

Executive Summary

Work Experience: Past, Present and Future

Published by the Education and Employers charity on 25 June 2026 and funded by the DHL UK Foundation. Authors: Dr Anthony Mann, Professor Prue Huddleston, Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE, Dr Chris Percy, with Georgie Benzecry and Nick Chambers.

About this report

This report presents analysis of research, unprecedented in its detail, on the impact of employer engagement in lower secondary education (students aged 11-16) based on extensive research from the UK and around the world. It draws on three new surveys of young adults aged 19 to 26, teachers and small employers, an analysis of OECD PISA data and 47 OECD longitudinal studies, an audit of Government and large employer websites, and a previously unpublished examination of Government spending on work experience. It is being published ahead of the Government's response to Rt Hon. Alan Milburn's *'Young People and Work'* review.

Why this matters now

Over one million young people aged 16 to 24 are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET), a figure that the Milburn review says is a *"generational fault line requiring urgent action"*. It estimates the cumulative annual cost to the country at £125 billion with the number of young people who are NEET set to rise by an additional 500,000 to 800,000 in the next five years. The report cites the importance of work experience numerous times and in his foreword, Milburn says: *"Ensuring fewer young people leave school at risk of becoming NEET depends on getting the right balance in the school curriculum and the right exposure to work experience and careers guidance."*

The picture is made more acute by a crisis in career awareness. The OECD reports that **46% of UK 15-year-olds have no clear career expectation, up from just 5% in 2000**, placing England among the worst performers of 80 countries surveyed. Moreover, when they do have plans their aspirations are concentrated around a small number of mainly traditional jobs with 50% of young people apparently focused on just 10 jobs, such as being an actor, doctor or lawyer.

Key finding 1: Work experience works and the evidence is stronger than ever: it prevents poor outcomes in adulthood

The study finds that when young people can recall more employer engagement, they are substantially less likely to have been NEET between 16 and 18. For instance, the 25% of young people who reported the highest levels of employer engagement before the age of 16 had **80% lower odds of being NEET** than comparable peers who experienced the least. They also have much better odds of having a clear post-GCSE plan, getting onto the course/training they wanted, and feeling what they did at 16-18 was useful in the long-term. These findings are qualitatively consistent with the analysis undertaken for the report of 47 international longitudinal studies, completed or

reviewed by the OECD, 85% of which find significant evidence that teenage workplace experience leads to better employment outcomes. The economic case is compelling. One of the report's authors has calculated that each young person who becomes NEET represents a lifetime cost of £54,000 to the public purse.

Key finding 2: The Government's Work Experience Guarantee is undeliverable without proper support

The Department for Education's (DfE) widely anticipated new statutory guidance covers approximately 3.1 million students and requires an estimated three million placement days per year for under-16s alone. **Yet, 94% of teachers said job shadowing would be difficult or very difficult to organise, and 81% said the same for workplace visits.** Around 58% of KS4 students currently participate in some form of work experience. Schools face a shortage of quality placements with competition from other schools and colleges, rising travel costs and staff capacity pressures. Increasingly they also find themselves in competition from Higher Education Institutions, and now arguably with Government itself with the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and its new 'Jobs Guarantee' programme. Without proper support, many fear the policy will become a tick-box exercise. The Government is not practising what it preaches - only 22% of government departments mention work experience on their own websites. **The DfE, the DWP and the Cabinet Office do not appear to offer placements to under-16s.**

Key finding 3: The current system advantages the advantaged and mandating it without infrastructure will make this worse

Our surveys found that **81% of young people currently rely on family and friends** to find their own work experience placements. 78% of school staff agree that family connections are the primary reason some students benefit much more than others. Mainstream schools estimate that two in five students require additional support to secure meaningful work experience placements. Without the infrastructure to support less connected young people, making work experience mandatory will only deepen this inequality rather than close it - the best opportunities will go to those who already have the best connections, leaving the most disadvantaged with the least. **It will only serve to advantage the advantaged.**

Key finding 4: The geography of inequality of where professionals work shapes what young people can imagine

The inequalities young people face in encountering the world of work are vividly illustrated by new analysis undertaken for the report of where barristers, solicitors and civil servants work. Drawing on data from the Bar Council, the Law Society and the DfE's school census, the report reveals striking geographical concentrations. **There are 34 times as many barristers per young person in London compared to the North East,** and 23 times as many compared to the East of England.

