

Collaboration key to achieving global fluency

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Following the UK's vote to leave the European Union, there is an increased focus on international trade and attracting more foreign inward investment. This sits alongside renewed industrial strategies, and so there is an urgent need for a complementary skills narrative to support these global economic ambitions. We know that inward investors in particular worry about the skills supply in the UK and we need to ensure confidence that we are developing young people with a world-class skills set and mindset - global fluency - to help companies compete internationally and thereby ensure the UK remains an attractive location for investment.

Young people will need an enhanced set of skills to succeed – whether working at home or abroad. It is not enough to acquire the important technical skills needed to complete a task and employability skills to succeed. Young people will also need to be prepared to work with colleagues and clients from different cultures. To be valuable to the growing number of UK businesses with international exposure, working to international standards and possessing global fluency will be key.

With the need to develop home-grown young talent to fill jobs and a decreasing reliance on immigrant labour, what role will business and education leaders play in assisting young people to fulfil their potential in workplaces which have international exposure? A number of WorldSkills UK partners have discussed these challenges. What follows are insights, covering challenges, drivers to solutions and potential next steps. This paper sets out the discussion themes as follows:

- **Joining up the narrative around trade, investment and skills is vital**
- **Meeting business skill needs requires much more collaboration**
- **Achieving global fluency means working to world- class standards**
- **Harnessing collective energy is key to create solutions**

Joining up the narrative around trade, investment and skills is vital

There is clearly a concern from trade and inward investment partners about the supply of world-class skills in the UK. A recent foreign direct investment survey by consultancy firm EY¹ highlighted that the top investment criteria for investment was the “availability and skills of the local workforce”. EY states that "efforts to improve the UK's competitive position must not just continue, but intensify."

Skills - and particularly digital skills - are cited as key to building on a positive positioning as a location for inward investment. This is particularly important as digitisation is increasingly extending its reach beyond technical platforms and into application in manufacturing industry and services.

¹ EY's attractiveness survey, UK 2016, Positive rebalancing?

As EY states, satisfaction rates with current skills are high. Alongside our skills supply, the package of incentives to invest in the UK are key - including use of the English language, our legal framework and rule of law, our time zone, our international standing and our flexible labour market. And as the British Council has noted, our education and skills sector is seen as world-class from the perspective of many other countries globally. In an increasingly globalised and interconnected world it is more important than ever for individuals to have an international outlook and the skills to work across cultures.

The question remains, however, whether we are preparing to have the highly skilled future labour force which can help businesses compete in an increasingly competitive world and attract more inward investment and growth in existing services and manufacturing. It was argued that by demonstrating world-class standards in our skills supply chain, we can help build confidence for existing and new investors.

As with many global challenges, the answers begin to emerge locally. The skills challenges faced in England stem from both the education sector (supply side) and employers (demand side). There are clear challenges in collaboration across the education sector, for the sector in understanding and meeting employer demand but also for employers in appreciating the richness and diversity of a modern education system.

Meeting business skill needs requires much more collaboration

There was violent agreement about the need for more collaboration between colleges and universities from themselves - and from business. Putting learners and employers at the very heart of systemic change was seen as key to "defogging" the current landscape and creating seamless pathways for these key customers. Helping young people and employers better understand the range of different routes and how to navigate these much more easily was considered crucial to the productivity challenge.

This will require more effective and sustained collaboration between further and higher education including adoption of a joint language when talking about education pathways and an end to the vocational versus academic language divide. This was seen as being at the heart of the prestige perception with traditional academic pursuits valued over vocational, skills-based activities, despite many academic routes leading to practice-based careers eg medicine, law, engineering. It was argued that changing language to work-based learning and education-based learning could contribute to changing perceptions but more in-depth work would be needed to challenge more forcefully the cultural issues surrounding the "prestige imbalance" between higher and further education routes. It was agreed that the artificial divide needs to be addressed by leaders across the education sector through more fora for engagement and mutual understanding.

Two major policy and economic drivers were identified as helping shape the direction of travel: localism; and the Sainsbury Review. On localism, the drive to more local level collaboration through LEPs and combined authorities in England presents opportunities for FE, HE and employers to use the platforms to reshape how they engage with each other and with local economic communities - including young people and parents. Many are already engaged in these fora but the drive for further collaboration needs external stimulus at scale to drive reform. This is increasingly present in the shape of the Sainsbury Review and Skills Plan which, it was agreed, can provide a framework for establishing new ways of helping young people "navigate the fog" and help each other "navigate this disaggregated sector". However, success relies on all parts of the education sector engaging with the agenda, working in partnership together with businesses so that all partners take up their responsibilities to help drive up productivity.

