What should our schools be focusing on in order to prepare young people for the future? Should schools play a role in developing skills, or should subject knowledge be prioritised?

Whilst academic and vocational qualifications are central to the way in which young people are prepared for working life, we often miss the other factors central to a successful work and lifestyle. These skills have been defined as 'soft skills' and a s a consequence are rarely measured in any meaningful way, hence they have come in and gone out of fashion in cycles of education and skills thinking and reform.

The case for better qualifications and higher skills is undeniable; however this is only part of the solution. Qualifications are generally accepted as proxies for drivers of economic growth. However employers often go beyond the lack of technical skills when citing their reasons for their difficulties in finding the right people for their workforce. Research conducted by Leadership IQ in the UK, which tracked 20,000 new recruits in public, private and health care organisations found that 46% of new recruits into employment failed in some way within their first 18 months.
More alarmingly, only 11% failed due to a lack of skills and a staggering 89% failed due to attitudinal reasons. The reasons for this were numerous and most often cited as: low levels of emotional intelligence, the ability to understand and manage one's own emotions and accurately assess others' emotions; low motivation, lack of drive to achieve one's full potential and excel in the job; and lack of coach-ability, the ability to accept and act upon feedback.

It is time therefore that we educated the hirers (employers) and the hires (recruits) and their educators to invest in developing a wider set of skills, which make people more employable, this must include and start in schools.

The skills that are often cited as lacking in young people, other than the important STEM areas of study including communication, are: **Attentional control; emotional control; confidence; and resilience, the ability to make plans, step up to a challenge and stick at the task until it is successfully completed**. Arguably, the onset and expansion of social media together with the access to a seemingly unlimited amount of information through Search Engines and the like whilst making them quicker to respond to any given situation are in danger of de-skilling people. Neuroscientific research points to changes in the way our brains are wired and the areas that become underdeveloped by exposure to such media over time. For example multi-tasking through use of electronic media has been found top increase the production of the stress hormone cortisol, the brain can become overstimulated and information sent to the wrong parts of the brain, which can reduce long term memory.

What example s are there of schools and colleges preparing young people well for the workforce?

By way of introduction to a project that my organisation, Career Connect, has operated in a large number of schools in the Merseyside area, the following background is important:

It became apparent through our work with young people over time that supporting individuals to make informed and relevant decisions about the career paths best suited to their interests, skills and values was only effective if the individual had the self belief and personal capacity to put that decision into action and follow it through. Because our work is predominantly with people who are deemed to be in need of additional help and who are often vulnerable to under achieving and making unsuccessful transitions, we decided to extend our approach to address how we could help them to become more resilient and self confident.

In particular we used data and intelligence drawn from our many thousands of interactions with young people to attempt to identify at what point in the transition failure became evident and to understand what reasons lay behind this failure. What we learned was whilst there was universally a desire to find and keep work, for many they lacked the underlying behaviours and skills to be able to make this a reality; this was characterised by high numbers of individuals who cycled in and out of education, training and job opportunities without success.

What did we do in response?

In seeking to identify and measure the factors that could help young people to have realistic aspirations, make plans, set goals and stick at achieving their goals we used the 4Cs model of Mental Toughness. We had chosen the application of Mental Toughness for its ability to describe an individual's underlying mindset. It is a major factor in individual behaviour, wellbeing and performance and can be considered an enabler for these important outcomes. There are 4 elements in Mental Toughness (the 4Cs) – Control, Commitment, Challenge and Confidence. Mental Toughness, as defined by Professor Peter Clough at Manchester Metropolitan University, is a plastic personality trait, which determines in some part how individuals perform when exposed to stressors, pressure and challenge, irrespective of the prevailing situation. It has a proven link with one's performance, ability to adopt positive behaviours, and wellbeing.

The New Horizons programme was the first programme-wide application of Mental Toughness and the MTQ48 psychometric measure with young people in preparation for transition to the world of work. The programme was launched in 2012 and operated until 2015, the timescale being determined by the commissioner, the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP).
Our 'New Horizons' response was delivered within the framework of a Social Impact Bond (SIB) where risk capital was secured from a consortium of social investors.

The programme focused on young people who were assessed as at risk of underachievement. Based on tracking evidence from our work with school leaver cohorts in the Liverpool City region it was apparent that certain groups of young people were faring far worse than their peers. Specifically these were: young people in care/leaving care; young offenders and young people with Learning Difficulties or Disabilities.

