

# **What do recruiters think about today's young people? Insights from four focus groups**

**By Anthony Mann and Prue Huddleston with a  
response by Kevin Green, CEO of the Recruitment &  
Employment Confederation**

## About Education and Employers

[www.educationandemployers.org](http://www.educationandemployers.org)

Education and Employers is a UK charity created in 2009 to ensure that every state school and college has an effective partnership with employers to support young people. As well as undertaking research into the impact and delivery of employer engagement in education, the charity manages innovative programmes to enable schools and colleges to connect efficiently and effectively with employers including [www.inspiringthefuture.org](http://www.inspiringthefuture.org). The charity works in close partnership with the leading national bodies representing education leaders, teaching staff and employers/employees.

## Research into employer engagement in education

Education and Employers Research provides a free online resource making easily available high quality materials investigating the impact and delivery of employer engagement in education. Resources include a library of relevant articles and reports, many of which have been summarised to pick out key findings, papers and videos from the Taskforce research conferences and free London seminar series as well as Taskforce publications and a regular e-bulletin of relevant research announcements. The library has attracted usage from across the world including researchers at Harvard, the OECD, Japan, Australia and Denmark: [www.educationandemployers.org/research](http://www.educationandemployers.org/research)

## About the authors

**Dr Anthony Mann** is Director of Policy and Research at the Education and Employers Taskforce. He is the author or co-author of more than thirty publications on employer engagement in education. Joining the Taskforce at its creation, he has led its research function, chairing the Taskforce's annual international research conference and publishing extensively on themes surrounding employer engagement in education, including (with Julian Stanley and Louise Archer), the first collection of research essays on the subject: *Understanding Employer Engagement in Education* (Routledge, 2014). He is a member of the Editorial Board of the *Journal of Education and Work*. Anthony often advises government and its agencies on effective approaches to employer engagement in education. He speaks regularly on the subject, addressing audiences recently in Australia, Canada, the US, Greece (CEDEFOP), Denmark and Italy as well as across the UK.

**Prue Huddleston** is Emeritus Professor and formerly Director of the Centre for Education and Industry at the University of Warwick. Her research interests include: vocational education and training, vocational qualifications and work-related learning. She has published widely on vocational learning and applied pedagogy. Before joining the University she was a teacher and manager within the FE sector and worked on community and outreach programmes. She is a member of AQA's Research Committee and a member of OCR's Qualifications Committee. She is an Editorial Board member of the *Journal of Vocational Education and Training*. Recent publications include: Acquah, D. & Huddleston, P. 2014. "Challenges and opportunities for vocational education and training in the light of Raising the Participation Age" *Journal of Research in Post-Compulsory Education* 19:1, 1-17; Huddleston, P. & Unwin, L. 2013. *Teaching and Learning in Further Education: Diversity and Change* (4th. Edition) London: Routledge; Huddleston, P. & Stanley, J. 2012. *Work-related Teaching and Learning*. London: Routledge.

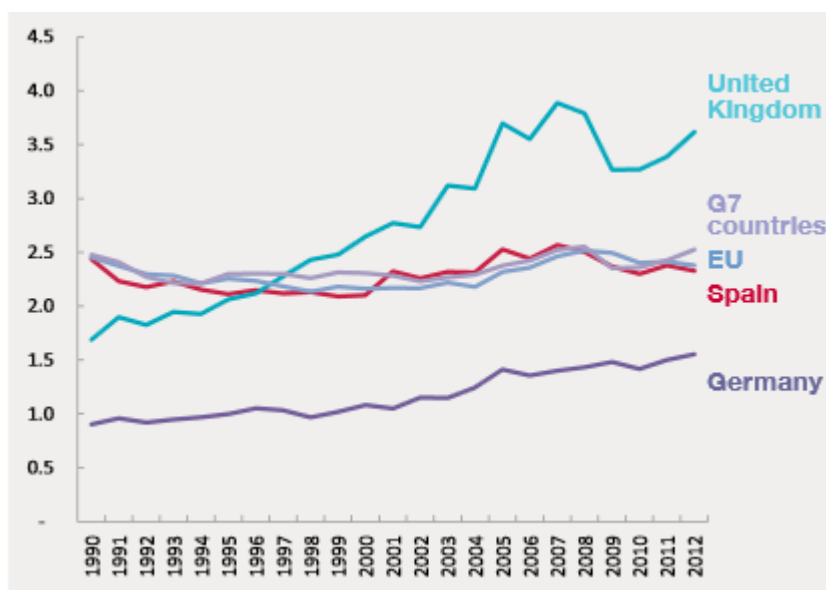
For more information about this report, contact: [Anthony.Mann@educationandemployers.org](mailto:Anthony.Mann@educationandemployers.org), Education and Employers Taskforce, 19-21 Clerkenwell Close, London EC1R 0RR.

## Introduction: education and employment in the twenty-first century

### Anthony Mann and Prue Huddleston

It is a striking characteristic of modern Britain: the current generation of young people entering the labour market are more highly qualified and bring with them more years of education than any preceding generation and yet they face record levels of rejection from employers. Over the last generation, the ratio of youth to adult unemployment has doubled meaning that young people are now some four times more likely to face unemployment than workers over 24. As Table 1 indicates, the growing employment penalty related to youth in the UK is internationally distinctive.

**Table 1.** Ratio of youth (15-24) to adult (25-64) unemployment rates



Source: OECD data presented by UKCES (2014).

Young people's earnings have flat lined, moreover, over the last decade while those of older workers have grown steadily (Gregg 2015; Mann and Huddleston 2015; UKCES 2014). As Apprenticeships have been opened up to applicants over the age of 24 over the last decade, young people have suffered in the competition for work, as employers chose to hire older people, over the age of 25. Currently, more than 40% of all apprenticeship starts were 25 years old or older prompting government intervention to reduce the costs to employers of hiring younger apprentices in an attempt to reverse the trend. In essence, employers have been needed to be bribed to take on young people.

### Background

Looked at over a generational timescale, young people are clearly finding it harder to break into sustained employment. Why is this? What has changed? And what, if anything, can be done by schools and colleges to help reverse the trends? These are questions addressed in a long term project undertaken by the Education and Employers charity in collaboration with Prue Huddleston, Professor Emeritus at the University of Warwick. The project emerged from a 2013 meeting called by the charity which brought together leading figures from the worlds of education and employment to consider long term responses to the UK's performance in the OECD's PISA studies (see annex below).

