

Employers! Put your best where it will do the most

Some emerging messages from good practice research

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There has been increasing interest in recent years in finding ways to provide pupils and students with the opportunity to gain experience of the work place, primarily through work placements. Typically the intention of such efforts is focussed on the benefits that such experiences may bring to the young person: experience of work can help them understand why certain topics are covered in class and how this information can underpin work place performance; for younger children it can help inform their decisions about the qualifications to aim for; importantly, for some, it can help them realise that their ideas about a certain area of work are wrong, and they are probably not cut out for the job they had envisaged. This last point should not be overlooked when considering the value of work placement experiences: one of my students once decided against entering training as a clinical psychologist after an undergraduate work placement in her final year, saving her from a potentially disastrous career choice and the state from spending money training someone unsuited to this work.

Each of these are good reasons for encouraging work placements in and of themselves, but serve to imply that employers should offer work placement opportunities to benefit the learner, rather than themselves. Indeed, many employers appear to see engaging with school pupils primarily as a cost: something to place on the 'corporate responsibility' side of the balance sheet, with few corresponding benefits. In this talk I will bring together work that I and my colleagues have undertaken at IES looking at equalities issues in work placements, gathered while undertaking a range of different types of research. The key theme that links these together is the identification of the benefits that getting involved with providing work experience opportunities can bring for employers – and not always in the way that is the most obvious.

The work experience agenda

Let's look first at the range of initiatives that has been seen around work placements over the past few years. Many of the developments have gone hand in hand with, or come about because of, the changes to vocational education and training in England. Table 1 sets out the various initiatives and the associated work placement components introduced since the government first announced its intention to increase the options available for young people between the ages of 14 and 19 in the Green Paper, *'14-19 Extending Opportunities, Raising Standards'* (DfES, 2002).

Table 1: Work placement offers in education and training since 2002

Date introduced	Title	Scope/aim	Work placement?
September 2002	Increasing Flexibility	Created enhanced vocational and work-related learning opportunities for 14-16 year olds by promoting collaboration between FE colleges, schools, training providers and employers.	Young people involved in this programme spent time in an FE college for one or two days a week and had the opportunity to develop their knowledge in a work context eg through employer placements.
January 2003	14-19 Pathfinders	<p>Tested a variety of models of collaborative working which would secure the vision and principles for the 14-19 phase.</p> <p>The 14-19 Pathfinder prospectus emphasised choice and flexibility, clear progression routes from 14 to 19, an increase in the amount and quality of work-related learning and opportunities to experience enterprise activity. Institutional collaboration was seen as the key to the achievement of many of these objectives, especially in the crucial area of increasing choice and flexibility in curriculum pathways from 14</p>	Work placements seen as central part of the model. Consortia included employers.
2003	'Work related learning'	Section 560 of the Education Act 1996, amended by Section 112 of the School Standards and Framework Act 1998, enabled students of compulsory school age to participate in work experience schemes as part of their education. The entitlement applied to students at any point during their last two years of compulsory education. In 2003 the requirement for statutory provision of 'work related learning' was introduced for all young people at key stage 4.	Introduced the requirement for statutory provision of 'work related learning' for all young people at key stage 4
August 2003	Entry to Employment (E2E)	<p>Conceived in the report of the Modern Apprenticeship Advisory Committee - Modern Apprenticeships: the Way to Work (October 2001) to act as bridge between school and either employment or entry to further education/training.</p> <p>Aimed to reduce the number of young people not in education, training or employment and ensure</p>	Work placements, including opportunity to gain one or more units of an NVQ qualification were a central part of offer

Date introduced	Title	Scope/aim	Work placement?
		further learning opportunities or increased likelihood of sustained employment.	
September 2004	Young apprenticeships	<p>An opportunity for 14-16 year olds to combine the practical application of skills and knowledge in a vocational context with studying for qualifications related to particular occupational sectors.</p> <p>The programme was designed as a small scale, high-quality route at Key Stage 4 to offer able, well-motivated pupils the option to pursue industry-specific vocational programmes outside school, in partnership with employers and involving extended work experience and work-related learning.</p>	Work placements throughout the programme (up to 50 days). Originally several different placements were envisaged for each student however some schemes offered only one placement.
September 2005	Work experience entitlement	<p>In 2005 the 14-19 White Paper stated that every KS4 student should have 5 days of 'enterprise entitlement'; this came into force in September 2005</p> <p>In practice 'work experience' could be translated as learning 'about work', learning 'through work' and learning 'for work.' While it might include placement, the policy did not translate as entitlement to work placement .</p>	Work experience of up to 10 days with one employer. Up to 15 days in one academic year might be spent on placement.
April 2006	Activity and Learning Agreements (from 2008, Activity Agreements only)	<p>Learning Agreements (LA) were aimed at employers of 16-17 year olds in 'JWTs' (jobs without training) to increase access to training for this group of young people.</p> <p>Activity Agreements comprised a range of potential activities and were aimed at young people NEET. Young people were offered a weekly allowance in return for agreeing to participate in activities to integrate them back into learning.</p> <p>By January 2008, the purpose of these agreements began to shift in order to test the support necessary to enact Compulsory Leaving Age change.</p>	AAs could include work placement activities
2008	Diplomas	Applied academic courses in work-related areas that were intended to have one or more elements of work based learning	Included work placement, but less than YA provision. The future of Diplomas is now uncertain.

