



**Evidence for  
Excellence in  
Education**

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## Research summary

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# Improving Employability Skills, Enriching our Economy

National Foundation for Educational  
Research, London Councils, the  
London Enterprise Panel and South  
East Strategic Leaders



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# Improving Employability Skills, Enriching our Economy

National Foundation for Educational Research  
London Councils  
London Enterprise Panel  
South East Strategic Leaders

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## Introduction

This report summarises the findings of an exploration of education-employer engagement by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), in partnership with the South East Strategic Leaders, London Councils and the London Enterprise Panel. The research sought to examine how small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and micro-businesses in particular work together with secondary schools and colleges in London and the South East to improve young people's employability skills and successful transition into work. This is vital to the continuing economic success of London and the South East<sup>1</sup>.

We have used this evidence to inform a 'connect card' for use by SMEs and schools and colleges to facilitate meaningful conversations leading to effective education-business link activities which are likely to be sustained over time. An accompanying case study report also highlights existing promising education-business link activity across the region (relevant case studies are referred to within this document). All these outputs are available via [www.nfer.ac.uk/employability](http://www.nfer.ac.uk/employability).

**We are grateful to the Federation of Small Businesses (FSB); the Association of School and College Leaders (ASCL); the 157 Group of Colleges and the Education and Employers Taskforce (EET) who have kindly given us their views in the drafting of the connect card.**

## The important role of SMEs, schools and colleges in careers provision

Often schools and colleges and SME partnerships are a missed opportunity when developing careers provision. In London, SMEs represent 99.8 per cent of businesses, while in the South East they represent 99.6 per cent (London Enterprise Panel, 2013<sup>2</sup>). The opportunities for young people to have a stake in, contribute to and benefit from this sector of the economy could be better. Encouragingly, our findings show no shortage of support for strong (SME) employer-educator relationships which provide a more outward focus to careers information. However, we recognise evidence that demonstrates the challenge for SMEs to invest time in building these relationships (for example BIS Research Paper 206, 2014<sup>3</sup>). By the end of March 2015, London Councils and the London Enterprise Panel Skills and Employment Working Group will have developed an outline proposal for a 'London

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<sup>1</sup> SMEs are defined as businesses with less than 250 employees and micro-businesses as firms with between 0-9 employees.

<sup>2</sup> London Enterprise Panel (2013). *Jobs and Growth Plan for London*. London: GLA.

<sup>3</sup> [https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/386030/bis-14-1271-understanding-the-link-between-employers-and-schools-and-the-role-of-the-national-careers-service.pdf](https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/386030/bis-14-1271-understanding-the-link-between-employers-and-schools-and-the-role-of-the-national-careers-service.pdf)

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Careers Offer' for young people. This will help inform strategic dialogue with a range of key stakeholders to bring about a much needed culture change in careers provision across London.



What will our school/college gain?

**From an educator's perspective, engaging with SME employers benefits young people.**

Engagement helps by enabling schools and colleges to:

- understand employers' needs and develop a more joined-up approach to skills development and a 'personalised curriculum' for specific business sectors
- provide independent, impartial advice from individuals not employed by the school and support educators to deliver a broader offer to young people
- increase awareness amongst young people of the role of SMEs in the workplace and provide a more balanced exposure to national corporations
- provide young people with increased awareness of work tasks through working within a small business team.



How can employers get involved?

**Respondents identified a range of ways in which educators and businesses can work together to offer a broad experience of industry.**

For example:

- one-off in-school sessions on interviewing techniques or enterprise days
- careers fairs at which employers are invited to have a stand
- SME employees acting as mentors within schools
- SMEs sponsoring projects or course modules, as seen for example at University Technical College (UTC) Reading (case study 12)
- employers providing workplace visits, work experience or apprenticeship opportunities ([click here to read an example of how local SMEs have welcomed a school onto their premises \(case study 4\)](#))
- becoming a school governor

- 
- mentors supporting the transition from school into further education, training and employment by acting as a conduit between educators and employers and encouraging in-house careers provision (case study 13).

How do I make it happen?

A key assertion was that relationships need to be driven by schools or colleges and, therefore, require time and commitment, but with long term benefits.

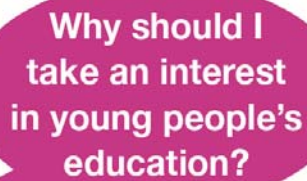
Despite the existence of websites that aim to provide a platform for businesses to engage with educators, there was clear evidence that they were generally perceived as being fairly limited in terms of helping initiate and develop these relationships. Rather, the evidence suggests the importance of the 'sell' to businesses; the more informed and involved employers are, the more they 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 for the workplace. **A dedicated careers coordinator plays an important role in brokering meaningful long term connections.**

Overall, the main facilitators to effective engagement include:

- A **single line of communication** (face-to-face where possible) to help SMEs understand the importance of their role; smooth out queries; break down barriers; and instil confidence in the employer, with the ultimate goal of sustaining relationships. The process involved in the recruitment of business partners by UTC Reading is a good one and provides insight into the importance of a key point of contact (case study 12).
- Once a relationship is established, there is scope for websites and portals to provide a place for SMEs to access information in a flexible and timely way.
- Discussing together the **content of careers information**. This will assist buy-in from employers. In addition, providing employers with updates on students' progress on courses, for example, helps maintain communication channels.
- Ensuring **flexible methods of engagement, and the value of any commitment, however small**, are understood. Providing case study examples of *how* employers can engage with educational institutions may help broaden the offer to allow employers to examine various strategies that can fit into their business calendars. This could vary from full-time apprenticeships, to offering half-day supervised placements (as happens within the Kent Tourism and Hospitality Guild, case study 3).

