



The Prince's  
Responsible  
Business Network

Report

# TIME TO ACT

January 2023

Addressing Inequalities in Education



# REPORT

## TIME TO ACT: ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATION

Today's education inequalities are tomorrow's societal inequalities; Business in the Community (BITC) is calling on employers to **act now**. Respond to our four calls to action to help tackle the challenges exacerbated by the pandemic and cost-of-living crisis to improve the skills, wellbeing, and employment opportunities for disadvantaged young people in education.

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused, and continues to cause, seismic changes throughout every aspect of society, from economic, to social, to personal. The sphere of education is no exception, with the pandemic's impact causing not just new problems but highlighting existing ones.

The role of businesses in addressing inequalities in education has never been more important. BITC is calling upon its network of members and partners to recognise that when it comes to business engagement in education, it's **time to act**.

The number of businesses engaging in education partnerships has declined in recent years, from nine in ten in 2019, to seven in ten in 2021<sup>1</sup> - a trend which must be reversed.

Following an in-depth consultation across business and education, we have identified four critical areas of focus for businesses who want to engage in education to drive meaningful and sustainable change. Emerging from detailed research and stakeholder engagement, these four pillars of leading practice were chosen as key priorities on which BITC can engage and challenge our membership and utilise the unique power to connect our members to lead and influence in the communities they serve.

1

**Create needs led, place-based education engagement partnerships**

2

**Develop essential transferable and digital skills using recognised frameworks**

3

**Address student and staff wellbeing**

4

**Reach those most disadvantaged through active inclusion strategies**

### THE CHALLENGES FACING YOUNG PEOPLE AND THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

#### Trends in Education

##### Declining Education Spending

The past decade has seen a consistent decline in public spending and a widening of the attainment gap between disadvantaged pupils (those eligible for Free School Meals at any point in the past six years) and their better-off peers. Despite a slight increase in education spending in the past two years, overall, both as a percentage of national income and in real terms, spending in education has seen no net growth per pupil, with education spending currently at \$116 billion, or 3.9% of GDP.

##### Falling Attainment

Existing issues were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Knowledge, skills, speech and language development, behaviour and attendance have all been significantly impacted. Ofsted has highlighted the following as areas of concern: mathematics, phonics, reading, writing stamina, languages (speaking and listening skills), and physical education.

These issues made worse by the pandemic are not limited to school-age children, with delays in baby and children's speech and language development. This includes limited vocabulary and confidence to speak.

##### Widening Attainment Gap

The attainment gap between disadvantaged primary school pupils and their better-off peers has widened to its largest level in 10 years. The data suggests that disruption to learning during the COVID-19 pandemic has had a greater impact on disadvantaged pupils, with grade disparity increasing from 2.9 in 2019 to 3.21 grades below their most advantaged peers on the government's disadvantage gap index, the highest level since 2012.

Given the ability of more affluent families to pay for private tuition and support, this issue will likely only serve to increase the attainment gap and continue to ensure those persistently disadvantaged students struggle to catch up.

##### Increasing Pressure on SEND System

There are an estimated 1.5 million pupils in the UK with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND),<sup>ii</sup> an increase of 77,000 in the past year,<sup>iii</sup> and the pressures being placed on the SEND system are rising, with an increasing number of students requiring additional support without a corresponding increase in financing.<sup>iv</sup> This, tied with the current cost-of-living crisis and its associated financial constraints, have led to growing pressure on the funding to provide a basic level of adequate support for SEND students. Schools are struggling to allocate additional resources for this critical issue.

##### Worsening Student Mental Health

In terms of student wellbeing, research shows that more young people are feeling anxious than ever before; half of young people say their mental health has worsened since the start of the pandemic, and one in four young people feel 'unable to cope with life.'<sup>v</sup>

This grim situation will only be made worse by the current cost-of-living crisis. The budgetary pressures felt in schools, local authorities, and the by households of learners and educators, will exacerbate the issues outlined above.

Responsible businesses engaging in education must ensure that they are actively targeting their support towards disadvantaged students to help break the cycle of disadvantage. The positive impact that businesses can have through their education partnerships can have a major impact on ensuring this cycle is broken.

