

Youth Voices on Employability

Pat McFadden Foreword

This is a tremendously important and timely report by the Youth Commission.

Over the last two years we have come through the biggest global economic contraction since the 1930s. The effects on the economy, on business and commerce are obvious, but the effects on families, on individuals and in particular on young people have also been profound. Although we have debated this many times on the floor of the House of Commons, all too often the voice of young people has not been heard, and so I particularly welcome the Commission's work and the insight - directly from young people - that this report brings.

The Government has an unrelenting focus on young people in the recession. We remember that in the 1980s youth unemployment often led to permanent joblessness and have been determined to avoid this happening during the downturn of the last two years. An example of our continuing focus is the Government's response to the Milburn Panel's report on Fair Access to the Professions. This introduces a new National Internship Service to better co-ordinate the many thousands of internships available across the country and to show what support is available, so that many more people can access this invaluable experience of the world of work, either whilst studying or in the holidays. Alongside this new service we have announced the creation of 10,000 new undergraduate internships for young people.

The Youth Commission's report comes at an important time as we head towards an election and as our country emerges from the global recession and back in to positive growth.

Elections must be fought not on what has happened in the past, but on what will happen in the future and it is of course right that political parties of all colours should be tested on their offer to young people considering their options on leaving school and entering the world of work, higher study or vocational training. But as the report itself states, these questions are not merely for politics, but for our society as a whole to address.

It is a debate and a task which we should relish as there is little of more importance than the success of the next generation and its contribution to the future of the UK in an ever more globalised world.



Pat McFadden, Minister for Business, Innovation and Skills

Andy Powell Foreword

Edge is a firm believer that the education system needs to incorporate more practical and vocational learning, cater for people's different talents and abilities, and ensure that there are many paths to success. The second Youth Commission report into young people's employability shows that we can not afford to continue down the current road, as there is far too much at stake.

The strong messages in this report show that education, employers, and young people themselves, need to make changes to ensure this generation, and future ones, are prepared for employment. Young people are demanding change, and we all need to work together to make sure this happens.

This report can mark the starting point in making these changes. To ensure these changes are the right ones, we need to make sure young people are our partners in creating, and carrying them out. If we can combine their powerful voices with the thinking of government and employers, then we have a great basis from which to work.



Andy Powell, *Chief Executive of Edge*



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Introduction

The Youth Commission was established by the Edge Learner Forum with the support of Edge at the start of 2009. The aim was to create a tool through which young people as leaders would have their say on some of the most important issues facing them relating to employment, education, and skills. With the help of the Chair of the Children, Schools and Families Select Committee, Barry Sheerman MP, we undertook our first investigation in the beginning of 2009. As the Youth Commission continues to move forward we want to enable even more young people to get involved in the key issues they face. We will take these views directly to Government, business, and others, so together we can make the changes that young people are calling for.

The first Youth Commission report in the summer of 2009 saw young people looking at Raising the Participation Age. By the end of the investigation over 4,300 young people had given their views. With our new investigation into young people's employability we have gone even further, engaging 7,059¹ young people. With each future investigation we aim to broaden and increase this engagement yet further.

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One of the biggest economic and social issues at present is unemployment amongst young people. In January 2010, 927,000 16-24 year olds were declaring themselves as currently unemployed.² With a figure this high the latest Youth Commission investigation has one big aim – to get young people themselves working on what needs to change in relation to their employability. The number of young people currently unemployed is a danger to them and to our society as a whole. Rather than just looking at the reasons behind why this is the case, we want to go a step further and offer a way forward, by finding out how we can make young

people more employable.

Young people hold the key to the future of the economy and ensuring that they are ready for the world of work is of paramount importance. With youth unemployment at a record high there is big opportunity to find out from the horse's mouth what needs to change. Whilst ensuring that young people are at the forefront of the investigation we also acknowledge the need to engage a range of sectors. Alongside young people we have worked with employers (Tesco; Orange; Bovis Construction); the Government (Department for Business, Skills, and Innovation; Department for Children Schools and Families, Department for Work and Pensions) and other key partners (third sector organisations).

In January 2010, 927,000 16-24 year olds were declaring themselves as currently unemployed.

Key partners who we would like to give special thanks to for their in-depth support throughout the investigation are the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and Skills; Habbo; YouthNet; Young Enterprise and Manchester University.

Now at the conclusion of the second investigation we believe that the Youth Commission is fast becoming a meaningful vehicle for young people as leaders to be the catalysts for great change. The Edge Learner Forum is a growing network of young people across the country who are using their voices for positive change. With the support of the educational foundation Edge who have funded and supported the Youth Commission from its initiation, together we are making this possible and allowing more and more young people to have their say on education and skills.

¹ Total responses from qualitative, quantitative, workshops, Question Time event, and careers academies

² <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/8469648.stm>

Methodology

The research and commentary contained in this report has been co-created by young people, and young people have driven the methodology for the investigation at all times. Working alongside members of the Edge Learner Forum, we designed the investigation in four stages to ensure that we got the breadth and depth of responses from young people from all backgrounds. The age of participants in the investigation was 13–25 years.

