

Key issues in employer engagement in education: why it makes a difference and how to deliver at scale

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Contents

Introduction **Pg 3**

- 1.** Employer engagement in education – a worldwide theme **Pg 4**
- 2.** Why employer engagement makes a difference **Pg 5**
- 3.** The role of schools and colleges **Pg 5**
- 4.** Barriers to large scale employer engagement in education **Pg 6**
- 5.** Connecting the two sides **Pg 7**
- 6.** Conclusions **Pg 8**
- 7.** About the author **Pg 9**

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Introduction

The final report of the Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce (Education Working for All) described employer engagement with education as a crucial ingredient of future success in preparing young people for further learning and employment.

The Scottish Government has already acted on a number of specific recommendations. In particular:

- **industry-led “Invest in Youth” groups will be set up across Scotland; and**
- **the Government is working with Investors in People to develop an award to recognise employer investment in young people.**

Drawing on evidence from the UK and worldwide, this paper identifies the tangible benefits of links between employers and young people in education; looks at some of the reasons such links have not (yet) become deep rooted; and suggests ways of increasing the variety, frequency and quality of future links.

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Key lessons for Scotland

- less than a quarter of teenagers now combine school with work. We have to find other ways to introduce them to the world of work
- no young person should be expected to make important choices about options of study or where they will study next without having the opportunity to speak to people who work in related industries
- to maximise the benefits of employer links with education, schools and colleges should arrange multiple interactions with employers, even of short duration, from an early age: more is more and variety is good
- reasons employers don't engage as much as they could include:
 - seeing it as demanding or difficult
 - never being asked
 - failing to understand the business case for working with education.
- reasons schools and colleges don't engage as much as they could include:
 - cost
 - finding the right people to talk about the right topics, at precisely the right time
 - a narrow focus on exams, which squeezes out other desirable outcomes.
- the two sides will work together at scale if:
 - it is easy for both sides to work together
 - schools can connect for free (or very low cost)
 - business cases and expectations on both sides are sharp and supported by wider political culture – in particular, making it clear that qualifications are not the only outcome from education
 - schools are clearly the customer – instigating relationships to meet the different needs of their pupils.



1 Employer engagement in education – a worldwide theme

If employer engagement in education made for a snappier hashtag, without doubt it would be trending. As nations around the world grapple with youth unemployment, skills shortages and stalled social mobility, new attention has been devoted to finding ways for schools and colleges to better work with employers across a range of activities such as work experience placements, careers events, enterprise activities, mentoring and mock interviews.

While government motivations have been broad, what has most driven interest is an ambition to better support the transitions of young people into the world of work primarily by enabling more informed decision-making. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has become clear in its advice:

“More complex careers, with more options in both work and learning, are opening up new opportunities for many people. But they are also making decisions harder as young people face a sequence of complex choices over a lifetime of learning and work. Helping young people make these decisions is the task of careers guidance... [Careers professionals] need to be able to call upon a wide of information... Strong links between schools and local employers are very important means of introducing young people to the world of work.

Individual career guidance should be a part of a comprehensive career guidance framework, including a systematic career education programme to inform students about the world of work and career opportunities. This means that schools should encourage an understanding of the world of work from the earliest years, backed by visits to workplaces and workplace experience. Partnerships between schools and local firms allow both teachers and students to spend time in workplaces.

(OECD, Learning for Jobs, 2010)

The final report of the Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce saw employer engagement with education as a crucial ingredient of future success in preparing young people for further learning and employment, stating:

“We need to encourage those exemplar employers and industry leaders already active and engaged with schools and colleges and in recruiting, employing and training young people in their business, to inspire their peers and to challenge others to engage and stimulate demand for young people.”

