Education & Culture Committee – Educational Attainment Gap

Submission from Aberdeen & Grampian Chamber of Commerce

1.0 Introduction

1.1 Aberdeen & Grampian Chamber of Commerce (AGCC) welcomes the opportunity to submit evidence to the Education and Culture Committee’s Inquiry on the education attainment gap.

1.2 Aberdeen & Grampian Chamber of Commerce is North-east Scotland's leading private sector, member-focused, business organisation. The Chamber represents more than 1,300 businesses with 130,000 employees in the private sector covering all industry sectors, ranging in size from sole traders to multi-national corporations.

1.3 AGCC supports efforts to ensure all young people have the opportunity to realise their potential, both academic and personal. This is a critical issue as we attempt to retain and attract skilled employees to work in the North-east of Scotland.

1.4 It is estimated that the North-east economy will generate between 9,000 and 39,000 additional jobs in the next 10 years. The higher scenario of 39,000 jobs relies on a co-ordinated package of support including infrastructure investment, skills investment and promotion of the region.

2.0 Business and Schools Engagement in the North-east

2.1 In 2012, AGCC undertook research as part of North East Business Week which aimed to find out whether skills shortages were a barrier to growth and if they were, what businesses were doing to address that challenge.

2.2 Shortages of skills and people were rated as the main barrier to business growth, with 70% of businesses reporting this to be the case.

2.3 Relevant to this committee the research also found that businesses widely wanted to engage with schools, with 77% responding that they were willing to engage with schools.

2.4 AGCC’s research found activity was mostly restricted to ad-hoc engagement or mutually beneficial interventions such as businesses attending careers fairs. However, time constraints on businesses were acute, with only 3 in 10 businesses feeling able to commit a regular resource of 2 hours per month and less than 25% able to offer training for teachers to become better informed of industry and career paths.

2.5 AGCC was keen to find out more about what activity was taking place between schools and businesses, and whether that activity was benefiting businesses, schools and the young people themselves. Therefore AGCC, in partnership with ACSEF and OPITO, delivered further research which assessed the number, type and quality of school and business links which were in place in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire secondary schools.

2.6 The main findings were as follows:

- While all schools valued the support businesses could offer, the way in which links were established and assessed, then managed and evaluated varied significantly between schools
• Approximately 12,000 young people at secondary schools in Aberdeen and Aberdeenshire were participating in some sort of industry / business related activity arranged by a third party, i.e. The Youth Philanthropy Initiative or Go4Set. This was the most popular method of engagement between businesses and schools.

• Activities focused on the oil and gas industry were most common, with related industries such as science and engineering also common. Gaps in the market included finance, tourism and food and drink.

• Programmes being delivered between schools and individual businesses fell into four main categories; schemes which offered practical applications of knowledge, soft skill development support, career information and practical support for teachers in the school setting.

2.7 All of these programmes have the potential to impact on young people’s wider attainment and career choices. However, many of the programmes were aimed at specific groups of young people, often high or mid-achievers. There was a significant gap in the market for young people at the lower-end of achievement to raise their aspirations.

2.7 Based on the findings of the research, the research partners made the following recommendations:

• Create a business database to hold data on businesses who want to engage with schools, and which should be accessible for all schools to use.

• Local Authorities should devise policy guidance to clarify the nature of business which should be approached or partnered by schools.

• Improve the evaluation of opportunities and activities delivered within schools.

• Devise Continual Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for teachers.

• Each school should have a named member of staff to act as a business coordinator and that this coordinator should provide input into a “business links teacher network”.

2.8 Following publication of the research, a small working-group was formed which included the three research partners, Aberdeen City Council and Aberdeenshire Council and other skills organisations such as Skills Development Scotland. The group met regularly during 2014 to drive forward the quick delivery of the recommendations made in the research report.

2.9 To date, the following actions have been delivered or are in progress:

• the business database which will hold data on businesses who want to engage with schools, and which should be accessible for all schools to use (this is being delivered by the AGCC Research Unit).

• the evaluation of opportunities and activities delivered (AGCC is supporting the delivery of this).

• Continual Professional Development opportunities for teachers.