The project questions were first explored in a plenary session at the Education and Employers 2014 research conference, chaired by Professor Huddleston and featuring Professors Bob Schwartz (Harvard University), Hugh Lauder (University of Bath), Chris Husbands (Institute of Education) and the OECD's Andreas Schleicher.<sup>1</sup>

Subsequently, in February 2015, we published *How should schools respond to the demands of the twenty first century labour market?* Here, we presented interviews with eight leading commentators on the relationship between education and employment:

**Kay Carberry** - Assistant General Secretary of the Trades Union Congress

**Peter Cheese** - Chief Executive of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

**Chris Husbands** - Professor of Education Policy and Director of UCL Institute of Education

**Professor Ewart Keep** - Chair in Education, Training and Skills, University of Oxford

**Hugh Lauder** - Professor of Education and Political Economy at the University of Bath and editor of the *Journal of Education and Work*

**David Pollard** - Education, Skills and Business Support Chairman at the Federation of Small Businesses

**Andreas Schleicher** - Director of Education and Skills at the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development

**Professor Lorna Unwin** - Professor Emerita (Vocational Education) UCL Institute of Education, University College London; Honorary Professor, ESRC-funded Research Centre, LLAKES; Honorary Professorial Research Fellow, School of Environment, Education and Development, University of Manchester

In our introductory essay to that work, we highlighted interviewees' consistent concern over how structural trends relating to technological change, labour market deregulation, globalisation and inequality have worked against the employment interests of young people. It is a phenomenon which has worked most consistently against the interest of young people who seek to enter employment with the fewest qualifications and in areas of greatest disadvantage, but one which is felt in very broad terms across the full extent of the labour market. In discussions, three primary themes emerged, each help explaining ways in which the labour market had become more hostile to young people and each demanding residual action from schools and colleges.

### **Theme 1: *The labour market has become more complex* – demanding improved careers guidance enriched by first-hand employer contacts**

The modern jobs market is very different from that which existed a generation ago and the relationships between education, qualifications, training courses and ultimate employment much less direct. For young people needing to make critical investment decisions about their education and training, it has become more difficult to make informed judgements about labour market demand and what they need to do to become competitive for available positions. As Professor Ewart Keep argued, with greater complexity comes a rising need for effective careers provision enriched by authentic relevant insights into the labour market:

*It is absolutely apparent that if we want to do anything to make transitions into an increasingly complex working world easier for young people, it is essential that high quality careers information advice and guidance is available. Without that, we might as well give up,*

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<sup>1</sup> Watch the panel discussion at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hm8ZZe51-EQ>.

*it is that important. ...We need to help young people become far more discerning consumers of the provision available to them.*

With the labour market characterised by rapid technological change, with high proportions of jobs susceptible to automation, the difficulty of making unproductive investment choices in education and skills grows.

**Theme 2: School to work transitions have become fractured – requiring schools to improve the recruitment skills (and resilience) of young people**

A second trend in the operation of the labour market noted by commentators was the increasingly fractured nature of transitions from school to work. As Peter Cheese noted:

*The well-structured pathway (such as graduate entry schemes leading to long term employment) is becoming rarer and rarer – we are in the era of portfolio careers, zero hour contracts, part-time and self-employment, employment growth in small, rather than large employers. These are all trends which demand adeptness and confidence from young people if they are to navigate successfully through choppy waters into rewarding and secure careers.*

Modern transitions are much more likely to require that young people show resilience in this navigation, understand its characteristics (roles of employment agencies, Job Centreplus, internships, strategic volunteering, contractual variety) and go into the labour market with well developed skills necessary to secure employment within recruitment processes, independent of any preceding social connection – presenting a CV, completing an application, interviewing well.

**Theme 3: ‘Good’ employers are more demanding – demanding not just knowledge itself, but capability effective application, commonly delivered by schools as enterprise education**

While the presence of wage premiums in the economy linked to level of qualification demonstrates an ongoing and strong relationship between the certified knowledge and skills possessed by an individual, clearly technological change has made access to knowledge easier. As Andreas Schleicher has argued the world economy increasingly pays people not for what they know, but for what they can do with what they know, with employers specifically valuing the ability to be personally effective in applying knowledge to solve new problems. For Schleicher, the implications for education are clear:

*Schools must stop trying to predict the future, but they should try to prepare young people for the change they will experience. Schools need to stop preparing young people for the jobs that existed a generation ago and start preparing them for jobs which do not yet exist. For example, entrepreneurship education is much more important now than it was a generation ago because it teaches those skills and personal attributes which oil the modern labour market. It should not be taught separately but written into every subject.*

*The art of being enterprising – solution-focused attitudes, spotting opportunities, connecting dots and dealing with uncertainties – has, for example, a very clear and strong relationship with effective maths teaching. The great goal of such teaching is not in ensuring deep conceptual understanding as an end in itself, important as that is, but in fostering the ability of young people to apply the knowledge they have accumulated in new situations. In this way, we give them the confidence and intellectual resource to embrace and deal with the myriad unfamiliar problems they will encounter through life.*

*All subjects should be taught to develop the mindset of young people enabling them to identify and seize future opportunities. This is why the OECD has placed such an importance on creative problem solving, alongside literacy and numeracy, as a key indicator of national educational performance.*

Such a creative problem-solving approach to learning is commonly described as enterprise education, drawing on real life examples to illustrate how knowledge can be effectively applied. As Chris Husbands argues:

*For schools, it is a question of pedagogy and use of community based resources. In pedagogic terms, there are tried and tested means of teaching young people to apply emerging knowledge in unfamiliar contexts. Enterprise styles of learning are considerably more effective if they engage real people from real workplaces in their delivery, as is commonly seen in University Technical Colleges.*

In the current publication, we return to these themes and address them from the perspective of people at the sharp end of the relationship between education and employment: recruiters.

#### **Four focus groups: methodological approach**

In a second phase of the project, we spoke to people with first-hand experience of recruitment. Working through the extensive networks of employers and HR professionals connected to Education and Employers through the Inspiring the Future programme and to the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development through its national and local structures, we actively sought out recruiters with long standing recruitment experience.

