Educational Attainment Gap  
Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce  
Response from Young Scot – February 2015

1. Introduction and background

Young Scot is the national youth information and citizenship charity for Scotland. We provide young people, aged 11-26, with the best blend of information and engagement to support young people to make informed decisions and choices and engage in their communities. Our vision is that young people take responsibility for changing our world now and tackling social issues – so they grow up in a Scotland that promotes aspiration, enterprise, opportunity, inclusion and wellbeing.

As a universal service, we focus our work on **five strategic impacts** where young people can:

- **Inform**: make informed decisions to support transitions
- **Access**: enjoy healthy, active positive lifestyles and opportunities
- **Engage**: contribute as assets to their communities
- **Progress**: reach positive destinations that give them the opportunity to maximise their aspirations
- **Celebrate**: be celebrated as citizens – locally, national and globally

We pay particular attention to reaching both young people “in-school” and those aged 16+, supporting them through key transitions with information and opportunities relevant to their needs and life stage.

Young Scot welcomes the opportunity to provide evidence to the Scottish Parliament’s Education and Culture Committee on the Education Attainment Gap, in relation to theme 1: Commission for Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce (“Wood Commission”). Young Scot supports a number of youth employment programmes including Modern Apprenticeship programmes and the Certificate for Work Readiness. In addition to this, we have supported young people to engage with policy makers around vocational education and youth employment:

- Recognising the importance of ensuring young people contribute directly to the findings of the Commission, a discussion day was held, organised by Young Scot, the Scottish Youth Parliament and NUS Scotland, focusing on the Commission’s Interim Report. This discussion day took place on Saturday 8th February 2014 in the COSLA
Conference Centre in Edinburgh, attended by around 45 young participants, including young people at school, young people at college, Modern Apprentices, college graduates and unemployed young people.

- The Scottish Government asked the Scottish Youth Parliament, YouthLink Scotland and Young Scot to deliver an event to engage young people at the start of a process to develop a refreshed strategy for tackling youth unemployment. A full day event took place on Tuesday 19th August in Edinburgh to give over 50 young people aged 16 to 21 who are experiencing, or have experienced, different journeys towards employment the opportunity to directly influence the development of refreshed Youth Employment Strategy.

This response is based on some of the key themes identified from young people through these engagement events and the experiences of our staff team working with young people.

Committee question: 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 young person’s Wood Commission discussion day in February 2014, a number of key issues were discussed which subsequently were included in the final report, such as:

- The need for more emphasis to be put on work experience and vocational training;
- The need for young people to be introduced to the world of work at an earlier age; and
- The need for more person centred approach to education.

Some specific comments on the potential impact of vocational education reforms on school and college attainment included:

- ‘Less emphasis on traditional subjects will allow young people will be able to choose what options suits them best; this may lead to overall marks improving.’
- ‘Young people may become more engaged in their school work and this could lead to higher marks in exams.’
- ‘With more options available to young people there will be a higher chance that upon leaving school, they will have attained enough qualifications to help them reach a positive destination.’

If the 39 recommendations were to be fully implemented we believe that all young people will benefit. However, we believe that the greatest potential for impact is amongst young people who are at risk of disengaging with secondary school education.

Some of the recommendations which resonate most with the feedback from young people include:
• Receiving quality career advice and guidance from an earlier age. Most young people we have engaged with have indicated that understanding the world of work early on in secondary school would have been beneficial to their learning.

• Redressing the gender bias in specific career pathways, as many young people saw a need to challenge traditional job stereotypes.

• Providing early intervention and sustained support for those at risk of disengaging with education or requiring additional support.

Committee question: Whether the report – which includes a section on improving equalities – places enough emphasis on pupils’ socio-economic inequalities and how these could be overcome.

We welcome the separate section of the Commission specifically recognising the significant inequalities faced by young people from particular backgrounds, including the issues related to gender, race, disability and care leavers. However, as the report notes, there is a need for a wider investigation of the barriers faced by other groups of young people.

At our event focusing on the Commission’s Interim Report in February 2014, the attendees responded to the Interim Wood Report with the following recommendations on equalities issues:

• Schools and colleges should make use of opportunities for peer education and role models in order to breakdown gender stereotypes about career pathways.

• There should be increased investment in teacher training about equality issues.

• Equality issues should be more holistically built into the all subjects and classes within the context of the Curriculum for Excellence, including careers education.

• Schools, colleges and universities should be required to identify young people with additional needs in a more timely fashion, in order to provide any required additional support to their career development.

• Information for parents on careers advice should be tailored to meet the needs of different cultural groups.

Committee question: 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”.

Young Scot has experience of supporting around fifty young people through Modern
Apprenticeship qualifications over the past three years. Regular feedback and questions from Modern Apprentices often highlights the fact that young people do not understand the levelling of their vocational qualification, or what the qualification means resulting in them struggling to compare their achievements to the ‘standard’ academic qualifications. In turn, this can make it difficult for them to effectively sell themselves to potential new employers, or for them to recognise the worth of their own achievements without the support of dedicated members of staff who can help them with this. This can be down to a number of factors, including a lack of awareness and knowledge of the SCQF qualifications framework.

In November 2014, Young Scot worked with SCQF to bring together a focus group of young people to examine marketing produced by SCQF. There were many findings from this group, but importantly: “There was a feeling that schools should be doing more to promote the framework – none of the group had been informed of the SCQF through their school and believed that young people should understand it.” We feel that more should be done both to emphasize the value of high level vocational qualifications, but also to enhance awareness and understanding of the worth of the qualifications gained to allow young people to make the most of them, and for employers to truly understand their worth.

