



# Commonwealth Education Partnerships

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# Strategies for supporting youth employment and the school-to-work transition

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## Introduction

With the global youth unemployment rate at 12.6 per cent and projected to rise further, the need to connect education to labour market demands is crucial. Given this context, it is only natural that growing attention has been focused on supporting skills development strategies for youth, specifically around the school-to-work transition. Indeed, the gains made towards achieving universal primary education mean that more youth today are entering the labour market having completed some level of secondary education, so making it especially important to enhance the relevance and quality of instruction at that level. This paper explores strategies to support youth employability and the school-to-work transition. Brief examples are also used to illustrate how programmes in different regions are working to tackle these issues.

## Box 1

### Kanjanapisak Goldsmith College

**Context:** While Thailand's youth unemployment is low compared to the rate in advanced economies, it is high compared to Thailand's overall unemployment rate (one per cent).<sup>3</sup> Thailand's youth also face high underemployment and informality.<sup>4</sup>

**Model:** Kanjanapisak Goldsmith College provides training in goldsmithing and jewellery-making to young students as they concurrently complete their academic qualifications and learn soft skills for employability, so directly linking the educational and professional development of the students. It is a business-adopted school programme, supporting skills delivery through co-operation between schools and local businesses.

The College offers a certificate programme (three years of vocational secondary school), a diploma (two years of post-secondary school) and a bachelor's degree (two years of continuation after the diploma). All programmes include on-the-job training. The government covers the certificate programme, and industry pays for the diploma and bachelor's programmes. Post-graduation work in the supporting businesses is requested, but not mandatory. Most students come from poor, rural families.

**Impact:** Kanjanapisak Goldsmith College graduates have achieved a 100 per cent employment rate. Equally important, employers are reportedly satisfied with the skill sets of graduates of the college.

## What is the skills gap?

There are generally seen to be three types of skills: cognitive, non-cognitive (also known as behavioural or life skills) and technical. Results for the Development Institute's<sup>1</sup> Innovative Secondary Education for Skills Enhancement (ISESE) project examined both employer demands and secondary level curricula from a mix of countries across Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia. The findings revealed that employers are as concerned about non-cognitive skills as they are about cognitive and technical ones.<sup>2</sup> Indeed, these non-cognitive skills (such as communication, entrepreneurialism and leadership) are particularly important in the informal sector. Worryingly, however, curricula in many countries do not articulate these skills, and students are at a disadvantage when entering the labour market.

## Strategies to support skills development and the transition to work

Given this skills mismatch, the ISESE research investigated innovative interventions that strengthen relevant skills for employment at the secondary level. The landscape of models identified was markedly diverse: while some models work to create improvements within the existing education system, others offer an alternative method outside of the traditional system; and while some models were implemented by just one organisation, many drew upon the strength of multi-stakeholder partnerships to improve their quality, relevance and sustainability. Across all models, however, four key approaches emerged as particularly effective in improving the quality of education and relevance of the skills imparted to secondary level students, and thus their prospects for a smooth school-to-work transition.

- First, a critical element of effective skills development initiatives is the active involvement of employers in providing both advisory and financial support to education and training programmes. For instance, employers and industry leaders can contribute on qualification frameworks, lending expertise to trainings of trainers, or providing in-kind donations. Some innovative models also partner with employers to prepare students for the workplace alongside general secondary education by pairing traditional study with internships or apprenticeships (Box 1). This also provides students with the opportunity to 'earn while you learn', helping to counter financial constraints faced by many students who cannot afford to choose education over contributing to family income. Such programmes can offer a high chance of employment after graduation, as students often turn apprenticeships into full-time employment. Meanwhile,

direct financial support can be provided via governments creating incentives such as tax breaks for employers to play an active role in developing programmes that are relevant and affordable.

- Second, it is clear that collaboration between employers and industry speaks to a larger lesson, namely that effective programmes often rely on the resources and commitment of a variety of stakeholders. Effective public-private partnerships, particularly when introduced into an existing system to build upon and improve the efficiency of established institutions, provide an opportunity for higher impact and sustainability. These partnerships are even stronger if they involve a wider variety of actors, including educators, employers, non-

## Box 2

### Lend A Hand, India

**Context:** Youth unemployment in India is twice as high as adult unemployment. While enrolment has improved at both the primary and secondary levels, formal school does not typically impart the life and technical skills that students need to excel in the workforce.

**Model:** Lend a Hand India's (LAHI) Introduction to Basic Technology (IBT) programme uses a pre-vocational training module to give students a hands-on learning experience that they do not typically benefit from in traditional Indian schools, whose curricula emphasise rote memorisation. The purpose of the course is to expose students to vocational learning and encourage them to consider Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) as a viable path to gainful employment.

