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From Policy to Practice: Strategic Approaches to Embedding Employability Skills in the K-12 Curriculum

Working Paper for Seminar “Integration of Employability Skills in the K-12 Curriculum”

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Regional Center for Educational Planning

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Disclaimer

This paper was commissioned by the UNESCO Regional Center for Educational Planning (RCEP) in Sharjah, United Arab Emirates. The paper falls under RCEP's second strategic objective, which is to produce and disseminate knowledge in support of education policies to enable planning of educational systems. The views and opinions expressed in this paper are those of the authors and should not be attributed to RCEP.

Regional Center for Educational Planning

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Employability Skills as a Policy Priority

Over the last two decades and particularly in the post-pandemic period it has become clear that education and training policymakers across a wide range of international contexts are increasingly prioritizing embedding employability skills in school curricula, K-12 9 (Bakhshi and Schneider, 2018). This is an essential part of preparing students for the rapidly evolving workforce and ensuring they possess essential life skills to flourish in a changing labour market. In recent years, this has become particularly urgent as many industries are going through a transformational process as they deal with a range of technological advancements, particularly in fields like AI and through broader digital innovations. Similarly, the pressures of climate change and the need for greener ways of working in all sectors are changing the nature of work, the structure of jobs, and the trajectory of careers. We are in a period of occupational uncertainty. What is clear is that students will need more than academic knowledge (OECD 2015; OECD 2018). Whatever AI or climate driven changes take place in the labour market, it is very likely that the next generation of workers will need broader and transferable skills such as critical thinking, communication, and collaboration to thrive in diverse work environments.

These sorts of skills will be critical in supporting young people to transition effectively into the labour market, even if they continue in education and training at tertiary level before attempting to get a job. Research clearly shows that having effective and demonstrable employability skills will ensure that those entering the labour market, particularly for the first time, will be stronger in a competitive hiring process and make smoother transitions (Koen, J. et al., 2012; Goodman et al. 2015). This becomes even more important in times of economic strain, when labour markets become even tighter (McQuaid et al., 2006). Given the scarring effects of youth unemployment on long term career trajectories (De Fraja et al. 2017), supporting young people to gain work in difficult economic conditions is an essential part of avoiding the potential for unequal labour market outcomes to entrench and deepen existing social inequalities. As such, ensuring the formation of employability skills for young people is an important lever for policy makers around the world.

Perhaps even more importantly, it's clear that most people will need to change jobs and sectors numerous times during their working lives, often having multiple careers (UKCES, 2014). The model of a career for life has long been a thing of the past. It is very likely that the next generation of workers will need to change jobs multiple times during their working lives. In fact, the changing nature of work points towards a dominance of portfolio careers, with individuals combining multiple income streams simultaneously often across a diverse range of jobs (Stokes, 2021; WorldEconomic Forum, 2018). Transferable skills are a key part of enabling employees to navigate the labour market in a flexible and agentic way in the longer term. Critically, integrating these competencies early equips students with a mindset of lifelong learning, further increasing their adaptability to career mobility and giving them the foundation for resilience in the face of ongoing change, uncertainty, and potential career challenges.

Critically, the formation of employability skills within the school curriculum doesn't just benefit individuals. It also benefits employers who are keen to have work ready employees. While some analysis of future skills demands tend to emphasise the need for technical and digital skills, particularly in the face of AI-related development, employer survey data from around the world clearly shows transferable skills are in constant and high demand (CBI Pearson, 2018; DfE 2018; Heckman, and Kautz, 2012). This cuts across multiple roles, sectors and levels. In fact some of the most senior roles in politics and business are viewed as requiring transferable employability skills, with a recent study that interviewed Chairs and CEOs of a third of the FTSE100 found transferable skills are seen as essential for C-suite executives (Robson, et al., 2021).

Close alignment between employer skills demands and skills supply is also an essential part of any industrial strategy since skills alignment is closely linked with enhanced productivity and economic growth (Fettes et al., N.D.; Robson, 2023). A skills system that is able to effectively meet the demands of industry is a key part of economic growth. This means that, from a policy perspective, embedding employability skills into the K-12 curriculum is a major policy priority. It is part of creating a more resilient, capable and flexible workforce; it enhances future employability for individuals across sectors enabling greater labour market returns and individuals with the ability to navigate an

uncertain labour market; it contributes to a reduction in skill gaps and shortages; and is part of a broader drive towards improvements in productivity and economic growth.

