Preparing Students for the World of Work:
The Benefits of Education – Business Partnerships

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Abstract: Many of today's work opportunities require appropriately trained and skilled workers. Employers in different countries complain that schools are not preparing students adequately to face the present work challenges. In order to overcome such problems, it is recommended that educational institutions should establish closer links and meaningful ways of collaboration with the business community with the aim of bridging the gap between education and the world of work. One way of doing this is by creating effective education-business partnerships.

Keywords: Education-business partnerships, school-to-work transition, developing human resources.

Introduction
Hotar and Eylul (1997) believe that thriving economies are characterized by their investment in human resources and their proper use. In such economies, there is a demand for highly skilled workers and as this demand continues to increase, so do the strategies adopted for training and preparing the future workforce.

The rationale behind this is the human capital theory, which links education and the economy. In simple terms, the human capital theory views education and training as an investment that will yield returns in the future. The worker’s skills and abilities are viewed as a form of capital because they are assumed to affect the worker’s productivity, while the worker gains through a wider selection of employment opportunities, higher wages and economic security (La Belle, 1986).

It is assumed, that during the years spent at school, students gain skills, attitudes and competencies that are transferable to the workplace. According to Blackmore (1990), such abilities are becoming even more important as many workplaces are becoming increasingly complex and technological. In spite of the apparent logical arguments in favor of the human capital theory, the link between education and economic development is not as strong as one is led to believe by the theory and is subject to a lot of criticism (Sultana, 1992).

Today’s students can be considered as tomorrow’s workers, and according to
Preparing students for the world of work

the South Lanarkshire Economic Development (SLED) (1998), it is imperative that these prospective workers are equipped with the necessary skills so as to be able to meet the demands of the business community. Laanan (1995) points out that unfortunately, a large proportion of young people entering the workforce today in America are not properly prepared to meet the demands of the unpredictable work environment. This was also confirmed by Leary (1996) who goes on to conclude that traditionally, secondary and post-secondary institutions do not adequately prepare students to be desirable employees, equipped with a base of knowledge they can apply in a multitude of situations and with good soft skills. Still in America, Lapinsky (2000) found that the vast majority of employers believe that schools are not doing a good job preparing future workers, while educators resent being blamed for it, as they feel that the problem is beyond their control.

In Canada, which can be considered as one of the most developed countries, the Conference Board of Canada (CBC) (2002) questions whether the present educational system is capable of preparing students to face future challenges and for a working life that is characterized by high technology and rapid change. In Scotland, the Education Business Partnership Conference (EBPC) (2000) did not only find similar trends but also believes these problems as becoming more acute. In Malta, Xuereb (2002b) found that many employers complain that they do not find suitably trained workers although in actual fact the problem may not be that acute. It is evident that the problem of inadequately trained workers is not limited to one state or geographical region but rather widespread amongst most countries.

Need for partnerships

According to Imel (1991), this scenario necessitates a programme that connects youths in schools with the world of work so as to give young people both knowledge of work and knowledge of themselves. A better prepared work force increases public confidence and support for education, and leads to an improved quality of community life as a result of economic development (Lankard, 1991 and 1995). It has been suggested that one possible solution to this problem is the formation of education-business partnerships which bring businesses and education together for mutual benefit. The term business here will include all those organizations, enterprises, and industries which offer employment.

In America, Lapinsky (2000) found that in recent years there has been a dramatic increase in the number of education-business partnerships as a result of the private sector’s concern that the educational system, in isolation, cannot produce a motivated, skilled, and self-directed workforce. Faced with a shortage of suitably trained workers, businesses have joined forces with educators to help prepare students for the transition from school to work. In England, the Association for Science Education (ASE) in its
policy statement on Education-Industry partnerships (1992) recognizes the importance of such partnerships and sees them as an opportunity for those working in business and education to work together.

The SLED (1998) and Laanan (1995) consider partnerships as critical agents in smoothing the transition between school and the world of work. Weeple (2000) does not view partnerships as mergers but associations, which may be complex, freely entered into by independent bodies to achieve a common goal. However, the CBC (2002) stresses that in partnerships there must be an adequate balance between the different goals of education, that is preparing students for further studies, for the world of work, citizenship, and personal development. Furthermore, the continuous growth of knowledge, technology, and the need for new skills, requires continuous training.

