

## PRESS RELEASE

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### New ‘connect card’ will help schools, colleges and SMEs to produce work ready young people

Many schools, colleges and employers want to develop stronger links to prepare young people for work, but are struggling to make this happen. However, a new report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), London Councils, the London Enterprise Panel and South East Strategic Leaders, gives practical advice on how education organisations and local business can work together to make young people ‘work ready’. Based on research with SMEs, micro-businesses, further education colleges and secondary schools in London and the South East, the report includes case studies and a ‘connect card’ with advice on how to develop effective partnerships.

Forming partnerships between SMEs and education is not easy, the research finds. Whilst many larger companies have well-developed education links programmes, SMEs (which account for 99.6% of all businesses in the South East) are less likely to have strong links with education.

A key assertion is that relationships between education and business need to be driven by schools and colleges.

To help develop these relationships, the research partners have produced a ‘connect card’ containing a checklist of five key questions designed to stimulate discussion, plus advice on understanding business needs and developing long-term relationships.

“The more informed and involved employers are, the more they will realise that schools and colleges cannot produce a ‘work-ready’ young person alone and that their input is crucial to the better preparation of young people to the workplace,” the report says.

It identifies the key things that improve education-business relationships. They are:

- having a single line of communication (face-to-face where possible) to help SMEs understand the importance of their role and break down barriers
- joint involvement by SMEs with the content of careers information
- showing how employers can get involved, with flexible methods of engagement such as providing apprenticeships and work placements
- a dedicated careers coordinator who can broker long-term connections.

The research also includes case studies showing how businesses (SMEs and micro firms) are already engaging effectively with secondary schools and colleges. (See notes to editor).

Senior NFER Research Manager Tami McCrone says:

“Concerns amongst employers about the lack of ‘work readiness’ amongst young people leaving education have been raised. The contribution made by small and medium-sized enterprises to improving the employability skills of young people is invaluable.

Schools, colleges and businesses are keen to work together, but the challenge is not knowing how to go about developing partnerships that work. The research not only shows the value of developing direct relationships between schools, colleges and SMEs, but also how to do it.”

Cllr David Burbage MBE, SESL Chairman and Leader, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead commented:

"Our education and skills system must become increasingly effective in responding to the priorities of the South East economy. Greater skills devolution is vital to securing this, as is the involvement of businesses in education. Our case study report shows how local authorities and LEPs are already brokering meaningful links between employers and educators. Beyond large corporates, we need to tap into the vast pool of innovative micro and small and medium sized enterprises - the backbone of the South East economy". He continued: "Employers of all shapes and sizes want work-ready young people and are willing to be part of the solution – our Connect Card, developed in partnership with schools, colleges and businesses, will help make this a reality".

Councillor Peter John, Executive member for skills and engagement, said:

"London has high levels of youth unemployment and, yet, a fifth of unfilled vacancies is due to a skills shortage. The findings of this joint research project confirm that in order to make a difference to those statistics, employers, schools, colleges, and local authorities each have a role to play. Schools must ensure businesses are involved in preparing young people for the workplace at the earliest opportunity; employers of all sizes must take a more proactive role in helping to shape London's future workforce; and local authorities play a vital role in facilitating these relationships. I would urge all partners to consider the recommendations in this report to help save a future generation of Londoners from worklessness."

Cathy Walsh, Member of the London Enterprise Panel said:

"Improving employability skills, enriching our economy comes at a key stage in the debate on how the London Careers Offer can be enhanced to help young people make more informed career choices. The Panel's Skills and Employment Working Group, is particularly interested in what a London Careers Offer would look like and welcomes the report's findings particularly the importance of the development of employability and enterprise skills within education, through direct involvement of employers. It is a win win for everyone. It better prepares young people for work and it benefits businesses by shaping the employability skills of their future workforce."

The research report is timely as concerns about young people's employability skills have been raised by the British Chambers of Commerce. In a recent survey (published on 1 March) it revealed that more than half of UK employers believe a lack of soft skills is hindering young people's readiness for work and that there is a lack of focus on employability and enterprise in schools.

The report and connect card are available [here](#).

**For more information contact:**

- 1) Jane Parrack, Marketing and Communications Manager. Email: [j.parrack@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:j.parrack@nfer.ac.uk).  
Phone: 01753 637245.
- 2) Anne Nicholls, PR consultant. Email: [ancommunications@hotmail.co.uk](mailto:ancommunications@hotmail.co.uk). Phone: 07973 491439.
- 3) Philippa Mellish, South East Strategic Leaders. Email: [philippa.mellish@hants.gov.uk](mailto:philippa.mellish@hants.gov.uk).  
Phone: 01962 847482

Interviews can be arranged with spokespeople and case studies involved in the project. (See notes to editor).