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## Benefits to SMEs

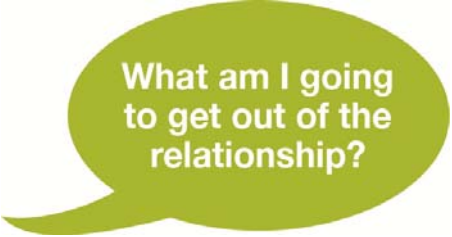


Why should I take an interest in young people's education?

**SMEs' contribution to improving young people's employability skills is critical to the better preparation of young people for the workplace.**

From an SME's perspective, partnerships with schools and colleges provide employers with opportunities to:

- pass on their enthusiasm and interest in their industry sector to young people
- provide job opportunities in the local area and identify potential employees who fit their business needs
- support the development of young people in their specific business area
- provide a geographical benefit to employers, whereby business can employ young people from within the surrounding area
- promote their own businesses (for example, see UTC Reading, case study 12)
- influence the curriculum offer.



What am I going to get out of the relationship?

Read the story of how one family, who owned a painting and decorating company, responded to a lack of relevant training provision by establishing their own rolling apprenticeship programme to help improve employability skills and foster a genuine interest in the construction industry (case study 6).

There are also opportunities for SMEs to apply for various awards or 'kite marks' in recognition of their commitment and support for young people through pre-employment or employment activities. For example, the Hampshire Investors in Young People Award (case study 2).



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## Conclusions

Our research evidence and case study approaches highlight the importance of developing direct relationships between schools, colleges and SMEs, where respect, transparency and mutual benefits are valued. Educators explained the importance of being open and direct with partners from the outset and managing employers' expectations of young people. Additionally, just as educators need to understand the pressures on businesses, SMEs need to appreciate the way the education environment works. This can be achieved through more dialogue and open-mindedness on both sides, and through flexible methods of engagement which provide the structure needed to progress and sustain engagement in a meaningful way for all.

The evidence pointed to the need for a straightforward, easily accessible guide to initiate and facilitate meaningful dialogue between schools and colleges and employers.

## Methodology

This small scale study adopted a purposive approach to sample selection and research design. There were five parts to the research:

- A **desktop review** of current approaches, guidelines and toolkits for employer-education engagement which are valued by key stakeholders.
- A **consultation** with seven key stakeholders (who have knowledge in the area of skills, employability and economic growth) to review current guidelines or toolkits promoted and used for employer-education engagement across London and the South East.
- A **focus group discussion** with seven individuals from London and the South East who had experience of employer-education engagement.
- **Telephone interviews** with four individuals from either SMEs or colleges who have experience with employer-education engagement.
- **Case study analysis** examining examples of promising practice of employer-education engagement across London and the South East.

The research took place between November 2014 and March 2015.

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## Project partners

**The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER)** is a charity with a reputation worldwide for providing independent and robust evidence for excellence in education and children's services. Its authoritative insights inform policy and practice, offering a unique perspective on today's educational challenges.

NFER works with an extensive network of organisations, all committed to making a difference to education and learners. Any surplus generated is reinvested in research projects to continue NFER's work. Contact: [enquiries@nfer.ac.uk](mailto:enquiries@nfer.ac.uk)

**London Councils** represents London's 32 borough councils and the City of London. It is a cross-party organisation that works on behalf of all of its member authorities regardless of political persuasion.

London Councils makes the case to government, the Mayor and others to get the best deal for Londoners and to ensure that member authorities have the resources, freedoms and powers to do the best possible job for their residents and local businesses.

London Councils acts as a catalyst for effective sharing among boroughs – be that ideas, good practice, people, resources, or policies and new approaches. Contact: [14-19@londoncouncils.gov.uk](mailto:14-19@londoncouncils.gov.uk)

**The London Enterprise Panel (LEP)**, the local enterprise partnership for London, is one of 39 LEPs across England and was established by the Mayor of London, Boris Johnson, to take a strategic view of the regeneration, employment and skills agenda for London. The Panel brings together leading business representatives, the further and higher education sectors, London's boroughs and the Mayoralty to allocate government funding in the capital. Contact: [LondonEnterprisePanel@london.gov.uk](mailto:LondonEnterprisePanel@london.gov.uk)

**South East Strategic Leaders (SESL)** 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. It aims to:

**Influence** – speaking with a stronger, united voice for South East strategic councils

**Inform** – producing robust evidence relevant to practice

**Inspire** – connecting people, sharing ideas, sparking innovation.

The Group is chaired by Cllr David Burbage MBE, Leader, Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead. Members include: Bracknell Forest, Buckinghamshire, Central Bedfordshire, Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Kent, Milton Keynes, Oxfordshire, Reading, Windsor and Maidenhead, Slough, Surrey, Swindon, West Berkshire, West Sussex, Wiltshire and Wokingham. Contact: [sesl@hants.gov.uk](mailto:sesl@hants.gov.uk)

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