This report presents testimonies from recruiters who attended four sessions with the editors.<sup>2</sup> In all four sessions, the report authors acted as facilitators working through semi-structured questions. Contemporaneous notes were taken. Wide ranging discussions were encouraged and the report below presents an edited, thematic review of points stressed by participants.

As is consistent with research ethics, contributors participated on the basis that any specific contributions would be anonymised. In total, representatives from 31 different employers took part in the sessions. Many were from large well-known employers in both private and public sectors with responsibilities related to national recruitment policy or local hiring, others came from small and medium sized enterprises. Participants were drawn from London and the South East and from the East Midlands.

We are grateful to both the Association of School and College Leaders and the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development which kindly provided accommodation, and facilitation, for focus group sessions. We warmly welcome too, the thoughtful response to these findings by Kevin Green, CEO of the Recruitment & Employment Confederation, a body which represents thousands of organisations and individuals working at the sharp end of recruitment practice in the UK.

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<sup>2</sup> Three sessions took place during the summer of 2014. Additionally, insights from a fourth focus group came from an unpublished write up of a session undertaken with employers in March 2011.

## What do recruiters think about today's young people?

### There is no single employer perspective

Throughout the focus group debates it became clear that it was not possible to generalise about 'what employers want.' This is hardly surprising given the heterogeneity of employers. Different sectors demand different skills from their employees. The size of a company and its product market will determine its demand for labour. Very little discussion focuses on the increasing numbers of self-employed and free-lance workers (Huddleston and Keep, 1999; Huddleston and Laczik, 2012; Haynes, Wade and Lynch, 2013). Employers were looking for different types and levels of skills, qualifications, attitudes and viewed young applicants for positions in very different ways. In particular, employers varied a lot in terms of how much importance they gave to qualifications. Often experience was seen as more important, especially where experience related specifically to vacancies in question. Recruiters also varied considerably in their view of the capabilities of young people: some felt 'spoilt for choice'; others struggled to find young people 'appointable' for their positions.

One national employer reported receiving one thousand applications for every vacancy, another said that she was

*quite overwhelmed by the quality of the applicants.*

A third stressed, echoing a theme raised in interviews with commentators, that it was getting easier to find well qualified candidates:

*There's a trend in people being over qualified for jobs, graduates are taking non-graduate jobs, people who used to get entry level jobs without needing much by way of qualifications are getting bumped out by people who wouldn't have applied ten years ago.*

Other highlighted regional variations...

*We're struggling in particular locations, for example Sheffield. It's hard to get people to apply there. Whereas in other locations we're getting lots of applications. I think it depends on the location. I think that might be because there are a lot more jobs available in places like Sheffield, more choices.*

...or variations by entry route.

*For Apprenticeships, it's not too bad because you have a much wider pool to fish from. Now we're seeing young people who have chosen not to go to university applying for Apprenticeships because they don't want the debt. They're a really high calibre – more academic. Others are trickier. They want to work but they come with baggage [the school leavers]. They also have to apply to 6 to 10 jobs a week. It's really tough for them.*

In general, however, recruiters struggled to find young people who were well suited to their vacancies. And while there was uncertainty as to whether significant change was putting young people at a structural disadvantage in the labour market, change was certainly felt to be afoot. One recruiter highlighted the growing competition from older workers:

*One trend I've seen is that people just aren't retiring like they use to. People are choosing to stay on, reducing their hours, working flexibly. It's a real problem for young people. No permanent vacancies come up if people aren't leaving.*

A second, the manager of a supermarket, highlighted the reduction of teenage part-time working:

*We used to do what we called the 'milk and cookie' crew – 2 hours a day, one hour before school, one hour afterwards for 14 year olds. We don't do it anymore. Regulations. It being dark in the morning. We got some fantastic colleagues from that. They'd come back to the store to do their work experience, to learn about the business. I have some great colleagues now who started that way. We don't employ under 16s now.*

Recruiters were sympathetic moreover to the view that the changes in the operation of the labour market had worked to the general disadvantage of young people highlighting the similar themes to commentators interviewed.

### **The implications of an increasingly complex labour market.**

There was compassion in discussions for young people. Recruiters recognised that it was becoming more difficult for new applicants to understand the nature of work expected or how to relate skills and qualifications to the realisation of career ambitions.

*Jobs and the skills they require are getting increasingly diverse and complex. It does make it harder for young people to prepare themselves. The pace of work is changing so quickly. Sometimes you see a complete mismatch between what the job is now and what they have to offer.*

*There is so much choice in work these days – it is such a challenge for careers advisers. Not everyone has the contacts, there are so many jobs.*

Across all sessions there was a strong agreement from recruiters that very many young people struggled, in general, to understand the world of work:

*Even some post-graduates are spectacularly naïve. They've just done years studying mechanical engineering and when it comes to interview it turns out that they are not actually interested in working in mechanical engineering!*

*I think college courses are totally disjointed from what's happening and needed in the workplace. It's really hard to motivate apprentices because of this disconnect.*

To a number of recruiters, young people were faced with structural, very practical difficulties in making good investment choices in the education and training they embarked on.

*Young people do the course which is funded, not the course which is best for the job. The advice they get isn't smart enough.*

*It's getting harder. Traditional skills aren't available anymore. Particularly traditional machining, manufacturing, turning, milling. And schools don't want to let you in to talk about it. Colleges seem happier to, but it's still difficult. We struggle every year. Apprentices come in and they don't appreciate how difficult traditional manufacturing is, and some drop-out. It is crippling businesses in the local area who need the skills to function in the future.*

Recruiters were sympathetic towards young people, however, feeling that they were, in general, poorly prepared by their schools to understand the modern labour market. Careers provision was widely felt to be inadequate:

*They [schools] absolutely need to spend more time on careers. It should be compulsory through the whole year.*



*Careers should be integrated into the curriculum – giving young people lots of insights, helping them to understand what's what and make good decisions for themselves.*

*Fourteen is too late for careers education to start. It should be done from Year 7 upwards.*

*My biggest bug bear? Young people – they have no vision. They don't really know what they want to do or prepare for it. They're so uncertain about it all. There isn't the support to help them understand what is out there, the jobs, the help to get CVs right and so on. They get terrible careers advice and employability skills are non-existent.*

Career advice was felt, in general, to be too heavily weighted to university study:

*Schools have to be giving young people more and better careers advice especially on the non-university routes.*

*We should promote professional apprenticeships.*

*We need to make young people aware of the range of pathways and jobs available, not just talk about higher education.*

*Career teachers need to be credible people who've done a range of jobs, who take it seriously, who understand businesses and how they work.*

*...they have no perception on leaving school what the real world is actually like. They don't take responsibility; they have no perception of time management. The number of times I have to chase kids to actually complete their applications on time when they are interested in doing one of our apprenticeships.*

Participants observed a disconnection between educational provision and demands of the labour market.

