

Work Experience

Past, present and future

June 2026

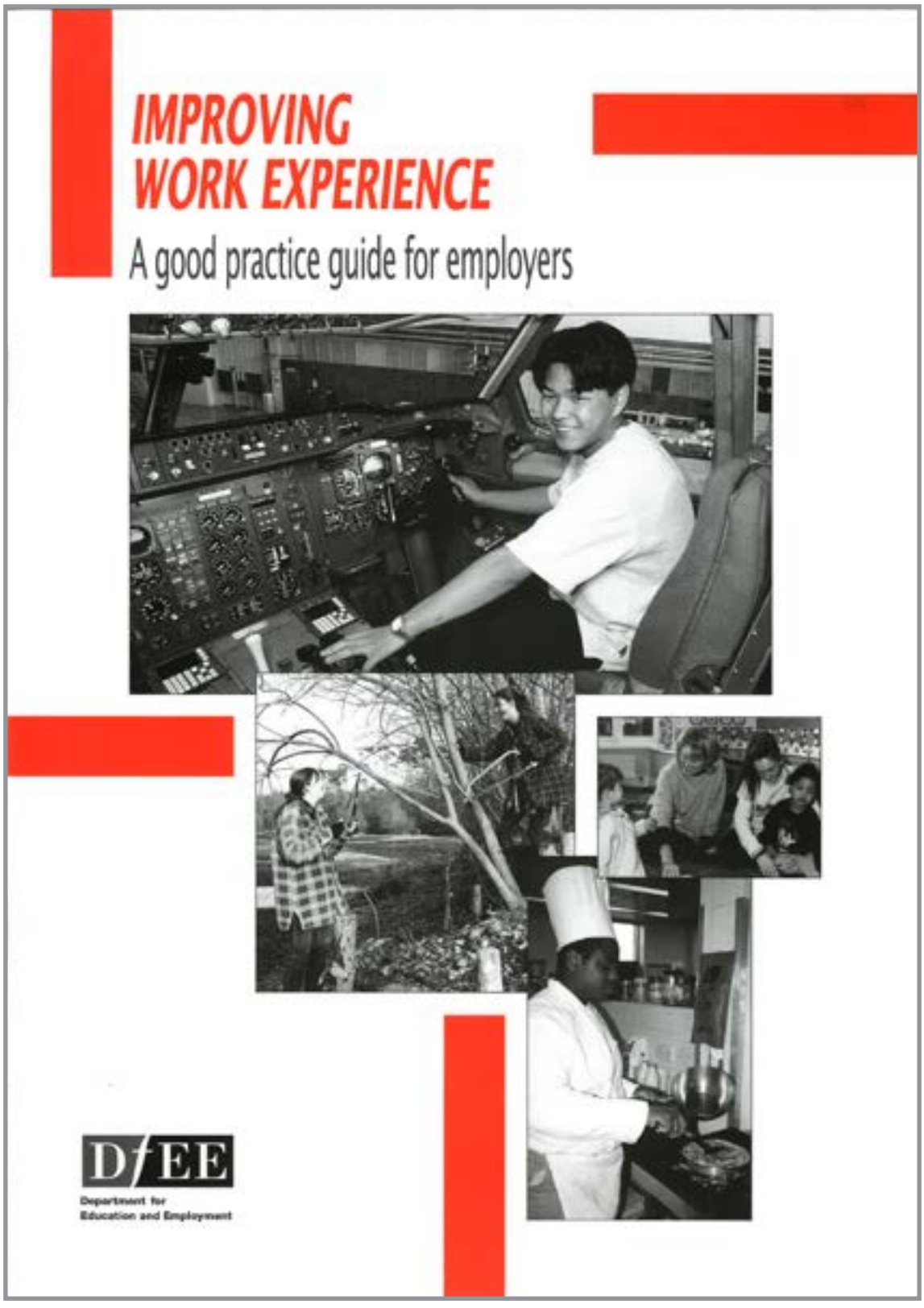
DHL UK FOUNDATION | education and employers

Dr Anthony Mann and Professor Prue Huddleston, Associate Professor Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE,
Dr Chris Percy with contributions from Georgie Benzecry and Nick Chambers



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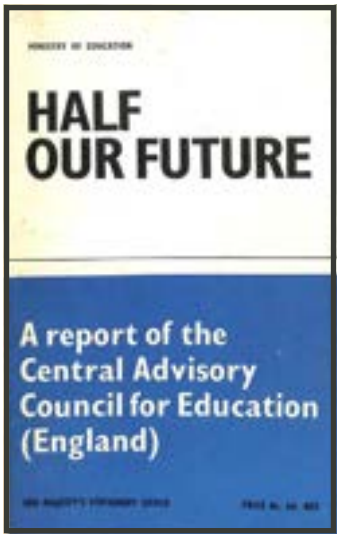

IMPROVING
WORK EXPERIENCE
A good practice guide for employers
D/EE
Department for
Education and Employment

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This is a publication of the Education and Employers Charity. It was launched in 2009 which aims to *"provide children and young people with the inspiration, motivation, knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to help them achieve their potential"*. It does this though connecting schools and colleges with volunteers from the world of work at scale, quickly, easily and for free using innovative state-of-the-art matchmaking technology it has developed called *Inspiring the Future*. The charity also undertakes research into the effectiveness of employer engagement and works with a wide range of partners and governments internationally. Its work has been featured by the likes of the OECD and the World Economic Forum and its video *'Redraw the Balance'* showing that stereotyping starts at a young age has been viewed over 100 million times.

Both Education and Employers and the authors wish to thank the DHL UK Foundation for its support in making this work possible and particularly Caroline Courtois and Emma Stratford for their deep engagement in the project.



Foreword

This report is the outcome of a reference given to the Central Advisory Council for Education (England) by my predecessor, Lord Eccles, in March 1961.

I am sure there is a need for wide public discussion of many of the Council's findings and recommendations. The teaching profession, the local education authorities and the Government will need to consider, both individually and jointly, the many recommendations that call for new initiatives, particularly in the fields of research and development. But I agree with the Council that there is above all a need for new modes of thought; and a change of heart, on the part of the community as a whole. We who are professionally and constitutionally concerned with the work of the schools cannot hope to discover the true needs of these pupils, and the best means of meeting them, without the backing of widely informed public opinion.

We therefore owe a great debt of gratitude to Mr John Newsom and his colleagues on the Council for the skill and care with which they have defined the problem, and so admirably prepared the ground for what I hope will be a general raising of sights in our attitudes towards these pupils. Their potentialities are no less real, and of no less importance, because they do not readily lend themselves to measurement by the conventional criteria of academic achievement. The essential point is that all children should have an equal opportunity of acquiring intelligence, and of developing their talents and abilities to the full.

EDWARD BOYLE

August, 1963.

220. As well as meeting visitors in school, the pupils themselves need to go out and explore. Sometimes, they may go as small teams carrying out a particular investigation. At others, they may be taking part in a series of visits planned to give them glimpses of different types of industry or to take them to places of cultural interest. Always they will need good preliminary briefing. Many schools do already arrange excellent programmes of this kind, but there is room for more experiment in this field, especially in relating the experiences of the visits more closely to the rest of the work in school.

The pupils themselves ought to be brought in as much as possible to the initial planning and organisation and making of arrangements. In the management of themselves and their contacts with other people outside the familiar school situation, and in the subsequent presentation of their experience, they can learn much, quite apart from any specific information they may have acquired

221. One source of outside experience on which to base studies in school could be community service projects such as we have discussed earlier. Another ready to hand, but seldom put to use, is the spare-time employment which many pupils obtain for themselves. In our sample, forty-two per cent of the fourth year boys and fifteen per cent of the girls had an out of school job. Such work is not likely to have much bearing on the kind of employment they eventually take up - a great many schoolboys, for example, do paper rounds - but it can give a taste of the authentic discipline of a real job. We are not in the least recommending that all pupils should be encouraged to take part-time jobs: but if considerable numbers are doing so anyway, teachers might as well take account of the fact and help the pupils to make useful sense of the experience.

About the authors

Dr Anthony Mann led the OECD Career Readiness project from its launch in 2019 to 2025. His previous roles include policy development within the Department for Education and Director of Policy and Research at Education and Employers. He has published widely on youth career development and works internationally as an independent researcher and policy consultant.

Professor Prue Huddleston is Emeritus Professor and formerly Director of the Centre for Education and Industry, at the University of Warwick. She has a particular interest in the 14-19 curriculum, focusing on vocational education and work-related learning and has published widely on vocational learning and applied pedagogy. Before joining the University of Warwick, she worked within the Further Education sector, as a teacher and manager. She is a Governor and Chair of Academic Quality and Standards Committee at Birmingham Metropolitan College. She is a member of OCR Standards Advisory Board; City and Guilds Quality and Standards Committee and an Editorial Board member of the Journal of Vocational Education and Training.

Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE is Co-Founder of CareerChat UK Ltd, CEO of dmh associates, and an academic researcher at the University of Warwick's Institute for Employment Research (IER), currently trialling an evaluation framework for the use of LLM-powered careers advice. A former Chair of the National Careers Council in England and a UKCES Commissioner, in 2012 she was awarded the Order of the British Empire by Her Majesty the Queen in recognition of her services to lifelong guidance. She has published extensively in academic and professional journals, and co-edited three Routledge books on decent work and sustainability, migration and wellbeing, and creative methods in guidance and counselling. She is a Legacy Fellow of the Career Development Institute (CDI) and Vice President of the IAEVG.

Dr Chris Percy is a consulting researcher working primarily on emerging technologies, career trajectories, and economic development. He has some 20 years of cross-sector experience and over 50 academic and sector publications. Past clients include the OECD, the World Bank, the Royal Society, the Open University, EU organisations such as Cedefop, local authorities and government departments across all four nations of the UK, and governments in the Middle East and East Asia. Chris is a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Derby and served previously as interim Director of Academic Strategy at Kings College London. His current Research and Development work includes exploring quantum technologies for learning, the metaphysical nature of artificial intelligence, and the potential for large language model AI to improve careers support.

Nick Chambers is the CEO of Education and Employers. Following a degree in Environmental Management Nick obtained a PGCE at Manchester University and started his teaching career in Wigan. In 1996 he was appointed Development Director at a state school where he taught design technology and science. This appointment, the first of its kind, included responsibilities for employer engagement and was featured in the *TES:* '*Teacher with the Midas Touch*'. Nick is the founding Chair of the Institute of Development Professionals in Education, which celebrated its 25th anniversary in 2025. He was then Director of Development at St Paul's School, London before joining Business in the Community as Director of Education looking at how employers could most effectively work with and support schools and young people. Nick has been a Member of the SEARCH Education Trust in Haringey, London since 2016.



Work Experience
Past, present and future

OVERVIEW AND OPTIONS

Today's generation of young people is the most educationally qualified in history. Yet despite talent and potential being evenly distributed, a young person's socio-economic background remains the single biggest determinant of their future success.

For many young people the world of work is daunting and difficult to understand. The last 20 years have seen the creation of a plethora of new jobs and roles, with job titles that are challenging even for adults to decode. This is compounded by the influence of social media on perceptions of work and by widespread concern that AI is fundamentally reshaping the labour market, with entry-level roles particularly at risk. It has led to further uncertainty and a lack of confidence, exacerbated by challenging macro-economic conditions that can easily result in young people disengaging altogether.

Indeed, the DfE report '*The risk factors of becoming NEET*', May 2026[1] suggested that persistent absence and low engagement with school are significant contributing factors, due in part to young people not seeing the relevance of education to the world of work and the opportunities open to them.

Over a million young people are currently not in education, employment or training (NEET). The Rt Hon Alan Milburn in his '*Young People and Work: Diagnostic Report*'[2] May 2026, raised the very real prospect of a 'lost generation'. Set against the backdrop of the decline in entry level jobs and that the 16-19 population is set to reach its highest level in a generation by 2030. He is right to call this a crisis – one we must address as a matter of urgency.



Young People and Work: Diagnostic Report, 2026

And the problem is not restricted to young people who are NEET. The 2025 OECD report on global teenage career preparation[3] found that **46% of young people in the UK are uncertain about their career options**, nearly double 2018's level of 24%. In fact, the UK was one of the worst performers of 80 countries surveyed. Moreover, 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.

This report sets out to understand why concerns over the transitions of young people from education to employment are so acute and, critically, what we can collectively do about it. It examines extensive research from around the world supplemented with new surveys of schools, employers and young people.

1 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/risk-factors-for-becoming-neet-a-statistical-analysis-using-linked-data
2 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report
3 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/the-state-of-global-teenage-career-preparation_d5f8e3f2-en.html

Ratio of youth to adult unemployment

The ratio of youth unemployment to adult unemployment has been rising steadily for the past 25 years and is now at an all-time high, meaning a young person is far less likely to secure a job than an adult. As many have observed, young people are often caught in a catch-22: they must demonstrate work experience before they can get a job, yet with the **decline of part-time work, holiday jobs, and Saturday jobs**, obtaining that experience has become increasingly difficult.

We have also seen a significant decline in the number of young people starting an apprenticeship, which has nearly halved in the last ten years to around 75,000. In England, unlike many other countries, apprenticeships tend to be undertaken by people already in the labour market rather than those at the school-to-work transition point.

Much of what determines a young person's access to experiences of the world of work still comes down to social capital – **who they know, and who their parents/carers know**. Those from well-connected backgrounds secure the best opportunities; those from disadvantaged backgrounds – often the young people who would benefit most – are left behind. It is a structural inequality that schools and colleges, for all their dedication, cannot fix alone. In a survey undertaken for this report 81% of schools said that all or most students were required to find their own placements.

We are in effect risking reinforcing a system which advantages the advantaged and disadvantages the disadvantaged. This report examines work experience in depth – its history, and the evidence for its impact. We explore the significant challenges facing the Government's commitment to guarantee ten days of work experience for every young person under 16. That is an enormous logistical undertaking, set against a backdrop of declining employer participation, socio economic challenges, and a lack of national infrastructure focused on good quality, effective work experience placements.

New research commissioned for this report reveals a striking finding: young people who experience the highest levels of employer engagement before the age of 16 have 80% lower odds of becoming NEET compared to those who had the least experience. Our research also finds that schools and colleges are enthusiastic about the principle but seriously concerned about delivery – with 94% saying that pupils aged 14-16 require additional personalised support to participate meaningfully.

Without meaningful resources, coordination, and a simplified system, there is a real risk that the policy provides little benefit to the young people it is designed to help. Employers, too, are willing in principle but frequently deterred by bureaucracy, competing demands, and the lack of a coherent national framework.

This report presents **four options** on how government, schools, colleges and employers might work together to turn a well-intentioned manifesto commitment into a genuinely transformative programme. A programme that reduces NEET numbers, challenges inequality, and equips every young person with a comprehensive understanding of the opportunities open to them, providing them with the real-world experience they need to succeed.

We do not underestimate the scale of the challenge, nor that work experience is just one part of the solution to a complex problem. But the cost of inaction – measured in wasted potential, rising youth unemployment, and widening inequality – is far greater than the cost of getting this right.

What would an ideal world look like?

The evidence brought together in this report provides incontrovertible proof that **work experience makes a difference**. It helps build young people's confidence, develops work-based skills, helps them to make clearer career decisions, and enriches their applications for employment and to many HE courses – by providing authentic insight into the world of work that cannot be replicated in the classrooms.

And, closely related to these benefits, it significantly reduces the odds of young people becoming NEET.

In an ideal world, every young person would be able to make the most of their skills and talents, confident that their background does not determine their future. As well as addressing inequalities within the labour market, this means building career awareness early. **The research[4] we have done over the last 15 years shows children as young as seven begin ruling out options based on their socio-economic background and gender.** By the time young people move through secondary school, college, and into the labour market, many lack a genuine understanding of the diversity of jobs and sectors available, the pathways needed to reach them, and the skills employers actually need.

Clearly, **fixing the careers information and guidance young people rely on is a pressing imperative**. Centralised government-provided careers information in its current guise is widely regarded as unfit for purpose – designed mainly for adults, hard to navigate, and out of step with how young people search and engage online. Parents are often the single biggest influence on their children's career choices yet often find themselves discussing careers they know little about. A trusted, high-quality national careers information resource – accessible to young people, parents, and educators alike – is long overdue. This can build on the excellent work by Skills England which has developed the UK Standard Skills Classification, a set of standardised lists of the skills, knowledge and tasks required for UK occupations.[5]

A new national careers information system could incorporate a wide range of video resources, more integrated and regularly updated Labour Market Information, and details of all the educational and training pathways and opportunities open to young people. It would help them to understand the world of employment, the routes into it, with advice and guidance about applying for jobs as well as the range of apprenticeships available. It could utilise AI, as the Department for Work and Pensions are doing for job seekers, to support, navigate, and personalise the careers information and advice for young people. Yet technology alone is never sufficient. For those who need it most, access to career guidance from trained and qualified careers professionals remains essential to ensure that no young person is left to navigate critical decisions without the human expertise, empathy, and advocacy without support.

Success in this ideal world would be measured not just by young people fulfilling their potential, but by employers finding people with the skills they need and by a significant reduction in the number of young people who are NEET. Closing the gap between young people's aspirations and labour market reality is not just a matter of fairness – it is essential to the country's economic and social future.

The Impact of Employer Engagement

The evidence for employer engagement, of which work experience placements are just one aspect, is compelling – and is also explored in detail in this report. It is now widely accepted that encounters with the world of work are vitally important for all young people. Such encounters broaden horizons, raise aspirations, challenge stereotyping, increase motivation to learn, and help young people to become well informed about the full range of modern jobs and career routes available to them. Meaningful employer engagement also helps reduce the mismatch between young people's career aspirations and the reality of the labour market.

4 https://www.educationandemployers.org/research/startingearly/

5 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/uk-standard-skills-classification-development-report/the-uk-standard-skills-classification

1963

The Newsom Report: Half our future *(extracts)*



CHAPTER 9

Going out into the World

'I couldn't believe it, you are at school and suddenly you are at work, and there are years before you are 65'. 'Home, School and Work'. M. Carter

208. Schools cannot prepare their pupils for everything that may lie ahead in all those 'years before you are 65' - or beyond - but they can make the world a slightly less confusing place for young leavers. Many conferences and courses and publications in recent years have been concerned with the transition from school to adult working life, but there is still much to be learned about effective forms of preparation, especially at the level of our pupils. All boys and girls need guidance, but the youngest and less well endowed school leavers need it especially.

209. The school can help them in several ways. It can give them, just before they leave, an extra polish intellectually, in their skills and previous learning; and personally, in attention to speech, health, dress, deportment and social behaviour. A short residential course at this stage could serve a useful purpose, although this is not, as we indicated earlier, the only type of residential course which we hope will be available to the pupils. The school can see that they have factual information for immediate needs, and some clues as to where to turn for it in the future, in connection with employment, further education, and personal interests. And it can begin to enlarge their understanding of the wider world, so that as adults they may take a more satisfying part in it.

210. As we see it, the school programme, in the last year especially, ought to be deliberately outgoing. This means taking the pupils mentally and often physically beyond the school walls. It also means bringing men and women from the world outside the walls into the school. It almost certainly demands a greater flexibility in the timetable and in methods of study. And it may require more time than is normally available inside the conventional school day.



Our Charity's landmark report ***'Employer contact at school reduces likelihood of young people becoming NEET' 2014***[6] found that young people who recalled **'four or more'** impactful encounters with the world of work were significantly less likely to become NEET. Our research has shown that higher volumes of school-mediated employer engagement are associated with reduced incidence of NEET by up to 86%[7] – a finding that has shaped careers policy ever since.

Employer engagement is uniquely valuable because it does two things at once: it helps young people understand the working world and how it relates to their education, giving them the opportunity to apply knowledge and skills developed in the classroom in real-world settings. It also helps young people to meet and interact with a diverse range of role models beyond their family and friends, and people in their community.

To be impactful, these encounters should be **authentic, multiple, and varied,** assumption-challenging, and appropriate to the activity – from career talks and mentoring to job shadowing and work experience placements. Employer engagement is, however, one element of a wider system. It works best alongside, not as a substitute for, high-quality, impartial careers guidance and up-to-date labour market information, ensuring every young person can make genuinely informed decisions about their future.

Work Experience: Context and Challenge

Work experience is far from a new concept. In 1963, the Central Advisory Council for Education documented schemes in which schools, employers and the youth employment service were collaborating to give young people direct experience of the workplace:

6 https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/media_release_neets_-_02.02.2012_final.pdf

7 https://www.educationandemployers.org/research/contemporary-transitions-young-britons-reflect-on-life-after-secondary-school-and-college/

> "We have had a number of examples, all quite separately sponsored, brought to our notice, of schemes in which schools, the youth employment service and groups of firms have co-operated in various ways. Girls have made extended visits to shops or offices, intensively for a fortnight or in a series of half-day visits spread over a term. Boys have attended factories on Saturday mornings. In a scheme organised through a Rotary club, pupils of sixteen and seventeen have spent a week with firms, covering eleven different types of occupation between them. Another school is at present engaged in arranging for small groups of pupils to pay extended observation visits to particular firms, and in one case to participate in some of the activities of the training school there".

The Chair of the Council, John Newsom presented its findings and recommendations to the Government which included that: ***"the school programme, in the last year especially, ought to be deliberately outgoing. This means taking the pupils mentally and often physically beyond the school walls. It also means bringing men and women from the world outside the walls into the school"***.

Since the introduction of government-backed work experience programmes in the 1960s, the workplace itself has undergone considerable transformation, a process that has accelerated since COVID-19. Manual tasks that were once commonplace have been largely replaced by technology, while flexible working and working from home mean that many workplaces are no longer fully staffed nine to five, five days a week. Added to this, businesses now face increasing demands around HR legislation, health and safety requirements, compliance, safeguarding, data protection, and growing economic pressures.

Schools too have undergone radical change, with far greater accountability and performance measures than before. Safeguarding regulations have rightly been tightened, making trips outside school considerably more complicated, time-consuming, and costly than in previous decades.

The term 'work experience' now covers a wide spectrum, from a traditional week-long placement to workplace visits, employer talks, school-based business simulations, and virtual or AI-enabled activities. This breadth is both a strength and a source of confusion – and, as this report shows, it matters enormously for how policy is designed and delivered.

New Policy, Real Challenges

The Labour Party in its 2024 manifesto[8] included the following statement **"We will also guarantee two weeks' worth of work experience for every young person, and improve careers advice in schools and colleges"**. The Department for Education has since outlined how this might be achieved: five days of employer-led activities at Key Stage 3, and a five-day workplace placement at Key Stage 4 – spanning a large population of around 3.1 million students. Work experience requirements also extend to Key Stage 5, FE study programmes (including 45 days for T Level students), higher education, and through the DWP's Youth Guarantee, to young people currently unemployed.

The intent is right. But the scale is daunting. We estimate that it requires circa six million days per year for the under-16s alone, rising to well over ten million per year when FE, HE, and youth unemployment schemes are included. This comes at a time when the breadth of employers offering work experience has fallen significantly, with many more reluctant to take on students under 16.

8 https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf

Schools

Our surveys of schools, colleges, employers and young people paint a consistent picture: **enthusiasm for the principle, serious concern about the practicalities**. Schools and colleges broadly welcome the policy but do not believe they have the resources to deliver it meaningfully. Without proper support, many fear it will become a tick-box exercise and one which benefits young people from well-connected backgrounds the most.

Schools find themselves in competition with other schools in the local area, colleges, and higher education institutions, as well as the organisations approaching employers to provide paid work experience for unemployed young people. Some schools have stated that they will simply repurpose existing trips to, for instance, a zoo or a museum and do a worksheet where young people can literally 'tick a box' to indicate that they have met people working in those settings. While such experiences of visiting a museum are an important component of enrichment activities for young people, they are certainly not work experience.

What might support look like? Historical infrastructure provides one example, although we should be objective about the limitations of past systems with respect to the ambitions of the present. For instance, in 2010 there was an infrastructure supporting work experience delivery with government funding of c. £100 million (equivalent to c. £160m in 2026).

Employers

Employers, too, have serious concerns about the practicalities. Despite being enthusiastic about the concept, there is considerable reluctance to get involved, with suggestions that the bureaucracy is complicated and the time requirement too high. Many face an uncoordinated stream of requests, often from multiple schools simultaneously, and concentrated in the same weeks of the year. There is no shortage of advice and guidance for employers, but the sheer volume adds to the confusion rather than reducing it. There would be considerable merit in the government providing a single authoritative source, developed with and endorsed by employer organisations.

Analysis undertaken for this report shows that **only 22% of the main government departments themselves mention that they provide work experience on their websites**. For example the Department for Education, Department for Work and Pensions and the Cabinet Office do not appear to offer work experience placements to under-16s. Our analysis of large employers showed that only 31% mentioned work experience on their website and some specifically exclude under-16s, for example the BBC, which does not provide in-person work experience placements, although it does provide open days and other valuable activities.

Numerous pilots are currently under way looking at how work placements can be arranged. These include replacing a single five-day placement with five separate one-day visits. This sounds attractive in some respects, generating insights into more workplaces for attendees and seemingly reducing the burden on any one employer. However, they multiply the organisational burden on schools and colleges and the total burden across employers is unchanged. Our Employer Survey found that hosting workplace visits for under 16s was one the most difficult ways for them of providing young people with the experiences of work.

Nonetheless, such pilots are welcome attempts to understand the complexity and options available. Similarly, the DfE's recent £8.5 million investment in the Aspiring Pathways programme (focused on learners in Alternative Provision), is a very welcome step for ensuring that work experience meets the needs of diverse learners.

To date much focus has concentrated on frameworks for schools, strategic infrastructure advice, and reporting structures, with **little funding for direct delivery to meet the needs of schools**. Whilst schools are accountable and responsible for organising work experience placements, they don't have the buying power that enables them to buy in services. Nor are they entitled to a level of service from a government-funded organisation which would provide them with a set number of placements per year. With some 3,700 secondary schools, there are significant economies of scale to be made from providing schools with some form of central service, supplemented by regional support.

Possible options

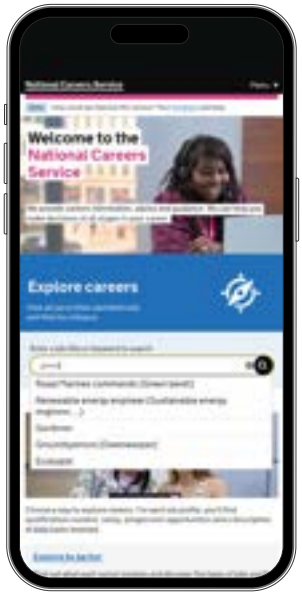
This report does not set out to tell government, schools, colleges, or employers what they should do. Its purpose is to present the evidence and set out four realistic options for moving forward – each with different implications for ambition, investment, and delivery. The four options are:

1. **Current intention for schools and employers**
2. **Significant support, infrastructure and backing**
3. **Targeted prioritisation**
4. **Wider systemic approach**

The implications of different approaches are considered in terms of the effectiveness, equity, and efficiency of provision as outlined in detail within the main report. Each option examines the challenge from three perspectives:

- which students need most support and how schools and colleges are helped to provide this;
- which employers are best placed to offer work experience and how this aligns with growth sectors and skills shortages; and
- what infrastructure needs to put in place to make delivery possible.

The fourth option is the most ambitious but not necessarily the most expensive. To put this into perspective, even the costliest option amounts to little more than the price of extending HS2 by two football pitches.[9] It looks beyond work experience in isolation to address the wider careers infrastructure that too many young people cannot access. England is widely regarded as an outlier internationally in the limited weight it gives to structured career development and skills acquisition through secondary education, and the evidence suggests that this deficit has substantial consequences.



