



British Embassy
Stockholm



Wilton Park



Report

The future of work for UK-Nordic youth - rising to the challenge

Thursday 4 February 2021 | WP1854V3



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In association with the British Embassy in Stockholm

This virtual event, delivered by Wilton Park in conjunction with the British Embassy in Stockholm, explored how COVID-19 has affected education and the workplace for young people, and how recovery from the pandemic can involve opening new and reshaping existing pathways into employment. Over 25 participants and speakers were in attendance, including education professionals, government representatives, non-profit executives and student representatives from Student Unions and Youth Councils across the UK and the Nordic regions.

The COVID-19 pandemic has placed an unprecedented strain on education across the globe. Lockdowns and other restrictions have seen in-person learning replaced with temporary digital solutions, and examinations and other standardised testing has been cancelled. The economic fallout of the pandemic has made university unattainable for some young people. It is in these challenging circumstances that students must begin planning future careers. But throughout history, moments of crisis have led to long-term human improvement. It is vital that we take the right actions today to effectively equip the workforce of tomorrow and ensure that solutions are accessible to all.

Recommendations

i. Definite Actions

- Ensure measures that tackle unemployment focus on providing jobs that are meaningful and that provide longevity, and that employers are provided with incentives to offer stable rather than precarious work.
- Place a greater focus on vocational education to match the increased need for skills-based workers in the workforce. Do more to ensure skills training is an enticing prospect for young people.
- Encourage greater employer involvement in education. Consult with employers on the design of education programmes and curricula; employers should be involved in upgrading college equipment to match industry standards; employers could second staff to teach skills in colleges.
- Extend educational support to those who have become unemployed during the pandemic. Make guidance available about what education is required for certain jobs and careers.

- Ensure timely resumption of networking opportunities, work experience, internships and other training placements. Commit to paid internships where possible, to provide greater accessibility.
- Involve young people in discussions on education and employment reform. Encourage participation in organisational groups and forums, and cooperation across nations. This could include the creation of a UK-Nordic Citizens' Assembly.
- Resolve the uncertainty surrounding the UK's involvement in the Erasmus scheme post-Brexit.
- Make board groups and other leadership groups more representative. These groups should do more work to inspire the next generation through inclusive marketing and outreach.
- Address age discrimination in the workplace. Young people should be supported to learn about what they are entitled to at work and what impact their work has on future pensions.
- Utilise remote working and other digital technology to widen participation, potentially across borders.

ii. General guidance

- Avoid educational reform that locks out young people whose skills are not suited to examination and other 'traditional' schooling methods. There is a need for alternative styles of education and pathways into work.
- Allow young people and people from marginalised backgrounds the opportunities to learn about and be involved in the development of innovative technologies, particularly artificial intelligence (AI) which may otherwise have biases 'baked in'.
- Leverage young people's aptitude for digital technology to support roll-out of office digitisation and flexible working.
- Improve lifelong learning provision and expectations. Afford people the opportunity and funding to return to full-time or part-time education to refresh or expand their knowledge and skills.
- Consider introducing greater flexibility into the higher education system. Normalise a delay to the beginning of higher education, to complete work experience or undertake full-time employment. Should some degrees be broken down into smaller portions of learning rather than a three-year degree?
- Consider the merits of the 'boarding school' model of university. Students are less inclined to spend money on accommodation when much teaching can be undertaken remotely
- Ensure a level playing field when reopening economies, with equal opportunities across age groups and ethnicities.
- Prepare the workforce for digitisation and automation, with more emphasis on soft skills that cannot be replicated by technology, such as communication, empathy, creativity, innovation and interpersonal skills.
- Lean into the opportunities necessitated by the looming environmental crisis to refresh the jobs market. Consider what role young people can play in shaping and filling these vacancies.

Introduction: the impact of COVID-19 on education and the workplace

Education

1. COVID-19 and climate change are both fundamental shifts that have forced different ways of interaction. Around the world, education has been severely disrupted by the pandemic. Lockdowns and other restrictions have made it more difficult for students to attend in-person learning. Most pupils have instead been reliant on remote learning solutions. For many, examinations have been cancelled, a situation that has created unstable circumstances for perusing and pursuing future opportunities in higher or further education. However, the current situation provides an important opportunity to re-set how education and training are delivered.
2. Higher education has been devalued by the pandemic. The future of the 'boarding school' model of university – which sees students live on or nearby campus – is in question. Existing problems with the system have been emphasized by the pandemic. Tuition fees are not seen as providing 'value for money' for students, especially with face-to-face teaching replaced by online learning. Students are reluctant to pay for student accommodation when they can learn remotely. The abolition of means-tested maintenance grants had already made some universities less accessible for students, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who lack the funds to pay the living costs associated with the 'boarding school' model. Online learning has improved considerably during the pandemic, but quality is variable and this inconsistency needs to be addressed; value for money is an essential consideration to ensure that students are receiving an appropriate return on their time/fees investment.
3. Current university students will not leave university with the same skill sets as their predecessors, as online learning fosters different skills to in-person learning. Networking, work experience, internships and other training placements are also currently impossible to facilitate. These were useful opportunities for students and recent graduates to learn more about different business sectors and gain experience to support job applications.

