



Closing the skills gap: Interconnecting Critical Skills



Prepared by
Dr Laura White, Dr Iro Konstantinou, Laura Longstaff

Table of Contents

Introduction	3
Data summary	4
Key findings	5
Interconnecting critical skills	7
Student perspectives	8
Teacher perspectives	10
Key recommendations	12
Resources for schools	14

Introduction



The transition at 18 for UK students moving from school to university, apprenticeships, or the workforce can be challenging for some young people. This is, in part, due to deficits in their skills and knowledge identified by research, schools, universities, employers, and students themselves. The consensus is that students' pathways through education and life before this transition have not given them sufficient opportunities to develop core skills around managing and knowing themselves, communication skills, and digital working. The core issue appears to be a mismatch between the skills, competencies and knowledge developed through traditional academic learning, and the skills required by universities, training providers and employers.

Our conclusion from the literature and policy review, is that students' skills gaps at post 16 are consistently seen in three areas. To be equipped for their post 16 pathways, students need stronger intrapersonal skills, the ability to better manage, navigate and know themselves. This would include time management, emotional self-awareness, and goal setting. Students also need stronger interpersonal skills for post 16, improved abilities to manage, navigate and know others, for example listening and communication skills, leadership skills, and conflict resolution skills. Students also need stronger digital skills, an improved ability to manage, navigate and know in the digital world, including strong digital IT skills, digital communication skills, and digital literacy skills.

Our study gathers the perspectives of students in the critical school years 9, 10 and 11 (ages 13-16). What do young people in schools know, identify, and imagine about the skills they will need for their post 16 pathways? What do they think is working well, and what changes would they like to see? Alongside the students' perspectives this study also gathers and analyses the perspectives of their teachers. In education settings, it is often teachers who are on the frontline of students' skills development, whether in timetabled lessons, personal development programmes, or through pastoral or extra-curricular work. What do teachers suggest is working well with this age and stage, and what do they think could be improved? What opportunities and challenges do they perceive? Taking student and teacher perspectives together, what can we understand better which might inform practice and policy in this area?

Data summary



767 Students

58 Teachers

11 Schools

58% teacher respondents are directly responsible for skills development

92% of teacher respondents' answer that their role beyond classroom teaching supports skills development.

10% student respondents SEND

12% student respondents EAL

19% student respondents No parental HE

10% student respondents FSM



Key findings



- ① Many opportunities for meaningful skill development exist in schools. However, teachers and students often lack awareness of how skills are developed, their real-life applications, and their broader significance. This leads to fragmented teaching and missed opportunities for meaningful skills development.
- ② PHSE curriculum reform since 2020 has reduced the time available in these lessons for broader skills development. This may result in PHSE lessons being less focussed on the application and articulation of skills in real-world contexts.
- ③ Computing and ICT lessons play an important role in building digital skills. Unequal access to these creates a digital divide among students and schools, putting those with limited access at risk of falling behind in essential digital competencies.
- ④ The assumption that young people are 'digital natives' leads to an overestimation of their digital skills, resulting in minimal development between Year 9 and Year 11, as simply using digital devices does not equate to essential digital competencies.
- ⑤ Many teachers feel confident in teaching interpersonal and intrapersonal skills, but report lower confidence and proficiency in their own digital skills. Digital skills are often narrowly defined as basic tasks like writing reports or online searches, overlooking essential aspects of digital literacy such as critical thinking, online safety, and responsible engagement.

Key findings



- ① The strong focus on academic achievement and exam success often overshadows the development of skills. As a result, students may underestimate the value of skill-building processes. Given the importance of skills for students' wellbeing and post 16 pathways, this raises questions about how we prioritise skill development in the curriculum and beyond.
- ② Skills development extends beyond schools, with family, society, and digital spaces playing a crucial role. This raises questions about the role of families in education and schools' understanding of students' digital environments.
- ③ Students from different backgrounds, including students who receive Free School Meals, who have English as an Additional Language, and SEND students, may experience skills development differently, with some struggling to identify necessary skills despite perceived progress.
- ④ Students from disadvantaged backgrounds may exhibit a 'confidence gap' in articulating and trusting their skillset, impacting their school experience and future employment prospects. This disparity potentially hinders these students' opportunities and contributes to the socioeconomic wage gap later in life.

