



Developing young people's aspirations

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Introduction

Every year, Barclays LifeSkills commissions independent research which looks at how educators around the country work with their students and learners to help them prepare for the world of work and the role that the programme resources play within that.

Today, we want to share some of the findings and examples of effective practice that emerged from looking at feedback and experiences of educators and students from mainstream and special schools and colleges across the country.



Challenges around young people's aspirations

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Over years of our research for Barclays LifeSkills, 'aspirations' is the word that comes up again and again as something that can be a barrier to young people's success or a key to unlocking it.

Issues around aspirations can be manifested in a variety of ways. 'The main challenge for us is student aspirations' is a phrase that can be attributed to so many teachers and school leaders, regardless of where they are in the country.

In disadvantaged communities in particular, students' aspirations are often limited not only because they might lack self-belief and motivation to pursue a particular career path, but also because they're often not provided with an awareness of the range and variety of careers, in order to be able to find and focus on something that interests them.

"We're constantly trying to improve the aspirations of our young people, and to break the cycle of possibly third-generation worklessness within families and to encourage the parents of the children as well to support their children in education and wanting to do better."



Challenges around young people's aspirations

Challenges around young people's aspirations

In other schools and settings it is not so much low aspirations that concern teachers and leaders. Young people's aspirations might be high but unrealistic and without a clear plan to achieving them. Some of the extreme examples of this might be young people dreaming to become premier league footballers (because their lifestyle looks attractive) whilst not even playing football regularly themselves.

Elsewhere, young people choose career paths without considering whether they are right for them. Instead, their choices might be driven by prospective salaries, their peers' or families' preferences.

This can be further exacerbated by many societal stereotypes, dictating to young people which jobs are good and which are not. Some of these stereotypes had been challenged during the Covid-19 pandemic but schools and other education settings are saying that there is still a long journey to go if all jobs are to be respected and valued.



Challenges around young people's aspirations

"Although we do have a duty to make children aware of what jobs are available, and raise their aspirations, I think that we also can't belittle or think poorly of the children that don't have what we would consider high aspirations. It's almost taking away what they want to be, and what they want to do when they're older, and making sure that wherever they go in the future that they feel comfortable when they get there.

I think we need to almost take a step back and say actually, does it matter if the children don't follow that route? Probably not, as long as they're happy, and comfortable, and have the skills to cope with whatever choice they make."

Undefined or poorly defined aspirations can lead to a wide range of short and long term issues for young people. These might include becoming disengaged at school because they cannot see the relevance of their studies, becoming disillusioned and feeling like they failed and a greater likelihood of becoming NEET after leaving school.

There is no perfect solution, but years of LifeSkills research and evaluation work have enabled us to identify some of the ways in which students' aspirations can be improved and refined.



Refining and improving student aspirations

Refining and improving student aspirations

We noticed that there are many similarities in how teachers and other educators successfully tackle the challenge of student aspirations.

Improving aspirations cannot happen in an instant. Educators across a wide variety of settings all tell us that their work on improving their students' aspirations takes time and requires **multiple inputs**. These are:

Aspiration	Information
Developing the whole person	This might include activities aiming to help young people develop their confidence and self-esteem or looking at personal finances and independent living, and why these are important when making career choices
Identifying strengths, skills and values Commonly, work on aspirations starts here	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people realise that they already have some of the skills and attributes needed for the world of work which leads to a more positive view of their future • It helps them identify career aspirations that are right for them rather than being influenced by stereotypes or people around them • Finally, when there is a focus on transferable skills, young people not only develop better awareness about how to be successful in their chosen career path, they also become more adaptable in their plans. This gives them a short-term advantage but also leaves them ready for long-term changes to the world of work

Refining and improving student aspirations

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Commonly, work on aspirations starts with helping young people figure out their **strengths, skills and values**.

