



Young People's Views on Literacy Skills and Employment

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In 2013, the National Literacy Trust and the All Party Parliamentary Group on Literacy are holding a joint commission to examine the links between young people's literacy skills and employment in the UK. After hearing evidence from a range of stakeholders, a final report will make recommendations about how the employment options of young people in the UK can be boosted by improving their literacy.

Using secondary sources as well as National Literacy Trust survey data, this short report outlines how important young people think literacy skills are to their employment prospects and what skills they believe are particularly important. It also briefly outlines the important role that technology plays in the lives of young people and the degree to which this is linked to wider employment skills. A complementary report presents evidence on employers' views on literacy and employability.

[T]he labour market has changed for young people and it will continue to do so for the foreseeable future. This matters, because if youth unemployment continues at current rates, by 2022, costs to the exchequer and lost output to the economy are estimated at £28 billion on top of the human and social cost. (UKCES, 2012: 4¹)

Youth unemployment studies, such as the one above (see also Bivand, 2012²; Lee et al., 2012³; Petrongolo and van Reenen, 2012⁴) outline the scale of the problem within the UK, with 20.7%⁵ of 16 to 24-year-olds currently unemployed. An array of (interconnected) causes has been proposed as sitting at the heart of the issue in these studies, and one of the frequently cited ones relates to young people's skills on leaving school and entering the job market⁶. Indeed, youth skills for the labour market are a focus not just in the UK but also internationally, as highlighted in a 2012 UNESCO report⁷.

We know that education is an important driver of social mobility. Our Literacy Changes Lives review (2008⁸) outlines the importance of literacy skills, which underpin education, to five areas of a person's life: economic wellbeing, aspirations, family life, health and civic/cultural engagement. It presents overwhelming evidence that literacy has a significant relationship with a person's happiness and success. It also shows that men and

¹ <http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/the-youth-employment-challenge.pdf>

² <http://www.tuc.org.uk/tucfiles/239.pdf>

³ <http://www.privateequityfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/short-term-crisis2.pdf>

⁴ <http://cep.lse.ac.uk/pubs/download/cp338.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN05871>

⁶ Also see http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/Education-to-Employment_FINAL.pdf

⁷ <http://www.unesco.org/new/en/education/themes/leading-the-international-agenda/efareport/reports/2012-skills/>

⁸ http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0401/Literacy_changes_lives_2008.pdf Also see

<http://www.kpmg.co.uk/pubs/ECR2006.pdf>

women with poor literacy and/or numeracy are least likely to be in full-time employment and more likely to be in manual jobs compared with those who are competent in both. Poor literacy skills can also be a serious barrier to progressing once in employment. 63% of men and 75% of women with very low literacy skills have never received a promotion.

As shown above, literacy and numeracy skills are fundamental to people’s employment chances. Although the proportion of 15 and 16-year-olds who achieve both English and maths GCSE at grades A* to C has increased steadily since 2005, only 6 in 10 (59.9%) reached this benchmark in 2012⁹ (see **Figure 1**). **Figure 2** illustrates the same steady increase in the proportion of 15 and 16-year-olds who gain GCSE English at grades A*-C.

