

Breaking down barriers to employment? Young people and sports leadership

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The role leadership programmes can play in boosting the employability skills of young people is explored in this briefing note. It draws on findings from an evaluation of the first year of the Asda Active Sports Leaders Programme, a three year initiative which aims to capitalise on the enthusiasm from the Olympic and Paralympic games in London to create long lasting behavioural change in favour of greater physical activity, specifically in young people.

Young people and skills: the current climate

Youth unemployment remains a *'substantial and persistent issue'*ⁱ, despite significant falls since the economic recovery. 16 to 24 year olds remain disproportionately represented amongst the unemployedⁱⁱ. Emphasis is increasingly being placed on the need to build high quality vocational routes into jobs. The UK Commission for Employment and Skills (UKCES) highlight that for the first time *'employers regard vocational and academic qualifications as being of equal value in their recruits'* and emphasise the need for initiatives aimed at *'breaking down the barriers between education and work'*ⁱⁱⁱ.

Alongside this is the need to develop 'employability skills' amongst young people. These are *'the skills almost everyone needs to do almost any job'*^{iv} and

'cover a broad range of non-academic or softer skills and abilities which are of value in the workplace'^v. Concerns have been raised about 'soft skills shortages' in the UK^{vi} and the CBI reports that 70% of employers *'want to see the development of employability skills among young people at school and college made a priority'*^{vii}.

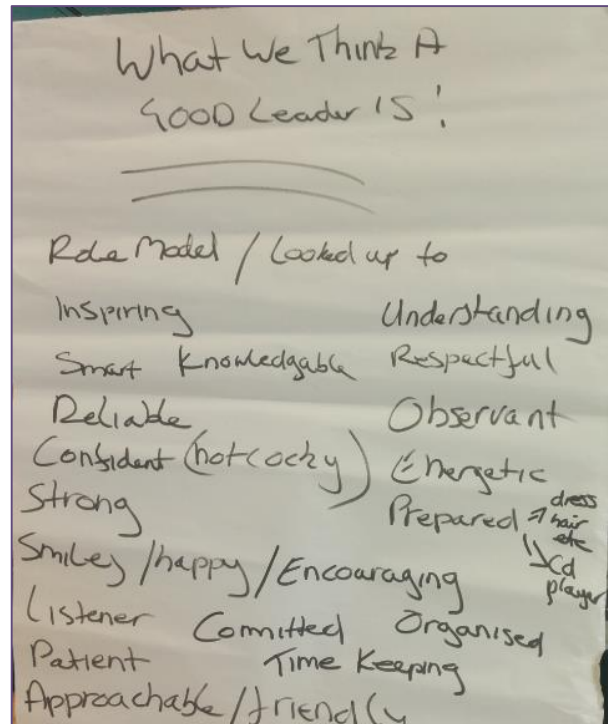
Employers note in particular weaknesses in self-management skills amongst school leavers and team-working and problem solving amongst graduates. A lack of management and leadership skills has also been identified by employers, with one study reporting that 72% of organisations in England experience a deficit in these skills^{viii}.





Becoming a sports leader

The Asda Active Sports Leaders project is one initiative that is aiming to address some of these skills issues for young people. Building on Sports Leaders UK's programme to provide awards and qualifications in sports leadership, the project aims to develop the confidence and leadership skills of teenagers so they can help others to get more active in their communities. Through a programme of practical courses, including volunteering hours to support and lead others in physical/sports activities, the initiative promotes sports leadership as a stepping stone to employment. A key part of this is the development of employability skills.



Employability skills

The research found that teenagers were positive about the skills they developed through the Sports Leaders UK courses and the transferability of those skills to paid employment.

Four in five teenagers (78%) thought that the skills they gained could be used in the workplace 'a lot' or to 'some' extent. Skills in communication, leading others and working in a team were particularly highlighted (figure 1^{ix}).

