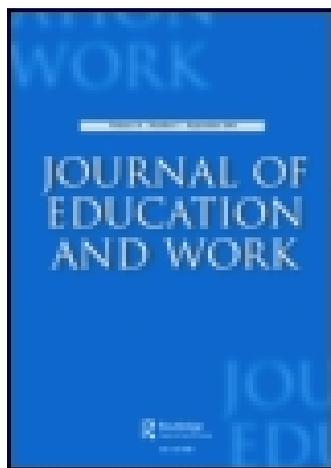


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## The ‘Employer Engagement Cycle’ in Secondary Education: analysing the testimonies of young British adults

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Work experience placements are mandatory in the UK for all young people aged 16–18 in education, and their employability effects and associated wage premia are well noted in the literature. Through Bourdieu’s lens, this article analyses and conceptualises a unique data set of reflective testimonies submitted in response to a YouGov survey of over one thousand young people. Different capitals are detected, their distributions are observed, and correlations with key variables such as social background and school type are reported. Emerging through young people’s perceptions of employer engagement is a complex web of human, social and cultural capital accumulation. Overlaps are frequent, with newly acquired forms of capital often activating others. We argue that because of the cyclical nature of employer engagement gains, benefits accumulate exponentially for some young people while leaving others increasingly detached from the capitals that are most important for labour market success.

**Keywords:** employer engagement in education; work experience; human, social and cultural capital; equity

### Introduction

In the half a century since the Newsom Report (1963) first recommended that exposure to the working world be incorporated into the final years of British schooling, the relationship between classroom and workplace has become a mainstay of political debate and policy intervention (Stanley, Mann, and Archer 2014). In England, work experience placements moved from being a marginal activity aimed at a small proportion of lower achievers in the 1960s to mainstream provision, following the Wolf Report (2011). It is now expected of all pupils enrolled in education between the ages of 16 and 18 (DfE 2013).

The shift to compulsory work experience in England represents the logical conclusion to fifty years of state action to increase employer engagement in

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education. Successive English ministries of education have encouraged, enabled (through significant dedicated funding) and, ultimately, required schools to work more closely with employers to support pupil learning and progression across a range of discrete activities and purposes. Alongside work experience placements, activities such as enterprise competitions, business mentoring, careers sessions and workplace visits have become commonplace within English secondary schooling, and not just within vocationally focused programmes. Employer engagement has been delivered within, and alongside, academic provision characterised by GCSE and A level qualifications (Huddleston and Stanley 2011; Mann and Kashefpakdel 2014; Stanley, Mann, and Archer 2014). Approaches taken in England have been mirrored in Scotland and Wales following devolution of powers over education policy in the 1990s (Scottish Executive 2004, 2007; WAG 2004, 2008). Employer engagement has, moreover, found influential champions around the world (OECD 2010; Symonds, Schwartz, and Ferguson 2011).

The policy push for closer ties between schools and employers has been primarily driven by an expectation that employer engagement will enhance young people's labour market prospects. When a statutory requirement for work-related learning was introduced in 2004 in England, the rationale of the then Department for Children, Schools and Families (DCSF) was to help young people aged 14–16 'to develop the "employability skills" that make them attractive to their future employers' (DCSF 2008, 6; see also DfE 2013). A similar statutory requirement in Wales was intended to provide 'opportunities for learners to improve their knowledge and understanding of, and skills for, the world of work, enterprise and entrepreneurship' (WAG 2004, Section 1.4).

Until recently, such assumptions remained largely untested. In this article, we review research literature suggesting policy makers were right to associate improved employment outcomes with participation in school-mediated employer engagement and go on to address a deeper question: How can we best understand such findings? Our analysis draws on the testimony of 488 young British adults aged 19–24 who responded to an open question within a 2011 survey on their teenage experiences of employer engagement activities. We consider testimonies in the light of existing theoretical modelling and employ a new framework – the 'employer engagement cycle' – to interpret young people's responses as they reflect upon experiences that remain fresh enough to be recollected accurately, at a time when they have sufficient personal and professional distance to offer a measured perspective on its value.

### **Teenage workplace engagement and adult employment outcomes**

In recent years a small, but growing, body of research literature has tested whether school-mediated exposure to the workplace is linked to improved

outcomes in the early labour market (for overviews, see; Neumark and Rothstein 2006; AIR UK 2008; Canadian Council on Learning 2009; Mann and Dawkins 2014). In the United States, four notable studies have used longitudinal data to test whether young people undertaking learning programmes rich in employer engagement went on to secure higher earnings than control groups. Evaluations of programmes delivered by Jobs for the Future (1998), Montgomery County Public Schools (Applied Research Unit 2001) and MacAllum et al. (2002) followed high school graduates one to six years into the labour market. Each review showed programme alumni to be enjoying average earnings up to 25% greater than control groups. While such results are striking, lack of transparency over methodologies used in creating control groups, low sample sizes and lack of independence suggest findings should be treated with caution (Mann and Percy 2014, 4).