National Careers Service website: search results for 'green' careers

In 2012, the National Careers Council in England recommended that the National Careers Service – then largely focused on adults – should redirect its attention towards young people and radically overhaul its online offer. **Fourteen years on, little has changed**. A young person searching today for jobs in the **green** sector is directed first to Royal Marines Commando – because commandos wear **green** berets. Those students looking at careers in **AI** will find in the top ten suggestions – tr**ai**n driver, p**ai**nt sprayer and w**ai**ter – all containing the letter combination 'ai'. This is not a system fit for a generation making high-stakes decisions about their future. A trusted, high-quality national resource – designed around how young people actually search and engage, and accessible to parents / carers and teachers could be delivered within one to two years. Such a system could form the backbone of other regionally focussed resources.

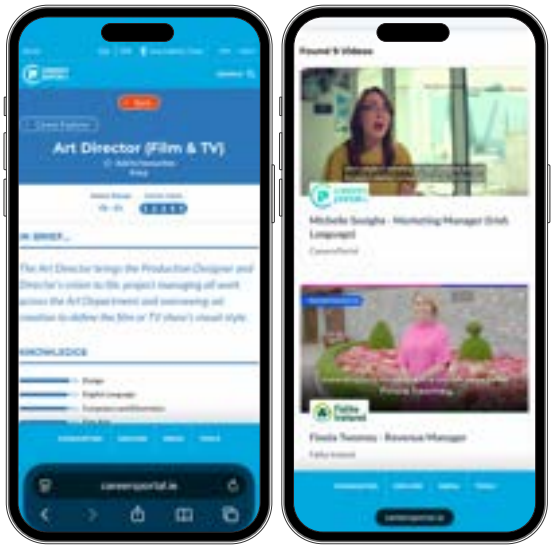
9 https://www.gov.uk/government/speeches/hs2-6-monthly-report-to-parliament-may-2026

OVERVIEW AND OPTIONS



ABOVE: Most UK colleges and universities use de-centralised funding to produce their own career guidance and information.

BELOW: CareersPortal.ie is a 'one stop shop' for those needing or providing career guidance in Ireland.



The goal is simple: every young person should have the chance to meet people from the world of work and spend time in a real workplace. What should be straightforward has become unnecessarily complicated. Simplifying the process – for young people, schools, colleges and employers alike – is essential.

Real change requires genuine buy-in from all parties, **developed collaboratively rather than imposed from above**. At present, schools and colleges bear responsibility for sourcing and organising work experience while employers are responsible for delivering it – yet the two sides are rarely brought together to reconcile supply and demand within real-world constraints.

The government has the convening power to bring together the leaders representing education and business. Using it to establish a sustained, structured partnership – rather than a one-off meeting – could unlock the progress that fragmented effort alone has not delivered.

With the right structure, support, and targeted investment, **the manifesto commitment to ten days of work experience is deliverable**. For example, an approach might be: five days' worth of employer engagement activities for KS3 students (aged 11 to 14) being delivered largely in schools (e.g. career talks in person or virtually). Building on this, KS4 & KS5 students (aged 14 to 18) would be guaranteed an in-person work placement for five days with tailored support for particular students.

This approach would also mitigate the risk of a **decline in work experience placements at KS5**. At present the DfE's guidance is that every person *"should have had at least one further meaningful workplace experience (Gatsby Benchmark 6)"*. The Gatsby definition is that this "could be achieved through visits to workplaces, work shadowing and/or work experience". While some schools' interpretation of this requirement is very varied, some schools do a full week's work experience placements because they see the value to their students. If all the measurability is at Key Stage 3 and 4, there is a very real risk that schools will drop Key Stage 5, which has huge benefits for young people.

Consideration could also be given to a national campaign aimed at encouraging employers to give half-day open days. If the government were to take the lead across all its government departments and arm's length bodies and encourage businesses to get behind it, this could have a very significant impact. It is also a simple concept, relatively easy to organise and would send an important signal. Not only that, but it would engage employers who have previously not been involved and hopefully lead them to consider offering a full week's work experience placement.

This approach has proved highly effective with the Inspiring the Future campaign where volunteers are asked to **give an hour a year.** A simple ask that's hard to turn down but has led to the engagement of lots of people and their companies then going on to do a lot more.

Playing our part

Our charity is committed to doing all it can to help young people achieve their potential. Since our launch nearly 17 years ago, there have been four Governments, seven (and soon to be eight) Prime Ministers and ten Secretaries of State for Education. Throughout that time, we have worked with organisations representing education, employers and government to explore what more can be done to help young people. We have aimed to understand how employers and schools can do so in the most effective and impactful way, ensuring that those who most need support, are able to access it. That commitment is stronger than ever.

To enable this at national scale, we developed the online *Inspiring the Future*[10] 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.

Given the scale of the challenge we face, we are keen to significantly increase the number of volunteers available and the support we provide to schools. We will also intensify our work in the primary sector, building on the partnership with the National Association of Headteachers that began in 2014. Through this partnership we developed a version of Inspiring the Future for primary schools called Primary Futures. We have also undertaken extensive research[11] into the importance of younger children meeting role models from the world of work.

This report is offered in a spirit of collaboration. Many organisations are working very hard, often on very limited budgets to tackle the same inequalities we describe here. We hope the evidence brought together in this report proves useful to schools, colleges, employers, government, charities, and everyone else committed to ensuring that all young people have the opportunities to enable them to achieve their potential, whatever background they are from.

Together we can make a positive difference to young people, guarantee that they fully understand the careers and educational pathways open to them, and by doing so also ensure that we have the future workforce we need to ensure our country's future economic and social prosperity.

Nick Chambers
CEO | Education and Employers

About Education and Employers

Education and Employers was launched jointly by the Secretaries of State for Education and Business on 15 October, 2009, to connect education and employers to *"provide young people with the inspiration, motivation, knowledge, skills and opportunities they need to help them achieve their potential"*. Now an independent charity, our focus is on the unique role employers can play in helping young people understand the world of work and make a successful transition to it. Our work has been featured by the likes of the OECD and the World Economic Forum[12] and our video *'Redraw the Balance'*[13] showing that stereotyping starts at a young age, has been viewed over 100 million times. We have also undertaken extensive research – including some 70 studies – into the most impactful contributions employers can make, and how to make engagement as easy as possible for both employers, schools, and colleges.

10 www.inspiringthefuture.org www.primaryfutures.org
11 https://www.educationandemployers.org/research/startingearly/
12 https://www.weforum.org/stories/2018/01/kids-draw-their-future-jobs-careers
13 https://www.educationandemployers.org/redraw-the-balance-10-years-on/



Four options

As the evidence in this report demonstrates, work experience makes a significant difference to young people's outcomes. What is less clear is how we go about ensuring that all young people get work experience. This report does not recommend what government, schools, colleges, or employers should do. Instead, it presents the evidence and sets out four possible options, each with different implications for ambition, investment, and delivery. They are not presented as a detailed delivery plan, nor as a menu from which one must be chosen and the rest discarded as they are not mutually exclusive. They are designed to stimulate discussion and debate.

We have chosen not to attach a definitive cost to each option. All will require funding, but in the context of this country's long-term economic future and the importance of ensuring young people are properly prepared for it the sums involved are modest. Perhaps more important than funding, however, is the collective will to act. That costs nothing. It is something that, together, we have the power to change.

The Department for Education's new policy expects all students in KS3 and KS4 education to complete 10 days of engagement with employers.

At KS3 this is at least five days of 'work experience activities', notably workplace visits and career exploration activities, primarily on employers' premises. At KS4, it is at least a five-day work experience placement in a place of work. This study estimates that currently around 58% of students in KS4 complete a work experience placement of some type. At KS3 it is unknown what proportion of students participate in career development activities on the premises of employers. This study however reveals considerable concerns over the challenges in such provision linked to transport costs, staff accompaniment requirements, and employer capacity.

We consider the likely impacts on provision at KS3 and KS4 in terms of effectiveness, equity and efficiency of provision:

- How **effective** is provision? For students, effective provision should help them understand their options, plan their next steps, and prepare for the transition into further education, training or work. For government, it should support a well-functioning labour market with enough skilled workers in key sectors and fewer young people who are NEET.
- How **equitable** is provision? Equitable employer engagement must recognise that some students face greater challenges than others, both in accessing the careers support and experiences available to them in school, and in securing fulfilling employment once they leave education. Provision that does not actively address these inequalities risks widening the gap rather than closing it.
- How **efficient** is provision? Efficient employer engagement should deliver good outcomes at the lowest possible cost to the public purse. This means minimising duplication across school, local, regional and national provision, making the most of resources that employers and other partners can contribute, and maintaining a clear understanding of the returns that public investment can be expected to generate.

OPTION 01

Current intention for schools and employers

This option considers the current DfE expectations but without the significant additional funding or the infrastructure that supported near-universal provision in 2010 when one or two weeks of work experience at KS4 was near universal. Under this option, schools and colleges would source and manage most placements. Careers Hubs working with the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) would provide frameworks, tools and resources – including for SEND students.

This is the lowest-cost option for government and places the full weight of accountability and delivery on schools and colleges. As our School Survey shows clearly, they do not believe they have the capacity to successfully deliver this policy. Barriers include staffing, resourcing, the availability of employers, and the increasing competition for work placements.

Schools are not simply competing for a finite pool of employers – they are in competition with further education and sixth-form colleges (vocational courses, including T levels, V levels (from 2027), and 16-19 study programmes), higher education institutions, and now arguably with Government itself through the DWP's new 'Jobs Guarantee' programme, which pays employers to offer work experience placements for unemployed young people.

KS3	Schools unlikely to undertake additional, large-scale, employer engagement and will adapt planned events involving whole year groups (visits to the theatre or zoo) to involve some career guidance dimension. Clarifying that acceptable provision includes well-evidenced effective in-school provision (which is delivered strategically) will optimise benefits to students.
KS4	Participation rates can be expected to increase a little.
Effectiveness	No strategic engagement of employers to address strategic skills provision; quality of work experience placements can be expected to improve marginally
Equity	Additional challenges facing vulnerable groups largely unaddressed. Unlikely to tackle inequality, and indeed likely to make it worse.
Efficiency	No savings through economies of scale as schools will continue to manage employer engagement largely independently; no savings from standardisation of administrative requirements; no investment strategy based upon understanding of reasonable returns to the public purse expected.

Implications for young people:

- Access to work experience continues to depend heavily on parental networks and school capacity. If all students are expected to do it then inevitably those from well-connected backgrounds will secure the best opportunities; those who arguably need it most risk missing out altogether or being left with poor-quality placements.
- Disadvantaged students, those in rural areas, SEND pupils, and those at greatest risk of becoming NEET will disproportionately miss out.
- Career uncertainty and confusion – already the highest in the OECD among 15-year-olds at 46% is unlikely to improve.
- Quality remains variable: evidence suggests around a third of young people currently describe their work experience as a waste of time.
- Young people in KS3 may find that rather than addressing significant career exploration needs it is more of a tick box exercise.

Implications for schools and colleges:

- Schools faced with growing administrative burden without the additional resources or staffing needed to meet travel costs associated with placements, particularly in rural areas.
- Risk of teacher disengagement if a manifesto commitment becomes widely seen as undeliverable.
- Schools in deprived, rural, or high-special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) contexts, increasingly unable to deliver meaningful and affordable provision.
- Schools would be reliant on the charities who help find work experience placements, but given the scale of the challenge, it is highly likely that they would be unable to meet the needs of the schools without themselves receiving additional funding.

Implications for employers:

- Continued uncoordinated requests from multiple schools and colleges, often concentrated in the same weeks of the year.
- DBS and insurance costs remain a disincentive for under-16 placements.
- Small-medium sized employers disengage due to complexity and administrative bureaucracy.
- Mechanisms not in place that would encourage more employers to engage at the scale and in the sectors needed.

Implications for government:

- No or little additional cost, but the manifesto commitment risks becoming meaningless without the additional resources to support it.
- Reputational risk if the pledge is seen to have faded without delivery.
- Fails to fully leverage the power of school-managed employer engagement to prevent NEET outcomes.
- There is a high risk it widens existing inequality, directly contrary to the stated aims of the Milburn Review and the Manifesto commitment.

OPTION 02

Significant support, infrastructure and backing

This option would fully resource the Government's Manifesto commitment. It would require reinstating the kind of national infrastructure that underpinned universal work experience during the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) era of the 1980s and 1990s, and the 2000s (Statutory entitlement for work-related learning at KS4), when participation rates reached approximately 90%. It would require ring-fenced funding, a national and regional brokerage network, employer incentives, and a mandatory quality framework backed by inspection-led accountability.

In 2011 Education and Employers undertook a comprehensive study of public funding on employer engagement. This is published for the first time in this report – see Annex 1. It found that the Government's annual expenditure for the delivery of employer engagement to support employer engagement in secondary education was c. £100m (equivalent to c. £158m in 2026). **In total, the study estimated that investment in employer engagement was £599,311,173** of which contributions came from:

- employers (including calculations for time given) 76%
- government (national and local) 17%
- schools and colleges 7%
- third sector organisations 1%.

The estimate is based on calculated engagement of 749,290 employers/employees over a total of 10,693,470 hours participating in engagement activities with schools.

The fiscal case for significant additional funding is compelling. Analysis by one of this report's authors, economist Dr Chris Percy, finds that each young person who spends time NEET, when they would ordinarily be in compulsory education or training represents a lifetime cost to the public purse of £54,000, due to welfare payments, lost tax revenue and wider social costs.[14]

Every young person who enters the labour market with confidence, skills and a realistic understanding of the opportunities available to them represents a return on investment that accrues across the education, health, justice, and welfare systems simultaneously. A one percentage point reduction in NEET rates equates to approximately 0.34% of GDP. A comprehensive national return on investment study would help quantify these benefits more precisely and guide future investment decisions.

New evidence presented in this study finds significant and substantial links between teenage employer engagement and lower NEET rates at 16-18. These findings are consistent with a substantial body of international evidence linking teenage employer engagement with better employment outcomes in early adulthood.

14 Percy, C. (2025). Technical note: Fiscal benefit of inferred NEET reductions due to careers education – updated analysis for 2020/21-2024/25. London: The Careers & Enterprise Company. See also, new analysis presented in Department for Work and Pensions. 2026. Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report.

KS3	Greater school engagement in workplace activities, supported by external coordination and dedicated budgets covering additional staffing, transport and related costs; additional employer engagement through a national one-stop-shop with regional support.
KS4	Participation rates of up to 90% could be expected. Additional employer engagement through national one-stop-shop and mechanism for addressing barriers (e.g. insurance).
Effectiveness	Strategic engagement with employers to address national and local shortages of workplace partners; a national framework to set clear expectations for both employers and schools, improve the quality of provision, and encourage student part-time working and community volunteering; and a strategic approach to virtual provision. Mechanisms would be in place to support learning and collaboration between schools. Concerns remain about the availability of high-quality careers guidance to make the most of employer engagement activities.
Equity	Additional needs of vulnerable students addressed through national campaigns to identify employers well placed to support vulnerable students; school funding to address family poverty and provide additional support where needed.
Efficiency	Provision would be fully funded through a national digital resource – available to multiple intermediaries on a white-label basis and overseen by a small national team – combined with a dedicated budget to support schools in delivering placements. Reduced duplication of expenditure through standardisation of administration (plus economies of scale in health and safety assessments); and identification of interested employers; coordination of activities between neighbouring schools; assumes many students continue to find their own placements (as in 1990s and 2000s). Mechanism in place for monitoring data on engagement and overseeing targeted research to improve the quality and robustness of return on investment assessments of the greater long-term savings through reduced NEET rates.

Implications for young people:

- KS3 students receive structured employer engagement – career talks, workplace visits and related activities – as part of a coherent programme of career development.
- Universal entitlement: all KS4 students access a minimum five-day, quality-assured workplace placement, regardless of background or parental connections.
- Clear guidance to schools on how to maximise the value of work experience through preparation, reflection and integration into wider career development strategies.
- Quality standards are put in place, e.g. objectives, planning, review, H&S as other less quality focussed work experience placements can have little value.
- Disadvantaged students, SEND pupils and those in rural areas are supported with transport costs and brokered placements in sectors aligned to their interests.
- Designed to ensure all young people benefit from the levels of employer engagement currently enjoyed only by the most advantaged.

Implications for schools and colleges:

- Ring-fenced funding to schools provides practical resource for delivery for the first time in over 15 years.
- Reinstated brokerage support removes the administrative burden of placement sourcing from schools, who are currently absorbing this without additional resource or paying (widely ranging) sums to external providers to do this for them.
- Mandatory quality framework establishes clear learning objectives, workplace induction standards, feedback mechanisms and reflective debrief.
- Ofsted accountability: compliance with Gatsby Benchmarks 6 and 8 becomes meaningful and measurable rather than aspirational

Implications for employers:

- Brokerage services handle matching, especially for under-served students, DBS coordination, and insurance guidance – significantly reducing the administrative burden on employers and helping to manage overlapping demands from schools.
- A single authoritative, government resource hosted on GOV.UK. This would provide clarity and credibility. It would set out clearly why employers should offer work experience, benefits to young people, the business benefit and how to get involved. It would build on and acknowledge some of the guidance already available by a range of largely third-sector organisations. Such a resource would need to be developed in partnership with the organisations that represent education and employers and be endorsed by them.
- An employer toolkit would form part of the resource with structured and standardised placement templates, learning objectives and feedback tools to reduce the supervisory burden, particularly for SMEs.
- Consideration of incentives which could range from a recognition and acknowledgement scheme through to making it a requirement to qualify government procurement processes or some type of tax credit or levy support.
- Sectors currently underrepresented in work experience provision – transport, utilities, and manufacturing would require active outreach to ensure priority group students have access to a genuinely broad range of opportunities.

Implications for government:

- Delivers on the Manifesto commitment to guarantee 10 days of work experience for all young people,
- Will make measurable progress against the current figure of over one million young people who are NEET.
- Government to show leadership in providing work experience – all government departments would be expected to provide work experience as would their Arm's Length bodies. Currently only 22% mention that they offer it and Cabinet Office, DWP, and DfE do not appear to provide places to under 16s.
- Great care would need to be taken to ensure that any new brokerage infrastructure builds on and supports the work of existing charities and regional organisations, rather than displacing them.
- Cross-departmental ROI case is strong: benefits accrue across DfE, DWP, DHSC and HM Treasury through reduced benefit dependency, improved productivity and lower health and justice costs.
- Requires strong coordination across DfE, DWP as well as the Department of Culture, Media and Sport, Department for Science, Innovation and Technology and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, to align school, FE, HE and unemployment schemes and prevent the competition for employer capacity that currently exists.
- A national mechanism through which funding from other government departments and large employers can be channelled and coordinated.

RISK The principal risk is sustainability. The TVEI and Education Business Partnership infrastructure of the 1990s and 2000s was dismantled when ring-fenced funding ended. With it ended decades of accumulated expertise, employer relationships and institutional knowledge.

Any new approach must be protected across spending review periods to avoid repeating that cycle. Embedding the active involvement of leaders from organisations representing both education and employers will help build the cross-party ownership needed to outlast any single government. It will also help establish work experience as a genuine expectation – part of the fabric of how schools, colleges and employers relate to one another – rather than a policy that rises and falls with the political cycle.

As the history section of this report makes clear, the cost of stop-start investment is not just financial: it is the repeated loss of progress, relationships and institutional memory that have to be rebuilt from scratch each time.

OPTION 03

Targeted Prioritisation

This option provides additional funding targeted on place and need, concentrating resource on the students who face the greatest barriers to accessing meaningful work experience.

The case for targeting is clear. The Schools Survey shows that around 40% of students require additional support to access good quality work experience with that figure excluding Special Schools, where nearly all students need it. The greatest challenge in moving to work experience for all is to respond to the complex needs of these students. Professional guidance counsellors are best placed to identify those needs, which are often multi-faceted and often unpredictable. The Department for Education has published good practice guidance on identifying and supporting young people at risk of becoming NEET, including through its Using Risk of NEET Indicators (RONI) framework[15].

Rather than a universal entitlement, this option concentrates funding on the young people who need it most and who currently have least access to labour market opportunities. It is realistic within a constrained public spending envelope and ensures that limited additional resource is directed where the evidence says it matters most.

Its central challenge is one of design. A poorly constructed eligibility framework risks creating a two-tier system in which only the most visibly disadvantaged students receive meaningful workplace experience, while the majority including many who would nonetheless benefit significantly are left with a lesser offer. Getting the targeting right is therefore as important as the funding itself.

Priority groups might be expected to include:

- Young people at risk of becoming NEET or already disengaged from education
- Those with special educational needs and/or disabilities (SEND) and/or alternative learning needs (ALN) and in Alternative Provision and PRUs
- Care leavers, for whom early workplace experience can be transformative in building independence and economic stability
- Those with health and wellbeing challenges, including mental health difficulties and forms of neurodiversity, that create additional barriers to workplace entry
- Students uncertain about their next steps at 16
- Those wishing to pursue vocational or apprenticeship pathways where workplace experience is integral to their programme.
- Students planning on studying a university qualification that requires related work experience.
- Students at higher risk of labour market discrimination, including those from ethnic minority backgrounds, those with disabilities and those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds.
- Students interested in working in fields where people with their characteristics are underrepresented

Schools in isolated areas or areas of high deprivation, where employer capacity is thinnest and transport costs greatest, would also qualify for targeted support.

15 https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6797ac51cbd1e3a508a22ccc/Identify_and_support_young_people_at_risk_of_being_NEET_Jan-2025.pdf

KS3	Improved but not universal engagement, with particular focus on schools in rural areas and areas of high deprivation. All KS3 students receive structured employer engagement through high quality career talks (primarily in school) and the occasional workplace visit. Ring-fenced budgets will ease challenge of transportation costs.
KS4	Increased participation rates between 60% and 80% depending on funding. Additional brokerage to support employer engagement to help address the barriers encountered by vulnerable students.
Effectiveness	Focus of employer-facing outreach will be on supporting vulnerable students by characteristics or place rather than on skills sector; national mechanism for guiding expectations on the employer and school side to improve quality of provision; strategic use of virtual provision.
Equity	Additional needs of vulnerable students addressed through national campaigns to identify employers well placed to support vulnerable students; school funding to address family poverty.
Efficiency	Costs reduce for schools in their identification of interested employers for vulnerable students; other economies may be possible.

Implications for young people:

- Priority group students receive funded, quality-assured placements with dedicated brokerage and support.
- Care leavers and those with youth justice experience, who face some of the steepest barriers to employment, receive targeted brokerage into placements with employers experienced in supporting young people with complex needs.
- Students with SEND receive placements matched to their individual needs and aspirations, with appropriate workplace adjustments – addressing a longstanding gap in provision.
- Disadvantaged students with higher education ambitions gain access to work placements in fields such as medicine, law and engineering, strengthening their university applications and widening access to competitive professions.
- Young people with health and wellbeing challenges benefit from phased, supported entry into workplace settings – building confidence and resilience at a pace appropriate to their circumstances.

The principal risk is that students just outside the eligibility threshold – uncertain about their futures but not yet formally identified as at risk – miss a formative experience that could have prevented later disengagement. Our research finds that 73% of young adults found pre-16 work experience helpful in deciding what to do after Year 11; restricting access to a minority means the majority lose that benefit.

Implications for schools and colleges:

- The focus would be on KS4 with funding allocated to schools against clear criteria, including geography with schools in rural and isolated areas receiving an additional budget to cover transportation costs and pupil characteristics such as high proportions of FSM-eligible pupils or SEND students.
- Schools could use this funding to commission external organisations to provide placements, or draw on a government-funded brokerage service offering a guaranteed minimum number of placements per school, increasing transparency and public accountability in the process.
- The funding to schools would enable them to provide personalised provision that may include extended work experience for some and more preparatory work-related career development activities for others.
- Managing provision for priority and non-priority students within the same institution requires careful handling to avoid stigma, resentment, or the perception of a hierarchy of opportunity.
- Quality framework applies to funded placements; lighter-touch arrangements for remaining KS4 students risk embedding inconsistency across the same year groups.
- Schools would identify, assess, and review eligibility across a wide and diverse range of priority groups. Based on guidance the schools would be trusted to make the best decisions for their students and asked to provide a report on how funding has been used. This would avoid unnecessary bureaucracy that limits schools' capacity to deliver what's right for the students.
- Effective delivery for students with SEND, health challenges, or youth justice experience will require close coordination between Careers Leaders, SENCO teams, pastoral staff, educational psychologists, social workers and external support agencies.
- Care leavers, who may be spread across multiple institutions or outside mainstream education entirely, require particular outreach and coordination with local authority virtual school heads.
- A phased pilot approach would allow evidence to be built, and staff capacity developed before wider rollout, particularly important given the complexity of the cohorts involved.

Implications for employers:

- Total placement demand is lower and focused on KS4 than under Option 2, making this a more manageable ask of employers.
- Employers receive tailored guidance on working with students with complex needs, including SEND, mental health challenges and youth justice backgrounds, alongside clear information on legal obligations and available support
- Targeted cohorts allow for more purposeful matching – employers know in advance the profile and support needs of students, reducing uncertainty and enabling better preparation and improving outcomes for students
- A subset of employers with experience of supporting young people with complex needs – including those with SEND, health challenges, or youth justice backgrounds – will need to be actively identified, supported, recognised and potentially incentivised.

- Brokerage support is essential for SMEs working with priority group students. These students may require additional pastoral care, adjusted working arrangements, or direct liaison between the employer and support agencies.
- Employers in priority sectors – particularly energy and utilities, digital, health and social care and hospitality – are simultaneously being approached under the DWP Youth Guarantee with subsidised adult placements; school placements must be clearly differentiated and coordinated to avoid further fragmenting finite employer capacity.

Implications for government:

- Resource concentrated on cohorts where the evidence for need is strongest and the long-term cost of inaction highest including benefit dependency, health expenditure and justice system costs.
- The £8.5 million Aspiring Pathways programme for Alternative Provision students already provides a good foundation and demonstration of what is possible for this approach.
- Eligibility criteria will require careful cross-departmental design – drawing on data and expertise from DfE, DWP, DHSC, the Ministry of Justice and local/combined authorities – to identify the right young people without creating perverse incentives or undue bureaucracy
- Coordination with the DWP Youth Guarantee and Jobs Guarantee is essential to prevent duplication of effort and competition for the same employer.
- There is a risk that targeting is perceived as rationing. Politically, this option requires honest communication about what it does and does not offer to the majority of young people.
- A communications campaign would be desirable to help employers and others understand that many students have additional needs and this is what equity looks like.
- Does not fully deliver on the Manifesto commitment of 10 days' work experience for every young person; Government would need to be explicit about whether this represents a first phase towards that or a revised commitment.

OPTION 04

Wider systemic approach

This takes the broadest view of the challenge. Rather than treating work experience as an isolated policy intervention, it asks a more fundamental question: how do we ensure that all young people fully understand their options and are properly prepared for their futures? It would not only meet the Labour manifesto's commitment to guarantee two weeks' work experience for every young person and improved careers advice in schools and college, but it would also achieve considerably more.

More young people than at any point in recent history are uncertain about the careers open to them. They lack access to trusted information and guidance, and too much depends on personal connections. This is simply unacceptable. They need to know about all the different sectors, the jobs, the careers, and educational pathways open to them. Their social and economic background should not limit their understanding of the potential opportunities available. They should be making informed choices and not, through no fault of their own, be wasting their talent.

