Today’s school leavers and graduates face a future certain to bring uncertainty. Many will be doing jobs that do not yet exist, using technologies and skills yet to be invented. Over increasingly long working lives, they are likely to follow careers paths unimaginable to previous generations. It’s not only jobs for life that are now threatened with extinction: careers for life seem to be going the same way.

These trends add up to a major challenge for an education system that despite decades of “reform” is still largely failing to prepare young people to thrive both in the workplace and the wider community.

Following the evidence
The Commercial Education Trust (CET) is an independent charity with roots going back to the nineteenth century. Today, it supports programmes that deliver commercial education - a term covering the development of:

- essential generic skills;
- employability; enterprise and entrepreneurship, and
- the understanding of commerce, business and trade.

CET also champions improvements to the education system, believing these should be based on evidence of what works - not on political whim or the latest fad. For this reason, CET recently commissioned a study of what types of learning experiences are currently available to help young people both understand the world of commerce, and to develop the skills and attitudes needed for a successful working life.

A research team led by Professor (Emeritus) Prue Huddleston of the University of Warwick’s Centre for Education Studies carried out a literature review, followed by observations and interviews at five case study organisations offering programmes identified as examples of good practice. A focus group was also set up to discuss the case study findings. This group consisted of staff from the case study sites, CET, members of the research team and experts in commercial education – or “business and enterprise education”, as some preferred to call it.
Primary and Secondary School

The case studies, which covered all phases of education, revealed a wide range of rich learning activities, with equally varied aims

Primary school
At Queen Ethelburga’s Collegiate, an independent school near York, the main focus of the “Young Enterprise Our Business” programme is to develop generic skills such as team working and communication. Designed by the Young Enterprise charity to support Year 5 and 6 pupils in setting up and running their own businesses, the programme consists of activities ranging from pitching a business idea to a school governor, to setting a price for a product and selling it on a stall.

All pupils interviewed said these activities had helped them think about their future careers. For teachers the strength of the programme lay in providing an engaging context for pupils to apply learning from other curriculum areas.

Budgetary constraints are a challenge and have been reviewed by the school for the next academic year. One teacher noted that “enterprise education” could be better funded if it became part of the key stage 2 national curriculum.

Secondary school
Queen’s Park High School, a comprehensive school in Chester, works with the not-for-profit organisation Enabling Enterprise (EE) to run a whole programme including teacher training and support, access to tools and resources to develop essential skills and challenge days at school. Enabling Enterprise’s Skills Builder Framework allows the school to assess progress in eight essential skill areas, including teamwork, creativity, listening and presenting.

The challenge days give students opportunities to practise the essential skills that they are developing at school. Insights into the world of commerce are also provided - for example, through visits to Bank of America Merrill Lynch in Chester, where students work alongside business volunteers on engaging activities such as simulated stock market trading.

The school’s headteacher sees the development of enterprise skills as helping students stand out when they apply for jobs or university, as well as a way of raising their aspirations. The students themselves view the challenge days as contributing to their skills development, while also increasing their resilience. “Keep going – if [a] task [is] not going well, don’t let other people make you less determined”, as one Year 8 student put it.

Budgetary pressures are again an issue, with the school only able to run EE challenge days because their partner local business, Bank of America Merrill Lynch, pays for these events.

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Further, Higher and Post-graduate education

Further education
Leicester College, a large further education college, runs a Peter Jones Enterprise Academy (PJA) programme that has won national recognition for excellence. The two-year programme, which leads to a BTEC level 3 Business Enterprise and Entrepreneurship qualification, aims to develop both business specific knowledge and employability skills by giving students opportunities to set up and run their own businesses, either hypothetically or in reality. They are also encouraged to forge links with employers, with business mentors giving feedback on students’ start-up ideas.

College staff recognise the importance of developing business knowledge and skills, while also emphasising the programme’s role in helping students gain “soft skills”, including team working, operating in different environments, and public speaking. Students themselves reported that in addition to giving them business knowledge, the programme had boosted their confidence.

The approach to delivering the PJA curriculum reflects awareness that topics related to business cannot be taught in isolation. It was described as “teaching to the topic not the [BTEC] units”. Staff also stressed the importance of embedding business-related activities in the curriculum, rather than offering them as add-on experiences.

Resourcing was once more flagged up as a challenge, as was the difficulty of finding enough employers to engage with students and provide business mentors.

