



Erasmus+

Shaping Characters

Employer Research Report

How work ready are young people leaving education – views from employers



**SHAPING
CHARACTERS**

Building resilience through
character education

3 November 2017

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Executive summary

There has been much focus on how work ready young people are when leaving education with employers reporting that many young people do not have the skills and qualities they look for when recruiting new staff.

Each of the four cities involved in the Shaping Characters project decided to undertake their own research to better understand how well prepared employers in their city felt young people were for work. They also wanted to understand if, and how they would like to work with education to improve employability skills.

When talking about what they look for in new employees, a number of key attributes were commonly cited by employers across the four cities:

- Curiosity and drive
- The ability to cooperate
- Honesty and integrity
- A positive approach to challenges
- Social skills
- An entrepreneurial approach
- A creative thinker

A number of the employers we spoke to across the 4 cities felt some young people currently did not possess the communication skills they needed, had unrealistic expectations regarding salary and job roles, were not able to self-regulate and had poor labour market awareness. Furthermore, the employers overwhelmingly felt that education should do more to prepare young people for the world of work, believing that schools should prepare young people for life, not just to pass exams.

The majority also stated that they would like to be able to influence what employability related skills are taught and would be prepared to invest time (within reason) in working with schools.

The research we carried out mirrored other research findings, such as a study carried out by BIAC for the EOCD in 2015 in which 100% of respondents said they thought the education system in their country should do more to promote important character qualities for the workplace.

BIAC (2015) "*Character Qualities for the Workplace*", <http://biac.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/06/15-06-Synthesis-BIAC-Character-Survey1.pdf>

The partners in the Shaping Characters project are all committed to character education and improving the employability skills of the young people leaving education in their city. This research demonstrated that their local employers share their goals and are willing to play a part in making this happen.

Introduction

Project background

With high levels of youth unemployment across Europe and an ever more competitive labour market, young people leaving education are expected to not only have the technical skills required by employers but also to be well rounded individuals with the attitude, attributes and employability skills necessary to enter the labour market effectively.

Employers often report that young people leaving education are not work-ready and lack some of the core skills employers require for effective entry into the world of work. Furthermore, consultation with students and teachers has shown that students often find it difficult to make the connection between what they are taught and its relevance to the world of work or are unable to articulate how what they do in school and out of school gives them the essential and basic skills employers require.

Currently, employability skills and character resilience tend to be taught on an ad-hoc basis and are very often linked to specific projects. There isn't a widespread consistent approach whereby character education and employability form an integral part of teaching and where students are being equipped with the skills, attributes and behaviour that will empower them to take ownership of their own development, improve educational engagement and attainment and build their resilience when entering the world of work.

The Shaping Characters project was funded under the Erasmus + programme and explored activities which develop key traits in people under the age of 18 such as confidence, resilience, ambition and respect. During the project, partners from Gävle in Sweden, Riga in Latvia, Olomouc in the Czech Republic and Basingstoke in the UK carried out research, shared resources and looked at best practice examples. Young people from each of the four countries also came together for a week in February 2017 to test some of these resources. The project ran for 2 years from October 2015.

To find out more about the partners and the work carried out through the project visit the project website at: <http://www.shapingcharacters.eu/>

Objectives

The purpose of this research was to better understand the views of employers in each of the partner cities and to test if they were similar to those reported in other studies reviewed. The research also aimed to see how involved local employers were willing and able to be in influencing or delivering employability sessions in educational settings and to explore any difference between the 4 European cities.

The results will be used by the partners to shape local projects and to influence where possible employability programme design.

Methodology

Employers in each city were asked the same 5 questions:

1. What do you think is the current problem with regards the employability of young people leaving education?
2. Do you think it should be schools/colleges responsibility to better prepare people for work and at what age?
3. What key skills/attributes do you want in new employers?
4. Would you like to be able to influence what employability related skills are taught?
5. How would you prefer to do this?