Employer engagement in secondary education serves two distinct but related purposes: broad career exploration, which helps young people understand the range of sectors, jobs and pathways available to them; and direct workplace experience, which becomes especially important as students approach the transition from compulsory education. That transition matters most for those leaving at 16, for whom a quality KS4 placement can be formative.

Several practical barriers that currently frustrate schools and employers alike can be addressed quickly and at modest cost: standardising documentation and administrative requirements across schools and multi-academy trusts; enabling shared procurement of external support at place level; and issuing definitive national guidance on DBS checks and insurance – one of the most consistently cited deterrents to employer participation.

The pinch point for most schools is the requirement for "work experience activities" to take place in workplaces at Key Stage 3. If this were relaxed allowing children of that age to primarily encounter the world of work through people coming into schools, in person or virtually, via talks and other activities, the burden on schools and employers alike would be significantly reduced. Focus could then shift to providing in-person placements for older students.

This is the most ambitious option but not necessarily the most expensive, and arguably the one with the greatest potential for lasting impact. It most directly addresses the root causes of youth disengagement and NEET risk which employer engagement can address. It would require strong political backing, cross-departmental coordination, and Government, at the most senior level, convening the leaders of organisations representing education and employers to develop a shared strategy and plan of action. Only by bringing these parties together, with leadership from the top, will real and lasting progress be made.

Starting Early

Research[16] by Education and Employers and others has demonstrated that children as young as seven begin ruling out career options based on background or gender. Furthermore, it has found that the career aspirations of seven-year-olds are similar to those of 17-year-olds[17] and have little in common with current and projected labour market demands. It is why, some 12 years ago, Education and Employers, in partnership with the National Association of Head Teachers, established Primary Futures – giving primary-aged children the chance to meet and interact with people from the world of work. It focuses on broadening horizons, raising aspirations, and showing children what is possible.

Its Scaling Up study[18] of over 60,000 primary-aged children – the largest of its type ever undertaken – found that those who experienced its career-related learning interventions showed significant positive gains: 82% of children were more motivated in the core subjects of maths, English and science, and 88% showed a better understanding of how doing well at school is helpful to them in later life.

Thanks to financial support from the AKO Foundation, the Westminster Foundation and a number of other philanthropists and corporate supporters, Primary Futures has grown significantly since its launch. In-person visits remain at the heart of the programme, supplemented over the last six years by virtual interactive sessions – meaning geography is no longer the barrier it once was. Schools in rural or isolated areas, which have historically struggled to attract employer volunteers, can now access a national pool through interactive online sessions.

Some 43% or primary schools have already registered with Primary Futures and with the right partnerships in place, has the potential to reach every primary school in the country, providing the foundations on which secondary-level employer engagement can build.

Key Stage 3

The school survey results clearly show the significant barriers schools face in implementing external visits at Key Stage 3. It is proposed that this element of the policy is reviewed so that the focus shifts to in-school activities and people coming into schools, rather than young people going out to workplaces. This option would return to John Newsom's original vision for work experience, with people coming into schools to talk to young people, as well as young people going out into workplaces. The cost would be considerably lower and the logistics far simpler than attempting to organise five days of largely out-of-school activities for every student.

Key Stage 3 would focus primarily on career exploration, scaling up the high-quality, authentic career talks that the evidence shows clearly work, and complementing them with enterprise activities and work-related content embedded in the curriculum. Subject associations could work with professional bodies, trade associations and trade unions to develop a bank of learning resources that bridge the worlds of education and work – demonstrating, for example, how mathematics underpins engineering, or how communication skills matter in medicine. This kind of contextualised learning improves

16 https://www.educationandemployers.org/research/startingearly/
17 https://www.weforum.org/stories/2019/01/childrens-career-aspirations-jobs-of-future/
18 https://www.educationandemployers.org/scaling-up/

motivation, attendance and behaviour, as well as broadening young people's understanding of where their studies can take them. Some external activities would still take place where practical – schools already take whole cohorts on visits to theatres, museums and other venues, and these can readily incorporate a careers dimension.

Different approaches are possible. However, it is important to recognise that an infrastructure to do this at scale already exists. Inspiring the Future's database of nearly 100,000 volunteers could be significantly expanded through a national call to action, at no cost to government, broadening the range of sectors, professions and backgrounds represented and ensuring that every school, however remote, can find and invite a volunteer at the click of a button.

Virtual engagement has been an important part of the programme since the pandemic and should be embraced and expanded further. It is important, however, to be clear about what virtual engagement means: it must be interactive, giving students the ability to talk, ask questions and engage directly with volunteers.

Some pre-recorded video resources have confusingly been referred to as virtual work experience – whilst they are valuable resources in helping young people understand career options they are not virtual work experience which requires young people to be able to interact with real people.

Key Stage 4

Our Teacher Tapp survey of circa 6,000 teachers, conducted for this report, found that work experience placements currently take place predominantly in Year 10 (61%) and Year 12 (38%). When asked which year groups should have placements, teachers were clear: 76% said Year 10 and 55% said Year 12 – suggesting that teachers themselves see the value of extending provision into post-16 education rather than concentrating it at Stage 4.

Rather than requiring all placements to occur in Key Stage 4, a guarantee that every young person in either Key Stage 4 or 5 – or at both stages – would better suit their developmental needs and be easier to deliver. Subject to available funding, consideration could also be given to increasing the entitlement from five days to ten, spread across Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5 within a wider framework of career preparation.

Building on the in-school activities established at Key Stage 3, external placements at Key Stage 4 would be complemented by careers talks, enterprise activities, careers fairs, mock interviews and virtual workplace encounters as career exploration with people in work remains highly important. Greater recognition should also be given to the importance of part-time working and community volunteering as valid and valuable forms of employer engagement. Preparation for the realities of the labour market should form an explicit part of this offer, including interview and CV workshops with recruiters, guidance on how employment agencies work, and practical information on tax, benefits and employment rights, which is especially important for those leaving secondary education and going straight into work.

While provision at Key Stage 5 has not been the focus of this study, the data collected suggests that by no means all students are completing work experience at that stage, in spite of the long-standing government expectation under Gatsby Benchmark 5, which requires all pupils to have at least one meaningful employer encounter each year. What is clear is that some schools are already going considerably further than this minimum,

and doing so because they see the benefit. It would be a significant missed opportunity if that activity were to be displaced by a narrow focus on Key Stage 4 placements alone.

In addition to work placements, much greater consideration should be given to investigative workplace visits, where young people at Key Stage 4 and 5 are given the opportunity to spend a half day in a place of work, speaking with and shadowing working professionals. This is common in many other countries – including the widely used Take Your Child to Work Day model, which has been particularly effective in ensuring that young people from less advantaged backgrounds gain some of the same workplace exposure as their peers. Should such a scheme be launched by the government, it could gain considerable traction quickly. All government departments and their arm's length bodies could be required to host half-day or full open days for young people, setting a clear lead for other employers to follow. A half day to help young people see the future could be rolled out regionally and nationally in a simple, effective and scalable way.

Longitudinal research offers valuable tools for identifying which young people are on track and which are falling behind. Studies such as 'Indicators of Successful Transitions: Teenage Attitudes and Experiences Related to the World of Work' provide a framework that could be updated and which schools could draw on to monitor progress more strategically and target support more effectively.[19]

There are some notable examples of excellence in work experience provision at Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5, driven by charitable organisations such as Futures for All (see case studies). Serious consideration should be given to how such programmes could be better supported and expanded, rather than reinventing what already works well.

National infrastructure

Consideration should be given to establishing a national intermediary organisation focused specifically on work experience placements at KS4 and KS5. To ensure it meets the needs of the wider stakeholder community, governing oversight should be shared between representatives of the educational workforce, employer bodies, trade unions and government. A new partnership board bringing together all key stakeholders should confirm the design of this systemic approach and encourage local and regional equivalents to develop alongside it.

To support schools and deliver considerable economies of scale, a government-funded brokerage service focused on work experience placements would make a significant difference. Given that schools are responsible and accountable for work placements, some with greater needs than others, it makes sense for them to become the effective customer for this service – entitled to a set number of placements made on their behalf, subject to agreed criteria with targeted support in economic sectors not well represented. The government-funded organisation would be required to meet the needs of schools, with quality of delivery determined by the schools themselves. Where schools did not receive the matches they needed, their feedback would provide government with performance data, allowing the organisation's budget and targets

19 https://www.educationandemployers.org/research/indicators-of-successful-transitions/

to be adjusted accordingly. This creates an efficient, accountable system with clear value for money for the taxpayer.

The organisation would need to harness and support the many organisations – a significant number of which are charities – that are currently organising work experience placements and encounters with the world of work. Multiple charitable organisations are simultaneously approaching the same employers, with different requirements at different times of year: a coordination function – light-touch but authoritative – is essential to prevent that competition from intensifying. Government funding should not be spent competing with or replicating what these organisations already do well. Instead, it should build on their expertise and enhance what they are doing. A light-touch national portal, perhaps building on the technology used in the Inspiring the Future platform[20] – could make it simple for employers to signal their willingness to help and be matched with schools in their area.

Underpinning all of this would be a clear national framework: DfE guidance for schools, colleges and employers, developed in collaboration with representative bodies for education and business; definitive clarity on the safeguarding, DBS and insurance requirements that currently deter employer participation; and an inspection and accountability regime that gives teeth to expectations without adding disproportionate burden. Such guidance should be issued across relevant government websites – including those of the Department for Education, DWP and the Department for Business and Trade – and be supported by statements from the leaders of organisations representing both education and employers, making clear that this is not simply a government initiative but one backed by those who work in schools and businesses every day and that Government should lead the way by offering work experience placements.

Careers Advisers

On 9 February 2023, the Shadow Secretary of State for Education, Bridget Phillipson, made this commitment: *"We will recruit over a thousand new careers advisors and deliver two weeks' worth of work experience for every young person".*[21] On 26 June 2024, just seven days before the General Election, Phillipson again reiterated Labour's pledge to *"turbocharge"* careers advice: *"We will train a thousand new careers advisers, and deliver two weeks' worth of high-quality work experience for every young person at secondary school to boost opportunity".*[22] For *"Delivering work experience and careers advice for all young people"* the Labour Manifesto 2024[23] committed funding of £85million.

In welcoming this commitment, the Association of School and College Leaders' Director of Policy, Julie McCulloch said *"What we now need to hear is how exactly this ambition will be achieved. Currently many schools and colleges lack the time, staffing and resources needed to organise and provide work experience opportunities. It is also challenging to find a sufficient number of employers willing to offer placements while local careers advice services were severely cut back from 2010 onwards. There is a lot of rebuilding to be done. To ensure this works well for pupils, schools and colleges, and employers, there needs to be a joined-up strategy that clearly sets out who is responsible and accountable for provision and how this is going to be funded."*

20 It was developed following extensive consultation over 8 months with the leaders of organisations representing education and employers in partnership with government. This ensured that the needs of the key stakeholders were met and that the mechanism developed was effective and scalable. It also enables the running of national campaigns on particular economic sectors.

21 https://www.sunderlandecho.com/news/opinion/columnists/bridget-phillipson-give-people-the-skills-required-to-do-the-jobs-of-the-future-4018547

22 https://ca.news.yahoo.com/labour-pledges-turbocharge-careers-advice-213000157.html

23 https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf

The commitment to recruit a thousand new careers advisers has however not been mentioned in any ministerial speech since the election. The focus seems to have shifted to training existing careers advisers with the DfE recently issuing a tender to provide 1,000 qualified careers advisers with CPD with a budget of £407k per annum for three years.[24]

A detailed analysis of careers spending by one of this report's authors, Chris Percy (with Tristram Hooley and Siobhan Neary), published by the University of Derby in July 2023 [25] – *'Investing in careers: what is career guidance worth?'*, found that we currently spend £68 per person per year on career guidance for young people – less than half the £159 spent in 2009 in real terms. The study concluded that *"The career guidance workforce has also been depleted and the system has been de-professionalised."*

The CDI and Careers England have both warned of a growing recruitment and retention crisis in the careers profession, with workforce shortages, unfair pay, and high attrition rates all undermining the supply of qualified advisers. This matters directly for work experience. Without sufficient qualified careers advisers to help young people prepare for, reflect on and act upon their employer encounters, even well-organised placements risk delivering limited long-term benefit. Expanding work experience without expanding the guidance infrastructure to support it is, at best, a missed opportunity and, at worst, a waste of both public and employer investment.

Careers information and digital resources

This option also proposes a radical overhaul of government-provided careers information making it genuinely useful, interactive and designed for young people and their parents.

The National Careers Service, in its current form, is not fit for purpose for young people. Its content does not reflect how young people actually search for and engage with careers information: interactive, rich in up-to-date labour market data, and drawing on the video and digital formats they already use daily. It is also insufficiently accessible to parents and carers, who remain the single biggest influence on young people's career choices.

A reformed, genuinely youth-focused national careers resource should provide trusted, up-to-date and engaging advice on the full range of careers and pathways available, and include clear routes to a human adviser for in-depth guidance where needed. It should embrace responsibly designed AI-powered tools that can provide personalised, on-demand careers support at scale – available at any time, unconstrained by geography or family resources. Human oversight remains essential: ensuring AI-generated information is accurate and appropriately nuanced, and that it complements rather than replaces the work of skilled practitioners in schools, colleges and communities. For young people facing complex barriers, at risk of disengagement, or navigating difficult transitions, there is no substitute for a careers guidance professional working alongside teachers and parents.

A high-quality digital careers resource combining rich labour market information, engaging content, responsibly designed AI careers information and advice and clear pathways to human support could be delivered at modest cost relative to the wider investment the system requires. Unlike a placement programme, it would reach every young person regardless of where they live or their family background, and it would do so immediately.

24 https://www.contractsfinder.service.gov.uk/Notice/fd856d4a-4a5a-47f4-addd-e4bc795fa0a4
25 https://derby-repository.worktribe.com/output/806049/investing-in-careers-what-is-career-guidance-worth

OVERVIEW AND OPTIONS

KS3	All students have the opportunity to meet volunteers from a diverse range of sectors and professions – with virtual engagement meaning that geography is no longer a barrier, and young people in any part of the country can connect with employers and professionals from across the UK. This can be supported by a wide range of online career related curriculum resources. The shift to virtual and in-school engagement at KS3 should not mean a reduction in the quality or authenticity of young people's encounters with the world of work. The evidence is clear that passive exposure sitting through a presentation with little interaction generates limited impact. Independent assessment is needed to ensure that benefits are optimised. What works is personal, interactive engagement with real professionals, combined with authentic tasks that reflect genuine workplace challenges.
KS4 & KS5	By focusing the policy on this age group, the finite number of employers able and willing to provide placements will be used to maximum advantage. Additionally, the prioritisation of funding for certain groups will ensure that those students who most need support will get it.
Effectiveness	A national careers information resource provides the backbone of provision, which can then be developed, enhanced and personalised at regional and devolved level. It offers significant economies of scale, removing the need for schools and employers to replicate provision independently, whether in developing guidance materials, quality-assuring content, or managing safeguarding requirements.
Equity	Trustworthy information will be available to all young people, creating genuine equality of access. A national work experience placement brokerage service would target support on those with additional needs
Efficiency	This is the most efficient of the four options. A national digital careers resource delivers value at scale, reaching every young person at minimum cost. Virtual and in-school employer engagement at KS3 eliminates the transport, insurance and supervision costs associated with activities in the workplace, while a targeted approach at KS4 ensures that the most resource-intensive provision, brokered, quality-assured workplace placements is concentrated where the evidence says it matters most and where the return on investment is greatest. By building on existing infrastructure rather than creating parallel systems, and by coordinating rather than duplicating the work of schools, employers and intermediary organisations, this option avoids the wasteful fragmentation that characterises the current landscape.

Implications for young people:

- All primary school pupils benefit from regular, structured encounters with people from a wide range of careers – addressing the evidence that horizons narrow from as early as age seven
- All KS3 and KS4 students receive consistent, high-quality, in-school employer engagement – career talks, enterprise activities, virtual encounters and careers fairs – regardless of their background or location.
- KS4 and KS5 – minimum of 5 days' work experience placements but ideally 10 days.
- A reformed national careers information resource provides all young people and their parents with trusted, up-to-date careers advice and information on the full range of careers and pathways and opportunities to access to a qualified careers adviser on the CDI professional register.
- Encouraging, enabling, and valuing community volunteering and part-time working (within reasonable hours)

- Most 16–19 students receive longer, higher-quality statutory placements – better aligned to their developing career thinking and more directly connected to employment or further study
- Young people in rural, isolated or disadvantaged areas benefit disproportionately from the shift to virtual and in-school engagement, which removes the geographic and logistical barriers that currently exclude them

RISK removing a formal KS3 workplace visits requirement means that the social and cultural capital built through authentic early workplace experience – particularly valuable for young people from non-professional backgrounds – may be harder to acquire before the age of 16. **MITIGATION** a well-resourced programme of employer visits, open days and in-school encounters can substantially address this for most young people, particularly where provision is targeted at those most at risk of disengagement and backed by quality assurance

Implications for schools and colleges:

- External support is available to source appropriate work experience placements, targeted at those with greatest need, with schools either receiving ring-fenced funding to commission provision themselves or being entitled to a set number of placements organised on their behalf by a centrally government-funded brokerage service which could be regionally operated. Prioritisation could be determined by deprivation data, NEET risk indicators, or other relevant school-level measures. This would ensure quality of provision and value for money, with any centrally funded organisation held accountable for its delivery to schools.
- Significant administrative relief at KS3: no requirement to source, manage and quality-assure pre-16 placements for the general cohort.
- In-school employer activities are easier to schedule, scale and quality-assure than external placements, with less disruption to curriculum time.
- Where ring-fenced funding goes directly to schools, they would decide how to deploy it and whom to prioritise, tested by student outcome.
- Schools must redesign their KS3–KS4 careers curriculum to embed in-school activities as the primary vehicle for employer engagement – a significant but manageable undertaking with the right support. Learnings be taken from the approach Ireland is taking on whole school provision at lower secondary.[26]
- The DfE statutory guidance issued in May 2025 requiring KS4 workplace placements would benefit from refinement under this option – reframing the KS3 requirement to focus on in-school and virtual employer engagement rather than visits to workplaces. This should be presented as a strengthening of the policy's ambition and reach.
- Post-16 placement coordination increases in schools with sixth forms, which may require additional Careers Leader capacity.
- Clear national guidance, accountability, and coordination across all parts of the system – schools, colleges, employers and government – to replace the current fragmented landscape.
- Primary schools gain access to a structured, supported programme of employer engagement for the first time – building the foundations that secondary schools currently have to work against.
- Delivering this model will require schools to have sufficient Careers Leader capacity. A ring-fenced staffing budget should accompany any funding for activities, recognising that even the best resources

26 https://metc.ie/index.php/national-programmes/professional-support-guidance-counselling-supervision-programme-for-post-primary-school-guidance-counsellors-2023/

and materials require a trained, supported professional to coordinate them effectively. The variation in how the Careers Leader role is currently fulfilled across schools – from full-time dedicated staff to part-time roles with no administrative support – risks creating further inequality in delivery. National guidance should set minimum expectations for staffing, and this study shows the need for ring fenced budget to support quality work experience.

- Schools should be supported to leverage the experience of former and current older students, making it easy for young people who have recently navigated the school-to-work transition to return and share their experiences – building on models such as Inspiring the Future – and involving students in engaging with employers and researching the interests of their peers.
- This option enables lower secondary schools to take a strategic, five-year view of employer engagement – aiming to ensure that every student gains at least some exposure to each major part of the economy before leaving Key Stage 3. Provision could range from a short assembly talk to a workplace visit, but the goal is cumulative and deliberate: building a map of the economy in young people's minds over time, rather than leaving coverage to chance. A useful framework for this would be the 19 main industry sections in the Standard Industrial Classification (SIC2026) and the nine major occupational groups in the Standard Occupational Classification (SOC2020). The aim would not be to provide work experience across all of these – that is neither feasible nor necessary – but to ensure that no student leaves Key Stage 3 without at least one meaningful insight into each sector and occupational group. Direct encounters would be supported by classroom learning on the economy as a system, and by a labour market information resource – potentially AI-powered – that students can interrogate for wider information beyond what direct encounters can cover. If broad sectoral coverage is achieved during Key Stage 3, the work experience placement in Key Stage 4 can be better targeted to each young person's emerging interests – interests now informed by a broader, less biased base of understanding.
- Consideration could also be given to formally embedding career-related learning (CRL) into the schemes of work of all secondary subjects.
- Schools will also need help in optimising benefits of part-time working and community volunteering.

Implications for employers:

- Significant relief from pre-16 placement demand: in-school activities such as career talks, enterprise challenges and virtual encounters less commitment, more flexible and easier to fit around business pressures.
- The employer open-day model provides a simple, low-bureaucracy route for organisations that want to engage with young people but find the logistics of hosting individual placements prohibitive.
- Post-16 placement demand increases – but in a more coordinated, better-supported environment where brokerage, DBS coordination and quality frameworks reduce the administrative burden.
- Employers in sectors currently underrepresented in school engagement – construction, manufacturing, transport and utilities – are more likely to participate in open days and in-school activities than in managing individual placements.
- Clearer national guidance on safeguarding, DBS and insurance – one of the most frequently cited barriers to employer participation – removes a significant deterrent at all levels.
- Very large numbers of employers invest significant resource in delivering sessions in schools and in some cases have been doing

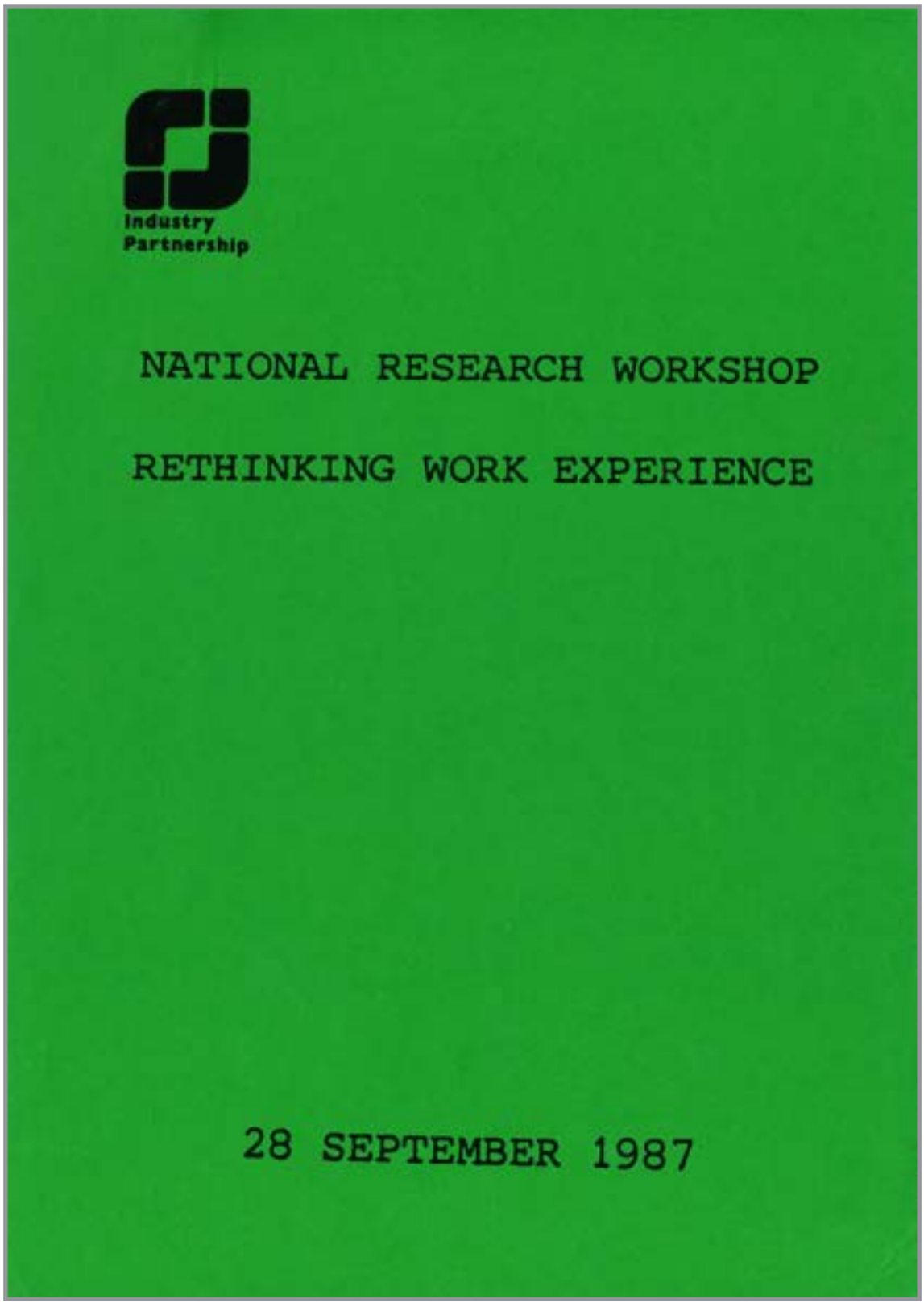
so for a very long time. That investment is currently underutilised because too many schools lack staffing to coordinate it effectively. Ensuring every school has a full-time, trained and empowered Careers Leader – able to liaise with employers, plan provision strategically and build lasting relationships – is a precondition for making the most of what employers are already willing to offer.

RISK the shift away from pre-16 placements reduces the pipeline of young people who develop early interest in specific sectors or employers – potentially affecting recruitment in the medium term.

Implications for government:

- Greatest potential for lasting, systemic change, addressing a key root cause of poor transitions rather than symptoms of youth disengagement and NEET risks
- Reform of the National Careers Service is a high-impact, relatively low-cost component that could be delivered quickly and would demonstrate immediate visible progress.
- Consolidating and properly resourcing the existing 16–19 placement framework is more cost-effective than creating a parallel new system for Key Stage 4.
- Having determined an affordable national budget, Government could apportion funding on the same basis as the current pupil premium – keeping administrative requirements and new policy design to a minimum.
- Requires sustained cross-departmental coordination – DfE, DWP, DSIT, MHCLG and the Ministry of Justice – but the Youth Guarantee trailblazer areas provide an existing vehicle for piloting the whole-system approach.
- The DfE statutory guidance issued in May 2025 would benefit from refinement under this option. This should be presented as a strengthening of ambition and reach rather than a change of direction, with clear communication to schools to maintain confidence and momentum.
- Fulfilment of the commitment to recruit 1,000 new careers advisers.
- Government should take the lead by opening up its own departments and arm's length bodies to work experience placements at both pre-16 and post-16 level, and by hosting half-day open days for young people. This sets a clear and visible example for employers to follow.
- Authoritative, simple and practical national guidance, issued directly by government rather than through an intermediary, and therefore carrying the credibility that schools and employers need, should replace the current fragmented landscape. This means a clear guide for employers and a separate, equally clear guide for schools: what is expected, what support is available, and how to get started.
- Government should convene the leaders of organisations representing education and employers in a long-term partnership, committing to a sustained joint strategy that outlasts any individual spending review period or change of administration. The development of Inspiring the Future, which required eight months of extensive stakeholder consultation before it was ready to launch, offers a useful benchmark for the time and genuine investment that an endeavour of this scale demands plus the organisations focussed on work experience which require funding.
- Strongest long-term fiscal case: by addressing career uncertainty, improving labour market information and building employer engagement from primary school onwards, this option has the greatest potential to reduce NEET rates, improve productivity and generate returns across multiple government departments.

