
Skilled and Ready: what combined authorities want from schools

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ABSTRACT The purpose of combined authorities, driven by government, is economic growth and public sector reform. Economic growth requires improved productivity. The main obstacle, it is claimed, is a 'skills deficit', which schools need to address. In this article the evidence for this claim is examined. The real problem, it is argued, is a structurally low-skill, low-investment economy. What employers want from 'non-academic' school leavers is basic skills, 'soft skills' and positive attitudes to work. The contradiction with the Government's EBacc-dominated curriculum creates a space for 'employability' programmes in schools which may be promoted by combined authorities.

A useful distinction can be made, following Peck and Tickell [1], between two interrelated processes of the neo-liberalisation of local government, 'roll-back' and 'roll-out'. Roll-back neo-liberalism refers to 'the active destruction or discreditation of Keynesian-welfarist and social-collectivist institutions', most obviously through the massive cuts in government funding of local authorities, and also through legislative restrictions, of which a current example is the enforced academisation of all local authority schools. Roll-out neo-liberalism comprises 'the purposeful construction and consolidation of neoliberalized state forms, modes of governance, and regulatory relations' (p. 37). It is exemplified by the creation of combined authorities.

Devolution to combined authorities is transforming the landscape of local government in England. The first combined authority to be established was the Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA) in 2011, followed by combined authorities in the North-east, West Yorkshire, Sheffield, Liverpool and the West Midlands, and there are some two dozen more in progress.

Governance, Business and Democracy

The governance of combined authorities comprises a Cabinet consisting of the leaders of the constituent councils, together with, in the Government's preferred model, a mayor directly elected for four years. Most combined authorities have accepted a mayor because it attracts more devolved powers and funding. Claims that the new combined authorities represent decentralisation disguise the reality that they are a new form of highly centralised power. Devolution is delegated, conditional and revocable by government. So, for example, 'Greater Manchester will be required to put in place an extensive programme of evaluation, agreed at the outset with HM Treasury (HMT)' (p. 6).[2]

The primary purpose of combined authorities is private-sector economic growth. That is why employers from the one or more Local Enterprise Partnerships, the LEPs, are represented on the governing board of combined authorities. As the Greater Manchester LEP says, 'The GM LEP sits at the heart of GM's governance arrangements, ensuring that business leaders are empowered to set the strategic course, determine local economic priorities and drive growth and job creation within the city region'.[3] There is no equivalent representation from trade unions or community bodies.

What none of the combined authorities have – unlike London – is an elected assembly to hold them directly and continuously accountable. The profound democratic deficit of the combined authorities both in their formation and in their governance structures is the subject of a damning indictment by the House of Commons Communities and Local Government Committee in *Devolution: the next five years and beyond*, its report on the combined authorities programme, published in February 2016.[4]

'Public Service Reform'

The remit of combined authorities also includes 'public service reform'. They are an instrument not just for cutting and privatising public services in the context of reduced funding but also for reshaping and integrating them more closely into their economic agendas. The West Midlands Combined Authority, for example, will be responsible for the formation of the workforce through 'skills development', for housing, transport, land use, the police (taking over from the Police Commissioner), the fire service, and 'mental health'. The Greater Manchester Combined Authority is the exception, so far, in also being responsible for the National Health Service and social care budget, but the intention is that all combined authorities will take on more devolved powers over time. For example, *DfE Strategy 2015-2020: world-class education and care*, published March 2016, refers to the role of the combined authorities in the development of new delivery models for children's social care.[5] And the GMCA Agreement states that 'HMT agrees to work with Greater Manchester on their early years pilot, with a focus on providing advice and support in ensuring effective pilot design and the creation of a robust evaluation framework. HMT

will work with Greater Manchester on engaging with schools to support early intervention'.[6]

In short, combined authorities are overarching socio-economic projects which seek to increasingly integrate many of the social services on which families and communities depend more closely into the agenda of capital.[7] That invites the question: what are the potential implications of combined authorities for education in schools?