### Coventry Building Society (CBS) partnering with stakeholders to ensure focused engagement: Call to Action 1

Coventry Building Society has developed a place-based approach to its social impact programmes and has identified key issues that align with its broader strategy and purpose.

Using data regarding the number of pupils eligible for free school meals, deprivation, and the number of students whose first language is not English, Coventry Building Society committed to partnerships with local Primary Schools.

Ensuring the partnerships CBS has created are long-term has enabled the needs and aspirations of each school to be tailored to, and to grow organically through different interventions.

Engaging with specialist third party organisations such as *Young Enterprise and Young Money* and the *Number Partners website* was an effective way to build expertise in education before moving to in-house development. Additionally, having experienced staff members with responsibility specifically for these programmes has increased both engagement and employee enthusiasm. Regular review meetings with teaching staff, as well as student questionnaires, ensure that CBS has a strong understanding of the success of each programme and how to improve them moving forward.





### TIME TO ACT CALLS TO ACTION

#### Create needs-led, place-based education engagement partnerships

##### Why this is needed

- This was the most common recommendation made during our stakeholder engagement, with 85% of those consulted considering this a critical issue for BITC to engage businesses on.
- The lack of partnership opportunities for schools in underserved areas is a common issue in business engagement, and something that was raised frequently in BITC's stakeholder engagement; a place-based approach is a clear way to tackle this.

##### bp partnering to engage students and STEM: Calls to Action 1 and 4

bp partnered with Reach Academy to encourage students to choose a career in STEM and close the Essential Skills Gap. Reach Academy has 44.9% of students eligible for Free School meals, almost twice the national average, and these students are being consistently excluded from programmes and opportunities in the field of STEM.

The school called upon bp to help create projects that would engage students in real-world applications of abstract aspects of science. Getting buy-in from the education partner was critical to ensuring the business partner could dedicate time to working with the volunteers. Additionally, ensuring the teachers were engaged and supported the programme by aligning it with curriculum needs was a big factor behind the programme being a success. The programme supported the needs of the school as well as allowing the volunteers in the program to develop their skills and demonstrate their knowledge.

- 34% of stakeholders highlighted the importance of a place-based approach, something that corresponds strongly with the advice given to BITC members regarding their engagement, and the place-based model BITC is engaging with in locations throughout the country.<sup>vi</sup>
- Ensuring a partnership is needs-led requires effort from the part of the business and education partner, but investment into this from the outset will ensure the quality and impact of education partnerships are maximised.

##### The actions for business

- Build a relationship over time (BITC recommends a five-year commitment as standard, with exceptions for industries working on temporary, site-based projects), establishing clear objectives and accountability. An established relationship between organisations enables the development of trust and understanding where both parties feel ready to innovate and tackle challenging issues.
- Secure buy-in at a senior level, ideally cross-organisational. This is critical to the success of any partnership, and the benefits of engagement to the business can help solidify this support at an executive level.
- Undertake in-depth needs assessment across specific areas, including Leadership and Governance, Curriculum, Careers and Skills, and wider issues including Health and Wellbeing and the cost-of-living crisis.
- Where possible, we recommend that businesses choose locations where they have a presence and, equally important, a significant interest to enable a long-term and strategic investment in the place. Businesses, civil society organisations, and local government should each play a key role in setting a strategy for a place.
- Any needs analysis should recognise that the support the business provides can play a critical role for the broader community as well as the school itself, and engage multiple stakeholders in the initial engagement process, with more information on the guiding principles of

engagement available in the [Power of School Partnerships](#) report published by BITC in 2021.<sup>vii</sup>

- Tools to support in determining the location for Place work include the [Indices of Multiple Deprivation](#), [Patchwork Philanthropy](#) report by the Young Foundation, and the [Department for Education's Opportunity Areas](#).
- Consider different data sources to look at the various needs at regional, local, school, and student level, and recognise these intersectional relationships are critical in understanding the needs of the education partner and broader community.