(Education Working For All: 45)

The report includes four key recommendations on employer engagement with schools and colleges:

- 1. The creation of regional industry-led Invest in Youth groups across Scotland to provide leadership and a single point of contact and support to facilitate engagement between employers and education;**
- 2. Businesses across Scotland should be encouraged and supported to enter into 3-5 year partnerships with secondary schools. Every secondary school in Scotland and its feeder primaries should be supported by at least one business in a long-term partnership;**
- 3. Scotland’s leading industry sector groups and companies should be encouraged to work with the Scottish College for Educational Leadership to develop a programme to provide emerging school staff leaders with a wide ranging understanding of industry and careers;**
- 4. Employers and national industry sector groups should form partnerships with regional colleges to ensure course content is industry relevant and full advantage is taken of work based learning and employment opportunities.**

In addition, the Commission recommended a nationally-defined “Invest in Youth Accolade” to recognise industry’s engagement in the development and employment of Scotland’s young workforce.

In its initial response to these recommendations, Cabinet Secretary for Training, Youth and Women’s Employment, Angela Constance, announced the investment of £1 million to create Invest in Young People groups. She also announced the government’s intention to introduce an “Invest in Young People Award”. (The Scottish Government, Response to the Wood Commission on the Young Workforce, 24 June 2014)

This growing focus on the careers dimension of employer engagement within education has coincided with the emergence of a compelling run of studies which have found meaningful employment and attainment outcomes linked to pupil exposure to the local economic community. A series of important UK and US research studies have used quantitative analysis to look for, and have found evidence, of significantly better employment outcomes and higher earnings linked to teenage employer engagement whether through part-time employment, family social networks or, importantly, school-mediated activity.

Of these three potential means of engaging young people with the labour market, it is the third which generally demands greatest attention from policy makers and stakeholders, with the scale of impacts commonly averaging at around 10% for both earnings and reduced NEET rates.

“More complex careers, with more options in both work and learning, are opening up new opportunities for many people. But they are also making decisions harder.”

The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

2 Why employer engagement makes a difference

By looking across studies, it becomes possible to gain a better understanding of why such work-related interventions, which collectively have made only a modest contribution to educational experience in Britain, might have positive effects on young people.

Historically, governments have encouraged schemes of work experience and enterprise education, notably, with a view to developing the human capital of young people – of developing their softer employability skills particularly. There is a widespread perception across employers, teachers and young people themselves that such programmes of work do, to some extent, develop such skills and that these are additional to those commonly offered through traditional classroom teaching.

However, studies show as well that young people who encounter working professionals in more fleeting situations through their schools or family networks also derive ultimate employment benefits from the connections.

Analysis of the testimonies of young adults about what they gained from their experiences of employer engagement shows that social capital is much more often valued than skills development. Through careers fairs, workplace visits or work experience, they felt they had access to authentic, persuasive advice, broadening and deepening their understanding of the labour market.

What seems to be happening is this: young people rarely have a good sense of their local jobs market, but when they do access

information which they believe they can trust and see as relevant to themselves, its impact can be considerable. Young adults report that they often gained better senses of the reality of jobs and careers and, as a consequence, changed their viewpoints of who they might be and how they might go about achieving their goals. As sociologists would describe, they gained access to non-redundant, trusted information relevant to their emerging aspirations within a meaningful social exchange. Within this, many young people can often be seen to be developing more realistic career aspirations aligning better with their educational expectations. This leads to the OECD's welcome emphasis on integrating employer contacts systemically into professional careers information, advice and guidance.

3 The role of schools and colleges

A growing body of research has found positive outcomes, especially in terms of reduced rates of NEET and improved earnings, for young adults linked to their teenage experience of the labour market.

In the past, at least one important experience of the working world would have come from part-time working. A generation ago, up to 75% of older teenagers combined paid employment of some sort with full-time studies. This is no longer the case. As reported by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, the Saturday job is dying. Over the last generation, there has been a rapid fall in teenagers working part-time time alongside their full-time studies, with less than a quarter of teenagers now combining school with work.

The decline in part-time teenage working increases the high importance of the roles that schools and colleges have to play in helping to optimise the chances of young people achieving successful transitions into work. As well as providing experiences of value, schools can also help young people understand the breadth of the labour market, not just those elements understood by family acquaintances and informal social networks. It hardly needs stating that a young person's social networks reflect in large part the social characteristics of their families.

