Educational Attainment Gap - Commission for Developing Scotland's Young Workforce
February 2015

Introduction
The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) is Scotland’s largest direct-member business organisation representing over 19,000 members. The FSB campaigns for an economic and social environment which allows small businesses to grow and prosper. An education system that meets the skills needs of small firms and prepares young people for employment is a key element of this environment.

The FSB has taken a close interest in vocational education and has responded to a number of consultations and parliamentary debates in recent years. Most notably, in the work of the Wood Commission,1 the Scottish Government’s response (Developing the Young Workforce),2 and as members of the National Invest in Young People Group.3

We welcome the opportunity to respond to the Committee’s inquiry. Rather than reiterate our key views which are covered in more depth in the footnotes below, we have restricted our response to the questions posed by the Committee and specifically those with a business and economic dimension. It is worth noting, however, that in our preliminary research we were unable to source information on the economic impact Scotland suffers from the variation in educational attainment.4

Summary
The Scottish Government’s aim to create a ‘work relevant educational experience for our young people’ is very welcome. Equally welcome is the financial commitment made by the Government to implement the Wood report. This movement in policy converges with positions we have been articulating for some time, namely: hardwiring a greater focus on employability, employer engagement and work experience in schools and colleges. In our view, the primary purpose of education at

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2 “Response to Developing Scotland’s Young Workforce Debate”, FSB Scotland, December 2014.
4 The contextual data for the final Wood report suggests a major economic loss, stating that the ‘unemployment rate for 16-24 year olds with no qualifications is 47%...twice the rate overall.’
all levels is to equip learners with the skills they need to succeed in the job market – a purpose that is even more important given the impact socio-economic factors have on developing cognitive abilities and attainment more generally.  

Questions

1. **If the Wood report was fully implemented, what would be the likely impact on attainment in schools and which pupils would benefit most?**
   The evidence base suggests that the risk of becoming unemployed is greater for those with the lowest qualifications. It is certainly possible that a focus on more vocational content could lead to better engagement in the school environment and improved educational attainment. However, it would be impossible to estimate with any degree of certainty.

2. **The report aims to significantly enhance vocational content "without splitting young people off into separate streams at school age." What are the disadvantages of such an approach and how it could it be avoided?**
   We have not taken a view on this. It is our belief that creating parity of esteem between the vocational and the academic, as well as clear pathways into employment, would better equip young people for the world of work.

3. **Other than those advocated in the report, what other measures are required to ensure young people leave school with "high level vocational qualifications which have strong currency in the labour market"?**
   This issue does not suffer from a lack of evidence; far from it in fact. There is little missing from the Wood Commission’s report and the youth employment strategy. The challenge will be how the education system practically improves vocational education for the benefit of all – learners and businesses alike.

Nonetheless, we would emphasise the importance of the following measures:
- Better equipping young people for the world of work with functional, work-based vocational training.
- Providing annual work experience placements to expose young people to the world of work.
- Better equipping young people to make informed choices about their future via [http://growingupinscotland.org.uk/about-gus/key-findings/](http://growingupinscotland.org.uk/about-gus/key-findings/)
a careers advice service that is in tune with current and future labour market trends.

- Encouraging industry involvement in the classroom where they can offer value and expertise (e.g. in entrepreneurship, coding, accountancy etc.).
- Encouraging more positive outreach by schools through the utilisation of resources available within the wider public sector (Business Gateway, Scottish Enterprise, Highlands and Islands Enterprise and so on) and in the developing Invest in Young People groups.

4. Does the report place enough emphasis on pupils’ socio-economic inequalities and how these could be overcome?
We are not best placed to answer this question.

5. Would a significant reorganisation in schools be required to accommodate all the proposed changes (for example, enabling more links with colleges/greater focus on work placements)?
While we are not experts on the education system, it is our belief that structural reform would not be required to deliver Wood’s vision. The flexibility within the senior phase of Curriculum for Excellence, in particular, should allow schools to embrace the wider cultural change required to create an employer-led system that equally values creates vocational and academic pathways.

6. What action and resources would be required to deliver specific recommendations aimed at schools and teachers?
Regularly exposing teachers old and new to the world outside education is critically important if the Government’s youth employment strategy is to be a success. Indeed, it is no exaggeration to describe teachers as the key delivery vehicle for large parts of the strategy. Undeniably, developing the skills and knowledge of teachers in areas they are likely to have little experience in (employability/skills and enterprise is a challenge) is a challenge – especially at a time of extensive curriculum change. Whether the funding provided by the Scottish Government will allow teachers time out of the classroom to undertake necessary CPD or create closer links with business remains to be seen.

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6 For example, developing teachers’ skills and knowledge in areas like employability and skills and creating closer links between schools, colleges and employers.
Contact
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