Workplace

4. Young people in the world of work have also been affected by COVID-19. Many young people find themselves shut out of meaningful employment. Prior to the pandemic, young people were most likely to be in precarious or insecure work, on fixed term or part-time contracts. The majority of staff in industries worst-hit by the pandemic – the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors – are young people. 47% of those furloughed in the UK between March and July 2020 were under-24.¹ Since the beginning of the pandemic the number of young people in receipt of universal credit in the UK increased by 130%; 250,000 young people are now relying on welfare.
5. The recently published Prince's Trust Youth Index shows the psychological impact of unemployment. 40% of respondents to the survey who were not in work, education or training (NEETs) felt "unable to cope with life" since the start of the pandemic.² Periods of unemployment early in life can have a long-term scarring effect. There is a danger of losing this group of young people from the labour market forever. When reopening the economies we must ensure there are equal opportunities for young people, and that no one is left behind.

¹ HM Revenue & Customs, Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme statistics: August 2020, London: 2020, <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/coronavirus-job-retention-scheme-statistics-august-2020> (accessed 15/02/2021)

² The Prince's Trust, The Prince's Trust Tesco Youth Index 2021, London: February 2021, <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/research-policies-reports/youth-index-2021> (accessed 15/02/2021)

The future of work: what does it look like for young people?

'Fourth industrial revolution'

6. The so-called 'fourth industrial revolution' – characterised by a greater reliance on automation, computer-integrated manufacturing processes, artificial intelligence (AI) and other technological advancements – heralds an evolution in the composition of the workforce. The use of video conferencing, online file-sharing and collaboration software has become increasingly commonplace in office jobs. These changes were not initiated by COVID-19, but they have been accelerated by the pandemic. In a June 2020 survey of business executives, commissioned by McKinsey, 85% of respondents said their companies have accelerated digitisation during the COVID-19 pandemic; 67% of companies said they have accelerated the use of automation and artificial intelligence.³

Changing Requirements

7. Such changes to the workplace will lead to a shift in the types of jobs available, and the skills needed by the workforce. More emphasis will be placed on soft skills, such as communication, empathy, creativity, innovation and interpersonal skills.
8. Whilst there are benefits to remote working, such as flexibility, reduced travel, the ability to recruit regardless of applicant location, and greater accessibility for disabled individuals, there are downsides for young people. Integration into a job role is harder; it is difficult to build an understanding of a company's structure, culture and working methods remotely; and there are fewer opportunities to learn from senior personnel.

Opportunity

9. The looming environment crisis also presents an opportunity to refresh the jobs market, for example the advent of the 'green new deal' and low-carbon jobs. We should consider what role young people can play in shaping and filling these vacancies, matching their values with their skills.

Education to work: pathways to employment in the time of COVID-19 and beyond

Challenges

10. It has always been challenging for youth looking to enter the workplace. Young people often have the lowest salaries, the least savings, and a narrow understanding of their rights in the workplace. Entry level roles can be filled by older applicants who already have prior experience. High stress levels, anxiety and loneliness are associated with the transition from education to work, exacerbated when working remotely without the support networks normally available to new starters. Job security and career progression were privileges not afforded to everyone, with credentials often more valuable than talent.
11. There is a risk that rising unemployment and the economic fallout of the pandemic will lead to young people becoming disillusioned with the working world. Any focus on employment must do more than simply offer jobs for all young people; it must offer 'good jobs' that provide both meaning and longevity.

³ McKinsey Global Institute, What 800 executives envision for the post pandemic workforce, Washington DC: September 2020, <https://www.mckinsey.com/featured-insights/future-of-work/what-800-executives-envision-for-the-postpandemic-workforce> (accessed 15/02/2021)

Changing Demand

12. The demand for workers with vocational training has increased in recent years. The CBI estimates that nine in 10 workers in the UK will need to learn new skills for their own jobs by 2030.⁴ However, vocational education was under-filled prior to COVID-19, with fewer young people undertaking the skills-based learning that is needed for the workforce. There is also social stigma attached to skills training as opposed to academic learning. More should be done to make training in skills a more enticing prospect for young people.
13. Vocational skills taught in schools and colleges should be relevant to what employers need. In the UK employers have already been involved in co-designing content for apprenticeship standards and other vocational qualifications, but more can be done. Employer involvement in education should extend to working closely with colleges and other further education institutions. Employers should be involved in upgrading college equipment to mirror current industry standards. Employers could also arrange secondments for current employees to teach skills in colleges. Many of these suggestions have already been outlined in the recent UK Government 'Skills for jobs' white paper. Education should not be entirely dictated by the labour market, but there needs to be greater cooperation between private and public sectors. Employers could have a greater say in which programmes are offered. Any educational reform needs to be adequately funded and affordable for students from all economic backgrounds.