Businesses are realizing that they need the help of teachers to persuade young people that learning does not stop with formal education and are seeking active ways of collaboration for the purpose of lifelong learning (Marsden, 1990). The EBPC (2000) and Alexander (2000) emphasis that what is required is lifelong learning which can be attained through partnerships between education and business. In this respect, Mcleish (2000) predicts that lifelong learning is going to require an ever more entrepreneurial approach by learning providers. With respect to lifelong learning, the Maltese National Minimum Curriculum (NMC) also recognizes that compulsory education should only be regarded as the start of a lifelong learning process that would enable individuals to live effectively and productively.

History of partnerships
It has been found by various authors such as Lankard (1995), Lapinsky (2000), and Weller and Dillon (1999) that education-business partnerships have a long history although not in a formal way. In fact, it was only in the 1970s that such partnerships were formalized in the United States and in the United Kingdom where they were mainly associated with geography and environmental education. The emphasis was on learning subjects or skills through these contacts rather than on learning systematically about industry or commerce as important areas of human endeavor relevant to life after schools. Indeed, Taylor (1998) argues that business leaders were increasingly distant from public education during this period and partnerships were sought as a means of re-establishing connections with public education.

Initially, educational partnerships were formed to ‘foster school-community cooperation, provide incentives for students, supplement curriculum and staff, and obtain equipment’ (Clark, 1992, 2). Businesses gained from these relationships through improved public relations and enhanced community image (Grobe et al., 1993).

During the 1980s, Lankard (1995) found that businesses in America were seeing their competitiveness diminishing due to the low skill level of prospective workers,
Preparing students for the world of work

and the demands of the evolving economy. These factors acted as drivers towards the formation of partnerships of various sizes and types to improve the skills of the future work force. As a result, Grobe et al. (1993) found that the number of business-education partnerships expanded in number and dimension from simple one-to-one agreements to complex multi-agency collaborative arrangements with mutual benefits. Today, Dodge (1993) estimates that the number of partnerships runs into thousands.

Establishing partnerships

When seeking to set up education-business partnerships with the purpose of improving the acquisition of skills and competencies which are necessary for life and the world of work, it is recommended by the EBPC (2000, 15) to:

- identify commonly-agreed goals from the outset;
- maintain long-term viability through flexibility and regular revisiting of goals, implementation, and outcomes;
- ensure that partnerships remain sustainable but not static;
- understand each of the partners’ priorities and maintain a balance between their interests;
- build partnerships on enlightened self-interest to ensure ‘win-win’ outcomes;
- value the different ways that industry and education have of doing things rather than try to make everyone act and think in the same way;
- meld the capacity of businesses to bring ‘method’ to the partnerships with the reflective critical thinking of academia;
- look to the needs of teachers as well as pupils in designing partnerships;
- embrace not only education and business but also voluntary organizations and communities; and
- be guided by best practice in their own countries as well as others.

Depending on prevailing factors and the environment, one has to decide which of these recommendations are applicable.

Types of partnerships

Partnerships between education and business can vary in nature (Imel, 1991) depending upon the need the partnership is created to serve (Lankard, 1995) and on what each part hopes to achieve (Warden, 1986). The objectives of the partners will determine the degree of involvement, whether to be directly or indirectly involved in all school programmes or in just a few areas. A potential partnership can only be successful if it is aimed to be based on a win-win relationship.
Partnerships can be created between one school and one business, or one business and a number of schools, or some other combination. They can be simple or complicated, formal or informal, short term or long term. Warden (1986) distinguishes between partnerships and the ‘adopt a school’ concept. The latter is mainly aimed at disadvantaged students while the former are intended to improve the overall educational system. Traditionally, according to Lankard (1995), the business is considered to be the benefactor, while the school is considered as the beneficiary.

As a result of the partnership, educational institutions can receive equipment and materials, incentives and scholarships for students, and opportunities for students to learn about the real-world application of knowledge and skills. Very often it happens that in the short term, the business partner gains very little from the relationship, however, on a long-term basis, it can lead to ‘a better prepared entry-level work force that would reduce training costs, increase productivity, and improve products and services’ (Lankard, 1995, 2).