RISK the ambition and complexity of this option requires sustained political commitment across spending review periods. The history of careers policy in England suggests this cannot be taken for granted.


Industry
Partnership
NATIONAL RESEARCH WORKSHOP
RETHINKING WORK EXPERIENCE
28 SEPTEMBER 1987

Summary of key findings

This report is about the engagement of employers in the career development of young people in lower secondary education. Employer engagement includes work experience placements, workplace visits, career talks and job fairs and other related activities that bring full-time secondary students into contact with people from the world of work. The paper is written in the context of a new expectation from the Department for Education (England) that students aged 11 to 16 will engage with employers for a minimum of 10 days over this period of schooling, including a work experience placement of at least five days duration between the ages of 14 and 16. The primary focus of the report is on provision in England.

The report also comes at a time when the number of young people aged 16 to 24 in the UK who are Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) has exceeded one million and youth unemployment has reached 16.2%, returning to levels last experienced in the aftermath of the Great Financial Crisis of 2007/08. Young people in England today face a post-16 landscape of extraordinary complexity. From September 2027, a third qualification pathway – V Levels – will sit alongside A Levels and T Levels, offering new Level 3 vocational routes for students wishing to explore different sectors before specialising. Each V Level will equate to 360 guided learning hours, equivalent to one A Level, and students will be able to mix and match them with A Level subjects – a flexibility designed to reduce the pressure to choose between academic and vocational routes at 16. The first V Levels, in Education and Early Years, Finance and Accounting, and Digital, are due from September 2027, with further subjects including Construction, Engineering, Health, and Care Services following from 2028. At the same time, changes to Further Education provision are introducing shorter, more flexible study programmes alongside new requirements for students' exposure to employer engagement and work experience. For many young people, and for the schools, colleges and careers professionals supporting them, navigating these overlapping changes is itself a significant challenge.

The scale of the challenge facing young people in the labour market has rarely been more acute. Alan Milburn's '*Young People and Work: Diagnostic Report*' published in May 2026 and commissioned by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, Pat McFadden, describes the UK as facing a "generational fault line" in the transition from education to work, and sets out a comprehensive diagnosis of how systems designed to support young people – education, health, welfare and the labour market – are failing to work

together. Far from being disengaged, 84% of young people not in education or training stated they wanted a job or training – a finding that underscores the systemic rather than individual nature of the problem.

Against this backdrop, the two government departments with greatest responsibility for young people's futures are working more closely together than at any point in recent decades. Following a machinery of government change in September 2025, skills, adult and further education, careers, apprenticeships and Skills England all moved to the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), with Secretary of State Pat McFadden explicitly identifying tackling NEET rates among young people as a core priority. Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson, meanwhile, is driving forward the qualifications reform programme and the new employer engagement requirements in secondary schools. Skills Minister Jacqui Smith works across both DfE and DWP, providing a shared ministerial bridge between education and employment policy. It is in this context – of a reformed qualifications landscape, a deteriorating youth labour market, and a more joined-up government response – that this report's analysis of the role of employer engagement in the career development of young people takes on particular urgency.

Methodology

This study explores the role of school-managed employer engagement in preventing poor transitions into the labour market and asks how it can be most effectively, equitably and efficiently delivered. The authors draw on an extensive research literature, analysis of data from the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), the UK Government's successive National Employer Skills Surveys, interviews with school staff responsible for career guidance and representatives of employers with experience of working with schools. In addition, it draws on the results of three new surveys:

- **Survey of Young Adults:** 804 UK young adults aged 19 to 26 who between the ages of 11 and 16 attended secondary schools in the UK
- **Schools Survey:** 350 school staff in England with current or anticipated responsibilities for supporting the career development of students between the ages of 11 and 16
- **Employers Survey:** 220 owners, managers and/or HR professionals working in UK enterprises which employ 50 or fewer people.

Employer engagement in teenage career development prevents poor outcomes...

It is now widely agreed internationally that effective career guidance systems will support teenage career development through engagement with employers and people in work. The international evidence that this can typically be expected to lead to better outcomes in employment is compelling. The paper presents, for the first time, collated findings from 172 separate OECD reviews of international longitudinal studies which follow large numbers of people from childhood into adulthood and use statistical analysis to explore relationships between forms of teenage career development and better outcomes in adulthood (lower NEET or youth unemployment rates and/or higher wages and/or greater job satisfaction). Looking across different studies, the paper reports that:

- 85% of 47 international studies which look at links between teenage experience of working (through work experience placements, part-time working or community volunteering) find significant evidence of better employment outcomes;

- 78% of 40 studies which look at teenage participation in career exploration activities (career talks, workplace visits/job shadowing, recruitment skills activities, and study programmes which are typically rich in employer engagement) also find significant evidence of better outcomes.

Both forms of activity are also positively associated with other teenage predictors of better outcomes in adulthood, including: clear career plans, alignment of educational and occupational intentions, and understanding of how education and training can enable ambitions. Additional retrospective 'user studies' which survey large numbers of young adults about their labour market status and recollections of school-age career development consistently find similar results.

...but students in the UK are not getting enough of what they need.

The young people leaving education today do so more highly qualified than any generation in history but increasingly they struggle in the competition for work. The ratio of youth to adult employment (how many times higher unemployment rates are for people under 24 compared to those who are older) has doubled over the last thirty years and is now among the highest in Europe. Over the same period, the proportion of teenagers combining full-time study with part-time employment has halved. The most recent internationally comparative PISA study reveals significant concerns over the career readiness of 15-year-olds:

- 46.4% UK students now have no clear career expectation; twenty-five years ago, this figure was 5%
- 67% of students with a career plan expect to work as a doctor, lawyer or one of the other professions, a type of work that employs only 21% of the working population
- Career confusion is commonplace: 28% of those expecting to work in a job that typically requires a degree for entry do not plan on going to university, rising to 40% among the most socially disadvantaged
- Growing numbers also struggle to see how their schooling will help them in working life. A majority (54%) of UK 15-year-olds now agree that "School has done little to prepare me for adult life"
- Compared to similar countries moreover, participation levels in workplace visits/job shadowing are poor and in work experience placements average, but in job fairs good.

There is nothing new in school's working with employers to support career development, but much to be learnt from previous practice

As highlighted in the foreword, employer engagement in student career development is not a new idea. In the report Professor Prue Huddleston illustrates how successive governments going back to the 1960s have acted to encourage and enable students to prepare for their working lives through it. Historically, in England employer engagement has been facilitated by Government investment which brought together key stakeholders (schools, employers, trade unions, local government) and put in place an organisational infrastructure that enabled substantial student participation in work experience placements and related career development activities. Since 2011 however, full responsibility for employer engagement has fallen onto secondary schools themselves

with external support fragmented and marketised. With the majority of 16-year-olds now staying on in education after the completion of lower secondary schooling for more than 30 years (as opposed to seeking employment at 16), considerable opportunity exists to learn from past practice.

Effective employer engagement in the career development of young people

In the UK and around the world, policies aimed at encouraging and enabling schools to work with employers are predicated on the assumption that schools alone cannot adequately prepare students for working life: interaction with the economic community provides students with information, insights, experiences and opportunities that cannot be offered to a comparable standard by other means. When it is effective, students can be expected to learn new things and/or gain additional experiences which are valuable to their futures. The pedagogic theory of employer engagement in publicly funded career development is rooted in the unparalleled capacity of the economic community to offer demonstrably authentic access to the world of work in its different forms.

Encounters with people in work help address widespread gaps in students' understanding of the labour market, educational requirements, and the realities of different professions – gaps that are particularly acute among disadvantaged groups. Employers, as future recruiters, value not only qualifications but also the human, social and cultural capital that teenagers can begin to build through authentic experiences of work.

New data from this project's 'Survey of Young Adults' provides further evidence that employer engagement makes a difference. Looking back, most young adults report that these were useful experiences for them. Regression analysis finds that both participation in pre-16 work experience and engagement in larger numbers of employer engagement activities are associated with more positive outcomes at 16+.

Young adults who reported having participated in pre-16 work experience have **62%** lower odds of reporting having been NEET between ages 16 and 18 than someone with comparable characteristics who did not do a placement; each additional employer engagement activity is associated **24%** lower odds of being NEET; and, the quarter of young adults reporting the greatest levels of pre-16 employer engagement had **80%** lower odds of being NEET compared to those who reported the least.

In addition, young people reporting pre-16 employer engagement have significantly better odds of reporting that it was easy to decide what to do after Year 11; that it was easy to achieve what they wanted to do; and, that whatever they did between the ages of 16 and 18 has proved useful to them in helping them to later on. In keeping with the results of other studies, a majority of 'Schools Survey' respondents agree that it is a good thing for students to engage with employers as part of their career development.

However, current provision is inconsistent. While is it likely that most students benefit from their employer engagement activities, it is also clear that many students are insufficiently prepared for work experience placements and receive limited preparation and feedback or have only narrow exposure to the labour market. Virtual alternatives are not seen as providing the same quality of experience as in-person placements, but they are seen to have their place. Importantly, opportunities to learn about rights at work or the precarious nature of modern employment remain limited.

The evidence suggests that effective employer engagement is authentic, frequent, varied, well supported by professional guidance throughout lower secondary education and demonstrably valued by students (as they gain new information and experience). Unfortunately, not all young adults agree that their experiences were positive. Around 33% say that they were a waste of time. In keeping with historic polls of young people, it is clear that a substantial minority got little from their experiences. Less effective employer engagement limits workplace experiences, opportunities to meet potentially useful people, and to actively learn from activities. Employer engagement is more effective if delivered in the context of professional career education which varies across schools. School staff signal concerns that pre-14 career guidance is not sufficiently preparing students for post-14 career development.

A minimum of four effective employer engagement activities by age 16 should be considered a baseline, with more extensive career exploration extremely desirable, especially for those planning early entry to the labour market. Policy and practice must also recognise that some groups of students face predictable additional barriers and therefore require personalised support to ensure equitable access and outcomes (see below). Strengthening the consistency and quality of provision, expanding sectoral engagement, and valuing part time work and volunteering as legitimate developmental experiences will improve recent provision. Ultimately, high quality employer engagement should nurture curiosity, build confidence, and support students to develop clear, well aligned agentic plans for their futures—laying the foundations for successful transitions into further education, training and employment.

Equitable employer engagement in the career development of young people

While work experience placements are often clearly valuable, access to effective placements is shaped by predictable inequalities. Schools in rural areas, high poverty communities, Special Schools and Pupil Referral Units face significant barriers in securing appropriate placements, often compounded by limited local labour markets, transport constraints and sometimes employer hesitancy. Students' experiences are similarly uneven. Most students are expected to find their own placement and those with greater family social capital are more likely to secure desirable placements. Most school staff agree that some students have better experiences than others on work experience and primarily believe that this is because of family connections. Excluding Special Schools where nearly all students require additional support from school staff to secure a successful experience, school respondents believe on average that 42% of students require additional personalised support. This group includes students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities, neurodiversity and anxiety, low-income and LGBTQ+ students, students with uncertain career plans, or aspirations to work in gender imbalanced professions or fields not well represented in the local economy. Additional needs are complex and are best judged by guidance professionals which leads to a considerable burden being placed on schools to ensure equitable participation.

To deliver genuinely equitable pre 16 work experience, national policy must recognise and respond to these differentiated needs. This is likely to include targeted support for schools facing structural disadvantages, ring fenced funding for schools to enable well-placed guidance professionals to provide personalised assistance, and external support to secure placements for students who encounter the greatest barriers. Policy should also consider strengthening employer preparedness, address discriminatory behaviours, and allow schools

the flexibility to offer work related learning aligned to students' developmental stage rather than age. Continuous data collection on student experiences will be essential to monitor progress and ensure that work experience contributes to reducing, rather than entrenching, existing inequalities. A well understood challenge of work experience provision is the risk of social reproduction with socio-economic background shaping access to opportunities.

Efficient employer engagement in the career development of young people: understanding and minimising costs

In England, the ambition to secure 10 days of employer engagement for all students aged 11 to 16 is very challenging. Currently, it is reasonably estimated that around 58% of students aged 14 to 16 complete some form of work experience placement. For all students to complete a one-week placement would require a minimum of additional 273,000 placements for students, many of whom require additional personalised support, at a time when expectations of employers hosting older students and young adults is growing.

The current process of securing employer engagement is far more complex and resource intensive than it needs to be. Most employers—especially smaller enterprises that provide the majority of work experience placements—do not feel that they have a clear business incentive to engage with schools. Consequently, it is essential to make the process as easy as possible for them. Around one in five workplaces has recently hosted a school student on work experience, employers have clear ideas about how the process can be further simplified and how the availability of new information can strengthen the business case.

Schools (and students), meanwhile, spend substantial time trying to identify suitable employers, navigate unclear application processes, and meet administrative requirements. A desktop survey undertaken for this study found that the great majority of large national employers, government departments and relevant professional bodies do not explain on their websites if they offer work experience or how it can be applied for.

Delivering workplace visits at 11 to 14 raises notable concerns among school staff. Transport costs, curriculum and staffing pressures together with limited capacity of workplace hosts raise clear challenges, particularly in rural areas. Despite strong evidence that employer engagement improves young people's long term employment outcomes and reduces NEET rates, the current system lacks the coherent national infrastructure (which historically enabled near universal level provision) needed to make engagement efficient, equitable and scalable.

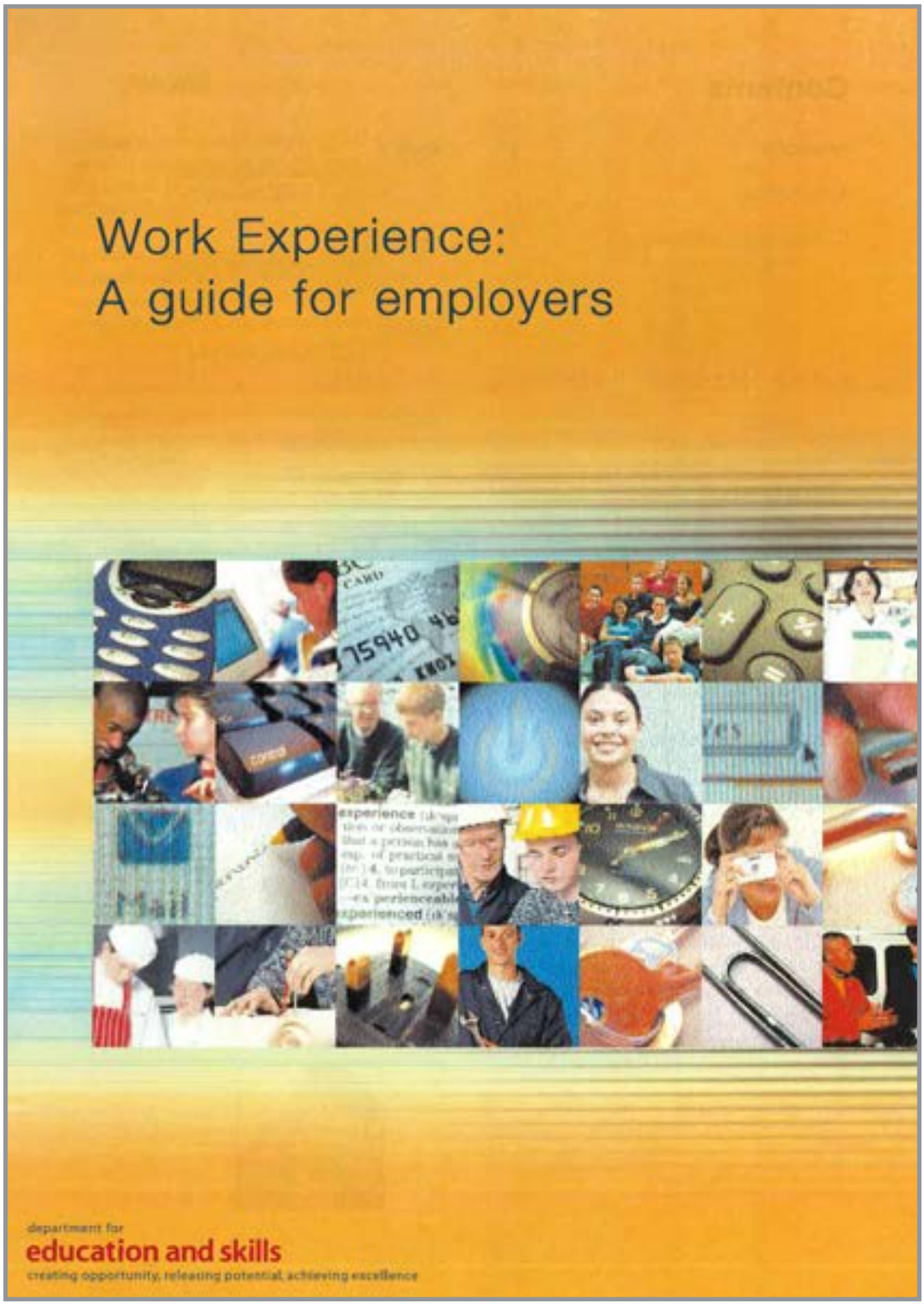
The findings of the report make a firm case for national coordination and investment. Both schools and employers feel strongly that they would benefit from clearer expectations, standardised documentation, streamlined administrative processes and a single mechanism with a national entry point but responsive to local needs for connecting schools with at least some willing employers. An intermediary body focused specifically on work experiences could be expected to help organise placements for schools, reduce transaction costs, expand sectoral participation to make it more authentically representative of the national economy, manage school competition for work placements, and ensure targeted support and placement availability for students and schools facing the greatest barriers. Costs are reduced to schools when using an external provider. Half of all secondary schools already pay a patchwork of external

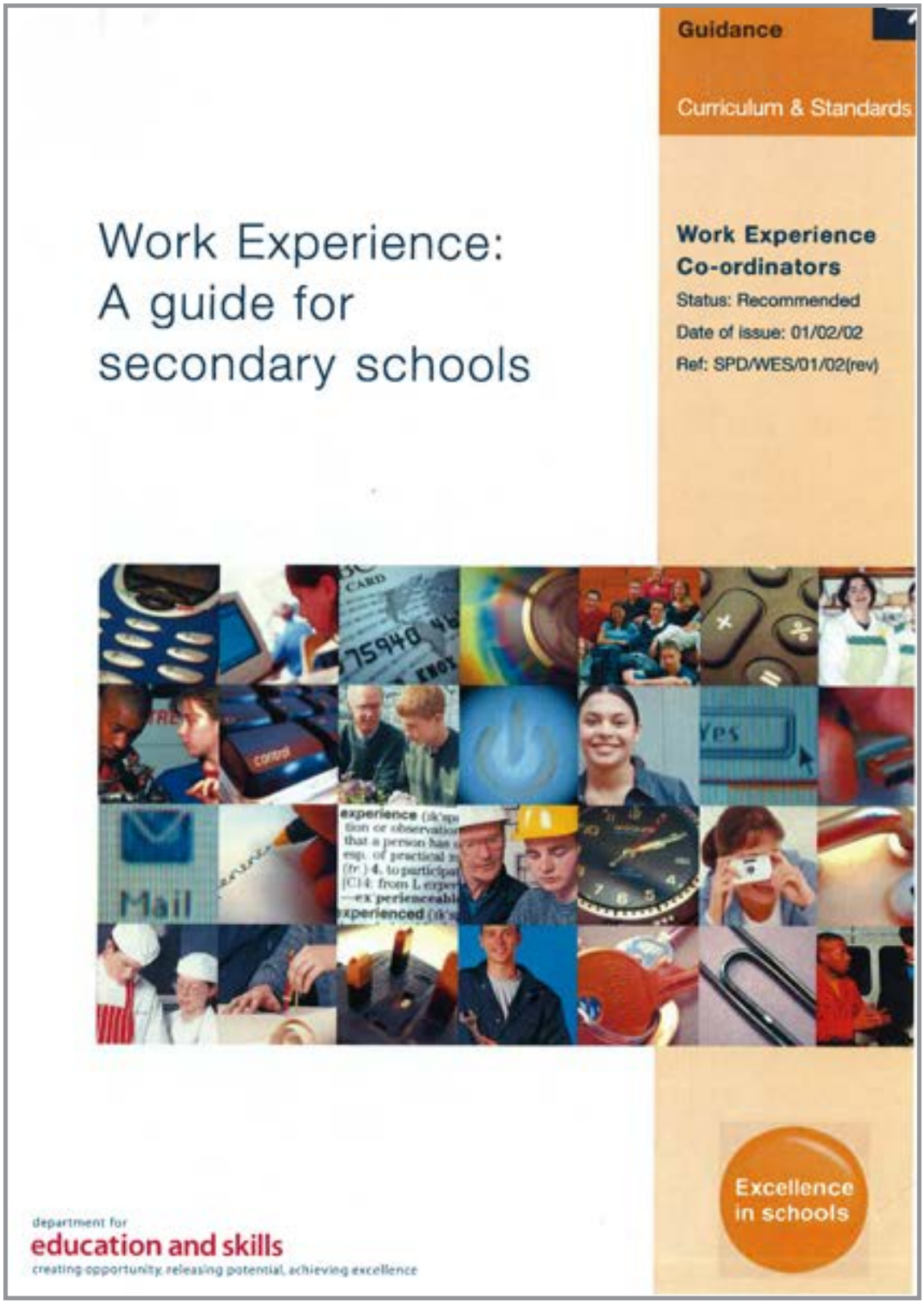
providers an average of £5,212 annually in the context of around half of current students completing work experience placements. Ring fenced funding for schools linked to levels of need, combined with consistent data collection on student experiences (tied to participation but also established predictors of better employment outcomes in adulthood), would help ensure provision is both equitable and effective. A national infrastructure could moreover challenge nationally-specific barriers to the rolling out of job shadowing programmes that are common in other countries. In developing any new national infrastructure great care would need to be taken to build on the existing efforts of the regional and national organisations. Many of these are charities that have been working hard over many years to help address weaknesses due to a lack of government funding. Any new system should harness their endeavours and support and complement what they're doing rather than competing against them. The support of any new national initiative should focus on work experience placements and workplace visits, which are the most challenging aspects, rather than other areas of employer engagement and work-related learning, such as curriculum materials, resources for schools, and talks. These again have a wide range of organisations, many of which are charities supporting schools with those.

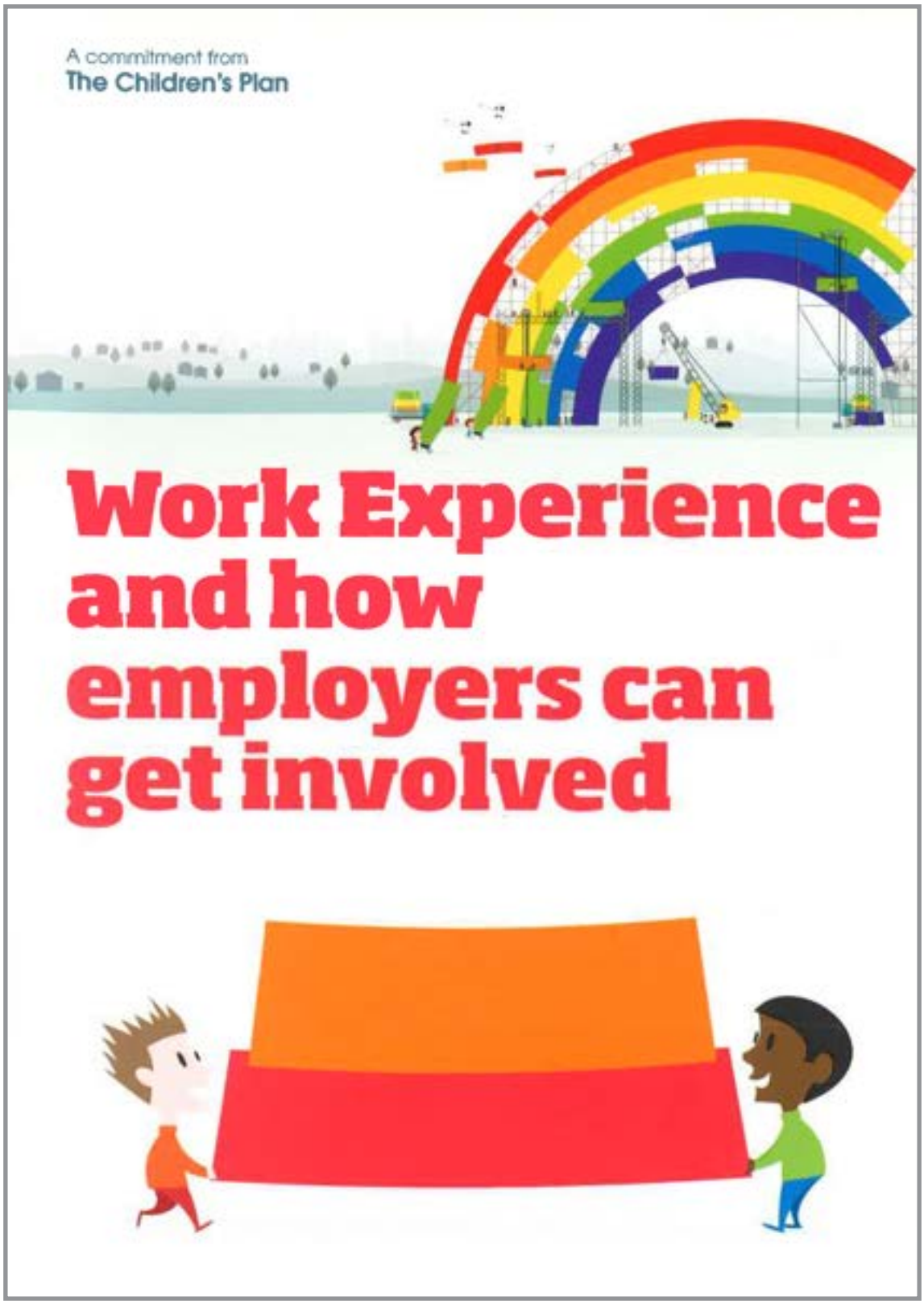
Given the scale of youth NEET rates, a comprehensive national Return on Investment study is now timely to quantify the long term economic benefits of strengthened employer engagement and to guide strategic policy decisions on appropriate investment.

Learning from the past

The paper concludes by drawing on historic insights. **Annex 1** summarises the previously unpublished findings by Education and Employers of a 2011 study, done with the support of the Department of Children, Families and Schools (now Department for Education) which systematically explored the costs entailed in providing national infrastructure to enable near-universal levels of work experience and substantial student engagement in other employer engagement activities. **Annex 2** is a commentary from Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE on the recent chequered history of professional career guidance in England and outstanding opportunities for ensuring consistent, high-quality provision. **Annex 6** provides an overview of historic policy to support employer engagement in England.


Work Experience:
A guide for employers
department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence


Guidance
Curriculum & Standards
Work Experience: A guide for secondary schools
Work Experience Co-ordinators
Status: Recommended
Date of issue: 01/02/02
Ref: SPD/WES/01/02(rev)
department for
education and skills
creating opportunity, releasing potential, achieving excellence
Excellence in schools


A commitment from
The Children's Plan
Work Experience and how employers can get involved

Chapter 1

Introduction, context and methodology

The focus of this report is on the career development of young people and how it can be most effectively, efficiently and equitably enhanced through the engagement of employers and people in work. It looks specifically at work-related experiences undertaken in lower secondary education before the age of 16, including notably:

- Work experience placements where students undertake tasks under supervision in places of employment typically for a period of several days
- Workplace visits where students travel to places of employment with the intent of learning about the world of work
- Talks where people in work talk to students about their jobs and their career journey.

