How do we support young people to get in and get on in the world of work?

Introduction

The extent to which young people are, or should be, prepared for the "world of work" continues to be debated amongst education policy-makers and commentators.

Both major political parties have made commitments to improve skills and work preparedness: Labour has committed to an equivalent to two-weeks work experience for every child should they form the next government and the Conservatives have brought in policy change during the last parliament including expanded careers advice for primary school children and the Skills and Post-16 Education Act.

The Times Education Commission suggested that reform of the education system could boost the UK economy by £125 billion a year if new recruits were better prepared for the world of work. As the 2020 Commercial Education Trust (CET) report outlines, almost three quarters of the companies they surveyed feel that their efficiency and profitability would rise by at least 25% if their recent hires had "excellent" commercial ability. Commercial ability', is defined by CET as having five key pillars:

- Basics for Life - fundamental life skills that everyone needs for work
- Workplace attitudes and behaviours - personal qualities and learned behaviours crucial for success
- Essential transferable skills - skills you need to make the most out of what you know and do
- Organisational Know-How - practical knowledge and understanding of the working world
- Sector-Specific Know-How - practical and academic knowledge for a particular industry or job

In spring 2024, the Education Policy Institute (EPI) and CET brought together politicians, civil servants, school leaders and employers to consider how commercial education can improve young people's skills to establish fulfilling careers and help to increase productivity nationally.

This paper is a summary of the discussion of the roundtable (conducted under Chatham House Rule), drawing together reflections on what organisational know-how and work-ready attitudes and behaviours look like; how they may be further developed through the education system and how to build closer relationships between schools, colleges and employers to facilitate workplace experiences and build pipelines of talent. We are grateful to the Commercial Education Trust for their support of the event and to all participants for their contributions.

Work-ready attitudes and behaviours

When asked about work-ready attitudes and behaviours, participants described encountering a hugely diverse range of attitudes to work in the young recruits they encountered. Whereas many 16–25-year-olds were described as keen and ready to take on new challenges, others were disadvantaged by a lack of financial literacy; were not as confident navigating ambiguity and displayed a lack of initiative. One participant felt that cultivating an environment where young people feel they can ask colleagues for help was crucial to overcoming some of the latter challenges. Another attendee highlighted the need to break down skills and actions to make them tangible. For instance, by encouraging young people to chair meetings, organisations can help give young people a better sense of their worth. Overall, participants held varying experiences of young people as employees.

On the concern around young people struggling in the workplace, participants considered a wide range of causation factors. One participant suggested there has been a cultural shift in attitudes to work wherein young people are less eager to please and perhaps over-reliant on praise to stay motivated. This was countered by another participant, who commended the resilience of the younger generation, particularly during the pandemic. Participants generally agreed that younger people were more non-hierarchal as a generation and as such perhaps less formal in attitudes to work than previous generations; participants felt these changed habits should not be taken as a lack of respect for managers or the workplace.

Several participants suggested that earlier, systemic failings could explain some young people's perceived disinterest in work, using anecdotal case-studies to explore how a lack of support from the education system, particularly for those with special educational needs, might have led to an erosion of confidence.

Similarly, another recurring theme was the wider societal conditions facing young people today. The cost of living, particularly the extent to which house prices have not kept pace with normal wages, is potentially acting as a cap on aspiration amongst young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In part, conflation between skills and attitudes was a contributing factor to the challenge of readiness to work. One participant differentiated between the two, describing behaviours as skills-based, for instance, being a good communicator or effectively managing money, whereas attitudes are more a pattern of how we make choices which in turn is linked to values. Participants strove to break down whether there is any consensus on what these work-ready attitudes and behaviours are. Though this question was not definitively answered, honesty, integrity and a willingness to take on new challenges were all noted as attributes desirable to employers.

Disparities in access to work experience and careers guidance

To improve work readiness, encompassing both the attitudes and behaviours discussed above as well as organisational know-how, participants discussed the current state of work experience and careers guidance and considered what else needs to be done to ameliorate these services and support young people to develop the pillars of commercial ability.