Schools can democratise access to working world for young people – and some do just that, but not always and not enough. Where young people are asked to source their own work experience placements, as is commonly the case, it is unsurprising that young people from working class backgrounds typically fail to access opportunities into highly paid professions such as law, medicine or with blue chip businesses which their independently educated peers walk into through family ties.

Schools have a key role to play, moreover, in integrating exposures to the working world into key decision-making points. No young person should be expected to make important choices about options of study or where they will study next without having the opportunity to speak to people who work in related industries. Like us all, young people don't know what they don't know and will often rule out options on the basis of misplaced assumptions. Schools can ensure young people interact with people from wide ranging backgrounds – through careers networking events, for example – and integrate first hand encounters with the workplace into the provision of comprehensive and professional careers information, advice and guidance.

Schools which draw on the resource provided by employers most effectively do so recognising that different activities and interventions can help the decision-making, academic progress, personal development and career thinking of young people in different ways. Teachers with experience of enterprise competitions see them, for example, as an effective means of developing problem-solving and team working skills; business mentoring has been often used as a successful strategy to support borderline achievers requiring a motivation boost; and post-16 work experience, linked to undergraduate courses of study, helps secure access to universities of choice.

A primary conclusion from the research, therefore, is that more is more and that variety is good. To optimise benefits, schools should draw upon the full diet of opportunities presented by providing multiple interactions with employers, even of short duration, from an early age. This is a significant challenge: a 2011 survey showed that while the majority of young British adults had some employer engagement within their education (most commonly work experience), only 15% recalled encounters with employers on three or more occasions. When it comes to employer engagement, the goal is volume and variety, but how can it be secured?

4 Barriers to large scale employer engagement in education

Over half a century, a series of initiatives have encouraged (and yes, helped) employers and schools to work more closely together. Over that time, both sides have been surveyed and interviewed on multiple occasions to understand their perceptions.

A review of what has been learnt shows foremost that there is widespread willingness on both sides to collaborate. Most teachers see employer engagement positively and most employers would certainly entertain the idea of doing something to help young people in local schools, if asked and if feasible. For employers, three key barriers are apparent preventing higher levels of involvement with schools:

- **A perception that it is probably too difficult or demanding, often based on a poor understanding of what is involved.** One striking survey commissioned by the Edge Foundation showed, for example, that employers who already work with schools consider it to be much easier than employers which have never done so. While some, moreover, might see difficulties in accommodating a work experience placement (the most familiar form of engagement), few would be able to argue that sparing an hour a year to go into a local school to talk about the job they do was too onerous.
- **Many are simply never asked.** Surveys show that high numbers of employers have never been approached by schools or their agents. A challenge for policy makers is how to tap into strong latent willingness to work with schools.

- **Poor understanding of the business case.** The most common driver for employers to work with schools is altruism – giving something back to their local community. While such a spirit drives much activity, it masks a deeper, stronger business case for systemic engagement with schools linked to bottom line objectives: recruitment, staff development, engagement and corporate reputation. With the admirable work of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (through their Learning for Work project) attitudes are changing in larger businesses and must continue to evolve if working with schools is going to become, as should be the case, an HR rather than a CSR issue.

For schools, other barriers are uppermost:

- **Cost.** Where government investment has made it low cost or free for schools to connect with employers through old fashioned brokerage – as was the case when there was a national network of education business partnership in Scotland - schools responded in significant numbers, with most secondaries offering work experience placements for pupils. For schools, employer engagement is a positive, but if it demands too much resource, hard questions begin to be asked of tough budgets.
- **Quality.** Classroom teachers say they would happily engage more employers in their work if only they could easily find the right people to do the right things at the right time. With relevance of economic activity to a young person's emerging aspirations often key, the more difficult it is to find the right people, the greater the barrier – and difficulties are commonly greatest for the most disadvantaged schools.