The current context: education to work transitions in crisis

This report is written in the context of widespread concern over the transitions of young people from education into employment. As of May 2026, 1,012,000 young people aged 16-24 in the UK were classified as being NEET (Not in Education Employment or Training). One person in eight (13.5%) in this age range is neither preparing for the labour market or being employed within it, approaching rates last seen in the aftermath of the Great Financial crisis. Such NEET rates are among the very highest in Europe.[1]

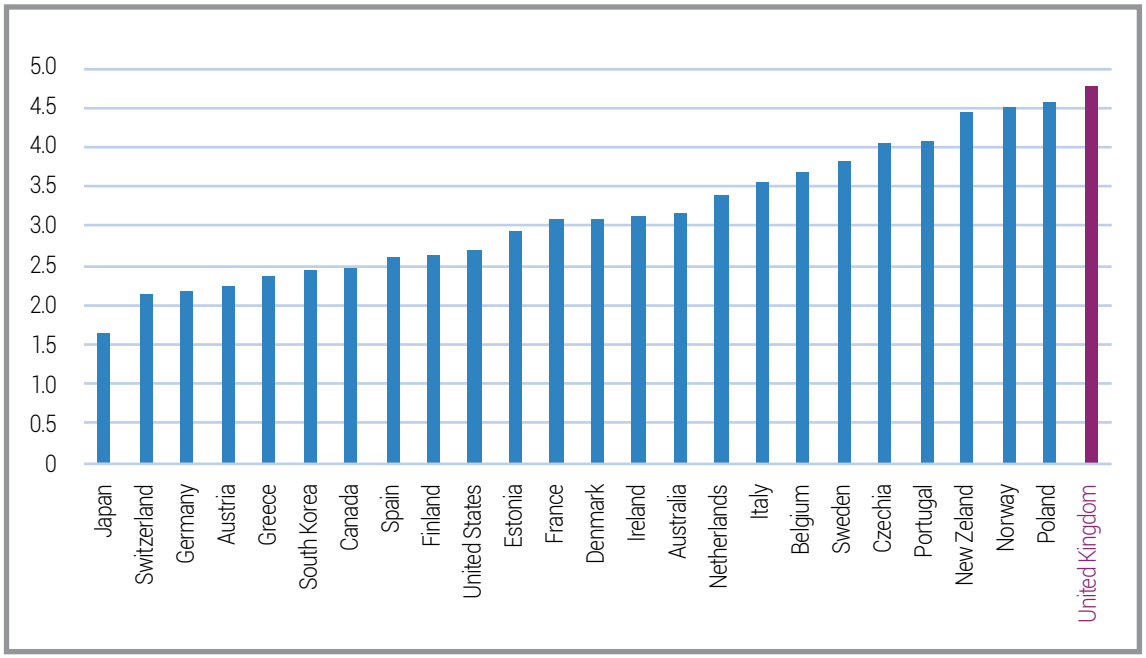
In addition, at the start of 2026 there were 729,000 young people aged 16 to 24 who were classified as being formally unemployed, meaning that they were available for work. The unemployment rate for young people was 16.2%, up from 14.6% from the year before. At time of publication, there are around 190,000 more unemployed young people than just before the pandemic.[2]

While it might be assumed that these figures represent lack of demand for workers in general within a slowing economy, a deeper concern is apparent if unemployment figures are unpacked and looked at from an historical perspective. A comparison of the unemployment rates of young people (under the age of 25) and older adults (over 25) shows that over the last generation it has become increasingly difficult for young people to secure work. Increasingly, UK employers prefer to hire older people. Whereas in the late 1990s younger people were two to three times more likely to be unemployed than oldef66 people, nowadays this ratio has risen to more than four. The ratio of youth to adult unemployment in the UK is exceptionally high when compared to other countries.

1 See: **https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/february2026#related-links;** Clegg, A. et al. 2026. Lost in transition: An examination of why the UK NEET rate is high and rising. Resolution Foundation, London.

2 Francis-Devine, B. et al. 2026. Youth unemployment statistics. House of Commons Library, London.

TABLE 1.1: Youth to adult unemployment ratio, selected countries, 2024.



SOURCE: Author's analysis of data from the OECD Data Explorer. The table shows the number of times greater youth unemployment (15-24) is when compared to adult unemployment (25+).

There is something remarkable as well as depressing about these figures. At the same time employers are increasingly reluctant to hire younger staff, young people themselves have never left education more highly qualified. Record numbers of young people in UK (as in other countries) are staying on in education to 18 and attending university. And yet, these unprecedented levels of education, training and qualifications are not translating into better outcomes in the competition for work.

The costs of poor transitions into the adult world of work are significant for both society and for young people. Societal costs in terms of welfare payments, lost tax revenue and social costs are considerable. It is estimated that every one percentage point decrease in NEET rates increases GDP by 0.34%.[3] It is well understood that early experiences of unemployment have a 'scaring' effect on young people, meaning that they can expect for many years later to find it more difficult to find to work and when in employment to be paid less than comparable people who had smoother transitions into adult working life. Youth unemployment is also significantly linked moreover with poorer mental health both at younger ages and in later adulthood.[4]

The challenge of career readiness

In significant part, this lack of attractiveness to employers relates to the career preparation of young people. As this study will show, scores of reliable research studies are now available to show that participation in different forms of career development in secondary education is strongly and significantly related to better outcomes

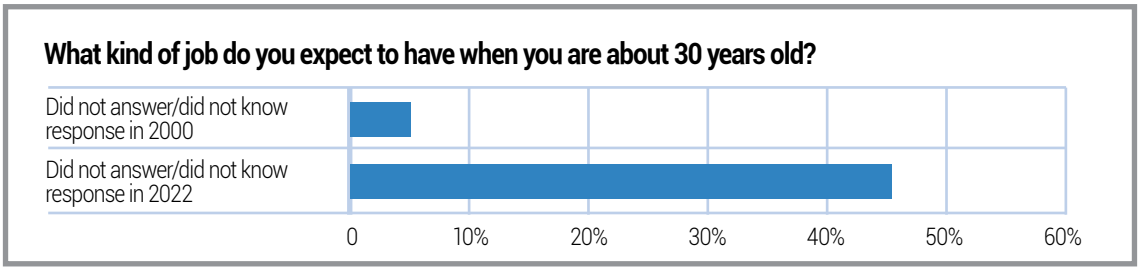
3 PWC. 2022. Youth employment index 2022 : building a resilient workforce for the future. PWC and Youth Futures Foundation.

4 De Fraja, G. et al. 2021. The Wounds That Do Not Heal: The Lifetime Scar of Youth Unemployment. Economica, 88: 896-94; Anders, J. & Macmillan, L. 2020. The unequal scarring effects of a recession on young people's life chances. UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, London; Strandh, M. et al. 2014. Unemployment and mental health scarring during the life course, European Journal of Public Health, 24:3, 440–445.

in employment. This is because employers value experience, they value relevant recommendations, and they seek new recruits with good understanding and interest in their professional fields. The latest study by the OECD Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reveals chilling findings concerning the preparation of young people for their lives in work.[5]

PISA shows that young people have never been more uncertain about their plans. Since 2000, PISA surveys have collected information from large, representative samples of teenagers aged 15-16. In most studies since then, students have been asked: What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old? In 2000, 5% of students in the UK did not answer the question, said that they did not know, or provided only a vague response. By 2022, such career uncertainty had risen to 46%, one of the highest levels found across the OECD countries. While it may be unreasonable for a student to have reached a final career plan by this age, it does great harm to them if they have no idea at all. Multiple longitudinal studies which track people from childhood to adulthood show that greater career certainty at 15 is statistically related to better employment outcomes in early adulthood.[6] In the absence of any clear work plan, it is hard for any student to make coherent decisions about what they will do after 16.

TABLE 1.2: Projected career certainty for 15-16-year-olds in the UK



SOURCE: PISA survey results

Of those who do have a clear job plan, these are strongly concentrated around a small number of occupations. In the UK, PISA 2022 shows that 47% of girls and 46% of boys now expect to work in one of ten jobs. The occupations aspired to are overwhelmingly in the professions. Young people expect to be lawyers, doctors, engineers and teachers in big numbers. PISA shows that 67% of UK teenagers expect to work in one of the professions, occupations which employ only 25% of the country's adult workforce. Many expect to secure such jobs without going to university: 28% of all UK students, 35% of boys and 40% of students from the most disadvantaged social backgrounds anticipate working in a profession which typically requires a university qualification but do not expect to complete even a first degree. These figures are amongst the highest found for OECD countries.

5 OECD PISA 2022 data can be reviewed on the OECD Teenage Career Readiness Dashboard at **https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/teenage-career-readiness.html.** Full PISA data is available for analysis at **https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa.html.**

6 OECD. 2024. Teenage career uncertainty: Why it matters and how to reduce it? OECD Publishing, Paris.

The policy context

The UK government is determined to break down barriers to opportunity and to secure economic prosperity through strategic growth. This report looks at a key issue that clearly influences the employment outcomes of young people, can enhance social mobility and underpin economic growth: ensuring that students in secondary education understand and are prepared for their futures.

In the context of reduced government willingness to support immigration and long-standing concerns over falling living standards, it is more important than ever that young people can go into adult working life confident of finding fulfilling employment and that employers have every opportunity to benefit from the talents, energy and ambitions of the rising generation. To do this, young people must properly understand themselves and the labour market and how their engagement in education and training can optimise the chances of securing fulfilling employment. At this stage in the twenty-first century, it is a reasonable demand that all young people are effectively supported in securing this understanding and that their opportunities are not limited by their social background and personal characteristics. It is essential that the choices that young people make are effectively informed. Their talents are too great to waste.

This report focuses specifically on the role of employer engagement in the career development of young people. It draws on the findings of multiple studies from this country and internationally to show conclusively that employers have a role of fundamental importance to play if young people are going to receive the career preparation which they deserve and the country needs.

It asks how employer engagement in career development can be most effectively delivered, ensuring that the right students are getting the right support at the right stages in their school lives. It asks how employer engagement can be equitably delivered, recognising that one size does not fit all: for some students (and schools) challenges are greater than for others in accessing effective employer engagement. It also asks how employer engagement can be most efficiently delivered. In addressing these questions, it looks at what is now a long history of UK governments requiring and enabling employer engagement with schools. It also looks at the role of professional career guidance in schools, essential in ensuring fully effective practice. In this work, the report draws on a rich heritage in the UK of serious studies and relevant data which explore the challenge and initiatives which sought to respond to them.

Of particular importance are three new surveys from key stakeholders which were commissioned to understand the current state of employment engagement in education. Prior to commissioning the surveys with employers and school staff, the research team conducted a series of interviews and focus groups. Their insights were invaluable.

These sources of evidence provide a fresh perspective on the costs and delivery of employer engagement and how taxpayers' money can be most efficiently spent. It is beyond the remit of this study to do a full cost/benefit analysis of such provision, but it has never been easier for government to understand what outcomes can be expected in return for investment. Equally, the study provides new insight into the growing complexity of disadvantage in career development. In the interviews and survey comments, it was

clear that there is enormous appreciation among school staff of the value of employer engagement, but frustration that professionals do not always have the support and resources at hand to offer excellent experiences for all.

This gathering of evidence provides new insights into the unique role of employer engagement in career development. Around the world, governments look to the employer community to provide young people with insights and experiences that cannot be so easily or effectively provided in their absence. As work by Education and Employers Charity and others have shown, it is the authenticity, trustworthiness and the volume of these interactions which drives the unique power of this special relationship.[7]

It is now widely agreed that effective career development informed by employer engagement, begins in primary school[8], continues through secondary education into further education.[9] Recent Government announcements in England have recognised this importance. At secondary level for example, it is expected that all students on study programmes aged 16-18 will engage with employers as part of their learning and those enrolled on vocational T-levels, gain 45 days of work experience.[10] Most recently, the Department for Education has announced its expectation that all students between the ages of 11 and 16 will engage with employers for at least 10 days within their career development. This ambition is widely applauded – so long as resources are in place to enable it. It is certainly desirable but is it feasible under current arrangements? This question drives much of the discussion that follows.

This paper draws on historical and international evidence to identify useful lessons for practice and explores how forms of employer engagement aimed at supporting student career exploration and workplace experience can be most effectively, equitably and efficiently delivered, identifying predictable risks of poor outcomes to students which should be addressed in new provision. A particular focus of the paper is on underserved youth, students who are particularly vulnerable to poor outcomes in both education and employment. These students can be expected to face additional challenges in accessing effective employer engagement within their career development and have greater risks of becoming NEET after the age of 16.

A final introductory note relates to the scope of this study. It is unfortunate that surveys returned too few respondents from Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to allow for reasonable comparisons with experience in England. Historic data too is very focused on the English experience. Consequently, and in light of policy development driven by the English Department for Education, this report focuses strongly on the role of employer engagement in England.

7 See studies collated at **https://www.educationandemployers.org/research-main/**

8 Starting Early, Education and Employers 2021, **https://www.educationandemployers.org/research/startingearly/**

9 Cedefop. 2026. An EU reference framework for lifelong guidance. 18 guidelines for policy and systems development. Publications Office of the European Union; Inter-agency Group on Career Guidance. 2025. Investing in Career Guidance. A joint publication of Cedefop, European Commission, European Training Foundation, International Labor Organisation, OECD, UNESCO and World Bank.

10 "Work experience is a key component of 16 to 19 study programmes. The term work experience refers to all forms of work-related activity, including work tasters, running a student enterprise, participation in a social action project, volunteering or a placement with an external employer. It aims to give young people the opportunity to develop their career choices and develop the critical employability skills needed for real working conditions. All students are expected to undertake work experience or work-related training as part of their study programme, and for some students, it can be the core aim of the study programme" – **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/16-to-19-study-programmes-guide-for-providers/16-to-19-study-programmes-guidance-2022-to-2023-academic-year#annexb.** See also, at primary level: **https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/news/careers-education-in-primary-schools-shows-early-promise.**

Note on research methodology

The paper draws on an extensive review of research literature on employer engagement in career development, including peer review papers published in academic journals, and analysis of public data primarily related primarily to two sources of evidence underutilised in UK studies of teenage career development. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) overseen by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, has gathered data from large representative samples of teenagers aged 15 to 16 since 2000.[11] Routinely, PISA collects data on the occupational and educational expectations of students and at times on their participation in career development and attitudes towards it. Data from PISA 2022 were published in 2024 and 2025 and provide the most extensive international data available on the career preparation of young people. Analysis of PISA data also allows for relationships between participation in career development and social and emotional skills. A comprehensive analysis of PISA 2022 career-related data for England is available:

SOURCE: Mann, A., J. Diaz and S. Zapata Posada. 2024. Teenage career development in England: A Review of PISA 2022 Data. OECD Publishing, Paris, https://doi.org/10.1787/13452cbe-en.

The OECD Teenage Career Readiness Dashboard[12] allows for international comparisons to be made across many PISA 2022 items related to career development.

Secondly, analysis was undertaken of UK Employer Skills Surveys. The UK government regularly commissions large representative surveys of employer establishments or workplaces and many of these surveys include questions on employer perspectives on teenage career preparedness and the engagement of young people in work experience programmes.

TABLE 1.2: UK Employer skills surveys, 2005-24.

Year	Survey title	Sample size	Teenage recruitment	Work experience
2024	Employer Skills Survey: **https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024**	22,712	Yes	Yes
2022	Employer Skills Survey: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2022	72,918	Yes	Yes
2019	Employer Skills Survey: https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/employer-skills-survey-2019	81,013	Yes	Yes
2014	Employer Perspectives Survey: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employer-perspectives-survey-2014	18,000	Yes	Yes
2012	Employer Perspectives Survey: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/employer-perspectives-survey-2012	15,000	Yes	Yes
2009	Employer Skills Survey: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-employer-skills-survey-for-england	79,152	Yes	No
2007	Employer Skills Survey: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-employer-skills-survey-for-england	79,000+	Yes	No
2005	Employer Skills Survey: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-employer-skills-survey-for-england	74,835	Yes	No

11 https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/pisa.html
12 https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/teenage-career-readiness.html

In addition, three surveys were commissioned for this study:

- **Survey of Young Adults.** A survey of 804 UK young adults aged 19 to 26 who between the ages of 11 and 16 attended secondary schools in the UK. This survey explored the experiences and perspectives of recent users of the UK career guidance system.[13]
- **Schools Survey.** A survey of 350 school staff in England with current or anticipated responsibilities for supporting the career development of students between the ages of 11 and 16.[14]
- **Employers Survey.** A survey consisted of 220 owners, managers and/or HR professionals working in UK enterprises which employ 50 or fewer people.[15]

Fieldwork for all three surveys was undertaken in January and February 2026. Respondents were reached, in the case of the surveys aimed at young adults and employers, through TGM Research.[16] Responses to the schools' survey were secured through the kind support of the NAHT, Career Development Institute, the Inspiring the Future network of school contacts, and through the networks of the report authors with controls in place to ensure the integrity of responses.

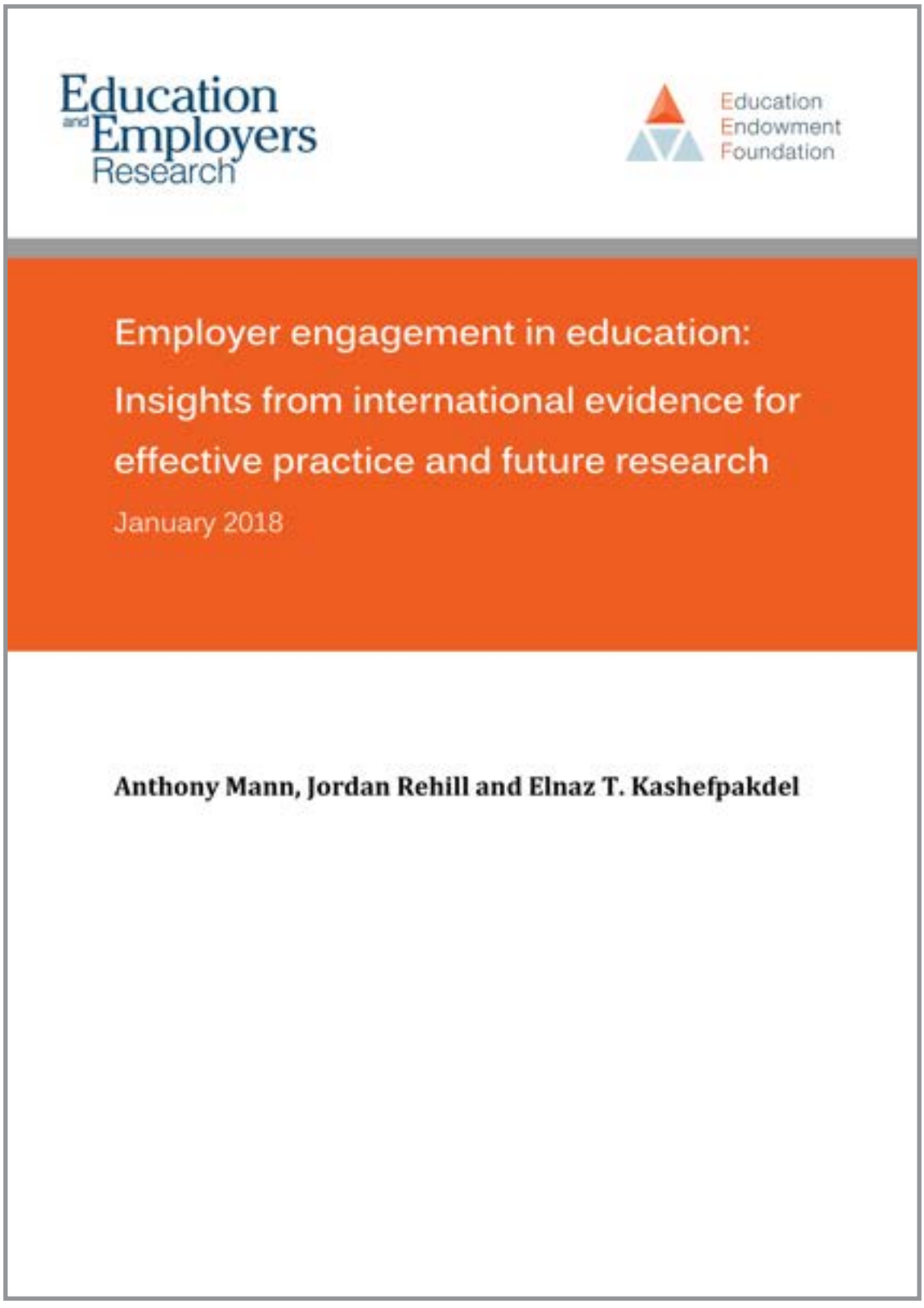
Prior to survey confirmation, interviews were undertaken with 15 members of secondary school staff with responsibilities for Key Stage 4 career guidance and with 8 people in larger workplaces with experience of working with schools and young people to support their career development. Anonymised quotations from these interviews are used in this report, illustrating key perspectives from employers and from school staff tasked with implementing new requirements in England for students aged 11 to 16 to engage more intensely with employers within their career development. Respondents to the Schools Survey were also offered the opportunity to provide written comments and these are also drawn upon in the text that follows.

13 Characteristics of the sample. 804 young adults responded to a survey conducted by TGM in January and February 2026. Respondents all attended UK secondary schools for at least part of their pre-16 education. Age: 19 to 26 – 19 (15% of sample), 20 (11%), 21 (11%), 22 (11%), 23 (11%), 24 (15%), 25 (16%), 26 (9%). Gender: female (46%), male (54%). Nativity: native-born (92%), foreign-born (8%). Receipt of free school meals at any point in education: Yes (41%), No (59%). Ever classified with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities at any point in education: Yes (12%), No (88%). Pre-16 school location: Countryside or isolated area (11%), City or large town (49%), Suburb of city or large town (39%). Pre-16 school type: state comprehensive (74%), state grammar (13%), private school (8%), special school (1%), Alternative Provision (1%) Further Education College (3%). Main activity, 16-18: Academic study (42%), vocational education training (27%), Apprenticeship (12%), Work (15%), NEET (5%). Highest qualification: Less than five GCSEs or equivalent (9%), Five GCSEs or equivalent (22%), Two A levels or equivalent (29%), Higher Apprenticeship/BTEC level 4 or equivalent (8%), Undergraduate degree (23%), Postgraduate degree (8%). Activity at time of survey: Apprenticeship (5%), NEET (15%), full-time study (19%), full-time work (55%), other (7%). Ethnicity: White British (64%), Non-white (35%), other (1%). Sexual orientation: heterosexual (85%), Lesbian, Gay or Bisexual (12%), other/prefer not to say (3%). Gender identity same as at birth: Yes (96%), No (3%), prefer not to say (1%). National jurisdiction/region: Northern Ireland (1%), Scotland (5%), Wales (4%), England (90%) comprising of East Midlands (9%), East of England (7%), London (21%), North East (5%), North West (11%), South East (excl. London) (11%), South West (7%), West Midlands (12%), Yorkshire (7%).

14 Characteristics of the sample. Ages of students attending institution: 11-18 (55%); 11-16 (26%); 14-18 (4%); Other (15%). School funding: State (95%); private (5%). School type: comprehensive (67%); Special School (12%); Grammar (8%); Alternative Provision (2%); Further Education College (2%); Other (9%). Region: East Midlands (13%); East of England (9%); London (15%); North East (8%); North West (10%); South East (excl. London) (19%); South West (10%); West Midlands (7%); Yorkshire (5%); Other (5%). Percentage of students receiving Free School Meals (FSM): Less than 5% (11%); 6% to 15% (20%); 16% to 25% (20%); 26% to 35% (19%); More than 36% (30%). Percentage of students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND): Less than 5% (7%); 6% to 15% (32%); 16% to 25% (27%); 26% to 35% (13%); More than 36% (21%). Place: City of large town (36%); A suburb of a city or large town (44%); The countryside or isolated area (17%); Other (4%).

15 Characteristics of the sample. Size of workplace: 2-9 employees (26%), 10-49 employees (74%). Employer sector: private (88%), public (12%). Economic sector: Agriculture and fishing (1%); Arts, entertainment, sports and recreation services (3%); Business Services (including professional, scientific and technical services) (16%); Construction (8%); Education (6%); Financial Services (8%); Health & Social Work (7%); Hotels & Restaurants (6%); Information & Communications (11%); Manufacturing (9%); Public administration (2%); Transport & Storage (1%); Utilities (3%); Wholesale & Retail (15%); Other (5%). Workplace role: Manager/owner (88%); HR (12%). Workplace location: A city or large town (64%); A suburb of a city or large town (30%); The countryside or isolated area (6%).

16 **https://tgmresearch.com/.**


Education and Employers Research
Education Endowment Foundation
Employer engagement in education:
Insights from international evidence for effective practice and future research
January 2018
Anthony Mann, Jordan Rehill and Elnaz T. Kashefpakdel

Chapter 2

The role of employer engagement in the career development of secondary school students

> "We will also guarantee two weeks' worth of work experience for every young person, and improve careers advice in schools and colleges."
> *Labour Party 2024 UK General Election manifesto*[17]

The policy environment in England

In 2025, the Department for Education (DfE) in England announced its vision that all students in England aged 11 to 16 will engage with employers and people in work to support their career development for at least 10 days in total.

- Over the years 7 to 9 (aged 11-14), it is expected that all students will engage in five days of "work experience activities." These "should consist of multiple, varied and meaningful employer-led activities to explore different industries and careers and involve active engagement with a diverse range of employers, including small and medium sized enterprises." By way of example, the Department highlighted "multi-day work visits involving employer-set tasks or projects, work shadowing and in-person or virtual employer talks in the workplace, including technical demonstrations or tours of working premises."
- During years 10 and 11 (aged 14-16), students are expected to complete one or more "work experience placement", totalling at least five days. This "should allow pupils to experience a real working environment and begin to develop work-based skills and behaviours."[18]

In the context of teenage lives, the vision represents a determined effort to increase considerably (if from an unknown baseline) the engagement of employers and people in work.

In such processes of employer engagement under the auspices of schools, students interact with members of the economic community to gain insights and experiences which cannot be so effectively delivered by schools acting alone.[19] As with any other educational tool, it is essential that practice is informed by research and evaluation, and monitored to ensure that provision enables all students to gain benefit at the lowest costs to the public purse. Consequently, this paper explores how employer engagement can be most effectively, equitably and efficiently delivered in light of available evidence, including the expert perspectives of the careers leaders and employers who are ultimately responsible for making it happen.

17 https://labour.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/Labour-Party-manifesto-2024.pdf

18 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-guidance-provision-for-young-people-in-schools/careers-guidance-and-access-for-education-and-training-providers. Emphasis added.

19 Stanley, J. & A. Mann. 2014. A theoretical framework for employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London; OECD. 2021. Getting the most out of employer engagement in career guidance. OECD Publishing, Paris.

The DfE's expectation is not trivial. Under the age of 16, each year group in England consists of some 650,000 girls and boys, in state comprehensive, selective, special schools, and alternative provision schools. Collectively, they will be expected to engage directly with employers in total over 6,650,000 days during their secondary education.[20] In terms of curriculum time, the new expectation is also a significant investment. At GCSE level, most subjects include between 70 and 100 taught classroom hours. A student on a five-day work experience placement lasting 7 hours a day will spend 35 hours in the workplace. [21] In addition, the DfE continue to expect that all students enrolled on 16-18 programmes of both academic and vocational learning will engage with employers while other policy developments will introduce new expectations of employers to support the training and employability of young people.

