



Lost in Transition:
the challenges of
preparing young
people for work



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Lost in Transition

Foreword from the Commercial Education Trust (CET)

The exponential pace of change in the workplace in recent years, the growth of the gig economy and the anticipated impact of artificial intelligence have raised major headlines in the media. Inevitably, debate on the skills required in the future world of work will continue. However, CET aspires to see this discussion resolved into constructive action to ensure education adapts to these changing requirements with a practical contribution from business and supportive legislation from government.

In response to this challenge, CET engaged with academic researcher Trisha Fettes to explore examples of educational programmes that help people develop the know-how and skills needed to succeed in work: and additionally, to hold a series of discussions with business practitioners, large, small and self-employed, to draw on their direct experiences and reflections. The result is *Putting Skills to Work* (2018)* summarised here, as *Lost in Transition*.

The Fettes study reinforces the view that many skills deemed essential in the workplace have been understood for some time but delivery is patchy: and even when skills are acquired in an educational setting, there are significant challenges to their application in the world of work. The seven projects highlighted in the Fettes report and mentioned in *Lost in Transition*, illustrate the value of the endeavours charities undertake to bridge the worlds of education and employment. Nevertheless, sustained support must be found for evidence-based metric evaluation over time. In this respect, government has an important role to play.

To avoid a loss of skills 'in transition' from learning to work, with the consequent impact on productivity, the study leads us to conclude that educators and employers need to work more closely together. To succeed in the modern flexible economy, a renewed focus on commercial awareness, combined with an understanding of the workplace, will guide young people in acquiring the soft communicative and problem-solving skills that will allow them to succeed in the future.

Ultimately, we need to work smarter: the overlapping spheres of influence in education, employment and government must come together to nurture the commercial instincts of all, if we are to thrive and prosper in the future.

David Coughtrie
Chairman

Clare Brooks
Director

* A copy of the Fettes report is available to download on www.lccicet.com.

Context

The transition from education to work can be tough on young people. Many struggle to succeed in today's complex labour market with its growing competition for entry-level jobs and employers' changing requirements.¹ According to a recent estimate², young adults are four times more likely to be unemployed than older people.

Successive government initiatives have attempted to improve young people's employability.

Yet despite all these efforts, employers continue to complain that young people often lack both the skills and know-how needed in the workplace.

Many schools, colleges and universities do, of course, offer programmes designed to prepare students for work. But not all young people have access to the best of these learning experiences. As one report³ puts it, current approaches 'do not seem to be working, at least not universally so that all young people can benefit'.

So what approaches do work?

What skills and know-how do young people need to become work ready?

How can they learn to make good use of these capabilities in the workplace?

And is it possible to find out what interventions make a real difference?

The Commercial Education Trust (CET) supported academic researcher Trisha Fettes to explore these questions and suggest possible ways forward. On the following pages we highlight some of the key points in her study, *Putting Skills To Work*.

About the study

The CET study *Putting Skills To Work* sets out to identify the skills and know-how needed to succeed at work, and the methods that can help young people develop these capabilities and use them in the workplace. It also considered the feasibility of evaluating programmes that include commercial education to prepare young people for work.

The study, which ran from November 2016 to December 2017, consisted of a literature review, case studies of seven projects (six of them funded by CET) and a pilot online survey of former project participants. Researcher Trisha Fettes also invited contributions from fellow academics specialising in related areas, and used a framework developed during previous CET-funded research⁴ to analyse the case studies. In addition, CET set up a Business Advisory Group to gain employers' perspectives on the issues raised by the study.

The full report can be downloaded from www.lccicet.com

¹ Mann, A. & Huddleston, P. (2016) Schools and the twenty-first century labour market: perspectives on structural change. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 45:2, 208-218

² Youth Employment UK (June 2017) *The Youth Employment UK Employability Review*

³ *ibid*

⁴ Evans, K., Guile, D. & Harris, J. (October 2008) *Putting Knowledge to Work: integrating work-based and subject-based knowledge in intermediate-level qualifications and workforce upskilling*. Teaching and Learning Research Briefing. T.L.R.P./E.S.R.C

1 The evolving employment landscape

Young people are entering a rapidly changing labour market, with new business models and technologies requiring skills that were previously unknown or judged unimportant. One study⁵ predicts that by 2020, more than a third of the core skill sets for most jobs will be made up of skills not considered crucial today.

