

STUDIO SCHOOLS

TAKING STOCK FIVE YEARS ON

“

I switched my son to the Studio School because they were able to offer a flexible approach to learning that benefitted his focused learning style. I have not been disappointed. The school provides excellent education, which has seen my son mature as a young man. Teachers know him and talk to him as a person rather than as a number, and his self-confidence and social skills have benefitted hugely – Parent

01

BACKGROUND

It's now just over five years since the first Studio Schools opened in England. They began life as an ambitious programme to address longstanding failings of the secondary school system, focusing particularly on the needs of young people who thrive best in a learning environment with plenty of opportunity for practical learning and entrepreneurship.

The schools constitute a major change in how education is organised – but also offer important lessons about the challenges of innovation, and the often-contradictory nature of government policy.

Two rather different clusters of problems prompted a large group of teachers, employers and others to come together to design the first Studio Schools. The first was the evident boredom and disengagement of a substantial minority of teenagers who didn't see their schools as all that relevant to their lives. The second was strong evidence that employers were dissatisfied with the job-readiness of so many school-leavers and graduates, who, even with good formal qualifications, lacked the problem solving, creativity, teamwork and motivation to succeed in the workplace. Typical secondary schools weren't doing anything like enough to provide young people with these skills, largely because it wasn't something that they were required to do.

From 2005 onwards many people contributed to shaping the Studio School model, and then testing it out. The elements that came to make up Studio Schools were not in themselves original. Most had been tried and tested around the world, though Studio Schools brought them together more systematically. They included a curriculum with a large element of project-based learning; work with real world partners and clients; personal coaches for every pupil; assessment of non-cognitive skills as well as academic ones; and strong links into key industries, particularly ones likely to generate jobs in the future.

This model was never intended for everyone. But it was clear that a substantial minority of pupils were likely to thrive better in such an environment than in traditional schools, including more entrepreneurial teenagers as well as ones with more practical than academic aptitudes.

“

The one-to-one coaching system is particularly effective in alerting staff to any problems students may be experiencing in their lives. Students say they trust staff to help them if they encounter difficulties, be it with academic work or life outside school... Students respond well to being coached and they say it has encouraged them to think for themselves about issues in their lives – OFSTED

02

WHAT HAS WORKED?

Since the first two schools opened in September 2010 huge progress has been made, and dozens of schools have now been opened. The model marked a radical break from the norm – but has been shown to work, again and again, and has been endorsed by employers, and employer organisations. Sceptical, even cynical, visitors to the schools were won over by the enthusiasm of the staff, students, and employer partners. A succession of OFSTED reports noted the positive results – often in glowing terms.

Employers

A very wide range of industries and professionals are now involved in the schools – from space to computer games, construction to engineering, sport to healthcare, accountancy to independent artists. In many ways the least challenging (without understating the work involved) element of establishing a Studio School has been enlisting the support of employers; particularly SME's. The typical reaction of businesses when Studio Schools are explained is "Why didn't someone do this before now?"

In the words of Michel Van der Bel, CEO of Microsoft UK:
"With project-based learning at the heart of what you do, your students are acquiring exactly the skills that a company like Microsoft hopes to find in the new recruits of tomorrow. In conversation with your students it was impressive to see their self-awareness, positivity and confidence and the respect they returned for being treated as adults."

All over the country hundreds of employers are enthused by, and engaged with, their local Studio School, which is why they have had strong endorsement from bodies including the CBI and the British Chambers of Commerce. As well as offering regular and frequent work experience many employers are using the schools as an opportunity to talent spot potential employees. Students receive real value from this, and in many cases have been offered permanent jobs by these same employers; the first step to a rewarding career. A recent national survey (below) underlines the high level of employer support for the model.

“

The Studio School is providing students with excellent resources, I am jealous that I did not get the opportunity to go to this school. Students will definitely be more prepared for employment than those at other schools. It is really interesting to see 14 year olds working with Agile Methodologies when I did not discover these until university

– Employer

2016 National Survey – Employers	% Agree
This school is providing young people with the skills and experience they need for the world of work	94
Students at this school are better prepared for work with employers than other schools	91
We value the contribution the Studio School makes to our company	93
Our work with the Studio School helps us to identify potential future employees	91

Students

It's almost impossible to identify a 'typical' Studio School student. Personal characteristics, prior attainment, and attitudes vary enormously – as one might expect. However, it is very clear that students make rapid progress across a range of indicators. Many of these indicators (confidence, attitude to learning, resilience) are valuable in the real world, but rarely measured in mainstream education. Discussions with students, or remarks in OFSTED inspection reports, show that the students themselves regard the Studio School as transformative; providing them with opportunities that they simply wouldn't have either had, or been confident enough to take advantage of, in a more conventional secondary school environment.