Why employer engagement is at the heart of effective career development

Employer engagement is now widely viewed as an essential aspect of teenage career development

The desire of the DfE to enrich career development in secondary education through the involvement of employers and people in work is strongly shared by international policy experts. The Inter-Agency Group on Career Guidance (IAGCG) brings together the European Commission, European Centre for the Development of Vocational Training (Cedefop), European Training Foundation, International Labor Organization, Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and World Bank. All of these international organisations are tasked and funded by governments to provide expert policy advice based on best available international evidence. The 2025 joint IAGCG statement, Investing in Career Guidance, is clear that provision for school students is significantly enriched when it connects them with the world of work:

> When people in work cooperate with schools and other providers, there is a better understanding of the working world in all its forms. This is particularly important for young people. It allows access to new and trustworthy information and experiences that broaden and deepen career aspirations. First-hand encounters are powerful learning opportunities. Direct experience of workplaces helps individuals to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to access available work.[22]

As illustrated below, students in many countries engage with employers within career guidance provision more commonly than is the case in the UK. In many OECD countries, government policy requires or encourages schools to provide students with the opportunity to participate in a work placement while still in full-time general education.

20 https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25?subjectId=0b888b70-db35-4653-4f44-08dd736a5cea

21 Foster, R. et al. 2020. Hours Spent Building Skills and Employability. Department for Education, London

22 Inter-agency Group on Career Guidance. 2025. Investing in Career Guidance. A joint publication of Cedefop, European Commission, European Training Foundation, International Labor Organisation, OECD, UNESCO and World Bank. See also, ILO. 2024. A guide to work experience: Using the ILO's career development framework to support work experience in education and training in low- and middle-income countries. International Labor Organisation, Geneva

In some countries, such as France, Finland, Germany, Sweden and Switzerland they are either mandatory or universally expected, while in others such as Denmark, Ireland, Italy, Norway, some Canadian provinces and Australian states work placements are optional for students.

In Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, work experience is actively encouraged in secondary education but ultimately optional for students. Across jurisdictions, such work placements are generally offered between the ages of 14 and 18 with provision at 14 to 16 most common.[23] In most of these countries, governments put in place advice, guidance and resources to enable such experiences. Such international practice provides useful models for consideration but also reflects a growing international consensus that employer engagement is an essential characteristic of effective career guidance within secondary education. Such perspectives draw on persuasive research evidence.

Compelling international evidence shows that many forms of teenage career development enriched by employer engagement are significantly associated with better employment outcomes

To assess the impact of a policy initiative, governments place greatest faith in studies which compare the experiences of similar individuals who either take part in an specific initiative (the intervention group) or who do not (the control group) and use statistical analysis to ensure that the results are not due to some other predictable factor. The gold standards for such studies are the Randomised Controlled Trials (RCTs) and longitudinal cohort studies.

Unfortunately, in the field of teenage careers guidance RCTs are rare.[24] Much more common are longitudinal cohort studies which survey large numbers of individuals over long periods of time. Statisticians compare what happens to individuals who did or did not engage in particular interventions, assessing whether any differences in outcomes found can be better explained by other personal or social characteristics or due to chance.

In the field of career guidance, the OECD has undertaken itself or reviewed 172 such studies from 10 countries, including the UK. This is the most comprehensive review of its nature. Individual studies asked whether any one of three adult employment outcomes (NEET rates, earning and career satisfaction) commonly between the ages of 18 and 25 can be significantly related to different forms of career development, typically at the age of 15.

The OECD found that evidence of one or more beneficial employment outcome could be related to 11 specific forms of career development which cluster together in three groups: how young people think about their futures in work, how they explore their potential future careers, and whether they have gained first-hand experiences of being in workplaces. Across the 172 studies, statistical analysis ensure that positive results

23 Fitzenberger, B. et al. 2020. Different counselors, many options: Career guidance and career plans in secondary schools. German Economic Review, 21:1, 65-106; SQW. 2022. International work experience practices: A rapid evidence review. Speakers for Schools; Kettunen, J. et al. 2023. Work Experience Placements in Lower Secondary Education in Nordic Countries, Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance, 4:1, 29-42; Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, M. 2024. A Cross-National Analysis of the (Re)actualization of Work Experience Placement as a Career Education Activity in Sweden and Denmark. Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance, 5:1, 94-106; OECD. 2025. Internships for secondary school students in general education. OECD Publishing, Paris

24 A small number of RCTs are available. As valuable as these are, the studies tend to focus on multi-year career-related programmes which typically include a range of different interventions making it difficult to assess the value of specific interventions. See for example, Renée, L. 2025. The Long-Term Effects of Career Guidance in High School and Student Financial Aid: Evidence from a Randomized Experiment. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, 17:2, 165–183; Kemple, J. 2008. Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Work, Education, and Transitions to Adulthood. New York: MDRC.

could not be better explained by the gender, social background, academic attainment and often by many other characteristics. The relationships were deemed to be significant and so meaningful if there were 90% or better certainty that these 'control variables' did not better explain the outcomes or that the results were due to chance. Of the 172 studies, 134 (78%) find evidence of better outcomes.

TABLE 2.1: 172 analyses of longitudinal cohort studies exploring the relationship between teenage career development and better employment outcomes

Career development form	Specific form of career development	Number of studies reviewed	Number of studies identifying significant positive benefit	Percentage of studies finding beneficial relationships with employment outcomes
Thinking	**Career certainty**	19	15	79%
	Career alignment	11	9	82%
	Career ambition	19	15	79%
	Instrumental motivation	15	13	87%
	Career originality	4	2	50%
	(Sub-total)	**(68)**	**(54)**	**(79%)**
Exploring	School-based career reflection activities	7	2	29%
	Career conversations	10	7	70%
	Career talks/career fairs	7	4	57%
	Workplace visits/job shadowing	6	4	67%
	Application/interview skills development	4	3	75%
	Career pathway programmes	23	20	87%
	(Sub-total)	**(57)**	**(40)**	**(70%)**
Experiencing	**Part-time working**	31	27	87%
	Community volunteering	8	7	88%
	Internships/work placements	8	6	75%
	(Sub-total)	**(47)**	**(40)**	**(85%)**
	Total	**172**	**134**	**78%**

NOTES: The table is created by the report authors based on review of studies listed below. 'Career certainty' describes student ability to name an occupational expectation. 'Career alignment' describes the alignment of educational plans and occupational requirements. 'Career ambition' describes intention to work in major categories 1 or 2 as categorised by the International Standard Classification of Occupations. 'Instrumental motivation' describes student capacity to see value in education as a means to securing employment ambitions. 'Career pathway programmes' describe study programmes common in the United States which take place alongside academic learning often between the ages of 15 and 18 and are focused on specific vocational areas, combining significant employer engagement and work-related learning.[25]

SOURCES: : Covacevich, C. et al. 2021. Indicators of teenage career readiness: An analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries. OECD Publishing, Paris; OECD. 2024. Teenage career uncertainty: Why it matters and how to reduce it? OECD Publishing, Paris; OECD. 2024. Aligned ambitions? How to tell (and why it is important to know) if students' occupational and education plans are aligned. OECD Publishing, Paris. Herdman, P. et al. 2024. Innovation in career pathways across five countries. OECD Publishing, Paris. OECD. 2025. Teenage part-time working: How schools can optimise benefits and reduce risks for secondary school students. OECD Publishing, Paris. OECD. 2025. Voluntary work in the community: A guide to delivering an effective career development activity. OECD Publishing, Paris. OECD. 2025. Internships for secondary school students in general education. OECD Publishing, Paris.

25 Covacevich, C. et al. 2021. Indicators of teenage career readiness: An analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries. OECD Publishing, Paris

The forms of career development in bold were confirmed by the OECD as predictors of better employment outcomes in that such associations were found in at least three countries and in the majority of studies undertaken. Where they are found, wage premiums of 5-10% are commonplace, broadly equivalent to an additional year of secondary schooling.[26] If anything as the OECD argues, the results are almost certainly an underestimate of actual impacts. Studies routinely disaggregate programmes of career development into a series of atomised attitudes, activities and experiences. They struggle to capture the interactions between combined forms of guidance (e.g., a student deciding on a work placement after reflective discussions with a guidance counsellor and encounters with employers through job fairs or career talks). Often, they provide little or no information on the quality, intensity or frequency of the intervention and this matters, as studies show that guidance interventions which were found by students to be helpful are strongly connected with still better outcomes.[27]

Longitudinal studies overwhelmingly find that first-hand experience of the world of work through part-time working and community volunteering are associated with better employment outcomes

The international evidence base is especially strong in relation to long-term employment benefits linked to teenage part-time working and community volunteering: 34 of 39 studies (87%) that looked at first-hand encounters of the world of work through these forms of experience found evidence of better outcomes.

A specific driver for enhanced teenage engagement with employers in England is concern over rising rates of young people experiencing unemployment and being NEET. First-hand experience of the world of work (undertaking tasks under supervision in a professional environment) while still in education is strongly connected with young adults having better employment prospects and lower risks of becoming NEET. The overwhelming majority of studies which look for evidence of long-term positive employment outcomes linked to teenage participation in community volunteering or part-time work find it. Of eight UK studies identified or undertaken by the OECD, seven find some significant evidence of a positive benefit. Full details are set out in Annex 4.

Longitudinal studies related to teenage work placements are fewer and of poorer quality, but also suggest employment benefits can be typically expected

Evidence from longitudinal cohort studies on the long-term benefits of work experience placements within full-time secondary education is weaker. While six of eight specific studies find some evidence of better outcomes, four of the studies relate to two datasets explored from different dimensions and in one of those datasets, the question used for analysis is ambiguous. One further study focuses on the experiences of students enrolled in special education who participated in a 12-week work placement within a programme of work preparation. In all, there is significant need for more reliable studies of employment outcomes linked to such teenage experiences. The OECD study highlights

26 Covacevich, C. et al. 2021. Indicators of teenage career readiness: An analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries. OECD Publishing, Paris; Kemple, J. 2008. Career Academies: Long-Term Impacts on Work, Education, and Transitions to Adulthood. New York: MDRC; Hanushek, E. & L. Wößmann. 2007. The Role of Education Quality in Economic Growth. World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4122.

27 Moote, J. et al. 2024. More is more: exploring the relationship between young people's experiences of school-based career education, information, advice and guidance at age 14–16 and wider adult outcomes at age 21–22 in England, Research Papers in Education, 40, 1, 72-95; Kashefpakdel, E. T., & C. Percy. 2017. Career education that works: an economic analysis using the British Cohort Study. Journal of Education and Work, 30:3, 217–234.

two separate analyses from the UK, both related to data from the British Cohort Study. See Annex 4. Longitudinal studies from Scotland and Ireland however will soon provide important opportunity to gather further evidence.[28]

Longitudinal studies also find that teenage career exploration involving employers are routinely linked to better employment outcomes

As well as gaining first-hand experience of work between 14 and 16, the new DfE expectations anticipate students will engage with employers and people in work primarily at ages 11 to 14 to explore potential futures in work. With the important proviso that relatively few longitudinal studies note student participation in career development activities before the age of 14-15, the OECD analysis indicates that in general such exploratory and experiential provision can be strongly expected to increase young people's likelihood of securing better ultimate employment outcomes than would otherwise be the case and the size of impact is often considerable. Such activities include participation in career fairs and career talks, workplace visits and job shadowing, and interview and CV development sessions which commonly engage employers. The strongest evidence of long-term benefit relates to Career Pathway programmes, programmes of study common in the United States which focus on a vocational field and typically run for one day a week within general secondary education for students aged 15 to 18. Such programmes are rich in employer engagement and work-related learning.[29] Considering these four different forms of activities, 31 of 40 studies (78%) provide evidence of better employment outcomes.

Longitudinal studies of such career exploration activity in the UK are rare, with the important exception of analysis of the British Cohort Study by Kashefpakdel and Percy (Education and Employer) on the long-term impacts of participation in career talks. With a range of controls in place for gender, ethnicity, academic ability, highest qualification achieved, home learning environment and socio-economic background, they find that:

- Young adults (in full-time employment) experienced a wage premium at age 26 of 0.8% for each career talk undertaken at age 14-15. Such long-term beneficial associations were identified after teenagers participated in three or more career talks.
- Where students agreed (at age 16) that the career talks had been 'very useful' to them, the premium per career talk increased to 1.6%.
- Young adults enjoyed a wage premium of 0.9% at age 26 in relation to career talks undertaken at age 15-16, but only if talks were found to be 'very useful' at the time they were experienced.
- Young people who found career talks to be 'very helpful' on average participated in 3.4 talks. By comparison young people who did not find them to be helpful typically took part in 2.25 talks.[30]

28 The Growing Up in Scotland asked 17 year olds if they had completed a work experience placement through their school: 34% respondents said that they had done so: **https://natcen.ac.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/GUS%20BC1%20Sw11%20User%20Guide_v1.0_FINAL.pdf?_ga=2.123569096.216260312.1763391025-214925045.1763039331;** Knudsen, L. et al. 2025. Life at age 17: initial findings from the Growing Up in Scotland study (Sweep 11). Scottish Government. The Growing Up in Ireland study includes questions for a similar age group: **https://www.growingup.gov.ie/pubs/Young-Person-Main-Questionnaire-17_18-years.pdf.**

29 Covacevich, C. et al. 2021. Indicators of teenage career readiness: An analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries. OECD Publishing, Paris. Herdman, P. et al. 2024. Innovation in career pathways across five countries. OECD Publishing, Paris. In the UK, the Scottish Foundation Apprenticeship and the discontinued 14-19 Diploma in England offer models of Career Pathway provision.

30 Kashefpakdel, E. & C. Percy. 2017. Career education that works: an economic analysis using the British Cohort Study. Journal of Education and Work, 30:3, 217–234; Percy, C. and E. Kashefpakdel. 2018. Insiders or outsiders, who do you trust? Engaging employers in school-based career activities, in Mann., A. et al. eds. Essays on Employer engagement in education, Routledge, London; OECD. 2023. Career talks with guest speakers: A guide to delivering an effective career development activity. OECD Publishing, Paris.

Career exploration and workplace experience are significantly associated with more beneficial career thinking

Longitudinal datasets provide compelling evidence that the ways in which students think about their futures are also very important in career development. Where students around the age of 15 express clear and ambitious visions for their futures and demonstrate understanding of how education and training can help them to be achieved, they can expect to achieve better ultimate employment outcomes. Analysing data from the 690,000 15 year-old students who took part in the 2022 round of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), OECD analysts found that more beneficial forms of teenage career thinking are significantly linked with a range of guidance activities, including career exploration activities with employers.[31]

Teenage career development predictors of better employment outcomes

Based on an initial substantial analysis of longitudinal studies from ten countries, the OECD identified fourteen questions for secondary school leaders seeking to enhance practice based upon findings. These are set out in full in Annex 5.

Insights from recent Young Adult user surveys provide further evidence that teenage employer engagement helps to prevent poor transitions into the labour market

There are limitations to longitudinal surveys. In any one country such surveys are rare, often ask far fewer relevant questions than would be hoped, and by definition the data will be old. Questions can be ambiguous and understanding of how interventions were delivered sometimes 20 or 30 years earlier can be limited. Any individual study can have weaknesses in its selection of control variables. Consequently, it is important to look at the patterns of results across multiple studies and here the results show compelling evidence of benefit and to confirm findings with more recent quantitative studies.

In response to the limitations of longitudinal cohort studies, researchers have introduced retrospective cross-sectional or 'user surveys' of young adults. Such studies ask large numbers of young adults about their recalled experiences of career development in school, their current participation in the labour market, and attitudes towards career progression. Using statistical analysis based on the personal and social characteristics of respondents, studies can compare the outcomes of young adults who recalled participation in a particular guidance intervention and those who did not.[32] Four such studies have been undertaken in the UK, exploring the relationship between teenage employer engagement and adult employment outcomes with five analyses appearing in the research literature.[33] Two other studies have been published by the OECD related

31 Covacevich, C. et al. 2021. Indicators of teenage career readiness: An analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries. OECD Publishing, Paris; Mann, A. et al. 2024. Teenage career development in England: A Review of PISA 2022 Data. OECD Publishing, Paris; OECD. 2024. Teenage career uncertainty: Why it matters and how to reduce it? OECD Publishing, Paris; OECD. 2024. Aligned ambitions? How to tell (and why it is important to know) if students' occupational and education plans are aligned. OECD Publishing, Paris.

32 An OECD study of young adults in Spain asked respondents if was easy or difficult for them to remember whether they had participated in different career development activities while in secondary school. Across the whole sample, 67% of respondents agreed in general that it was easy or very easy to remember. One in twenty found it very difficult to remember. Looking at 17 specific forms of career development activities, confidence in memory was substantially greater. Routinely, some 95% of students agreed that they remembered whether they had or had not taken part. Mann, A. et al. 2025. Career readiness in Madrid, Spain: Insights from a survey of young adults (19-26). OECD Publishing, Paris.

33 Mann, A. & C. Percy. 2013. Employer engagement in British secondary education: wage earning outcomes experienced by young adults, Journal of Education and Work, 27:5, 496–523; Mann, A. et al. 2017. Contemporary transitions: young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college. Education and Employers, London; Moote, J. et al. 2024. More is more: exploring the relationship between young people's experiences of school-based career education, information, advice and guidance at age 14–16 and wider adult outcomes at age 21–22 in England, Research Papers in Education, 40, 1, 72-95; Percy, C. and A. Mann. 2014. School-mediated employer engagement and labour market outcomes for young adults: wage premia, NEET outcomes and career confidence, in Mann, A. et al. eds., Education and Employers.Understanding employer engagement in education, Routledge, London; Kashefpakdel, E. & C. Percy. 2022. Work experience for all: exploring the impact of work experience on young people's outcomes. Futures for all, London.

to experiences in Spain and the United States.[34] After statistical analysis using control variables, all the studies find significant relationships between teenage participation in forms of career guidance, notably including the engagement of employers, and lower NEET rates among young adults. Evidence is also found notably in UK studies of higher wages and greater satisfaction with progressions through post-secondary transitions.

For secondary schools, it is notable that greater levels of student involvement in the working world appear to change the perspectives of young people about the usefulness of the education that they had received. Studies in both the UK[35] and Spain find strong relationships between recalled volume of employer contacts and greater belief that school had prepared respondents well for adult life (Table 2.2).

TABLE 2.2: Respondent perception of how well schools/colleges had prepared them for adult working life by volume of employer engagement activities recalled

	Looking back, how well do you feel that your school/college prepared you for adult working life?	
Between the ages of 14 and 19, did your school or college ever arrange for you to take part in any activities which involved employers/local business people? E.g. work experience, mentoring, enterprise competitions, careers advice, CV or interview workshops, workplace visits. If so, on how many different occasions (more or less) did it happen?	**Well**	**Poorly**
Never	34%	66%
Once	40%	60%
Twice	52%	48%
Three times	65%	35%
Four times or more	68%	32%

SOURCE: : Mann, A. et al. 2017. Contemporary transitions: young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college. Education and Employers, London. Responses from 1,744 individuals aged between 19 and 24. Fieldwork, May 2016.

Retrospective user surveys can also be used to gather information from young adults about the sorts of career development they wished that they had received while in school. From their perspective within the adult world, these are people ideally placed to provide user feedback to policy makers and practitioners. Results from a UK study finds that around half or more of the respondents wished that their schools had provided more help in practical preparation for the world of work in terms of understanding tax and benefit systems, how to create a good CV/application, how to perform well at interview, understanding how employers recruit, how to find a job and how the world of work is changing and which skills are likely to be in demand in the future. Demand was notably higher for young adults who had attended comprehensive state schools, young women and the children of parents who had not attended university.[36]

34 Mann, A. et al. 2025. Career readiness in Madrid, Spain: Insights from a survey of young adults (19-26). OECD Publishing, Paris ; OECD. 2023. Career Readiness Review: The Commonwealth of Virginia, United States, OECD Publishing, Paris.

35 Mann, A. et al. 2017. Contemporary transitions: young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college. Education and Employers, London.

36 Mann, A. et al. 2017. Contemporary transitions: young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college. Education and Employers, London.

Career guidance systems are designed to support the transitions of young people out of secondary education and into adulthood. At that age, as users of the system, they are well placed to confirm whether they felt that the experiences were in fact useful to them. Such studies are quick, comparatively very cheap, and easily tailored to specific policy questions.

Understanding the return on investment: how much is reasonable to spend on career development

This overview of quantitative longitudinal studies into the long-term employment benefits that can be confidently related to employer engagement in teenage career development identifies substantial benefits to young people, but also to their future employers. Effectively, through workplace experience and career exploration, young people become more attractive to employers with higher wages likely to reflect better matching of individuals and job roles and greater productivity returns. Such benefits are tangible.

The studies summarised in this paper lay the foundations for compelling analyses of the costs and benefits of guidance provision, helping governments to understand appropriate levels of investment in light of reasonably anticipated returns to individuals and to the state. Return on Investment (ROI) analyses enable comprehensive assessments to be made. In the case of career development, there is strong evidence that provision which includes employer engagement can be expected to reduce NEET rates (as well as enhancing earnings for those in work). It is a consistent message from current research that career development, notably when enriched by employer engagement, serves to prevent poor transition outcomes for a meaningful number of young people. Analysis by economist Dr Chris Percy finds that on average each young person who spends time NEET when they'd ordinarily be in compulsory education or training represents a lifetime cost to the public purse of £54,000. This is due to welfare payments, missing tax revenue and wider social costs.[37] For every 100 NEET outcomes prevented, average savings of £5.4 million can be expected with savings spread across government departments, most notably the Department for Work and Pensions and Inland Revenue. It is consequently reasonable, as has happened in the past, for DfE investment to be supplemented by other government departments with responsibilities surrounding strategic economic growth and the need for appropriately skilled labour to ensure the best quality provision is made available to students (discussed further in the Efficiency section below).

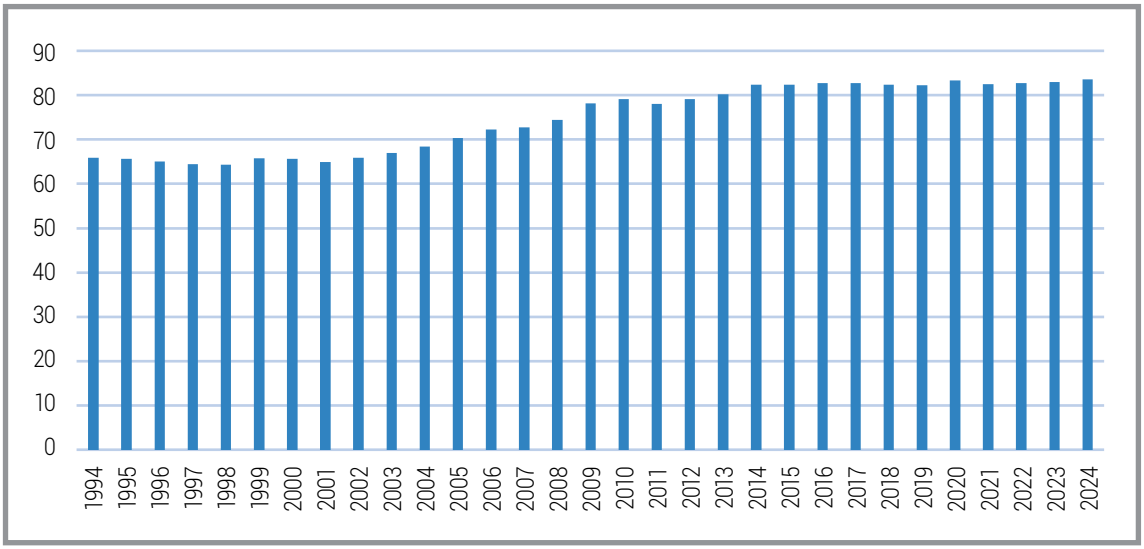
37 Percy, C. (2025). Technical note: Fiscal benefit of inferred NEET reductions due to careers education – updated analysis for 2020/21-2024/25. London: The Careers & Enterprise Company. See also, new analysis presented in Department for Work and Pensions. 2026. Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report.

A changing educational and economic context is making employer engagement more important for young people

The educational landscape for teenage work experience has changed

During the 1960s when UK government policy first began actively encouraging and enabling schools to work with employers to support career development, more than two-thirds of students left education by the age of 16 and 80% by the age of 17. Hence, an early focus of policy was on preparing students for early entry into the labour market. Thereafter, staying on rates crept upwards until the early 1990s when the majority of students began staying on in education after the age of 16, reaching 70% by 2005.[38] Since the Great Financial Crisis of 2008, around 80% of students or more have stayed on in secondary education (Table 2.3). Currently, after the age of 18, around half of teenagers will progress onto higher education.

TABLE 2.3: Percentage of young people aged 16-17 in full-time education.1994-2024, England.



SOURCE: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment

Government statistics for England in 2024 illustrate the routes taken by students in the three years after they typically sit their GCSE exams. Most students stay in education, generally proceeding to higher education from age 18. However, an important minority, especially young men, enter employment, apprenticeships or other forms of training. At age 17, one young person in twelve is NEET. By 18, this figure has risen to more than one in seven.

38 Bolton, P. 2012. Education: Historical statistics. House of Commons Library, London.

TABLE 2.4: What young people aged 16, 17 and 18 are doing? England, 2024.

	Female			Male		
Age (birthday after 31 August)	16	17	18	16	17	18
Full-time education (FTE)	90%	82%	53%	86%	77%	45%
Apprenticeships/WBL (less overlaps with FTE)	2%	4%	5%	3%	6%	8%
Part-time education (PTE) (less overlaps with Apprenticeships/ WBL)	2%	2%	2%	2%	2%	3%
Employer funded training (less overlaps with PTE)	1%	2%	5%	2%	3%	8%
Other education and training (less overlaps with PTE)	1%	1%	2%	1%	1%	1%
In employment (not in education or training)	0%	3%	19%	0%	3%	21%
Not in Education Employment or Training (NEET)	4%	7%	14%	6%	8%	15%

SOURCE: : https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/participation-in-education-and-training-and-employment/2024

The context in which employer engagement is delivered has therefore changed considerably since the 1960s. Since the 1990s, it has become the norm for students to stay on in education after 16, underpinning the particular value of research studies exploring the delivery of pre-16 work experience undertaken over the last 20-30 years. As students stay in education longer, they have more decisions to make about what, where and how hard they will study, making important investments in their accumulation of the human capital. At least half hope that these investments will lead to desirable employment from the age of 18 or younger. For this group, career development in secondary education represents a highly significant proportion of overall preparation for good transitions into the labour market. It is a group that has specific needs which effective provision will address as they seek to thrive in what is becoming a more difficult working world. However, for all students, early career preparation is important. As noted later in this report, many students find that they cannot apply for preferred university courses due to dropping subjects in secondary education, many require related work experience for programme entry, and not all university graduates see the now very costly experience as ultimately worthwhile.

An increasingly challenging labour market

It is getting more difficult for young people to secure attractive employment. Whereas once teenagers commonly left education and entered apprenticeships, as Table 2.4 shows, nowadays fewer than one in twenty 17-year-olds and fewer than one in fourteen 18-year-olds transition into employment through this route.[39] The number of young people starting an apprenticeship has nearly halved in the last ten years to around 75,000. In 2024/25, just 21% of new apprentices in England were under 19.Half were over 25.[40] While this has led to recent government determination to increase the flow of young people into apprenticeships[41], the pattern represents an increasingly challenging labour market for young people in general.