1. It helps improve young people's self-esteem, and helps them develop a more positive view of their future which is so important for their wellbeing. They realise that they already have some of the skills and attributes that the world of work needs, that they have something of value to offer
2. It means that their career aspirations are right for them, rather than being influenced by stereotypes or people around them
3. Where there is focus on transferable skills, young people not only develop better awareness about how to be successful in their chosen career path, they also become more adaptable in their career plans. This gives them a short-term advantage (if plan a does not work out, go for a plan b), but also leaves them ready for long-term changes to the world of work. Or, as many educators describe it 'we need to prepare our students for the jobs of tomorrow, many of which don't even exist today'



Refining and improving student aspirations

Refining and improving student aspirations

Focusing on transferable skills and young people's own strengths as part of helping them refine their aspirations **impacts on their motivation and attitude** to learning too. In our research, we came across several examples of that:

- One student decided he wanted to be a plumber and because of that was dismissive of learning at school. When he realised that he wanted to own a plumbing business which required more than just 'learning the trade', he began to see the value in Maths and English he was taught at school
- Another student initially described himself as 'there is nothing good about me'. Unsurprisingly, his behaviour at school and his grades across all subjects were a major concern for his teachers. Once he realised that he had something to offer and there were a couple of career paths that he was interested in, he was ready to accept the support on offer, including asking his teachers what he could do to catch up and do better in lessons
- **Identifying what opportunities exist.** As jobs of the future evolve to fit a changing world, helping young people understand emerging skills that employers will look for will encourage greater exploration and understanding of the landscape



Primary

Educator: A class teacher and Key Stage 2 lead as well as the newly appointed Careers Lead for the school.

"When inspecting schools, Ofsted] ask that every curriculum area has an intent and a purpose, and how we're then putting that across to the children. By linking it to careers and the children's future, it's giving that straight away. 'We are learning about money in maths because when you grow up, you will have to make some decisions that involve money'. It's a really important thing for us in terms of giving what we're teaching the children a real life purpose, and engaging them in that way. We're also keen on developing the whole child in terms of their personal and social skills, developing how the children think and feel about themselves and how they think and feel about other people in the wider world.

Linking transferable skills and aspirations is so important because for us it doesn't really matter what they go on to do. We don't know what the careers are even going to be in 15 to 20 years. I think for us it's more about developing skills, and qualities, and the children's personal and social skills, rather than saying, 'These are the jobs that are available. You need to pick one of these now, and that's what you're going to do.'



Primary

This primary school uses some of the approaches that are more common to secondary schools' careers provision – local companies coming in and giving talks for pupils delivered by local employers, workplace visits and careers workshops delivered by the local learning trust. In addition, every year the school holds a careers week at the end of May across all age groups, to pull together their careers and skills development work and provide a clear focus for it.

This connected learning about jobs and careers, transferable and money skills (for older children) made the entire week progressive across year groups. The school used LifeSkills resources when designing activities to help pupils to get more out of the week.

"Using the LifeSkills resources gave us a much more focused plan to the week rather than what we've had previously of just go away and do it for yourself, which is brilliant."



How do you work on developing your pupils' aspirations?

"I think there's quite a lot of research and documents out there at the minute about aspirations, and actually even in deprived areas where we're in, it isn't that the children lack aspirations. Every child that we speak to has a dream of doing something. It's more that they can't see how to get from where they are now to where they want to be because of the situation they're in."

They might not have that advice from parents if their parents don't work they can't see how they would then get into work. At the end of our Careers Week, all of the children are going to create a roadmap of what they think they would like to do at the moment, and what that would look like."



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

In **reception**, the teacher began by showing a slide to the class with several photos of people working (e.g. scientist, vet, plumber, police). She asked the class to think of a job and what skills you'd need to do that job. The children were then introduced to their carousel of activities for the afternoon e.g. objects on a table for them to draw ("this is what an artist would do") and moving tyres and skipping ropes which was linked to being a fitness instructor.

As the children worked on their activities, the teacher prompted them with questions such as, "What kind of jobs could you do if you're good at obstacle courses?", "What skills does Spiderman need to do his job?", "Who would need to be good at writing?"



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

The **year 2** class started their grammar and spelling lesson by having to create sentences from pictures relating to careers that were shown on their whiteboard. They then used the Barclays LifeSkills [Job board tool](#) to explore the skills needed for some of the jobs and the students had to think about whether they felt they were suited to them.

A good range of jobs were discussed by the class i.e. receptionist, chef, doctor, plumber. They were then directed to the [Wheel of Strengths](#), asked to think about what they are good at and what they enjoy. They were told it would give them some career suggestions but that they do not have to stick to these if they do not feel right. They went through the process of picking interests, personality traits and discussed the jobs it suggested to them as a class.