However, from a policy perspective, the process of actually embedding the formation of employability skills into the K-12 curriculum, while an important aspiration, presents a number of key challenges. Sadly, schools are messy realities and things are never simple. Therefore, in this paper, I outline some of these key challenges covering issues of regulation, continuing professional development (CPD), the role of employers, mapping skills needs, and underpinning policy architecture. First to illustrate and contextualise this, I will start by describing a key policy initiative from England, the Studio Schools Model, that aimed to embed employability in the school curriculum. This innovative approach experienced major policy challenges that illustrate the broader arguments and provide a set of key lessons for an international policy context.

The Studio Schools Model: a case study of failure

Introduced in 2010, the Studio Schools model was an innovative approach to secondary education that combined academic learning with practical, work-related experience to develop employability skills. Designed for students aged 14-19, Studio Schools operated more like workplaces than traditional schools, with a curriculum that integrated core subjects alongside project-based learning and real-world work placements. Each student was supposed to have a personalized learning plan, tailored to their career interests, which was reinforced by partnerships with local businesses and industry professionals. These schools emphasized promoting skills like teamwork, problem-solving, and resilience as well as broader, transferable employability skills. The goal was to bridge the gap between school and work, helping students become better prepared for the job market by focusing on skills that are directly relevant to employers, while still ensuring students achieve essential academic qualifications.

The Studio Schools approach was distinctive in a number of additional ways. The tracking of employability skill formation was through a carefully designed skills framework, referred to as the

CREATE Framework. This enabled staff and students to track and develop skills-based learning journeys. CREATE stood for: communication; relating to others; enterprise; applied learning; thinking skills; and emotional intelligence. This framework was particularly applied through an integrated curriculum that combined academic and vocational subjects, skills and academic qualifications. At the heart of this was emphasis on project-based learning, work placements, mentorship and coaching. The schools even had a new category of staff, employability skills coaches, who specifically focused on work placements and skills formation.

In many ways, the Studio Schools model was exemplary as a policy intervention overtly focused on embedding employability skills in the school curriculum. A set of legislative changes and policy initiatives enabled and funded the establishment of 40 Studio Schools across England between 2010 and 2018. However, sadly, as an innovative approach to embedding employability skills in the curriculum it failed. Almost all Studio Schools have now either closed outright or (the majority) reverted back to operating in a traditional manner focused solely on academic outcomes. Innovative approaches like project-based learning, working directly with employers, deploying the CREATE Framework, and maintaining employability skills coaches have been iteratively abandoned.

Research undertaken by the Oxford University Centre for Skills, Knowledge, and Organisational Performance (SKOPE) analysed this trajectory and the ways in which key policy challenges in innovating around employability skills, associated regulatory frameworks, the role of employers, and the inexorable pull of the academic status quo all combined to doom this approach to failure (Robson, et al., 2023). Policy ambitions so often struggle against the messy realities of education and training systems and so important policy lessons can be learned from the Studio Schools experiment that, I think, are applicable across a wide range of international contexts.

The Regulatory Conundrum

The first key issue relates to what I like to refer to as the 'regulatory conundrum'. This relates to the tension between a traditional academic focus in schools and employability. There is the major challenge of attempting to find ways of fitting the formation of employability skills into an already strained curriculum. Time in schools is always at a premium. Instructional time is always limited and is inevitably tightly scheduled around core academic subjects and standardized testing requirements. Balancing academic demands with the need for employability skills requires thoughtful curriculum design and potentially even re-prioritizing learning objectives. Given that research points to the importance of project-based learning and interdisciplinarity in forming employability skills (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018; Emms et al., 2023), this may involve developing interdisciplinary projects cutting across standard disciplinary silos, which requires careful planning, resourcing, and often additional teacher training and CPD to be effective without increasing the instructional load.

This may sound like a practical issue, and to a certain extent it is. However, at heart, the key challenge involves finding ways to integrate employability skills without overwhelming teachers and students or compromising academic rigor. The issue is that, for most countries, regulatory frameworks for schools are structured solely around academic outcomes. Measures of teaching quality and centralised approaches to quality assurance focus on academic measures and academic targets. Schools, particularly secondary schools, are all too often geared around high stakes academic examinations, usually broken down into distinct disciplines. At the centre of almost every national schooling system is the embedded assumption that an academic trajectory towards a university education is the gold standard. This is reflected in and reproduced through almost every national regulatory framework and quality assurance scheme in the world. This means that employability skills are largely irrelevant from a regulatory perspective.