Most persuasive of the US studies is a 2008 evaluation by research agency MDRC of labour market outcomes among alumni of US Career Academies, a learning programme combining academic and technical curricula around a career theme delivered in partnership with employers who provided work-based learning opportunities (Kemple and Willner 2008).<sup>1</sup> Eight years after leaving high school, the labour market outcomes were assessed of 1428 respondents who either participated in the Career Academies programme between ages of 15 and 18 or were randomly assigned to a control group. While the two groups had similar levels of attainment and had progressed to higher education in similar proportions, Career Academies alumni earned on average 11% more than control group peers (11, 25). A separate study confirms Career Academies' students to be statistically more likely to partake in employer engagement activities, such as work experience and related work-based learning experiences, than peers (Orr et al. 2007).

In the British context, Mann and Percy (2014) identify a statistically significant relationship between the self-reported earnings of 169 young Britons aged 19–24 years old working on a full-time basis and the volume of recalled episodes of school-mediated employer contact. With controls in place for highest level of qualification, age at time of survey, region and type of school attended, they find each employer contact (on a rising scale of 'none' to 'four or more') to be associated with a 4.5% wage premium. Further analysis of a wider cohort of 850 young Britons polled in the same survey by Percy and Mann (2014) revealed statistically significant reductions (of up to 20 percentage points) in likelihood of being NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training) linked to higher recalled volumes of teenage school-mediated employer contacts. The association is supported by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills, a government agency, which has demonstrated the high incidence of employers recruiting young people following work experience placements (Massey 2014).

### **Cause and effect: How can wage premia be explained?**

Within research and policy debates, comparatively little attention has been paid to explaining the outcomes observed (Mann and Percy 2014). An exception is the work of Stanley and Mann (2014). They draw on insights from three interrelated concepts – human, social and cultural capital – to offer ‘a theoretical framework that can comprehend accounts of how employer engagement is experienced and how it provides resources that aid progression into the labour market’ (36). The conceptual model, which draws on works by Bourdieu (1994), Bourdieu and Passeron (1977), Granovetter (1973) and other social theorists, presents a mechanism for securing a deeper understanding of how young people experience employer engagement activities, and why these experiences may influence early labour market outcomes.

#### ***Human capital theory***

At the heart of UK and international educational policy, human capital theory posits, not unreasonably, that the labour market outcomes of young adults can in large part be explained by individual acquisition of knowledge and skills within educational settings. Codified within qualifications, such accumulations are presented as being ultimately exchanged by young people for financial reward from employers on labour market entry. While a growing literature explores the links between school-age employer contacts and academic attainment (AIR UK 2008; Canadian Council on Learning 2009; Woolley et al. 2013; Mann and Dawkins 2014), policy discourses have focused much more upon skills development, in terms of technical competency or, more commonly, the ability of the individual to operate effectively within the workplace (often described as ‘employability skills’). To the English Department for Education, for example, the requirement for all young people to take part in work experience placements at 16–18 stems largely from ‘the unique role that time spent with an employer can have in helping young people develop employability skills’ (DfE 2013; see also, UKCES 2009). This is a position strongly supported by UK employer bodies such as the Confederation for British Industry (CBI 2011).

#### ***Social capital theory***

UK policy discourses increasingly acknowledge that human capital acquisition alone provides insufficient explanatory power to understand variable youth transitions into the labour market, but that access to social and cultural resources also help determine economic outcomes (Panel on Fair Access to the Professions 2009, 29). The UK Commission for Employment and Skills has argued that compulsory work experience not only facilitates the development of employability skills but also improves

young people's prospects by putting them in direct contact with potential employers, recognising that the most common means through which employers recruit is through informal contacts (Massey 2014; UKCES 2015).

Social capital theory, however, goes beyond a narrow focus on employment opportunities being directly linked to personal networks. The work of sociologist Mark Granovetter has been invoked within analyses by US and European scholars seeking to explain positive employment outcomes associated with teenage access to workplace contacts (Jokisaari 2007; McDonald et al. 2007). Granovetter's concept of the 'strength of weak ties' as a bridging social capital, conveying non-redundant, trusted information about labour market opportunities to young people, has been adopted, for example, by Mann and Percy (2014) in seeking to understand adult wage premia differentials. From a different perspective, within ethnographic studies of marginalised British teenagers' experience of extended work placements, sociologist Carlo Raffo has argued (2003, 2006) that by developing trustworthy reciprocal social relations within individualised networks, young people 'gain information, observe, ape and then confirm decisions and actions with significant others and peers' (Raffo and Reeves 2000, 151). In exploring how employer engagement can provide authentic relevant information to young people, Raffo points towards a third conceptual approach widely used in understanding variation within the character of school to work transitions: cultural capital.

