton

However, as well the seemingly obvious benefit, there are broader reasons as to why employability skills are so valuable. First, as the CBI and NUS jointly recognise, they 'underpin success in working life'.⁶ As you have already seen, employability skills are not just useful for getting a foot on the career ladder. They are valuable, and should be developed, throughout your working life so that you are able to seek out new job opportunities as your career develops. They also enable you to 'adapt to an unknown future'.⁷ This is key. Not only should you be able to seek out new positions within your career, you should also be capable of taking your transferable skills and applying them equally well to a related as well as a non-related alternative:

.....
 6. Confederation of British Industry and National Union of Students, 'Working towards your future: Making the most of your time in higher education' (May 2011) 11 <http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI_NUS_Employability%20report_May%202011.pdf> accessed 19 July 2012.

7. <http://www.nus.org.uk/Global/CBI_NUS_Employability%20report_May%202011.pdf> accessed 19 July 2012.

My first degree was in Natural Sciences, specialising in physics. That taught me – amongst other things – how to take a methodical and scientific approach to problem solving which I then applied in my first career in software and technology development. Some years later, I studied law and found that the same approaches served me well in legal analysis and drafting. The management skills I picked up during my time in the technology industry also help when dealing with publishers and writing plans. So all the skills I've developed over the years in various settings are still useful today.

Dr Stefan Fafinski (author)

Development of employability skills is also crucial for two further reasons. First, employers consistently state that they are not always satisfied with the employability skills of graduates as Figure 1.2 illustrates.

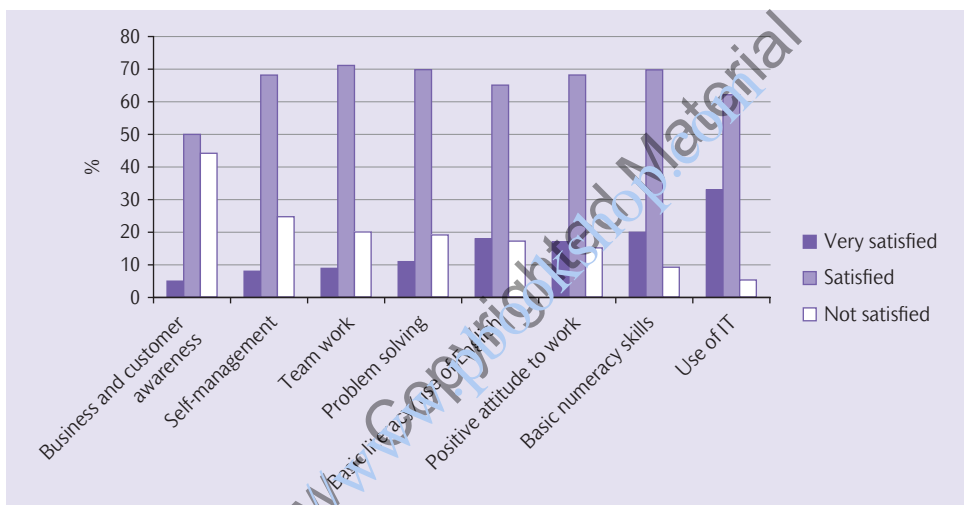


Figure 1.2 Employer satisfaction with graduate employability skills⁸

Similarly, 70% of employers said that they would like to see 'more effective development' of graduates' employability skills although they emphasise that it is up to students themselves to 'seize the opportunities available to strengthen their employability'.⁹

We need students who have more to offer than just academic brilliance. They need to be well-rounded individuals who will work well with others in our firm and, perhaps more importantly, with our clients. They should also be capable of understanding the world in which we work. So it's a package of skills that we're looking for.

Training partner, London

8. Confederation of British Industry and Education Development International, 'Building for growth: business priorities for education and skills—Education and skills survey 2011' (May 2011) 22 <http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1051530/cbi_edi_education__skills_survey_2011.pdf> accessed 19 July 2012.

9. <http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1051530/cbi_edi_education__skills_survey_2011.pdf> accessed 19 July 2012.

So, in summary, employability skills are important because:

- They help you to get the position you want
- They are highly desired by employers who want them to be developed further.

Doing a skills audit

The next chapter will help you to begin putting together a plan for developing the employability skills that you need for success. Before that, though, you should spend some time thinking about the skills that you currently have as well as identifying the ‘attainment gaps’¹⁰ that you need to address: that is, parts of your skills portfolio that are either missing or need further development.

Think about the activities that you currently do or have done in the past. These do not have to be academic. They could equally be sporting or musical, or some particular favourite hobby or pastime, or to do with paid or voluntary work that you have undertaken. Then think about what skill or skills you use to carry out each of these activities. For instance, if you have done voluntary work in a charity shop, you might think of the associated skills of timekeeping and customer service. If you have been captain of your netball team, you could consider your leadership as a skill. You could also ask other students, friends, or family what they see as your skills: these are more likely to be the transferable skills rather than specific professional skills. It can be quite illuminating to see yourself as others see you. Be honest with yourself: there is nothing to be gained if you rate yourself as expert at everything. By being realistic about your current skills capabilities, you will give yourself the best opportunity to engage actively with your skills development and take personal responsibility for your future employment prospects.