Source: Newton and Miller, Institute for Employment Studies

It can be seen from this table that not only has there been an increasing focus on the role of work as a medium for the education of young people but, increasingly, for much younger learners than has previously been the case within the English educational system. While there have been various policies aimed at providing young people with some form of work experience in the past, such schemes tended to operate on a fairly ad hoc basis until the School Standards and Framework Act amendment in 1998 introduced the idea of a two week 'entitlement' for young people at any point during their last two years of compulsory education. This was followed in 2003 by introduction of the requirement for statutory provision of 'work related learning' for all young people at key stage 4.

Since then, the policy focus on learners within the 14 – 19 age group has also served to increase interest in the role of the workplace as a forum for learning for (potentially) a much larger group of young people. Recent education ministers have grappled with the question of how the curriculum for this age group can be developed to offer a wider and more flexible range of options, with a parallel focus on the ways in which curricula might offer more work-relevant options; this is seen as central in encouraging greater engagement with learning amongst those young people who currently lose interest at an early age and become progressively more disaffected with study.

At the same time, ministers have been keen to encourage higher ability pupils to consider the vocational route as an alternative to the academic option: this was explicitly stated in the invitations to tender sent out to schools during the rounds of tendering for the Young Apprenticeship programme. For these reasons the focus has been both on expanding and improving vocational provision for those aged 14 – 16 along with greater integration between pre-and post-compulsory vocational offerings. Most recently, the diplomas (implemented from September 2008) have been promoted as offering a ‘third way’ to young people, providing an ‘applied academic course’, according to the then schools minister Sarah McCarthy Fry, (McCarthy Fry 2009) which includes a work experience component.

Data sources for this review

In the past few years IES has evaluated equal opportunity issues in the Young Apprenticeship (YA) programmes (see Newton, Miller, Page, Akroyd and Tuohy, 2006; Newton, Miller, Page and Tuohy, 2007). The work on the Young Apprenticeships extended to looking at the value of taster sessions (see Newton et al. 2007). In addition we also undertook two projects for the GLA looked at the issues surrounding attempts to encourage women into well-paid jobs in London, with one of these (Hurstfield, Miller, Page, Akroyd, and Willison, 2006) looking at young women’s experiences seeking work placements while at school as part of a larger investigation into the factors affecting career choice. While work experience was not the central focus for any of these projects, nonetheless it emerged as an issue in each

of them. I intend to pull out relevant points from these projects and then draw some conclusions for employers based on this work.

Emerging findings

In the two YA projects we examining attempts to mainstream equal opportunities within Young Apprenticeships. During this work we explored the types of employer engagement achieved in this programme and the work experience placements offered to young people as part of these qualifications. We also examined the impact that their work experiences had on young people's views of the sector.

First, the work revealed that early engagement with employers can be a fast and effective way of removing myths about a sector. For sectors such as engineering, where fairly negative stereotypes of the nature of the work can still prevail, this can be of particular value. Sector Skills Councils saw one of the main benefits being the fact that young people gained information from undertaking the programme that would help them in making their career choice. A SEMTA representative believed that the experiences gained through this route may offer the best opportunity yet for young people to gain insight into the sector:

'Getting in at this early stage means you have a better chance of influencing career decisions ... Without YAs, the advice they get may not promote the sector or vocational routes so well.'

One of the employers who did get involved in speaking at schools was a chemical engineer. She asked the pupils to draw a picture of where she worked. All of the pupils drew a picture with smoke billowing out from a factory. She was then able to tell them it was not at all as they thought – in fact her company made no atmospheric emissions. This led into a discussion about the kinds of assumptions people make about different jobs and work environment (Newton et al. 2006) and helped correct the views of those young people about that sector and the nature of the jobs in that sector. If employers are going to improve their recruitment opportunities, then helping to get across an up-to-date view of the industry is one relatively easy way in which they can help. And it can be very effective, as this employer illustrates:

‘I’ve been to their presentations [about the YA programme], and one of the questions I’ve always asked the students is, is this what you thought engineering was before you came here. And sometimes they say no, it’s totally different, and I think that’s possibly why there aren’t any females, because their concept of engineering is hard graft. So it’s wrong, because they just do not know, and if they came round and did work experience, it would open their mind.’