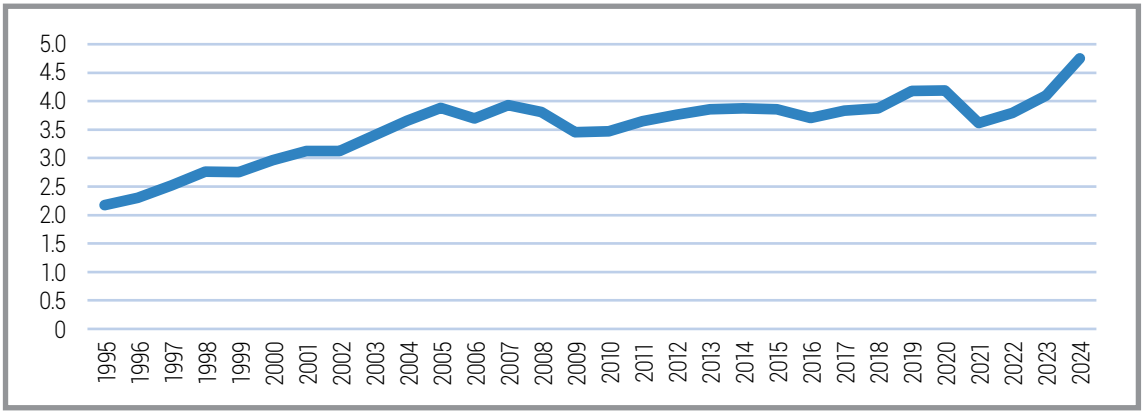
39 Crowley, L. 2024. Changing face of the youth labour market. CIPD, London

40 Murray, A. 2025. Apprenticeship statistics for England. House of Commons Library, London.

41 https://www.gov.uk/government/news/government-vows-to-unlock-opportunities-for-young-people-across-the-country-ahead-of-national-apprenticeship-week

In May 2026 1,012,000 young people aged 16 to 24 across the UK were classified as being NEET, 13% of all young people in the age cohort (ONS 2026).[42] While this figure represents a terrible social failure, it is not the best statistic to show whether it is getting more or less difficult for young people to succeed in the competition for work. Governments distinguish between NEET rates and youth unemployment rates. While NEET refers to all those who are not in any form of education, employment or training (people who are neither building their human capital nor being paid to use it) and includes many people who are not looking for work in many case due to poor health, the unemployment figures refer to people who are able to work and who are looking for a job, but who are unable to find one. This figure is also high and the rate for young people is much higher than that for people over the age of 24. During the 1990s, young people in the UK were between two and three times more likely to be unemployed than people over the age of 24. Now they are between four and five times more likely to be looking for work, but unable to find it compared to older people (Table 2.5). As noted earlier, by way of comparison, on average young people across the European Union are three times more likely to be unemployed and in Germany twice as likely.

TABLE 2.5: Ratio of youth to adult unemployment, UK, 1995 to 2024.



SOURCE: Author's analysis of OECD Data Explorer: Monthly unemployment rates

While the reasons for higher rates of youth unemployment are debated, it is clear that given the choice UK employers increasingly prefer to hire older people with negative consequences for young people. Economists are also increasingly aware of the risks of poor starts to working life. Longitudinal studies find that early periods of unemployment have a 'scarring' effect, with long-term employment and poor mental health greater than would be otherwise expected.[43] When in work, young people in the UK are twice as likely as older people to be in 'insecure' work, in that they are not guaranteed future hours or future work, have unpredictable pay, or their pay is simply too low to get by and/or lack of access to employment rights and protections.[44] Once in insecure work, they are more likely to stay in it than peers working with greater stability in their employment.[45] It is important to have a good transition from education into employment, and it is the role of career guidance systems to maximise the chances of this happening.

42 ONS. Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: February 2026

43 CSJ. 2026. Rewiring education Part 1: The state of technical learning in England. Centre for Social Justice; Department for Work and Pensions. 2026. Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report.

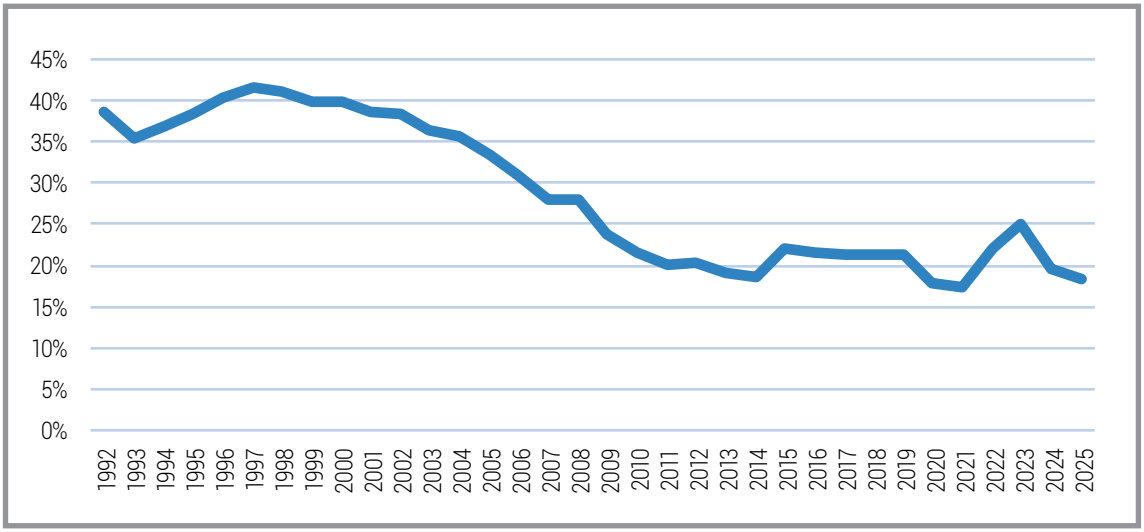
44 Florisson, R. (2024). The UK Insecure Work Index 2024. The Work Foundation at Lancaster University.

45 Navani, A. & Florisson, R. 2024. No progress? Tackling long-term insecure work. The Work Foundation at Lancaster University; Clarke, S. & C. D'Arcy. 2018. THE KIDS AREN'T ALRIGHT – A new approach to tackle the challenges faced by young people in the UK labour market. Resolution Foundation, London.

Schools can no longer rely on young people to gain experience through part-time work, but it should be encouraged

In the past, teenagers gained a lot from their work-related experiences outside of school. One of the stand-out findings from the earlier review of longitudinal cohort studies is that very large numbers of studies show that teenage part-time working is consistently associated with better employment rates. Unfortunately, as Table 2.6 shows the proportion of teenagers in the UK who combine paid employment with full-time studies has fallen significantly over the last generation and remains much lower than in many other countries.[46]

TABLE 2.6: Percentage of young people aged 16-17 in full-time education in the UK who are also employed, 1992-2025.



SOURCE: Office of National Statistic – https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/datasets/educationalstatusandlabourmarketstatusforpeopleagedfrom16to24seasonallyadjusteda06sa

UK students today find it more difficult than earlier generations to find part-time work, but they are also less keen to take time away from their studies and other activities, often being strongly dissuaded by their schools.[47] Schools can however encourage and enable students to work part-time (and to engage in community volunteering), counselling them to avoid excessive hours which can be expected to impact negatively on academic performance.[48] The Career Education Framework adopted by the Canadian province of New Brunswick stresses that by the final years of secondary education, students should have learned both "how to find part-time or summer work" and "how working part-time or in the summer can help me to understand career pathways and my plans for the future." In addition, students are expected to draw on experiences of part-time work to reflect on understanding of work/life balances.[49] In Australia as well, some schools actively provide guided reflection to help students to maximise the benefits of part-time working to wider career development.[50]

46 OECD. 2025. Teenage part-time working: How schools can optimise benefits and reduce risks for secondary school students. OECD Publishing, Paris.

47 Conlon, G. et al. 2015. The death of the Saturday job: the decline of earning and learning along young people in the UK. UKCES, London. The recent 'Milburn report' finds from its analysis of Labour Force Statistics finds that the percentage of NEETs aged 16-24 who have never worked has risen steadily from 45% in 2005 to 62% in 2025 – Department for Work and Pensions. 2026. Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report.

48 OECD. 2025. Teenage part-time working: How schools can optimise benefits and reduce risks for secondary school students. OECD Publishing, Paris.

49 Department of Early Childhood Development and Education. 2024. Career Education Framework in New Brunswick. Government of New Brunswick.

50 Billett, S., & Ovens, C. (2007). Learning about work, working life and post school options: guiding students' reflections on paid part time work. Journal of Education and Work, 20(2), 75–90.

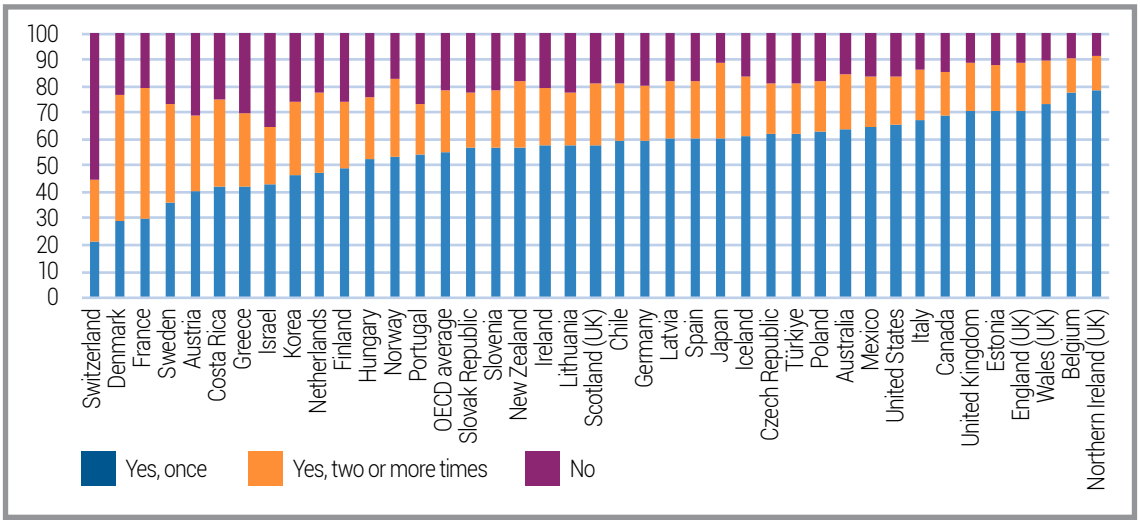
The career development of UK students in international perspective

Reliable research studies consistently show that student engagement in career development is linked with better ultimate employment outcomes, but the best available comparative data shows that students are just not getting enough of these experiences in the UK. There is good reason to believe that today's students around the age of 15 are preparing poorly for their working lives.

International comparative studies show that most UK students are not engaging with employers and people in work by the age of 15

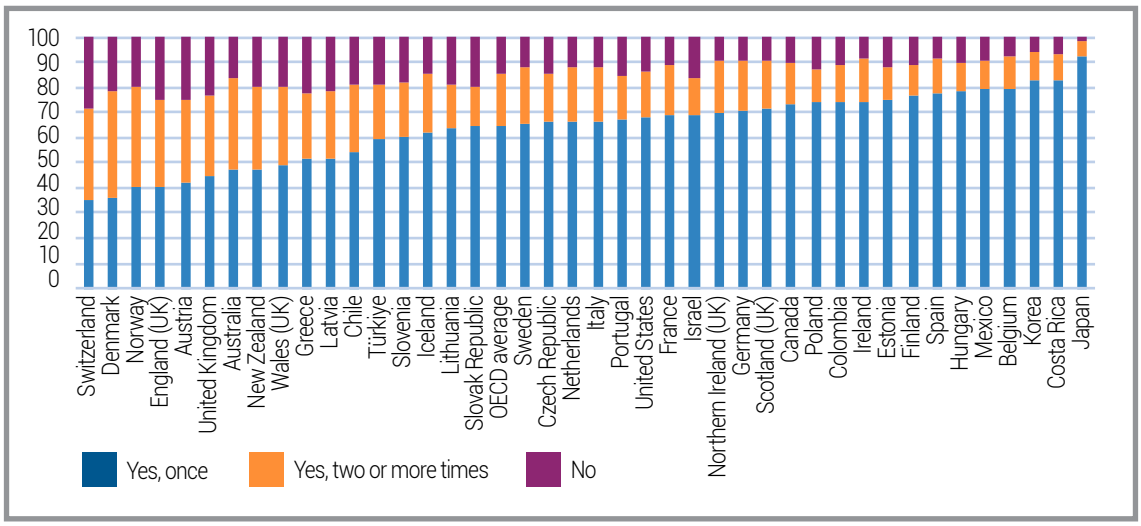
Internationally, employer engagement is common, if not universally experienced, within teenage career development. Findings from the 2022 round of the OECD (PISA) was published in 2024 and 2025 and includes the most extensive international data ever available on the participation of teenagers aged 15-16 across three common forms of employer engagement. Based on large representative samples of the student population, the tables below set out the percentage of respondents who said that they had visited a workplace/job shadowed (described in the PISA UK questionnaire as having "attended an employer visit"), had visited a careers fair, and/or completed an internship (described as "an internship or a work placement" in the UK survey). By the age of 15 across the UK, 35% of students said that they had completed an internship or a work placement (rising from 25% in 2018 PISA data), 30% that they had attended an employer visit (52% in 2018) and 55% a careers fair (39% in 2018). This data suggests that the vision articulated by the DfE that all students under the age of 16 should participate in at least 10 days of employer engagement within their career development by the age of 16 will require a considerable increase in provision. It is only with regard to participation in a careers fair where UK participation levels are significantly above OECD averages. In England, Wales and Northern Ireland visits to places of employment are notably rare.

TABLE 2.7: Have students participated in job shadowing or a work-site visit/attended an employer visit? OECD countries, PISA 2022.



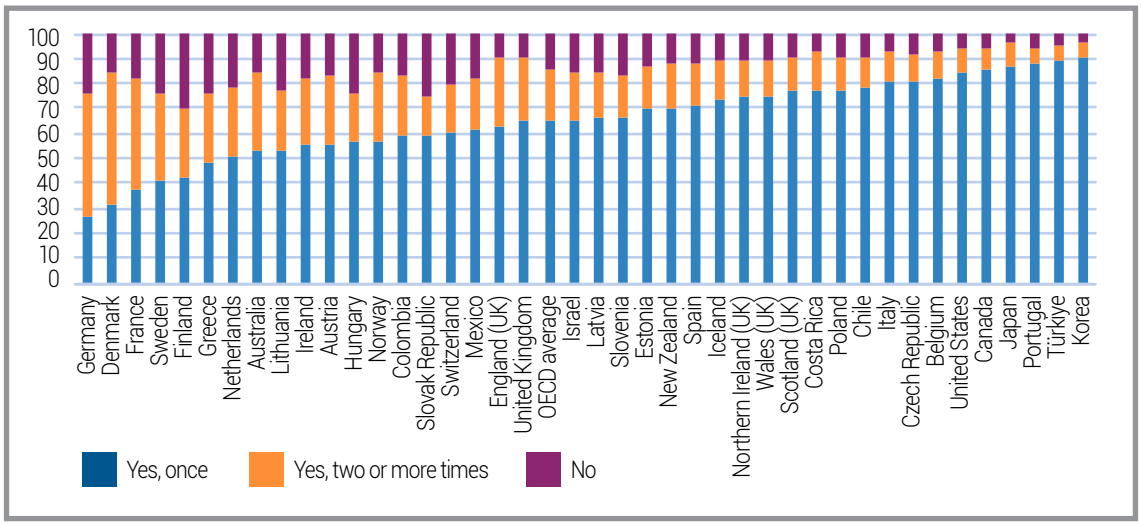
SOURCE: https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/teenage-career-readiness.html

TABLE 2.8: Have students attended a careers fair? OECD countries, PISA 2022.



SOURCE: https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/teenage-career-readiness.html

TABLE 2.9: Have students completed an internship or work placement? OECD countries, PISA 2022.



SOURCE: https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/teenage-career-readiness.html

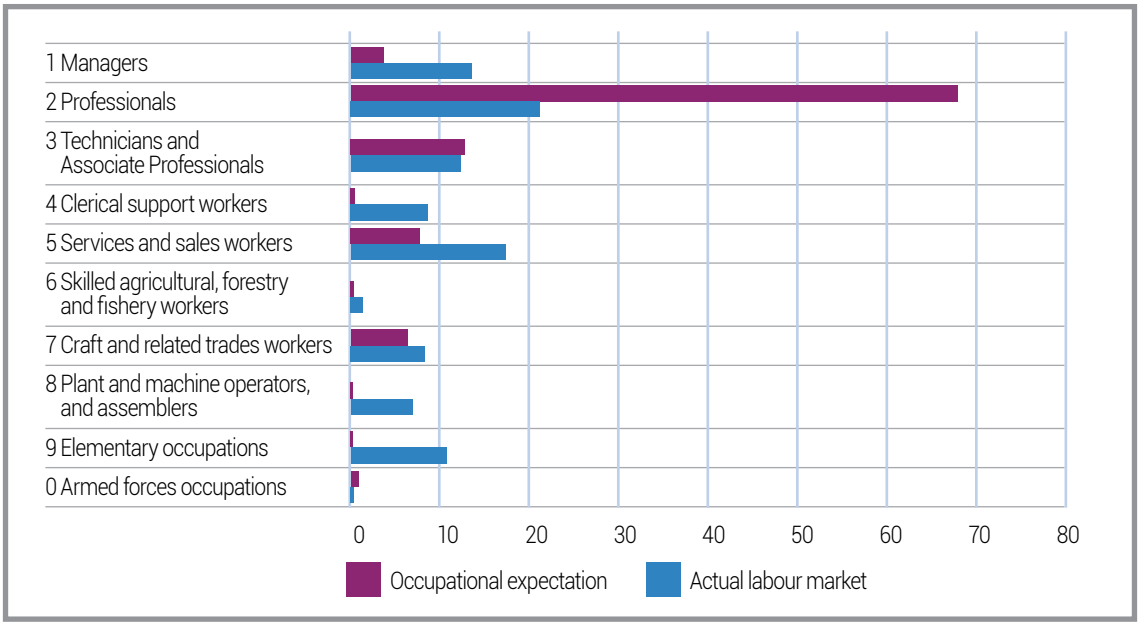
Uncertain, confused, but ambitious: international data highlights serious concerns over the career thinking of UK students

PISA also provides international comparative data on other ways in which students aged 15 demonstrate career development. As seen, when teenage students are uncertain about their job plans, longitudinal studies show that they can expect to do worse in the adult labour market than would otherwise be expected. Since 2000, PISA has measured uncertainty by reviewing responses to a question commonly used in research studies: What kind of job do you expect to have when you are about 30 years old? If students fail to respond, say they do not know, or write in a very vague answer, they are classified as being career uncertain. In 2000, 5% of UK students were uncertain. By 2018, this figure had risen to 25% and by 2022 to 46%. Over the same period, across all OECD countries

this proportion rose from 24% in 2000 to 39% in 2022.[51] Uncertainty at 15 is a particular problem because in the UK, as elsewhere, students make important decisions around the age of 15/16, narrowing down what they study in preparation for ultimate entry to the world of work. The good news is that if students engage in forms of career development, including activities that bring them into contact with people in work, they are significantly less likely to be uncertain about their career plans.[52]

When students do express job plans, they are commonly categorised using standardised occupational codes which can be compared to the actual distribution of workers across the labour market. As Table 2.10 shows for England, 67% of teenagers expect to work in one of 10 major occupational categories: the professions, an economic sector which employs 21% of the workforce.[53]

TABLE 2.10: Student occupation expectations compared to the actual distribution of workers across the labour market, England



SOURCE: Mann, A. et al. 2024. Teenage career development in England: A Review of PISA 2022 Data. OECD Publishing, Paris.

Compared to other northern European countries, these levels of interest in the professions are notably high (Table 2.11). In 2000, just under half of students in the UK expected to work in the professions. Nowadays, it is around two-thirds, including around half of students whose performance on the PISA assessments in mathematics, reading and science indicates that they would struggle to complete a university degree.[54] Competition for a small proportion of jobs is intense and as will be seen, employer engagement has an important role to play in enabling access.

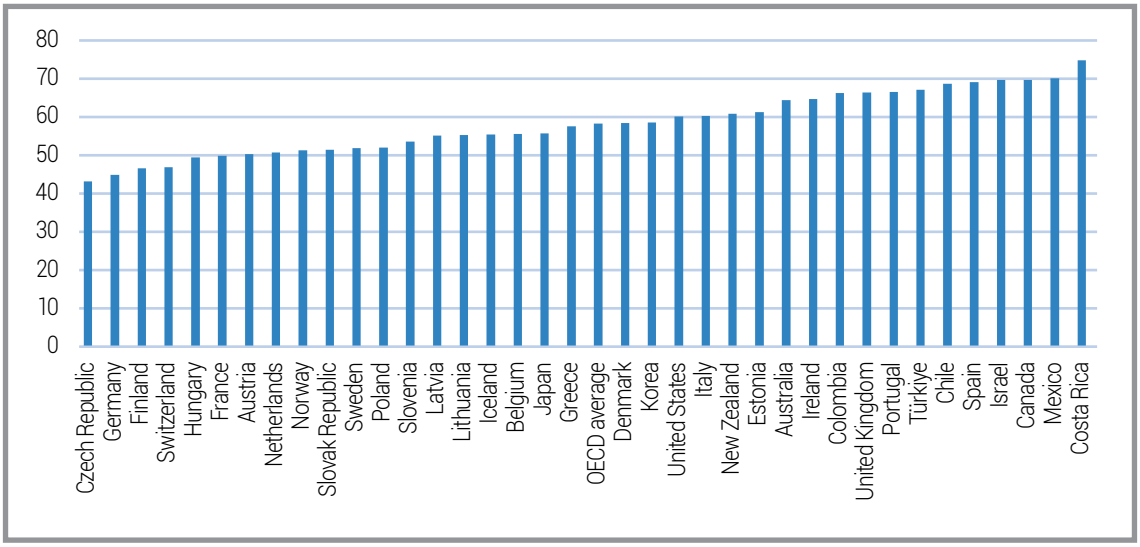
51 OECD. 2025. The State of Global Teenage Career Preparation, OECD Publishing, Paris

52 OECD. 2024. Teenage career uncertainty: Why it matters and how to reduce it? OECD Publishing, Paris.

53 Around the world, occupations are categorised using the International Standardised Classification of Occupations (ISCO) which was most recently updated in 2008. ISCO categorises occupations within 10 major categories. See **https://isco.ilo.org/en/.**

54 Mann, A. et al. 2024. Teenage career development in England: A Review of PISA 2022 Data. OECD Publishing, Paris.

TABLE 2.11: Percentage of students expressing an occupational expectation expecting to work as a professional, OECD countries, PISA 2022.



SOURCE: https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/teenage-career-readiness.html

Entry to such professions, as well as positions in senior management and in the 'associate professions and technicians' (jobs like surveyors, pilots, air traffic controllers and some nurses and paramedics) in the UK as elsewhere across the OECD typically requires a university level qualification. Unfortunately, many students who plan to go into such work do not plan on completing a higher education qualification. When this is the case, researchers classify plans as being misaligned and as found in multiple longitudinal studies this indication of student confusion is linked to worse than expected employment outcomes. PISA 2022 showed that the future plans of 28% of UK students were misaligned, much higher than the OECD average of 21%. Misalignment is especially common among students from the most socially disadvantaged groups (40% in the UK) and among low achievers academically (42%). As with career uncertainty, career guidance can be seen to significantly reduce levels of misalignment.[55] A simple test to be recommended to schools is to ask students about their career plans and check that they have a reasonable understanding of what they need to do to achieve them.

A further form of career thinking associated statistically with better employment outcomes is what sociologists call 'instrumental motivation'. This is the belief that investing time and energy in education will pay off in the long term. Such extrinsic motivation has been falling across countries, including the UK where it is found at lower levels than across the OECD as a whole. As Table 2.12 shows, when PISA asks 15-year-old students whether they agreed or disagreed with a series of statements, large proportions showed a lack of faith that their time in school will help them to thrive in adult life.

55 OECD. 2024. Aligned ambitions? How to tell (and why it is important to know) if students' occupational and education plans are aligned. OECD Publishing, Paris.

TABLE 2.12: Percentage of UK students demonstrating confidence that educational provision would be useful in working life, PISA 2022.

	% agreeing or strongly agreeing	
Statement	UK	OECD
School has been a waste of time	25%	25%
School has done little to prepare me for adult life	54%	49%
School has taught me things which could be useful in a job	64%	67%
I feel well-prepared for my future path after compulsory education	53%	59%

SOURCE: https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/teenage-career-readiness.html

Conclusions

This chapter explores the historical and international context surrounding the plan of the Department for Education (England) to require all students aged 11-16 to spend ten days engaging with employers to support their career development, including a work placement of at least five days at 14-16. The chapter illustrates the ways in which such employment engagement is now seen internationally as being essential to effective guidance provision. This growing consensus builds on recently collated evidence from 172 longitudinal cohort studies that explore the relations between teenage career development and employment outcomes in adulthood. Controlling for other characteristics which typically shape labour market outcomes, these studies provide compelling evidence that forms of career exploration, workplace experiences and career thinking are significantly associated with young people doing better in their transitions into work. Typically, these studies collect data from teenagers around the age of 15 (Key Stage 4 in England). Most recently, evidence from longitudinal cohort has been added to by user surveys which ask young adults to share their experiences of teenage career development and find further evidence of greater engagement in guidance, notably when it involves employers to be significantly associated with better outcomes. Across both types of study, multiple assessments that positive outcomes include lower NEET rates, higher wages and/or greater job satisfaction.

Longitudinal studies on the long-term impacts of work experience placements are relatively few. However, very large numbers of studies look at comparable experiences: part-time working and community volunteering where teenage students in full-time education also undertake tasks under supervision in professional workplaces. As discussed in the chapter below on Effectiveness, important lessons can be learnt for practice from this evidence.

Employer engagement clearly works as a form of career development, but students in the UK are not getting enough of it. As the OECD PISA study shows, in other countries it is more common that students complete placements, attend job fairs, or participate in workplace visits. PISA also highlights significant concerns with the wider state of teenage career preparation in the UK. The most recent assessment shows that students are exhibiting record levels of career uncertainty, that many (particularly the most disadvantaged) have educational and career plans that are misaligned, and growing numbers fail to see the value of education in helping them ultimately to find desirable work. All these forms of teenage career thinking are linked in multiple longitudinal

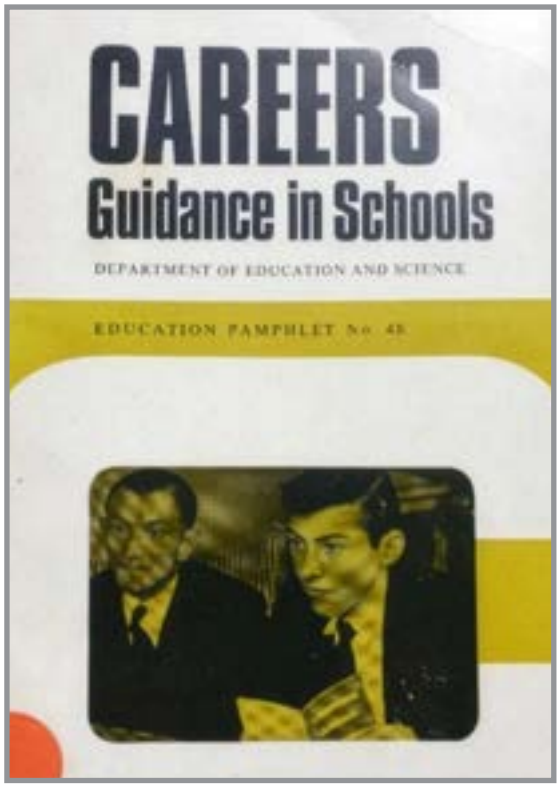
studies with employment outcomes which are poorer than would otherwise be expected given young people's characteristics. When students do have clear career plans, PISA shows that two-thirds expect to work in a vocational sector that only employs 21% of the working population: the professions. Again, compared to similar countries, this is a very high proportion.