Figure 1: GCSE English and maths A*-C from 2005 to 2012

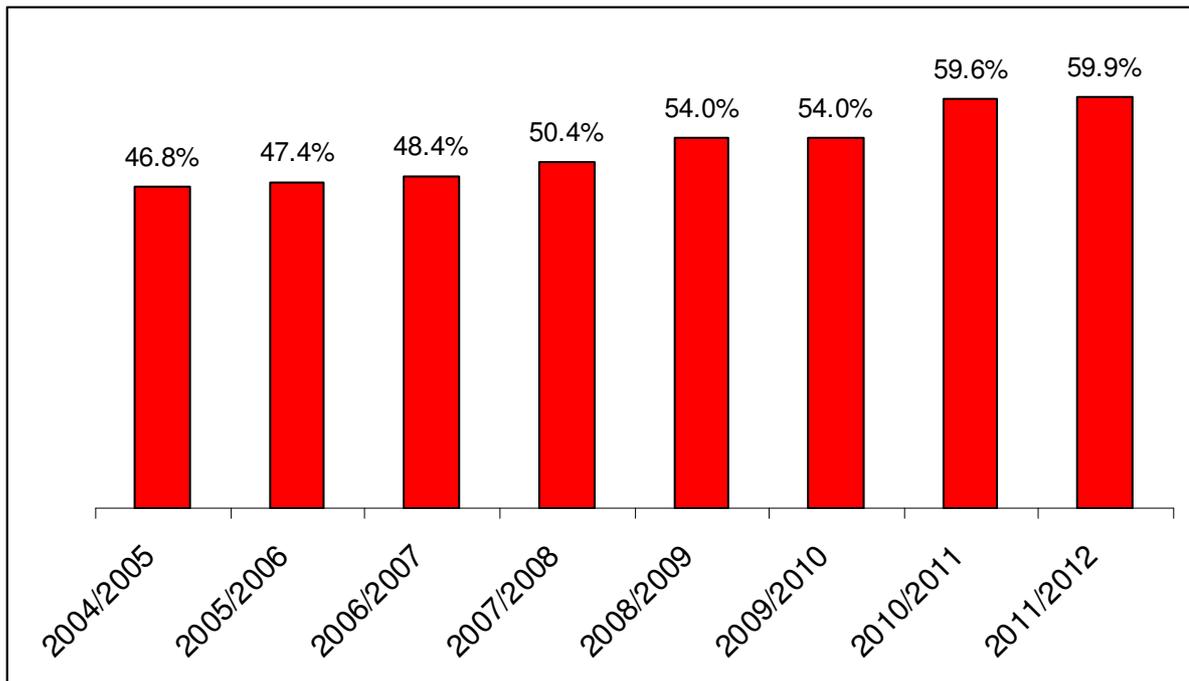
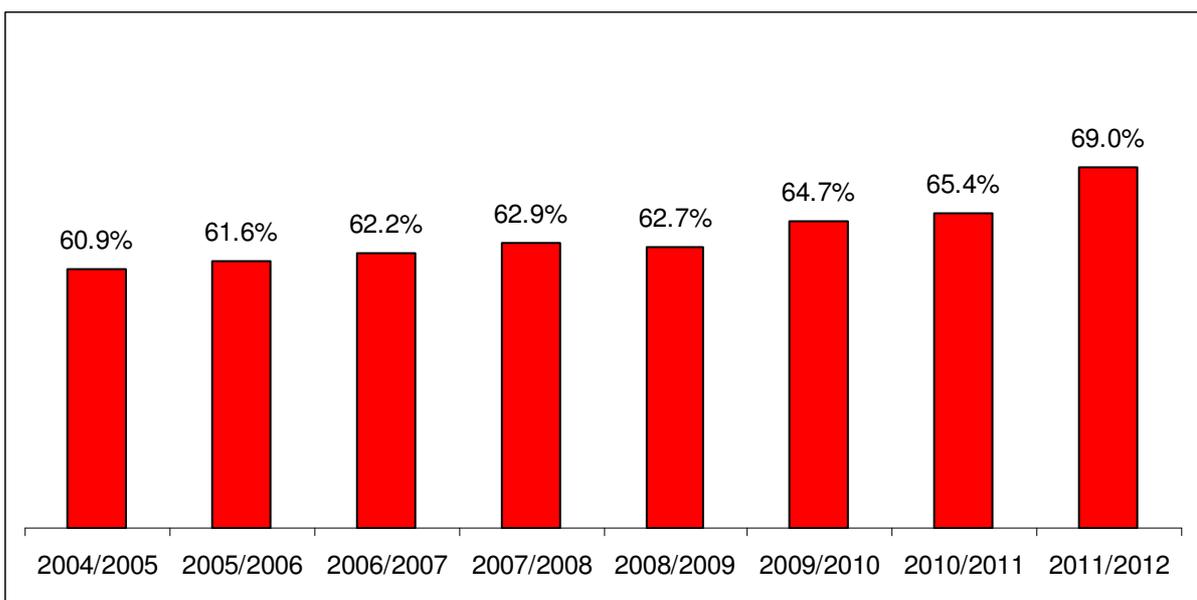


Figure 2: GCSE English A*-C from 2005 to 2012



⁹ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/167606/sfr02_202013.pdf (GCSE); <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/revised-a-level-and-equivalent-examination-results-in-england-academic-year-2011-to-2012> (A-levels)

However, the 2011 Skills for Life Survey (2012¹⁰) showed little change since 2003 in the proportion of 16 to 65-year-olds who have the literacy level expected of a 9 to 11-year-old, with 15% performing at that level within the UK. Although effective speaking and listening skills are also critical for employability, there is no formal structure for assessing these in the new curriculum.