In fact one employer had set out to get involved in presentations because they knew first-hand of the shortcomings of the guidance offered to some pupils:

‘I know that was missing when I left school, the actual guidance on various types of jobs and the ins and outs of them and what they entail. We got very, very little information and so you made a decision based on not a great deal of thought. That’s why I’m keen to be involved.’

However it needs to be acknowledged that even amongst these partnerships such employers were rare. It needs also to be recognised that many employers have no previous experience of working with this age group or with schools. Where an

employer has no previous experience of working with young people and/or with schools then they may need guidance from the school, college or training provider about what will be expected of them and how best to approach their role. It should also be borne in mind that schools, colleges and training providers might also need guidance in learning what to ask for from employers.

One way in which employers could get involved is by agreeing to act as role models or mentors for young people. This is particularly the case in areas that remain strongly segregated. The need for more employers to serve as role models or become involved in mentoring schemes in schools is emphasised by the following comments from the IES work on Young Apprenticeships:

'As far as gender segregation goes, in my honest opinion, engineering needs earlier work to get young people progressing through. It's too late to leave it until they have left school. We need more role models – more successful female engineers going into schools. How often do girls get to meet female engineers?'

This emphasises again the value of employers becoming involved with younger age groups if they hope to influence career decisions. Employers – and indeed schools – may need some help in thinking about how to organise events, but the following shows how relatively simple ideas can be used to great effect, with relatively little effort on behalf of the employer (or indeed, employee).

In Year 9 we have an equal opportunities morning, we make a conscious effort to bring in for example a female police chief, a male nurse, female engineer, and do a sort of 'What's My Line' with them, the pupils have to ask them questions and work out what their job is.'

Example given by Ernesford Grange school, in Newton et al. (2007)

The training provider TDR is involved in offering Young Apprenticeships in engineering and as part of the subject selection process offers schools the opportunity of an Industry Day for their pupils. At each of the Industry Days, the YA Lead makes a presentation about engineering and then introduces employers to the pupils. The employers give a presentation about work-placements in their organisation and answer questions from the pupils. Following this, there were activities for pupils to work on such as building a crash barrier or wind tunnel and other such practical activities. Employers helped out with these practical activities, which had the added benefit that they got to know the young people who might come to them on placement.

Example given by TDR, in Newton et al. (2007).

The extent to which employers are able to field a 'diverse' range of mentors or role models will of course depend largely on the diversity of the local sector workforce and the nature of the companies with which the partnerships are engaged. On the whole, fielding somebody who is enthusiastic and friendly is likely to be the most important factor on which to focus in the first instance. Just being able to get pupils talking about their views of the sector can be valuable, as the earlier chemical process example reveals. But importantly, what these examples show is that employer involvement does not have to be very onerous; and providers can help by giving clear guidance on the sorts of ways in which employers can help. It doesn't have to be 'work placement or nothing'.

However, looking at the group of employers that did get involved in offering placements to the young apprentices, what they often found was that the work experience could provide a useful way to pre-screen and (ultimately) recruit

enthusiastic young people to apprenticeships or other post-16 training programmes after they have completed the Young Apprenticeship. So this helped the employer with their recruitment efforts too. This issue emerged in the second project I am going to speak about.

In the Women in London's economy project we examined the factors affecting the position of women in the London workforce. The work was commissioned by the GLA and the aim was to look at ways of encouraging women into the more profitable and expanding parts of the economy. At that time these were: financial services; legal services; ICT; creative and media; and administration.

When we spoke to employers in those sectors, some in fact mentioned that they had been seeking to attract a more diverse applicant pool. Largely this had involved attempting to attract graduates from the under-represented groups, with little or not effect, often spending large amounts of money in so doing:

'In 2001/2 the company ran a series of women in IT events. These were aimed at females at university who were just starting to think about their career options. There were three events which cost £80,000 between them. The events attracted 300 females. This generated a small blip in female applications...it is difficult to justify the cost as the company may only get a few extra applicants for a good deal of money.' (IT employer)

If you stop to think about it for a minute or so, the reason for this is fairly obvious.

Because many of the areas of interest were strongly gender-segregated there are not

many women coming out of universities with qualifications in these areas, and many of the women who might in principle be interested will have made qualification choices which disbar them from entry to certain sectors. The employers recognised this point:

'There is a barrier to recruiting women for technical jobs. The "talent pipeline" is less than representative of the population from when pupils start to select their subjects. Fewer girls take science and maths and this starts at about 16 and then filters through to university and then to the number of applicants.' (Technology employer)

'The company has done some research and found that only 20 per cent of students on IT courses are female. Females are simply not there to be recruited.' (IT employer)

'Another barrier is that we look for graduates in maths, economics and engineering and women don't focus as much as men on those disciplines.' (Financial institution)

So the employers recognised that work needed to be done to encourage a broader group of entrants to these areas of study but that was as far as it went. As part of the overall programme of work we spoke to employers, undergraduate and postgraduate students and school pupils. One of the first key findings was that in fact schoolchildren were often keen to find work placements in these sectors in which employers claimed to be seeking to recruit a more diverse workforce. However, they found that work placements with such employers were hard to come by:

'A lot of us didn't have much option where we could go, we didn't know where or how to organise it. I regret not going somewhere more interesting that would have helped me in seeing what the work environment is like.' (Female undergraduate)

'I wanted to do something like working in a bank. They didn't have any of those options so then I went to do hairdressing.' (Schoolgirl)

'I worked in a vets but it wasn't what I wanted to do. I wanted to do something creative like design work. She didn't have options like that.' (Schoolgirl)

Providing work experience opportunities in these sectors is one way to promote job opportunities and promote a company to potential recruits as an 'employer of choice'. There is almost an open field for any employer that decided to start offering placement opportunities to young people. If employers did offer placements to school children, they would find they were attacking the problem on two fronts: first of all, some of the placement students might well decide afterwards that this is the industry for them, and opt to study the subject at university, thus increasing the diversity of the pool of graduates. However, as our work with young apprentices has also suggested, some of the placement students would be keen to return to working with their placement employer once they complete their studies. So these are two ways in which providing work placements would help employers both in the short and the longer term.

However, in my view the most important issue here is that as well the offering of placements to school children being a potentially more *effective* route to recruitment (and recruiting a more diverse workforce), it would also be a far *cheaper* approach. Taking the IT company I referred to earlier as an example: here we have a company spending in the region of £80,000 trying to recruit from a tiny pool of graduates and acknowledging the reason for that pool of graduates being tiny. It's difficult to believe that offering work placements would cost even a fraction of that amount – and would actually start to address their recruitment difficulty at its roots, by

impacting on the information that young people have to inform the choices they make while at school.

Conclusions

There is a range of ways in which employers could get involved. Giving a short talk or leading a discussion about their sector or industry are perhaps the easiest. Helping to run a taster session to give young people an idea of the sorts of activities involved in a job is another – this can either be on site at the employer's company or at the school or training provider's site. A work experience session – either stand-alone or as part of a training programme – is perhaps the best we could hope for.

In my view one of the things that needs to be most actively promoted is the potential for placements to create enthusiastic and loyal future employees for companies. If the IT company's experiences is anything to judge by, it could save them literally tens of thousands of pounds in recruitment activities.

But the problems seem to be getting employers even to the point of thinking that 'it could be you'. Two employers in different projects said words to the effect of 'someone should do this' – that is, talk to schools – but it didn't seem that it had ever occurred to them to volunteer and no-one had ever invited them. What is perhaps needed is guidance to be provided for employers to help encourage them to speak to schools and offer placements. They need to be invited, and it needs to be made easy. And perhaps that means that some guidance needs to be provided to schools and

colleges to help them think about how to invite employers to get involved and how to support employers in doing this.

Perhaps the most useful actions to take would be:

Be proactive. If schools, training providers and other relevant bodies were more proactive in approaching employers, this would be likely to pay off: many employers do not become involved simply because they do not know how.

Assess and publicise the benefits. Where employers are involved in activities, evaluate the impact and value of their involvement – this will help keep the present employers engaged and help demonstrate to other employers that involvement with young learners can have real benefits, such as promoting jobs in their company and making them an ‘employer of choice’.

Make it simple. There are many ways in which employers could be involved; it does not have to be through a work placement or apprenticeship. Giving a talk about the company or the industry at a career event, arranging a day visit, offering mock interviews are all less time-intensive yet valuable ways in which employers can become involved. If a school or other education and training provider is going to approach an employer then it would be useful for them to provide a list of the different ways in which the employer could become involved and contact details for the person with whom they should get in touch should they decide that they are able to offer some type of input.

Help make links. What would be helpful would be an easy way by which employers can register their interest in becoming involved. A good example of this is provided at the Year of Farming website which offers a registration service that allows schools and farms to make contact with each other. A central registration forum and database could be established that would allow employers to register their willingness to be involved; this might be undertaken by either the Department for Education at national level or by local education authorities or education-business partnerships at local level. Alternatively this is something that Sector Skill Councils might become involved with at a sectoral level.

Give guidance. Many employers are willing to help but have limited time and resources to give to finding out what is wanted. Provide guidance – in many cases there is guidance already available that can be used or adapted, such as that provided by the Royal Society on being a role model and the Frequently Asked Questions for farmers who are considering inviting schools to their farms. Alternatively, the development of simple guidance for employers on a range of activities is something that education-business partnerships might consider funding.

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