### ***Cultural capital theory***

In recent years, cultural capital theory, particularly as articulated by Bourdieu, has been drawn upon extensively by researchers seeking to understand how young people form career aspirations and subsequently navigate pathways through education and into work (Archer, DeWitt, and Wong 2014; Norris and Francis 2014; Zukas 2013). Within Bourdieu's complex and distinctive theorisation of the power of culture to shape life courses, the concept of 'habitus' emerges: that individual behaviour and agency is shaped and constrained through inherited and/or unconsciously acquired attitudes and self-perceptions that are linked, to some degree, to wider social structures such as social class, ethnicity and gender (Bourdieu 1984, 1997). Habitus, distinct from but related to cultural capital, is said to be 'vital to our understanding of how dispositions (internalised cultural schemas) affect behaviour' (Edgerton and Roberts 2014, 214).

In public discourses, UK state interventions such as AimHigher (which aimed to 'raise the aspirations' of able young people from disadvantaged backgrounds in order to increase their participation in higher education) can be understood as approaches which seek to provide authentic information on the merits of undergraduate study and challenge the habitus of such

young people, making university ‘thinkable’ for working class young people (Passey, Morris, and Waldman 2009). In the UK educational context, employer volunteering programmes have also been designed to bring about such changes in young people’s attitudes. Mentoring programmes have commonly aimed to change the way that teenagers at risk of exclusion think about the value of qualifications to later employment, challenging implicitly understood, and arguably economically situated, cynicism about the purposes of education (Green and Rogers 1997). From another perspective, much publically funded activity to connect young people with employees working in Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM) professions has been designed to broaden young people’s conception of what STEM careers entail, challenge assumptions around unrepresentative workplaces, and give young people confidence in navigating routes into careers where skills shortages and social or gender imbalances are widely reported (DeWitt et al. 2013).

Stanley and Mann (2014) argue that within these three well-established theories are insights of significant value to understanding young people’s experience of employer engagement. Using work experience placements as an example, they draw on wide-ranging pupil and teacher perceptions data to provide examples of human capital acquisition (employability skills), social capital growth (for example, in paid employment following unpaid placements) and changes in habitus (for example, in terms of shifting career aspirations and/or perceptions of the value of schooling). Moreover, they present evidence which illustrates ways in which preceding levels of capital accumulation influence access to, and engagement with, employer-related activities. For example they note that, through their schools, higher achievers commonly engage with employers in different ways to lower achievers, that access to specific work experience placements is shaped by family social networks and that pupils’ thinking about how they engage with employers is highly gendered.

### **Research objective, design and methodology**

The work of Stanley and Mann (2014) offers a theoretical device for explaining evidence linking school-mediated employer engagement and later employment boosts in early adulthood. Theories of human, social and cultural capital address both the assumptions of policy makers about what they hope to achieve and research insights into the experiences of young people themselves.

Here, we draw on this conceptualisation and employ textual analysis to analyse 488 responses that young adults aged between 19 and 24 years gave to an open question within a 2011 YouGov survey. The question focussed on the school-mediated employer engagement activities respondents participated in between the age of 14 and 19 and invited participants to reflect on

‘what [they] got out of employers being involved in [their] education’. Participants were prompted to consider whether the involvement was responsible for the following:

changing the way [they] thought about school or college, providing useful information or encouragement for thinking about possible jobs or careers, helping to get actual jobs either through people [they] got to know or giving [them] something useful for job applications or interviews, or in getting into a course at college or university.

A reassurance was added that ‘maybe [they] got nothing out of it at all’.

We draw on the framework developed by Stanley and Mann (2014) to examine these testimonies with a view to determining: (a) the extent to which the three different types of capital accumulation outlined above can be detected; (b) the influence of social background and school type on young people’s perceptions of employer engagement; and (c) the capacity of human, social and cultural capital to accommodate the data, inform public policy and, ultimately, allow more young people to benefit more productively from employer engagement.

Of the 1002 respondents to the 2011 YouGov survey, the great majority had some experience to call upon: 90% of 773 valid respondents recalled undertaking a work experience placement, 56% having career talks, 19% mentoring and 35% taking part in enterprise competitions with employers (Mann and Kashefpakdel 2014). Within the sample, 488 respondents took the opportunity to write up to 150 words about their own experience and perceptions of employer engagement activities. Of this group, 380 described some input from or contact with employers when at school. Of these, exactly half (190) indicated that they had found the contact helpful in some way.

Following principles of thematic analysis and coding consistency advocated by researchers such as Saldana (2009) and Guest (2012), where possible, we matched each respondent’s statements to the capital(s) being expressed. Each statement was independently coded by the paper’s three authors. Where differences arose, the majority view was taken. On the rare occasion that all three authors coded the data differently, the statement was discounted. Sometimes, a statement contained elements of different kinds of capital, in which case it contributed to multiple counts; in other cases, no specific type of capital was noted at all. To illustrate the coding process, one survey respondent wrote as follows:

The work experience I did was useful in providing me career options in working with children. Being involved in Connexions Changemakers also helped developed my confidence.