*I think college courses are totally disjointed from what's happening and needed in the workplace. It's really hard to motivate apprentices because of this disconnect.*

*Schools should recognise that some young people just don't have the family support they need to realise their ambitions and need to step in help them realise their potential.*

*[Apprentices] often don't see functional skills as relevant and so don't engage.*

Given that participants were recruited between two organisations, the CIPD and the Education and Employers charity, which are both campaigning to see greater levels of employer engagement in education and that many of the participants in the East Midlands focus groups were recruited directly through the volunteering programme Inspiring the Future, it is unsurprising that recruiters wanted to see greater collaboration between schools and employers.

*All they've got to do is let us in and tell their young people about what we do. And it needs to be done at the right time. When they're about to leave it's too late. We need to come in 2-3 years before they pick their options, but they're not.*

*Careers talks, especially one-to-ones, work really well for them. It so much outweighs the benefits of work experience.*

*We have young people in for work experience – that works – but again, there's no follow-up from the schools and a lot of schools have stopped it now they ask parents to pay.*

*Work experience should be compulsory and more structured. Young people, they need more exposure to the workplace and different jobs. Work experience is great at showing them what they would get if they went into this job or that job and what would be expected.*

*This is where business can lead. A good employer will take an active role in the young person's Apprenticeship.*

### **How relations between schools and employers can be improved**

*They need to evaluate the work experience. They should take it much more seriously.*

*Links between individual schools and colleges and employers should become long-term relationships. A full partnership that involves the teachers as well. I mean, they've never had a proper job. There's a complete lack of understanding of the world of work. The staff should definitely be involved.*

*Work experience should definitely be delivered once a week.*

*More speed-dating sessions. It's extremely valuable for pupils. It doesn't take much effort from employers. I'd put that top of the list.*

### **The implications of school to work transitions becoming more fractured**

#### **Recruitment skills: CVs and interviews**

There was considerable agreement across recruiters about where young people were distinctively and commonly weak, in comparison to older workers, when it came to applying for work. Recruiters noted poor skills in what might be termed job-seeking or recruitment skills (completing applications and going to interview).

Participants complained strongly about the inability of recruits to write adequate CVs; they were disappointed that so much time is spent in schools on perfecting the UCAS personal statements and so little on CV writing. They were surprised that the skills developed in writing UCAS statements were not transferred to CV writing. Schools and universities should emphasise, it was argued, the importance of the CV and help students in writing them. Schools could help students to make connections between job applications and their applications to higher education. Recruiters wanted schools and young people to treat recruitment processes far more seriously.

*Young people don't know what they want to do in life. Schools don't sit down with them to talk about jobs, what they have to offer and how work works. They don't understand how to apply for a job, what CVs should look like, how to get themselves a job.*

*The quality of interview preparation has certainly dropped over the last few years.*

*They need to show humility with confidence, spark, that they want your job as opposed to any job.*

It was a refrain repeated by recruiters from enterprises of all sizes and sectors.

*They really need to get better employability skills, learn better about how work works, how to get a job. They need to be taught CV writing and interview skills – it is so important. They need to learn to talk to staff if there is a problem.*

*You have to write well, present yourself well and submit a well-structured CV.*

*Preparation is absolutely vital – young people get muddled and just turn up.*

Schools, the recruiters argued, need to ensure that young people understand the importance of using research skills to find out about jobs: searching company websites, organising a placement or doing some volunteering.

*They really need to be getting interview practice before they leave education – it gets them the practice and starts building the resilience they need.*

There was broad agreement that the schooling of young people was not well connected to the world of work or even to continuing higher education. Participants felt that it was dangerous for young people that too often the relationships between education and ultimate employment were not well understood. Educational provision, in general, was felt to offer young people life skills insufficient to the demands of employment.

*It should be mandatory for schools to teach young people what they need to know for the transition from school to work. Children should be taught about the importance of being respectful, how to get useful information out of someone, how to listen well.*

*Pre-employment work should be done in schools.*

### **The implications of employers becoming more demanding**

As well as highlighting the changing nature of labour market complexity and school to work transitions, commentators have highlighted a third significant structural development in the nature of work: driven by technological change and labour market deregulation, employers are demanding new things of workers, especially those occupying jobs which are perceived to be highly attractive in terms of pay and reputation. As Andreas Schleicher argued, in a world economy which no longer pays people for what they know, but what they can do with what they know, demand has grown for employees demonstrating the ability

*to be personally effective in applying knowledge to solve new problems.*

For schools seeking to prepare young people to compete in such a world, commentators argued that a new emphasis should be placed on applied learning, enterprise education and use of real-life learning experiences to respond to such change in the ways that people work and are rewarded. In focus group discussions, considerable time was spent exploring whether young people possessed sufficient applied knowledge and skills to be competitive for vacancies.

### **Do young people have the right knowledge and skills?**

Recruiters rarely talked about difficulty in finding individuals with specific qualifications. In part, this was because qualifications were often used as a means to sift potential applicants with selection processes only beginning in earnest after those without minimal qualifications (which were recognised as being somewhat arbitrary) were excluded, but also because employers did not put much faith in qualifications:

*Employers really don't understand qualifications and how they are being endlessly reformed. We are a conservative bunch when it comes to recruitment. We go with what we know.*

*If being good with numbers is really important for the job, we will test them sometimes as part of the sift.*

*Lots of jobs do have GCSE maths, grade C, as a requirement, but to be honest it is pretty irrelevant to lots of jobs.*

*I suppose the thing is the young people do have lots of skills, but they're not necessarily skills we recognise because we don't ask for them.*

Two focus groups specifically explored whether recruiters felt that young people came to them with the right knowledge in terms of English, literacy, mathematics and numeracy. A range of views was expressed.