- **Narrow definitions of school success.** Too much focus on exam results as the sole (or main) measure of success can discourage schools from devoting time and energy to activities which are more closely linked with employment outcomes.
- **Time.** As pressure on schools grows to improve attainment, pressure on curriculum time often heightens. While research shows that opportunity costs for employer engagement activities are minimal, tensions can clearly emerge.
- **Timing.** To see deep and broad employer engagement in schools, access to the workplace needs to reflect the rhythms of the school year – the teacher must be the customer, accessing support on their own terms at times when they feel it is most valuable.

There is a need to broaden the menu of activities away from a simple focus on two week's work experience at a set age: job shadowing/work tasters, careers events, half day enterprise competitions, mock interview sessions – to name but a few – are highly regarded by teachers with first-hand experience of them and are relatively easy to integrate into school life. In addition, research shows that student performance and motivation can improve as they gain a deeper understanding of the relevance of education and qualifications to the workplace.

5 Connecting the two sides

Successive governments have promoted collaboration between schools and employers for more than fifty years.

Brokerage models have focused on making it easy for the two sides to work together – tapping into the latent willingness described above. As online technology has developed, new models have become available to address the barriers to engagement and secure high volume engagement. Inspiring the Future is a prime example.

Inspiring the Future (www.inspiringthefuture.org) is based on the simple premise that if asked, very many people – from all walks of life – would be willing to help schools. However, volunteers must be easy for schools to identify. Inspiring the Future provides the opportunity for employers and individual volunteers anywhere in the country to identify themselves as willing to be approached by local schools. The initial ask is modest: could you spare an hour a year to talk to young people about the job you do?

Two years after its launch more than 15,000 volunteers from all walks of life have come forward with that offer, identifying themselves as willing to provide personal perspectives on apprenticeships, entrepreneurialism, use of languages, maths or science at work. Many offer interview practice or help with CVs, flag an interest in becoming a governor or say they will help children to read or play number games. The model is simple and provides teachers with a pool of potential volunteers at the click of a mouse at the time they need them. Evaluations show, moreover, that the model works with teachers showing very high regard for the volunteers they have encountered through the system.

Since its launch in England, over two-thirds of secondary schools and colleges have signed up to this new way of connecting with employers, and thousands of primary schools are expected to follow suit this year. There are plans to promote the service in Scotland, though in fact a number of Scottish schools and employers have already chosen to sign up. The service is free of charge to all users.

“Two years after its launch more than 15,000 volunteers from all walks of life have come forward.”



6 Conclusions

The evidence is compelling: employer engagement in education makes a positive difference to the lives of young people.

It is most effective when delivered at scale, variety and throughout school lives. There is a widespread willingness across both employer and educational communities to work more closely together.

The two sides will work together at scale if:

- **it is easy for both sides to work together**
- **it is free (or very low cost) to establish connections**
- **business cases and expectations on both sides are sharp and supported by wider political culture – in particular, making it clear that qualifications are not the only outcome from education**
- **schools are clearly the customer – instigating relationships to meet the different needs of their pupils.**

For governments, what this means is that resource, where it becomes available, needs to be put into enabling collaboration – making it simple for schools to find employers they want to work with at the points when they are ready.



7 About the author

Dr Anthony Mann is Director of Policy and Research at the Education and Employers Taskforce.

His publications include (with Julian Stanley and Louise Archer), the first collection of research essays on the subject: *Understanding Employer Engagement in Education* (Routledge, 2014) and (with Chris Percy), the first peer-reviewed analysis of adult wage premiums linked to UK school-mediated employer contacts: *Employer engagement in British secondary education: wage earning outcomes experienced by young adults* (March 2013). His recent publication, *Employer Engagement in Education: Literature Review* (CfBT, 2014) provides a detailed review of the evidence cited in this paper. He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Education and Work*. Anthony regularly advises government and its agencies on effective approaches to employer engagement in education. He speaks regularly on the subject, addressing audiences recently in the US, Australia, Greece (CEDEFOP), Denmark and Italy as well as across the UK.

Inspiring the Future (www.inspiringthefuture.org) is a programme overseen by the Taskforce and its partners.