The statement was coded in terms of both social capital (because of the information about career options reportedly provided through the experience) and cultural capital (because of the confidence reportedly gained). Note that the analysis offered here is primarily qualitative. However, the way in which we have selected quotes from participants is informed by broader quantitative distributions in the data. These patterns will now be outlined, first for the whole population and then broken down according to school type.

## Findings

In total, the distribution of capitals identified by the 190 respondents who perceived their employer experiences as beneficial favoured cultural capital, as respondents reported becoming more self-assured ('doing my work experience at fifteen helped me a lot by boosting my confidence') and being constructively challenged about personal dispositions ('community action in a charity shop showed me there are more rewards to working than just monetary'). Human capital ('useful to show how you can apply the skills you are learning') and social capital ('personal contacts were helpful') were each only about one-third as common as cultural capital, as Figure 1 shows.

### *Cultural capital as enhanced personal confidence*

The most common type of capital detected in the statements of respondents was cultural capital, and the most common sub-type of cultural capital related to personal confidence, including encouragement to think more maturely and in a more wide-ranging way about future opportunities. No

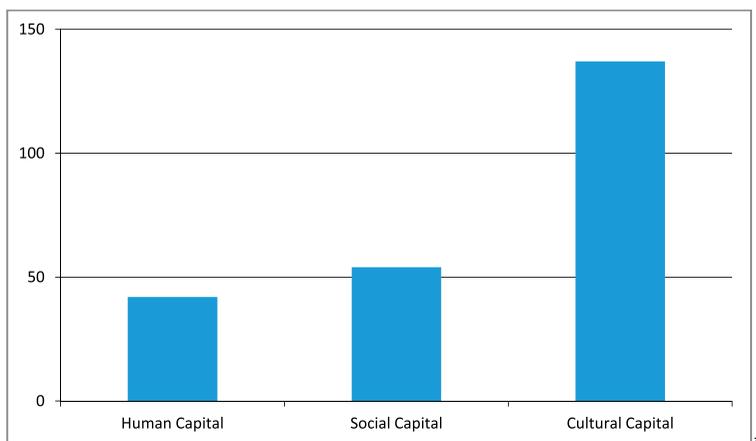


Figure 1. Distribution of human, social and cultural capital in the data.

correlation with school type was observable. A positive effect was reported by young people who attended all school types: non-selective state schools ('making you feel more confident'; 'helped me think more like an adult'); grammar schools and selective state schools ('broadening horizons'; 'helped develop my confidence') and independent schools ('the excitement of being independent').

### ***Cultural capital as elimination of options and visualisation of potential new pathways***

A less expected way in which cultural capital was detected involved young people developing the self-awareness and wider, contextual sentience to reject particular routes and identify new ones. While we acknowledge that work experience and related employer contacts are not generally framed as a way of *detering* young people from following a particular career path, it was notable that many young people took away exactly this kind of 'negative' capital from their employer engagement and, moreover, were grateful for the opportunity to have come to understand a job well enough to know it was not right for them.

Useful to know about a range of jobs, but none really inspired me. Work experience was useful to find out what I didn't want to do as a career. (Selective state school)

Made me realise what profession I did not want to go into in the future, so a good experience. (Non-selective state school)

It made me realise I definitely didn't want to become a teacher. (Non-selective state school)

The distribution of school type in the examples is indicative of wider trends, with young people educated at non-selective state schools much more likely to cite this kind of capital. This supports the idea, addressed below, that less educationally advantaged students have access to less prestigious or relevant engagement opportunities. However, it also points to the same young people having a less advanced understanding of the working world and inferior advice and guidance about what their contribution might be.

### ***Cultural capital as academic motivation***

The final sub-type of cultural capital is related to the previous sub-type in that it clarifies pathways ahead, but differs in that attitudes towards education are changed as a result of the employer engagement. Specifically, further study is incentivised by young people's desire to avoid the kind of workplaces to which they were exposed. Once again, this response was largely restricted to those at non-selective state schools.

My work experience placement made me determined to work hard in education and aim for a worthwhile job I will enjoy. (Non-selective state school)

I found my work experience horrible, which is why I made an effort to get a better education and a better job. (Non-selective state school)

It stopped me from leaving school early and made me stay on to go to uni which I think was a good thing in the end. (Non-selective state school)

A very small number of respondents made the opposite point. For example, one young adult noted that employer engagement ‘made me realise that I would prefer to be working than in education’. However, the cultural capital accumulated in this respect for the majority of the young people surveyed resulted in education being seen as a more attractive route to more fulfilling employment destinations.

### ***Social capital as authentic guidance and access to useful, trusted information***

Relating closely to the types of cultural capital outlined above, many respondents reflected upon the personal advice they received through employer engagement. This advice was usually held in high regard, with many indicating that they found it more credible and dependable than advice received from other sources.