We have also worked with young people, employers and training providers through a pilot project of the Certificate of Work Readiness in the Creative Industries. The Certificate of Work Readiness provides guided support for young people entering in to work experience for the first time, and is assessed by the employers with the support of training providers. Working with five national performing arts organisations in Scotland (Scottish Opera, Scottish Ballet, Royal Scottish National Orchestra, National Theatre of Scotland and Royal Conservatoire of Scotland) and in partnership with Skills Development Scotland, we acted as ambassadors for the qualification. We feel that this role was vitally important to the process of supporting employers who had no previous experience of the qualification, to allow them to offer up these opportunities where they had not previously done so. This reassurance for an employer was vital for them to agree to invest both their time and effort in support for a young person with no previous work experience. We would therefore suggest that an ambassadorial role would be a key fit with the findings of the Wood Commission Report.

Through our experience of the Certificate of Work Readiness programme and Modern Apprenticeship programmes, we understand that all young people may not be ready to enter in to a full apprenticeship programme as their first experience of the world of work. We are therefore supportive of Skills Development Scotland’s approach of introducing the Certificate of Work Readiness to act as a twelve week-long introduction to a workplace as a structured way for young people to gain understanding of a workplace but also to gain a better understanding of work in a particular sector. The importance of pathways of progression for young people of all abilities is something which we support, in conjunction with the need for high level vocational qualifications.

Young Scot have experience of working with both training providers and sector skills councils, and appreciate the challenges associated with ensuring equality of provision across
training providers. Ensuring young people and employers have a positive experience of vocational training assessment will go a long way to ensuring that qualifications have ‘strong currency in the labour market’. Employers need to be able to trust that training providers can provide significant enough guidance to them in the delivery of work-based training and that the quality of assessment is reputable. In the past, we have worked with young people who have suggested their qualification assessment was just a ‘tick box exercise’ and with employers who have needed to chase training providers for months in order to get an assessor to the workplace – these scenarios are not commensurate with building the reputation of vocational qualifications with either employers or young people.

Young people have spoken to Young Scot about what they feel are their barriers to finding employment. In a survey of 532 young people in 2012, the issue of ‘Need more work experience’ was identified as the greatest barrier to employment for young people questioned (42.1%). Young Scot supports the need for increased quality of careers advice and support with CVs in school. However, from our experience of supporting Modern Apprenticeship opportunities, we also feel that it is beneficial for young people to document their experience of vocational learning in a way that can further support them when applying for future employment and is not merely a folder of their written work. This could be through the collation of a portfolio of their work, or an online blog. Young Scot have previously supported a programme of work experience opportunities in partnership with Nesta, where young people have blogged about their experience and learnings throughout their experience – this was hugely valuable as a tool to showcase their work both to schools and employers, but also useful as a collection of visual aids, such as photographs and videos, which could then be utilised when completing presentations and at other times necessary to talking about their experiences. Showcasing and recording the learning of young people can also be of benefit to employers too, and encourage others to take on the provision of work-based learning programmes.

Committee question: What action and resources would be required to deliver the specific recommendations aimed at schools and teachers.

During the Youth Employment Strategy Refresh session in August 2014, young people clearly identified the fact that career guidance teachers should have more experience of the labour market. However, they also highlighted a number of other areas which would help in the delivery of report recommendations. These included ‘bringing in industry experts into school’ and ensuring that there is adequate time allotted to ensure that good quality careers advice can be delivered. They also saw the value in other support providers who should be remembered in this process, including the importance of youth worker and parental support, and the recognition that students should also take some of their own responsibility for finding places and information that can support them.

As a national organisation, Young Scot recognises the importance of local expertise, and therefore recognises that individual teachers and careers advisors may have valuable knowledge of the local area which is essential for making local work-based connections. The
learning of our Digital Academy Coordinator on a recent Fellowship to the United States highlighted the importance of a local connection in schools, who has strong personal links with the business community. New York City Department of Education supports work-based learning programmes in schools financially, but also in providing an online resource centre for work-based learning Coordinators. These Coordinators play a key role in the school environment, teaching classes on employability and work environment skills whilst also building valuable connections to local businesses in their school catchment area, often tailoring their approach to businesses with the requests of sector specific placements from individual pupils. These Coordinators and the learning programmes became a key element of the school offer and were embedded alongside academic learning to ensure no separation of streams between ‘academic’ and ‘vocational’. This has demonstrated the benefit of dedicated staff to be in place in schools to implement the recommendations and to be an identifiable point of contact for businesses and training providers who may be able to offer the school opportunities.

Although the report is clearly correct in identifying the need to develop teachers’ skills, we believe it is valuable also to consider the need for changing attitudes to vocational training among teaching staff. Young people have fed back about their experiences at school which has suggested that school staff are much more focused on academic qualifications and the need for students to pass exams, rather than attaching importance upon vocational skills or qualifications. Reversing this attitude may be just as important in ensuring that recommendations are delivered in respect of schools and teachers as upskilling staff. We also recognise that it would be difficult to upskill staff in relation to employability in respect to every sector of work, as there are just differences, for example in relation to developing a CV and portfolio for the creative industries, in comparison to doing so for an administration position.

Finally, more should be made of free resources which are open for teachers and school staff to access. During the Youth Employment Strategy Refresh young people discussed the fact that teaching staff rarely referred them to useful career information sources; “We got shown My World of Work once and that was it”. More could be done to raise awareness of sites such as My World of Work and the Young Scot website in schools, to ensure teachers are pointing students in the direction of key resources.
Contacts

We would welcome the opportunity to discuss any of the issues identified in this document. For more information or clarification, please contact:

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