“
My Studio School has given me more opportunities and experiences than any other school I have been to as of yet – Student

2016 National Survey – Students	% Agree
The school has given me opportunities I would not have had at my previous school	91
I feel proud of my work at this school	84
I feel more confident at this school	80
The school helps me to focus on my future	82
I feel happier at this school	77
I feel I am making better progress at this school	74
I feel I am more engaged with my learning at this school	72

Parents

Parents of Studio School students are highly complimentary about Studio Schools, often volunteering the positive impact that the school has had on their child's attitude to learning or the work related opportunities that the school affords. In fact, a recent survey showed that 83% of parents who responded agreed that the school was preparing them well for life after school.

Parents also single out the increased emotional maturity that their children begin to display – not often a characteristic associated with teenagers. In the survey mentioned above, 86% of parent respondents felt that their child had matured as a result of attending the Studio School.



The best choice that we have made for our child. Cannot speak highly enough about the school – Parent

2016 National Survey – Parents	% Agree
My child has matured as a result of attending this school	86
My child's school is preparing them well for life after school	83
My child is happier at this school	83
My child is making good academic progress as a result of attending this school	83
The school has increased my child's confidence	80
The size of my child's school has had a positive impact on their experience	91
My child has an improved attitude towards their learning	78

Staff

Staff in Studio Schools are highly motivated; they can see the difference that the new way of teaching makes to their students. The roles also involve a very significant degree of transferring best practice within Studio Schools, and this cross-movement sharing has been one of the big successes of the model.

These strengths have been reflected in feedback of all kinds, including OFSTED reports. Studio Schools have received 2 'Outstanding', 2 'Good with Outstanding features' and 10 'Good' reports from OFSTED



I could not wish for a better learning environment for my daughter – Parent

03

WHAT'S BEEN CHALLENGING?

As with any innovation, Studio Schools have also faced their fair share of challenges. Some of these have been a function of the innovative nature of the model; some the result of less than benign actions from other education institutions. But many also resulted from the unintended consequences of national policy decisions. The most significant challenges have centred around recruitment and finance.

Transfer at age 14

The Studio School model calls for transfer into the school at age 14 (or Year 10, to be more specific). We believe this to be the appropriate age at which students can really begin to benefit from the different elements of the model; they are young adults rather than children at this stage. However, this is not the normal age of transition in most parts of the country, and this poses a very significant difficulty for our schools. Studio School students will typically spend Years 7 to 9 (inclusive) in a mainstream secondary and then transfer. Getting information to these prospective students during this period has been very difficult. Existing schools often didn't provide reasonable (or any) access to students, and some local authorities were passively hostile and didn't circulate information to parents. In a few cases existing schools began whispering campaigns against the new schools, or appeared to deliberately less able students towards the Studio School. FE Sponsors were 'warned off' opening a Studio School; in one case the FE College was given to understand that local schools might choke the 'supply' of post-16 students to the college if they did not close their Studio School.

These challenges of recruitment mean that Studio Schools have to be 'marketed' to parents. We have had real successes in this, but difficulty as well. The 'pitch' to parents and students has to be right, but also has to use the right local media (Government has never promoted Studio Schools at a national level). In general terms, we have learned that some Studio School specialisms hold less broad appeal – business enterprise or construction, for example, resonate much less than science or the creative industries. In terms of media, it is also clear that some outlets (local radio, for instance) work well in some places, but not in others. All of this has to be tested before a final approach is settled on. It will take time for awareness of this new model to filter through to parents as a potential course of action for their children.

“

The Studio School has radically changed my son's relationship with education. He has gone from 87% attendance at his previous school to 100% attendance so far in this academic year – Parent

Financial vulnerability

All small schools have a degree of financial vulnerability, and this is particularly true while they are building their roll. In some cases this is exacerbated by location, with local funding formulas being particularly tight outside the main cities. When Studio Schools were first being planned in 2009, the formula included a 'small schools premium', which made a significant difference. However, this formula was later altered – so all the schools run on a smaller budget than originally anticipated. It is also the case that the small amounts of additional funding granted to new schools while they build their role has been insufficient for Studio Schools; as a new model, building to capacity can take longer than more traditional schools might.