The 'Skills Deficit'

A key theme of the economic discourse of combined authorities is the need to improve productivity, which is low in the United Kingdom compared to the rest of the G7 countries, as a report published in February 2016 by the Office for National Statistics confirms.[8] The principal cause, it is claimed, is a skills deficit, and the remedy is programmes of 'skills development'. Thus, one of the first acts of the West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA) has been to set up a Productivity Commission to tackle this: 'The Productivity Commission is based on a model for radical reform of the whole skills system that will reduce unemployment, raise skills levels and make a significant contribution to raising productivity'.[9]

Last year the Government launched area reviews of post-16 education and training. The first wave is taking place in combined authority areas, with the combined authority leading the review with the aim of gearing provision more closely to its economic growth strategy. The GMCA is typical:

For GM, the review will play a key role in further developing, and ultimately implementing, the skills flexibilities agreed through the devolution deal. ... In particular, the process will provide an opportunity for us to take a more detailed look at the capacity and financial stability of the institutions to inform our decisions around redesigning the FE system, ensuring that future provision is responsive to both the labour market and our local funding mechanisms. (Para. 2.2)[10]

These reviews are the first instance of combined authorities extending their reach into the school system. Though the focus is on further education colleges, sixth-form colleges and school sixth forms are included in the review, with the regional schools commissioners on the review steering groups. There is however no representation of teachers or their unions.

The post-16 area reviews are likely to be just the beginning of an increasing pressure from combined authorities on schools to ensure that the formation of the future workforce in terms of 'skills' and 'employability' is aligned more closely to the requirements of the local economic growth strategy. Of course this is not new: for example, a CBI report in 2000 said, 'There is a gap between the skills which employers will increasingly look for in their employees, and the skills schools currently equip their students with. The gap is

getting wider'.^[11] But the formation of combined authorities will generate renewed pressure to address that gap, driven by a compelling combination of factors. First, combined authorities are held closely to account by government for the success of their economic strategy. Second, employers' interests are relayed directly into the governance of the combined authorities by the representatives of the LEP(s). Third, the councils which constitute the combined authorities will after 2020 cease to receive their principal source of income, the block grant, from government, and will be dependent for funding on retention of the business rates. That provides an irresistible incentive to prioritise and promote employers' interests and attract business investment. And fourth, it is argued that the development of 'skills' and 'employability' to increase productivity begins in schools.

Schools and the Labour Market

A portent of future developments was the report *Devo Max – Devo Manc: place-based public services*, published in September 2014 and co-authored by Phillip Blond, author of the book *Red Tory* and director of the think tank ResPublica. It argued that:

Greater Manchester should take responsibility for driving up standards in schools, looking at value for money in terms of pre-16 education. ... there should be a keen focus on preparing Greater Manchester young people for the world of work and sustainable employment. Education needs to be embedded in the local labour market. (p. 40)^[12]

This theme was picked up in February 2016 by Sir Michael Wilshaw, the Chief Inspector for Schools, when he challenged local politicians in two combined authorities, Manchester and Liverpool, to improve the low performance of schools in order to meet the labour requirements for economic growth:

I am calling on them to make education in general – and their underperforming secondary schools in particular – a central target of their strategy for growth. Unless they do, I fear Manchester and Liverpool will never become the economic powerhouses we want them to be.^[13]

The previous month, Wilshaw had claimed that 'Nine out of 10 employers, according to the British Chambers of Commerce, say school leavers are not ready for employment. Six out of 10 firms say the skills gap is getting worse'.^[14]

The 'Skills Gap': the evidence

I want to examine the evidence for this claim. There is no doubt that there are skills shortages in some specialised sectors such as the automotive industry.

Jaguar Land Rover, based in the WMCA area, is a case in point: it has an annual investment of approximately £2.75 billion a year but faces critical skills shortages in engineers, designers and technicians.[15] The explanation for this shortage offered by Begley et al (2015) puts Wilshaw's claim into context. In part, responsibility lies with the employers themselves: it is 'a legacy of the engineering sector being locked into a low-skills equilibrium caused by a long-term failure to educate and train its workforce' (p. 594). It is also the result in part of the failure of government to ensure sufficient qualified maths and science teachers:

A key problem in the recruitment of many home-based students to study engineering degrees appears to be their lack of proficiency in physics and mathematics, rendering them unsuitable for admission to higher level or degree level courses (Ashton, 2014; Lightfoot and Saunders, 2012). This situation is also compounded by the fact that 9 out of 10 secondary school children give up sciences at the age of 16 which may in part be affected by the shortages of suitably qualified maths and physics teachers in state schools (Devlin 2014; Mills, 2013). (p. 598)

There are two fundamental causes of this skills shortage. One is the huge gender inequality in university engineering and computer courses – 85% of candidates accepted are male (p. 600). The other is the damaging distortion of the British economy resulting from the overwhelming structural dominance of the financial sector:

With the growth of the financial sector, graduates with degrees in engineering have since been enticed into the banking and investment sectors where their mathematical skills are in high demand with pay being commensurate, particularly in 'The City' (RAE, 2010, 2011, 2012). For example, starting salaries in investment banking begin at £45,000 per annum compared with an average of £27,500 in engineering and industrial firms (High Fliers Research, 2015). (p. 600)

However, the crucial point to understand is that these skills shortages are far from typical of or prevalent in the British economy as a whole. The most authoritative source of national data is *The UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2015*, published in January 2016 [16]:

The majority of establishments reported that they had a fully proficient workforce: 86 per cent felt that all their staff were fully proficient at their job. However around one in seven employers (14 per cent) experienced skills gaps within their establishment. This equates to approximately 1.4 million staff who were not fully proficient (five per cent of the UK workforce). (p. 55)

Only a relatively small proportion of employers – 14% – report a skills deficit. Furthermore, the two most common reported causes of skills gaps are temporary:

Three in five of all skills gaps were deemed to be caused, at least in part, by the fact that staff were new to the role, while a similar proportion were attributed to employees' training being only partially complete. These factors are both predominantly transient: that is to say one would expect skills gaps resulting from these causes to be eliminated once staff have settled into their new roles and/or existing training has been completed. (p. 55)

But the survey also notes that a significant minority of employers report staff having *under-utilised* skills and qualifications, and that this is likely to be underestimated:

Some employers may experience a skills imbalance where they perceive that staff are being 'under-utilised', that is, the skills and qualifications that these staff hold are above those required for their current role. Three in ten employers reported that they had at least one employee who fits this description within their establishment (30 per cent), with two million workers reported to be under-utilised in this way. (p. 77)

Across the UK, nearly two in five establishments (39 per cent) reported having employees with qualifications more advanced than required for their current job role. ... It is possible that this is an underestimate: eight per cent of employers did not know whether their staff have skills or qualifications more advanced than required for their role, with this proportion rising to nearly half (46 per cent) among establishments employing 250+ workers. (p. 79)

Thus, the number of staff with under-utilised skills and qualifications significantly exceeds those reported to be at least temporarily 'not fully proficient'. More detailed evidence is available from the GMCA. The *Greater Manchester Skills Analysis 2015/16* was published in January 2016 by New Economy, the policy, strategy and research arm of the GMCA and the GM Local Enterprise Partnership. It reports that

there are problems with skill utilisation. There are more level 4 qualified people than 'level 4 jobs' available. ... a worrying 39% of unemployed people have level 3 and above skills (19% have a level 4 qualification). ... This shows that qualifications are not necessarily a guarantee of work. Many unemployed people have valuable skills.[17]

The conclusion we can draw from this evidence is that claims that the principal cause of low productivity is a skills deficit are greatly exaggerated. There are

undoubtedly skills shortages in certain specialised sectors, and these need to be addressed. But it is also the case that there is a major problem of under-utilisation of the skills and qualifications that employees have. It confirms the analysis developed by Martin Allen and Patrick Ainley:

We have argued that, rather than responding to the needs of a 'knowledge economy' in which high skilled jobs predominate, 'education, education, education' has not been able to fulfil the expectations it raised, producing instead an 'overqualified and underemployed' generation. (p. 79)[18]

A Low-Skill, Low-Pay, Low-Productivity, Low-Investment Economy

The explanation for this is that much of the British economy is structurally a low-skill, low-pay economy. This was the subject of a report entitled 'Exploring the Debate between the Low Wage Labour Market and Productivity Improvement' published in 2015, again by New Economy [19]:

The British business model generates a lot of low paying work by international standards. Over a fifth of jobs pay less than the low pay threshold (two thirds of median earnings).