Figure 1: Development of employability skills amongst teenagers





The development of confidence is a key area of success for the project and was widely reported by both young people and their Tutors:

“Before I did the sports leaders course I had very little confidence and I was very afraid of talking to large groups of people. But since taking part in the Sports Leaders UK course this has changed. My confidence in myself and in general has improved and developed”



Photo: Y Dance and Photographer Paul Watt

Confidence building is closely intertwined with the development of communication and leadership skills, with sports leaders engaging with groups of people as part of the course. Communication skills are widely recognised as a ‘core’ employability skill^x and the research points to the success of the project in fostering this amongst young people. 99% of teenage sports leaders said that they developed their skills in communicating with others through the courses. Leadership is a key focus of the project and both young people and their tutors recognised the skills developed in this area. There were numerous examples of young people who had gone on to use their leadership skills in volunteering or paid job roles:

“It has enabled me to run successful sports sessions at my local cadet unit. The skills I learned and developed on my sports leaders course really did help me”

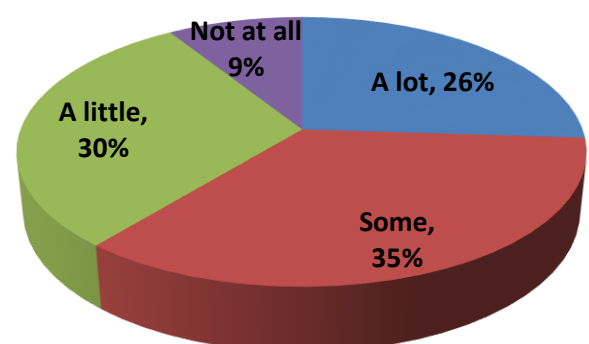
Preparing for employment

Over half (55%) of teenage sports leaders thought that the courses helped to prepare them for paid employment ‘a lot’ or to ‘some’ extent. There were numerous examples of young people whose thinking or plans for their career were influenced by the courses.

“It has given me the confidence to pursue a career related to sport as I am currently studying an HND in coaching and developing sport. Sports Leaders has given me the ability to talk confidently to peers and children in coaching sessions”

Two in three teenagers (61%) thought the Sports Leaders UK courses improved their chances of getting paid employment.

Fig 2: Teenagers reflections on whether courses helped their chances of getting paid work





A stepping stone?

The research identified that sports leadership programmes have the potential to raise the skills of young people reported as 'lacking' by employers including team working, problem solving, leadership and self-management. Young people recognised that they developed these skills through the Sports Leaders UK courses and were confident that they were transferable to the workplace.

However, the evaluation has raised a number of lessons for this project and other sports leadership programmes hoping to break down the barriers between education and work: Programmes should:

- **Provide learners with practical, real life experiences of leadership – experience of life is recognised as an asset by employers^{xi}.**

- **Encourage learners to reflect on their experiences, learning and skills and use these in their pursuit of paid work. Amongst employers who said young applicants did not meet requirements, 33% said that this was because they had not 'communicated their employability well enough'^{xii}.**
- **Work with employers and promote employer input to promote greater recognition of the skills gained through sports leadership and to ensure programmes are striving to develop skills and experiences needed by employers.**

About the Asda Active Sports Leaders Project

The Asda Active Sports Leaders Project is a three year initiative funded by the Spirit of 2012. The Asda Active, Sports Leaders UK, ukactive partnership aims to capitalise on the enthusiasm from the Olympic and Paralympic games in London to create long lasting behavioural change in favour of greater physical activity, specifically in young people. One of the key aims of the project is to extend the reach and impact of sports leadership across the UK by growing volunteering hours to one million per year.

About the evaluation

The evaluation assesses the impact and effectiveness of the Asda Active Sports Leaders project. The findings in this briefing are based on research undertaken by the Institute for Volunteering Research (IVR) between October 2014 and June 2015 and included a survey of 1067 learners, interviews with sports leaders and survey and interviews with Tutors and Centre Managers.

ⁱ UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2015) *Catch 16 – 24: Youth Employment Challenge*, UKCES, p6

ⁱⁱ *ibid*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid*, p 9 and p23

^{iv} UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2009) *The Employability Challenge*, UKCES, p10

^v CBI (2011) *Building for growth: business priorities for education and skills*, CBI

^{vi} Development Economics (2015) *The value of soft skills to the UK Economy: a report prepared on behalf of McDonalds UK*; Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2012) *Leadership & Management in the UK – The Key to Sustainable Growth*, BIS

^{vii} CBI (2011) *Building for Growth: business priorities for education and skills*, CBI

^{viii} Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2012) *Leadership & Management in the UK – The Key to Sustainable Growth*. BIS

^{ix} Framework adapted from Blades, R., Fauth, B., and Bibb, J (2002) *Measuring employability skills*, National Children's Bureau

^x *ibid*

^{xi} UK Commission for Employment and Skills (2014) UK Commission's Employer Skills Survey 2013: UK Results, UKCES

^{xii} *ibid*