Policy incoherence

Overall, Studio Schools have had good support from the Labour, Coalition, and Conservative governments. Ministers have recognised that they fill an important gap, and have been impressed when they have visited Studio Schools. They've helped with capital, and in creating a pathway for new schools to open. But, as often happens, policy has not always been coherent. Some policies have made it significantly harder for Studio schools, and similar initiatives to thrive. Apart from changes to funding, and the challenges of communication, the bigger issue is that in a system whose currency is exams in general, and GCSEs in particular, it is difficult to grow a school model with a rather different view of what success is. The current debate regarding the compulsory introduction of the English Baccalaureate is a perfect illustration of this. Imposing this standardised model would threaten the very existence of Studio Schools, and other schools with distinctive approaches. In the meantime the uncertainty is inevitably destabilising.

Further Education Colleges

A significant number of FE Colleges established Studio Schools between 2010 and 2015, but disproportionate numbers of these schools have closed or are closing. More than three quarters of Studio School closures and planned closures were those that were first established by an FE College. In many cases provision for the post 16 students has simply been absorbed into the FE College, and pre-16 students dispersed to other schools sponsored by the college. These closures are superficially a result of recruitment difficulties, but are at least partly a function of the very difficult financial environment that FE finds itself in. Of course, it must be stressed that many FE Colleges also remain amongst the most committed supporters of Studio Schools, and are responsible for some excellent schools.

How do we prove that the schools are working

The people most closely involved in Studio Schools have become more convinced that the model works, and delivers significantly better outcomes for many young people. But it's not always easy to prove this. The Studio Schools Trust has pushed hard for systematic and rigorous evaluation, including tracking how well pupils went on to do in employment. Detailed design of an evaluation was done in collaboration with the University of Oxford. But to our surprise no one was willing to fund it, even though several funders talk a lot about a commitment to promoting evidence. In time, we will have an evidence base from the schools but this is currently very patchy.

“

We are proud to work with the school and our partnership is delivering key on the job experience enabling young people to gain the skills they need for a life in logistics

– Employer

04

WHAT ABOUT THE REST OF THE WORLD?

Globally there is extraordinary interest in new approaches of this kind, and the Studio School model has resonated with many.

This interest includes being described as one of the '100 top global innovations in teaching STEM' – Telefonica Fundacion; becoming a finalist for World Innovation Summit for Education awards; keynote speeches at conferences in Europe, Asia, North America, and South America; TV documentary crews from France, and Brazil; and delegations from dozens of countries. Active discussions are underway regarding the viability of opening Studio Schools in Brazil, Taiwan, Malaysia, India, and Hong Kong – and international enquiries arrive at the Studio Schools Trust several times each week.

Over the next few years we also expect significantly greater interest in models of this kind as the OECD's PISA survey begins to place a greater emphasis on collaborative problem solving skills – exactly the sort of skills that are at the core of the Studio School model. It seems highly likely that the network of Studio Schools will develop from just 2 schools five years ago to a movement that will span the continents.

“
The school's programmes for careers guidance are of an exceptional quality. These are firmly rooted in the strong relationships it has developed with a diverse range of employers. Students see the world of work very much as it is and learn quickly the expectations this places on them... – OFSTED

05

HOW CAN WE IMPROVE?

The challenges that Studio schools currently face in England are being addressed head on. We may be moving into a more propitious policy environment. Tougher hurdles for new schools are on balance good for Studio Schools, since they ensure that new ones are really robust. There's also a confidence amongst principals and staff that grows over time. But we badly need more coherent and strategic policy.

We need confirmation that the English Baccalaureate will not be applied to Studio Schools. We need an approach to funding which recognises that schools require more support in the first few years of existence; this will have a cost but would be offset to a considerable extent by reduced risk. We need greater political awareness of the benefits of making 14 a standard transition point. And we need support for an independent and comprehensive evaluation of Studio Schools. Innovations in any field need some care and guarding, and most of the things we take for granted in schools today originally depended on support from committed leaders who were able to see them through early teething troubles. Studio schools are no different and now need a combination of commitment and coherence to ensure that their full value is realised.

“

All learners said that their teaching now was much better than in their previous schools. This is due to teachers' diligent care in making sure learners understand a topic thoroughly before they progress to the next one. It is also promoted by teachers' supportive relationships with learners, which empower them to believe in themselves and give of their best – OFSTED

“

Everyone in the school respects and looks after you, the teachers know you personally and can have a professional talk about the future or with any inquiries that the students have. They are open to suggestions about clubs and school trips; they are a family – **Student**

Acknowledgements

The Trust wish to thank the following organisations for their generous support during the development of the Studio School model:

Edge Foundation
Charles Dunstone Charitable Trust
Young Foundation
Resolution Trust
Paul Hamlyn Foundation



Contact

Studio Schools Trust
16 Blossom St
Manchester
M4 5AW

0161 200 1630

studioschoolstrust.org