Low pay is concentrated in private sector services. Three quarters of jobs which pay the National Minimum Wage (NMW) are to be found in industries such as hospitality, accommodation, retail, care, cleaning, employment agencies, leisure, security and hairdressing. Some 9.7 million of the UK's total of 28 million jobs are found in these low-paying sectors (although not all are minimum wage jobs). With rare exceptions, these are also the sectors where productivity per employee is low and has been throughout economic history – implying at least some kind of a connection between productivity and pay.

Low wage, low productivity employment has grown significantly in the years since the recession to give the labour market its increasingly bottom heavy appearance.

One graphic indication is the spread of zero-hours contracts. According to a report published by the Office for National Statistics in March 2016, the number of workers on zero-hours contracts had increased by more than 100,000 over the previous 12 months to exceed 800,000 for the first time.[20]

The fundamental cause of Britain's low productivity compared to other major economies is not lack of skills; it is lack of investment. Larry Elliott put it succinctly in the *Guardian* (14 March 2016):

Britain's recent growth has been heavily biased towards low-productivity jobs that do not pay very well. Businesses would rather employ cheap labour rather than spend more on new kit, which

explains why investment as a share of GDP is still well below where it was before the recession. Higher investment is the bedrock of a more successful economy. It boosts productivity, leading to higher wages, a bigger tax take and a smaller deficit.[21]

This explanation for low productivity is entirely absent from the documentation published by and about combined authorities, as is the need for substantial public investment to redress it, as argued for by Jeremy Corbyn – a National Investment Bank.

What Do Employers Want from Schools?

So what do employers mean when they complain that, in Wilshaw's words, 'school leavers are not ready for employment'? They are referring not just or even mainly to specific vocational or academic skills and qualifications but to what *The UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2015* calls 'People and personal skills' (p. 55).[22] According to the *Birmingham Skills & Employment Vision: 2016 to 2026*, which feeds into the WMCA's emerging economic strategy, it is 'soft skills' and attitudes that are needed:

Finding people with the right qualifications is only one aspect of the recruitment difficulties that employers face. Employers are clear that issues around employability, motivation and an absence of so-called 'soft' skills such as teamworking and communication skills are a significant barrier to recruitment. Employers particularly report that young people lack the appropriate work ethic and attitudes to employment. (p. 12)[23]

From this perspective what the schools are failing to deliver is future workers with not only the 'soft skills' but also the positive attitudes and commitment to the work situation that employers require. This is what employers want from schools and what they will be looking to the combined authorities to press schools to deliver. There is no acknowledgement that what the labour market offers to many young people is low-skilled, low-paid and precarious work, or unemployment, and no recognition that this reality may shape their attitudes and dispositions.

Further evidence of what employers want from schools is provided by an economic strategy document of the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP, the *GBSLEP Skills for Growth Plan 2013* [24], which is one of the components of the WMCA's economic strategy:

Schools play a major role in influencing how a young person approaches their career and transition into work. ... The GBS LEP is firmly committed to ensuring that schools help young people to think about their futures, to transition to the labour market and to build a meaningful understanding of what the local labour market actually needs. (p. 63)

The lever that the LEP wants to see made more use of is Ofsted:

The key driver that currently exists for schools to engage with employers and prepare their learners for transition is the Ofsted Inspection Framework. Through this framework schools have a responsibility to equip their students with the skills necessary to make them employable. (p. 65)

The *Skills for Growth Plan 2013* quotes the Ofsted Grade descriptor for Outstanding, which has been reworded slightly since 2013, in the *School Inspection Handbook 2015* as follows: 'Pupils understand how their education equips them with the behaviours and attitudes necessary for success in their next stage of education, training or employment and for their adult life' (p. 52).[25] The Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP report continues:

However at the moment a focus on careers and employability is essentially implicit within the framework rather than explicit. There would be value in trying to bring this out more explicitly and making it a part of inspection as part of a drive to make school more relevant to work. (p. 65)