Employers' perceptions of the skills of young people entering the job market have been well-documented (see Macey 2013 for a review conducted on behalf of this commission). These studies show that employers want young people who are literate, numerate, communicate well and possess the right attitude or work ethic¹¹; though study findings are mixed as to whether or not employers find it easy to recruit young people with those skill sets.

However, there is a dearth of similar studies outlining the perceptions of young people themselves – both with respect to general employment skills but particularly with respect to literacy skills. Indeed, nearly 15 years ago, Morris et al. (1999: 64¹²) concluded in their review of the literature that “No good quality research literature has been discovered on young people’s attitudes towards employers or the structure of work”. This is still very much the conclusion reached by researchers (e.g. Oxenbridge and Evesson, 2012¹³; Price et al, 2011¹⁴), which means that we know very little of how young people construct their identities as employees.

What do we know about young people’s perceptions of the (literacy) skills that they will need in order to compete within and succeed in the workplace¹⁵? Oxenbridge and Evesson (2012)¹⁶ recently reviewed general information on young people’s expectations of work and the skills they feel are required to be successful in the workplace. They found that,

the degree of knowledge of work and labour markets among young people not yet in the labour market is mixed, and may be dependent on their personal circumstances, their available networks, and the labour market opportunities available to them. ... most young people anticipating work are aware of the soft skills required by employers, and in some cases, believe that they possess these skills. (Oxenbridge and Evesson, 2012: 17)

Batterham and Levesley (2011¹⁷) identified that young people are aware of the importance of gaining both qualifications and practical skills, and that work experience and contact with employers prior to work are key in the preparation for the realities of

¹⁰ https://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/36000/12-p168-2011-skills-for-life-survey.pdf

¹¹ Also see http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/media/media/downloads/No_snakes_but_no_ladders_-_Young_people_employment_and_the_low_skills_trap.pdf

¹² Morris, M. Nelson, J. Rickinson, M. and Stoney, S. with Benefield P. (1999) A literature Review of Young People’s Attitudes towards Education, Employment and Training. Research Report 170. London: DfEE

¹³ <http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/2/Young-people-entering-work-a-review-of-the-research-accessible-version.pdf>

¹⁴ Price, R., McDonald, P., Bailey, J. and Pini, B. (2011) A Majority Experience: Young People’s Encounters with the Labour Market. In Bailey, J. and Pini, B. (eds) (2011) Young People and Work. Abingdon: Ashgate

¹⁵ For definitions of employability skills see

http://www.ncb.org.uk/media/579980/measuring_employability_skills_final_report_march2012.pdf

¹⁶ <http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/2/Young-people-entering-work-a-review-of-the-research-accessible-version.pdf>

¹⁷ <http://www.skillsdevelopment.org/PDF/New%20Directions.pdf>. They also found that young people weigh up a variety of sources of information, including personal preferences as well as external resources when deciding on which careers to pursue. The majority (63%) of young people had decided on a career they would like to pursue, with 80% basing this on their interests and 49% basing this on their qualifications. Just over 7 in 10 reported seeking information from other people when making their career choices. In these choices, parents (68%), careers advisors (67%) and teachers or tutors (60%) were perceived as the most important sources of advice.

work. Indeed, the vital importance of work experience as the route to gaining relevant employment skills has been identified by numerous studies, with as many young people believing in its importance as employers or parents¹⁸. Research further suggests that young adults who recalled four or more employer-related activities while at school were five times less likely to be not in employment, education or training (NEET) and tended to earn 16% more than peers who recalled no such activities¹⁹. Yet, a YouGov survey for the Private Equity Foundation (2011²⁰) found that more than one in 10 young people have never undertaken work experience and one in four will leave school without any interaction with employers²¹. A recent CIPD (2013: 4²²) report shows that,

Confidence is an issue for many young people and many find interview situations particularly stressful as they have no prior experience of the workplace and they often don't know how to talk about their skills or how to 'market' themselves to a potential employer.