### Develop essential transferable and digital skills using recognised frameworks

#### Why this is needed

- A consistent theme from both businesses and education practitioners was skills and the lack thereof in those finishing education, with almost 50% of stakeholders mentioning it as an issue. Ensuring that business support enables young people to develop skills, ideally through recognised frameworks, is an effective way to ensure the partnerships will support the goals of all parties. The impact on skills caused by the pandemic, especially for those students making the transition to secondary school, highlights the critical need behind this.

#### The actions for business

- Focus on skills development at all stages of engagement, including providing the opportunity for reflection and evaluation of the skills being developed.
- Use the [Skills Builder Universal Framework](#) as a guide to develop essential skills throughout business engagement. The Framework breaks eight skills down into a sequence of steps, to enable participants to teach, learn, and measure essential skills.

### Skills Builder Partnership using skills to enhance student wellbeing: Calls to Action 2 and 3

Skills such as speaking, problem solving and teamwork are proven to enhance academic outcomes, halve the likelihood of being out of work, and increase earnings across a lifetime. In recent years, their ability to boost wellbeing and life satisfaction has become a focus for many, especially those working with young people given the detrimental impact the pandemic has had on life outcomes.

Of the eight essential skills, staying positive, which is our ability to use tactics and strategies to overcome setbacks and achieve goals, has become a popular focus. Many employers recognise this and have worked to include a greater emphasis on this skill in the experiences they provide to young people. A fantastic example of this is Heathrow, who are delivering a series of essential skills masterclasses to local college students with additional needs. One of these focuses on how students can use staying positive to overcome challenges and learn lessons when something goes wrong. Heathrow volunteers' share examples of challenges they have overcome in their professional lives, and students apply the staying positive skill to a real-life scenario within the Heathrow context. The masterclass aims to improve the students' confidence in staying positive, with a particular focus on preparing them for their next steps in education or employment.

- Engage with frameworks to encourage development towards the [Gatsby Benchmarks](#), with specific focus on those areas that partners struggle to make progress on, specifically tying in skills development to Gatsby benchmarks 4, 5, and 6.

### UBS and Bridge Academy long-term partnership, Call to Actions 1 and 4

UBS founded Bridge Academy in Hackney in response not only to levels of deprivation, but also school rankings and the fact that almost half of secondary-age students in Hackney had to leave the borough to find a school place. The partnership has specific and clear aims, to close the destinations and attainment gaps between disadvantaged and other students to promote social mobility.

UBS volunteers support several curriculum subjects within which they have knowledge, and additionally contribute to the personal, social, health, and economic curriculum.

All interventions have measurement to ensure that what is taking place is creating impact, both in the form of results from the students and qualitative data.

All projects were co-created, with consultation with teachers and aligned with the Gatsby benchmarks which are recommended by the Department for Education.

Alongside measuring the success of the interventions, UBS also measures the experience of volunteers, which showed a clear increase in pride in working for UBS and the way the programme develops soft and professional skills.

- Consult with your education partner to understand whether some students need additional support to enable them to engage with virtual opportunities, such as

digital literacy support, access to equipment, data or a suitable environment from which to engage.

- Consideration should also be given to the increasing support available for the [Just Transition](#), with frameworks on Green Skills being developed to ensure every job can be green in the future<sup>viii</sup>.
- Focus on the outputs of engagement when measuring skills development, regardless of the framework chosen, and the outcomes you wish to develop.

### Address Student and Staff Wellbeing

#### Why this is needed

- The impact of the pandemic on student wellbeing has been well-documented and is being exacerbated by the cost-of-living crisis, with evidence showing the direct links between food insecurity and mental health, particularly for students on free school meals<sup>ix</sup>. Developing the resilience and confidence of students through a clear focus on skills and behaviours tied to wellbeing is an effective way to support those most vulnerable.
- Businesses have a role to play in supporting staff wellbeing as well, as 78% of all education staff<sup>x</sup> experience poor mental health symptoms as a result of their work, and 59% of staff have considered leaving the sector in the past academic year due to pressures on their mental health and wellbeing.