Stage 1: Qualitative peer-to-peer questionnaires

This stage used peer-to-peer questionnaires to gather in-depth views from 1,210 young people around the country. Edge Learner Forum members led on the design of these questionnaires, and then carried them out through their own networks including learning institutions; street surveying; and engaging particular groups such as NEET's. Through this approach we aimed to enable young people as researchers to engage their peers, especially those from harder to reach communities, and draw out issues that are more openly discussed on a peer to peer basis.

Edge Learner Forum members led on the design of these questionnaires, and then carried them out through their own networks

Stage 2: Quantitative online survey

In this stage we created a quantitative survey to test some of the insights emerging from Stage 1. We ran this survey online using our own survey tool and working in partnership with the popular social networking site for young people, Habbo (www.habbo.co.uk). This stage reached 5,827 young people and provided insights on a wide variety of themes relating to youth employment. As well as running the survey with Habbo, we have worked with a number of other partner organisations, including YouthNet and Young Enterprise, to ensure that the survey has reached a wider range of young people as possible. The reason behind running the survey with such a high number of young people was to ensure that we had large and robust samples through which to form our

evidence base.

Stage 3: Solutions workshops

The third stage involved running workshops with certain groups (e.g. NEET's, soon to be graduates, autistic students) that have specific concerns about employability. These workshops provided a real and powerful insight into particular challenges these groups face. They also focussed on creating solutions to the problems the young people faced. Part of the workshops was dedicated to messages they would give to government, employers, and other young people about what needs to change.

Stage 4: Employer panels

The fourth stage built on our research data by running two employer panels. The aim was to look more deeply at the issues young people have about employment. The panels allowed them to ask a wide range of well-known businesses about these issues. The first employer panel was a face to face Question Time which saw a group of 35 young people come together. They put their questions to an expert panel including Tesco; Orange; Bovis Construction; Jeremy Moore (DWP); and Iain Wright (14-19 Reform Minister). Alongside this we ran a virtual online employer panel in conjunction with the teen social networking site, Habbo. These online career academies saw a number of leading business including Barclays, Sony, and Nokia speak to the online users of Habbo to offer careers advice and answer their questions about employability. Both the employers and young people felt that these virtual career academies were highly beneficial, and an idea that could be utilised very successfully in the future.

We ran a virtual online employer panel in conjunction with the teen social networking site, Habbo with a number of leading business including Barclays, Sony, and Nokia

Are we ready for work?

Summary:

One of the key questions running throughout this investigation and looked at in this chapter is, how ready do young people feel they are for employment? The strong message emerging is that young people have a much stronger belief that they are prepared for employment at a younger age. As they become older, this belief becomes a lot more fragile, as illustrated by **85% under the age of 17 feeling they are prepared for employment, but only 53% over the age of 17 feeling they are prepared for employment.**

I am prepared

72% feel they are equipped with the right skills for employment³

76% believe they can explain the relevant skills they have for the workplace⁴

76% believe that education has helped prepare them for employment⁵

The majority of young people we spoke to believe they are ready for employment, and equipped for the world of work. They also believe education is helping to prepare them for employment. When asked whether they can explain the skills they have for work, young people feel they can articulate these skills to employers. 69% of young people feel education is helping them to develop employment skills, for instance CV writing and interview practice⁶. Many of the young people we spoke to felt that there were a number of opportunities to develop their CV writing abilities and interview skills. These opportunities were available through specific lessons and days dedicated to helping students improve these skills.

"At our school there is a "Preparation for Work Day" every year for the year 11s. This system

really helps and I think it gives us the best opportunities for later life as we learn how to write good CVs and how to act and answer questions in interviews" (15, Male, South West)

Have Your Say: What the Edge Learner Forum Thinks

When we saw these statistics we agreed, but also believed they may come from a blinkered perspective. We believe that education teaches you how to pass exams. As education teaches you to pass exams we think a lot of young people assume they are prepared for employment. Some of us are also of the view that education is starting to turn a corner and beginning to be better at helping young people in terms of employment. This is due to the introduction of more vocational courses and a wider range of subjects. We were sure that if the question about education helping had been asked two years ago there would have been a much lower number of young people who agreed.

The older you get the harder it seems

85% of young people under 17 believe education has helped prepare them for employment⁷

As opposed to...

53% of young people over 17 believe education has helped prepare them for employment⁸

When looking at how many young people feel they are prepared for employment by different ages, a new perspective on the figure emerges. It is evident that, as they get older, fewer young people feel education has helped them. With age, increasing doubt begins to set in their minds about whether they are fully employable.

³ Data from qualitative stage

⁴ Data from quantitative stage

⁵ Data from quantitative stage

⁶ Data from qualitative stage

⁷ Data from quantitative survey

⁸ Data from quantitative survey

The quotes below suggest that the certainty that there is at a younger age about employment has been replaced by concerns.

“I’m not sure about interview skills; I’ve not had any information about this” (20, Male, Manchester)

“I don’t think I am equipped with the right skills for employment as I haven’t had any practice but I would hope to get by on my current skills” (21, Female, North East)

“Having undertaken a module called ‘communication skills’ I do feel I have some skills but I realise now that I am lacking commercial awareness and practical skills/knowledge” (20, Female, North East)

Have Your Say: What the Edge Learner Forum Thinks

We believe that the majority of young people who said they were prepared for employment had neither had a lot of experience, nor yet applied for a job. We believed that in a number of cases young people made blind judgements. These judgements happened as they linked being prepared for employment to what they learnt in their subjects, rather than having practical skills. They only became more aware of these required skills and how necessary they are as they got closer to employment.