Creating Opportunities

14. Recent technological advancements, accelerated by COVID-19, have meant the types of jobs available to young people are changing fast. It is important that youth are afforded opportunities to learn about innovative technologies and prepare themselves for the reshaping of the working world. Furthermore, the workforce must be equipped with the ability to regularly update their skills, through a lifetime skills guarantee, lifelong learning or a more flexible approach to higher technical and academic education where people can study in bite-sized chunks. The option to delay study in favour of entering work after school should be normalised; students in Sweden attend university later, but specialise into their chosen field earlier.
15. Lifelong learning will become more important moving forward (highlighted by the need for groups of people to reconsider the viability of their careers during and post-COVID). More must be done to ensure people feel able to take time out from work to return to education and refresh their skills. The newly digitised work environment will necessitate a minimum level of technical understanding to ensure equal access to work. Young people are best placed to support with this education. Having grown-up with digital technology they are more likely to already possess the required skills and are more receptive to increased digitisation. But successful lifelong learning requires collaboration between private sector, professional guilds, government and public authorities.

⁴ Confederation of British Industry, Learning for life: funding a world-class adult education system, London: October 2020, <https://www.cbi.org.uk/media/5723/learning-for-life-report.pdf> (accessed 15/02/2021)

Creating the right environment

16. However, there is no point progressing down a narrow skills-based education pathway if there is no clear or open route into employment post-education. Placements, internships and other gateways to employment have been temporarily closed off by the pandemic. We must ensure these reopen in a timely manner during recovery. This is also an opportunity to re-evaluate the use of unpaid internships as a pathway to employment. Unpaid internships exclude young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds who may not be able to afford to take up the opportunity. These groups of people need work experience opportunities like internships the most, as they are less likely to have family or school connections to support their career prospects. The European Youth Forum is currently campaigning to ban unpaid internships, but this is a difficult undertaking that requires co-operation from many countries.
17. Educational support should extend to those who have become unemployed during the pandemic. A policy trialled in Sweden and Denmark guarantees apprenticeship to young people who have been out of work for four months or longer. It is an important imperative to make information and guidance on how to choose educational pathways that lead to employment readily available.

Involving our youth

18. Finally, young people should be involved in discussions on education and employment reform. Youth should be encouraged to participate in organisational groups and forums, particularly those that cooperate between nations, to build representational influence. Existing bodies, such as youth councils and student unions, provide a starting point for this work and excellent initiatives already exist; for example, youth organisations in Finland working in 'action coalitions' on specific policy issues to influence policy-makers and politicians. We should make use of models such as this within existing UK-Nordic connections, as well as building further collaborations such as a UK-Nordic Citizens' Assembly, as some of the issues faced are shared by both UK and Nordic countries.

Erasmus

19. However, whilst it was recognized that networking across borders and regions would be key to development of worthwhile collaboration, the uncertainty over the UK's future involvement in the Erasmus scheme places unhelpful limitations over cooperation as well as narrowing educational options for young people from both the UK and Nordic countries.

Diversity, inclusion and equal opportunities post-COVID

COVID-19 Mitigation

20. The impact of the pandemic has been disproportionate, with economic background, ethnicity and location all affecting health and employment outcomes. People from marginalised backgrounds are over-represented in the industries most affected by the pandemic. The pandemic recovery is an opportunity to introduce a new way of thinking about social sustainability; diversity and inclusion should be placed at the heart of the COVID-19 response. It is not enough to be against discrimination; we must be for inclusion. This must start from the top. Recruitment processes could be anonymised to increase fairness. More paid internships need to be made available to young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. Board groups should be more representative. There needs to be a focus on inspiring the next generation, particularly under-represented groups, through inclusive marketing and outreach. These groups should be encouraged to attend networking opportunities.

Importance of flexibility in inclusion

21. Flexibility should become a common trait in pathways into education and employment. Not all young people are suited to examination and 'traditional' schooling. There is a need for alternative styles of education as well as alternative pathways into work. We also need to find ways to reach students outside formal systems, particularly first or second generation immigrant groups. These groups will not be able to draw on the experience of their parents, who may be unemployed themselves or have not gone through the same education systems. We can create better links between employers or professional guilds and young people to bridge this experience gap. Outreach by universities to minority groups is also important – if there are opportunities out there they need to be advertised.
22. We need to address problems associated with age discrimination in the workplace. The efforts and working hours of young people are respected less than those of older workers. The school timetables of young people who are still in full-time education are not always considered by employers when planning shifts. There are still instances of workplace bullying due to age.

Technology Issues

23. Remote working is here to stay. Employers should use this technology to widen participation, potentially across borders; businesses can have employees based in different countries to bring different innovations and viewpoints. Visas and immigration issues might be a thing of the past.
24. Diversity is a problem within technology. New technologies, such as AI, will be designed without diverse viewpoints in mind if no under-represented groups are involved in development. Inclusive study plans should encourage people from different backgrounds to study for STEM subjects, particularly women and people of colour. Women are under-represented in STEM subjects and work placements across UK and Nordic countries.

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