Academic standards and employability skills shouldn't be positioned in a zero-sum game between each other. They should, in fact complement each other. However, if regulatory frameworks place no value on the vocational aspects of the curriculum, inevitably, in a time constrained, high-pressure context, teachers will focus on the areas that do feature in regulation, i.e. academic outcomes.

Regulatory approaches, if not appropriately changed to actually value employability skills, inevitably pull schools in the direction of disciplinary silos and academic outcomes. Project-based learning and interdisciplinarity don't naturally lend themselves to these kinds of measures and so all too easily get lost and abandoned in a high-stakes academic context. That means standard regulatory frameworks will always squeeze employability skills out of the curriculum.

This was the key lesson from the Studio Schools model. Policymakers provided funding and encouragement around foregrounding employability in an innovative manner, but failed to change the regulatory mechanisms for the schools that were attempting to do something new and exciting. The innovative activity wasn't valued and so inevitably was abandoned in the face of regulatory pressures (Robson et al., 2022). This is the regulatory conundrum – policy makers want employability skills to feature in the curriculum, but actually, radical regulatory reform is required to make this happen. Few people have the appetite for that. The result is all too often surface level policy 'tinkering' rather than deeper policy reform.

The Role of Employers

This is linked with the second key policy issue that I want to highlight: that research has clearly shown that employability skills are best developed in the workplace (Mann and Huddleston, 2016). This is partly age specific and mainly reflecting older age groups in secondary school and beyond, but when it comes to 14+, there is pretty clear agreement that direct work experience is very beneficial for young people and is linked with the formation of broad transferable skills (Emms et al., 2023). This requires input and engagement from employers.

However, this presents several practical challenges. First, many employers, especially small and medium-sized businesses, may lack the time, resources, or staffing to consistently support school programs, as these commitments can be time-intensive and require careful coordination. Additionally, aligning the goals and schedules of businesses with the school calendar and curriculum needs can be difficult, as employers often operate on different timelines and may have varying expectations about

the skills students should acquire. There is also the challenge of ensuring that work placements and projects offer meaningful, hands-on learning experiences rather than simply filling administrative roles that provide limited skill development. This falls to schools and developing and maintaining partnerships and ensuring high quality placements requires time, resources and infrastructure. These logistical hurdles, along with differences in organizational cultures and priorities, make sustained, impactful employer involvement challenging to achieve on a large scale.

This issue also has the potential to underpin a range of inequalities at the heart of schooling systems. Schools with the best resources, links, and even cultural capital through parental and personal contacts are most likely to develop strong relationships with employers and facilitate high quality work experience for their students. This is potentially compounded by regional inequalities within nations where some areas have constrained labour markets, high levels of unemployment, or simply a low skills economy. This means that the opportunities for work experience are fundamentally limited at structural, economic and geographic levels.

This is a major policy challenge. It requires ensuring schools have the appropriate resources and infrastructure to make structured links with employers. It means ensuring that staff have the appropriate experience and understanding of employability skills and the process of skills formation to manage relationships and assess quality. It requires appropriate initial teacher training includes a focus on employability and employers and that there are appropriate CPD opportunities in place. It also requires policy makers to have a national strategy that deals with regional inequalities and disparities all the way down to a local level. These key issues were apparent in analysis of the Studio Schools model where different schools in different regions had very different experiences. Critically, all schools were stretched by the logistical burden of trying to work with employers who were largely uninterested in participating in education and training (Robson et al., 2022).

This also raises the broader policy question of how to engage employers in the process of skills formation and determining the role employers within the schooling system. Employer engagement is fundamentally related to the way in which education and training policy positions employers in

the economy and in relation to broader skills formation processes. This is a complex policy issue rooted in the macro relationship between education and training policy and industrial strategy.

