

The Commonwealth School Enterprise Challenge

Tackling the global unemployment crisis through enterprise education

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The rate of global youth unemployment continues to rise. At the same time, we are inching closer towards achieving the UN Development Goal of Universal Primary Education.¹ This helps to illustrate that the relationship between education and poverty is a complex one – research by the UK Department for International Development (DfID, 2007) shows that education on its own cannot break the cycle of poverty. More needs to be done to prepare young people for the workplace, as traditional models of education continue to fall short.

Youth, enterprise, education and the Commonwealth

The percentage of people living in the Commonwealth who are under the age of 24 puts the Commonwealth in an interesting position – if it utilises the fantastic resource that these young people represent, this could be its chance to become a global economic powerhouse. On the flipside, if youth unemployment levels continue to rise, it could be a catalyst for great civil unrest. Within the Commonwealth much has already been said about the ‘youth bulge’; the median age for Commonwealth countries is four years younger than for non-Commonwealth countries (Burnett, 2013). This is especially significant because young people are three times more likely to be unemployed than adults over the age of 24 (ILO, 2012). ‘All young people, wherever they live and whatever their background, require skills that prepare them for decent jobs so they can thrive and participate fully in society’ (UNESCO, 2012). Therefore, the pressure is on to ensure that young people across the Commonwealth are equipped to lead the Commonwealth into a strong economic future.

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In 2013 the Commonwealth selected as its theme ‘Opportunity through Enterprise and Innovation’. In part, this represents an attempt to promote programmes that equip young people with the skills they need to find (or, indeed, create their own) employment when they finish education. One such programme is Teach A Man To Fish’s ‘Commonwealth School Enterprise Challenge’, a programme the Royal Commonwealth Society has promoted within its network of schools.

The School Enterprise Challenge was piloted in 2011 as a way of encouraging as many schools as possible from all over the world to start their own profit-making enterprise. These enterprises serve

both as learning platforms and as income-generating activities for the school, as students run a business alongside their regular educational activities. In this way, students learn valuable technical and entrepreneurial skills and the school has the ability to raise its own funds in a sustainable way. This allows students from low-income families to have access to a free or low-cost education that is relevant to their employment needs and enables them to lift themselves and their families out of poverty.

The competition runs on a yearly basis – in the first two years, over 18,000 young people at over 300 schools in 41 countries benefited from taking part. At the time of writing, the 2013 competition is in progress, and currently over 1,100 schools from across the Commonwealth have signed up to take part. The competition has inspired young people across the globe to establish businesses as diverse as tailoring in Zambia, flip-flop manufacture in Pakistan, party planning in India and chicken farming in Uganda.

A flexible model of success

The School Enterprise Challenge is a flexible and scalable approach to tackling the youth unemployment crisis and is proven to work successfully within a range of situations and contexts. To illustrate this, there are three examples below from schools in a diverse range of contexts.

Ilowola School, Tanzania

Ilowola School in Tanzania set up a bee-keeping business in 2013. Tanzania is placed 156th (low human development) on the Human Development Index (2013), and while enrolment in primary education is nearing 100 per cent, half of all primary school leavers cannot read in English (required for secondary education), 20 per cent cannot read in Swahili, and only seven out of ten are numerate to a Standard 2 level (UWEZO, 2012). Moreover, the transition to secondary education is only 18.8 per cent (DfID, 2007). At Ilowola, the bee-keeping business is staffed by a team of 40 students. They sell honey and make products such as candles out of beeswax, and have used the business to enhance teaching across biology, chemistry and geography classes. Ilowola use 40 per cent of its profits to support students from disadvantaged backgrounds, which enables more students from primary school to complete secondary education. The other 60 per cent is used to build beehives for vulnerable community members who are in need of a source of income, thus contributing to the economic development of a deprived area more generally.

DLF Public School, India

India, a country where inequalities in and access to education is extreme within the different regions, sits at 136 on the Human Development Index (medium human development). Interestingly, in India, self-employment and casual wage employment make up a large majority of youth employment (Mitra and Verick, 2013). This may be seasonal or very low wage, and the challenge remains to ensure that young people have the skills and experience to enter the formal workforce. Inequality in India is rising and this is especially so for women (World Bank, 2011). Historically, social exclusion in India is based on caste and sex. Community initiatives to support change are therefore an essential aspect of the School Enterprise Challenge.