The findings outlined above show that the majority of young people feel education is doing enough. However, there are particular groups of young people that have the opposing view and believe education does not do enough to support them. In the case study below we explore the viewpoints of young people not in education, employment or training.

Case Study: Young people who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET)

Most young people in education believe they are

employable but for those outside of the system it can be a different story. The Edge Learner Forum held a number of interviews with NEET’s to find out what specific measures they believe need to be put in place to assist them back into employment.

Young people who are NEET believe a number of stereotypes are made about them which they find frustrating. They have a strong sense that employers will prejudge them when they initially apply for a job. These stereotypes include them being unfit for work and inferior to people who apply that have stayed in education. When asked what can be done to remedy this they say that employers need to make it very clear that they have an all embracing mentality. A key reason why there are so many who are NEET is due to not enough young people being made aware of the social benefits of getting a job. They are aware of the financial benefits, but other benefits such as security, personal growth, health, and career progression needed to be made much clearer.

For people who are NEET there is a belief that education is not doing enough to prepare students for employment. One change education could make is that, if a young person fails a course, it needs to be made explicit that it isn’t the end. The people we spoke to said that one of the reasons they believed they had become NEET was because, once they had failed their course, they were not told that there were still other courses and routes available to them. They felt it was the end of the road. The second change is that more advice and support is needed within schools. Organisations such as Connexions should come into schools at regular points over the year. They should provide in-depth, intensive advice and give young people the stability in knowing that the support is in place to help them gain employment. For young people to avoid becoming NEET they need a regular stream of support at a vital time in their lives so they make the right decisions.

What Do Employers Want From Us?

Summary:

Many young people can align employability too closely with academic achievement. The risk is that they can underestimate the value of practical experience, and vocational routes to employers. **69% believe that employers place more value on academic rather than vocational qualifications.**

Experience vs. Qualifications

55% agree that employers place more value on qualifications rather than experience⁹

Young people believe the two biggest barriers to employment are a lack of skills/experience (34%) and qualifications (27%)¹⁰

The young people we spoke to had a sense that they would need both qualifications and experience to gain employment. Opinion was split as to which of these factors would be the most valued by employers. Young people are aware that to be successful in gaining employment they will need qualifications. Young people know they will need some experience to show they have knowledge of the workplace

Our research demonstrates concerns over experience are especially apparent in university students. They have a fear about how to make themselves stand out from the crowd. They want to be armed when seeking employment with more than just a qualification so they are sufficiently distinct, from everyone else to be able to attract employers.

“I feel that people are very quickly judged by their academia and not by the content of their personal attributes. In my opinion and from experience I know that personal experiences can provide you with skills which you can never get from any qualification” (25, Male, North West)

⁹ Data from quantitative stage

¹⁰ Data from qualitative stage

Have Your Say: What the Edge Learner Forum Thinks

We believe that before 18 there is not as much emphasis placed on experience. This means that young people do not see the value of experience as much as qualifications until they get older. As they get older they realise more that employer's value experience highly. There is a tendency when younger to see qualifications as the baseline and then not build on this by gaining experience. As they get older, young people become more aware that alongside the baseline of qualifications, they need the experience, as this is what clinches employment. We think young people should place more weighting on experience. In reality at the moment grades play an important part but in the future we would like employers to look at what you can do more than what grades you have.

Young people from certain areas such as rural ones are aware of the importance of experience. In a series of interviews we had with young people from rural areas they acknowledged the importance of grades. Through their background they also had the opportunity to gain a lot of practical experience in rural jobs whilst growing up and they believed this to be just as important as obtaining good grades.

Case study: Young People in Rural Communities

The Edge Learner Forum interviewed young people living in rural communities who belong to the National Federation of Young Farmers Club (YFC). We wanted to find out how living in a rural community affects young people's attitude towards work and to understand what would make it easier for young people to feel ready and confident about it.

All the young people interviewed feel they are employable and a range of factors have contributed to this confidence. These include having qualifications, involvement with the YFC network (with which many of them have developed skills like public speaking, event organisation and leadership development), as well as the work ethic instilled in them by their upbringing in a rural setting. One interviewee commented “we are encouraged to be out of the farm from a young age and gain an experience of working rather than coming home and messing around on a computer”.

Living outside of the city presents challenges to young people, including the dwindling opportunities in some agricultural roles due to the increased use of machinery, the seasonal nature of some work and the general lack of information about opportunities felt by some young people. Most expressed fears that the recession would make it more difficult to find jobs, due to the high competition for places. However all stated that their experiences with the YFC put them in a good position in the face of this competition.

The interviewees felt that a number of changes could be made for young people, especially those from rural areas, to feel equipped and confident when facing their future. One change that many interviewees were passionate about was the promotion of vocational routes as equal to academic ones, in the eyes of employers as well as schools. Many of the young people felt a stronger work-related element to their learning would help them, suggesting making Business Studies and Life Skills compulsory alongside the core subjects of English, Maths, Science and ICT. They all felt that young people would benefit from organisations such as YFC and that these should be widely publicised among other young people from rural areas.