'Employability' as a Neo-liberal Ideology

In an article published in March 2016 Richard Crisp and Ryan Powell note 'a switch in understanding from unemployment as a structural condition explained by a lack of employment to an individual problem caused by a lack of employability (McQuaid and Lindsay, 2005; Peck and Theodore, 2000)' (p. 5).[26] They identify employability as a neo-liberal ideological construction grounded in and justifying government economic policies:

recent welfare reforms under the Coalition Government were distinguished by the extent to which young people have been the target of spending cuts, less generous benefits, tighter eligibility criteria and more punitive forms of welfare. This is beginning to manifest itself in the emergence of a cohort of young people increasingly at risk of worklessness and poverty relative to older groups. (MacInnes et al., 2013).

What's more, these processes and outcomes have occurred during a period in which young people are becoming ever more employable as indicated by levels of formal qualifications. We suggest, therefore, that the notion of employability is more than simply a form of supply-side orthodoxy. Rather it has been colonised as a form of discursive legitimisation for neoliberal policies which seek to reduce the costs of supporting young people while simultaneously compelling their engagement with 'flexible' and insecure labour markets. This is likely to accentuate the difficulties faced by

marginalised youth and contribute to their continued stigmatisation.
(pp. 1-2)

The Dominance of the EBacc Curriculum

The ‘employability’ agenda for schools, as promoted by employers and by the Chief Inspector, encounters a fundamental obstacle: the curriculum, dominated by the English Baccalaureate, comprising a prescribed set of traditional academic subjects. John Cridland, director of the Confederation of British Industry, attacked the monopoly of the EBacc in a speech in June 2015 which re-opened the debate about the 14-19 curriculum: ‘For too long, we’ve just “pretended” to have a multiple route education system. Yet in reality there has been only one path the system values – GCSEs, A-levels, University’. He called for the creation of a vocational pathway with equivalent status, which would include ‘the attitudes and aptitudes necessary for work and life’.[27] His argument was restated by Sir Michael Wilshaw in his ‘Ambitions for Education’ speech on 18 January 2016:

The great comprehensive school headteacher knows that a ‘one size fits all’ model of secondary education will never deliver the range of success that their youngsters need. Some of our international competitors understand this probably better than we do. Their education systems are more flexible than ours and are much more geared to aligning the potential of the student with the needs of their economies. ... Most of all, we must stop paying lip service to improving vocational education and get on and do it.[28]

But there is no sign that the Conservative Government elected in 2015 has any intention of abandoning Gove’s blueprint and conceding to the employers’, and the current Chief Inspector’s, proposals. On the contrary, its Coalition predecessor scrapped Labour’s Diplomas – an attempt to provide a vocationally oriented pathway – and abolished compulsory work experience. It leaves the schools, and in particular those serving socially deprived areas where the EBacc provides the greatest challenge, trapped between the contradictory demands of the Department for Education on the one hand and those of local employers on the other, relayed with added urgency by combined authorities where they exist.

Teaching ‘Employability’: skilled and ready

That contradiction creates the space for a business opportunity to sell to schools: an add-on curriculum programme designed to develop ‘employability’ skills and dispositions. Such a programme is currently operating in schools in three combined authorities: Greater Manchester, the West Midlands and Liverpool City Region. It is run by ‘Skilled and Ready’, an organisation which

offers an 'employability' curriculum programme and award, the Skilled and Ready Award, for young people aged 11-18:

This award introduces an employability skills framework within which schools and colleges can develop meaningful relationships with local employers.

Our aim is to equip all young people with an understanding of their local economy and job opportunities, measurably improve their employability skills, as well as growing the confidence and ability to articulate these skills to employers in both application and interview scenarios.[29]

The award is available at three stages, Introductory, Intermediate and Advanced, which broadly correspond to Key Stages 3-5. Unit 1 is 'Recognising employability skills in the curriculum'. These cover the Confederation of Business and Industry's '7 competencies', which include 'business and customer awareness' and 'specialist lesson plans, designed with employers'. In Unit 2 'Learners solve a real business problem for a real business!' and in Unit 3 'Learners apply for a virtual job'.