*...there's a huge variance between young people. Text language is quite worrying. But even those you'd consider academic – grades A\*-C – have very poor literacy and numeracy standards. Just things like poor sentence construction and spelling errors.*

*I disagree. I've seen a really high standard of maths and English. I often ask them 'How do you spell this?' or which key do I need to press?*

Participants were introduced to the disagreement between the UKCES and the CBI over the numeracy of young people. Over recent years, surveys of CBI members have highlighted a widespread concern from member companies over the basic numeracy of school and college leavers.<sup>3</sup> Across a similar period, the UK Commission for Employment and Skills regular surveys of some 90,000 enterprises found that only 2% to 4% of employers felt that numeracy skills were lacking in school and college leavers.<sup>4</sup> In debates, the recruiters lent towards the Commission view, but in an interesting way. Recruiters did articulate some dissatisfaction with the numeracy skills of young people...

*With us, we need good mental arithmetic and that is getting harder to find.*

*Even at the graduate level we assess using basic physics questions. But they're not getting them right. I sat down with a colleague and did the test to see if it was too hard, and we got them all right.*

...but it didn't unduly concern them.

*You recruit for personality and attitude and then train them in the knowledge, numeracy, maths, whatever you need.*

*Maths is more of a problem at management level – in general, if someone isn't especially good at maths lower down we'll find a way around it.*

*In the Apprenticeship, the maths is pretty basic, not especially specialised. The truth is that they learn their maths just for the college part of the Apprenticeship and then we train them for what they need on the job and that's different.*

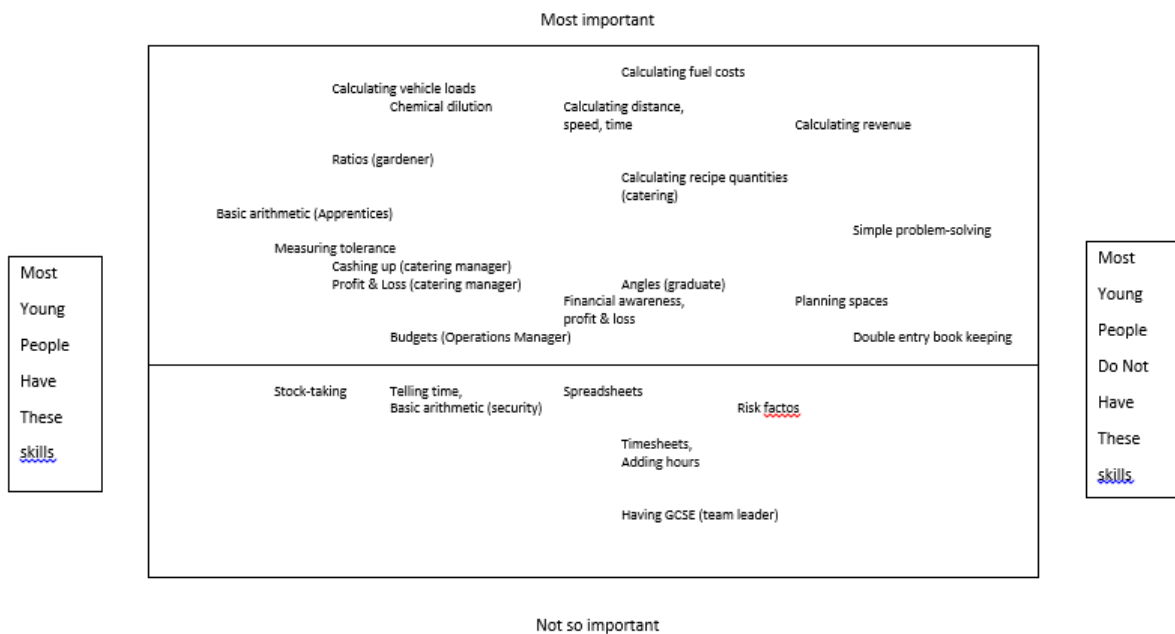
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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, CBI. 2014. *Gateway to Growth – CBI/Pearson Education and Skills Survey 2014*. London: Confederation of British Industry which reports that 38% of 291 employers were dissatisfied with the basic numeracy skills of school and college leavers (p.49).

<sup>4</sup> See, for example, UKCES. 2014. *UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2013: UK Results*. London: UK Commission for Employment and Skills (p.89).

Pushed on what was important in terms of maths and numeracy, recruiters in two groups took part in an exercise specifying the mathematical skills required of specific jobs for which they had recently recruited and to which young people might be expected to apply. The participants were asked to place different mathematical skills on a grid depending on whether they were very important to have or just desirable and whether most young people possessed the skill – or did not. As the tables below set out, academic mathematical skills were held in relatively low regard. It was the practical applied uses of mathematical skills which were most commonly deemed to be both important and often lacking: applied calculations; interpretation of data; problem-solving.

Recruiter Focus Group A. In your experience what are the Mathematical abilities which are most and least important and which are the abilities most and least likely to found when recruiting young people?





**What do employers want from GCSE level mathematics?**

Recruiters attending the two focus groups looked at two specifications for GCSE level mathematics – the English revised GCSE specification and that developed in Wales as a GCSE qualification in numeracy.<sup>5</sup>Overwhelmingly, recruiters valued the numeracy qualification, seeing that as more relevant to their needs.

Reactions to the English GCSE Mathematics specification were consistently negative. Recruiters felt that it had very limited relevance to the numeric skills required in their workplaces.

*This is a bit gobbledygook to me. It's very academic isn't it?*

*It's more scientific and calculus. It's not aimed at where you need it.*

*What they're being given is not realistic for what they need later on at work*

*The algebra? There is no real life situation where they'll ever need to memorise a formula like that. They need to be able to take and use a formula, for sure. Just knowing it means nothing – they need to be able use it.*

*Algebra is quite specialist – never use it; hard to think of roles where it is used. There is not enough on the basics – adding up, basic ratios et cetera.*

<sup>5</sup> See: [http://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/mathematics/mathematics-gcse/WJEC%20GCSE%20Maths%20-%20Numeracy%20Specification%20%28From%202015%20WALES%20ONLY%29%20%2828-10-14%29.pdf?language\\_id=1](http://www.wjec.co.uk/qualifications/mathematics/mathematics-gcse/WJEC%20GCSE%20Maths%20-%20Numeracy%20Specification%20%28From%202015%20WALES%20ONLY%29%20%2828-10-14%29.pdf?language_id=1); and <http://filestore.aqa.org.uk/resources/mathematics/specifications/AQA-8300-SP-2015-V1-0.PDF>

A number of participants felt strongly that young people were being poorly served by having to follow such an academic programme of study.

