Employers and schools: How Mansfield is building a world of work approach.

In Perspective article for Local Economy

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Abstract
There is a keen interest in encouraging employers to engage with schools so that young people can learn more about careers, understand the skills that employers are interested in, broaden their aspirations and be motivated to succeed. Employer engagement in schools in England however is increasingly fragmented because of a loss of brokering infrastructure. This article describes a partnership approach developed in Mansfield where a consortium of local schools has worked with their business community and public sector organisations. Together they have listened to what young people say they both want and need to know about careers and then responded by providing a strategic careers learning programme. The particular contribution of the Mansfield Learning Partnership which is wholly funded by the town’s secondary schools is detailed in the paper alongside elaboration of Mansfield framework for career learning which provides a work experience programme and several imaginative opportunities for young people to engage in meaningful encounters with employers.
Introduction

‘One of our local employers - an accountant - offers a traineeship to a 16 year old every year, he takes them on and trains them up. Last year this employer got no interest from our area – he had to recruit someone from the neighbouring town. Yet this is an area of such high unemployment… we've got to be able to do something better for our local kids….’

This story about an employer in Mansfield captures the concerns expressed in recent reports which are highlighting a growing problem for young people – namely that their knowledge of the world of work, of careers pathways and the expectations of employers are increasingly fragile. The CBI for example have been highlighting this issue for many years, their recent Employer Trends report of 2012 suggested that 51% of firms which expect to have roles for young people have concerns about their lack of appropriate skills. Consequently the CBI see stronger engagement between schools and businesses as ‘essential to improve young people’s employability skills’. Meanwhile a recent report by the Chartered Institute for Professional Development (2013) suggested that there were mutually unrealistic expectations of both employers and potential young employees. In particular they suggested that young people were unprepared for the competitive nature of job seeking and lacked skills and strategies to secure employment.

The concern about mismatched expectations between young people and employers is associated in part with concerns about infrequent or inadequate careers advice. The recent Ofsted review (2013) suggested that “too few schools are providing careers guidance that meets the needs of all their students” with four in every five schools providing an inadequate offer to young people. CBI Director-General John Cridland (2013) recently told headteachers
that careers advice is on “life support”; meanwhile the Education Select Committee (2012) has also concluded that there has been “a worrying deterioration” in careers services.

A response to this issue has been to suggest the increased involvement of employers in education. For example the Local Government Association have promoted local authority partnership with local businesses across a range of themes (including careers advice and guidance) to harness the hidden talents of young people and in particular young NEETs (not in education, employment or training) (Allen, Mehta and Rutt, 2012). The CIPD (2013) recommend employer engagement with schools and colleges to encourage young people and their parents to give more careful consideration to thinking about employment as well as educational attainment. Meanwhile the Education and Employers Taskforce have been promoting the positive impact of employer engagement in schools generally (Mann and Glover 2011), and more specifically through employer talks in schools (such as those organised through the Inspiring the Future¹ network. These calls are echoed by the coalition government whose response to the Education Select Committee report was captured in an ‘Inspiration Vision Statement’ (HM Government, 2013) which controversially suggests that the best sources of information and mentoring come from people in jobs (Watts, 2013), and encourages businesses, schools and colleges to work together.

Research suggests that there are several positive impacts of employer engagement in schools for pupils, teachers and employers themselves. For example, AIR UK (2008, 29) found ‘positive impacts of employers’ involvement with education…..in terms of preparedness for work, developing job and work skills, improving work-based competencies, attitudes and behaviours,

¹ http://www.inspiringthefuture.org/
enhanced employability and higher initial wage rates’. Although the AIR UK report found no
evidence of a positive link with impact on attainment, an evaluation of the Business in the
Community’s Business Class programme reported a 38% improvement in academic
achievement for students. In addition, research by the Education and Employers’ Taskforce
(2012) found that multiple interactions of pupils with employers were associated with a reduced
risk of becoming NEET. On the other hand, in a review of UK and international evidence, NFER
research concludes that ‘whilst key features of successful employer engagement can be
identified in the literature, these features have not been empirically tested……[and there is a]
lack of robust evidence on the impact of employer involvement on harder outcomes such as
achievement and post-16 destinations’ (Burge, Wilson and Smith-Crallan, 2012).

Despite the inconclusiveness of the available body of research, the available evidence
nonetheless provides sufficient justification for a range of initiatives that seek to build stronger
alliances between businesses and employers. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills
(2012) has for example made a strategic commitment to supporting and promoting business
and schools working together. However, there are a number of practical barriers associated
with building school and employer links. These are outlined further in the UKCES (2012) report
as:

• schools not wishing to engage with employers as they do not see the relevance;
• businesses, particularly SMEs not knowing how to approach schools or what might be
  acceptable or appropriate;
• businesses finding it difficult to provide the number and quality of work experience
  opportunities requested by schools as they all seem to be made at the same time; and
misinformation and misunderstandings about regulations associated with health and safety and Disclosure and Barring Service (formerly CRB) checks.

In turn UKCES then makes a number of practical recommendations which are to:

- enhance and enrich the delivery of education through a range of activities;
- increase the flexibility of the timing of work experience opportunities; and
- provide up to date information about careers in their sectors and raise the profile of careers.

In this paper we will explore what young people want to get out of employer engagement and how a partnership approach to school and business links can help to meet young people’s expectations, help overcome some of the barriers outlined by the Commission and move towards implementing their recommendations. We use the experience of partnerships in Mansfield to explore how local partnerships are using innovative and creative ways of bringing together young people and local employers in an area of high social deprivation with limited economic opportunities.

**About Mansfield**

Mansfield is a former mining community. It is an area of both educational and economic disadvantage being the 38th most disadvantaged District (out of 326) in England on the average score of the 2010 Index of Multiple Deprivation. There are few major employers within the town itself, with the largest being Kingsmill Hospital, Linney Group and Mansfield District Council. The sectors that dominate the local economy are business services, health, wholesale, manufacturing of transport equipment and transport and logistics.
Mansfield has seven secondary schools, of which five have recently acquired academy status. All the schools have some sixth form provision. There is a strong culture of collaboration between the schools on careers and employability programmes and work experience. For example, four schools have developed specialisms in their A level provision and are able to offer collaborative off-site provision for Key Stage 5 pupils. This means that students can study for the qualifications they are interested in, even if they are not offered at their own school.

There are issues with attainment and labour market transitions which affect Mansfield schools and their pupils. Since 2004 Nottinghamshire has consistently performed below that of the other shire counties in the national performance attainment of Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications by the age of 19, and it performs below national and Local Authority averages at Key Stage 4. Whilst results for Mansfield schools are improving, (in some schools above the Local Authority average), Mansfield unfortunately consistently underperforms in terms of attainment. The factors which influence this observation are socially, spatially and economically complex but are nonetheless characteristic of many former coalmining communities (McCarthy, 2012).

Schools in Mansfield are working hard to address these issues and already support the attainment of their pupils through direct interventions such as additional tutorials, peer tutoring and after-school classes. However, these activities encourage pupils to focus on attaining grades. There is a consensus across key partners in Mansfield that this could be extended further to encourage pupils to consider how the skills they are developing to achieve their grades are important to employers, to future learning providers and ultimately to helping them to succeed in their lives.
There are two partnership groups which bring the business community together with the public sector and community groups. Mansfield 2020 (M2020) was created in 1991 and is a locally powerful business led partnership between the public and private sectors and community support organisations, with a membership of 170 organisations. Their primary objective is to promote innovation, support and nurture inward investment and create a platform for dialogue between all agencies in the private and public sectors to help build a strong business community and boost the local economy. The second is the Mansfield Area Strategic Partnership which is another well-established community partnership, facilitated by Mansfield District Council which provides a co-ordination function between public services that operate in Mansfield and the business and local communities.

Schools link into these two partnership structures through the Mansfield Learning Partnership (MLP). These links were initially developed from 2009 during the implementation of the former national diploma qualifications (Isaacs, 2013) but their collaborative work has continued ever since. MLP is a soft federation of six secondary schools in Mansfield. It is staffed by a Director, with support staff who are hosted within one of the schools and whose staffing and associated overhead costs are shared by the schools. The director has a human resources background with skills in employee development, education and employability skills and is well connected within the schools and employer networks. The director reports termly to an executive group comprised of head-teachers. The heads have all agreed that work with employers is a strategic priority for their schools and that MLP is the best way to make that happen.
The partners across all these networks have a collective concern about the futures of their young people in Mansfield. In response to withdrawal of funding for the Education Business Partnership and the reconfiguration of Connexions work (Hooley and Watts, 2011), the MLP and local business networks decided to develop their own programmes and activities. Together they made a strategic decision to support Mansfield’s young people by improving their career knowledge, giving them practical skills and amplifying their personal networks. They began this work by asking young people what mattered to them through a process facilitated by researchers at the International Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby.

What young people want? The learner voice

Discussions with Year Ten pupils in facilitated workshops were held in four of the secondary schools followed up by an on-line survey which was completed by 501 pupils in Years 9, 10 and 12. Survey findings demonstrated that most pupils that participated in the research were beginning to think about their futures. Most of the respondents to the survey (80%) said that they had begun to make career plans, and most (73%) responded to an option to say that they had a “reasonably good idea” about which subjects and qualifications they were going to take. However, while their educational plans were currently being shaped, their career plans were more opaque with only 12 % of pupils saying they had “a clear idea about what they need to do” to pursue their career ideas. Most pupils were able to identify some sort of career path, but many of them reported several (often unrelated) career options. We interpret this as being a shortfall in general awareness and understanding of progression routes through learning and into employment.
In terms of information, most pupils in Mansfield would use Google to search for careers information. Around a third said they would look at a single University's website or look at the site of West Nottinghamshire College – the main local college. This suggests that their aspirations for further study are associated with a particular learning provider, rather than thinking about what qualifications or training they need and then searching for a suitable course.

The survey then went on to ask who they would talk to about job and career ideas. Naturally most (77%) would talk to their parents or carers. But then 59% said they would talk to someone in that career, while 52% would talk to a careers advisor and 47% would talk to their subject teacher. When the survey asked whose advice would they most value, 61% said they would most value the advice of someone who works in that job or career – a higher proportion that those who would value advice from any other source (including parents). As a consequence what young people want within the career learning programmes in school are opportunities to meet employers and to have work experience with 56% and 74% respectively of pupils saying these were essential. However, they are not the only things that young people want as 62% also said that they want individual face to face advice from a careers adviser.

There were some differences between the responses from boys and from girls with the latter generally being more open to learning about careers from a range of resources. Similarly there were differences between those in Key Stage 3 and Key Stage 4 with the older pupils being more likely to have clearer plans and to want to learn about jobs and careers from a range of professionals rather than their family and friends.
The clear reflection from this process is that when young people are encouraged to think about jobs and careers they recognise their own learning needs. They recognise that they need support to help them to think about their futures and that they would value support from both employers and careers advisers.

A co-creation model for career related learning in Mansfield.

The messages that came out of the work with young people was considered by MLP with their business and local authority partners. It helped to guide their plans to create a progressive and innovative career related learning programme. This programme was developed by partners following a series of focus group activities with local employers. It now forms a strategic plan for guiding their collective work to:

- excite young people about exploring the world of work;
- help young people make an informed choice about their career direction;
- give young people an insight into how to prepare for the world of work;
- develop and improve employability & workplace skills;
- benefit from business mentors as role models;
- build confidence, self-esteem and self-belief;
- develop a ‘can do’ and ‘want to’ attitude;
- help the young people understand themselves & their strengths; and
- inspire young people to want to enter the world of work.

Working with the Director of the Mansfield Learning Partnership, three M2020 board members and other M2020 employers have developed:
• a partnership careers and employability framework;
• a partnership work experience policy, and
• a local career related learning programme.

These have been endorsed by the M2020 board and adopted by head teachers.

The themes that have been generated by the partners in Mansfield have clear resonance with the three recommendations outlined earlier from the UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2012) which emphasised the need for flexible work experience opportunities, provision of up to date and relevant careers information and the delivery of a range of activities that enhance educational objectives as well are career-related learning objectives. This paper now describes some of the ways in which employers and partners in Mansfield are implementing their plans and the Commission’s recommendations.

**The careers and employability framework**

Opportunities for young people to learn about careers within their schools and with local employers are strategically led and co-ordinated by the MLP. With Mansfield 2020 and their partner schools, MLP have developed a ‘Careers and Work Related Education Framework’. This sets out a shared commitment intended to assist pupils to make and implement education, training and occupation choices and to learn how to manage their careers. The MLP promises to offer young people the opportunity to develop their knowledge and skills so they can make deliberate career choices that are right for them and then support them in their move on to their preferred progression pathway.
The framework is collaborative programme of career and work related education activities for KS3 and Post 16 learners. This programme embeds the three main areas of the Association of Careers Education and Guidance (ACEG) framework:

- self-development through careers and work-related education;
- finding out about careers and the world of work; and
- developing skills for career wellbeing and employability.

The framework therefore helps young people learn about their local labour market from local employers – in a way that they said they valued. However, by placing it within a career learning framework it also offers a structured way for them to learn about what skills are important in the workplace, to understand how choices they make now can affect their opportunities in the future, and to reflect on the type of person they are and what they want out of their working life. It is this combination of in-school career education with learning about, through and in work that makes the Mansfield approach potentially very powerful.

**A partnership work experience policy**

Within the Framework there is a commitment to securing a broad range of work experience opportunities. The MLP have developed a work experience policy that sets a clear aspiration for it to be able to offer a broad range of work experience opportunities including work placements, volunteering, work shadowing, internships and part-time and casual work. This policy initially prioritised work experience at KS4 to bridge the gap left after the withdrawal of Education Business Partnership funding. Subsequently, and in the light of emerging focus on post-16 work experience (Department for Education 2013) this older age group is becoming more of a priority. The MLP are working with local employers to provide a programme of work
placement programmes that provide young people with meaningful and inspiring experiences whilst demonstrating to the local business community that they build their talent pipeline through quality work placements.

The programme requires young people to be interviewed by the prospective employer, and receive a visit from a school member of staff whilst they are on placement. A formal work placement review invites feedback from learners, employers and the school partner and provides an opportunity for young people to reflect on what they have learned from their experience and how they will use those new insights to help shape their future career decisions. The partnership between schools and employers is valuable here because it ensures that young people have that opportunity for structured reflection as part of their learning experiences rather than simply exposure to a series of activities (Hooley et al 2012).

**A local career related learning programme**

Work placements are not however the only way in which employers support career learning in Mansfield. The MLP in partnership with its schools and employer networks provide several opportunities for local young people to learn about careers and the world of work within the framework.

_**Junior enterprise event.**_ This event targets year 9’s and has a MadebyMe theme. Enterprise activities offer opportunities to learn and develop the entrepreneurial characteristics of tenacity, independence, innovation, imagination, risk taking, creativity, intuition and leadership. The aim of this challenge is for participants to develop an understanding of how to set up a small business enterprise to sell a product, including the costs and responsibilities involved. Participants will also consider the skills required for the enterprise activity and how to promote
the activity. The products are sold at a market place event in Mansfield Town Centre and a panel of employer judges score each team against a number of categories. The winners are announced a high profile awards ceremony.

**Short story competition.** A local employer who felt very strongly about improving young people’s literacy skills, confidence and self-belief sponsored a short story competition open to students aged 11 – 19. Entrants and winners attended an event hosted by a national radio DJ where they were asked to reflect on the skills they have demonstrated and their importance to the workplace alongside a celebration of achievement. Evidence of their achievement will be a publication of the winning stories printed by another local company.

**Post 16 master classes.** These bring enthusiastic, knowledgeable and authoritative local speakers who are leaders in their field into schools. The speakers address a group of students and describe their educational and career journey and talk about the challenges they have faced and what they consider their achievements to be. They aim to motivate and inspire young people and answer their questions. It is important that these are local people so that their young audience can relate to them and think that ‘people like me can become people like you’. Speakers have included a local lawyer, the marketing manager of the local shopping centre, Sainsbury’s local store manager, a medic and a local journalist.

**Sponsor a Student Programme.** This enables students in 6th Form to attend the M2020 breakfast events and meet local employers. This experience will help students develop networking skills and the confidence to make decisions about their future career. Students apply to attend the networking meetings and this is popular with those students who are studying business but who are not intending to apply to University. Each month MLP allocate 5 or 6
places to one of the 4 post 16 partner schools. The group of students then participate in a short workshop session to help them understand what to expect and to learn how to network effectively. Working with M2020. MLP try to place each student with an employer that the student has a career interest in the business. This is both popular and has seen some successes with some young people having secured work experience, part-time work and one young man got offered an apprenticeship.

**Business mentors.** Local employers act as Business Mentors to support employability related programmes which are funded by Mansfield District Council. Working with small groups of around 6-8 young people a local business person will run sessions on SWOT analysis, CV’s, covering letters, interview roles plays, assessment centres and giving Top Ten Tips for success. In the academic year 2012/13 450 young people in Key Stage 4 total graduated from this programme.

**Building on the benefits**

Informal feedback suggests that businesses are benefiting from involvement with schools and want to continue their work. There is a local sense that ‘success breeds success’ – employers are talking about their involvement and experiences and this is generating wider interest leading to further increased levels of activity and engagement. There is clear pride in the work that employers and schools are doing in the local area and in recognition of this MLP and M2020 have developed a Careers Champion (CC) kite mark under which all employer work is undertaken. A cross-sector CC board has been set up which oversees the development of this work and quality assures its provision. Every employer who makes a pledge to support young people in schools can use a CC logo on their marketing material and will receive publicity in the
local newspaper. In addition the MLP sponsor a CC Award as part of the M2020 Business Awards 2014. There is also now a clear understanding within the Mansfield schools that collectively they can have a greater impact through MLP than would be achieved by each school working individually.

Meanwhile there is increasingly widespread acknowledgement that young people do have a useful skillset that can be nurtured and developed by employers. Further development of programmes that improve the knowledge of young people about local opportunities and generate realistic expectations about the opportunities that exist in the current economic climate are being considered. There is continued commitment to listen to the voice of young people in Mansfield to inform everything the partnership does.

The MLP continue to develop their activities. Next steps for development include consideration of how to generate a greater number of local apprenticeship schemes, and how to help young people to secure local employment opportunities by drawing up a set of ‘characteristics’ that employers are looking for in young people that use language that young people and employers can relate to. There is also a need to embed this activity more firmly within each stakeholder group. In schools for example employer liaison should be a part of every School Improvement Plan, the local councils should enshrine it within their economic development strategies and it should be part of the workforce development planning of local businesses. This will help to assure the sustainability of activities by fixing them within systems. Finally there is a need to evaluate the impact of MLP and its activities on young people’s understanding of and progression into learning and work and on employers recruitment practices and skills needs. An evaluation would help shape future provision in Mansfield and enable other schools in a partnership or collegiate to replicate the model.
The Mansfield experience demonstrates that there can be effective business and school links based on a locally based networked model that is owned by schools and businesses alike. The strength of this model is that liaison between a network of schools and a network of businesses is both more practical and more strategic. Individual schools do not need to develop contacts with a large number of businesses to find provision that meets their pupils’ needs, similarly employers do not have to find the right person to speak to in each of the schools. MLP makes this process more efficient and arguably makes the difference between activity and inertia. In addition the programmes that are developed are more strategic; activities can be scaled up across the whole town and given significance through media coverage and celebration events that would not otherwise be possible. This has the potential to improve their impact and their sustainability. Thirdly, they are part of a strategic learning framework which is a planned and deliberate approach to careers support – avoiding the danger of presenting young people with a series of seemingly unrelated activities. Finally, the approach can meet the needs expressed by young people in the consultation research to bring them face to face with employers and help them to be in touch with the world of work.
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