Partnerships can also be formed to resolve immediate problems of a business such as the lack of basic skills on the part of their workers. Companies such as Motorola, General Motors, Boeing, and Honeywell are either joining with educators to offer basic skills courses to their employees or forming alliances with local community colleges and technical institutions to upgrade their workers’ technical skills (Dreyfuss, 1990).

Lankard (1995) claims that in the one-to-one type of partnership, the agreement can be targeted simply and specifically to a given problem while when more partners are involved, the agreements become more complex and the benefits are usually far more reaching.

Benefits derived from partnerships
As indicated above, traditionally, education-business partnerships have been viewed from the perspective of the benefits to education. However, if the relationship is to be considered as a partnership, Grobe, et al. (1993) emphasize that the benefits must be realized by all partners such that the benefits radiate from one partner to another. Some of the benefits have already been mentioned, however the following is a more comprehensive description.

Benefits for business
Lankard (1995) argues that when businesses engage in collaborative partnerships, they seek benefits that have an effect on their operations, productivity, and profit such that they become more competitive. The SLED (1998) sees partnerships as an important way how businesses can influence the development and implementation of the curriculum while at the same time gaining a greater awareness of educational
Preparing students for the world of work

The European Training Foundation (ETF) (1999) also views partnerships as allowing educational institutions to better respond to labour market needs and this ultimately contributes to the increased employability of their graduates.

Perhaps the greatest advantage mentioned by Lankard (1995), Lapinsky (2000), Leary (1996), Marsden (1990), and Warden (1986) is the smoothing of the school to work transition. Entry-level employees come on board with significant skills and competencies, so they are immediately productive thus cutting down on the cost and need for training. Partnerships can therefore be seen as a future investment.

Weller and Dillon (1999) found that very often, teachers’ abilities in the business context are undervalued. This should not be the case and businesses can use the abilities of teachers through partnerships for motivating and developing their own staff (SLED, 1998). Besides gaining training services, Marsden and Priestland (1989) also mention the potential of research services and access to potential recruits. Furthermore, Lankard (1995) and Lapinsky (2000) view partnerships as important for improved public relations by providing an enhanced corporate image.

Benefits for youths/students
In England, the Department for Education and Skills (DES) (1999) claims that the main advantage of partnerships for students is that they broaden the students’ understanding of the world of work. Partnerships give students the possibility of understanding the relationship between what is learned at school and the competencies and skills required at the workplace (Vaznaugh, 1995). The overall effect on the students is usually a positive one, because they gain a clearer picture of the world of work thus improving their motivation to learn, obtain qualifications, and become more self-confident (SLED, 1998).

Benefits for teachers
The ETF (1999) states that the role of teachers cannot be overemphasized. Their active input is crucial in forging the link between education and training, and the world of work. Teachers benefit from improved insight into the needs of industry so they can relate this back to the classroom (DES, 1999) while improving their personal skills. Businesses are usually impressed by the proficiency of teachers who spend time working with them and this has led to a new appreciation by businesses of the teaching profession (Kubota, 1993).

Benefits for the school
‘Coping with escalating costs, responding to greater diversity among students, and keeping pace with changing technology are all high priorities for today’s educators’ (Lee, 1997, 1). Marsden and Priestland (1989) and Warden (1986) view education-
business partnerships as a possible way to ease some of the financial problems of schools by supplying funds, materials and professional expertise for projects which the school budget would not be able to cover.

Furthermore, according to Kubota (1993, 3) 'when business representatives visit schools, they are confronted with classroom conditions. They gain insights into the paucity of resources in schools and the challenging conditions in which teachers work'. 'In this way, business partners have a better appreciation of what goes on in schools and therefore, express fewer concerns about the system' (Taylor, 1998, 402).

Possible forms of collaboration
According to Kubota (1993), SLED (1998) and Warden (1986), all businesses have something to offer and to gain irrespective of size or sector in which they operate. There are various ways how businesses can be involved such as by providing guest speakers, transferring staff temporarily to schools, offering advice, giving special demonstrations, donating equipment and materials, allowing the use of their facilities by students and teachers, offering work experiences, and helping teachers and students to become more aware of the business environment.