Taking an academic route will give me a much better chance of being employed

69% agree that employers value academic qualifications more highly than vocational ones¹¹

Only 10% disagree that jobs that need a degree are more valuable than other jobs¹²

76% believe that the money they spend

on university would be worth it for their future¹³

With echoes of the first Youth Commission report there is still a fixed idea that the best route to success is through university. Young people as mentioned in the first chapter have a narrow perception of how to gain employment and do not believe that other routes (e.g. vocational and applied routes) can provide employment. Of added concern is the problem of young people believing that employment achieved through routes other than a degree are of lessened importance, status, and value. This needs to be changed and quickly.

Of course it is not the case that a degree will not help you into employment, but there is an urgent need to make young people aware that it is not the only route into employment. When taking a degree it is equally important to make sure that it is supplemented with real, practical experience as many university students we interviewed felt they did not get this.

The question arises that a large number may believe that non-university routes, such as 14-19 Diplomas, and Apprenticeships, are not worthwhile ones to invest in, and follow. Even young people who have taken degrees are concerned that not enough other young people are considering other pathways. In the first Youth Commission report only 9% of young people said they recognised vocational and applied routes as the next step available to them in their education.¹⁴ This idea is also evident in their perceived path to employment, with 76% believing that investing in university is worth it, despite growing numbers of unemployed graduates.

“For most high paid jobs you have to have a university degree” (16, Female, West Midlands)

“Young people are much more likely to be employed with a degree” (16, Female East Midlands)

“I have been to university and have a degree, however in my opinion too many people go to university, when they would be far better suited to doing a more vocational, skill based course/ apprenticeship” (24, Male, Yorkshire and Humber)

¹¹ Data from quantitative stage

¹² Data from quantitative stage

¹³ Data from quantitative stage

¹⁴ How to Make Staying on a Carrot and not a Stick: Edge Learner Forum Youth Commission Report

“I think that doing a degree is a brilliant experience but if the government want so many people to go to university after school they should include a much, much higher vocational aspect to prepare young people for the working world” (23, Female, South East)

Doctors (36%), lawyers (20%), and public sector (20%) account for 76% of the most respected jobs for young people¹⁵

Young people believe these jobs, which are considered traditional degree jobs are the most respected. This supports the idea that university is more likely to lead to a more successful job. These jobs are seen as very credible, and whilst this is commendable there is cause for slight worry that such a high percentage of the most respected jobs consist of a very small minority of actual jobs that are available to young people.

Have Your Say: What the Edge Learner Forum thinks

We believe, especially in the current economic climate, that investing your money in university represents a gamble, not a guarantee. For a long time there has been a stereotype that going to university equals success. However, for many this can be based more on hope, rather than belief. There needs to be more profiling of alternative routes such as Diplomas and Apprenticeships. With higher profiling of a wide variety of routes, we believe that we can start to reduce the number of young people who are unemployed.

As mentioned previously there is an ingrained idea that the academic route equals success. In a workshop with university students we found that a number of young people thought that with so many at university it would be hard to get an edge on everyone else. One solution to this is developing programmes that help give students an edge.

Case Study: Manchester Leadership Programme

The Edge Learner Forum ran a workshop with Manchester Leadership Programme (MLP) students at Manchester University to find out how taking part in the programme has impacted on their career prospects.

The (MLP), currently offered to 900 students at The University of Manchester, comprises two elements: a credit-rated Leadership in Action unit that enables students to explore the key leadership challenges facing 21st century society; and an opportunity to contribute to the development of more sustainable communities through completing verified volunteering work.

MLP students believed that the programme was invaluable in helping them to gain relevant skills for employment as well as providing them with essential work experience. The students considered the volunteering work to be of particular importance as it helped them gain practical experience, new skills and a much needed boost for their CVs.

We found that the students were concerned about gaining employment after graduation. They were aware that with record numbers of students graduating, there was a need to set themselves apart with additional skills and experience. They believed that the MLP would indeed help them to stand out.

The students were able to identify how they could apply the skills developed at university to future jobs. A number of the students felt that the MLP added a practical relevance to their degree that many employers would welcome.

As well as improving their employability, the programme also offered the students additional benefits. The students highlighted the lectures, which were delivered by actual leaders of major organisations and leading academics, as highly enjoyable. In fact, it was the course that they looked forward to the most and after taking the course they reported an improvement in their self-reliance and organisational skills by having to organise their own projects.

All the students felt that programmes such as the MLP are of great benefit, especially in that they help students prepare them for the world of work and distinguish them from other graduates. They recommended that programmes such as the MLP be adopted widely across the UK in schools and universities.

What Could Stand In My Way?

Summary:

Young people see a number of barriers to their employability, which create a strong sense of anxiety to them. **64% believe the recession will have a long term effect on their employability, and only 21% disagreed that their background would have a major impact on their career opportunities.** These anxieties can pose a serious risk to their motivation and resilience in seeking employment.

Will employers want me?

As part of our investigation in November, we ran a question time event with an audience of young people, a panel of employers, and sector specialists. These included 14-19 Reform Minister Iain Wright, Debbie Scott (CEO, Tomorrows People), Tesco, Bovis Construction, Jeremy Moore (Senior Civil Servant, Department for Work and Pensions); and Paul Preston (formerly Unilever).