At DLF Public School, students started up a craft business to help the local community and challenge social inequality by building skills and entrepreneurship. Students ran a stall that sold crafts made by local artisan families, as well as additional items made by students. In the first four months they made a profit of US\$1,018, which they used to reinvest in the business, pay for student trips and support a local charitable cause.

Carlogie Primary School, UK

Our final example of education and entrepreneurship comes from Scotland. The UK is currently placed at 26 on the Human Development Index (very high human development). Education is free for all and poverty is classified in terms of relative poverty and not absolute poverty. In this situation, the School Enterprise Challenge is focused on social impact and employability through development of soft skills. Within the UK, the unemployment rate for those aged 16–24 was 21.4 per cent at the time of writing (House of Commons, Youth Unemployment Statistics, 2013).

At Carlogie Primary School, students run a monthly Fair Trade café called 'Fairlogie' at their local church. As well as generating profits of nearly \$1,000 in their first few months of operation, they are also using the café as a platform to teach their local community about the benefits of Fair Trade. Some of the profits have been used to expand the business, and any excess is being used to support less fortunate members of their local community. The students have even caught the eye of the Co-operative Education Trust for Scotland, and hope to secure investment of \$400 for the expansion of Fairlogie Café activities.

Overcoming difficulties

Of course, this model is not without its problems. Although the political, social and economic situations differed hugely across each participating school, there were a number of common difficulties faced by all participants. There appears to be a global problem relating to the lack of time that teachers have to conduct projects that enhance student learning beyond the national curriculum. This potentially poses a problem for innovation in teaching overall, preventing teachers from responding to the ever-changing needs of the job market. Across the board, teachers mentioned that their time was extremely limited.

To address these problems, the suite of resources that support teachers have been delivered and co-ordinated in more

manageable amounts. Staff are beginning to recognise the value of the continued professional development that they gain as a result of the School Enterprise Challenge, and exceptional staff are rewarded with an 'Inspirational Teacher Award' – an added motivation to help them find time for the programme around their busy schedules.

For the teachers who were directly involved in the project, coming out of the classrooms and giving some practical knowledge to the students was a dream come true. This is what real education is all about... taking teaching outside the classroom... and making it an unforgettable experience...

St Mark's Secondary Public School, India

In addition, pupils have mentioned that they have felt pressure to attend academic classes over involvement in the School Enterprise Challenge. In response to this, Teach A Man To Fish has worked with teachers in a range of countries to develop lesson frameworks that use school enterprises as a way to enhance teaching and learning in core subjects such as maths, English and science. However, more needs to be done by policy-makers and those working in education in general to help young people to understand that their academic achievements will not be enough for them to survive in an increasingly competitive job market, and that they need to look beyond traditional academics to set themselves up for a good career.

On a logistical level, reaching under-resourced or 'offline schools' (those without internet access) has been a problem as the programme has grown and developed. Teach A Man To Fish has tackled this in a number of ways, including creating a mobile phone-based communications system, along with establishing its first School Enterprise Challenge 'hubs' in Tanzania and Uganda, which are designed specifically to reach out to and support lower capacity schools who may not have access to the internet. This is in addition to harnessing the enthusiasm of previous participants of the challenge who are now participating for the second or third year, supporting them to create offline support networks for schools wishing to adopt the approach.

Conclusion

There are no silver bullets to tackle the youth unemployment crisis, and worldwide there is a demand for skills that basic primary education is not fulfilling. This does not mean that universal primary education is not important or necessary – it is. However, without an additional focus on employability and soft skills, which programmes like the School Enterprise Challenge have been set up to develop, education alone serves only those who can afford to enter higher education. The School Enterprise Challenge demonstrates that youth across the Commonwealth have the creativity and tenacity to respond to the demands of today's economic climate – if only educators can give them the tools to do so.

Endnote

- 1 Primary school enrolment has reached 90 per cent in developing regions; however, 57 million children are still not in primary education
<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/education.shtml>

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