**Notes to editor**

- The **National Foundation for Educational Research** is the UK's largest independent provider of research, assessment and information services for education, training and

children's services. Its purpose is to provide independent evidence which improves education and training and hence the lives of learners.

- **South East Strategic Leaders** is a partnership of upper tier local authorities committed to nurturing the engine room of the UK economy and promoting public service excellence. SESL supports its members to create the conditions within which individuals, communities and businesses thrive. The group is chaired by Cllr David Burbage MBE, Leader, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead.  
Contact: e. [sesl@hants.gov.uk](mailto:sesl@hants.gov.uk), t. 07841 492507.
- **London Councils** represent 32 borough councils and the City of London. It is a cross-party organisation that works on behalf of all its member authorities regardless of political persuasion.
- **The London Enterprise Panel** is the local enterprise partnership for London. Chaired by the Major of London, it is the consultative and advisory body through which the Mayoralty works with London's boroughs, business and Transport for London to take a strategy view of regeneration, employment and skills agenda for London.

### **Research methodology**

The research took place between November 2014 and March 2015. It involved

- a desktop review of current approaches, guidelines and toolkits for employer-education engagement
- a consultation with seven key stakeholders with knowledge in this area
- a focus group discussion with several individuals with experience of employer-education engagement
- telephone interviews with four individuals from SMEs and colleges
- case study analysis.

### **Case studies** (\*These are available for interview)

#### Berkshire

- **Newlands Girls' School, Maidenhead\***, has embedded employability skills into the curriculum with participation from local employers. The subjects covered include hair and beauty, catering, printing and film making. For example, a film company (a social enterprise) based in Slough that has set up Resource Youth Film – a charity run by young people for young people aged 11-25 with a passion for film. Young people are taught how to make their own films on social issues and develop employability skills in the process.
- **Slough Aspire\*** is an innovative new private-public sector-led social enterprise designed to help local people to develop the right skills needed by local employers. So far it has engaged over 4100 young people with business, sponsored an annual careers event for schools and worked with over 140 organisations in the area. Pupils from one enterprise academy took part in an engineering challenge set by two businesses to stimulate an interest in STEM careers.
- **University Technical College Reading** has developed a curriculum based on partnerships with local industry. BTEC units are matched to the needs of specific businesses, with each unit linked to a specific business partner. The partner then delivers the unit, attends college sessions and can offer work experience or mentoring as well. Staff from SMEs provide specific activities in the college. For instance, a company specialising in database construction has delivered part of a course.

#### Oxfordshire

- **Opportunities to Inspire (O2i)\*** – an education-business links organisation in **Oxfordshire** – has recently launched (in December 2014) an integrated service to support young people in transition into work. The aim is to bridge the gap between the worlds of work and education in the county, ensuring integrated education-business links across schools, employers, parents students and other organisations. Volunteers from businesses are encouraged to register on the O2i website that provides opportunities to work with local schools.

### Wiltshire

- **Wiltshire Council** has built up a successful role model network which provides inspirational visit from business into schools, with a focus on STEM subjects and careers. Around 20 mentors – covering police staff, athletes, engineers, scientists and self-employed entrepreneurs – are providing one-to-one and group support for young people. In addition 17 schools have received an award – the careers mark - for providing high-quality careers education, information, advice and guidance.

### Kent

- In **Kent** a new **tourism and hospitality guild** is being developed between employers and learning providers to raise the profile of the sector as an attractive and sustainable career option. One activity is bringing business leaders into schools to raise the profile of opportunities within the hospitality industry. A new Kent passport will provide demonstration of the skills and experience achieved for those young people seeking to make a career within the industry.
- **Kent County Council's Skills** and Employability team has developed a model, called 2-1-2 that gives students the opportunity to spend two days working towards GCSEs in maths and English, with one day of work experience and a further two days of technical learning. This model is being used at Canterbury High School.

### London

- **A tri-borough employability programme\***, in **West London** has been set up to deliver a more joined up approach to tackling youth unemployment. The three boroughs of Hammersmith and Fulham, Kensington and Chelsea and Westminster are running an employer engagement pilot project with six schools. For example, at one school pupils undertook a crash course in French before setting up a French theme café with the involvement of a local patisserie and design business.
- **K&M McLoughlin Decorating Ltd**, a family-owned painting and decorating company in **Islington** employing 120 people responded to a lack of relevant training provision by establishing its own rolling apprenticeship programme. Tackling skills shortages in the construction industry and retaining staff is critical to their continuing business success. Their apprenticeship programme retains over 90 per cent of qualified apprentices. It takes on around 20 individuals every five weeks, working in partnership with a local college.