3 Education Working for All

3.1 AGCC welcomed the publication of Sir Ian Wood’s report Education Working for All. The emphasis on supporting non-academic vocational skills was particularly welcomed by Chamber members. Given the research that was undertaken by the Chamber during 2014, the report was also a timely addition to the debate on how businesses should engage with schools.
3.2 It quickly became apparent, through engagement and discussion with our membership, that AGCC would be best placed to lead on the development of a North-east Invest in Young People group. AGCC subsequently worked closely with both councils - Aberdeen City and Aberdeenshire - and North East Scotland College to develop the Invest in Young People project for the region. It is the Chamber’s view that the Invest in Young People organisation can only be successful with the buy-in of all Local Authorities and colleges.

3.3 Funding for the North-east Invest in Young People organisation was subsequently announced by the Scottish Government on February 16 2015.

3.4 The working groups will meet for the first time in March 2015 to make decisions on what should be the priorities of the North-east groups. However, these are the outline priority areas of the group:

- Equality of access to opportunities
- Challenging perceptions, opinions and current practice around work experience, both with employers and schools
- Increasing participation and engagement in a wide variety of employer led initiatives
- Ensuring Career advice to teachers and young people is contemporary and up to date
- Providing opportunities at an earlier stage in schools
- Improving communication between schools and employers

3.5 We also believe that the network is well-placed to encourage employers to offer more good quality apprenticeships and improve the needs identification which aligns these apprenticeships with the skills that are required. However, certain bureaucracy and financial barriers have to be removed for employers to ensure the right quality of apprentices is delivered.

3.6 It is clear to AGCC members that there needs to be an entire culture change about how vocational qualifications are viewed, particularly with parents and schools. Far too many young people are pushed towards Higher Education when it may not be appropriate. We would encourage the Scottish Government to consider how it enables this culture change.

4 Further Action Which Requires Consideration

4.1 While the recommendations made in the Education Working for All report will go some way in addressing some of the current barriers to raising the attainment and aspirations of young people, AGCC members are of the view that further action needs to be taken to ensure the North-east of Scotland has a ready and able young workforce.

4.2 Research conducted as part of a British Chambers of Commerce (BCC) study, published in November 2014, found that communication and teamwork skills were considered important for around nine in ten AGCC respondents. This figure was significantly higher for AGCC members than for the total UK sample. Likewise, around a third of local firms reported a shortage of leadership and management and language skills in their workforce. Few of these responses relate to ‘subject’ areas and embedding these skills within the entire curriculum is vital.

4.3 It is essential that schools seek to develop these types of skills in young people. In particular, AGCC is concerned about the lack of opportunities for young people to study a language
while at secondary school as part of the Curriculum for Excellence. This is in part being caused by a squeezing of choices under the current timetabling arrangements.

4.4 The same BCC study showed that at least of half of respondents who were members of AGCC believed work experience was the best indicator of a future employee’s on-the-job performance. It is therefore also crucial that significant improvements are made to quality and consistency of work-experience opportunities on offer to young people of all ages.

4.5 Both members and schools have told AGCC that the current favoured model of one work-experience opportunity for one week in either S3 or S4 is not fit for purpose. A more flexible approach is required, with a range of experiences and timescales. Extended placements of 3-6 months for an afternoon each week has proved to be very successful for some secondary schools in the region and has also proved beneficial for the business.

4.6 It is critical that teachers become more informed about career opportunities / paths in the region or that we design a new employer-led method to delivering careers guidance. AGCC members consider this to be an area of significant weakness with young people often receiving poor or incorrect information about careers and work opportunities in particular sectors. This change needs to be embedded in both primary and secondary schools.

4.7 One particular secondary school in the region already requires teachers to visit a business they have established a link with. This has proven to be a positive step both for the school and business, with teachers becoming better informed about the businesses recruitment process and the business having a better understanding of the new Curriculum for Excellence and how a modern school operates. As result, the school has established a strong work experience programme for a large number of the school’s pupils and often support teachers in the classroom.

5.0 Areas of Action

5.1 AGCC would highlight the following action must be taken to ensure the benefits of the Education Working for All report are maximised.

- All future Invest in Young People groups must have the support of the relevant Local Authorities and education providers in that area
- There needs to be a wider culture change amongst parents and schools about the merits and benefits of vocational pathways for young people
- Schools must improve the development of soft skills as part of the entire curriculum
- Career information and support within schools must be improved
- Teacher training should include modules on enterprise / business
- Reduce barriers to securing funding for delivering high quality apprenticeships