*Young people are going from junior school to senior school then to college and beyond, failing their maths and English. It can't be just their fault. The system is failing them somewhere.*

*The thing is that in schools the kids are taught to pass an exam, not how to apply the stuff they learn to real life. Many young people just don't think that maths is useful. They are taught to the test so don't take personal responsibility.*

*This shows you don't need to prove you can do all of it to any great depth. Just that you can do it on the day.*

Pressed on what they would like in terms of mathematical provision at GCSE level, there was a questioning of whether schools and colleges could segment or personalise learning to allow young people to develop profiles of greater relevance to specific economic sectors.

*It would be really interesting to see something around non-linear progression. You could separate it into units, then employers could say what a young person would need for say this path, or that path.*

*I think you need to go back to the basics of maths. We got to the point where we were giving people day release for maths training. This spec assumed that everyone is going to be good at everything, and it's not like that. It's the engagement bit, and what it means for the future that's missing.*

*Maths should be more segmented – one size doesn't fit all. It varies a lot what is needed for different jobs.*

There was strong sympathy to the idea of giving young people the option of studying for two qualifications at age 16 – one in academic mathematics relevant to continuing study after the age of 16 and of relevance to highly numerate careers and a second, drawing on the Welsh model, in numerical skills relevant to employment and daily living.

*The Welsh way [two papers in maths and numeracy] seems to make sense. It's not just Maths – its work skills and life skills – can you afford to do the shopping? Pay the mortgage?*

### **Applied knowledge: it's not just the knowledge, but what young people can do with it that counts**

Participants expressed frustration about the ability of some young people to apply the maths they learnt in the classroom to real-life situations

*Where I think they struggle is applying maths to common sense – like, if they come to me asking why their pay is short, they can't seem to work out that they worked a day less. Things like figuring out tax and rotas.*

A common perspective across the recruiters was a desire to see educational provision focus more on questions of real-world practical relevance than on theory. In specific discussion of GCSE mathematics content, one argued:

*I personally think the practical questions are more useful. I suppose there's no tailoring to a need though, but it should be more business-focussed*

Others echoed the perspective of Andreas Schleicher, OECD Director of Education and Skills, that employers no longer value knowledge in and of itself, but what prospective employees could do with the knowledge they possessed.

*They're adding in formulas that need memorising, but in the real world, wouldn't you just Google it? There would be other things I'd want them to memorise!*

*The thing about qualifications whether it is a GCSE or a degree is that you don't know if they are going to be able to use what they know in new situations. So test for knowledge in the sift and then look for the best attitudes.*

The ability to apply learning was seen as particularly important within recruitment processes:

*They need to be able to translate the skills, experience they've developed in school, university, volunteering, other work to show how it relates to the job that's available.*

One recruiter provided a frank assessment of why attitude had become more important when recruiting to lower skilled positions:

*If they can't read and write it doesn't matter if they have good social skills – we have jobs where you don't know how to read or write, but you do have to put a uniform on and you become a representative of our organisation. If they don't have the right interpersonal skills, it is quite challenging to think of them finding a job with us.*

*There's lots of jobs where to be honest a few years back you just needed two arms and two legs – cleaning jobs, security, catering – but not anymore. There are always people to recruit, but the problem is in retention. We need to recruit people who will be reliable, who will stay. They won't go AWOL. What we want is the right attitude – we recruit for that. We want to know about their personalities.*

*We employ a lot of young people, and it takes a good 12 week induction sometimes to get the intelligence, enthusiasm and capability out of them. We end up being teachers and drawing it out. We really take-on a coaching role. You're having to give them life skills, as an employer.*

Focus group participants felt young people often lack vision and drive. The old adage of 'recruit for attitude and train the skill' was resonant. By attitude, recruiters touched on the combination of team working, problem solving and communication skills commonly described as 'employability skills'.<sup>6</sup>

*Older people in general are much better at problem-solving. I think it's because folk just have to solve problems in work much more these days and they get more experience at it and with general life experience too. With young people, where they've done lots of things like the Duke of Edinburgh or been in youth organisations, you do see it, you can recognise it. Schools can put on this sort of thing for them.*

*It's a lot harder [for young people] because they're not job ready. There's a bigger difference between 'skill and will' than there was before. Now young people have the skills, I think, but when it comes to the will they don't have it. They're very short-win, like I want to go on holiday this summer, so can I work for 12 weeks please?*

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<sup>6</sup> See UKCES. 2009. *The Employability Challenge*. London: UK Commission for Employment and Skills.



[Young people need] *Motivation, being engaged, attitude, aptitude, energy, passion, drive, the desire to succeed, career-driven.*

### **What do employers want schools to do?**

In conclusion, participants were pressed for views on the priorities that schools should adapt to better support young people into early employment. As reported above, they wanted to see more resource devoted to careers provision, to see recruitment skills significantly improved and to encourage the cultivation of young people's skills in applying knowledge.

### **Closing the gap between the workplace and classroom**

Essentially, they wanted to see education become more relevant to the reality of the workplace. They wanted to see the gap between education and employment closed, for the engagement of employers in education to be greater and more highly valued.

*Schools won't let us through their doors – even if it's to give help with CVs, applications forms, interviewing. That's why initiatives like Inspiring the Future are so great.*

*Schools in communities aren't engaging with us. We're a big employer in the town but there's no communication, no two-way. We have no connection with young people.*

*Before Inspiring the Future, they never let us into the schools to talk to the kids about Apprenticeships. We call all the local schools and nothing. They do seem to get it now though.*

*You need to recognise that parents, some of them will really struggle to give their kids advice. It's important that young people see adults who are not teachers or parents. They need to do it for themselves, talk to people, find out about things, get involved – that gives them confidence and that is so important.*

*If you're under pressure, finding it difficult to recruit, you go after it more. If I have jobs to fill, I'd go to every school, Jobcentre Plus, every route.*

*You think of your own kids. You'd want them to have these experiences to help them get jobs.*

### **On work experience**

Debating work experience, for example, participating recruiters wanted it to be treated more seriously by schools and articulated senses of both pride and embarrassment with regard to the extent which their own enterprises valued it.