Participants noted significant barriers preventing young people from gaining work experience and careers guidance, disproportionately affecting disadvantaged pupils. Indeed, one participant cited that 50% of young people leave school with no work experience whatsoever and then shared excerpts from two UCAS personal statements, one from a state school and the other from a private school. The differences were stark; the young person from the private school had had access to significantly more opportunities for work experience than their state-educated peer. While this example is anecdotal, research from the Sutton Trust confirms disparities in access between state- and privately-educated pupils.

Participants felt this lack to be extremely limiting, through potentially curtailing aspirations and preventing the development of "know-how" and connections to positive career opportunities. The notion that "talent is evenly spread across the country, but opportunity is not" means there is a need to put inclusion at the heart of any framework for improvement. Moreover, participants felt use of available data and subsequent evaluation, such as linking frameworks for improvement to a national dataset detailing pupil outcomes and destinations, could offer insights into what strategies are working well so that best practice can be shared and continuously improved upon.

One participant suggested that for any such framework to be effective, a coherent system with an agreed lexicon is needed so that there is consensus on what is meant by terms such as 'wider' skills or 'soft' skills. The development by the Department for Education (DfE) of the UK Standard Skills Taxonomy was mentioned as a potential solution.

This, in turn, could support greater measurement and evaluation, both of the skills of young people and the efficacy of careers guidance and work experience opportunities. The measure of young peoples' skills is explored further below but in general, participants agreed that stakeholders need to advocate for better access and use of data from the DfE in order to facilitate further research into 'what works'.

There was general agreement that equitable access to both careers guidance and meaningful work experience must be placed at the heart of any framework and used as a key indicator to measure efficacy. How best to measure this effectiveness, however, remains an ongoing conversation.

What is needed from employers

Building on the discussion on barriers to work experience access, given significant workload burdens, capacity constraints and issues around teacher retention, the ability of schools to support students in securing work experience and offering careers guidance was felt to be

another barrier in and of itself, though career hubs were noted to be a growing and valuable source of support. One school leader said (of the challenges facing the education system) "it has never been as hard as it is now to work in schools". They asked for deep engagement with schools from employers if they wish to support young people into work; employers need to demonstrate what they can do for schools in order to build these relationships.

Participants considered how employers can help to improve work readiness.

Many participants felt that organising talks from employers in schools are very important, as confidence is built on the extent to which a young person can see themselves in a particular role or job. They felt the importance of role models should not be underestimated. However, another participant countered that employers want to engage but "don't feel smart enough", suggesting some do not feel confident to be in front of young people and desire greater clarity on the most effective way to connect with young people. Several participants described their desire for a common tool or resource facilitating this connection and resources such as those available through the Careers & Enterprise Company or Speakers for Schools were mentioned as useful to prepare for employer talks and indeed, offering work experience more widely. Common resources lessens the burden on employers and allows for greater equality of experience.

Secondly, participants highlighted the value of offering multiple routes into an organisation, for example graduate programmes, apprentices or degree apprenticeships, in order to allow for those with different educational experiences to apply. The importance of attracting diverse talent was also noted, particularly young people who are neurodiverse, so as not to overlook this pool of creativity and opportunity for varying perspectives.

Participants then considered the role of employers in building organisational know-how – a key pillar of commercial ability. Once in work, participants underlined the importance of employers demonstrating a cohesive purpose in an organisation and supporting early careers staff, particularly during the onboarding process, to understand end engage with this purpose and build their organisational know-how. They noted that this is often forgotten as organisations, particularly smaller ones with less capacity, may be too busy, even though good induction should be a priority. The onboarding process was felt to be critical, particularly the first thirty days, to ensure young people land well, feel comfortable in their new roles and develop a practical understanding both of the organisation and the world of work more widely. Participants suggested buddy programmes and community groups are a useful way for new employees to build connections across the organisation, offering opportunities for informal learning outside of their relationship with their line manager. These programmes were also highlighted as being attractive to young people, potentially increasing retention. Furthermore, incorporating sessions that build on new starters' financial literacy – such as on salary, pensions, and workplace benefits, - were described as key both to develop fundamental life skills and organisational know-how, especially for people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Although such programs could be carried out internally, participants considered the value for of utilising external help, anecdotally noting younger colleagues' preference for the latter.