Changing demands

Demand is expected to rise for people with problem-solving skills and the ability to work with data. Social, personal and creative skills are also of growing importance, even in jobs previously considered 'technical'. As Tom Ravenscroft, Founder and CEO of the social enterprise Enabling Enterprise has said: *'We might call these skills different things – soft skills, life skills or employability skills – but we draw on them as much as numeracy or literacy...When we look to the next decades, in a world of increased automation, fragmented jobs and the need for constant learning, it is these skills that will really set our children and young people up for future success.'*

The programmes described in our case studies aim to develop a wide range of non-technical skills, including communication, problem solving and team working. These programmes also seek to build confidence, resilience, ambition and other qualities that can help young people through working lives likely to include full-time, part-time and temporary employment, as well as self-employment, and periods back in the classroom.

The online survey⁶ carried out as part of the CET study shows that young people are well aware of the need to develop so-called soft skills. Asked to choose the three most important skills and qualities for being well prepared for work, a majority of respondents (57 per cent) ranked soft skills above all others. A similar majority (over 60 per cent) put communication and team working skills, followed by problem solving, at the top of the list of skills they saw as most important for performing well at work.

'It's all about the soft skills and knowing how to communicate with others, which is always the biggest challenge,' said one survey respondent.

Others expressed similar views. For example, Ronan, who completed the Royal Academy of Engineering's scholarship programme for aspiring engineering leaders, stressed the importance of communication skills, including the ability to engage with people from different backgrounds.

⁵ House of Commons, Work and Pensions Committee (March 2017) *Employment opportunities for young people. Ninth Report of Session 2016-17*

⁶ *Designed by Education and Employers Research, 573 programme leavers were surveyed, with a response rate of c. 10 per cent (56 useable responses)*

Chart 1 - What knowledge, skills and qualities do you think are the most important in being well-prepared for work?