A recent study by City and Guilds (2012²³) also indicated that there are disparities in the views of young people about the importance of vocational skills versus academic skills. For example, young people still at school believe the skills gained at university will help them get their dream job. However, this stands in contrast to the view of the majority of 16 to 18-year-olds (39%) who think that practical skills are most in demand. Young people perceive key subjects such as English and maths as important for the workplace, but 16 to 18-year-olds report that the teaching of mathematics should be made more relevant by teaching "real world" skills.

There is some insight into the specific skills that young people believe employers want. Morris et al (1999) reported that young people aged 15 to 24 believe employers are most likely to seek communication skills, general education, good appearance and team working skills. Similarly, Johnson and Burden (2003: 38²⁴) found that,

Most young people seem to have taken on board the message that formal qualifications are often a necessary but not sufficient condition for obtaining the types of jobs to which they aspire. They recognise that communication skills, teamworking ability, organisational skills, customer service and so on are all important.

A YouGov survey for the Private Equity Foundation²⁵ also found that most young people were confident about their skills, with 87% rating their literacy and numeracy as good or very good, 75% their soft skills, 65% their knowledge of the workplace and 49% their technical skills. NEETs were less likely to rate themselves as good/very good with respect to soft skills compared with other young people (57% vs 75%).

Findings from our latest annual literacy survey, which we conducted at the end of 2012 with nearly 35,000 8 to 16-year-olds, provide us with further insight into young people's views of the importance of literacy skills to their future employment prospects.

¹⁸ For example, <http://www.ukces.org.uk/assets/ukces/docs/publications/the-youth-employment-challenge.pdf>, http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/15069/its_who_you_meet_final_26_06_12.pdf and http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/15807/work_experience_report_april_2012_.pdf

¹⁹ http://www.educationandemployers.org/media/15069/its_who_you_meet_final_26_06_12.pdf

²⁰ http://www.huffingtonpost.co.uk/2011/09/13/young-people-think-they-w_n_959942.html

²¹ Also see http://www.privateequityfoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/09/The_Forgotten_Half_-_web.pdf

²² <http://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/MarsVenus%20FINAL%2030%2004%2013.pdf>

²³ <http://www.cityandguilds.com/~media/Documents/About-us/CityandGuildsWaysintoWorkViewsOfYoungPeopleReportpdf.aspx>

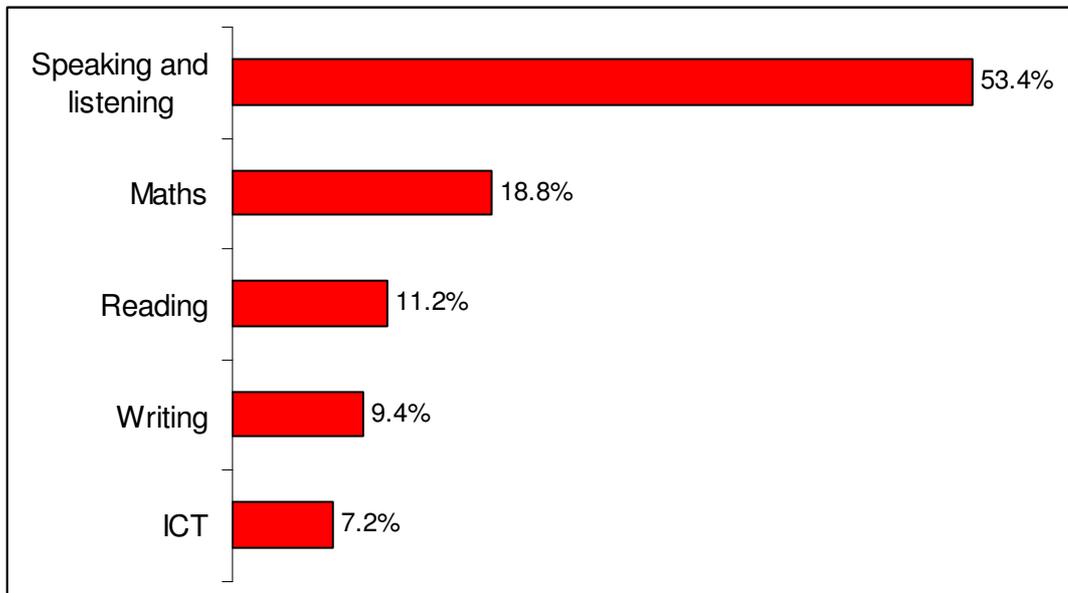
²⁴ <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/184263125x.pdf>