From the employer side, pressing timeline demands and finding solutions to long-term skills challenges do not sit easily together. Changes in the labour market, employer ability to clearly articulate skills needs and capacity to engage with education and skills providers are challenges they acknowledged. Breaching the "impenetrable fog" of FE and HE was a challenge but it was agreed that it was business' responsibility to help clear this up and engage in simpler and more honest partnership conversations.

Engaging business leaders in conversations about skills needs and changing business demands was seen as crucial to promote mutual understanding. A tendency to leave conversations to HR leaders to engage with the education sector alone without engagement of business leads was seen to cause "mismatches" in demand, expectations and subsequent delivery. This disconnect was considered a real factor in undermining confidence between education and business partners and the ability for future proofing workforce planning. Larger companies accept they have both the brand, resources and responsibilities to be able to engage more productively in the right settings. However, smaller and medium-sized firms would continue to be challenged and need to be engaged in different ways to ensure they are a significant part of the solution. As one large business noted, for this to be successful, we need "time and incentive" to get this right. While time will always be a challenge, the key policy and financial incentive identified to help push these conversations in the right direction was identified as the apprenticeship levy.

The focus on return on investment for the organisations covered by the levy and the opportunity for others to benefit from the levy should focus minds and sharpen conversations between business and education providers on the type of training they need. More honesty from employers and potentially more collaboration between employers themselves on skill needs in sector and in economic geographies could help drive education and training providers from FE and HE to collaborate more to meet employer needs.

Achieving global fluency means working to world-class standards

Behind all this was the recognition that achieving world-class standards is vital for increasing global fluency, productivity, economic competitiveness and social mobility. In a world where movement of labour may be constrained, the need for nurturing home-grown talent was seen not just as a necessity but also a responsibility.

It was agreed that world-class standards can be achieved in applied learning settings and that many businesses were keen on this type of learning environment. Some have used the experience of WorldSkills competitions to help drive up standards to world-class levels through objective assessment process which is integral to WorldSkills. Further, the competitions process has also had positive impact on the professional development of trainers as well as creating positive role models for apprenticeships and technical careers. Businesses were keen for global standards to be adopted as a way of easing labour mobility while being clear that the global standards achieved were objectively verified.

It was argued that setting global aspiration in young people at the outset of their education and training journeys was key to motivation and building confidence. Engaging young people in a global outlook when they are already engaged in an interconnected digital world outlook is vital to harnessing success. Being open to the world was critical.

HE was perceived as being good at giving a sense of global opportunities through their offer. However, FE was seen as not as good at doing this in general, although clearly some FE colleges have run successful international programmes for their students and some are using WorldSkills competitions to create a globally-accessible offer as part of broader employability activities.

It was suggested that work placements (either with large or small employers) could be a good opportunity to help young people better understand what working in a global supply chain looks like. Coordinating the right amount of work placements was seen as a significant challenge but locally driven facilitators could help this. Global policy messages from government were also seen as key - combined with employers demanding higher level skills and articulating their needs in relation to international competitiveness and global opportunities for young people as a pull factor.

Harnessing collective energy is key to create solutions

As a result of these deliberations and insights, we are proposing to continue these discussions with a view to sustaining a neutral space for our partners to debate and share insights on meeting some of the key challenges highlighted in our drive to help young people achieve global fluency.

These could include:

- Increasing collaboration to “defog” learning and employer pathways and foster global fluency
- Redressing the “prestige imbalance” for a global era
- Improving employer articulation of skills need at world-class levels
- Improving the role of work placements in increasing young people’s global outlook
- Defining and achieving world class standards

Thank you to Middlessex University for hosting this discussion and to all our partners who created a collaborative and engaging platform.

WorldSkills UK: a catalyst for global fluency

WorldSkills UK is well placed to convene partners to act as a catalyst to find solutions on promoting global fluency. We have expertise based on practical experience from our skills competitions work. We are part of a global network based on competing to international standards. We are the bridge between the international and the UK standards and we can play a conveying role in shaping policy making, driving higher standards in teaching and training, improving business productivity and engaging young people.

Competing to national and international standards means young people gaining both short and more lasting benefits, raising their technical, employability and personal skill levels to higher levels. This also meets employers’ needs for these higher quality outcomes to help improve productivity and competitiveness. Exposure to international competitions is key to building confidence and transforming outlooks.

For policy makers, gaining expertise and insights on setting standards to international levels and assessing these standards during training is crucial to meeting objectives of world-class skills across the UK. Further, improving access to skills competitions for as many young people as possible, from all walks of life, can play a key role in powering aspiration, social mobility and diversity in tandem with work on careers advice.

For the education sector, demonstrating world-class standards in teaching and training will help respond to changes in economic policy and changing business needs. Our CPD programme shares knowledge from our experts about training to international standards.

Thanks go to the following partners for their contributions:

