

Educational Attainment Gap – Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce

Introduction

Colleges recognise and welcome the opportunities to engage in the development of meaningful and productive vocational pathways for young people. Most colleges have existing partnerships and collaborations with local authorities and schools to provide young people of school age with access to vocational programmes. There are many examples of well planned, targeted and successful provision, but there is no consistency of approach across Scotland. These partnerships can take different forms and models, with a variety of recognised qualifications and experiences on offer to school pupils. The intention of the Developing the Young Workforce (DYW) strategy is that in every local authority area there should be consistent, high quality partnership planning of vocational pathways, which enrich the curriculum offer to pupils in the senior phase. These planning structures should support colleges and local authorities as they involve employers in jointly planning meaningful workplace experiences.

The volume of this school-college activity has been affected by funding policy changes introduced in 2010/11, reducing from 45,580 pupils in 2010/11 to 26,330 pupils in 2012/13. Implementation of the DYW Strategy therefore needs to ensure that the best possible use is being made of all available funding to ensure that school-college partnerships are resourced to deliver the best outcomes for young people.

➤ ***If the Wood report were fully implemented, what the likely impact on attainment in schools would be and which pupils would benefit most***

At the present time, schools often see the vocational programmes on offer by colleges as options only for those young people who would not progress to university. The clear intention of the Scottish Government's implementation plan for its DYW strategy is that vocational pathways will be seen as equally desirable routes to a successful career in employment. And that consequently the new and different senior vocational pathways will be attractive to the academically more able and provide a greater element of choice and relevance. School learners will be able to make an informed choice about vocational or academic routes and this will impact positively on attainment for all.

This more and different provision in the senior phase will require a re-appraisal of how attainment is measured, with a move away from the current perceptions of pupils, parents and employers with 'Highers' as the standard to be reached. Our view is that strengthened school-college provision will be more inclusive across the full spectrum of young people in schools, including those with additional support needs. We expect that access to foundation Modern Apprenticeships will also attract candidates of the highest calibre.

➤ ***The report aims to significantly enhance vocational content "without splitting young people off into separate streams at school age". What the disadvantages of such an approach would be and how it could be avoided***

Any system that defers choice for young people is to be preferred to one that forces choice at a time when young people are often unsure of themselves and their future career path. The present school system unfortunately often forces such choices on young people towards the end of the broad general education phase (as early as S2 in some schools). Having the opportunity to experience and understand better what is involved in a particular vocational area will help pupils (and their parents or guardians) make informed choices for their next steps.

- **whether any measures other than those advocated in the report are needed to ensure more young people leave school with “high level vocational qualifications which have strong currency in the labour market”**

One measure that would have a significant impact on the range of vocational opportunities to be offered to young people would be an increase in college funding. This is necessary to support better engagement with employers, a wider range of vocational subjects and more support for young people making the transition from academic approaches to education to learning in vocational contexts.

In addition, providing opportunities to engage in other qualifications such as National Progression Awards and National Certificates as well as making more use of the Scottish Credit and Qualifications Framework (SCQF) in colleges would allow for the development of programmes that are relevant and fill the gaps in labour market demands.

- ***whether the report – which includes a section on improving equalities – places enough emphasis on pupils’ socio-economic inequalities and how these could be overcome***

Colleges are well-versed in identifying and meeting the needs of individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. Colleges achieve this through the implementation of equality policies and the provision of various forms of support for vulnerable learners. The building of effective pathways for such pupils can be enhanced through closer partnerships with third sector organisations with expertise in this area.

- ***whether there would have to be significant reorganisation in schools to accommodate all the proposed changes (for example, to enable more links with colleges/ to have a greater focus on work placements)***

In our view schools will have to reconsider the ways in which the senior vocational phase is organised. The quality of the pupil experience in current school-college programmes has suffered because of structural and organisational barriers. Schools don’t appreciate the disruptive effect of their local arrangements on the learning experiences of pupils who attend college. And colleges making arrangements to provide for pupils from multiple schools within their region will require much more collaboration between schools to address the timetabling issues that work placements and college attendance will raise.

- ***What action and resources would be required to deliver the specific recommendations aimed at schools and teachers, for example:***

- ***teachers’ skills and knowledge may need to develop in certain areas (for example, “to better understand employability and modern work skills”);***
- ***closer links should be established between schools, colleges and employers (for example, “all 363 secondary schools in a long term partnership with employers within 3 years”).***

This will be a significant challenge in taking forward the DYW strategy in schools. For many teachers, the world of vocational employment is something of which they may have little personal experience. Certainly for most the up-to-date practices of the workplace may be an unknown. The use of IT in schools is in contrast to its almost universal use in workplace settings. Subject teachers and careers advisors could be supported by accessible and relevant resources provided by agencies such as Skills Development Scotland. In addition, teacher training programmes in universities could provide trainee teachers with better knowledge and understanding of vocational skills.

Colleges have the experience of fostering links with schools, and could offer coaching and guidance to school staff in relation to current industry practice. The strong links that colleges have with employers (e.g. City of Glasgow College has links with over 1500 employers) could be harnessed to assist schools in forming and maintaining their own such links.