The results were evident in the achievement of positive outcomes against which payments were made to the investors who had taken the financial risk to back the programme. The results reflected a rate card of outcomes set by the DWP. These were:

- school attendance and behaviour outcomes;
- qualifications gained at levels 1, 2 and 3;
- and entry into sustained employment.

Career Connect tracked the progress of each individual student on the programme and to establish its impact against having taken no action a comparison of outcomes against a similar 'control group' (this was not a counterfactual group study, rather a comparison of data later in the life of the programme). The 'control group' measured a similar cohort who had not been part of the New Horizons programme in the same area (Liverpool City region) and from another geographical area where Career Connect operates.

Education, Employment and Training (EET) Rates

	Year 1 cohort 2012	Year 2 cohort 2013	Year 2 cohort 2014
New Horizons participants EET rate	58%	79%	93%
Liverpool City Region Control group	48%	51%	54%
Statistical neighbour area Control group	68%	71%	70%

Apart from the achievement of education, employment and training outcomes a study of the ability of young people to sustain these opportunities was also conducted and compared also. This was known as the 'rtae of churn' or the degree to which young people dropped out of opportunities before their conclusion.

Rate of 'Churn' between NEET and EET			
	Baseline churn in 2011	**August 2013**	**August 2014**
New Horizon participants	25%	12%	11%
Liverpool City Region control group	22%	21%	20%
Statistical neighbour area control group	16%	15%	16%

Whilst the New Horizons example focuses on some of the most challenged and challenging young people our belief is that the same applications can be used with any young people to improve their preparedness for the world of work.

What examples are there of employer-led initiatives that have had an impact?

The National Grid sponsored Get Skilled programme has operated in 3 areas of the country: Berkshire, Warwickshire and Merseyside. These programmes were not focused on work with school pupils, but with young people who had recently left school and were not settled in further education, employment or training (NEET). The programme targets young people who are close to the labour market but who may lack the skills listed above to be able to realise their potential; often young people who are qualified at Level 2 or Level 3, or are capable of this level of achievement. In Liverpool Career Connect is delivering the programme as follows:

Title of course: Get Skilled
Timing: 30 hours per week
Location: Liverpool John Moores University
Participants: NEET Young People 16-21 years old
Aim(s) of the course:

- To deliver an innovative employability programmer to learners, that will be different, creative, inspiring and engaging .

- To support the development of learners to the stage where are able to progress positively into Education, Training or Employment
- To provide learners with the appropriate attitudes, knowledge, skills, behaviour and abilities needed for further learning or employment.
- To improve learners understanding and awareness of the full range of learning opportunities that is available to them including Local Market Information and how to access and research this
- Each learner will have a clear progression route and plan to move on into further learning or employment.

The initial cohort (this is in its early stages of delivery) had success rates of 81%, that is 81% of young people who have progressed on to further learning or work, as follows:

Higher Education	1	4%
Learning	4	15%
Training	4	15%
Employment/Apprenticeships	12	46%
EET		**81%**
NEET	**5**	**19%**

These examples are offered to indicate that more can be done by our education system to prepare young people for the world of work. Schools have many requirements placed upon them in respect of the achievement of academic performance and it is true to say that this is a major factor in them not looking wider at the learning and skills needed to manage a successful transition into adult and working life. Our New Horizons data for this targeted group of young people has also shown a vast improvement in qualification levels attained by the cohort based on their improved levels of confidence, commitment and resilience. Examples of feedback from young people, parents and frontline Advisers/Coaches provide further illustration of the benefit of such an approach:

"My son has benefitted greatly from the Mental Toughness programme – his confidence has soared, he's really started to believe in himself and with the help of his Adviser [Coach], he's started to think more realistically about how his qualifications match available work opportunities- Thank you"

Parent, Liverpool

'The Mental Toughness programme helped to improve my confidence – it made me feel stronger. I really enjoyed the brain training activities and learnt to do things step by step.
My friends should do it too"

Scott, aged 15.

New Horizons coaches:

"Young people respond to the Mental Toughness Development programme well; they liked to talk about themselves and recognising and relating their behaviour to their feedback…it has the ability to challenge the young people's behaviour and raise their motivation".

"Feedback from schools shows a pattern of young people taking a more proactive approach to their learning and taking more responsibility in lessons and in planning for the future".