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

Money skills add an important dimension to thinking about jobs and careers for older **(KS2) children** in the school.

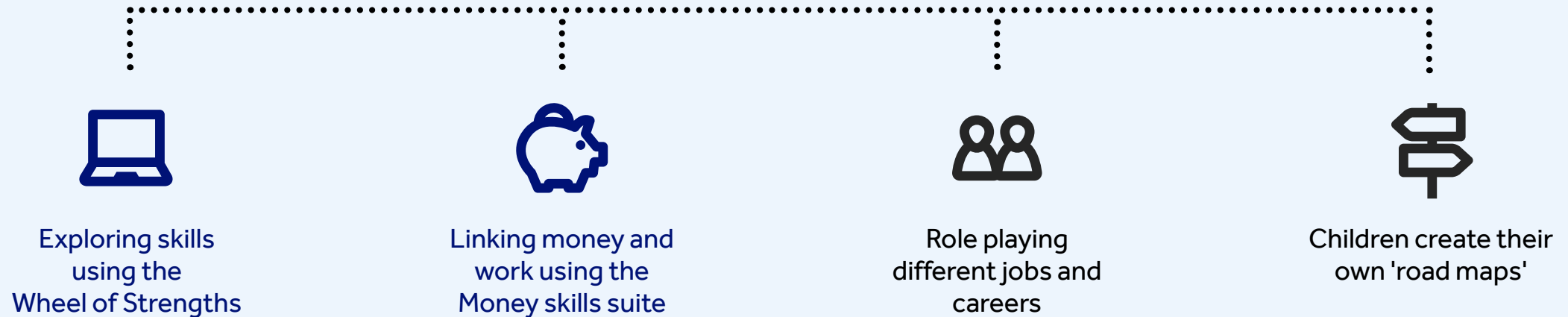
"The Year 5 and 6 children, so 9, 10, 11-year-olds, are thinking about the other side of it and linking it to work. Almost giving an importance of why we work. We work to earn money so that we can do X, Y, and Z.

Thinking about different jobs, and what salaries would be associated to different jobs. What that then looks like in the real world, which for some of them will be the first time."



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

The primary educator uses the following programme of study to support their learners with skills and careers conversations.



Feeling inspired?

Try [these resources](#) in your school.

Secondary (mainstream)

Educator: Head of Personal Development and Careers Leader, working with students in Years 7-11.

"One of our biggest challenges is that our students have limited understanding of what's possible, what's out there and no personal examples of success to draw on."

We help our students to discover what they LOVE about life, their interests and passions, [we start that] in year 7. Throughout their time with us we talk about the need to keep options open for future choices and how transferable skills are becoming more and more important. We look at these in their everyday life and they evidence how that looks in their day to day. We also emphasise that these are also employability skills."



How do you work on developing your pupils' aspirations?

The school has a progressive programme of study, moving from skills and aspirations in Year 7, through to looking at different jobs and pathways in Year 8, planning for the future and personal finance skills in year 9 and specific career management and preparing for next steps (e.g. personal statement, CVs, interviews) in Years 10 and 11.

Barclays LifeSkills are used across KS3 and 4, alongside other resources. LifeSkills resources are used in a six-week-long unit of study, each focusing on a topic in depth, e.g. budgeting, CV writing, growth mindset etc.