Interconnecting critical skills

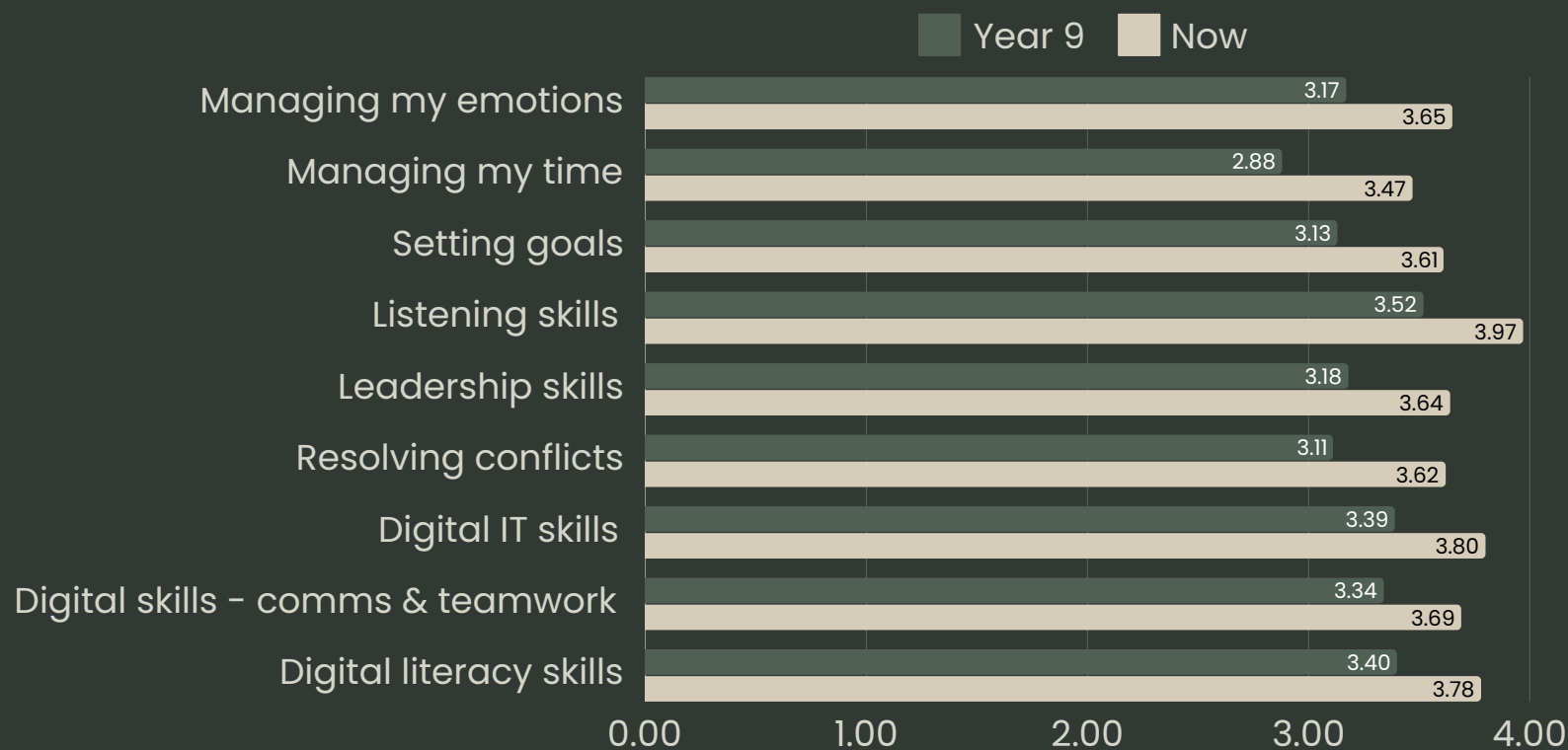


The argument that students need to develop both interpersonal and intrapersonal skills is not a new one. To be equipped for their post-16 pathways, students require opportunities and experiences that strengthen their ability to understand, manage, and navigate themselves and others. However, in a digital era where AI is omnipresent and set to reshape both work and education in the near future, we propose that digital skills must be developed in interconnection with interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Our study outlines two key principles for skill development that will help unlock students' potential:

- 1. Teach skills in an interconnected way, providing opportunities that resemble real-life experiences.** Learning should integrate interpersonal, intrapersonal, and digital skills rather than treating them as separate competencies. For example, project-based learning that involves collaboration across digital platforms can mirror modern workplace dynamics, helping students develop teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills in both physical and virtual environments.
- 2. Develop the ability to manage themselves and others in both real life and digital spaces.** As students engage with digital platforms for education, communication, and professional networking, they must learn how to navigate online interactions effectively. For instance, teaching digital leadership through activities such as moderating online discussions or managing virtual group projects can enhance their ability to regulate emotions, maintain professionalism, and foster productive relationships in digital spaces.

