Scottish School Leavers and their Understanding of the World of Work - Summary
Introduction

1. Futureskills Scotland has undertaken more than 19,000 workplace interviews since mid-2002 through the Employer Skills Surveys (ESS). Among the consistently positive findings of the surveys are that:
   • most employers are able to recruit the people they want most of the time; and
   • a substantial majority of employers who recruit people from colleges and universities report those recruits as being well prepared for work.

2. Less encouraging are employers’ responses when asked about the work-readiness of school leavers. In 2003, 43 per cent of employers who had recently recruited school leavers reported that their recruits were poorly prepared for work in terms of their core skills, with 35 per cent reporting the recruits being poorly prepared in terms of their technical skills. In 2004, the figures were 39 per cent and 37 per cent of employers, respectively.

3. In 2003, Careers Scotland asked us to find out from employers their experiences of young people's:
   • attitudes to work; and
   • understanding of the world of work.

4. Employers’ responses were clear. Based on their recent experiences of recruiting school leavers:
   • 79 per cent disagreed with the statement that, “most school leavers understand the world of work”; and
   • 57 per cent disagreed with the statement that, “most school leavers have a positive approach to employment.”

5. Careers Scotland asked us to investigate these findings in more detail. What do employers mean when they report that young people ‘don’t understand the world of work’ or ‘don’t have a positive attitude towards work’? What difference does it make to the performance of the organisation in which a young person works? Is it merely a passing irritation or does it have a greater impact on productivity and performance?

6. In order to shed light on these questions, we commissioned the Training and Employment Research Unit (TERU) at the University of Glasgow to undertake a series of detailed case studies with employers who had participated in the ESS and had recently recruited people directly from school.

7. This document presents a summary of results from the research. The full report ‘Scottish School Leavers and their Understanding of the World of Work’ is available from www.futureskillscotland.org.uk or www.careers-scotland.org.uk.
WHAT THE CASE STUDIES DO AND DON’T DO

8. The first reason for using a case study approach was to provide qualitative information of some depth to complement the quantitative information obtained through the ESS. Secondly, a range of people in an organisation can contribute to a case study, whereas the ESS generally obtains information from one respondent.

9. If those are the strengths of the case study approach, a possible weakness is that the 29 organisations that participated are in no sense ‘representative’ of employers. This is not a large sample from which statistically robust conclusions can be drawn. Rather, it complements the quantitative work which prompted this more detailed, qualitative research.

10. It is important to take a balanced approach when assessing this kind of evidence. There is no basis for sweeping conclusions about ‘all young people’ or ‘all schools’. Similarly, this evidence comes only from employers. As the report makes clear, some of the jobs that young people occupy are low-paid, entry-level posts, perhaps the not most attractive in the market. That may affect the type of recruits attracted to them and their behaviour in work.

SUMMARY OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

School Leavers in the Surveyed Organisations

11. 29 employers who had participated in the 2003 survey agreed to act as case studies for this research. They cover a range of industries and localities. Summaries of these case studies are presented in a separate report available from www.futureskillsscotland.org.uk or www.careers-scotland.org.uk.

12. Employers were selected on a number of criteria including sector and number of employees and whether they had been positive or negative about the young people they had recruited when interviewed for the Employers Skill Survey.

13. School leavers represent only a small proportion of the workforce in the majority of the case study organisations.

14. They are generally employed initially in low paid and low skilled positions, but in most cases there are opportunities for career progression over the longer term.

15. Employers, in some cases, have lower expectations of school leavers compared to other employees when assessing their skills and abilities. However most expect school leavers to have appropriate attitudes to work and at least some understanding of the world of work.

16. Various methods are used to recruit school leavers, but for around a third of employers word of mouth is the most important method.

17. Employers’ key recruitment criteria for school leavers include the school leaver having an interest in the career area, good presentation skills, apparent enthusiasm, a willingness to learn and self-confidence.

18. Employers are looking for school leavers to demonstrate some competence and initiative either at interview or soon after they are taken on. This clearly has implications for the preparation of young people before they leave school.
Understanding of the World of Work

19. Nearly all of the employers had hired some young people who understood what was expected of them at work. These were often young people who had part-time jobs while at school.

20. Nevertheless, nearly all had also hired young people who had been poorly prepared. This was true across employers of all sizes and all industrial sectors included in the case studies.

21. There was consensus around the main ways in which a poor understanding of work shows up in the workplace. School leavers who have a poor understanding of work can often be identified through frequent absence, being late, an inability to work on their own and appear to lack a sense of responsibility to their employer.

22. More than half of the employers believe there has been deterioration in school leavers’ readiness for work over time. Some of the perceived reasons for this included poor school-to-work preparation, a decline in the standards of parenting, a growth in worklessness and poorer attitudes to work in general.

23. There was also a consensus around the main impacts on employers, with the time wasted recruiting and training school leavers who then prove to be unsuitable the most frustrating negative impact for employers.

24. For half of the employers there were other significant negative impacts on the business, including decreasing staff morale, an increased incidence of poor customer service and the need for increased supervision of school leavers which limits the time managers can spend growing their business.

Attitudes to Work

25. In the majority of cases employers had at least some experience of hiring young people who had a good attitude to work, encompassing an ability to come into work on time, enthusiasm, commitment and a positive approach to training and career development.

26. Nevertheless, in almost all of the case study organisations there had been instances where school leavers with a negative attitude to work had been hired. Commonly, this manifested in a lack of interest in the job and a poor attitude to training and career development.

27. While a very small number of employers perceived that they had seen an improvement in attitudes over time, for the majority deterioration in attitudes was the more common experience. A range of reasons for this were suggested including an increase in social problems, lack of parental guidance, young people perceiving that they have no obligations to employers, an increase in benefits relative to wages and a culture that no longer values the need to put in hard work to progress.