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

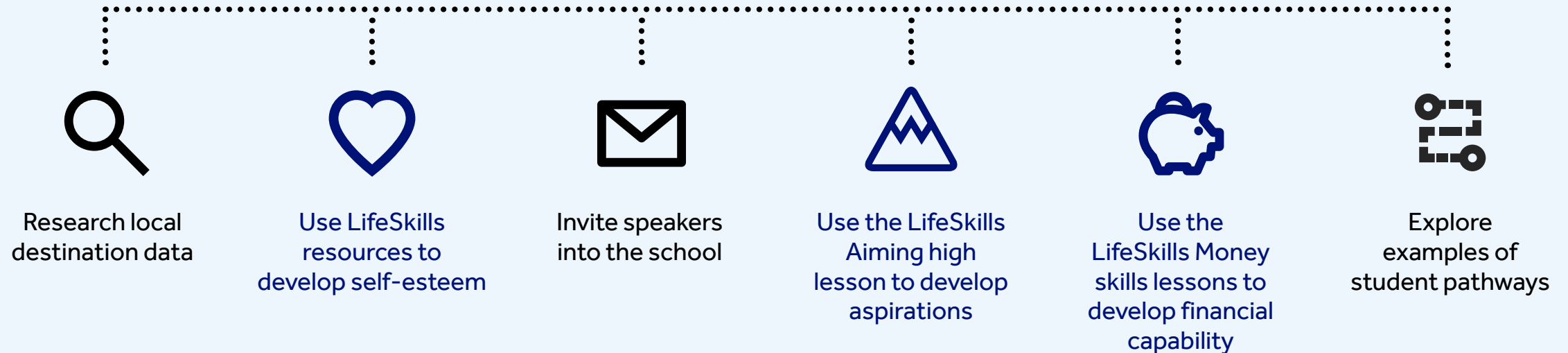
"Early on, I look at the data locally for the surrounding area, including destination data. I start my work with students by exploring the topics using the search tool and begin with self-esteem. After students have learnt about valuing self (I link this to the school's values) I go onto teaching how having high aspirations can increase their horizons and options. I invite guest speakers in for the gaps identified. For example, if no one historically has been to uni in their family, arrange a uni visit to school and follow up with a visit to the uni. I have examples of pathways that students can take to achieve their goals and of celebrities, especially entrepreneurs, who have succeeded by overcoming challenges. I also try to arrange a Q&A with a student (real life) who had low aspirations but is now aiming high because of a shift in attitude/opportunity.

I support this with workshops about aiming high and financial skills, for example being self-sufficient as a university student as funding is available, where to access it. All these topics are linked but often students are put off because of what parents may say or have known. It's about correcting misconceptions."



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

The secondary educator uses the following programme of study to support their learners with skills and careers conversations.



Feeling inspired?

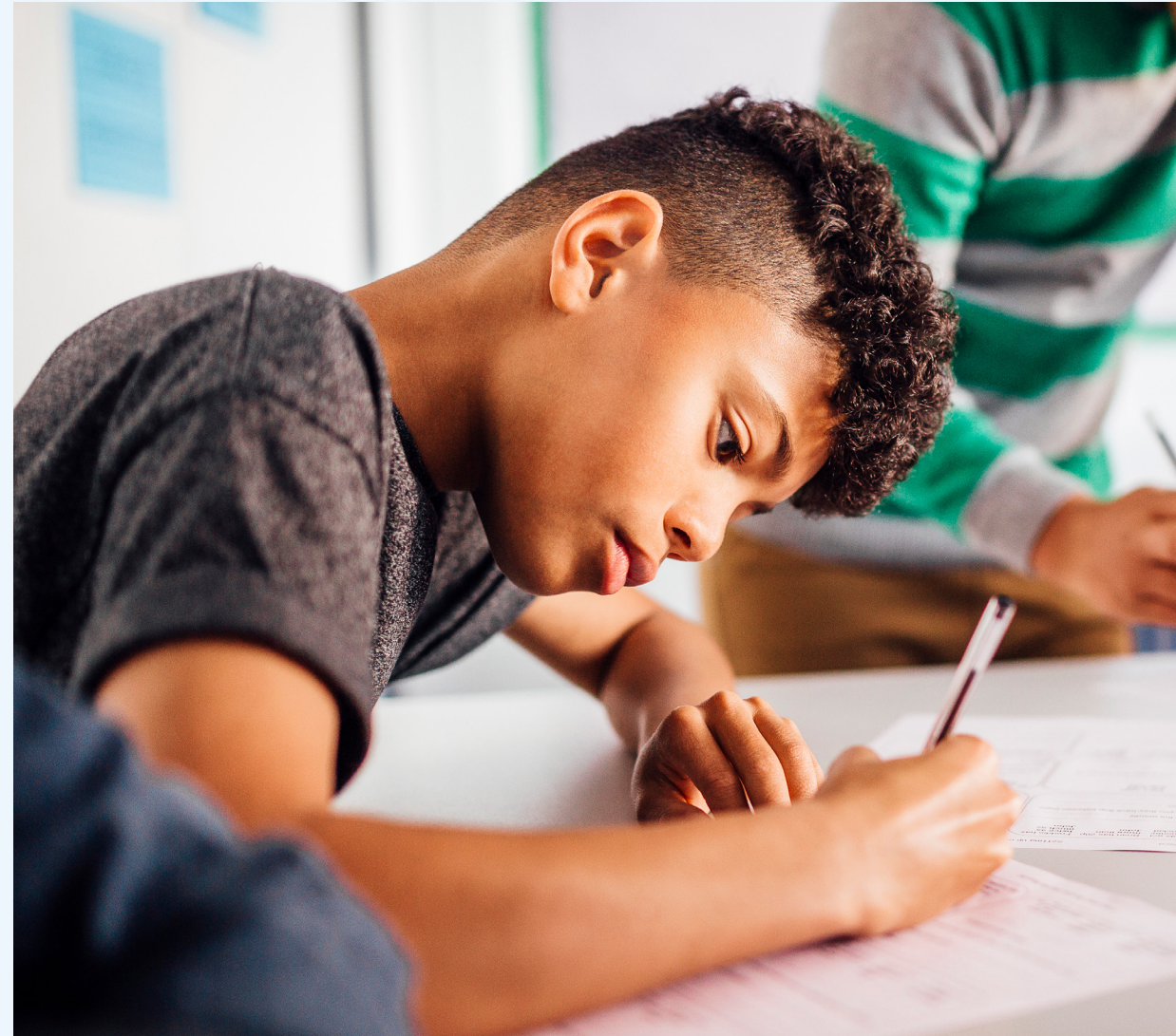
Try [these resources](#) in your school.

