BREAKING BARRIERS

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NEW THINKING FINDS WAYS AROUND THE MANY CHALLENGES OF PREPARING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR UNPREDICTABLE WORKING LIVES

What jobs might emerge in the next 10, 20 or 30 years? Will jobs even continue to exist or will there only be "gigs"? Will intelligent machines work with humans or replace them? Since no one can possibly know the answers to these questions, we need to make sure that young people have the skills and resilience to thrive no matter what the future throws at them.

Yet a crowded curriculum stuck in a mid-twentieth century time warp, together with a squeeze on school and college funding, leave little time or money to develop these skills - or so it seems. In reality, these barriers can be overcome if people tasked with preparing young people for work learn from each other and apply fresh thinking to what needs to happen next.

That was the key message to come out of a recent gathering of experts in commercial education convened by the Commercial Education Trust (CET), an independent charity with a mission to support commercial education programmes and research. "Commercial education" is a broad term covering the development of core business know-how; enterprise and entrepreneurial skills, and understanding of international trade, all underpinned by skills building and employability activities.

The gathering, which took place on 20 June 2019, profiled commercial education best practices, and also gave voice to some commonly-held concerns, focusing what needs to happen next in this field. David Guile, Professor of Education and Work and Co-Director of the Centre for Engineering Education at the UCL Institute for Education led a session that gave shape to new ideas and recommendations by challenging conventional thinking.

Re-thinking time, contextulising skills and listening to learners

Re-thinking time

Lack of time to devote to building work-related skills and know-how was perhaps the biggest barrier identified by those attending the gathering. One participant remarked that teachers are under pressure to be everything to everyone, and have little time left to teach: but teachers have always faced time constraints, a point made by Professor Guile.

In a series of comments designed to provoke participants into examining both their own thinking and prevailing practice in commercial education, he recalled his days as a deputy head in the 1980s when he was told that there was no space in the curriculum for students to go on work experience. "There will never be enough time," he said. "You would have to take the curriculum over to have the time that you think you want in order to achieve your objectives."

The group agreed on the need to think about time in new ways – as some of its members were already doing by looking at how to help students learn outside school or college. That might, for example, mean programmes taking place over the summer holidays, an approach some organisations are now exploring. Or it might mean using YouTube and other technology platforms to complement more traditional teaching methods.

Those taking part in the discussion were more divided over how realistic it is to involve parents, grandparents and other carers in developing young people's skills - and so extend the time devoted to learning. Some stressed the difficulty of engaging parents, especially those struggling "to put bread on the table". Others said this obstacle could be overcome - for example, by taking learning from the classroom into the family. One participant holding this view described primary school children talking about credit unions to parents who had been borrowing money at astronomical rates, and how discovering the existence of alternatives turned the lives of these families around.

Another attendee, emphasising "a huge deficit in adult skills", suggested that programmes could be designed to focus on the skills of both children and their parents.

Contextualising skills

What are the skills that these programmes need to develop? There is a clear consensus among educators, employers and society generally that skills for work are essential. The the gathering concluded that it is not always obvious if these are the skills that are important for the rest of the 21st century – or for the recent past. Talking about "generic skills" was considered unhelpful

because it is the contextualisation of skills, not the skills themselves, that really matters. This makes it essential for commercial education providers to help young people apply the skills they have learnt in contexts that will become ever more varied as artificial intelligence transforms the nature of work.

As an example of smarter ways of thinking, the group heard about an out of school project that computer scientists at UCL are carrying out with the Institute of Education's music department. The idea is to develop the engineering skills of the future and reach students who might not be thinking about careers in this field by helping them recognise that engineering matters in all types of work - including the work of musicians.

Listening to learners

The debate underlined the importance not only of defining and contextualising skills more clearly, but of making sure that feedback from beneficiaries of past programmes informs the design of future programmes. The voice of the beneficiary is often missing from the design process, although the gathering heard of some notable exceptions. These include the Industry Apprenticeship Council set up by SEMTA to make sure that students are heard by both designers of engineering and manufacturing training programmes and government ministers.

