

Key Skills in Cambridge

An Article for Varsity

Key skills occupy a rather neglected position within the Cambridge system. Due to the University's relentless academic emphasis, the acquisition and demonstration of "transferable skills" which can be used outside the narrow confines of academia are not as strongly encouraged as they could be. An element of this is certainly snobbishness: many students and staff will instinctively associate the words "key skills" with former polytechnics and less academically rigorous degrees. Many even foster a rather strange sense of pride in the esoteric nature of their courses and how inapplicable they are to the "real" world outside the Cambridge bubble. This is particularly unfortunate as Cambridge is one of the best places to acquire and develop additional skills which can increase employability and make graduates stand out from the crowd during selection processes. Examples range cover a whole spectrum of possibilities and the choices are almost endless: courses in everything from learning Korean to studying C++ are offered by various departments and centres. On the more subtle front, getting involved in one of the many clubs or societies often involves helping run an organisation more complex than a small charity or business and all but the worst officers will pick up and develop skills that would otherwise have to be painfully learnt in the first months of employment. All of these can and should be highlighted as part of a CV and when properly exploited, can make one far more attractive to employers. Perhaps more importantly, however, is the positive effect they have on our lives, beyond employment and into social activities and general interest. It is therefore unfortunate that not much effort is devoted learning such skills, especially by us as students.

The University and CUSU are beginning to work towards solving these issues and key skills are certainly discussed more now than ever before. In particular, the Education section and CUSU are working together to encourage students to see their Education as not just beginning and ending in the lecture theatre. Two personal development programmes, Springboard (for women) and Navigator (for men) have been developed and these might go some way to helping to help us see our lives in a more holistic way. Extra-curricular courses and lessons are also becoming more frequent and this can only be encouraged. Once these programmes are in place, the main problem will always be communication and telling students' of their existence. This is not a new problem, especially considering the collegic nature of the university but it will require the co-operation of the Faculties, Colleges, JCRs and CUSU to solve effectively and imbed as part of the "Cambridge-system".

In the long term, financial considerations may become a problem as extra-curricular courses are often the first to be cut when faculties or



colleges are faced with financial pressure. Services such as the Language Centre and Computing Service could easily be at risk should the university decide that its money is better spent elsewhere. This is something which CUSU needs to keep a careful eye on and ensure that these important programmes and the benefits they offer are not lost for future generations of students.

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