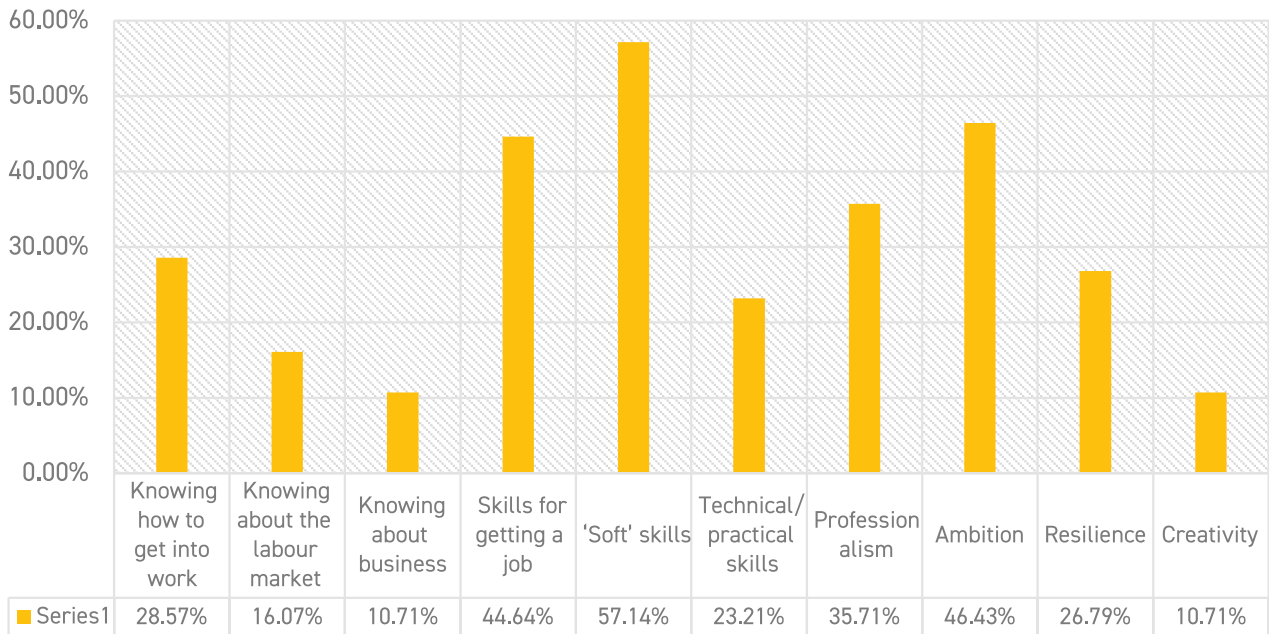
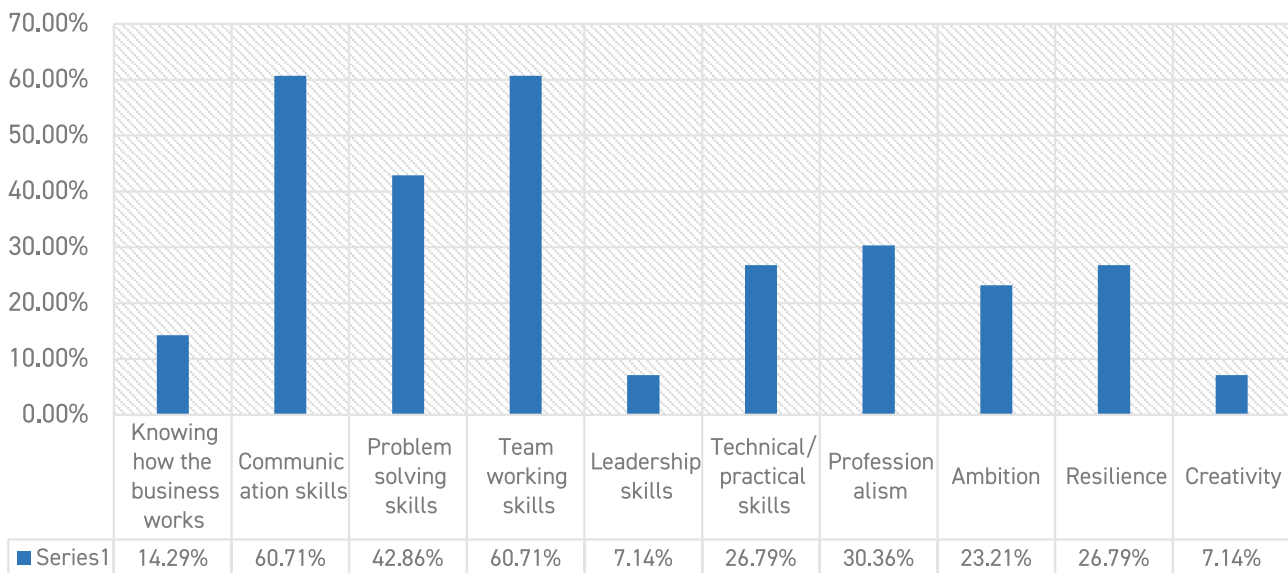


Chart 2 - What knowledge, skills, qualities do you think are the most important in performing well at work, once you have started?



Charts 1 and 2 are derived from the results of an online survey.⁶

Adjusting to work

The emphasis on soft skills continued when survey respondents were asked what they thought employers looked for when hiring staff. Around three quarters mentioned soft skills, followed by qualifications and ambition – the last highlighted by 81 per cent of male respondents but only 40 per cent of females. However, most responses to an open question about ‘things found difficult when starting work’ focused on the working environment, the demands of the working day, and knowledge, rather than skills.

Comments about the difficulties respondents had experienced in the transition from education to work included:

‘Adjusting to the social dynamics of the workplace.’

‘..having to be at work every day, no matter what..’

‘Rigidity of 9-5 imposed schedule’

‘lack of business knowledge.’

‘The rapid learning curve required when starting a job - there wasn’t much easing in.’

It is clear from these responses that new recruits need support in the early stages of their employment. Coming to terms with the culture and practices of the workplace can be especially difficult for those from disadvantaged backgrounds. For this reason, one of our case study organisations, Be Onsite (a not-for-profit company established by Lendlease that provides training and job opportunities in the construction industry), offers employees long-term support.

Expecting the impossible

While employers regularly refer to the difficulty of recruiting young people who are work ready, their own expectations may be unrealistic. Witnesses appearing before the House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee pointed to a mismatch at times between employers’ expectations and young people’s experience, capabilities and confidence levels.⁷

What makes matters worse is that some young people struggle to ‘sell’ themselves to employers during the application process and lack of significant work experience makes it difficult for employers to assess their suitability. In addition, recruitment practices, especially in small and medium-sized businesses that rely on informal, word of mouth methods, can disadvantage applicants without the ‘right’ social connections. However, examples provided by the Business Advisory Group suggest that some businesses are willing to adapt their recruitment practices to make sure they consider young applicants’ capabilities in the light of actual job requirements.