However, those taking part in the discussion recognised that we still tend to think that any young person at school or college is an empty vessel that can be filled up with "stuff". Some of this may be good stuff – but that's not the point. As one person asked: "What about what they can bring to the picture themselves?" That's important, he added, because it enables education providers to build on learners' existing capabilities.

Young people themselves are increasingly insistent on making their voices heard. They have more confidence than previous generations and are more willing to make demands and challenge norms. Acknowledging this reality, the group came to the conclusion that information on the difference that programmes have made to learners should be used to give a fresh perspective on what's been accomplished and how to improve it.

Building capacity, exploiting policy churn and sharing learning

Building capacity

With budgetary constraints often preventing schools and colleges from delivering effective programmes once external funding runs out, participants agreed on the importance of up-skilling teachers so that they become less reliant on outside support.

Some of the organisations represented at the gathering are already engaged in what was described as "institutional capacity building", often using online resources. In some cases the focus is on helping teachers embed commercial education skills in their teaching. In others it is on giving teachers the skills and confidence to use new technologies.

People also stressed the need to extend capacity building to alumni networks, which have been hit hard by the squeeze on school and college budgets. There was agreement that schools and colleges need to build and embed knowledge of how to maintain these networks and develop the alumni themselves. Suggestions for furthering this aim included delivering continuing professional development sessions to help schools make best use of alumni to support their students.

Exploiting policy churn

The discussion also highlighted what Professor Guile called the UK "cultural norm" of policy churn, which undermines collective memory of what worked in the past and leads to the recycling of old ideas. It doesn't help that the UK's four nations have developed different policy frameworks and initiatives.

Although participants saw the constant stream of government initiatives as putting yet another pressure on schools, they also identified opportunities in some recent policies. Both the Gatsby benchmarks, which provide guidelines on best practice in careers provision, and the government's careers strategy were seen as helping put renewed focus on this curriculum area. One person also mentioned opportunities to influence how these initiatives were rolled out.

The appointment of career leads in schools was generally welcomed, but as one participant in the discussion noted, the people appointed to these roles are usually generalists who may know a lot about careers, but not necessarily about business and commerce. "There's a real opportunity for third sector organisations to come together, fill that gap and provide expertise that's specific to commercial education," she said.

The new "Institutes of Technology" bringing together schools, FE colleges, universities and employers to provide high-quality technical education present further opportunities, she added.

The initiative could, for example, be used to develop sector-specific knowledge by bringing businesspeople into schools as role models.

Sharing Learning

Commercial education providers may believe that their programmes have made a real difference to young people's career prospects, but some of the experts at the gathering argued that organisations involved in this area have historically not done enough to find out if their work really does have an impact. Another view was that even where organisations do make serious efforts to evaluate programme outcomes, they sometimes forgot to share what they have learnt with other education providers.

The upshot of this part of the discussion was that evidence of what works should not only be shared between commercial education providers but be used to design new projects or extend existing projects in new ways.

The group was especially interested in how models developed in one sector or context could be replicated in a completely different context – or even country. Could some of the lessons learnt from a CET-funded training programme in a developing country, for example, be applied to programmes delivered in the UK's coastal towns and other "left behind" communities? Several thought that this was both possible and desirable.

Obviously organisations cannot replicate what has worked elsewhere unless they know about these programmes. Funders must do more to encourage fresh thinking by facilitating communication between organisations receiving their grants.

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Lessons Learned

For CET, the key lessons learnt from the gathering revolved around the need to:

• stretch the time available for commercial education programmes – for example, by helping students learn outside school or college;

• contextualise skills to help young people apply what they have learnt when they get into the workplace;

• use feedback from beneficiaries of past commercial education programmes to inform the design of future programmes;

• make schools and colleges less reliant on external funding by developing teachers' knowledge of trade and commerce and giving them the skills and confidence to use new technologies in their teaching;

• share knowledge of what works among commercial education providers.

• ensure clarity, continuity and stability in this area of work.

As CET Chairman David Coughtrie said at the end of the event: "We have to be much more imaginative in how we prepare young people for a world where change is the new norm – and not allow barriers to stand in our way." We can do this by concentrating on people and adaptive skills rather than trying to anticipate the jobs of the future.