In the session a lot of anxiety came to the fore about whether employers were willing enough to take young people on, and if they did turn young people down, the effect on confidence this can have.

Being rejected was the biggest fear young people had about the job application process¹⁶

When starting out on the employment journey young people are unsure and nervous. A young person will not get every job they apply for, it is impossible to not ever be knocked back. What emerged from the young people and the employers is that more feedback is needed if this occurs. There was agreement from both sides that feedback if you don't get a job would have a positive effect. It would help young people to understand why they had not managed to get the job, meaning their confidence would not be as greatly affected. It is better to have a reason, than no reason. It would also mean young people will be less likely to become as disengaged with employment, and deterred from going for other jobs in the future.

52% agree that paper applications are not the best way to explain the strengths¹⁷

One of the key reasons young people considered they may come across as unappealing to employers is because they do not feel fully confident in displaying their strengths through application forms. Alongside not having confidence with application forms there was also a desire for a more varied application process where those who were stronger in person would not lose out due to being less able to complete application forms successfully. One possible suggestion to counter this was that young people could design a video or digital CV so that their personality would be able to shine through.

Case study: Young People with Social and Behavioural Difficulties

The Edge Learner Forum ran two workshops at a school for students with social and behavioural difficulties. The workshops were carried out with young people aged 14-16 and were aimed at finding out how they felt about work and employment and what they perceived as enablers and challenges to succeeding in the job or career of their choice.

Most of the young people had a clear aim for their future professional role, which were, in the main, practical. Becoming a mechanic, media technician, plumber and fireman were cited among participants' aspirations, as well as musician and footballer for others. The young people said that these goals felt realistic and achievable, and most of them feel positive about the future. Some felt they would need general qualifications such as GCSEs, and attendance at school/college to achieve their goal and others valued practical experience such as work experience, meeting people in the industry, and specific qualifications gained through on-the-job training. The role of the family emerged as an important support, both emotionally as well as in presenting opportunities to work in a family business.

¹⁶ Data from qualitative stage
¹⁷ Data from quantitative stage

Most of the young people involved in the workshops felt disaffected by education and forgotten within what they refer to as the “system”. They perceived the system as something being done ‘to’ them yet not catering to their needs. Most felt that one of the biggest barriers to young people like them having work prospects, let alone successful careers, was the lack of understanding of “Government, politicians and MPs” of their backgrounds; in order to understand how to unlock their future potential, the young people felt that those making decisions about education need to know where they were coming from.

The young people expressed confidence that they could get over obstacles that may get in the way of achieving their goals through self-reliance. Many felt they had developed this as a result of their disaffection with education. Rather than external support, most participants cited being mentally strong, determined, confident and ambitious as the solutions to barriers standing in the way of their goals. Yet in spite of feeling mentally prepared for work, most participants didn’t talk about practical ways they anticipated preparing for their next step. The lack of a bridge between having the right goal and attitude and the young peoples’ current situation was apparent, and needs to be addressed. Targeting information at the young people’s families would be a useful approach, given that most participants said they respected the views and support of their families.

Will there be enough jobs available?

64% believe that the recession will have a long-term effect on their employability¹⁸

The United Kingdom is now officially out of the recession but there is a great deal of concern, especially for those over 18, around how great an effect it will have on their future employment.¹⁹

There is a feeling that in terms of employment, the biggest losers in the recession are young people, who feel that employers are even less likely to take a chance on them. A number of young people, especially those at university, see staying on in education as preferable, as if they were to leave due to the recession it would be very hard to gain employment.

“I am worried that the recession will damage my employability so I decided to do a PhD both for my own interest and enjoyment but so that when I finish there may be better job opportunities” (22, Female, Kent)

“As a result of the recession it is very difficult for young adults, such as me to get a job/ training to help our careers” (21, Female, North West)

Have Your Say: What the Edge Learner Forum Thinks

Even though we are out of the recession, we are aware there are still a high number of people laid off. Young people feel that when going for jobs it will be hard to compete with these people who have more experience. There is a real need for more jobs to be available to young people that they have a good chance of getting. This is vital as a lack of jobs and rejections can have a serious impact on the motivation of young people. If this motivation is lost then we will find less and less young people going for jobs.

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¹⁸ Data from quantitative stage

¹⁹ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/business/8479639>

Am I the right person for the job?

Only 21% disagreed that their background would have a major impact on their career opportunities²⁰

The fact that so many young people feel their background (e.g. ethnicity, class, criminal record, location) will have such an impact on their future career is highly worrying. A number of young people felt that employers would make a number of stereotypes based on parts of their personality. These stereotypes they felt could seriously hinder their chances of gaining employment

The Alan Milburn report 'Unleashing Aspirations' talked about a large number of professions becoming socially exclusive. This means a large number of young people are missing out on potential jobs through no fault of their own. There was a belief that Britain had a 'closed-shop mentality' with opportunities only being afforded to an elite group.²¹ Our findings support this in that young people feel their background can hinder their chances of accessing any job, not just certain professions.

