

# Education Business Partnerships

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## Key Features of Education Business Partnerships

**Education Business Partnerships (EBPs) provide a localised interface between schools and employers. They are designed to support work experience, work-related learning, careers education and provide information and guidance. The aim is to support learners' experiences and offer them an introduction to the world of work.**

**Operation Date: 1991 - present**

**Target Population: School students from the age of 5 to 19-year-olds, but for practical purposes, Key Stage 4 students (aged 14 to 17) were the primary target initially.**

**Purpose: To set up formalised, committed partnerships between education and business, providing work experience opportunities and business-related activities as part of the curriculum to develop skills, attitudes, motivation and aspiration of young people.**

## Introduction

The concept of education business partnerships (EBPs) has remained after the original core government funding was withdrawn in 1995 (and after all central sponsorship was withdrawn in 2011). However, the concerns regarding skills that were identified initially were still considered priorities in the 1996 Dearing report (Dearing, 1996). Employers continue to experience skills shortages and the Department for Education keeps this area under review by means of regular survey of employers, which also identifies training needs (Department for Education, 2019). Initial Parliamentary discussions indicated that providing any required training was 'essentially a task for employers' (Hansard, 1988). If training is regarded as the responsibility of employers, their active engagement with training is key to ensuring that these education and training needs are met. Recent analysis suggests that levels of employer engagement are insufficient (Keep, 2020).

## Context

In 1976, the Prime Minister, James Callaghan, expressed concern that school was not necessarily preparing students for life (Weller & Dillon, 1999). In 1979, the Further Education Unit published 'A Basis for Choice', which acknowledged the need for both vocational and academic qualifications in order to allow a choice and to address the needs of less 'academic' students (Pring, 1981). Creating choice in education was a key policy issue for the government of the day, but so too were youth unemployment and skills shortages, which affected economic growth (Wikeley, 1990). Indeed, the Secretary of State for Employment, speaking about the White Paper 'Employment for the 1990s' in 1988 stated that the 'greatest obstacle to employment growth [was] likely to be lack of skills'. (Hansard, 1988). An issue which, as discussed, continues to resonate today.

The 1988 White Paper set out the details of Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), which would facilitate the planning and provision of training at a local level. The lead on training was effectively delegated to local employers. Small and medium enterprises, which were considered to be key to industrial recovery (Ball, 1990), were also envisaged as playing a key role in the new partnerships. The 1988 White Paper's localised approach was criticised and there were calls for investment from the government at a national, rather than a local level. A centralised approach, with a skills audit to determine the needs of industry as a whole, was recommended. However, this was rejected and comparisons with Germany's policy in this area, which made use of local Chambers of Commerce were cited as justification (Hansard, 1988).

However, the TECs were established and the business education partnership initiative was introduced in 1990, with the first partnerships beginning in 1991. The government was 'looking to TECs, local education authorities and other community organisations to build partnerships which help to raise the aspirations and achievements of students in education and training, of all ages or abilities and which contribute to our future prosperity' (Hansard, 1990). A further White Paper, 'Education and Training for the 21st Century' was released in 1991, which referred to 'leadership of training' being delegated to 'business people' to 'apply local solutions to local needs' (Department of Education and Science, 1991).

## Policy details

The Confederation of British Industry's (CBI) original vision was that the activities of the EBP would be integrated into the curriculum of the participating schools (Bennett, 1992). While the initiative was intended to cover schools at all levels, many activities, such as work experience, were targeted more towards students in the later stages of secondary school. Five different 'levels' of partnership were used to determine the degree of formality (see Figure 1). Funding was provided by the Department of Employment and was intended to provide a stimulus to generate a national network of partnerships (Department for Education and Employment, 1997).

Figure 1: Levels of Partnership

Level 1	Ad hoc, fragmented
Level 2	Simple partnership, developing common goals
Level 3	'Compact' with a formal agreement, more than one school and targets
Level 4	Expanded 'Compact' involving more organisations and targets
Level 5	Full EBP with a committed partnership and activities which are integrated into learning. (Bennett, 1992)

## Funding

Core funding for EBPs was withdrawn in 1995, although many partnerships continued with funding from sources such as the government's Single Regeneration Budget (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). As the partnerships continued to use other sources of funding, there was little impetus to reinstate the funding when the merged Departments of Education and Employment reviewed the position in 1996 (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). The current position is that continuing partnerships receive funding from a number of sources. For example, Cornwall Council's 'Skills Your Way' programme is funded by the European Social Fund while the work experience programme is described as a 'government scheme' (Cornwall Council, 2021). Education Business Partnership North West is funded by a lottery grant (EBP NW, 2021). Typically individual EBPs have a diverse range of funding streams.

## Policy Evaluation

An evaluation of the partnership initiative by the London School of Economics on behalf of the CBI was published in 1992, two years after the policy was introduced. The evaluation noted that there had been significant progress in establishing EBPs, and it was possible to determine that EBPs in 78% of Local Education Authorities had progressed to level 3 or above (Bennett, 1992). However, only a few definite targets, for example in relation to 'attendance and punctuality', and to 'job guarantees' in relation to 'compacts' (ibid p12) had been set. A 'compact' involves minimum commitments in terms of numbers of contacts, liaison staff and a degree of formality. The report considered that '[a] wider set of targets more closely integrated with the curriculum and classroom process [was] necessary' (ibid p12) and it recommended that compacts should be regarded as 'stepping stone[s]' to the integration of business links into the learning experience and not a goal in itself (ibid p13). The evaluation also noted that the focus of businesses was primarily on students aged 14-16 and that there was far less provision for earlier stages of education (ibid).