Each city partner carried out the research with at least 5 local businesses (actual numbers were between 5 and 14), either via face to face informal interviews or by telephone. The businesses interviewed represented a mix of small, medium and large and were from a range of sectors.

Results

Question 1 - What do you think is the current problem with regards the employability of young people leaving education?

The responses to this question can be split into 3 categories; skills, attitudes and expectations.

Skills:

Employers from all 4 cities cited lack of experience and practical work skills as a real issue. Employers in both Basingstoke and Olomouc said that they felt fewer young people had part time jobs or undertook work experience placements while in education which meant that they had limited understanding of what work was really like and had not developed essential employability skills.

One business owner in Basingstoke did however also stress that most young people do develop these skills quickly once working and felt that employer's perceptions were not always a fair reflection of reality.

Attitude:

Once again, employers in all cities raised general issues relating to attitude and work habits. Low levels of motivation, lack of willingness to work hard, poor punctuality and reluctance to do 'boring' tasks were some of the specific problems cited.

Expectations:

Employers in 3 of the 4 cities said they believed young people's expectations were unrealistic in that they expected to start work in high level roles and to be earning high salaries straight away. Some felt that the commitment to working hard to achieve success was lacking.

Question 2 – Do you think it should be schools/colleges responsibility to better prepare people for work and at what age?

The majority of employers did feel that schools have a responsibility to better prepare young people with only one employer in Gävle stating that employability skills should be developed in the workplace.

Employers in Olomouc felt that there should be closer links between education and the labour market so that young people develop the skills industry needs. They also felt there needs to be more flexibility within education to respond to labour market needs and that young people need more and regular experience in the work place. Similarly, in Riga employers felt that education should provide work experience, exposure to and knowledge about the world of work. They also raised the importance of careers advice to help young people understand what they want and what they are able to do.

Employers in Gävle felt that companies should have input into courses and teaching materials to help develop employability skills and should be willing to go into schools and talk about what they do. In Basingstoke one employer believed that education should do more to prepare young people for the competitive nature of finding and progressing in work as well as more practical advice such as how to dress and act in a work environment.

Question 3 - What key skills/attributes to you want in new employees?

The following were cited by employers across the four cities with team work and social skills being the most commonly mentioned:

Curiosity and drive

The ability to cooperate

Honesty and integrity

A positive approach to challenges

Social skills

An entrepreneurial approach

A creative thinker

Question 4 – Would you like to be able to influence what employability related skills are taught?

All but one respondent said yes in answer to this question. The exception believed that work experience was more effective than 'teaching' employability skills. Many of the employers interviewed already have links with education and visit schools and/or host visits of children to their companies and felt this was an effective way of influencing what employability related skills are taught. Other comments made included the need for careers advisors to have good and up to date knowledge of the local labour market.

Question 5 – How would you prefer to do this?

Suggestions included:

- Through regular events to link careers advisors and local businesses
- By giving talks in schools
- Through long term partnerships between individual schools and businesses
- Businesses could develop optional study programmes for students
- Through apprenticeships (such as the German model)
- By supporting schools/colleges with information and materials about industry and career opportunities
- By offering to be a sounding board to schools in the development of their programmes and courses
- By offering work experience placements / internships
- Through business mentoring

Conclusion

Within this research we found significant agreement among the employers both within each city and across the 4 countries.

The key common views expressed by employers across the 4 cities were:

- many young people are missing some of the key skills they look for when recruiting new staff
- many young people leaving education have unrealistic expectations of the salary and role they can secure when entering the workforce
- too many young people joining the labour market are reluctant to work hard to achieve success; they do not expect to have to start at the bottom and work their way up
- education should do more to prepare young people for work
- employers are willing to invest time (within reason) to support this

There is clearly an appetite among employers to influence the work readiness of those leaving education. They can see how it benefits their business and supports their corporate social responsibility. They tend however to see it as the responsibility of public bodies and educational establishments to facilitate this and to make it easy for them to have this influence.