#### The actions for business

- Ensure mental health and wellbeing are prioritised through all aspects of education engagement.
- Include activities specifically focused on developing skills related to student wellbeing and confidence, e.g., focusing on the 'staying positive' skill within the [Skills Builder Universal Framework](#).
- Share leading practice on flexible working and wellbeing strategies with education partners, utilising business experience and expertise to develop and strengthen



partnerships, whilst considering the diversity of needs in wellbeing.

- Equip your governor networks with guidance and examples of effective employee wellbeing strategies that they can share with school leaders struggling with staff wellbeing.

### Reach those most disadvantaged through Active Inclusion Strategies

#### Why this is needed

- A driving factor behind any education work should be to ensure the attainment gap decreases, and disadvantaged students are given the necessary support to thrive. The most disadvantaged students currently leave school 18 months behind the most advantaged students,<sup>xi</sup> and this attainment gap is at its highest since 2012. 46% of our stakeholders mentioned reaching disadvantaged learners, with 27% commenting on the effectiveness of diverse role models in education partnerships.<sup>xii</sup>

#### The actions for business

- Target engagement at disadvantaged young people, including students on free school meals and with SEND, as well as black, Asian, and ethnic minority students, working with your partners to ensure that their needs have been built into your engagement plans.
- Involve relatable and diverse role models in delivering your activity with young people, drawing on internal Diversity and Inclusion (D&I) networks where appropriate.
- Embed education programmes into talent pipelines, connecting D&I, resourcing and outreach teams to maximise the long-term impact of your education interventions on both young people and your business.
- Reassure all partners that the programmes developed are open to all learners, actively engaging with those students most likely to be excluded from previous partnership work through communication with all stakeholders, including staff, volunteers, and partners.

- Working in partnership with Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs), which educate almost half of pupils in state-funded schools in England,<sup>xiii</sup> is an effective way to increase the reach of engagements. MATs often have greater resourcing in personnel to build relationships and ensure that businesses can reach those that would otherwise be missed in traditional engagements.

#### Insights from Business

Analysis from BITC's Education Awards and Responsible Business Tracker provided insights into business engagement in education:

93% of businesses are focused, at least in part, on *Developing Essential Skills*

81% focus on *Providing Information on the World of Work*

62% focus on *Offering Work Experience*.

The two key drivers in education engagement for business are *Fulfilling Social Value Commitments* and *Social Mobility*.

Development of reputation and skills shortages also featured in reasons behind engagement.

For those that do engage in education partnerships and outreach, 90% mention '*fulfilling social value commitments*' as a reason for their engagement, with 66% attributing their involvement to '*social value*' and 56% mentioning '*talent pipeline*.'

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

In March 2022, [BITC's Education Taskforce](#), made up of business and education leaders, set out to create a new framework for action from businesses to address the emerging issues and deepening inequalities facing the education sector.

Our methodology consisted of two main strands. The first was a comprehensive review and analysis of BITC's Business Class education programme, Education Awards for Excellence, and BITC members' submissions to our [Responsible Business Tracker®](#). This enabled us to establish a baseline of excellence in education practices from businesses and determine which areas to delve deeper into with our stakeholder consultation.

The second strand was stakeholder engagement, which focused on two key themes:

- What are the key emerging issues facing businesses in their engagement in education?
- What should businesses stop, start, and continue in their education partnerships?

We engaged a wide range of BITC members were engaged, representing the broad scope of our network, as well as education practitioners and partners. Overall, 76 external stakeholders were consulted. The resulting qualitative data was compiled and analysed to identify patterns and trends, that informed the development of our four Calls to Action.

### HOW BITC CAN SUPPORT YOU

**Advisory:** BITC's [Advisory Services](#) can support you to implement each of the four calls to action in this report.

- Our expert Social Impact Advisers can review your strategies, targets, and data to help you identify where and how to set up effective partnerships; and to ensure that your programmes are targeted towards the students and schools who most need support.
- Our new Successful Education Partnerships session can be delivered to key staff within

your organisation, taking them through the key issues within UK education and sharing best practice on setting up and managing education engagement partnerships.

- Our new Creating Social Impact Within Education session will upskill your staff on social inequality, social mobility and how businesses can engage with UK education to drive positive change in these areas.