A further 'stocktake' was undertaken in 1997 by the Quality Performance Improvement Division of the Department for Education and Employment, following the withdrawal of core funding. This later evaluation noted that there were several different funding arrangements in place. These included the Training and Enterprise Council, the Single Regeneration Budget Challenge, and the Local Education Authority. Local companies provided support for all EBPs, but this often took the form of staff time and activities, rather than the provision of financial support (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). The need for EBPs to apply for funding and the associated (primarily numerical) targets was found to be time consuming and put additional pressure on already limited resources. In addition, there was uncertainty regarding government intention toward the future funding of partnerships, which made it difficult to plan. In order to increase involvement from both schools and employers, the majority of those participating in the 1997 evaluation felt that they needed 'a clear demonstration of the priority attached to it by the Government and its agencies, particularly OFSTED' (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). Employers were participating, but those interviewed considered that they needed to approach employers with requests for participation that specified the 'what, why, when, where', (ibid para 2.23) rather than inviting participation in the partnership generally, which placed additional pressure on resources. The report indicated that business and education participants needed to be able to focus on their 'core business' in each case and believed that the efforts of those concerned should be concentrated on partnership activities, rather than securing funding. Overall, the report indicates that there was a lack of consistency between EBPs as their activities depended in part on what else was happening locally (ibid para 5.5). There also appeared to be little sharing of good practice in relation to business links more widely, either within or outside the local area. Further, some areas had more than one set of arrangement in place. In contrast, for some areas, for example, deprived rural areas, were at a disadvantage because of a lack of local businesses with which to work (ibid para 12.6).

Some teachers appeared to have concerns regarding 'inequitable distributions of corporate support' (Hayward & James, 2004) in favour of high performing students at 'the best' schools, rather than consistent availability of activities to all schools. There were also concerns from teachers regarding the potential for 'exploitation' of students as a 'market' where businesses were given access to schools as part of EBP arrangements. Some teachers regarded involvement in education as a potential 'conflict of interest' for businesses, given their 'profit-driven' agenda (ibid).

## Lesson Learnt

There are a number of lessons to be learned from this initiative. The legacy of this policy initiative has resulted in a number of ongoing partnerships, for example, Cornwall Council's EBP, which provides a variety of engagement programmes at all levels from Key Stage 1 to the creation of funded placements for those aged 16-24 (Cornwall Council, 2021). The national network of EBPs has transformed into the Association of Education Business Professionals to support the wider range of organisations operating in this space. It is possible for the funding of EBPs to be drawn from a variety of sources, such as lottery grants, district council funding, and by charging schools for the services provided. While funding in the current fiscal climate is likely to be an ongoing challenge, which can risk the financial viability of the organisations, the variety of available sources may allow the development of further EBPs.

The recently published 'Skills for Jobs White paper' (Department for Education, 2021) sets out proposals for the development of 'local skills improvement plans'. There are clear links with the ideas that led to the introduction of the EBPs as employers play a central role in this development, alongside local colleges.

## Policy borrowing

When EBPs were introduced, German policies were held up as an example to follow (Hansard, 1988). While German policies had been successful in Germany, a 'borrowed' policy may not thrive in a different context (Hayward & James, 2004).

## Lack of clarity

In addition, while a guide to the self-evaluation of partnerships in education was produced in 1991 (King, 1991), a year after the introduction of the policy initiative, there appears to have been a lack of clarity regarding targets, organisational structure and best practice (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). There were also indications that where there were targets, these were often 'numerical' and related to funding requirements, which detracted from the focus on quality educational experiences for the students concerned (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). The underlying focus was on local solutions and organisations (Hansard, 1988), which allowed for flexibility, but which appears to have resulted in a lack of clarity in relation to the most effective approach to EBPs.

## SME involvement

The fact that the partnership model is continuing in some form even now indicates that many businesses at a local level supported the concept and recognised its benefits. However, the expectation that SMEs would have significant involvement in the initiatives did not appear to be realised when the policy was reviewed in 1992 and 1997. This may be because the benefits and cost-effectiveness to smaller organisations were not necessarily apparent, at least initially (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). Similar challenges continue to be seen in other programmes relying on employer engagement, such as apprenticeships.

## Conclusion

The EBP policy initiative was intended to 'stimulate the setting up of a network of effective local partnerships between business and education throughout the country' (Department for Education and Employment, 1997). However, the view that '[t]raining is essentially a task for employers' (Hansard, 1988) remains potentially problematic. This view means that a significant commitment is required from employers and there is a reliance on 'voluntarism' (Wikeley, 1990). In addition, if employers are to be engaged effectively, it is important to take into account their 'expertise, experience, capacity and motivation' if 'policy expectations' are to be met (Huddleston & Laczik, 2018).

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