In many policy contexts the relationship between education and training and employers is one of skills supply and demand. Employers demand skills required in their industry and policy makers attempt to shape the skills supply side to ensure skills needs are met. Skills shortages, skills gaps, and the changing nature of work are consequently viewed as supply side issues, with the education and training system needing to respond appropriately. In fact, emphasis on the need for employability skills formation to happen in schools often starts with arguments about employer needs. However, a simple linear relationship between skills supply and demand can risk positioning employers simply as customers of a skills system with rights to skills supply (Robson, 2023; Killip and Robson, 2024). Rights may be linked with some kind of tax burden or skills levy.

This kind of relationship, where employers are seen as customers with consumer rights is not conducive to active employer engagement in the actual process of skills formation which is required in a model that emphasises work placements for young people. Analysis of policy structures globally has shown that approaches that position employers as customers of the skills system rather than active stakeholders with responsibilities rather than rights, inevitably pushes them outside this process of skills formation (Robson et al., 2024). This makes the process of embedding employability skills in the school curriculum particularly challenging and opportunities for work-based skills formation are likely to be limited. This is the 'employer conundrum': given that the formation of employability skills requires employer engagement, policy makers must find appropriate levers to ensure employers shift from being customers of a skills system, with consumer rights and little practical involvement, to having real roles and responsibilities in the process of schooling and employability skills formation. This means creating appropriate policy structures and incentives for employers to provide real and meaningful opportunities for work experience for young people and liaise actively with schools on co-designing high quality placements.

Underpinning policy architecture

This brings me onto my final policy challenge: that key assumptions about the nature of the governance of education and training in the form of the underpinning policy architecture, really matter. The point here is that the way in which regulatory policy is structured and the way the relationship between employers and education is positioned are both rooted in the broad political philosophy of the policy context.

Comparative research of different education and training systems has shown that more laissez-faire approaches to managing the sector focus on the invisible hand of the market as the core mechanism of governance (Robson et al, 2024). This places competition between institutions (schools, colleges or universities) as the main mechanism of driving quality and positions the role of the state as one of market regulator rather than taking an active coordinating role. This approach inevitably leadsto a vertically stratified education and training sector with different institutions competing for positions within a hierarchy (Marginson, 2016).

Where societies value traditional academic pathways, institutions with the strongest academic outcomes are positioned at the top of the hierarchy. In marketized approaches, the state has to regulate for those academic factors. This is why, in market based models, regulatory frameworks tend towards focusing solely on academic measures and struggle with introducing a more diverse range of regulatory approaches that might value vocational aspects of the curriculum (Robson et al., 2024). Market-based approaches lean towards the vicious cycle of regulation that squeezes out employability skills. Similarly, market conditions tend to mean that employers are all too easily positioned as customers with consumer rights and so see little value in fully engaging.

The contrasting policy approach to governance is a systems-based model where the state takes a more active approach in the coordination of the sector. This leads to what is often referred to as horizontal diversity with a broader range of complimentary offerings across the system (Marginson, 2016). Research shows that this kind of governance approach and underpinning policy architecture is more conducive to the introduction of more vocational aspects into the curriculum and will likely

enable regulatory mechanisms that can value employability skills alongside academic qualifications. The Studio School model can be seen as a victim of a systems-based approach implemented in a market-based political context. The schools could be seen as diversifying the offering of educational pathways available to young people, but the diversification struggled under market mechanisms which rewarded standard academic pathways. This pulled the schools back towards traditional modes of schooling and into a vertically stratified hierarchy. This is, then, the most significant challenge facing policy makers – ensuring that the underpinning policy architecture and political philosophy are aligned with a process of change that values diversification within the education and training system.

Conclusion

Through this paper, I've attempted to emphasise that that while embedding employability skills in the curriculum is increasingly important, the policy challenges are significant and often run far deeper than necessarily appear at first sight. There is only the space in this short paper to highlight and begin to unpack these challenges rather than offer detailed policy solutions.

However, for any policy maker in any international context, the key to beginning the process of embedding employability skills in the schools curriculum effectively and in a way that might avoid the pitfalls of the Studio School model will likely involve: rethinking regulation and quality assurance approaches that actually value more than purely academic outcomes; rethinking what meaningful employer engagement in skills formation actually looks like for schools; developing appropriate training and CPD for teachers to engage in employability skills work; developing structures and incentives for employers to engage in skills formation and provide high quality work placements for school age students; and a rethinking of political philosophy that values horizontal diversity over vertical stratification, creates space for regulatory reform and encourages collaboration rather than competition between key stakeholder.

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