Finally, a concern around the gap between larger organisations' ability to offer a work experience programme and that of small businesses was considered. Participants were sympathetic to the administrative processes, time commitment and financial demands of creating well-equipped work experience programmes that meet high safeguarding and inclusivity standards. Building such infrastructure is naturally more demanding on small business, so once again participants called for universal resources. One potential resource discussed was a clear list of skills and an end-of-work experience assessment as demonstrable output underlining young people's achievement.

Overall, participants agreed that schools and colleges cannot solve this issue alone, particularly given the significant challenges schools currently face. Therefore, deep engagement from employers is needed which demonstrates what they can offer both to education partners and to young people. In turn, there needs to be freely available resources for employers to learn how to develop their connections with local schools and colleges; implement safeguarding measures and build work experience programmes. Career hubs were noted as a key place to start.

Curriculum: PSHE, Financial Education and Experiential Learning

Turning to what is happening in school, participants considered current approaches and areas for improvement.

An education leader outlined two different approaches to skills development that they witness in schools. The first is where careers education and skills development is seen as an "add-on" or "good to have". If this is the case, it may be just one or two people in a school "banging the drum", which makes it very difficult to ensure all children develop the skill and experience they need. Alternately, this participant had seen other institutions where skills development and careers education were central to the school curriculum, a "destinations culture", rather than being compartmentalised within a PSHE curriculum for example. This model tended to be much more successful, according to the participant. To achieve this, they emphasised that schools need a coherent framework and consistent approach, starting with the leadership team. Schools that start with what they want to achieve in terms of skills development and work from there have a much bigger impact.

The role of PSHE was discussed at length. One participant specialising in PSHE was asked how to prevent a culture where the responsibility falls solely to the PSHE teacher. They responded that while the discussion at the roundtable had predominantly focused on education so far, they felt it should be much wider; there are many reasons why young people may be struggling to enter and succeed in the workplace including rising rates of mental health problems, dissolution of youth services and the rise of social media so to place the burden of solving it entirely on schools is both unfair and unworkable. Only so much can be achieved when you educationalise a problem that is actually one for a broader section of society to solve. They questioned how local and national policy could encourage engagement with wider social and extracurricular clubs to encourage skills development, noting the major funding

cuts that many state services have faced. This chimed with earlier discussions on the onus on employers to engage too.

The speaker felt that PSHE has a significant role to play: while there should be direct teaching on career paths and breaking down stereotypes on who 'can' enter which role, they felt there also needs to be a wider discussion on skills and relationships with neighbours, friends and colleagues so young people can develop the teamwork, communication and other 'soft' skills outlined above. They emphasised the importance of a careers thread running through all aspects of the curriculum, from primary school through to entry into the labour market, so that children and young people can see the relevance of what they are learning to their future jobs and outcomes. For example, in primary school a teacher may introduce a wide range of careers to the children and also link this discussion to other key areas, for example, a discussion on gender equality could also include implications for careers and the workplace. In particular, consideration should be given to what the jobs of the future may look like in any careers guidance given the rapidly changing workforce landscape.

The speaker highlighted finally that making PSHE statutory led to huge changes across schools and supported the notion of making careers guidance statutory, however they warned that the curriculum must be reformed; "it is already very full and we cannot keep packing more in, something has to give".

Participants also considered the part financial education can play in supporting young people to get in and get on in the world of work. It was felt financial and careers education are intimately linked; both are necessary to enable career readiness.

Participants agreed that financial education is not a controversial topic, there is buy-in across the political spectrum and wider society in general, yet it is not something education policy has managed to get right. One noted that, when considering early career employees, especially those from disadvantaged communities, many may struggle to manage their money. Research from MyBnk shows that only two in five young people consider themselves financially literate and 61% do not recall receiving financial education in schools.

Participants with experience in offering financial education highlighted that there is real appetite from learners, parents and teachers to engage but a major challenges is the time taken to learn and then deliver the financial education curriculum education curriculum within the already busy school year. This creates an unsustainable system where charities go in to teach the curriculum and therefore coverage is patchy. Participants felt financial education should be embedded in the curriculum, but similar to careers education, the challenge is finding time and space in the school day.