²⁵ See <http://www.acas.org.uk/media/pdf/5/2/Young-people-entering-work-a-review-of-the-research-accessible-version.pdf>

For example, only 56% of children and young people agreed that if they are good at writing they will get a better job when they grow up, which means that four in 10 children and young people do not appear to see the link between writing skills and their job prospects. Marginally more boys (57.5%) than girls (54.0%) agree that better writing skills will lead to a better job. Similarly, more young people who receive free school meals (a proxy of socio-economic status in our surveys) agree with the above statement than do young people who do not receive free meals (60.0% vs 54.9%). Perhaps interestingly, 8 to 11- year-old pupils are considerably more likely to agree with the statement than their older counterparts (KS2 – age 8 to 11: 60.8%; KS3 - age 12 to 14: 56.0%; and KS4 – age 15 to 16: 47.4%). This might – at least in part – be explained by differing perceptions of what “good writing” is, with young children tending to focus more on the technical skills of writing (such as being good at spelling or grammar) and older pupils focusing more on the compositional aspects of writing (see Clark and Dugdale, 2009²⁶).

In stark contrast to writing, nine in 10 (86.1%) children and young people agreed that good communication skills are important to get a job. Indeed, when asked what the *most* important skill is to succeed in life, most children and young people believed that is speaking and listening skills, followed by maths (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3: What is the most important skill to succeed in life?



(source: National Literacy Trust Annual Literacy Survey 2012; N = 34,910)

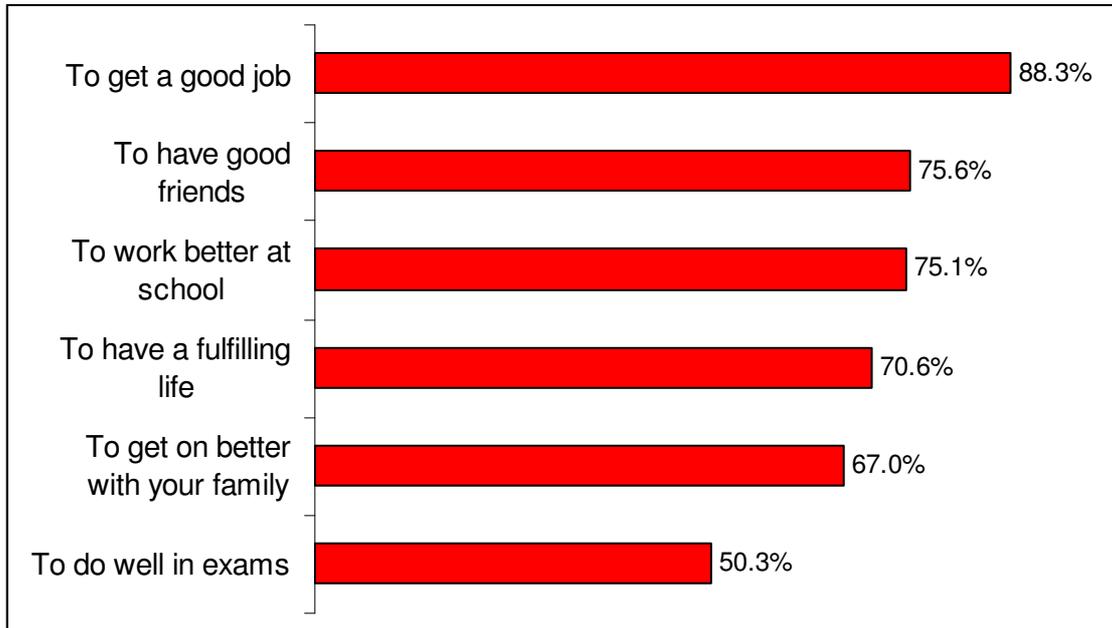
Girls were as likely as boys to agree that good communication skills are important to get a job (86.5% vs. 85.8%). Marginally more young people who do not receive free school meals agree with the statement compared with young people who are in receipt of free meals (87.1% vs. 84.9%); while more older pupils (KS3 and KS4) agree with the statement than do younger pupils (KS2), with 87.5% of KS3 and 88.5% of KS4 pupils agreeing compared with 83.3% of K2 pupils.