Civil servants, particularly at the senior level, remain disproportionately concentrated in the capital with **4,470 based in London** compared to 275 in the West Midlands and just **105 in the East Midlands.** Thus, for a young person growing up outside London and the South East, the practical likelihood of meeting a senior civil servant or barrister, whether through school, family connections or community, is vanishingly small. This is not simply a matter of missed aspiration; it is a structural inequality embedded in the geography of professional Britain. It reinforces the case for good quality

interactive virtual employer engagement as a complement to in-person work experience placement, enabling young people anywhere in the country to meet professionals they would otherwise never encounter while underscoring why a national, coordinated approach to work experience is essential rather than optional.

Key finding 5: The Government's careers information service is not fit for purpose for young people

In 2012, the National Careers Council, established by Government, recommended that the National Careers Service, which was then largely focused on adults, should focus far more on young people and it should radically overhaul its online offer to them. Fourteen years on, little has changed. The format is not engaging for young people and doesn't reflect how they search for and access information. One telling example: when a student searches for career opportunities in the green sector. The first choice of suggested job is that of a Royal Marines Commando - because commandos wear green berets. **Those searching for careers in AI find train driver, paint sprayer and waiter among the top 10 suggestions.** Nor is it sufficiently accessible to the parents and carers who remain the single biggest influence on young people's career choices. This is not a system fit for a generation making high-stakes decisions about their future. The report calls for a reformed, genuinely youth-focused national careers resource.

Four options for Government

The report presents four possible approaches, each with different implications for ambition, cost and deliverability. They are not mutually exclusive and are designed to stimulate discussion rather than to prescribe a single answer.

- **Option 1** — Current intention for schools and employers to manage placements: no additional funding or infrastructure created. The report's evidence suggests that the inequalities will continue and most likely widen, with the additional needs of many students not being addressed. Full compliance is also unlikely and with 'tick box' responses to be expected.
- **Option 2** — Significant support and infrastructure: reinstating the national brokerage infrastructure that supported work experience participation rates of 90%+ in the 1990s and 2000s, at an estimated cost then of approximately £100 million per year. Put another way, this is the equivalent of building just two football pitches' length of HS2.
- **Option 3** — Targeted funding and prioritisation rather than universal support. Concentrating additional resource on the young people who face the greatest additional barriers - SEND pupils, care leavers, those in high-deprivation or rural areas, and those most at risk of becoming NEET.
- **Option 4** — Wider systemic approach: Where KS3 interventions take place in-schools or virtually, enabling employers to give their time and resource to host visits/placements at their workplace for older students in KS4 and KS5. This acknowledges the importance of early interventions. It suggests a government-funded brokerage service focused on work experience placements, with a clear national framework; and a focus on providing young people with career advice and the overhauling of the National Careers Service website for young people and overseen by the organisations representing schools and employers.

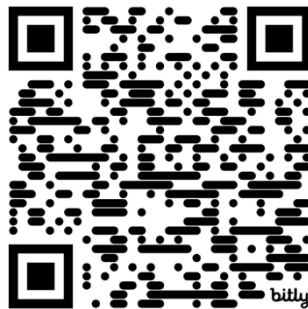
The case for action

The evidence brought together in this report makes a compelling case: work experience works as do other forms of employer engagement, but the current system cannot deliver it fairly, and the cost of inaction - measured in wasted talent, rising welfare costs and widening inequality - is far greater than the modest investment required to get it right. **With one million young people NEET and the Milburn Review's solutions report due in Autumn 2026, the window for decisive action is now.**

Education and Employers' own commitments

The charity is committed to doing all it can to help young people achieve their potential and is committing to expanding its *Inspiring the Future*¹ platform, which makes it quick, simple and easy for employers and schools to connect. Over 13,500 schools have registered, nearly 100,000 people have signed up as volunteers, and to date it has enabled over 7 million interactions between young people and the world of employment. It is an approach that has been cited as a global exemplar by the OECD and replicated by other countries. We will also intensify our work in the primary sector, building on the partnership with the National Association of Headteachers that began in 2014.

Work Experience: Past, Present and Future is published on 25 June 2026 and available here:



¹ www.inspiringthefuture.org