

Employer engagement: meeting the challenges

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British teachers' perspectives on the comparative efficacy of different work-related learning activities provide the basis for a useful toolkit, writes Nick Chambers, CEO, Education and Employers charity

Over the last generation, various UK governments have in different ways encouraged, enabled, even required state secondary schools and colleges to adopt teaching approaches and provide careers activities to better prepare young people for working life. These examples of work-related learning, ranging from the technical and vocational education initiative of the 1980s to the statutory requirement for work-related learning at key stage 4 and the 'inspiration agenda'

of the current decade have become mainstream elements of British educational experiences.

However, the type of activities promoted through such initiatives have been inconsistently evaluated with relatively little distinction, in research or policy, between activities and how young people can be expected to respond to them.

A 2016 study, 'Towards an employer engagement toolkit: British teachers' perspectives on the comparative efficacy of work-related learning activities' by Education and Employers' Director of Research Anthony Mann and colleagues explores professional perceptions of the comparative value



of different employer engagement activities. It explicitly investigates what schools staff think about the impact of those activities in terms of employability skills, attainment and student progression. The study is based on two premises: that different activities might be used by schools staff to achieve different goals for young people; and that students can be expected to respond to different activities in differing ways.

What 390 secondary school staff think about work-related activities

The study explores the perceptions of 390 secondary school staff about the value of 16 different work-related activities that students commonly undertake between ages 12-16. The aim was to enable more effective use of such resources through intervention toolkits. The report asks whether it is possible to distinguish between activities which aim to improve students' ultimate success in education and the labour market, and so enable a more strategic approach to their use in schools and colleges.

The methodology used to explore these questions is unusual. It effectively 'crowd sources' the informed perspectives of hundreds of secondary school staff. The study presented respondents with a list of 16 common activities and secured their views about their comparative value in achieving 10 different academic, employment or aspirational objectives. It also distinguished between five different types of young people: low achievers, borderline achievers, high achievers, learners with special educational needs, and disengaged and/or unmotivated learners.

Respondents were asked for their perspectives only on activities which took place within their schools. The full sample group comprised staff members from UK education institutions including non-selective state schools, selective state schools and independent schools. In all, 390 individuals with experience of working with students at key stages 3 and 4 completed the survey.

The study uncovers a widespread belief that many of the activities are effective in achieving different outcomes and supporting different types of student. All 16 activities were on at least one occasion listed among the five most effective activities; 12 of the 16 activities were endorsed as being an effective means of achieving different outcomes, on one or more occasion, by 70% or more of respondents with experience of the intervention.

The broad findings included:

- » Effective provision involves use of a variety of different activities – with an emphasis on real-world experience (direct engagement with workplaces and employee volunteers).
- » Different groups of young people are felt to respond in different ways to different types of activity.
- » Different outcomes are better achieved by use of different activities.

Looking specifically at the activities most valued by informed practitioners in securing different outcomes, responses can be clustered around three key themes: sustained engagement with working in the world; career exploration and recruitment skills; enterprise competitions.

For example, enterprise competitions were felt to be especially effective in developing problem-solving and communication skills while student volunteering was valued most highly in developing self-management.

Turning to different student types, the study finds that different types of young people are felt to respond in different ways to different types of activity, with responses clustering around two themes. Sustained engagement with the working world was perceived to be more effective for lower ability students; while career exploration and recruitment skills worked better for higher achievers.

Advice for practice

The typical young British adult leaves schooling having engaged with employers on fewer than two occasions over their secondary education (Kashefpakdel et al. 2016). The evidence presented in the paper suggests that this is not enough. To a strong degree, teaching staff believe that participation in most of the activities discussed in the study helps young people achieve important outcomes within and after schooling. The activities can be clustered within three primary thematic groups – see below.

Sustained engagement with the working world

Activities*	Felt to be particularly effective in outcomes:	Felt to be particularly effective for students:
Work experience	Self-management	Low achievers
Community volunteering	Accessing part-time work	Borderline achievers
Mentoring		Disengaged learners



Career exploration

Activities	Felt to be particularly effective in outcomes:	Felt to be particularly effective for students:
Career talks Career fairs Workplace visits Job shadowing Mock interviews Psychometric testing	Understanding of the world of work Career thinking Decision making	High achievers

Enterprise activities

Activities	Felt to be particularly effective in outcomes:	Felt to be particularly effective for students:
One-day enterprise competitions Long-form enterprise competitions Learner enterprises	Problem-solving Team working skills	Any

* Activities in **bold**, which routinely give students first-hand encounters with workplaces and working professionals, are most highly regarded by schools' staff

In addition, a fourth category is of activities relating to teaching and learning (including curriculum teaching, learning resources, financial education and WRL qualifications). These were highly valued individually, but not in a clear pattern in relation to particular outcomes or groups of students.

Teachers collectively argue in this survey that students should not be treated as a homogeneous group. Their differences – notably by achievement level – mean they respond to different activities in different ways.

Work experience presents a specific challenge to schools, policymakers and researchers: of all 16 activities studied, it is by far the most highly regarded. Schools' staff see it as one of the five most effective activities across 12 of 15 categories of outcome and student type. Indeed, on nine occasions it appears in the top three and on five occasions is endorsed by more than 70% of respondents with first-hand experience of observing its impact on young people.

Such positive perceptions tally with other published data (Mann 2012; QCA 2004) from both teaching staff

and students. Quantified analysis, however, has only in a very limited way been able to identify positive impacts from participation in work experience in terms of either educational or economic outcomes (Hughes et al. 2016).

Work experience decline

With student participation in work experience at key stage 4 declining rapidly since 2010 (Archer and Moote 2016; QCA 2004) important questions are raised about what may have been lost by young people and the extent to which related, less demanding activities have been able to take its place.

With regard to the design and planning of careers provision, the consensus of the 390 surveyed British teaching staff suggests:

- 1: Students should take part in a variety of different work-related activities.
- 2: Priority should be given to activities involving real-world workplace experience.
- 3: As a minimum, students should take part in at least one activity over KS3-4 in each of the following:
 - » sustained engagement with the working world, including work experience, community volunteering and mentoring
 - » development of career exploration and recruitment skills, including career talks, career fairs, workplace visits, mock interviews and job shadowing
 - » skill development through enterprise activities such as one-day and longer enterprise competitions.
- 4: The needs of higher and lower achievers should be considered separately. Students should not be treated as a homogeneous group. They are different – notably by achievement level – and can be expected respond to different activities in different ways. ■

The full publication can be downloaded free:
goo.gl/jsEhSc

More information about the study:
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For a free library of research resources related to employer engagement in education:
goo.gl/hWehsC

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