Higher education
Birmingham City University’s BSc Music Technology course includes a compulsory “Employability, Project and Management Module” designed to develop a range of business skills. The course gives students opportunities to go on work placements, tackle industry-focused projects, hear guest speakers and take part in an exchange programme with a North American university.

Students said they thought they would be well prepared for employment when they finished their course, singling out as especially useful elements such as interview preparation and project planning.

While the staff and business people who work on the programme are strongly committed to it, they recognise that there is often a “mismatch between what is required in the academic world and the reality of business”, although both parties are seen as having something to offer.

Post-graduate education
Harwell Campus, a national and international centre for scientific research, is committed to developing the next generation of scientists, innovators and entrepreneurs. The Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC) based on the campus hosts the European Space Agency’s Business Incubation Centre.

Development activities available to incubator participants range from workshops on marketing, HR and patent law, to one-to-one sessions on specific start-up issues, such as obtaining finance. Business mentoring is also offered, along with much valued networking opportunities. Participants spoke of the benefits of meeting people from different disciplines and of seeing “real life companies…present real-life problems”.

Some incubator participants and business mentors were critical of the formal education system for failing to prepare people adequately for the business world, particularly in how to convert research outputs into marketable ideas and products. STFC seeks to contribute to improvements both through its work with incubatees and by working with schools and colleges, offering them experiences of “real life science” through site visits, master classes and teacher training events, among other activities. The challenge is to meet demand for these activities, which are massively oversubscribed.
The case study findings and focus group discussion point to the following conclusions.

• While it is vital to prepare students to move into the world beyond education, how this is done is just as important as whether it is done at all. As the researchers point out, experiencing “business enterprise or employability” education does not in itself make people employable.

• To be effective, such education needs to be integral to the curriculum - not a “nice to have” add-on promoted by enthusiasts.

• Financial constraints are holding back educators from doing more to develop the know-how and attitudes young people need to succeed in work and other parts of their lives. However, even with limited resources, schools would be more likely to prioritise commercial education if it became part of a statutory personal, social, health and economic (PSHE) curriculum.

• Methods used to assess traditional learning are not always appropriate for programmes designed to develop enterprise and employability. A more nuanced approach to assessing the outcomes of these programmes would track young people’s progress in the labour market over the long-term.

What needs to happen next

Among other recommendations, the research calls on education policy makers and providers to allocate appropriate funding for commercial education, and to make this an integral part of the statutory curriculum throughout the years of compulsory schooling.

The research also highlights the need to clarify the role of business in delivering commercial education. This should focus on what is achievable – and how business might gain from engaging with education.

CET’s role

With long-standing ties to employers, educators and policy makers, CET is keen to work with these partners to take this agenda forward.

CET’s goal is to invest in initiatives that help young people learn new skills, apply these to the world of work and achieve prosperous and rewarding lives. Recent projects that support this goal include The London Chamber of Commerce and Industry’s Young Chamber pilot project exploring ways of improving business engagement in schools, a Nottingham University Business School project that seeks to add business content to undergraduate engineering courses, and a training programme for small business owners in a rural district of Ghana.

CET also funds research, seminars and lectures on skills development, employability, enterprise and trade. At the Commercial Education Lecture 2018, Justin King CBE made the point that young people looking for employment need to demonstrate interests and achievements beyond the academic.

Underpinning all CET’s activities is the belief that engagement with the world of work, even in the early years of education, can make a real difference to young people’s prospects – not least by making them more resilient in the face of what Prue Huddleston’s study describes as “increasingly uncertain destinies”.

CET would like to thank everyone who participated in the research and in particular:

• the research team led by: Prof (Emeritus) Prue Huddleston; Ian Abbott, Associate Professor and Dr Jacqueline Dynes, Senior Teaching Fellow, Centre for Education Studies, University of Warwick; and Caroline Luxton-White (independent consultant).

• the five case study organisations: Kirsty Clayton, Queen Ethelburga’s Collegiate, York; Lyndsay Watterson, Headteacher, Queen’s Park High School, Chester; Dr. Roy Priest, Associate Professor, Birmingham City University; Yvonne Sexton, Jocelyn Chauhan and Rupinder Drew, City of Leicester College; Mark Burrows, Harwell Campus Innovation Manager, Science and Technology Facilities Council (STFC).

• Trisha Fettes (independent consultant); Enabling Enterprise; Young Enterprise.

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