#### National Engagement

BITC operates throughout the United Kingdom, and differences in curriculum should be recognised and understood. Additionally, the Young Person's Guarantee that both the Scottish and Welsh governments have committed to are effective ways for businesses to engage at a national level.

BITC operated Leadership boards in Wales, Scotland, and across the English regions. These are excellent ways for businesses to engage in those locations where they have stakeholders, and to ensure national-level collaboration.

- Our expert Social Impact and Wellbeing Advisers can review and advise on your content and materials to help you ensure that your education programmes address student and staff wellbeing.
- Our advisers can deliver bespoke sessions for your staff to help them understand transferable skills, essential skills, and the Gatsby benchmarks, and can support you to embed these into your education and community programmes.

**Peer-to-peer learning:** BITC members can benefit from the collective passion and knowledge of our extensive network by participating in our regional boards, events, and engaging with our content. Our work on education is driven by our Education Taskforce; speak to your BITC relationship manager to find out how you can get involved.

**Place-based and regional delivery:** Our [Place Programmes](#) provide an opportunity for businesses to engage in programmes that follow a Place-based method.<sup>xiv</sup>

### Why your business should get involved

#### Enhancing your reputation

Your commitment to corporate responsibility is important for attracting and retaining talent and customers: two-thirds of millennials consider an employer's social and environmental commitments when deciding where to work<sup>xv</sup>, and more than half of consumers believe that businesses have a responsibility to social good<sup>xvi</sup>.

#### Growing your Talent Pipeline

Engaging in education initiatives provides opportunities to demonstrate the variety of careers available within not just your organisation, but your industry.

Given record job vacancies and growing skills gaps, there is a clear demand from businesses to develop the pipelines for future employees, and school engagement is a tangible and effective way to do so.

#### Engaging your community

The prosperity of business and society is inextricably linked. A healthy business is one that puts creating healthy communities and a healthy environment at the centre of its strategy to achieve long-term value.

Young people are the workforce of the future. Businesses have a responsibility to themselves as well as to their communities to help schools inspire, equip, and support all students to become the engaged, confident, and skilled prospective employees that they need them to be. The Time to Act is now.



### With thanks to...

ADI Group	CEC	Lincolnshire Cooperative
AF Blakemore	DYW	Mills Reeve
Amey	Deloitte	Morgan Sindal
AND Digital	Department for Education	Natwest
ARK	Electricity North West	Nottingham Trent University
Axis Europe	FEA	Novus Solution
bp	HS2	PWC
Burges Salmon	Hydrock	Severn Trent
Capgemini	Irwin Mitchell	Skills Builder Partnership
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Capital One	JLL	TSB
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## TIME TO ACT: ADDRESSING INEQUALITIES IN EDUCATION

### ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> [Skills for an inclusive economy, Birbeck](#)

<sup>ii</sup> [UK Government, Special educational needs in England, June 2022](#)

<sup>iii</sup> [Ofsted Annual report, 2021-22](#)

<sup>iv</sup> [UK Government, Special educational needs in England, June 2022](#)

<sup>v</sup> [Young people and Covid-19: where are we up to? - Association for Young People's Health \(princes-trust.org.uk\)](#)

<sup>vi</sup> [Business in the Community, Partnerships in Place](#)

<sup>vii</sup> [Business in the Community, Power of School Partnerships](#)

<sup>viii</sup> [Carbon Literacy Project](#)

<sup>ix</sup> [Ofsted, Education in Recovery 2022](#)

<sup>x</sup> [Teacher Wellbeing Index, 2022](#)

<sup>xi</sup> [Education Policy Institute, Inequalities in GCSE results across England and Wales](#)

<sup>xii</sup> [BITC Stakeholder Engagement](#)

<sup>xiii</sup> [Ofsted Annual Report, 2021-22](#)

<sup>xiv</sup> Business in the Community currently supports Place programs in Coventry, Bradford, Sheffield, Rochdale, Newport, Blackpool, Lowestoft, Norwich, and Wisbech

<sup>xv</sup> [Employee Benefits](#), 2022

<sup>xvi</sup> [IFA Magazine](#), 2022