28. Deficiencies in attitudes tend to have a more significant impact on smaller workplaces generally because the employer relies more on the school leaver, and because the school leaver is more likely to be working more closely with other staff in smaller companies.

29. More than half of the employers reported that the impact of negative attitudes was significant, with the most commonly reported impacts being on quality of customer service and staff morale.
Skills for Work

30. Employers often experienced deficiencies in basic skills, with almost two thirds claiming that school leavers had poor literacy and numeracy skills, although IT skills were thought to be good.

31. Among employers who commented on core skills, around a third thought that school leavers were poorly prepared. Typically, school leavers had difficulties communicating, were unreliable, could not organise themselves and found it difficult to work with others.

32. Employers were less concerned about school leavers' technical skills, as two thirds said that they did not expect them to have these skills in any case. Provided young people had the correct attitude to work, they were generally able to develop these skills when in work. However in some cases this can take a very long time and difficulties around young people’s abilities to generalise skills across tasks and upgrade their skills had been experienced.

33. There was little consensus on views about whether skills in these areas had changed over time, with some employers noticing a decline and others an improvement.

34. Deficiencies in basic skills seem to have the least impact on the organisations, although this may be because basic skills are not so important in the case study organisations.

35. A small proportion of employers reported that deficiencies in core skills had a significant impact on team performance and levels of customer service and could create extra pressure for managers.

36. For the majority of employers deficiencies in technical skills did not cause serious problems, largely because they felt that the majority of school leavers were able to develop the technical skills they needed in work or their jobs did not require any technical skills component. However, this again seems to be related to the kinds of jobs school leavers were undertaking in the case study organisations as in the majority the level of technical skill required is fairly basic. Case studies involving apprentices were more likely to report deficiencies in ability to acquire technical skills, with apprentices commonly taking a long time to learn skills and often unable to perform at the level of competence required.

37. The focus of future school-to-work preparation should clearly be on developing a positive attitude to learning, instilling an understanding of learning techniques and developing pupils’ self confidence.

Improving Preparation

38. Few employers are involved in any school-to-work preparation activities and of those who are, only a limited number find that any of these activities are rewarding.

39. The majority of suggestions made by employers to improve workplace preparation related to the need to improve attitudes to work, understanding of work and core skills.

40. Most employers felt that core skills could only be developed through experience; hence better work placements and encouraging more school students to get a part time job whilst they are still at school would be helpful.

41. Improving education for work and education industry links would help pupils develop a more accurate understanding of the workplace.

42. There is also a need for improved information about the different occupational areas on offer to young people. This would help to correct misperceptions and to attract more young people to go into particular occupational areas.

43. As many deficiencies were perceived by employers to be a result of inadequate preparation in the home, the development of mentoring programmes was suggested as a way of offering young people more positive role models.

44. Employers suggested four key stakeholder groups that could be involved in the development of programmes to address the deficiencies of school leavers:
   - Parents or care givers;
   - Schools and Careers Scotland;
   - Training organisations and industry bodies; and
   - Employers.
ISSUES ARISING FROM THE RESEARCH

45. The balance of the evidence in the case studies provides clear guidance on three points:

- the factors that mean some young people are not ready for work when they leave school;
- the effects on the workplace of young recruits not being work-ready; and
- employers’ views about the solutions that could be implemented to enhance young people’s work-readiness.

Why some young people are not ready for work

46. TERU’s research shows that when young people are not ready for work, the cause is most likely to be their attitudes and understanding of what work entails. Poor attitude means a lack of interest in the job and in career development. Lack of understanding manifests itself in absence, poor timekeeping and a lack of responsibility towards colleagues, customers and employers. People are likely to acquire many of these behaviours early in life.

47. In contrast, employers are less likely to express concern about the skills young people bring to the workplace. First, employers are clear that they do not generally expect school leavers to have the technical skills needed for the job. Most employers consider it their role to ensure that recruits receive appropriate training. Secondly, without being complacent, it appears that school provides most young people going into work with an adequate basis for the later development of technical skills, assuming, of course, they have a positive attitude to training and development. Thirdly, some employers report concerns about school leavers’ literacy and numeracy, although few report that such weaknesses adversely affect their recruits’ ability to do the job.

Effects on the workplace

48. The case studies show that the effects on the workplace of recruiting someone who is not ready for work are far from trivial. A school leaver with a poor attitude and understanding can:

- absorb large amounts of management time;
- adversely affect the morale of colleagues; and
- provide poor service to customers.

49. Importantly, most employers are prepared to work with young people they have recruited to maximise the likelihood that they will become productive employees. But for some employers and some school leavers that desired outcome is not achieved and the two part company with costs for each.

What do employers think should be done?

50. It is important to recognise that we are dealing here with employers’ views, not an objective appraisal of the range of possible options. They highlight one action in particular that they believe would better prepare young people for work by developing appropriate attitude and behaviour: more experience of the workplace while at school. That could be either:

- more and better work placements that arise through better linkages between schools and employers; and/or
- more young people holding part-time and holiday jobs while at school.

51. This is consistent with research published by Careers Scotland showing that school students who have worked part-time have higher aspirations than those who have not worked.

52. That is what employers most want. Yet among the case study employers, very few provide work placements or participate in links with schools.

53. Recent Scottish Executive initiatives such as Determined to Succeed, and the development of Skills for Work courses have been established to address issues such as those outlined above. They aim to help school pupils to improve their core skills, acquire an understanding of the workplace, and foster positive attitudes towards learning and employment. What impact they may have remains to be seen, but they represent a response to some of the challenges in this report.