Practical exercise: doing a skills audit

You will find a downloadable template to help you begin your skills audit on the Online Resource Centre. The skills that are listed on the template are just a starting point and you should feel free to add others if you wish. Then, as before, rate yourself against each of the skills. Unlike the last exercise, which used a very broad rating system with three possible options against each of the QAA benchmark competencies, you should this time use a five point scale:

- 1—No current knowledge of the skill (no current competency)
- 2—Some awareness but not sufficiently competent to use the skill with confidence (partially competent)
- 3—Familiar with and able to use the skill (competent)
- 4—Proficient with the skill and able to demonstrate this to others (highly competent)
- 5—Expert in the skill (fully competent)

So that you get used to demonstrating evidence-based skills, you should also use the space in the template to describe the evidence that you have to support your self-assessment of each of the skills.

10. Confederation of British Industry and Education Development International, ‘Building for growth: business priorities for education and skills—Education and skills survey 2011’ (May 2011) 11 <http://www.cbi.org.uk/media/1051530/cbi_edi_education_skills_survey_2011.pdf> accessed 23 July 2012.

If you do not have evidence at this stage, then you should just write a brief note or comment: you will be adding evidence as you build your portfolio of skills over time. You will find an example of a completed audit in Table 1.1.

You may also wish to complete these with a friend from your course, or with someone that you trust and who knows you well. Alternatively, you could compare your answers with a friend's responses and discuss them together. Sometimes others may offer a more constructive insight into your own skills than you are honestly able to do for yourself.

As you work through the remaining chapters in this book, you will find suggestions on how you could develop these skills. Note the actions that you are going to take in the 'Action plan' column. Remember to set a target date against each item if you can.

You will be revisiting this audit as part of your future personal development planning, so make sure that you put the date on your audit and keep your answers in the 'Reviews' section of your portfolio.

You will find information on personal development planning (PDP) in Chapter 2.

Table 1.1 Example skills audit

Skill	Self-assessment rating (1–5)	Evidence	Action plan
Practical skills			
Written communication skills	4	I normally get good feedback on clarity, grammar etc in my assessed pieces of work.	
Numeracy	3	I studied maths at A-level and I'm pleased my phone has a calculator on it: but I can do mental arithmetic pretty well. I had to when the till broke at the Oxfam shop.	
Problem solving	4	When I did my Duke of Edinburgh expedition we had loads of practical problems along the way that we needed to solve.	
Use of IT	2	I'm ok with Word but still struggle with what to do if it doesn't quite do what I want it to. I can never format footnotes correctly.	
Personal skills			
Time management skills	3	I usually get my assignments in time but I do tend to leave things to the last minute.	

Skill	Self-assessment rating (1–5)	Evidence	Action plan
Professional and ethical behaviour	2	I have a basic understanding about things like client confidentiality but have never had to put them into practice.	
Organisational skills	3	I suppose I've got my own system for filing and finding things, but I'm not sure anyone else would be able to follow it easily.	
Flexibility	2	I often get really flustered if things don't go according to plan.	
Planning	3	I make lots of lists of things, but could probably be more effective to be honest.	
Decision-making	3	I guess I have to make decisions all the time, but I'm not convinced that I'm skilled at it.	
Interpersonal skills			
Team working	4	I love working with other people.	
Verbal communication	3	I don't mind speaking up in tutorials, but sometimes struggle to make myself clear.	
Customer service	4	I worked in the Oxfam shop in the holidays and much preferred being out at the front, rather than sifting through all the stuff out the back.	
Leadership		Again, my DofE helped me with leadership. It went along with team working.	
Professional skills			
Legal research	4	I think I am a good legal researcher. I can find and use case law, Acts and journal articles, but prefer the databases to using the law library.	
Legal problem solving	2	I am a bit unsure when I have to identify legal issues in a problem question—I worry that I go off on tangents...	

(Continued)

Table 1.1 *Continued*

Skill	Self-assessment rating (1–5)	Evidence	Action plan
Drafting	1	Don't even know what this means in practice!	
Negotiation	3	I had a go at the internal negotiation competition and found it really enjoyable. Would like to do it again next year.	
Advocacy	2	I had to do an assessed moot, but it didn't go very well.	
Knowledge of legal practice and procedure	1	I have never worked in any form of legal practice.	
Interviewing	1	We don't have the option of doing any client interviewing.	
Presentation skills	3	I don't mind doing presentations, so long as I'm prepared.	
Commercial awareness	1	I know that law students are supposed to know about this, but couldn't really explain what it means at the moment.	

