Fit for work?

'UK school leavers a dismal failure': conclusion of a survey of employer opinion on communicative and related skills

[Below is most of the text (unadapted) of a British press release sent to *ET* in Nov 05 by the Forum of Private Business (FPB), a pressure group formed in 1977 that represents *c.*25,000 UK-based small and medium businesses (SMEs) employing over half a million people, for which it lobbies in both the United Kingdom and the European Union at large. The FPB claims 'a track record of positively affecting [EU] legislation prior to its introduction in the UK' (and elsewhere in the EU). Further information may be obtained at <www.fpb.org>, or through Ben Pinnington, media manager, <ben.pinnington @fpb.org>, or Rex Garratt, press officer, <rex.garratt@fpb.org>. The FPB head office is at Ruskin Chambers, Drury Lane, Knutsford, Cheshire WA16 6HA.]

Damning conclusion

School leavers are a dismal failure in the workplace. That's the verdict of a national survey of employers as the latest batch of pupils eagerly await the results of their GCSE and A level exams. The damning conclusion revealed that more than half of the employers who responded marked the standard of literacy, numeracy and oral skills of school leavers they recruited as 'poor' or 'very poor'.

Our survey of 4,000 employers amounts to a condemnation of Britain's education system, which is 'turning out school leavers who are socially inept and unprepared for the world of work,' said Len Collinson, National Chairman of the FPB, which carried out a Research on Skills Survey among its members. The FPB is now calling on the UK government to speed up the implementation of its recent White Papers on skills and education, to ensure school leavers can at least spell and add up adequately.

Mr Collinson declared: 'As an employer myself, I would like to see teachers and parents focus more on the basic 3Rs. Also there should be a greater emphasis placed on teaching "social skills", such as encouraging pupils to communicate clearly, instilling a modicum of respect for others, and promoting in them enthusiasm for a useful working life. Positive action like this could well be supported by parents and employers, who both have an interest in school leavers being better prepared for the world of work. We realise employers have to be engaged by education institutions.'

The study showed that, as far as school leavers' life skills are concerned, 46% of employers felt their young recruits' timekeeping is 'poor', 27% thought the general courtesy of school leavers towards colleagues and customers was 'poor', and 73% rated school leavers' ability to properly address a letter as either 'poor or very poor', while over 60% were equally damning of ex-pupils' ability to take a simple telephone message.

The opinions of employers, when asked to express their first-hand experience of taking on school leavers, were even more startling, including:

- Colin Bishop, managing director of JC International Marketing, Huntingdon: 'We are increasingly disappointed in standards of school leavers who in general have received no preparation whatsoever to working life after school. Communication skills are particularly poor. As an exporting Company we are frequently astounded at the very poor knowledge of world geography.'
- Dugdale Bradley, managing director Craigleith Ltd, business management consultants in Dollar, Clackmannanshire: 'The education system is still very heavily focussed on knowledge. Instead, it should move towards transferable "life skills" such as numeracy, problem-solving, IT, communication, and working with others in teams.'
- The managing director of an electrical contractor in Bury St Edmunds: 'They are ignorant, illiterate, innumerate, bad mannered, want everything handed to them on a plate, and fall apart emotionally if they don't get what they want. The education system and the children who are going through it could benefit enormously from turning the clock back 40 years.'

DOI: 10.1017/S0266078406001088

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078406001088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

Skills survey of school leavers: questions posed to employers and their responses expressed as percentages

	Very Poor	Poor	Average	Very Good	Good
1 How would you rate the literacy of school leavers you have employed:	9.8	44.4	35.5	9.5	0.8
2 How would you rate the numeracy of school leavers you have employed?	11.9	39.7	36.5	10.3	1.6
3 How would you rate the verbal skills of school leavers you have employed?	12.8	39.2	32.8	10.4	4.8
4 How would you rate school leavers' readiness for your workplace?					
4.1 Timekeeping	11.8	24.4	43.3	17.4	3.1
4.2 General courtesy towards colleagues and customers	2.3	25.4	36.5	31.0	4.8
4.3 Ability to properly address a letter	32.0	40.2	22.0	5.0	0.8
4.4 Ability to take a telephone message	19.0	41.3	31.0	7.1	1.6

- Richard Allen, proprietor of a beautician training school in Canterbury. 'As a Key Skills Practitioner delivering NVQs in my business, I would like to know how students can get GCSEs but can barely read or write?'
- Kate Owen, managing director of Opal Crafts Ltd, a London wholesale company: 'As an ex-teacher, I am horrified at the abysmal standards of school leavers that Britain is churning out. Bog-standard schools are churning out pupils and leavers with low confidence, poor social skills and very poor educational standards. Our company does not consider taking them on.'
- Chris Newberry, managing director of Pump Engineering Ltd in Littlehampton: 'Reliance on calculators and falling standards of literacy and mathematics mean that the employer has to fill in the gaps left by the schools.'
- David Wyld, managing director of Willis (organ makers) in Liverpool: 'Their apparent inability or complete unwillingness to follow instructions means most school leavers we have encountered are virtually unemployable.'
- Godfrey Room, managing director Xpress Train Ltd, a Swindon based company which specialises in training people to express themselves clearly: 'The increasing reliance on electronic media for communication and learning seems to be reducing the social and oral communication skills of newly emerging job-seekers.'
- John Michie, managing director of Aberdeen-based IFB business services: 'Due to the minimum wage, school leavers are now too expensive for the small contribution they make.'
- Richard Graham, managing director of Gisela Graham Ltd, London wholesalers: 'They show no real loyalty to the job and lack any understanding about paid employment.'
- Dulcie Huston, managing director of London entertainment agency CCA Management: 'Our ability to control and engender respect in students has been badly undermined by trends towards "Political Correctness" and parental misjudgement.'
- The proprietor of a car rental company in Truro: 'The current style of education will let down all who are exposed to it.'
- The managing director of a Macclesfield-based design company: 'Employers should be invited into schools to explain to teachers and pupils what is required of them in the real world of work.'
- Jeremy Rose, proprietor the Fensushi restaurant in London: 'British school leavers are not qualified for anything except getting drunk and not turning up for work.'
- Jim Ferguson, managing director The Castle Group Ltd, based in Inverness: 'The fact that

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078406001088 Published online by Cambridge University Press

they are passing exams only proves overall standards have fallen.'

- The managing director of a London-based international trading company: 'The quality of French and Japanese work placement students is a lot higher than UK students, not least in the quality of their second language, which is English.'
- Samantha Bevan, proprietor the Anchorstone residential care home in Farnham, Surrey: 'My job applicants lack basic skills of reading and writing and are reluctant to embark on further NVQ training.'
- Graham Mayhew, proprietor North Leicester Motors Ltd, Coalville: 'Qualifications are so invalidated that many employers now have the additional task of making their own assessment of any applicant, irrespective of their apparent qualifications.'
- Ann Pinnington, managing director, Hi Mark Ltd, a plastics manufacturer based in Wrexham: 'School leavers all know their rights, but do not consider their responsibilities. They lack presentation skills and do not take their appearance into consideration. They need to learn a few simple things such as manners, courtesy, respect for others, a willingness to start at the bottom, and, most important of all, how to spell.' ■

https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078406001088 Published online by Cambridge University Press