⁷House of Commons, Work and Pensions Committee (March 2017) *Employment opportunities for young people. Ninth Report of Session 2016-17*



Current approaches...do not seem to be working, at least not universally..

2 Making best use of skills

Government initiatives intended to improve young people's employability have tended to focus on boosting skills supply. But there is growing recognition⁸ that it is not enough to help young people develop workplace skills. They also need to be able to use what they have learnt, first to find a job and then to do that job effectively. Indeed, the Industrial Strategy Commission has said that 'ensuring better utilisation of people's skills must be core to a new strategy'.⁹

'Workers able to better use their skills are said to be more likely to have greater job satisfaction and benefit employers by being more productive and innovative.'
The Industrial Strategy Commission.

So the question that now needs to be asked is not so much what skills are needed or why, both of which have been addressed over the years, but how skills can best be developed and used. As the Business Advisory Group observed:

'It's been more, more, more for quite a long time. We now need a massive shift from more ... to BETTER...'

Our case studies show that the design and content of learning programmes, the environment in which they take place and the teaching methods used can all be part of this shift from 'more' to 'better'.

Embedding workplace learning

Some of the programmes featured in the case studies develop employability skills within traditional subject lessons. For example, a CET grant enabled education charity Future First to help schools develop communication and numeracy through the context of business studies, science and English lessons. Students were given opportunities to reflect on their skills and practise applying them in associated tasks.

All too often, however, programmes to prepare young people for work are one-off events that are not embedded within or alongside the curriculum.

Providing safe learning spaces

The experience of the case study organisations indicates that learners need a supportive environment, with opportunities to practise newly acquired skills in a range of situations, both inside and outside the classroom.

Several programmes, including The Prince's Trust Enterprise Programme, teach students to develop business plans and apply for start-up funding, giving them opportunities to practise the required skills in a safe environment before 'going for it for real'.

⁸ Keep, E. Improving skills utilisation in the UK – some reflections on What, Who and How? *SKOPE Research Paper No. 123*, August 2016

⁹ Industrial Strategy Commission (November 2017) *The Final Report of the Industrial Strategy Commission*

Growing business knowledge

To put their skills to good use in the workplace, learners need some grasp of business and economics. As the Business Advisory Group noted: *'Whatever the type of skills, their effective application is dependent on having a good understanding of the business/industry environment and the realities of the workplace.'*

Employers clearly have a key role to play in bringing these workplace realities into the classroom. Business involvement in the case study programmes includes delivering lessons with teachers, hosting visits to the workplace, providing coaching or mentoring and supporting projects. The international charity ARK (Absolute Return for Kids), one of the case study organisations, enters into agreements with business partners, who undertake to develop curriculum projects with teachers and link students with employees. As well as giving students opportunities to practise tasks such as running an interview or organising events, employees who volunteer to work with schools give talks about routes into business, and e-mentor students through job application processes.



Providing work experience

Employer involvement can also take the form of providing work experience placements and internships, which the Business Advisory Group described as helping young people become more realistic about their career options, and identify jobs that match their skills. While acknowledging that some businesses are put off providing placements by the bureaucracy involved in complying with regulations, members of the group stressed the need to increase the supply of work experience.

Young people responding to the online survey could also see the value of

work experience. *'I didn't find much difficulty [when starting work] due to the variety of my work experiences. 'I knew what I was getting into...'* said one respondent.

Teaching and learning

The case study organisations use a mix of teaching and learning methods, including 'learning by doing', teaching inputs, debates and role-plays. Extra-curricular activities are sometimes also used to prepare young people for work. Teambuild, for example, is a team competition designed to introduce undergraduates to the construction industry. The competition is split into stages mirroring the phases of a construction project, including briefing and planning, detailed design and handover. Teams have to tackle complex problems from the industry and apply their skills to meet changing demands. At the end of each stage, teams make presentations to a panel of industry professionals.

Survey respondents gave 'learning from others' the highest rating (80.36%), followed by 'direct experience of the workplace' and 'opportunities to engage in real work tasks and problems' (62.50% each).

Breaking down barriers

A report by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills¹⁰ suggests that one of the main barriers to developing employability skills relates to teachers' own skills, confidence and knowledge of the world of work. Teacher training is therefore key to developing learners' skills.