Remember that this initial audit is the baseline for continued improvement: your skills will only improve from here. No one is perfect! If you have been realistic in your assessment of your own competencies then you will undoubtedly have identified areas that would benefit from some development. You should return to complete this exercise again periodically as part of your personal development planning. This will show you that you have developed your employability skills which will, in turn, build the confidence that you will need to demonstrate those skills effectively and to realise your potential in the competitive job market.

The chapters that follow will help you build your employability skills and then use them to pursue your chosen career. As you work through the book, you will learn how to understand, identify, build, focus, and demonstrate your employability skills. The chapters are grouped around these themes, as shown in Figure 1.3.

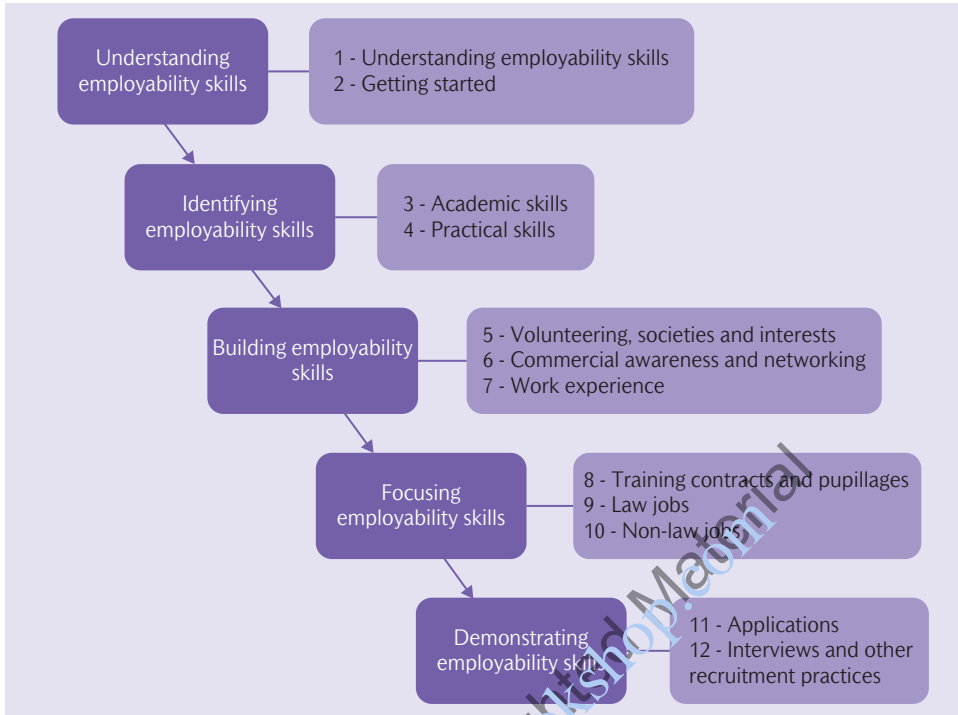


Figure 1.3 Structure of the book

A more detailed synopsis of each chapter is set out in Table 1.2.

Table 1.2 List of chapters

Chapter 2—Getting started	Helps you to build a plan for your skills development activities.
Chapter 3—Academic skills	Highlights the relationship between academic skills and employability skills so that you can maximise the value of the skills acquired through legal study for gaining employment.
Chapter 4—Practical legal skills	Reviews various practical legal activities that are available to you and demonstrates how you can develop both legal and transferable skills.
Chapter 5—Volunteering, societies, and interests	Considers the contribution that voluntary work, involvement in University societies, and your general spare time activities can make to your employability skills development.

(Continued)

Table 1.2 *Continued*

Chapter 6—Commercial awareness and networking	Focuses on two key development areas that you can use to make yourself stand out: awareness of the commercial world and building your personal network.
Chapter 7—Work experience	Covers all facets of work experience with particular emphasis on identifying placement opportunities and subsequently developing your skills through work experience.
Chapter 8—Training contracts and pupillages	Gives a comprehensive account of the steps involved in obtaining a training contract or pupillage with practical tips from former students and employers.
Chapter 9—Law jobs after graduation	Considers careers other than the traditional legal professions of barrister and solicitor, but which still offer some legal content.
Chapter 10—Non-law jobs	Looks at other career options that you can pursue with a law degree.
Chapter 11—Applications	Offers guidance on creating effective CVs and covering letters and completing application forms.
Chapter 12—Interviews and other recruitment practices	Outlines common approaches used in recruitment and offers a wide range of practical advice, including the importance of commercial awareness, that will help you perform to the best of your ability and highlight your employability skills.



WHERE NEXT?

You should by now have a clearer idea of what we mean by employability skills and why they are significant. Perhaps most importantly you should have an honest assessment of where you currently stand in terms of your own personal employability skills portfolio. The next step is to start planning not only for skills development but also for the practicalities of seeking employment including taking time to reflect on the sorts of career pathways you could explore with a law degree. This will be covered in Chapter 2.