Secondary (non-mainstream) – pupil referral unit

Educator: Deputy Headteacher, responsible for Behaviour, Student Needs, Attendance, Outreach, and Careers.

The school looks after students who are 11-16. Whilst some of them are permanently excluded, many Key Stage 3 students are referred to the school for six to twelve weeks at a time; and the school's role is to find ways to support them to be successful in mainstream. The school also supports students with EHCP and those who have anxieties or medical issues which makes attending a mainstream very difficult. Lastly, they have four places for students with EHCP's which we hold open for Year 11's.

Key Stage 4 (Year 10 and Year 11 students) receive the most input in relation to Careers and employment, because they are the most permanent group of students within the school. The school uses Barclays LifeSkills as a base for all its work on careers and supporting students' personal development.



How do you work on developing your students' aspirations?

"Lots of our students come from family backgrounds where people do practical jobs. Our students can be very closed off to other opportunities of other career paths. Lots of the boys want to learn a trade and the girls want to do Hair & Beauty or Childcare. Getting the students to understand that there is more out there and lots of different ways to earn a living can be hard."

"All students from Year 7 through to Year 11 use some of the LifeSkills resources, but it is particularly visible in Year 10 and 11. In Year 10 we start out with the Wheel of Strengths which enables us to get a discussion going about work. We have used all the resources about CV's, cover letter writing. We have also found the Interview units very good especially the interactive interviews. Anything which is online and interactive the students really make a connection with. They are less likely to look at tables or paragraphs of writing. Videos are also very helpful as often they are quite short and stick to the point so the student can take the key information from them easily."



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

The school also used LifeSkills money resources, linking personal finance skills with students' career aspirations and interests.

"One Year 11 female student found it very difficult to engage with other students socially and was often on her own during breaks, so she started using Barclays LifeSkills resources. She completed lots of the work around money and finance and was able to verbalise her opinions in class. Her CV and covering letter were the best in the year group but the best thing was that through using the interview tools she was able to complete her mock interview. Her success in that Interview coupled with the CV then led to a visit to a nursery school. Our staff supported her in a visit and then subsequent interview for a work experience placement which she gained."



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

"We work with a lot of students with low aspirations and find a good starting point is the Wheel of Strengths activity to get a conversation going. Sometimes they find a job they didn't realise they would be a good fit for but even if none of the jobs comes up that they like the look of we can start to rule out certain areas. We also use up to date Labour Market Index which show the students which jobs are in need now and which might be needed in the future. We then go back to the LifeSkills resources and plan out which activities might be useful for the student to get into that industry. Sometimes it's looking at videos of certain types of jobs. For others it's looking at the CV and covering letter work and linking that into real job advertisements.

We are very proud of the fact that the work we have done with Barclays LifeSkills has got us to the point where we can have mock interviews for our Year 11 students. Last year due to the pandemic this had to happen virtually, which suited a lot of the employers. This year we have been able to do both and it has been brilliant getting employers on to the school site and face to face with our students. The real world input the employers can give to the students helps to reinforce the messages from our Careers lessons."



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

The secondary educator uses the following programme of study to support their learners with skills and careers conversations.



Start with
the LifeSkills
Wheel of Strengths



Explore local labour
market information



Explore how
students can
start setting
goals



Explore careers
lessons to work on
CVs, cover letters
and social media
presence



Take part in mock
interviews with
employers

Feeling inspired?

Try [these resources](#) in your school.

Further education college

Educator: FE teacher (Construction skills curriculum area); also responsible for the development of a tutorial programme for students from age 16 through to adulthood (all ages) and working from pre-entry to level 5.

"Most of my students (for my teaching role) did not do well at GCSE, for a range of reasons. They need support to recognise their strengths and develop soft skills. Many have had a poor experience of education and feel that they are unable to do this."



How do you work on developing your students' aspirations?

This educator uses Barclays LifeSkills resources along with their own to prepare students for looking for employment, or to applying for future courses and apprenticeships. They adapt the resources to link more to the vocational courses they are on, highlighting skills that they are developing and help them transfer these skills to the part-time jobs they are applying for. They also create community project opportunities to help the learners as individuals, but also develop their soft skills and then they have experiences to add their CVs.

"We are proud of being able to help our students identify their skills and qualities, when they felt that they had none. Helping them to create positive CVs focusing on what they were working towards now, rather than the little achievement they had previously. Helping them identify positive experiences to discuss at interview. Many have been successful in attaining part time work or apprenticeships."



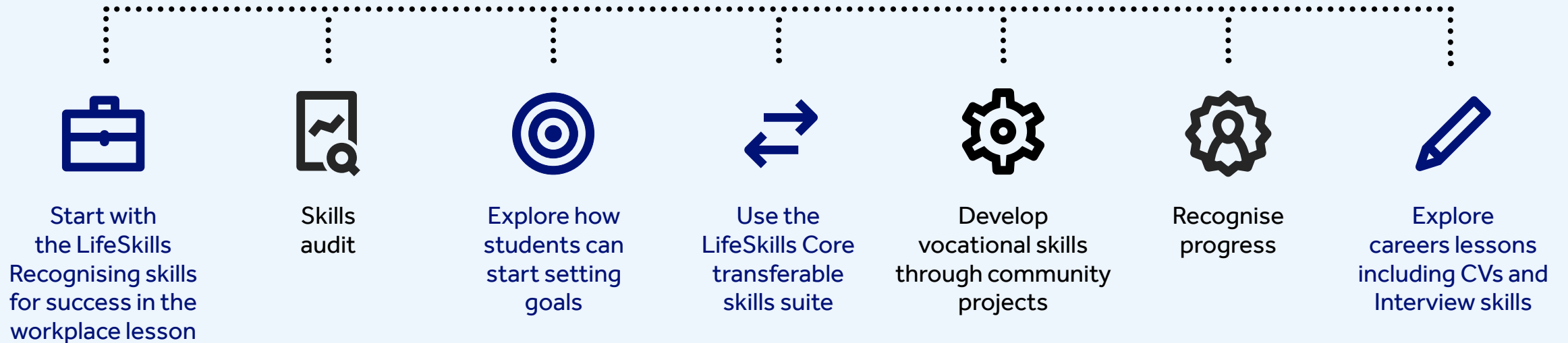
Linking skills and aspirations to careers

"We use a range of LifeSkills resources, along with our own and link to vocational areas. I'd start with something like recognising skills for success in the workplace. Do a skills audit to see where we are, then setting goals. Then use units such as listening and speaking, leadership, staying positive etc to build these areas. Then, start introducing community projects to apply these skills. We would have a client, a brief, submit plans etc. We would then recap our skills, see what progress had been made, and look at developing CVs, then move onto interview skills."



Linking skills and aspirations to careers

The FE educator uses the following programme of study to support their learners with skills and careers conversations.



Feeling inspired?

Try [these resources](#) in your school.