The initiative for the formation of partnerships usually comes from a person or a group within a school or a business. According to Taylor (1998), in the initial stages, the partnership frequently focuses on activities that improve the feel-good factor and on activities that strengthen the bond between the school and businesses but which unfortunately have very little educational value, however, as partnerships mature, their intrinsic value increases. Gauci and Xuereb (1998) stress that the cooperation between education and industry should not be a superficial one, but the two should work together to plan and to develop more meaningful curricula and more meaningful learning. The following are some practical activities that can be included in partnerships.

Curriculum-based activities
The type of curriculum-based activities that can be undertaken depend on the nature of the educational institution and the business involved. For example, SLED (1998) suggests that Higher Grade Technology Studies pupils can undertake an industry project involving several visits to a company to examine an industrial process while the company involved allocates time for the visits. Businesses can also provide workshop leaders or group advisers to work with pupils in classrooms (SLED, 1998).

Locally, in 2001, The Times reported the launching of the Education Business Links initiative by the Ministry of Education and the FOI. The partnership was intended to link six schools and businesses together in accordance with the provisions of the National Minimum Curriculum. In this partnership, the industries had the
possibility of making use of the training offered by the Education Division for their own workers, while students had the possibility to gain experience in operational and management methods in an industrial environment. Schools also had the possibility of making use of materials, components and fittings provided by industry to give demonstrations to their students, while teachers had the possibility of training to improve their knowledge. Unfortunately, the outcomes of this project were not publicized.

Field trips
Field trips are usually considered as an informal type of partnership. In field trips, students are taken for a visit to a business enterprise where, after a brief introduction, they are given the opportunity to see how the business operates or to follow a particular manufacturing process. Students can also be given information regarding opportunities of work. Such activities are important because they give students first hand experience of the workplace (Lee, 1997), while being exposed to the cultural and professional possibilities in their community (Vaznaugh, 995). Field trips have been found particularly useful for students with low motivation. Visiting careers conventions and exhibitions related to work also help to expose students to the world of work as well as to other school based activities such as those organised by Scoops¹ and Young Enterprise.²

Teacher centered activities
The business community recognizes that teachers have a primary role for effecting meaningful changes in the educational system (Kubota, 1993) and therefore it makes sense to develop them as the main agents of change. The SLED (1998) recommends different types of teacher centered activities, including attachment for a period of time with a business. This gives teachers the opportunity to be exposed to new technology, to authentic work, and to real world problems while interacting with professionals in the field (Lankard, 1995). Hopefully, teachers would be able to transfer this knowledge and experience back to the classroom. Kubota (1993) found that these experiences did in fact help teachers to improve their teaching strategies, and to act as change agents within the school system.

Work experience and apprenticeship schemes
The SLED (1998) views work experience as an important opportunity for young people. The businesses involved must not only offer opportunities for work but also

¹ www.scoops.org.mt
² www.youngenterprise.org.mt
the necessary personnel to shadow and monitor the inexperienced workers. Lankard (1995) gives an example of a partnership established between Southern California Edison Company, its unions, and a local high school to offer mentoring services to junior and senior students. The students were paired with mentors for a full year, during which they experienced six-week rotations in maintenance, operations, administration, warehouse, and technical occupations. The success of the partnership was evidenced by an increase in the number of schools and businesses that formed partnerships since the inception of this project. According to Alexander (2000), students participating in partnerships become associated with better transition outcomes and their academic education is not adversely affected provided that the hours worked are not too long. Apprenticeships, which can be considered as a form of structured workplace training, offer another avenue by which businesses can get involved in the development of youths (Brown, 1996).

Vaznaugh (1995) describes the formation of the California Partnership Academies Program, which can be considered as a three-way partnership among the state, schools, and businesses to provide academic and vocational training to disadvantaged students and to decrease youth unemployment. Students participate on a voluntary basis and have to enroll in one technical class designed with the collaborating business, as well as academic classes. During the summer, students are given jobs with the participating businesses with the aim of improving their employment skills and increasing their chances for gainful employment after graduation.

Locally, an interesting partnership was established by Lorenzo Gafa Boys’ Secondary School at Vittoriosa and the Malta Drydocks. In 1997, a five year formal agreement was established whereby the Drydocks bound itself to donate an annual financial contribution to the school for the procurement of equipment; to allow regular guided visits to the yard; to provide workers from the yard to do certain maintenance work at the school; and to give the opportunity to a number of senior students to have work experience in summer at the yard against remuneration (Attard, 1999). The agreement also aimed to provide students with work experience, to assist their personal development, and to motivate them at school.