Told us from experience. Told us straight. (Independent school)

Opportunity to ask questions without prejudice. (Non-selective state school)

You got advice that seemed more genuine. (Selective state school)

I trusted the word of someone in the working world as opposed to a careers advisor or teacher ‘telling’ you what to do. (Independent school)

Unlike the examples of cultural capital identified above, reports of authentic employer-mediated information were distributed across young people from all school types. Regardless of education background, the opportunity to hear first-hand from employers – rather than second-hand from advisors or teachers – was perceived as helpful by survey respondents.

### ***Social capital as ‘weak ties’***

Further evidence was found in the data that employer-related activities, fleeting as they may be, can collectively lead to enhanced employment opportunities and outcomes. Young people from all school types recognised the value of establishing ties but tended to articulate this differently.

Whereas the capacity ‘to network’ was cited exclusively by those from Independent schools, the value of forming ‘contacts’ was mentioned by young adults who had attended all school types.

### ***Social capital as access to employment opportunities***

The kind of social capital that is perhaps most directly useful to young people when it comes to employer engagement is that which enhances their prospects in a competitive job market. For some respondents, a clear progression was reported from early work experience opportunities, through to more regular part-time engagement with the same company or in the same field, through to a permanent, full-time position. Such perceptions align with analysis by the UK Commission for Employment and Skills demonstrating that employers commonly recruit young people who they would not otherwise have come into contact with, following periods of work experience (Massey 2014).

Following my work experience placement I obtained permanent part-time work at the same business. This steady job helped as a stepping stone into the working world. (Independent school)

It definitely helped me get summer internships during my degree. (Independent school)

Both of the examples above were from students who had attended Independent schools, and this sub-type of social capital, unlike the previous two, was largely the preserve of young people with more privileged educational backgrounds. Using employer engagement as a ‘stepping stone’ or conceptualising it as a potential ‘advantage’ in the job market reflects a broader, life-course awareness than is not observable or developed in all young people.

### ***Human capital as skills development***

Relating to social capital as access to employment is human capital in its ‘employability’ sense. Many respondents reflected on the uneasy relationship between formal education and the qualities sought by employers and required in the workplace. ‘The reality of the situation’ noted one, ‘is that the education system doesn’t really teach the practical skills needed to do well in work’. Another criticised the school system as ‘educating for education’s sake, with little emphasis on practical ability’, adding that ‘I say that as someone who did quite well at school’. Clearly, the development of work-based skills is seen as crucial, particularly for those respondents who had attended non-selective state schools.

### ***Human capital as enabling progression to further routes of study***

The final sub-type of capital in the cycle is linked to the academic motivation previously coded and discussed in terms of cultural capital. For many young people, engagement with employers allowed connections to be made between the different learning steps needed to achieve their professional goals. Specifically, respondents reported the employer engagement to be of value at three stages: selecting a degree programme ('context for what university courses you should look for'), navigating the admissions process ('helped get into university') and succeeding in higher education ('helped me when I went on to a degree'). Of these three stages, the second was the one young adults remembered most often, with one reflecting that employer engagement 'helped me to better prepare for my interviews for university' and another that it 'helped me to gain experience which I used in my university application'. It should be noted that this form of human capital was rarely detected in the statements of non-selective school applicants, raising further questions (following Schwartz 2004; Zimdars 2010; Jones 2013) about inequalities in access to high quality employer engagement activities and the implications for access to higher education. Findings align with those of Huddleston, Mann, and Dawkins (2014) that employer engagement is commonly used by higher performing English independent schools to support pupil admission to the most selective university programmes.

Employer engagement that incorporates outreach activity may have a part to play in addressing possible unfairness. One respondent was prompted to note that a one-week residential taster of university courses made them 'contemplate my previous "I don't want to go to university" mind-set'. Such testimonies demonstrate the value of engagement to university entry (Mann et al. 2011) and have ramifications for those who see higher education as an important lever for social mobility (Milburn 2012).

### ***Negative experiences of employer engagement***

It should be remembered that 50% of the write-in survey's respondents did not find employer engagement useful at all. Lack of relevance remains the main barrier to successful employer engagement, as the following statements, submitted by respondents from different school types, attest:

I worked in a bookshop doing the jobs no-one else wanted. This did not affect my decision to become a diagnostic radiographer. (Non-selective state school)

I folded letters and put them into envelopes for a solicitors. I now do a PhD in astrophysics. (Independent school)

However, we also note that many survey respondents complain about the routine nature of the employer engagement activities, particularly work

experience, they were offered, most commonly those who had attended non-selective state schools: ‘it was rubbish – I stacked shelves and that was it’; ‘Hell personified’; ‘more an excuse to have somebody work for them for free’; ‘the employer just used me as free labour’. Reflecting the class-matching and class-reproducing behaviour noted by Hatcher and Le Gallais (2008), respondents from less advantaged educational backgrounds were also likeliest to question who, within their peer groups, was receiving employer engagement and how this was decided as follows:

I gained very little from the types of employer contact we had at school, as they were very much targeted towards people who were not academically capable and who wouldn't be going on to university. (Non-selective state school)

Focused on business/vocations, not on the professions (e.g. law, medicine, accountancy). (Non-selective state school)

[I gained] nothing, as those that visited were recruiting from the army. (Non-selective state school)

Misbehaved children were given the opportunity to do more work placements so they could build up their CV ... [This] often left well-behaved children feeling like if you misbehaved you were rewarded. (Non-selective state school)

The statements above suggest that, with limited resources available, some non-selective schools target employer engagement towards students who are not on track to enter university. Indeed, the final example points towards a perceived correlation between student behaviour and employer engagement. The danger here is that some young people lose out on the capitals clearly available through employer engagement, not least those needed for the higher education admissions process if they are to pursue the academic route implicitly assigned to them.

### **Variation by school type attended**

The above review of engagement with capital accumulation through employer engagement highlights variation in the perceptions of young people. The question of whether distributions of detected capital gains were consistent among young people from different educational backgrounds was triggered by answers to an earlier question in the survey: Did you find the employer engagement you experienced to be useful? Responses to this question differed according to school type, with 46.6% of respondents from non-selective state schools reporting positive engagement, compared to 54% of respondents from selective state schools and 64.4% from independent schools.

There is evidence in the textual data that different perceptions by school type are linked to the nature and quality of the engagement undertaken. Previous studies have noted significant differentials in the quality of work experience opportunities afforded to young people. For example, Hatcher and Le Gallais find that it ‘does little or nothing to widen students’ career horizons by purposefully exposing them to workplace situations beyond those most familiar to their family class backgrounds’ (2008, 78) and that young people’s perceptions of the quality of employer engagement often correlate with their socio-economic status. Similarly, using a database of personal statements written by UK university applicants, Jones (2013) finds that access to high quality, relevant work experience is much more limited for young people at comprehensive schools and sixth form colleges than for those at independent schools.

A similar pattern emerges in this study. For example, one respondent reports that ‘in my particular case at a private secondary school, the staff noticed I had a keen interest in going the Royal Navy, thus they arranged my formal “work” interview to be with someone from that service branch’, while a non-selective state school peer remembers an ‘unhelpful range of employers, like shops – not any industry I would be interested in’. Other non-selective state school respondents complained that ‘having to sort it out yourself means companies tend not to want you and you end up working somewhere that is of no interest to you whatsoever’, with one reportedly advised to gain only retail experience, ‘even though I went on to be accepted into six University and completed a Master’s degree’.

When we broke down the data by school type, we found interesting disparities in terms of the distributions of capital detected (Figure 2).

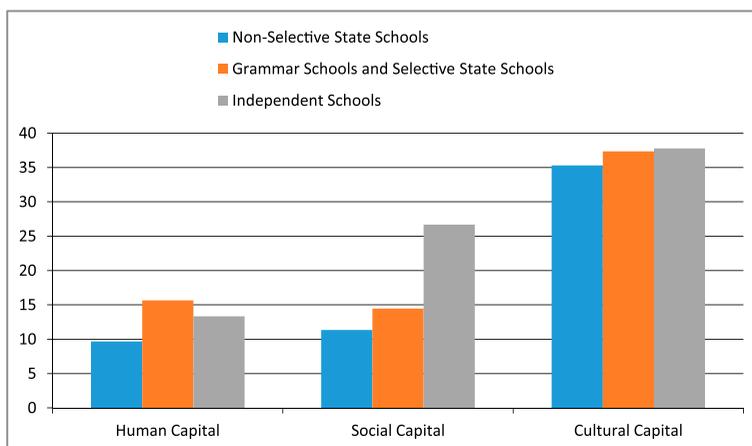


Figure 2. Percentage of statements in which human, social and cultural capital detected, by school type ( $N = 190$ ).

Cultural capital was fairly evenly distributed, albeit with a slight bias towards more privileged educational backgrounds. Human capital was detected in statements written by young people who had attended grammar schools or selective state schools at a 50% higher rate than their peers from non-selective state schools. However, the biggest difference arose in relation to social capital, with over one quarter of independently educated respondents reportedly benefitting, as opposed to 11.3% of young people from non-selective state schools and 14.5% of young people from selective state schools.