Case study organisations actively involved in this area include Enabling Enterprise (see next page) and ARK, which works with teachers to increase their understanding of how to help students develop and apply work readiness skills.

¹⁰ UK Commission for Employment and Skills (June 2008) *Employability Skills Project. Review of Evidence on Best Practice in Teaching and Assessing Employability Skills. UKCES*

Teaching the teachers

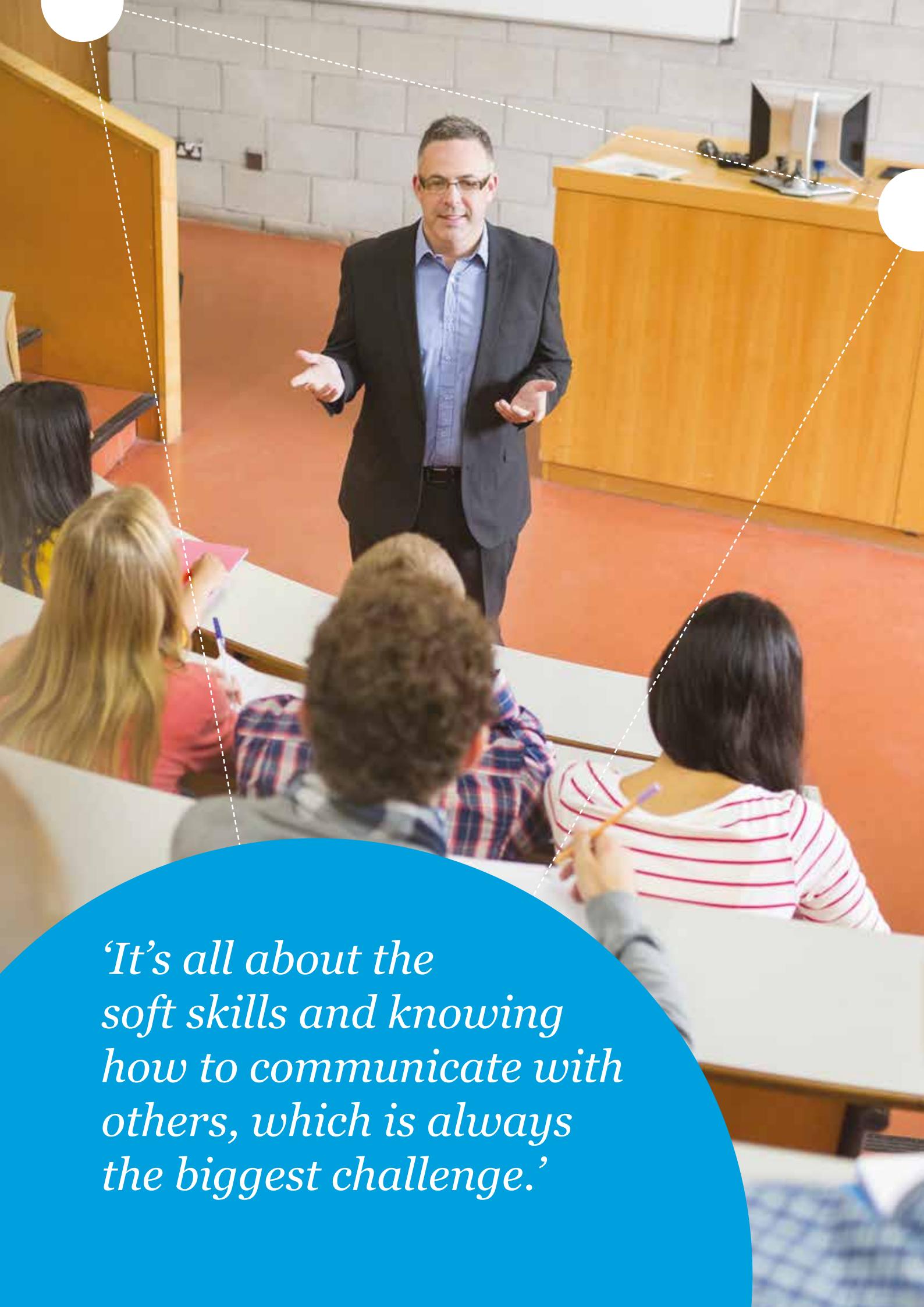
Enabling Enterprise (EE) offers training and resources to teachers involved in developing primary and secondary school pupils' employability and enterprise skills. Six principles underpin EE's advice to teachers on developing these skills:

- . Keep it simple: focus on a small, consistent number of highly transferable skills
- . Measure it: by really understanding students' existing skill levels we can identify strengths, weaknesses and where to focus
- . Start young and keep going: as with literacy and numeracy, building the skills, starting with basic empathy and resilience pays dividends throughout education, as well as beyond it
- . Focus tightly: ensure activities and projects give the students enough challenge, but not too much
- . Keep practising: reinforce the skills throughout school life – including within other lessons and the wider school ethos
- . Bring it to life: real world links help students apply the skills to new experiences and future employability

Creating the right culture

The CET study highlights the need to support learners after they leave school, college or university, with effective use of skills depending on a workplace culture that enables people to perform at their best. That can mean, among other things, encouraging autonomy, providing varying work tasks, giving regular feedback and creating learning opportunities.





‘It’s all about the soft skills and knowing how to communicate with others, which is always the biggest challenge.’

3 Discovering what makes a difference

The case study organisations employ a range of techniques to evaluate their programmes, using the results to inform improvements. ARK, for example, believes that: ‘...**great results** are achieved when **informed action** is taken by school leaders and teachers – as well as students and their parents. We also believe that these actions should be informed by **insightful analysis**, which is only possible when we have **accurate data**.’

But it can be difficult to work out what impact – if any – programmes have on students’ knowledge, skills and overall work readiness. As a guide to impact evaluation¹¹ explains: ‘Simple impact questions like “Did it work?” are becoming more difficult to answer when programmes overlap with others and are influenced by other developments, actors and their activities and policies. A more useful question in these circumstances is “Did the programme make a difference?”’

To answer this question, providers clearly need to collect data specific to the programmes they are evaluating.

‘...great results are achieved when informed action is taken by school leaders and teachers – as well as students and their parents. We also believe that these actions should be informed by insightful analysis, which is only possible when we have accurate data.’ (ARK)

¹¹ Stern, E. (2015) Impact evaluation. A design guide for commissioners and managers of international development evaluations in the voluntary and community sector. Prepared for Bond, Comic Relief, Big Lottery

Keeping track of leavers

It is often impossible to tell if a programme has made a real difference until long after learners have left. So tracking learners along their different career paths is an important part of any evaluation. It will show, for example, whether skills learnt on a programme are proving useful in the workplace.

Some of the case study organisations use centralised IT systems to track programme leavers. ARK, which has an expert team working with its network of schools, is trying to reduce the time teachers spend collecting and analysing data by using centralised systems to track students' progress. The organisation has also developed a common assessment framework and a common approach to analysing data.

Similarly, The Prince's Trust has a central team supporting evaluation, with a centralised system providing a consistent way of collecting data on all its programmes.

Many smaller commercial education providers, however, lack the resources to maintain centralised data management systems for tracking leavers long-term. They may also need to outsource surveys, which incurs additional cost.

Planning and preparation.

Tracking leavers after a programme ends calls for careful planning and preparation. It can be harder to gather feedback from former students when they see this as an 'add-on' requirement, rather than one they expected from the start.

The study also indicates that leavers need to be encouraged to keep in touch, with opportunities to 'give something back' or to develop their own skills acting as powerful incentives. As Serkan, a former participant of the Future First programme, which helps schools build and sustain communities of former students, said: *'I go back regularly to help the students because I feel so grateful to the school for the help they gave me...Not only that, but volunteering helps my own communication skills.'*

Choosing the right methods

Commercial education providers need to consider the strengths and limitations of different methods of collecting information. The Prince's Trust, for example, surveys alumni of its Enterprise programme by sending texts to their mobile phones, a method found to be 'young people-friendly' as well as 'resource-efficient'. But there is a limit to how much information can be collected this way. A combination of methods is likely to be needed to obtain more detailed information on how leavers are coping with entry into the labour market.

Using a variety of methods, including surveys, interviews and observations, also gives a fuller picture of a programme's effectiveness than one based on any one method.



4 Reflections

At a time when the government's new industrial strategy is investing in technical education and promoting local initiatives to develop skills for the future, there is an opportunity to take a fresh approach to helping young people make the transition from education to work. The examples of good practice identified by the CET study show what such an approach might look like.