“When applying for a career job many employers are biased about where you have studied making it difficult for people with the right qualifications but a not so fortunate background to get a good career” (16, Male, East Midlands)

“I believe that one's background and parentage is key in the progress and development that a child makes both academically as well as socially, and this does present a certain advantage towards some students and disadvantage, through no fault of their own, towards others” (15, Female, East Midlands)

Have Your Say: What the Edge Learner Forum Thinks

We believe that young people can often be pigeon-holed. Employers can make pre-judgements about a number of factors including criminal record, postcode, and social background. Due to these pre-judgements a lot of young people can miss out on jobs and with no feedback on why there can be a negative impact on motivation. Rejection letters often do not explain the reasoning and we think a number of young people will decide, rightly or wrongly, that it is due to their background.

²⁰ Data from quantitative stage

²¹ http://www.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/newsroom/news_releases/2009/090721_accessprofessions.aspx

The Changes Needed

Despite the fact that at the start of the investigation we identified readiness amongst young people, as we move forward we have uncovered a number of doubts. These doubts become increasingly apparent as they begin to enter the labour market. What young people believe would work in theory often as they get older they realise is not the case in reality (e.g. doubts over skills and experience). This increasing level of doubt has led to a high number of young people calling for big changes.

What can be done?

58% of young people agree that radical changes are needed to help their employment²²

A lot of young people want change made to help them with their employability. This does not mean they believe employers and government need to make all the changes. We have seen evidence of informed and considered opinions from young people that all the sectors need to work together to solve the problem of why large numbers of young people find it hard to gain employment. There is realisation that employers (e.g. application processes, work experience); government and education (e.g. careers advice, work experience); and young people (e.g. motivation, persistence) all need to work together and make changes. All the sectors need to cooperate and we have seen evidence that they are all willing to do so. On the foundations of this willingness it is possible to address the issues in this report and take them forward so we can provide solutions to the employability issues facing young people today.

What can be done better?

Career advice, work experience, and employment skills make up 60% of what young people believe education can do better to prepare them for their chosen career²³

Young people have a number of concerns about a range of aspects that education needs to deliver better. The investigations shows a large number of young people believe education should be doing more in certain areas, if they are to be properly equipped for employment. Careers advice, work experience, and employment skills are three of the most crucial areas. If 60% believe these aspects need to be delivered better then there is still a lot of work to do to ensure they are equipped with the right skills for employment.

“Improve advice and guidance so employers will take me more seriously” (17, Male London)

“More work experience or more opportunities for work experience” (17, Male Doncaster)

“We should be given courses for people to improve their employability and career skills” (21, Female, Manchester)

Case Study: Special School Students

The Edge Learner Forum ran a workshop with autistic students to find out what specific factors they felt needed to change to help them prepare for employment.

The students all wanted to have a career. There were a number of reasons why they wanted have a career. These included gaining more independence and because having a job is something they believe will be enjoyable. When asked about identifying possible careers they came up with a wide variety of jobs including IT, mechanics, and park wardens.

²² Data from quantitative stage

²³ Data from qualitative stage

To maintain this desire to have a career they believed it was very important to ensure that the correct training and advice was in place. There were concerns that they might not be able to get the right qualifications or obtain the necessary skills. A strong desire came through that support with gaining qualifications and developing skills needed to be made very explicit and accessible for them.

There was good awareness of what qualities employers would expect from them. When describing the attributes of an ideal employee they were able to identify a number of characteristics including experienced, able to use their initiative; hard-working; confident; respectful; friendly. A strong appetite for careers advice to support this came through.

Work experience was a big anxiety. The students who had work experience considered it to be of great benefit but were not enough opportunities to get this experience. Alongside this there was a fear, partly though lack of experience, that they did not have enough opportunities to mix with mainstream people. They wanted these opportunities to be more available so they could develop their skills and experience.

Make work experience better

Only 33% of young people said they had the chance to sample enough work placements to inform their career choices²⁴

There are high levels of dissatisfaction over work experience. Young people want work experience to be more relevant and they want more opportunities to have it. They also need to be able to see the point of it as they can just view it as a compulsory activity that needs to be completed, rather than understanding what the benefits of doing it are. They feel the large majority of work experiences currently do not allow them to consider entering the world of work with enough confidence or belief. When asked what could be improved about work experience 50% said that it needed to be made much more relevant to their learning and career choices; and that there needed to be a much wider choice available.²⁵

If young people are this unhappy with work experience then one of the most crucial aspects of developing their employability is not right. Work experience is their biggest opportunity to enter a

working environment and develop the real practical skills that many are not sure they possess. They believe that work experience is not affording enough relevant or good opportunities currently, and this needs to be changed.

What do young people across the country feel about work experience?

“They could try actually giving it to us at key points in our education such as during college and they could also try giving us experience that actually relates to us” (20, Female, Leicester)

“I would add more work experience so that students would benefit from learning by doing” (18, Female, North West)

“My two work experiences only made me think that I didn’t want to do those two jobs” (16, Male, London)

“Work experience can be made better by being offered a work placement that you are interested in and would like to do as a career” (18, Male, Sussex)

Get careers advice right

51% agree that careers advice for young people is not working²⁶

71% agree that careers advice should be available from year 7²⁷

The information, advice and guidance young people has a big role to play. As it forms such a vital part of their decision making, the advice available to them has to be relevant and tailored to individual needs.

If careers advice is not delivered effectively then it can leave young people with a lot of indecision, insecurity, and doubt about entering employment. It is also evident that they want careers advice from a younger age so that they can have some knowledge about jobs and the world of work. This can even be general and basic information to provide a context for employment from year 7. The Government have now introduced a policy to make sure careers advice is available from year 7 in their ‘Statutory Guidance’ paper. Our research shows that the appetite is there for this policy so we now need to ensure the advice delivered from year 7 is effective and inspiring to young people.

24 Data from quantitative stage

25 Data from qualitative stage

26 Data from quantitative stage

27 Data from quantitative stage

“There needs to be more advice given to teenagers to help them decide which career they feel is best for them. It is all well and good that 16-18 year olds can receive free further education, but if (like me) you were not given any guidance and are unsure of what you want to do then you end up doing something you don't like, or perhaps not even doing anything” (19, Female, London)

“Careers advice should be giving me a range of ideas so I am aware of what opportunities are available that I can choose from” (16, Female, Nottingham)

Have Your Say: What the Edge Learner Forum thinks

Forum members believe there is not enough good careers advice available for young people. If you are unsure about your next steps then careers advice falls down and becomes flawed, both for those on academic and vocational routes. This is because careers advice is set up to signpost rather than generate an appetite for employment. If careers advice is to work for more young people then it needs to be of much greater help to those who are unsure about the future.

Conclusion

Most young people are confident about their employability while they are safely within the school system. This is an easy confidence to sustain while the focus of education is firmly on getting the grades and passing exams, and employment is not an urgent priority. The general assumption is that education will lead to qualifications, which will seamlessly lead to employment. But what will it actually take for these young people to be marketable to employers? This question often receives a murky and unconvincing response.

When you probe a little beneath the surface, many young people believe employability is mostly about being good in subject areas, combined with the basic ability to be there on time, communicate well, and 'look the part'. There is very little understanding about the wider qualities an employer might be looking for such as initiative, problem-solving, dedication, the ability and willingness to learn. We suggest that young people are developing a false sense of security which will be dangerous for them; an acceptance that it will be possible to sleepwalk through education and end up in a good job.

Young people are developing a false sense of security which will be dangerous for them

Many young people completely underestimate the value of practical experience to their employability. But, as they get older and enter university or try to enter the job market the importance of having experience becomes more and more apparent to them. Those that are studying in higher education institutions start to realise they will need more than just the qualification to stand out in the job market. By the time this realisation dawns it is too late to gain the experience. For a growing number the fall-back plan is simply to study for another qualification.

Young people completely underestimate the value of practical experience to their employability

For a growing number the fall-back plan is simply to study for another qualification

Young people are telling themselves a story of success that rooted firmly in the value of academic ability and achievement. This is a risk because they underestimate the value of practical experience until a late stage in their journey. It is a risk because those who do not achieve academically feel that they will not be given another chance to prove themselves by employers. Vocational routes such as apprenticeships still have a low profile among young people, who are not yet seeing them as great opportunity to take another route into employment.

This investigation shows that young people's employability is a problem that we cannot afford to ignore as a society. It is irresponsible to allow young people to continue placing all their faith in academic achievement. If we do not challenge this assumption we are complicit in it and partly responsible for creating a generation that is unequipped to compete in a tough job market, both in terms of their practical experience and in terms of their outlook. The knock on impact is likely to be severe, both for this generation and the next.

It is irresponsible to allow young people to continue placing all their faith in academic achievement

One of the big messages coming from the young people is that they are anxious about securing jobs in today's climate. Even the younger age group believes that the recession will have a long-term impact for them, their inflated confidence is easily dashed when they start to complete for jobs. There is a distressing disconnect between the theory they have taken for granted and the reality. With little meaningful feedback from unsuccessful applications, it is easy for them to conclude that the odds are stacked against them – in terms of their social class, ethnicity, criminal record, or even their postcode.

Even the younger age group believes that the recession will have a long-term impact for them

Most young people we spoke to were clear that change is needed. Many of these were also sure that these changes need to be radical. Careers guidance, work experience opportunities, and employability skills are all areas in which young people are calling for change. For them these changes are an urgent priority.

So we are left with some very tough and difficult questions to address. How can we ensure that vast numbers of disillusioned young people do not just give up hope and fall through the cracks? How can we ensure that young people are resilient and equipped to compete in a tough market and will not give up at the first hurdle? How can we help young people to gain an appreciation of the wide-ranging benefits of work, and are motivated to pursue their career goals in the face of challenges?

These problems are not just young people's problems or Government's problems, they are problems for our whole society. The solution will only come from collective action. It is clear to us that employers, educators, policy makers and young people alike all need to take their share of responsibility for addressing the problem. Above all, the answers must be created with young people themselves. They are the people with the most to gain, and the most to lose.

These problems are not just young people's problems or Government's problems, they are problems for our whole society

The Edge Learner Forum Employability Manifesto

As a starting point for developing the solutions to the questions raised in this report the Edge Learner Forum Members have developed an employability manifesto. This manifesto will be a mechanism for moving forward to ensure changes happen to help improve young people's employability.