*Is it really of any value? Doing a week filing. It's difficult for them to learn too much because we move them from department to department through their time with us. Otherwise, it would be too big a demand on any one section. Moving them around works well for them – otherwise they'd get bored. There's guilt on the employer side that we don't offer something better. It's too time consuming though to train someone up to do meaningful work.*

*We'd definitely do more if it was staggered through the year. We'd do one a month.*

*It's definitely needs to be planned well. It needs to excite the individual.*

*For [young people], there's value in turning up for work, making tea, getting back on time. From the employers' perspective, I think we should do something more. We need to understand where the advice is.*

*Health and safety definitely gets in the way. Getting the young people fire trained takes virtually two days. Too much. It's disproportionate. But we have to do it.*

*We mix up what they can do. Spend time with supervisors. Get them in a suit to shadow the Department manager. We won't let them be late. Won't have the mobile phone on.*

*Some of them tip up and say 'I'm here for my work experience'. They've got no objectives, have done no preparation. Don't know what they want to get out of it. Some of them though have a book setting out what they need to do, recording it. That works really well.*

*One day a week would work a lot better for us and I can see how it would work really well for the kids too. One week is very difficult. We don't think we are adding value.*

## **Conclusions**

This paper sets out key messages emerging from some four hours of discussion with more than thirty professionals with first-hand experience of recruitment in large and small enterprises across private, public and third sectors. The discussions centred on participants' personal experiences of recruiting young people and engaged with three significant structural changes each of which was recognisable within a changing youth labour market: its growing complexity, the increasingly fractured character of school to work transitions, and the changing requirements of employers.

Running through discussions was a clear perception that the distance between the classroom and the workplace had grown too great – and with rapid increases witnessed in self-employment and changing working environments set to grow still wider. Participants gave first hand reports of what the UK Commission for Employment and Skills has described as the Death of the Saturday Job. Against a background of declining exposure to paid part-time employment, participants broadly felt that schools had been unable to put in place sufficient employer engagement for teenagers to make up for the loss and respond to need.

The discussions reflected here, considered collectively, offer a strong case for a pedagogy that facilitates the transfer of knowledge and skills learnt within school/college to situations beyond the classroom to enable 'boundary crossing.' Participants testified as engaged observers that it was difficult for young people to make connections between the worlds of work and education where opportunities to engage with real workplaces and with authentic, work-based tasks were limited.

Recruiters were strongly of the view that applied skills, recruitment skills and 'soft' skills should be emphasised more strongly within the school curriculum. Young people, they consistently argued, need to be made far more aware of the complexity and 'messiness' of the contemporary labour market. In such a critique, they raised a challenge and stretched out a helping hand to a teaching profession which may have experienced an increasingly distinctive linear career trajectory. Perhaps the strongest and most consistent message emerging from the sessions related to careers provision: many voices argued that a great deal more was required in terms of careers advice and guidance for all young people, not just those identified as 'falling by the wayside.'

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the recruitment criteria behind the focus groups, participants appeared very willing to engage with schools and colleges. They demanded, however, to be given a clear

mandate of what was to be required from them. Even those working at the heart of recruitment policies for large national companies found it difficult to articulate exactly what they required from schools in terms of precise skills and knowledge and willingly turned to schools for guidance and leadership in how they should best engage in the lives young people. Certainly, they had clear views on the sorts of weaknesses typically found in the recruitment profiles of young people, but these were commonly either highly generic or very specific. Behind much debate was the old adage: recruit for the will (attitude) and train the skill. Consistently, employers wanted schools to help them better signal employment opportunities to young people to enable more effective matching between particular jobs and their demands and the supply of interested labour.

For schools, a key message was: identify what employers can do best, acknowledging that this will vary from employer to employer, and let them get on with it. Employers, for example, demonstrated great confidence in their ability to assess the softer skills, recruitment skills and attitudes of young people – things which have been seen as notoriously difficult to assess in the education community. With such competencies more commonly developed within workplaces through reflective experiential learning than through didactic training, optimal employer contributions are arguably likely to lie more in assessment of pupil progress than in teaching and learning. Equally, while employers can with clarity articulate elements within qualifications which their organisations find of greatest utility, capacity and interest in full qualification design was limited.

The paper records discussions, therefore, which capture the need for relationships between educators and employers which are inherently and demonstrably *authentic*, reflecting the very significant breadth of recruiters' demands, *commonplace* and *targeted* at addressing structural weaknesses routinely experienced by young people in the competition with older workers for employment. In recognising the reality of that competition for ever growing numbers of young people, the priorities of schools became more transparent.

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## ***What do recruiters think about today's young people?***

### **A response by Kevin Green, CEO of the Recruitment & Employment Confederation**

I'm struck with how many of the themes in this report resonate. While this report draws on insights from around 30 employers, I believe if we had asked each of the 3,500 recruitment businesses in REC membership, we would have found very similar themes.

Our members work to help individuals find a job and help companies find the talent they need to succeed. The difficulties of finding the right job and suitable staff are what our members deal with on a daily basis. There is no doubt – the recession had a disproportionate effect on young people. It's why we set up our Youth Employment Taskforce led by Baroness Prosser in 2010, as we saw that it was getting harder for young people to get a foot on the jobs ladder.

But the good news is the jobs market is expanding and this should have a positive effect on young people. In July 2015, 80% of the employers surveyed for our monthly *Jobs Outlook* said the economic outlook is improving. Last year in July 2014, only 47% said the same thing and the year before it was even lower at 23%. So things are definitely getting better. When employers grow in confidence, we can expect them to be more interested in hiring young people with potential so they can develop in a job – rather than looking for someone who is fully competent. Over the next year, we can expect more opportunities for youngsters than at any time in the last eight years.