The study's main conclusions are listed below.

- Policymakers have over the years focused largely on boosting the supply of workplace skills. They have paid less attention to how generic skills such as problem-solving, team-working and communication can be used in the workplace.
- To manage transitions and meet changing demands of the labour market, all young people need to develop 'career adaptability skill' and strategies for 'putting their skills to work'.

This is just as important to the self-employed/freelancers/temporary workers as to the employed.

- The case studies show how education providers can work with employers and entrepreneurs to help learners develop and make the best use of their skills in different situations. They can also help learners gain insights into the business environment and the realities of the workplace.
- There is sometimes a mismatch between employers' expectations and young people's capabilities. But CET's Business Advisory Group has suggested that some businesses are willing to adapt their recruitment practices to ensure that these capabilities are considered in the light of actual job requirements.
- While good practice certainly exists, not all young people have access to the best quality learning experiences to prepare them for work, with the difficulty of arranging work experience in parts of the country amounting to a serious gap in provision.
- The case study organisations show that it is possible to evaluate programmes shortly after they have been completed. But it is often difficult to tell if these programmes have made a real difference until long after learners have left. Centralised systems and alumni networks have been shown to help education providers track former students over the long-term.
- The Business Advisory Group has argued that we need to do better, perhaps by dropping some activities and focusing on those that matter most. That includes building on efforts already underway to achieve greater consistency across the country - something that can be achieved only through 'partnerships between education, business and government, not forgetting the important role of parents/carers in career development.'

5 Next steps

The CET study suggests that a co-ordinated approach involving a range of stakeholders would help young adults make a successful transition from education to work. Support is needed, including work as part of the learning process from an early stage and well into young adults' early careers. The steps that each group of stakeholders need to take – if they have not done so already – are outlined below.



Employers

- Ensure that their recruitment practices enable them to identify both young people's current ability to do particular jobs and their potential.
- Develop a culture that helps new recruits settle into the workplace and allows them to grow and use their skills to perform at their best.
- Work with schools, colleges and universities to increase young adults' understanding of the labour market and the realities of the workplace; build employability skills through, for example, projects and interview practice, and, where possible, real work experience.
- Help teachers develop or update their knowledge of workplace practices and career pathways.

Education providers

- Develop an organisational culture that values skills and business knowledge, as well as academic learning.
- Make sure that all students have opportunities from early in their education to develop the capabilities needed to meet changing work requirements.
- Ensure that teachers are aware of resources available to support skills development – and can access training that strengthens and updates their own business knowledge.
- Help teachers use national data and other resources to evaluate the effectiveness of their interventions.

- Build and maintain relationships with local business partners and former students who can bring the world of work into the classroom and offer direct experience of the workplace.

Government and its agencies

- Use the new industrial strategy as an opportunity to take a long-term approach to skills policy, for example, by giving wider support for commercial education and helping providers share data to inform programme improvements.
- Provide incentives for local measures to address gaps in provision and give all young people opportunities in order to develop the required skills and know-how, and learn how to use these at work.
- Urgently address the problem of uneven access to quality work experience.
- Make better support more widely available to develop the skills of the self-employed/freelancers/temporary workers, i.e. to manage and grow their businesses/cope with the unpredictability of their work.
- Ensure that teachers' initial training and continuing professional development include a focus on skills development.
- Commission and fund further research on how young people can learn to make use of their skills in the workplace.

About the Commercial Education Trust (CET)

The Commercial Education Trust (CET) is an independent grant-investing charity, originally established by the London Chamber of Commerce and Industry to improve the commercial education standards of clerks working in the City of London. The sale of the LCCI Examinations Board in 2002 provided an 'endowment fund' to support CET's activities.

CET has a vision of society in which people have the 'know-how', skills and opportunity to succeed in work, thereby creating a thriving UK economy.

The Trust supports sustainable wealth creation through making a positive contribution to effective commercial education that seeks to:

- **equip people with the skills and commercial awareness to grow, develop and lead in business;**
- **embed at every level of education, the means by which people can apply their learning to work;**
- **encourage people to be enterprising and innovative in their approach to business.**

The programmes funded by CET included in the Trisha Fettes study and featured in the report *'Putting Skills To Work'* incorporate many of the key elements of commercial education, i.e. education that develops employability, enterprise, entrepreneurship, business and economic understanding.



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