**Vocational education programme development**

As an example of a vocational education programme development, Lankard (1995) describes the partnership between the Los Angeles Harbor College and Hyundai. Evaluation by external consultants of the automotive programme of the Los Angeles Harbor College highlighted the potential of its automotive department provided it is restructured. At the time, Hyundai was looking to establish a satellite training program for its technicians and recognized the potential of Harbor College as a training...
Preparing students for the world of work

resource. Both partners invested in the arrangement for mutual benefit by producing training materials and technical skills modules for the program. In the process, Hyundai trained and certified instructors from Harbor College and supplied $150,000 in equipment, including cars, tools, and training aides. Harbor College used additional grants and curriculum development funds from other sources to supplement the funding from Hyundai.

Locally, The Sunday Times (2002) reported that a group of students from St Patrick’s Salesian School in Sliema were the first to complete the HSBC Cares for Children Fund’s ‘Introduction to Financial Services’ course. The fund is aimed at providing underprivileged children with the opportunity to fully develop their potential. The course was run by volunteer HSBC employees who provided resident teenagers with important background about banking and finance. At the end of the course the students were awarded a certificate.

Another initiative was taken by The Malta Tourism Authority (MTA) which, recognized the difficulty of young students to decide what to do after finishing school, launched two initiatives related to work in the tourism industry to help them decide. The first one was called ‘Choice’, which consisted of a week-long programme giving students the opportunity to meet speakers from the industry, for field visits, and the chance to try out a few skills. The other initiative was the publication of the first from a series of career guides to the tourism industry to help students decide on their career (Zammit Gatt, 2002).

Enterprise activities

These are based on the concept of schools as developers of entrepreneurial skills (Miller, 1995). There are many forms and levels of enterprise activities such as the mini-enterprise in primary schools, and the young enterprise project for secondary school students. Businesses can support such activities by offering help when approached in the form of sponsorships and advice.

An interesting case was reported by the Malta Independent magazine First (2002, 49) which focused on the career of a young interior designer, the co-owner of a successful business, who attributes his success to his participation in a Young Enterprise programme. Hence, the value of such activities cannot and should not be ignored. The Young Enterprises Malta usually organizes an annual fair during which the various companies have the opportunity to show and sell their wares and to compare their performance with that of others (Xuereb, 2002a).

Students in Maltese secondary schools have the possibility to participate in the Scoops project which was established to give them work experience by participating in a cooperative set-up at their own school. The Scoops project was sponsored by a private bank, which also gave the cooperatives the possibility of up to Lm200 overdraft
at 2% interest rate in order to manage their business (*Il-Fuljett tal-Koperattivi*, 2000). Once a year, an annual fair is organized for all the cooperatives to show their work and expand their skills in dealing with customers.

On an informal but more regular basis, various schools organize bazaars and fairs throughout the year in order to raise funds either for the school or for some philanthropic cause. The students get some experience with the production, collection, sorting, displaying, and selling of commodities.

**Further and higher education links**

These partnerships usually involve professional, industrial, and commercial partners so that they can make the best use of their resources and expertise. For example, at the University of Malta, a formal partnership was established between the board of studies for information technology and the Malta Information Technology and Training Services Ltd. (MITTS) to provide work experience in the industry. MITTS also sponsored a number of specialized journals in the field to be used by IT students (Ellul Micallef, 2001). Recently, another partnership was set up between the University of Malta and the Federation of Industry.

**Criticism**

Although education-business partnerships have a lot of positive aspects, they are not immune from criticism and one should be aware of it before attempting to establish such links. While some welcome the involvement of the business sector in public education, others view it as an intrusion, infringing on local controls of schools, and as an attempt by employers to train workers for a limited number of jobs thereby limiting the educational options of students too early in life (Lapinsky, 2000). The ETF (1999) warns that the education sphere and the economic sphere which includes the world of business and work are not necessarily natural partners as they traditionally fulfill different roles in society and have different goals. Some authors are totally against them and some, such as Taylor (1998), perceive them as an assault on schools.