Student perspectives



- ① We asked students to rank themselves between 0 and 5 on a range of skills, and compare themselves at the beginning of Year 9 to now. The majority of our student responses come from Year 11, representing two years of skills development.
- ② Students rate their listening skills highest against all other skills sets at the start of Year 9.
- ③ Students rate their ability to manage time lower than all the other skills sets at the start of Year 9.
- ④ Although 'managing my time' remains the lowest ranked skill at Year 11 (now), it has seen the greatest increase over time (+0.59), followed by conflict resolution (+0.51).

Student perspectives



- ① On average, students feel that their intrapersonal skills develop most strongly (+0.52) through this phase of their education. Of these, students feel that their Time Management skills (+0.59) develop more strongly than any other skill we asked them to rate.
- ② Interpersonal skills also show an, on average, perceived increase of 0.47 across the three aspects we explored in the survey. Conflict Resolution shows the most development (+0.51) which again comes from a lower starting point (3.11/5) than the other interpersonal skills at the start of Year 9.
- ③ On average students perceive that their digital skills develop much less than their Inter- and intrapersonal skills, with an average +0.38 increase across three areas we investigated. On the whole, students' self-assessment is higher initially (3.38/5) and they perceive only a small development on these skills in this period.
- ④ Overall, FSM students in Year 9 rate themselves with a lower rating than their non-FSM peers across all skills. This gap is still present 'now' although the difference is reduced from that in Year 9.
- ⑤ SEND students show significantly greater improvement in "Managing My Time" compared to not SEND. This could suggest that strategies to help with organisation and time management are particularly beneficial for these students, and that students are aware of these areas as a deficit when beginning Year 9. In contrast, SEND students see less change in their digital skills acquisition during their school career.
- ⑥ Although their start point is lower, students who are eligible for FSM make greater improvements across all skills sets. This is not the same for students with SEND, EAL or those with parents who attended university.
- ⑦ Despite making progress on all skills, few students rate themselves at 5 for their current skill level. This shows that students recognise the need for further development on all skill areas at the end of this educational phase.

Teacher perspectives



- We asked teachers to rate students in their school on the same scale (0-5) across the same array of skills. Teachers were asked to consider students in their school 'on average' at the beginning of Year 9 and the end of Year 11.
- Overall, teachers perceive a greater increase in skills and competencies in their students, across the board, than the students themselves do. Average increase of +0.75 compared to students +0.46. Teachers however, view their students' overall start point as lower across all skills.
- Teachers view students' ability to resolve conflicts as their lowest scoring skill set at the start of Year 9.
- Teachers view students digital skills for communications & teamwork as their most well developed skill set at the start of Year 9.

Teacher perspectives



- ① On average teachers think that students begin Year 9 with relatively stronger digital skills, with interpersonal and intrapersonal skills starting from a slightly lower point.
- ② Despite the growth across all areas, students are still felt to need skills development in Year 11 with none of the teachers rating students at a 5 on any skill at any point.
- ③ The largest gains were thought to be on intrapersonal skills, in particular "Managing Emotions," "Managing Time," and "Setting Goals," with moderate increases of about 0.9 points.
- ④ Interpersonal skills, including "Listening," "Leadership Skills," and "Resolving Conflicts," also demonstrated some improvement, though to a slightly lesser extent.
- ⑤ There is noticeably less development in their digital skills, in particular with digital IT skills seeing almost no development in these three school years.
- ⑥ Overall, teachers see students as still being in need of development on all skill areas at the end of this educational phase. Despite overall progress on all skills, teachers still see that students' skills for the future are in need of more development for them to be ready for their post-16 pathways.

Key recommendations



- 1** Schools should conduct a comprehensive curriculum review to ensure that key skills are consistently taught, practised, and applied progressively throughout secondary education.
- 2** Schools should incorporate direct teaching of skills, alongside deliberate practice, and application. Experiential learning opportunities, such as project-based activities, role-playing, and real-world problem-solving exercises are particularly valuable in enabling students to apply their skills in practical contexts, making their learning more meaningful and effective.
- 3** Schools should establish a structured assessment system for digital skills, akin to the regular evaluation of academic abilities. Relying on assumptions about students' digital proficiency is inadequate; regular assessments will help identify gaps, track progress, and ensure students acquire the essential digital competencies needed for both academic and real-world success.
- 4** Schools should implement a comprehensive digital skills and digital literacy framework that encompasses essential IT skills, critical evaluation of online content, ethical AI usage, cybersecurity awareness, and responsible social media engagement.
- 5** Schools should provide ongoing professional development in digital skills and literacy for teachers, ensuring they stay updated on emerging technologies and digital best practices.

Key recommendations



6

Schools should implement strategies to support students with limited access to digital resources, such as providing alternative learning methods, offering digital literacy and digital skills workshops, and creating opportunities for hands-on practice with technology.

7

The government must ensure that all schools have the necessary digital infrastructure, including access to up-to-date technology, reliable internet connections, and funding for digital literacy programmes. Targeted support should be provided to underfunded schools to bridge the digital gap and promote equal learning opportunities for all students.

8

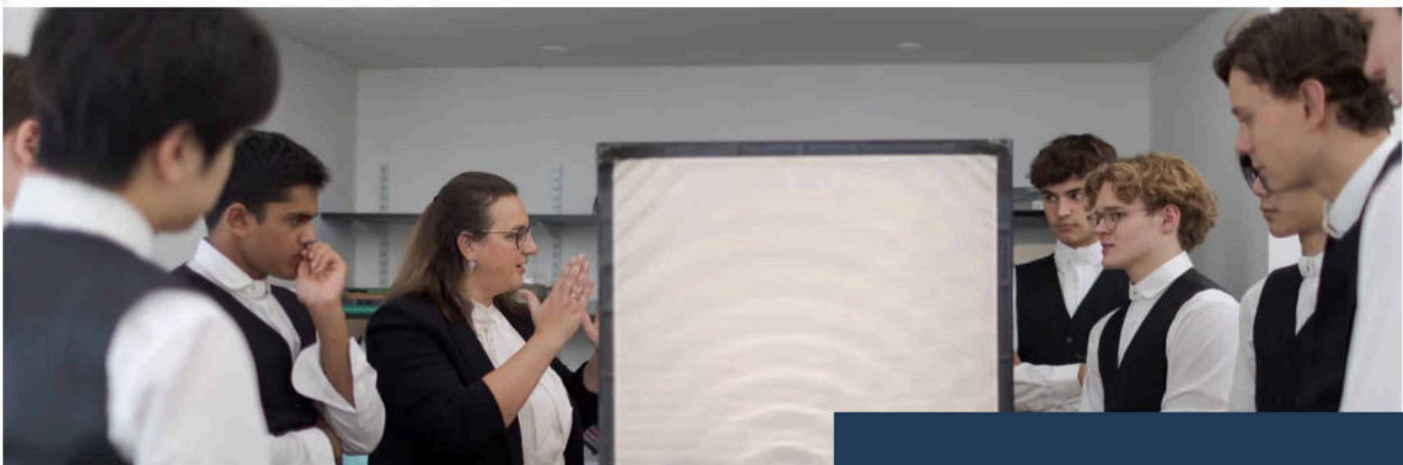
Schools should integrate skills development more visibly into the curriculum by linking it to real-world applications, career readiness, and personal growth. Schools should also communicate the importance of skills more effectively and directly, ensuring students understand what they are learning and its relevance to their future success and wellbeing.

9

Schools should actively involve families in skills development through workshops, parent engagement initiatives, and open communication about how skills are fostered both at home and in school.

10

Schools should conduct targeted research involving both teachers and students to gain a deeper understanding of disparities in skills development related to student disadvantage. They should then implement tailored interventions with a particular focus on students in receipt of Free School Meals.



Resources for schools

Survey Templates

[Template for the Student Survey in Microsoft Forms](#)

[Template for Teacher Survey in Microsoft Forms](#)

Curriculum Review Tools

[Template for Curriculum Review Briefing for Teachers](#)

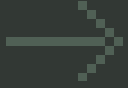
[Template for Curriculum Review](#)

Key Reading

[Sutton Trust - Life Lessons](#)


[NFER- The Skills Imperative 2035](#)

[Edge Foundation - Skills Shortages Bulletins](#)



Thank you!

 CIRL, Tony Little Centre, Eton College

 +44 1753 370100

 CIRL@etoncollege.org.uk

 cirl.etoncollege.com