**Impact:** LAHI has reached 7,000 students through the IBT course in government-aided schools so far, and 13,000 students are currently enrolled in the IBT programme. IBT has been incorporated into the state curriculum of Maharashtra.

## Box 3

### Educate!, Uganda

**Context:** With 78 per cent of Uganda's population under the age of 30, supporting youth employment in the country is vital.

**Model:** Educate!'s flagship programme is Educate! Experience, an entrepreneurship initiative that aims to empower youth at the secondary school level. Engaging local mentors and on-the-ground staff, it is based on an entrepreneurship and experiential learning curriculum designed to develop young leaders and entrepreneurs by imparting business knowledge, self-confidence and other non-cognitive skills. Students take part in the programme for two years starting in their penultimate year of secondary school. Educate! operates in private, public and religious schools all over Uganda.

**Impact:** Educate! currently reaches 8,000 students, and youth supported by Educate! have started 284 enterprises and earned thousands of dollars in revenue.



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governmental organisations (NGOs) and community-based organisations. Beyond financial and institutional sustainability, these types of multi-stakeholder partnerships are likely to encourage community buy-in, such as LendAHand's Multi-Skill Vocational Training project in India (Box 2), which ultimately ensures optimisation of the programme's reach and impact.

- Third, new strategies are emerging that are improving the content and methodologies for teaching and learning. For example, new information and communication technologies (ICTs) are enabling teachers to impart skills and competencies through multiple formats and learning experiences. Active and learner-centred teaching methodologies, for example, have shown not only to increase learning of the subjects being taught, but also improve a student's higher level critical thinking and analytical skills and the ability to absorb and process new concepts and competencies. This kind of adaptive and flexible learning was identified as highly valuable by employers in Africa and Asia, and can greatly enhance a student's ability to transition smoothly from school to work.
- Last, there are a growing number of programmes that explicitly emphasise non-cognitive skills as a critical complement to traditional cognitive or technical skills-based curricula, not only because of the independent value of teaching these skills but also the promise that these skills show in positively affecting learning outcomes, particularly for disadvantaged students. Some models also incorporate courses designed to directly improve students' future employment options, such as the supplementary entrepreneurship courses offered by Educate! in Uganda (Box 3).

## The enabling environment

While it is clear that many innovative strategies and approaches are being used to achieve significant impact, many still struggle with the constraints of inflexible national education systems, the lack of a guiding framework on which to benchmark standards and successes, and a shortage of institutional and financial support.

These challenges reiterate the importance of creating a strong and hospitable enabling environment to ensure that innovative strategies and programmes are efficiently financed, effectively implemented and sustainable over the long term. This environment must include informed policy decision-making, increased industry involvement and improved co-ordination across all concerned stakeholders. To achieve this, priority must be placed on two areas:

1. Increasing the knowledge base about what works in skills development programmes, including further impact evaluation and cost analyses of promising models
2. Supporting the scale-up and replication of successful models in a sustainable manner and building on multi-stakeholder partnerships

Interactive platforms such as the Center for Education Innovations (CEI) can also play a role in sharing effective strategies and fostering partnerships.<sup>5</sup> Such forums can enable skills development programmes operating in similar contexts to link with one another to share best practices and learn about each other's challenges and solutions. Policy-makers and funders can also identify promising opportunities for investment, adaptation and institutionalisation. At



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*Progress on primary enrolment means that more youth today are entering work with some level of secondary education behind them*

the global level, interactive, comprehensive platforms can also provide an evidence base for systematic evaluation of what strategies work and how to scale them up to achieve maximum results.

Ultimately, strengthening the link between education and the world of work will require collaborative, cross-cutting partnerships. Only then can curricula be made more relevant to the needs and demands of employers, and young people truly acquire the skills to progress successfully onto the workplace. This in turn will play a pivotal role in helping to stem the rising youth unemployment rate and ensure that youth are engaged, productive members of their communities.

### Endnotes

- 1 Results for Development Institute (R4D) is a non-profit organisation whose mission is to unlock solutions to tough development challenges that prevent people in low- and middle-income countries from realising their full potential. Using multiple approaches in multiple sectors, including Global Education, Global Health, Governance and Market Dynamics, R4D supports the discovery and implementation of new ideas for reducing poverty and improving lives around the world.
- 2 Innovative Secondary Education for Skills Enhancement, Phase I Synthesis Reports. Available from: <http://www.resultsfordevelopment.org/knowledge-center/innovative-secondary-education-skills-enhancement-phase-i-synthesis-papers>

3 ILOSTAT (2010).

4 ILO (2012).

5 The Center for Education Innovations ([www.educationinnovations.org](http://www.educationinnovations.org)) is a Results for Development Institute initiative to increase access to quality, affordable and equitable education for the world's poor by identifying, analysing and connecting non-state innovations.

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