Lapinsky (2000) questions what role, if any, should businesses play in determining what is taught in public schools. He goes on to elaborate that from a Conflict Theorists point of view, such partnerships can be seen as a smoke-screen used by the dominant classes in society (the employers) as a means of controlling education for their own interests. There is a real danger that if the educational programmes offered are too specific and linked to particular jobs, then it would be less likely that schools will produce literate, well-rounded generalists who can cope with rapid changes at the workplace and everyday life. What happens is that especially during times when unemployment is high, teachers are encouraged to listen harder to what employers want and to look for closer links between the school and the workplace (Taylor, 1998).
Although there are some good practices in both primary and secondary schools, Weller and Dillon (1999), express some serious reservations especially since schools very rarely build on students’ existing understanding as the majority of the students are unable to extrapolate economic concepts, and exposure to economic ideas on its own does not necessarily lead to economic understanding. Kubota (1993, 1) goes further to claim that although businesses do enrich school programmes through their contributions as indicated above, they do little to facilitate fundamental changes in classroom teaching and learning. According to Taylor (1998), links that fail to bring about new ways of doing things in education are seen as problematic and corrective measures should be taken.

Taylor (1998) in fact feels that there is a certain wariness on the part of teachers towards partnerships. Weller and Dillon (1999) claim that having chosen a career in education rather than in industry or commerce, teachers influence students, consciously or unconsciously, in the same direction. In addition, despite the rhetoric to the contrary, solving industry problems in industrial settings does not necessarily make teachers better educationalists.

Furthermore, it is also difficult to establish what levels of cognitive skills constitute the necessary minimum for the effective performance of particular jobs. This is why some claim that rather than having a shortage of skills among the work force, there is a large surplus of educated and skilled workers in most fields. In this respect, it becomes more difficult to argue that industrial societies require an ever-increasing percentage of highly educated individuals (Gauci and Xuereb, 1997).

Importance of safeguards
In spite of the above criticism, education-business partnerships can offer various opportunities for learning provided one is aware of negative aspects while seeking ways how to overcome them at the planning phase.

When planning partnerships, it is imperative that one is guided by a number of safeguards and best practice principles. The BCTF (2002) proposed a set of guidelines to ensure that there is no violation of the integrity of public schooling and that the business partner does not take advantage of the set-up. An education-business partnership, whether formal or informal, should only be established when the following conditions are met:

• programmes of corporate involvement meet an identified educational purpose, not a commercial motive;
• ethical standards that protect the welfare of students and the integrity of the learning environment are agreed to and followed by all parties;
• sponsored teaching resources and materials are evaluated for bias before they are used, and teachers retain discretion in the use of the materials; sponsored and donated
materials are held to the same standards used for the selection and purchase of curriculum materials;
• corporate involvement does not require students to observe, listen to, or read advertising. Sponsor recognition and corporate logos are for identification rather than commercial purposes, and therefore should be kept to a minimum;
• corporate involvement does not increase inequality in the education system;
• partnership agreements are reached after full discussion among participating school staff, parent representatives, and the prospective partner, and any agreements are open as public information;
• partnership agreements are for a limited time;
• all partnership agreements are systematically evaluated; and
• teacher and student participation in partnerships is voluntary.

Special consideration must also be given to advertisement involved, as nowadays many advertisers are focusing on children as a potentially profitable target since besides being present and future consumers themselves, they can also influence the buying behavior of their parents (Aldman, 1995). Various companies are aiming their advertising campaigns towards children through marketer-sponsored school activities by linking their products to educational goals, for example by sponsoring literacy programs and anti-drug campaigns, in the process reaching into schools.

Aldman (1995) emphasizes that educational partners must periodically review all sponsored materials and activities to ensure that the same educational standards as other curriculum activities are upheld. Furthermore, one must also take into account liability, costs, accountability, and quality.

Concluding remarks
In spite of the criticism leveled towards education-business partnerships, governments in various countries, including that in Malta, are promoting the setting up of such partnerships in all domains of public life.

It is true that education goes beyond preparing students for the world of work, however, part of the education of young people should include such a preparation so that the transition is as smooth as possible (Xuereb, 2002). Genuine partnerships are only established if there is a two way trading relationship leading to a win-win situation. Education-business partnerships are not just about businesses working with education to help improve the latter's performance, but also about education helping businesses to improve and flourish.
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