More information with respect to young people’s knowledge of the workplace and the importance of communication skills for it can be gleaned from pre-project assessments for one of our work-related projects. Words for Work challenges pupils to re-evaluate the way they use their communication skills by working alongside volunteers on tasks that stimulate thought and discussion around communication and how important it may be for their future.

²⁶ http://www.literacytrust.org.uk/assets/0000/0226/Writing_survey_2009.pdf

When asked as part of the pre-project survey to indicate what they think they need good communication skills for (see **Figure 4**), most young people said that they need them to get a good job, mirroring findings from the wider national survey.

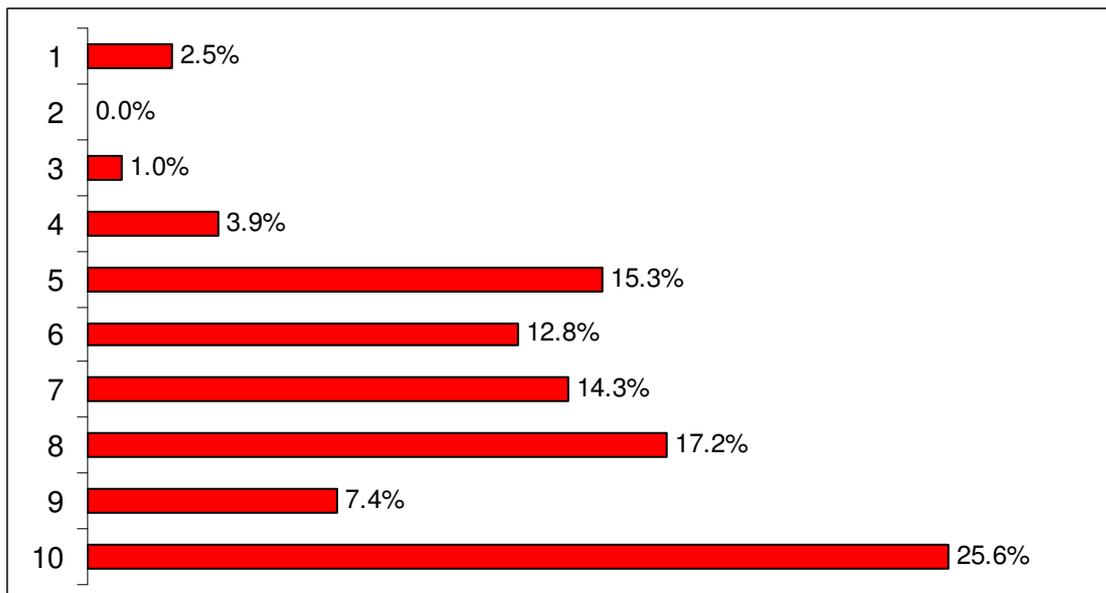
Figure 4: I need good communication skills



(source: Words for Work pre-project evaluation survey 2012/13, National Literacy Trust; N = 206; unpublished data)

Not only do young people think that communication skills are important for their future job prospects but **Figure 5** shows that the majority of young people rate their communication skills to be good to excellent.