Skilled and Ready's origins lie in Birmingham in 2013, when its predecessor, Skills for Birmingham, was contracted by the local authority to deliver the 'Birmingham Baccalaureate', an employability programme in a dozen or so schools. Rebranded as Skilled and Ready, it took off in Manchester a year later when it was contracted by New Economy, the joint policy arm of the GMCA and the Greater Manchester LEP, to deliver its programme in, currently, 42 schools. And it has recently expanded into Liverpool, sponsored by Hays Recruitment, one of the UK's largest employment agencies, including as a supplier of teaching staff to schools.

Skilled and Ready is a charitable company run by a board of directors with an interesting political composition. The founder, Rachel Maclean, a Birmingham business owner, stood as Conservative candidate in a Birmingham Labour constituency in the 2015 General Election. New Economy, which is an arm of the GMCA (made up of 10 councils, nine of which are Labour), is a member of its board. And it also includes Gisela Stuart, a Birmingham Labour MP on the right of the party, and Liam Nolan, the founder and chief executive of a chain of five academies and free schools in Birmingham, a self-proclaimed Labour supporter who has been feted by David Cameron and Michael Gove. In March 2016 Nolan was charged by the Education Funding Agency with serious financial mismanagement, including secretly paying himself a second salary, and his chain of schools is being transferred to another trust.[30]

A Neo-liberal Pedagogy

Of course, young people need to leave school with the skills and attributes and understandings to have the best opportunity of getting decent jobs. That is not in dispute: after all, it is what young people expect schools to do. But schools

should also help children and young people to develop a critical understanding of the world of work in a capitalist economy, one that is not restricted to an employer agenda and perspective. And this is what is completely absent, deliberately, from the education for employability programmes that employers want and that Skilled and Ready provides. They exemplify what Patricia McCafferty describes as ‘the increasingly pervasive embedding of rhetoric and practices of “enterprising education”’.[31] She argues that this is an aspect of a ‘neo-liberal pedagogy’ that entails:

the uncritical promotion of values of enterprise and entrepreneurship through approaches that lead to greater ‘frontline’ business involvement in schools, helping to normalize free market values and ‘neoliberal commonplaces’. These promote a particular perspective on the relationships between education, the labour market, the economy and social justice ... ‘enterprising education’ and the promotion of business values ‘on the ground’ is a problematic, yet increasingly core function of state education in developing the ideological apparatus of neoliberalism across the UK. (p. 541)

A critical understanding of the world of work would entail asking questions about the commodities and services that are produced and their social value, about systems of power and who holds it, about workers and working conditions here and in the global economy, about issues of class, gender, nation and ethnicity, and about the current state of the British economy and the reasons for high youth unemployment. It would integrate abstract and systematised ‘academic’ knowledge with the practical and experiential knowledge of young people and their families and communities.

Conclusion

Let me summarise the argument I have been making. The purpose of combined authorities, driven by government, is economic growth and public sector reform. Economic growth requires improved productivity. The main obstacle, it is claimed, is a ‘skills deficit’, which schools need to address. Combined authorities, driven by funding and governance imperatives, will seek to put pressure on schools to do so. However, the evidence provides little support for the ‘skills deficit’ claim. The real problem, I argue, is a structurally low-skill, low-investment economy. What employers want from ‘non-academic’ school leavers is basic skills, ‘soft skills’ and positive attitudes to work. But the Conservative Government has a very different project for schools, exemplified by the dominance of the EBacc. This contradiction creates a space for ‘employability’ programmes such as Skilled and Ready.

It remains to be seen the extent to which combined authorities will seek to extend their reach into the school system and how effective they will be in gearing schools more closely to their agendas. In that context it also remains to be seen the extent to which schools, especially those which are not high

performing in terms of government targets, will turn to ‘employability’ programmes such as that offered by Skilled and Ready, and the extent to which combined authorities may promote them. What can be predicted, I think, is that as combined authorities spread and develop they will add fuel to the debate about the relationship between schools and the labour market, resulting in more questioning of the EBacc curriculum and more pressure to validate a pre-vocational and vocational pathway. But it also opens up the opportunity to argue the case for a unified and critical common core secondary curriculum for all.

Notes

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