1) Get Careers Advice Working for Everyone

At the moment we can see that careers advice isn't working for around half of young people. The advice given is often too focussed on academic routes and qualifications. This does not reflect what employers want, and it doesn't do enough to emphasise the value of practical experience.

Careers advice is failing to tune in to the motivations and needs of all individuals. It does not do enough to help the large numbers of young people who have not decided what they want to do in the future. We think many young people prefer to turn to teachers, parents and friends than formal careers services. This means they are not as informed as they should be.

Our vision of the future is that careers advice caters for all young people, whatever stage they are at, whatever their needs and motivations. Careers advice should be a *process* which helps young people to develop a vision of their future and work towards it. The process should start at a young age, even engaging primary school pupils. It should help young people understand the value of practical experience as well as qualifications. It should inspire them to ask their own questions and find the answers that will work best for them. It should be unbiased, and show young people that there are many paths to success, not just the traditional academic route.

2) Make Work Experience a Real Experience of Work

When it's done well, work experience can give young people a real insight into the world of work

and help them develop vital employability skills.

But at the moment too many young people underestimate the importance of work experience. They see it just as a compulsory activity without fully appreciating the opportunity. They often do not get their first choices and so do not get the chance to try out potential career paths. When they go on work experience, many young people feel that they are under-used and do not get a real experience of work.

Our vision of the future is that work experience will be valued by young people, employers and education alike. There will be a much broader range of opportunities available. Young people will approach work experience with the right attitude, ready to take as much from the experience as possible. They will be motivated to seek out their own opportunities, and not just wait to see what school offers them. Before a placement starts, there will be a clear plan and expectations shared between the employer and the young person. During the placement, young people will get a good insight into the work place and chance to gain vital skills for the world of work such as communication, initiative, working within a team, problem-solving, and meeting deadlines. Above all, work experience in the future should 'do what it says on the tin', by providing young people with a real experience of the world of work.

3) Embed Employability in Education Early On

We have seen that, as they get older, many young people have doubts about whether education has really prepared them for employment.

At the moment employability is too often treated as an 'add-on' within the education system. Schools and colleges may believe they are doing enough by helping students to write a CV and rehearse for job interviews. But too many young people are leaving education with an unrealistic sense of their employability, only to have this dashed as they try to enter the job market.

Our vision for the future is that young people will feel fully equipped as they leave education and try to compete in the job market. To achieve this, education should be explicit about employability being a top priority. Employability should run through the whole curriculum and educational experience from an early age. Young people in education should gain a much clearer understanding of the skills and qualities they are gaining for employment. They desperately need to develop and appreciate skills such as initiative, team work, creativity, problem solving, and working under pressure.

Going forward, education must do everything possible to equip young people with the resilience and tenacity they will need to compete for employment. We need to prepare young people to deal with rejection and failure without losing motivation. And we want to see a future where all young people see the wide-ranging benefits of employment, beyond simply earning money, which will give them a greater drive to succeed.

4) Promote Vocational Routes to Success

The Youth Commission has shown us that too many young people feel that the *only* way to successful employment is through university. Young people are not seeing the full value of other routes to success, such as Apprenticeships. We don't want to see a situation where young people do not take vocational routes because they feel there is less chance of being employed afterwards.

Our vision for the future is that young people understand the value of vocational learning and believe that it can lead to great employment outcomes. We want to hear more employers speaking out in favour of vocational learning, and more employers taking on apprentices and work-based learners. We also think that employers need to develop more diverse recruitment practices to avoid using degrees as an easy way of filtering applicants. This is particularly urgent in traditional professional sectors, such as Law, which are currently felt to be 'closed shops' and desperately need to open their doors to other routes.

5) Bring Young People and Employers Closer Together

We know that young people can be unsure of what employers want from them, and visa versa. Young people have told us they do not get enough feedback from employers about what it really takes to succeed in the job market. The lack of feedback has negative effect on their confidence and motivation. Likewise, most employers have little chance to get to grips with how young people see the world of work.

This investigation has shown us that, if we bring young people and employers together, the experience is illuminating and inspiring for both sides. Direct dialogue between them removes confusion and misunderstanding about each other's expectations.

Our vision for the future is that employers and young people will speak to each other more. There should be a wide range of spaces for these conversations to happen. We want to see more employers in schools and youth centres giving young people an insider perspective on careers, and allowing young people to ask their own questions. We would also encourage employers to take advice from young people about how they can improve what they do, for example in terms of recruitment and work experience. And whenever there are major debates about education and skills, employers and young people should work together as partners to come up with a better solution.

Responses to the report

“The report outlines the very real need for jobs to be made available to young people but it also highlights how important it is that young people are prepared for the world of work while they are still at school. There needs to be a three-way conversation – we need to know what employers are looking for, what young people want and how education can implement those changes – and only by doing that will we be able to make sure young people leave the education system with the best possible chance of gaining employment.” (Barry Sheerman, MP, Chair of the DCSF Select Committee)

“The time to co-create an agreed and shared definition is long overdue! We have to spell out - and be able to demonstrate the value - of employability and not just the skills and attitude; we are talking here about employment intelligence. Their five step manifesto has my full support. We are lucky to have it to guide the next phase.” (Dame Ruth Silver CBE, Chair of LSIS)

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