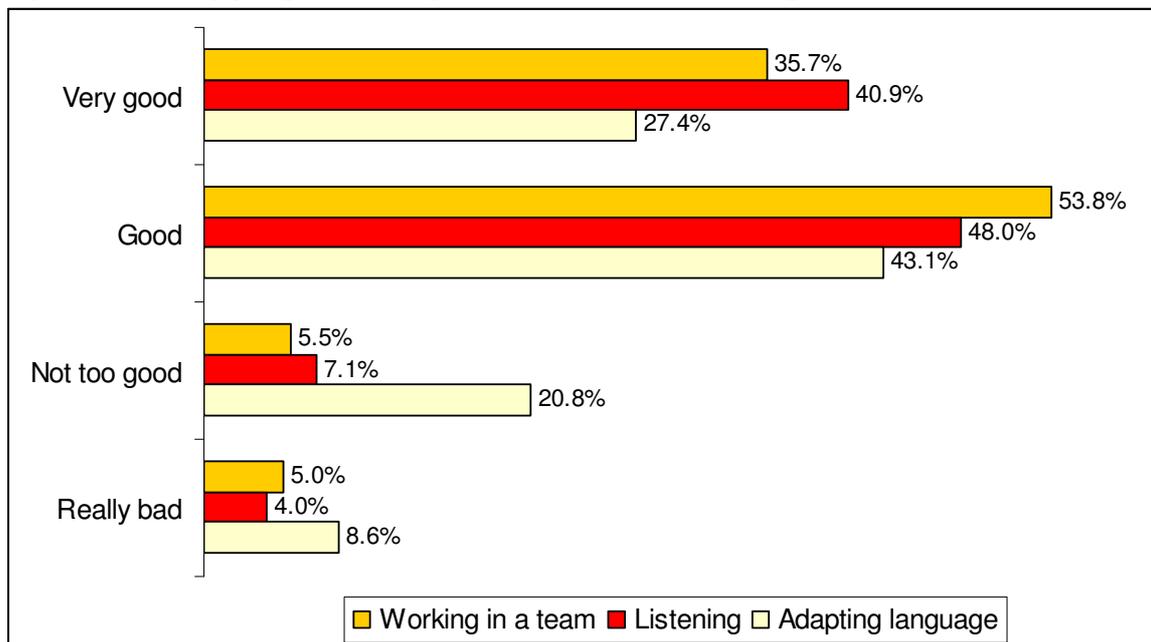
Figure 5: Young people's ratings of their communication skills based on a 1 to 10 scale, where 1 = poor, 5 = average and 10 = excellent.



(source: Words for Work pre-project evaluation survey 2012/13, National Literacy Trust; N = 206; unpublished data)

Figure 6 shows that most young people also rate their team working and listening skills as either very good or good and feel either very able or able to adapt their language to suit different audiences.

Figure 6: Young people's ratings of their skills in three specific areas



(source: WfW pre-project evaluation survey 2012/13; N = 206; unpublished data)

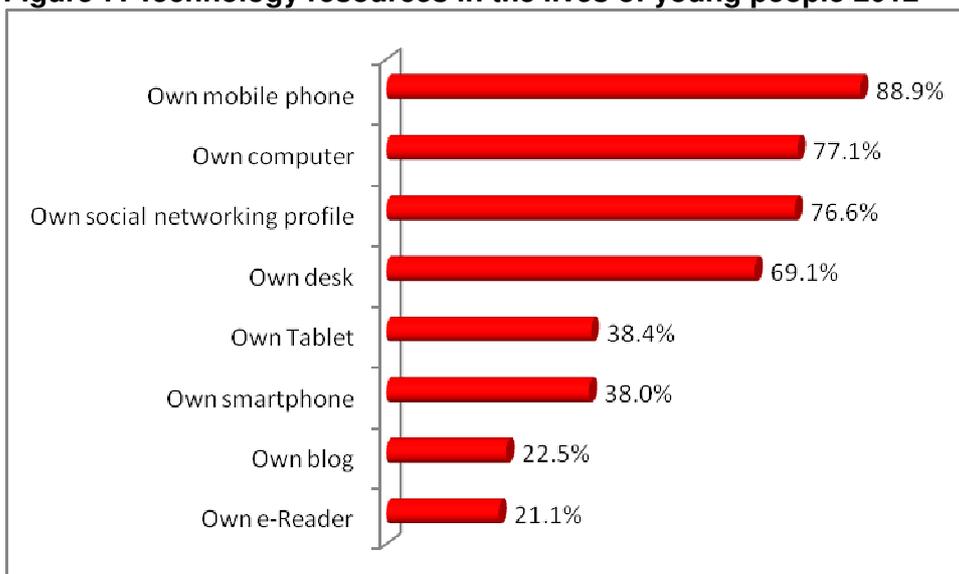
Most young people who take part in our Words for Work project feel either very confident or confident that they will get a job when they leave school (74.6%). Young people who rate their communication skills more highly are more likely to feel very confident that they will get a job (83%) than young people who feel less secure in this area (42%).

Words for Work data also shows that many young people initially lack knowledge about what daily life in the workplace entails, with only 14.1% saying that they know a lot about daily life in the workplace, 52.5% knowing some, 25.3% not knowing much and 8.1% not being sure. After taking part in the project and meeting business volunteers, 82.3% of young people feel more knowledgeable. The latter finding is in line with numerous other studies that have shown that young people benefit greatly in terms of their knowledge as well as their skills in work-related projects, placements or schemes.