### **Cycles of employer engagement**

In reviewing the testimonies evidence emerges of what can be described as a cycle of employer engagement. The experiences of young people are commonly complex, building of preceding levels of human, social and cultural capital as described by Stanley and Mann (2014) but also moving across conceptual boundaries. A number of examples illustrate as follows:

Work experience helped me to better understand how my school studies translate into the job world and which areas of my studies would be useful in work. This provided motivation to work hard at university modules that were not necessarily the most appealing in terms of enjoyment but I could see that they would be valuable to finding employment later on. (Non-selective state school)

I was told by professionals in businesses such as publishing, marketing, PR that the skills I would develop would benefit me greatly when it comes to applying for jobs. (Independent school)

Learning about business in the real world helped me to relate to what I was learning in business studies and Young Enterprise. The more practical examples of day to day finance and the running of a business, the better overall understanding of business in general. (Non-selective state school)

The first of the statements above is an interesting articulation of a cycle of meaning: the respondent makes direct connections between workplace experience and employment opportunities ('helped me to better understand how my school studies translate into the job world'). In addition to human capital, the respondent also talks about the employer engagement providing cultural capital (expressed as 'motivation' derived from a more sophisticated awareness of how academic content links to job skills) and cultural/social capital (expressed as acceptance that less enjoyable learning experiences could still be 'valuable to finding employment later on').

Based on the analysis of capital within the statements submitted by survey respondents, we propose that young people's experiences are best understood within a cycle of employer engagement, as visualised in Figure 3. Though we find the established types of capital, as outlined in

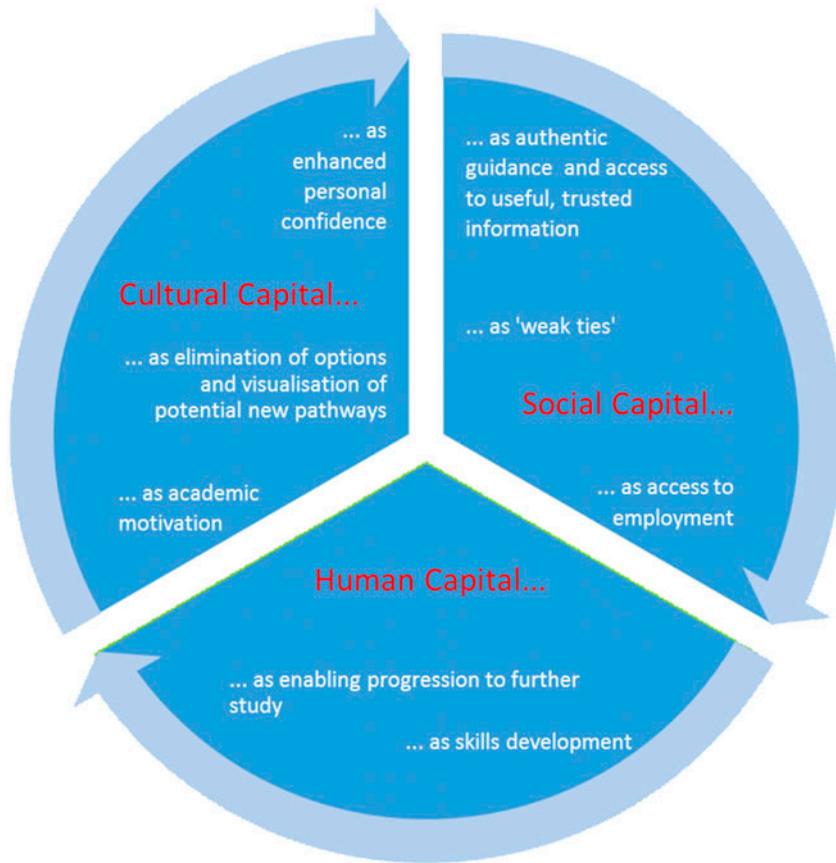


Figure 3. The 'Employer Engagement Cycle' in Secondary Education.

linear fashion by Stanley and Mann (2014), to be useful, we also note overlap and circuitousness in the way that the benefits of engagement are articulated by those who receive it. Figure 3 expresses this relationship, with different types of capital both feeding off and feeding into neighbouring types of capital. It does not exhaust the ways in which capital was expressed by respondents, but it illustrates how the more common articulations inter-connect.

For example, through employer engagement activities, a teenager may make the contacts needed to be offered a job (social capital ... as access to employment) while simultaneously acquiring the expertise or ability to make themselves employable in that role (human capital ... as skills development). Or, to give another example, a young adult may report maturing and becoming more assured about themselves (cultural capital ... as enhanced personal confidence) as a result of trusted information from employers (social capital ... as authentic guidance). The idea that capitals both emerge

from and foment other capitals is not new: for example, von Otter and Stenberg (2014) report that parents with more human capital tended to offer their children more social capital. However, we see this cycle as being particularly germane to the testimonies of young adults reflecting on their experiences of employer engagement.