Finally, while much of the discussion focused on the content of the curriculum, one participant made the point that we should be thinking about *how* it is delivered too. Currently, as shown above, it can be a challenge for young people to convert the knowledge they have learned in schools into the skills needed for the workplace. Participants felt young people know a lot but don't have the "chemistry of opportunities" to make the transition, compounded by the fact some young people, particularly from disadvantaged backgrounds, don't have the necessary

support or guidance at home and many of the youth services that might previously have intervened have now been cut.

On the question of how, the potential of experiential learning was raised, for example the opportunity for young people to try setting up their own business, as a way to develop a wide range of skills and relate learning to later careers. It was acknowledged that while there is hesitation around large-scale education reform, particularly curriculum reform, given it often takes significant time and resource, experiential learning could be embedded as a "transitional approach" ahead of any larger reforms, allowing for evidence to be gathered on its benefits and what needs to be improved.

The Accountability System

As with many current education policy discussions, participants discussed the impact of the accountability system too. They were asked: to what extent do the pressures in schools either support or counteract the challenges employers are seeing with young people?

It was said to be a driver with potentially perverse consequences. One participant emphasised how high-stakes the situation in schools now is; significant weight is placed on gaining knowledge, passing exams and going to university. The speaker felt this puts students under a lot of pressure and creates an atmosphere of competition meaning wider skills can be forgotten. Another said that young people may be afraid of making mistakes because they have been pushed so hard to get the right answer in schools, preventing the development of confidence and initiative needed to thrive in the workplace.

Participants also raised the important question of whether these wider skills should be measured in order to demonstrate competencies to employers. If the answer is yes, how can we go about this, particularly given the current system assesses predominantly through desk-based written exams? It is important to consider whether the current accountability metrics by which schools are held to account mean that other areas are squeezed out or not prioritised, to the apparent detriment of children and young people when entering the workplace.

Conclusion

The wide-ranging roundtable discussion considered the skills and attitudes that are needed to succeed in the workplace; how employers can support their young recruits and engage with schools and colleges to offer work experience, careers guidance and build their pipelines of talent; and finally, the role of the curriculum in offering high quality careers education.

Participants agreed that there is still uncertainty around skills terminology and a common language would be useful both for the education system and employers to support development and measurement of these skills. While the UK Standard Skills Taxonomy is

awaited with interest as a potential solution, nevertheless some participants called for work to begin on translating our current conception of work-ready attitudes and behaviours into a set of metrics, allowing for the development of standards and qualifications to demonstrate competencies to employers.

Employers were felt to be a valuable source of resource and opportunities to improve young people's career readiness and organisational know-how, particularly if those resources are targeted at the most disadvantaged young people. However, it was noted that to for this to happen effectively, employers need support too. Third sector organisations are a helpful provider of common resources and best practice for employers to draw on and there was a call for further conversation around how best to support those keen to develop their training opportunities, including through further engagement with the Careers & Enterprise Company's Employer Standards.

Finally, schools face significant challenges and there was agreement that strong engagement is needed from employers as the education system cannot solve this alone. Indeed, some participants felt that to see career readiness and skills development as purely an education issue is to ignore wider societal issues of rising mental health problems, lack of economic opportunity and increasing sparse youth services. Considering the issue through a wider lens would offer a greater range of both opportunities for improvement and resources to do so.

Both the curriculum and the accountability system were considered key to improving career readiness in schools. Participants noted the importance of starting early, in primary school and linking careers to all aspects of the curriculum to ensure children and young people see understand how what they currently learn can be beneficial for the future.

Finally, participants felt that resources should be targeted towards young people who need it most and to do so, the importance of data collection, sharing and evaluation processes cannot be underestimated. Participants called on the DfE to allow greater sharing of national datasets with researchers and education institutions to facilitate this process and drive improvements so all young people can get in and get on in the world of work, making informed choices and building thriving careers, beneficial for themselves and the wider economy.