Technology in the lives of young people and how it supports employment skills

Conversations around employment and young people often centre on the skills they are believed to be deficient in. However, young people are also now joining the workforce with technological knowledge that is often far beyond that of the generation before them at a time when the workplace itself is becoming increasingly technology-driven. National Literacy Trust surveys, as well as other studies, have shown how central technology is in the literacy lives of young people. For example, data from our 2012 Annual Literacy Survey shows that children and young people either own or have access to a wealth of technology (see **Figure 7**). Indeed, they are more likely to say that they have a computer of their own than a desk (77.1% vs 69.1%).

Figure 7: Technology resources in the lives of young people 2012



In 2012 it was unusual for young people not to engage with technology to read, with only 7.3% of young people saying that they only read using paper-based materials. Overall, more young people now read on a computer (67.1%) than use paper-based materials (such as books, magazines, newspapers; 61.8%). 63.8% of young people say that they read on a mobile phone or smart phone, 70.2% read on a Tablet and 37.9% read on a games console.

Not only are children and young people more likely to say that they read on an electronic device rather than on paper, they also do it more often: more young people read daily using technology (38.9%) than paper-based materials (27.9%), while 33.2% are omnivorous and read both daily.

The majority of children and young people use their devices to network socially (81.3%) or to browse websites (85.4%). However, a large proportion of young people also use their devices to read fiction, non-fiction, magazines and news. Additionally, research by the Prince's Trust (2013²⁷) shows that a large proportion of young people also use technology to do work-related tasks, such as creating Word documents (55%), creating or updating their CV (55%) and searching for jobs online (53%).

Overall, children and young people are technology-savvy, using it not only to communicate and to stay connected but also as part of their wider literacy lives. This savviness, as well as greater global awareness²⁸, ought to be a bonus to employers and should be harnessed accordingly.

It is worth mentioning here that recent research by the Prince's Trust (2013a²⁹) has shown that unemployed young people in particular feel that they are being held back in finding employment because of a lack of digital literacy. 10% of unemployed young people said that they cannot send their CV online, while 17% believe they would be in work today if they had better computer skills. Also, 35% "rarely" or "never" look for jobs online. Overall, 10% of unemployed young people claimed that their computer skills have let them down more than their maths or English when applying for jobs.

²⁷ http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/pdf/DIGITAL_LITERACY_2013B.pdf

²⁸ http://www.britishcouncil.org/new/PageFiles/15492/YouGov_Report_v3.pdf

²⁹ http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/pdf/DIGITAL_LITERACY_2013B.pdf

These barriers exist against a backdrop of wider disadvantage, as highlighted by further studies. For example, research by the Prince's Trust (2013b³⁰) also shows that 28% of young people who are in work feel down or depressed “always” or “often”. However, this proportion nearly doubles to 48% for young people who are currently NEET. Generally, young people who are NEET are significantly less happy across all areas of their lives but are least happy about their work/education, followed by money and emotional health.

Being NEET also damages young people's confidence, and the longer they are out of work the less likely they are to feel that their confidence will recover. 27% of young people who had been out of work for more than a year said that their confidence will never recover from their period of unemployment, compared with 10% of those who had been unemployed for less than six months.

Summing up

Although the evidence base is scant, young people appear to have insight into the types of skills they are expected to possess in the workplace and generally feel confident that they possess these skills. However, there frequently appears to be a disconnect between young people's perceptions of their skills and the views of employers³¹. There is some suggestion in the literature that young people have a very limited understanding of what team working and communication skills actually mean within the workplace context³²; if so, this situation is likely to be compounded by the fact that many do not get the opportunity to gain work experience while still at school. Whether this disconnect is real or based on differing definitions will be explored in greater detail during the commission and in the final report.

Words for life

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³⁰ <http://www.princes-trust.org.uk/pdf/youth-index-2013.pdf>

³¹ E.g. <http://www.jrf.org.uk/sites/files/jrf/184263125x.pdf>,
http://mckinseysociety.com/downloads/reports/Education/Education-to-Employment_FINAL.pdf and
<http://www.cipd.co.uk/binaries/MarsVenus%20FINAL%2030%2004%2013.pdf>

³² <http://www.demos.co.uk/files/workingprogress1.pdf>