## Conclusions

In the context of the growing number of quantitative studies which point to meaningful economic gains in young adulthood for those who participated in employer engagement activities when at school, this article has used the theoretical framework developed by Stanley and Mann (2014) to analyse the reflections of 380 young adults on their school-mediated employer engagement and identify the relative influence of human, social and cultural capital within their recollected experiences. Overall, the analysis supports the view that the theorisation of capitals offers useful explanatory tools for understanding different experiences of school-age employer engagement activities and sheds new light on how and why employer engagement may convey long-term benefits for participating young people. We present a new, visual representation of the capitals associated with employer engagement within an analysis underpinned by testimonies collected directly from young people themselves. While different types of capital are recognisable, they cannot be neatly separated. Rather, they bleed into, trigger and inform one another. Those young people who are able to break into this cycle benefit exponentially, as existing forms of capital constantly mobilise other capitals. However, for others, either because opportunities are limited or the engagement available is unsuitable, the deficit widens over time.

Some young people perceive employer engagement to have been more useful than others. This is partly to do with the nature of the engagement and partly to do with the habitus of those young people, but it also reflects how the engagement is conceptualised. Not all young people are equally equipped to deploy their work experience as a 'launch pad' (Evans, Schoon, and Weale 2012, 38; Zukas 2013) for entry to higher education or career development. Models of 'Life-course Analysis' (Pallas 2007) suggest that the ability to conceptualise individual interventions in terms of one's whole life progression is important and not equally distributed. In our data, evidence was found that young people from more educationally advantaged backgrounds were much better at conceptualising employer engagement as a 'stepping stone' within a long-term career plan.

Cultural capital is the clearest benefit associated with engagement as young people from all backgrounds grow in personal confidence and begin to develop insights that prove valuable when navigating the job market. This links to social capital, the second most common type, which often involves establishing a range of 'weak ties' providing resources of differing

types rather than a single connection that leads to permanent employment. Human capital in the traditional sense of skills development was found to be relatively low frequency, thereby challenging the assumption that teenage exposure to working professionals necessarily generates ‘employability skills’. Young people more commonly use employer engagement to aid self-realisation than to develop workplace skills directly. In other words, they become better equipped to make connections between their academic input and their future roles in the workplace.

This analysis consequently suggests that school-mediated employer engagement contains within it potential resource to enable smoother navigations from the teenage classroom to the adult workplace. As a series of recent studies note, school to work transitions have become longer, more fractured and more complex over the last generation (OECD 2010; Tomlinson 2013). With young people, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, often struggling to understand the character of local labour markets (Yates et al. 2011; Norris and Francis 2014; St. Clair, Kintrea, and Houston 2014), the value of authentic engagements with employers whilst still in education can perhaps best be seen as providing resources to enhance individualised journeys from school to work. Arguably, it is in this arena and within this process that the greatest explanatory potential for understanding the connection between teenage employer engagement and adult wage premia can be found.

In theoretical terms, the study calls for a reconceptualisation of ‘capital’ in relation to employer engagement. The value of employer engagement for young people often lies in its perceived authenticity. It acts more as a trusted route towards social and cultural capital than as a direct accretion of human capital. Common to young people of all educational backgrounds is a perception that workplace staff communicate more directly and truthfully about labour market realities than other sources. These ‘trustworthy reciprocal social relations’ (Raffo and Reeves 2000) are key to both enhancing young people’s self-confidence and giving them the ‘weak ties’ needed to progress.

Similarly valued by respondents are the kind of insights (‘socialised’ human capital) that allow the often hostile terrain between school and higher education or full-time employment to be navigated more readily. As noted by Kemple and Willner (2008, 40), accumulation of such ‘invisible’ capital is more common than mastery of direct, technical skills. This article also suggests that ‘negatively accumulated’ cultural capital is an important outcome of employer engagement, as young people become endowed with enhanced agency to reject some vocational options and re-engage with academic routes. This elimination-and-motivation approach was especially appreciated by young people who had been schooled in the non-selective state sector. Indeed, because of the cyclical nature of capital, in delivery terms, it is important that opportunities for all young people to engage with

employers are maximised, regardless of school type or whether their preferred route is academic or vocational. This calls for managed experiences, where broader early exposure is mandated and later, more focused exploration is facilitated. Employer engagement is a highly effective strategy to help young people rule in and rule out potential pathways, but only if they are able to access, understand and conceptualise it in appropriate ways.

The effect of employer engagement on young people is therefore complex and nuanced, with different types and sub-types of capital inter-connecting in reciprocal and often unexpected ways. This underlines the value of employer engagement, as articulated in the Newsom Report (1963) and in multiple policy documents since. However, textual analyses of responses to the YouGov survey also suggest that the capitals accumulated are cyclical and self-reproducing in that the social gains of workplace exposure and widening networks soon lead to cultural gains in confidence that in turn facilitate savvier decision-making when it comes to choices about destinations and greater awareness of how academic knowledge connects to employability skills. For those on the carousel, the incremental follow-on gains make employer engagement a highly efficient mechanism to achieve their goals. For those not on the carousel, the risk is ever-increasing distance from the all-important capitals that their peers continue to accrue.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **Note**

1. The US Career Academies programme is different from the UK charitable programme of the same name.

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