Besides this growing employer confidence, the fact is employers are going to have to work harder to find new recruits. Government figures show we are nearing full employment. *Report on Jobs*, our monthly snapshot on the jobs market, shows there are more job vacancies but staff availability is declining month on month. In this climate of skills shortages, it is a business imperative to help young people get the jobs available. If we don't act now, we will only have ourselves to blame.

While there are some short term reasons to be more optimistic about the prospects of young people, we would recognise too that there are some worrying trends which demand attention.

A theme in this research is how the labour market is increasingly complex, and that better careers information for young people while they are still in education is critical. We agree and are keen to see recruiters play a role. Our members are happy to be used as a resource by teachers to inform young people on the realities of today's jobs market. Getting recruiters and employers interested in this is easy but in our experience, getting schools to take up this offer of help is where things get difficult.

In 2010, our Taskforce found the link between the worlds of education and work was fundamentally broken. We are convinced that removing mandatory work experience for Year 10 and 11 students damaged this link further. There's a simple way to fix this – put it back in the national curriculum. It does not have to be the two weeks of photocopying and making the tea. It can be tailored to local jobs and provide young people with an all-important experience of what work is really like. Some companies ask students to test their products or comms channels during work experience – which results in tangible benefits for all parties. We are also keen to see good quality careers information used in the classroom, starting as young as possible, and we need to give teachers a break – they shouldn't deliver these sessions, employers should.

In truth, all employers make recruitment decisions based on aptitude and attitude as much as knowledge. When I am interviewing, I want to see someone who is willing to learn and apply themselves. But that's not the message you always get at school which can tend to focus on exams. Given this exams focus, we should not expect change in the foreseeable future. What recruiters can do is help young people identify the transferable skills they are gaining from their studies and help them express these when they look for work. Equations learnt in maths help develop logical processing skills. Reviewing a book in English literature helps with analytical and debating skills. As an employer, we can use those skills. So as well as giving more young people work experience, we want to see this government support more employers and recruiters to help teachers identify the transferable skills. This has to be embedded and consistently applied each and every day a young person is in education, to break the cycle of it being about "who you know". Maybe then we'll see a future where employers give more young people the opportunities they crave.

*REC represents 3,349 corporate members who have branches across all regions of the UK. In addition, the REC represents 5,759 individual members within the Institute of Recruitment Professionals (IRP). All members must abide by a Code of Professional Practice and take a compliance test to enter and stay in membership. Above all, the REC is committed to raising standards and works to promote the positive contribution that high quality recruitment can make to people's careers in every sector of the economy.*

**Annex: What do employers want from the school curriculum? Towards a new approach.**

*'Ensuring a good match between the skills acquired in education ... and those required in the labour market is essential if countries want to make the most of their investments in human capital and promote strong and inclusive growth.'* OECD (2013), Skills Outlook – First results from the Survey of Adult Skills

On November 11<sup>th</sup> 2013, national leaders from the worlds of education and employment (see annex for attendees) came together to reflect on the chastening findings of the OECD's 2013 *Survey of Adult Skills*. During the working lunch, there was a clear view that the barriers separating the classroom and workplace must become more porous with greater clarity in terms of what employers truly require of young recruits, particularly in terms of the curriculum.

Works in the UK by the CBI (notably, the *First Steps* report), the CIPD, the Education and Employers Taskforce and the UKCES, and overseas by the Harvard University and OECD provide messages which cannot be ignored. They consistently argue that the new character of the twenty-first century labour market, fundamentally different from that which existed a generation ago, drives a pressing need to close the gap between the current needs of employers and the reality of today's education system. To thrive in today's labour market, young people need qualifications that match, and are informed by, their emerging aspirations. It is recognised that while ever growing proportions of jobs do require higher levels of skills and qualifications, these, in and of themselves, are rarely enough to guarantee success.

As Brian Lightman, General Secretary of the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL) made clear, there is significant interest across school leaders for clearer understandings of what employers truly demand in terms of the knowledge, skills and attributes of young people coming into the labour market. ASCL, which represents school leaders in 90% of the UK's secondary schools, is committed to using its good offices to communicate clearly what employers actually want in terms of the curriculum if only a clear statement were available. Support is also strong from the National Association of Head Teachers which represents the vast majority of primary school leaders.

Following recent political reforms, a growing proportion of schools (half of all English secondary schools as of early 2014) now have discretion over curriculum driving interest from school leaders in new approaches to curriculum development and delivery at both local (school) level and at national levels (e.g., curriculum related to specific subjects).

**Attendees on the 11<sup>th</sup> November 2013: What does the OECD's Survey of Adults Skills mean for employers and our education and skills system?**

Ariel Eckstein	Managing Director	LinkedIn EMEA
Brent Hoberman	Internet Entrepreneur and Investor	
Brian Lightman	General Secretary	Association of School and College Leaders
Charles Parker	Chief Executive	Baker Dearing Educational Trust
Christine Hodgson	Chairman	Capgemini UK plc
Dame Clara Furse	Chairman	Nomura Bank International
David Cruickshank	Chairman	Deloitte and Chairman Education and Employers
David Frost	Chair	LEP Network
Jeremy Newman	Chairman	Audit Commission
John Morgan	Chief executive	Morgan Sindall Plc
Kay Carberry	Assistant General Secretary	Trade Union Congress
Lesley Giles	Deputy Director for Research and Policy	UKCES
Lord Michael Grade		
Mark Protherough	Executive Director	ICAEW
Mr Russell Hobby	General Secretary	National Association of Head Teachers
Nick Chambers	Director	Education and Employers Taskforce
Paul Drechsler	Chairman and Chief Executive	Wates
Paul Ryder	Group Co-Head of LTROD	HSBC
Peter Cheese	CEO	CIPD
Peter Dart	Director	WPP
Richard Hardie	Chairman	UBS Ltd
Ron Dennis CBE	Executive Chairman	McLaren Automotive and McLaren Group
Sir Anthony Salz	Executive Vice Chairman	Rothschild
Sir Charlie Mayfield	Chairman	John Lewis Partnership and Chairman of UKCES
Sir Mike Rake	Chairman	BT Group and President of the CBI
Stephen Welton	CEO	Business Growth Fund
Terry Morgan CBE	Chairman	Crossrail
Tim Thomas	Head of Employment Policy	EEF