Over the last generation, it has become the norm for young people in the UK to stay on in education after the age of 16. Eight in ten now plan on doing so, needing to make important decisions about what and where they will study. However, many do not have a clear idea (or have a clearly confused idea) about the end to which these investments in education and training will be the means. While the majority of students say that they expect to complete a university qualification, around half will have left education by the age of 18 seeking to enter the labour force. Unfortunately, in spite of young people in general leaving education more highly qualified than any previous generation, employers increasingly prefer to hire workers over the age of 24. The UK now has one of the highest ratios of youth to adult unemployment in Europe.

In subsequent chapters, this study explores the effective, efficient and equitable delivery of employer engagement and identifies strengths and weaknesses in provision. In building the evidence base on which employer engagement policy is founded, opportunity exists to:

- Make greater use of user surveys to confirm and deepen understanding of how teenage career development shapes outcomes in the labour market, notably exploring questions of equity;
- Draw on these data and other studies to produce a comprehensive Return on Investment analysis to confirm reasonable levels of investment in enabling effective and equitable provision.

In addition, from a policy perspective it is essential to take regard of long-term trends which are making the world of work increasingly hostile to young people and address predictable challenges within transitions through education into the labour force. In this, it is extremely helpful to reflect on what is now a long history of government policy to encourage and enable student engagement with employers within secondary education.



The World of Work in the School Programme

A great many schools use the natural interests of children in the adult world to provide new and lively material for use in normal curriculum subjects during the last year. The work of previous terms in history and geography is revised and extended by a local survey of industry and commerce. A study of the occupations entered by leavers in the past few years reveals a local pattern of industry different from that of the region, or the country as a whole. Project work based on local knowledge and careers booklets displays the work of local craftsmen. Films, broadcasts and visits illustrate typical work processes both clean and dirty, indoor and outdoor, quiet and noisy, solitary and social, in new and old factories, some large, some small. A map showing the location of the places of work entered by last year's leavers begins a study of transport costs in relation to wages. Rates of wages, piece work, bonuses, stoppages, income tax and insurance are introduced into mathematics, and the intricacies of personal budgets, hire purchase

• *Id.* Page 27.

Chapter 3

A brief history of work experience: Old wine in new bottles?

By Prue Huddleston

What have they been saying about work experience?

The purposes of education-employer links, including pupil work experience and other work-related learning activities within the final years of secondary school, have been stated and re-stated, sometimes with different emphases, over the past one hundred years. The Haddow Report of 1926 argued:

> Every effort should be made to ensure a close connexion between the work in school and the pupil's further education after leaving. A practical bias should be introduced after careful consideration of local conditions and upon the advice of persons concerned with local industries.[56]

In 1984, the Department for Education defined work experience as "an insight into the world of work", as "part of an educational programme." Whilst the Manpower Services Commission (1984) characterised work experience as: "an early and permanent bridge between school and work."

More specifically, the Department for Education and Employment (1995) described work experience as "a placement on an employer's premises in which a pupil carries out a particular task, or duty, more or less as would an employee, but with an emphasis on the learning aspects of the experience."[57]

The Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (2003) stated: "The experience involves taking on the role of a young worker and engaging in work tasks, using and developing work skills, being involved in work processes and experiencing work environments."[58]

The Confederation of British Industry in 2007 presented an employers' perspective: "work experience has a key role to play in preparing young people for the adult world and to bring home to them the attributes, skills and knowledge they need to succeed throughout their working lives."[59]

Over the next 20 years similar definitions have been reprised, and most recently by the Careers and Enterprise Company in describing 'modern' work experience as an activity that: "Develops transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, while helping students make informed career decisions."[60]

56 Cited in Maclure, J.S. 1973. Educational Documents England and Wales 1816 to present day. London: Methuen

57 DfEE. 1995. Work Experience. A Guide for Employers, HMSO: London.

58 QCA. 2003. Work-related Learning at Key Stage 4: Guidance for Implementing the Statutory Guidance from 2004. London: QCA.

59 CBI. 2007. Time Well Spent: Embedding Employability in Work Experience. London: Department for Education and Skill.

60 **https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/modern-work-experience**

Reactions to work experience are often located within a particular view of the purpose of work experience, of which several have been prayed in aid. For example, 'career tasting,' 'broadening generic skills,' 'engaging with communities of practice,' 'contextualising learning,' 'raising standards of achievement for students.'[61]

Nevertheless, a broad sweep of activity can be identified reflecting the ebb and flow of government policy and its commitment, including budgetary, to pupil work experience aimed at young people aged 14-16 and to wider education-business links, illustrated here:

- Work experience for some (1973-1982)
- Work experience for most/all (1983-2010, with a statutory requirement for all KS4 pupils to engage in work-related learning from 2003)
- Work experience for some (2010-2025)
- Work experience for all (2026)… and round we go again.

Down memory lane

See also Annex 6: A Brief History of Work Experience in England — Policy, Investment and Practice, 1926–2026

There is nothing new about the provision of work experience for 14–16-year-olds.[62] For at least one hundred years, British public policy reports have drawn attention to the nature of the curriculum for universal secondary education and the extent to which engagement with the world of work and employers should be encouraged for all pupils, not just for those directly entering employment at 14. In the 1963, the Newsom Report, regarded work experience as a means of dealing with potential youth disengagement from, and poor performance in, mainstream education: "The school programme in the final year ought to be deliberately outgoing – an initiation into the adult world of work and of leisure."

The report recommended that "experiments to enable some pupils over the age of fifteen to participate to a limited extent, under the auspices of the school, in the world of work in industry, commerce, or in other fields, should be carefully studied."[63] By 1969 the Institute of Careers Officers reported that 2% of young people had undertaken a short period of work experience before leaving compulsory full-time education. In 1965 the Department for Education and Science (DES) published information and guidance on Careers Guidance in Schools highlighting innovative practice in terms of education-employer engagement. Examples provided included work experience, school/employer visits, talks, open days, and careers conventions: a list bearing remarkable resemblance to today's offerings, so nothing new here. As the DES guidance noted:

61 Huddleston, P. and Stanley, J. eds. 2012. Work-Related Teaching and Learning a guide for teachers and practitioners. Routledge, London; DCSF (2009) The Work-Related Learning Guide. Department for Children Schools and Families.

62 Huddleston, P. and Stanley, J. eds. 2012. Work-Related Teaching and Learning a guide for teachers and practitioners. Routledge, London; Miller, A. et al. 1991. Rethinking work experience. Falmer Press.

63 Central Advisory Council for Education (1963) Half Our Future (Newsom Report). London: HMSO

A great many schools use the natural interests of children in the adult world to provide new and lively material for use in normal curriculum subjects during the last year. The work of previous terms in history and geography is revised and extended by a local survey of industry and commerce. A study of the occupations entered by leavers in the past few years reveals a local pattern of industry different from that of the region, or the country as a whole. Project work based on local knowledge and careers booklets displays the work of local craftsmen. Films, broadcasts and visits illustrate typical work processes in both clean and dirty, indoor and outdoor, quiet and noisy, solitary and social, in new and old factories, some large, some small. A map showing the location of places of work entered by last year's school leavers begins a study of transport costs in relation to wages. Rates of wages, piece work, bonuses, stoppages, income tax and insurance are introduced into mathematics, and the intricacies of personal budgets, hire purchase and savings provide ample material for discussion. Making arrangements for a visit, reporting on what has been seen, applying for a job, taking part in an interview, provide practice in speaking and writing. Groups of leavers, taught in this way by teachers who are interested in this transition from school to work, build up a fund of knowledge about careers and develop sensible attitudes to the problems involved in the choice of employment.[64]

In the wake of 1972 legislation – Raising of the School Leaving Age – the government acted in 1973 Education (Work Experience) Act to make it possible for all pupils – regardless of ability – to take up work experience in their last year of compulsory schooling.[65] Nevertheless, doubts were raised by educational professionals, parents, and pupils as to the educational merits of such placements and their association with schemes for the less able. In response, DES (1979) issued guidance confirming that work experience: "should have value for pupils of varying ability and aptitudes and should neither be designed as vocational training nor aimed at a limited range of ability."[66]

Similar challenges emerged with the Raising the Participation Age (RPA)to 17 in 2013 and to 18 in 2015. For a fuller discussion see (Acquah and Huddleston (2014).[67]

Following Prime Minister Callaghan's Great Debate, 1976, there was renewed emphasis on the need to draw education closer to the world of work and to meet the demands of a changing labour market. Concerns were raised by employers about the failure of the education system to provide young people with the necessary knowledge and skills to enter employment; a criticism that continues to this day. In parallel, concerns were raised by some within the education community emphasising the wider purposes of education (not simply as a preparation for work), and the potential impact of proposed education industry links on teacher autonomy, curriculum design, and delivery.

During the 1980s the growth of the schools-industry movement was characterised by the rise of a range of national initiatives and support structures. These included, amongst many others, the appointment of Schools Industry Laison Officers (SILOs) within local education authorities funded by the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI), and the

64 DES. 1965. Careers Guidance in Schools. London: HMSO.
65 Miller, A. et al. 1991. Rethinking Work Experience. Falmer Press
66 DES. 1979. Aspects of Secondary Education in England. London: HMSO
67 Acquah, D. & P. Huddleston, P. 2014. Challenges and opportunities for vocational education and training in the light of Raising the Participation Age. Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 19:1, 1–17.

School Curriculum Industry Partnership (SCIP), a publicly funded organisation tasked with working with LEAs to promote curriculum development in the field of education-industry links. SCIP was the only organisation formally supported by the Trade Union Congress (TUC) and thus enabled active trade union involvement in the school-industry movement. Other individual private sector projects, and voluntary organisations, often supported by business, such as Project Trident (specialising in the organisation of school work experience placements), and Young Enterprise (supporting pupils in setting up their own business) were also active in the field. Jamieson describes the schools-industry movement during the 1980s as a "diverse collection of employer and trade union groupings; specially constructed educational or quasi-educational 'projects'; government statements and exhortations" designed to influence the ways in which the content, delivery and assessment of teaching and learning is structured.[68]

The introduction of the Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI) 1983-87 (pilot), 1987-1991 (extension) with a budget of around £900m heralded in an unprecedented level of curriculum innovation and change involving, amongst other things, planned work experience, a combination of general, vocational, and technical education leading to recognised qualifications, and student profiling. It aimed to: "widen and enrich the curriculum in a way that will help young people prepare for the world of work, and to develop skills and interests including creative abilities. That will help them to lead a fuller life and to be able to contribute more to the community."[69] Such sentiments still voiced within current policy discourse concerning the preparedness of young people for entry into the world beyond the academy, including the labour market.[70]

Largely as a consequence of TVEI in the 1980s, work experience placements came to form part of the education of two-thirds of school leavers, a proportion rising to four-fifths by the first decade of the twenty-first century.[71]

Despite the substantial investment in TVEI, cries for education and business to draw close together were still widespread. In a parliamentary debate on 26th June 1989, Gillain Shepherd, MP for Norfolk, South-West declared:

> Without an effective partnership developing between business and education the prospects for an internationally competitive United Kingdom economy in the 21st century will become remote. The issues have to be high on the agenda, both of the business community and of educationalists. We will all fail if answers cannot be found and applied.[72]

68 Jamieson, I. 1985. Corporate Hegemony or Pedagogic Liberation? The Schools-Industry Movement in England and Wales in Dale, R. (ed) Education, Training and Employment: Towards a new Vocationalism, Oxford: Pergamon, in association with Open University Press.

69 Dale. R. 1991. The Technical and Vocational Education Initiative. In Esland. G. Ed. Education, Training and Employment Volume 2. The Educational Response. Addison-Wesley / Open University Press.

70 OECD. 2025. Trends Shaping Education 2025, OECD Publishing, Paris; WEF. 2025. Future of Jobs 2025 Insight Report. Geneva: WEF.

71 Hillage, J. et al. 1996. Pre-16 work experience in England. Institute for Employment Studies, University of Sussex; Mann, A. 2012. Work Experience: impact and delivery – insights from the evidence. Education and Employers; Miller, A. et al. 1991. Rethinking Work Experience. Falmer Press; Stanley, J. (2012) What is work-related learning? in Huddleston, P. and Stanley, J. eds. Work-Related Teaching and Learning: a guide for teachers and practitioners. Routledge.

72 Hansard, vol.155, debated 26th June 1989.

In 1988 The Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) launched its Enterprise and Education Initiative (EEI) (1988-1991) through which all secondary pupils were to have two or more weeks work experience during their last year of compulsory schooling with a target of 700,000 per year. In addition, 10% of teachers were to be involved in industry placements every year, and trainee teachers were to gain experience of the importance of links between education and employers through the Enterprise Awareness in Teacher Education Programme (EATE). The roll out was supported by a network of 147 Education and Enterprise Advisers tasked with linking schools and business and securing target work experience numbers with a budget of £8 million over two years. A parallel Teacher Placement Service was established to secure the teacher placement targets. The DTI sought to encourage this process by appointing one local host organisation only to run both the adviser and teacher placement services. The Teacher Placement Service budget was £14 million over 5 years. The substantial investment appears to have borne fruit:

> I am delighted to announce that in only the first five months of this year our advisers have found 67,000 additional work experience places. That is an impressive figure, and I take this opportunity to commend the advisers who have found those places – The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Industry and Consumer Affairs Mr. Eric Forth, Hansard vol 155, Debated 26th June 1989.

However, further investment by DTI in education-business activities was curtailed when a new Secretary of State abolished education as a line of DTI expenditure.

Nevertheless, pupil work experience was already well established within secondary schools with a range of intermediary bodies, in addition to schools themselves, undertaking their sourcing and organisation. Examples included: brokerage organisations (for example local education-business partnerships), businesses with dedicated work experience managers (for example, the Boots Company), work-related learning providers, including careers services, support agencies, (for a fuller discussion see Stanley, 2012).[73] Funding for work-related learning activities derived from a range of sources including, government departments Department for Education and Employment (DfEE), Business Innovation and Skills (BIS), other funding agencies and support organisations, and businesses. By the mid-1990s, more than 90% of lower secondary students were completing placements.[74]

Given the range of activity, it is unsurprising that the Davies Report (DfEE, 1999) recommended that DfEE and DTI should review the provision of work experience bearing in mind the significant investment by government and business involved and the lack of clarity around learning outcomes and quality. More than 25 years after the passing of the Work Experience Act (DES, 1974) questions were still being asked about the educational purpose and quality of work experience. It is argued that such questions remain now 25 years after the Davies Report.

73 Stanley, J. 2012. What is work-related learning? in Huddleston, P. and Stanley, J. eds. Work-Related Teaching and Learning a guide for teachers and practitioners. Routledge

74 Hillage, J. et al. 1996. Pre-16 work experience in England. Institute for Employment Studies, University of Sussex.

In 2003 a statutory educational requirement for work-related learning and for careers education for all pupils at KS4 was introduced.[75] In addition, there were non-statutory programmes for Economic Well-being and Financial Capability at KS3 and KS4, which also included key work-related elements such as careers education and enterprise education. The legislation heralded in what might be described as another "golden age" of education-business link activity. The statutory requirement for work-related learning at KS4 brought with it an abundance of guidance, curriculum materials, support, and funding for work-related learning[76] of which work experience was a key, but not the only, activity. To facilitate heightened levels of engagement, funding was provided to every local authority in England to support an Education Business Partnership Organisation (discussed in further detail in the section on 'Efficiency' below).

In tandem with this surge in activity was the introduction in 2008 of a new qualification – the 14-19 Diploma.[77] This composite award which included principal (sector specific) learning, generic (personal and functional skills) learning, and additional/specialist learning, also included a substantial period of work experience. This placed further demands on employers to host longer, more focused, work experience placements for young people in addition to those already offered to KS4 pupils and to post-16 students following vocational programmes often requiring work placements (for example those pursuing a BTEC qualification). The 14-19 Diploma qualification was abandoned in 2013.

However, by 2020 another qualification was launched – the T level – with a stipulated 45-day work experience placement for all students. This now places further demands on employers and potentially sets schools and college in competition for securing finite places, particularly in rural areas and for sector specific placements. Employers are expected, and exhorted, to participate on a voluntary basis. Much depends on a coalition of the willing, and it can never be assumed that sufficient work experience places will be supplied simply because there is a policy intention to do so. This remains one of the greatest challenges to the provision of large-scale work experience.

In 2011, the final recommendations of the Review of Vocational Education (The Wolf Report) stated: "DfE should evaluate models for supplying genuine work experience to 16–18-year-olds who are enrolled as full-time students..... Schools and colleges should be encouraged to prioritise longer internships for older students, reflecting the fact that almost no young people move into full-time employment at 16; and government should correspondingly **remove their statutory duty to provide every young person at KS4 with a standard amount of "work-related learning"** (p.17) (author's emphasis). Moreover, "the blanket requirement to give all KS4 pupils 'work experience' – or, as it has officially become, 'work-related learning' – has served its time. It is very expensive: typically, for a school, the equivalent of at least half a full-time senior teacher's salary a year plus substantial administrative support. Too often, now, this does not even involve being in a workplace, as schools admit defeat and arrange something 'work-related' (and largely pointless) on school premises." (p.131).[78]

75 QCA. 2003. Work-related Learning at Key Stage 4: Guidance for Implementing the Statutory Guidance from 2004. London: QCA.

76 QCA. 2007. Work-Related Learning at Key Stage 4, London: QCA; QCA. 2008. The Diploma: An Overview of the Qualification. London: QCA; DCSF. 2008a. Quality Standard for Work Experience. London: DCSF; DCSF 2008. The Work-Related Learning Guide: A Guidance Document for Schools, Colleges, Students and their Parents and Carers. London: DCSF; DCSF. 2008b. Building Stronger Partnerships – Employers How Can You Support Children, Schools, Colleges, Students and Families.

77 QCA. 2008. The Diploma: An Overview of the Qualification. London: QCA; LSIS (2009) Practitioner guide to the Diploma. London: LSIS.

78 DfE. 2011. Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report. London: DfE.

Following Wolf's hammer blow, the termination of funding for Education-Business Partnerships in 2011 compounded the assault. The substantial infrastructure for supporting education-business link activity was reduced, as were the various organisations that had provided curriculum materials, training, and support to schools.

However, that did not stop governments from expecting schools to continue to work with employers to support pupil career development. In the 2010s, the joint Department for Education and Department for Business, Innovation and Skills Work Inspiration Vision (2013) called on schools to use their developed resources to host career talks, arrange workplace visits and provide 'high quality' work experience placements.[79] The subsequent adoption (and recent updating) of the Gatsby benchmarks reinforced the expectation:

Benchmark 5. Encounters with employers and employees – Every learner should have multiple opportunities to learn from employers about work, employment and the skills that are valued in the workplace. This can be through a range of enrichment activities, including visiting speakers, mentoring and enterprise schemes, and could include learners' own part-time employment where it exists. Every year, alongside their programme of study, learners should participate in at least two meaningful encounters with an employer. At least one encounter should be delivered through their curriculum area.

Benchmark 6. Experiences of workplaces. Every learner should have first-hand experiences of workplaces to help their exploration of career opportunities and expand their networks. By the end of their programme of study, every learner should have had at least one meaningful experience of a workplace, in addition to any part-time jobs they may have.[80]

Although work experience continues in many schools, and certainly in colleges through 16-19 Study Programmes, it depends upon many different forms of local organisations and the willingness of volunteers to get involved. It can be a hit and miss affair, in terms of learning outcomes and quality. Pupil 'own finds' raise concerns in terms of equity and quality (for a fuller discussion see Mann, Huddleston, and Kashefpakdel (2019).[81]

There are now more competing demands on companies to provide work experience placements and other forms of work-related activity, not only from schools but from colleges and higher education institutions. In addition, employers are urged to host apprenticeships, to join employer boards, to become governors, to be involved in qualification design, even assessment. These are tasks for which they may have neither appetite nor experience, let alone capacity. If employers are to be engaged in 'modern' work experience there must be clarity about what it is they are being asked to do, the time commitment, duration, and intended benefits for all parties.[82]

79 **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/careers-inspiration-vision-statement**

80 Gatsby Foundation. 2024. Good career guidance: The next 10 years.

81 Mann, A., Huddleston, P. and Kashefpakdel, E. 2019, eds. Essays on Employer Engagement in Education. Routledge.

82 Huddleston, P. & A. Laczik, 2012. Successes and difficulties of employer engagement. The new Diploma Qualification. Journal of Education and Work. Special Edition: 24:4, 403-421; Huddleston, P. & A. Laczik. 2019. 'Employers at the heart of the system?': the role of employers in qualification development in Mann, A. et al. eds. Essays on Employer Engagement in Education. Routledge.

What has history taught us?

There is nothing new about work experience, or wider work-related learning activity within the school curriculum, its origins can be traced back one hundred years. There are many work-related learning opportunities, for example visits, careers talks, guest speakers, 'live projects', but these do not equate to work experience and should not be promoted as such. Work-related learning defined as: learning through, learning about, learning for work covers a wide range of learning activities and experiences that go far beyond a work placement. (For a fuller discussion see: Huddleston and Stanley, 2012).[83]

Clarity is required about the purposes of work experience, that is the extent to which it complements and is aligned with the curriculum (where curriculum is broadly constructed, not just a list of subjects), or compensatory, that is something for those who are not doing well in general subjects. This raises fundamental questions about the purposes of education: to what extent should education be a preparation for employment or a preparation for life, in which employment may or may not play a significant part? Given increasingly volatile and unstable labour markets and the growth of freelance and precarious employment, work experience should help to prepare young people for facing such challenges rather than serve as a narrow preparation for a job that may soon cease to exist.

Work experience should be supported by a quality framework that includes: the purpose of the experience, clear curricular aims, a set of planned activities and expected outcomes, roles and responsibilities, health and safety considerations, links to the student's programme of study, opportunities for reflection, review and sign off (for host and student). Without clear purpose, planning and co-ordination a young person's work experience may turn out to be patchy, tedious and with little meaning or relevance. Bearing in mind that the time required to fulfil a two-week work experience programme equates to most of a GCSE course, there is an opportunity cost. There is also a significant financial (under-reported) cost for schools and employers.[84]

Work experience placements must be experiential and educative, requiring clarity, supervision, and guidance. Responsibility for placements is shared between a range of stakeholders, who may hold differing perspectives about the purpose of the work experience. It requires clear learning objectives and collaboration between school, colleges and workplaces, support, and mentoring. It requires integration.

Education employer links, including work experience have been used to secure a range of national policy goals: educational, social, economic, technological, but these do not necessarily relate to local conditions. Setting blanket targets for numbers to be achieved do not reflect the diversity of locations (urban/rural), occupational sectors, availability of work experience placements. A recent example is provided by the under-achievement of T level 45-day placements and the subsequent relaxation of targets. The targets for 'modern' work experience appear overly optimistic.

83 Huddleston, P. & J. Stanley. eds. 2012. Work-Related Teaching and Learning a guide for teachers and practitioners. Routledge.

84 CEI. 2004. Education-Business Link (EBL) Activity: Research on Structure and Funding Outline Report for Internal Use by LSC National Office. Unpublished.

The provision of an infrastructure to support large scale delivery, including a brokerage service, and financial resource has been shown to be effective in securing placements and in the matching process. Periods of mass work experience have been characterised by the operation of such services/systems, for example, Education Business Partnerships (EBPs), Enterprise and Education Advisers, Teacher Placement Service, Careers Services, private companies and charities, voluntary sector organisations, Local Education Authorities. For example, EBPs took on the role of meeting the expectation that virtually all 14–16-year-olds should experience a work placement in addition to other work-related experiences.[85] Funding ceased in 2011.

The matching process is crucially important. Where pupils select their own placement, much is left to chance and to social connections. Those without role models, particularly in cases where family members are unemployed, or have long-term sickness or disability, an adequate system of support is required to help students secure placements.[86] Brokerage organisations also have a role to play here.

Work experience, either 'ancient or modern', is not of itself 'a good thing'. It requires careful planning, integration, delivery, and evaluation. It must serve curricular aims and meet the needs of all stakeholders. Unless there are clear, demonstrable benefits for all parties, students, teachers, employees, employers, trainees, then the opportunity cost may be too great.

85 CEI. 2004. Education-Business Link (EBL) Activity: Research on Structure and Funding Outline Report for Internal Use by LSC National Office. Unpublished.

86 Le Gallais, T. and Hatcher, R. (2014) How school work experience policies can widen student horizons or reproduce social inequality in Mann, A., Stanley, J. and Archer, L. (eds) Understanding Employer Engagement in Education Theories and evidence. Abingdon: Routledge

CASE STUDY 1



Key Stage 3: Tailored SEND Workplace Visit

As part of West London Careers Hub's CEC Equalex pilot programme a series of workplace visits for KS3 students are being organised. Funded by the Education Development Trust one was delivered by Education and Employers for a SEND School – 10 Key Stage 3 students with Autism Spectrum Condition from Wembley Manor School to took part in a tailored workplace visit to the Victoria Road Crossover Box site (HS2), managed by SCS Railways as part of the HS2 project.

The intervention was designed to provide students with first-hand insight into workplaces and exposure to a wide range of job roles. The visit included an introduction to HS2 from SCS employees and Education and Employers staff, a tour of the site, an interactive hands on bridge building challenge activity, exposure to multiple job roles through direct engagement with staff in a speed networking style activity and an end of visit reflection activity. As students could not enter the live construction site, the experience was adapted to include a visit to the rooftop viewing platform to ensure they could still experience the scale of the project.

The half-day experience for a small group, delivery required extensive coordination and repeated iteration between E&E, the school and employer including:

- Identifying a suitable employer able to host SEND students in a high-risk environment within the geographical location
- Adapting plans multiple times due to safety and site restrictions
- Aligning school timetables, staffing, transport and employer availability
- Managing permissions, safeguarding and risk assessments
- Preparing the employer to engage confidently with SEND students
- Providing information in advance to support student preparation

Significant back-and-forth was required to refine even minor elements (timings, activities, group size), resulting in a bespoke and resource-intensive model. The visit could only accommodate 10 students, limiting scalability. The result was an inclusive and highly successful experience. Students gained first-hand insight into a major infrastructure project, engaged in meaningful interaction with professionals across a range of roles, and developed a greater understanding of careers within construction and engineering. Perhaps most importantly, they felt comfortable and confident in an unfamiliar environment, engaging positively with employees and asking questions about their work. 73% of students rated the visit as 'outstanding' and 100% agreed that the visit helped them learn skills that are useful in different workplaces. Feedback from the school highlighted the significance of the experience, particularly for students with limited exposure to workplaces:

"The whole day today was so well planned with different activities. Our students do not have many experiences. They are not exposed to different jobs or even being on site. So this is something which they will remember forever."

Education and Employers organised and facilitated the visit, sourcing and securing employers through its national network. It worked closely with employers to design structured visits aligned with Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6, and meeting all operational and health and safety requirements- demonstrating the resource and coordination needed to deliver high-quality, tailored workplace experiences.

CASE STUDY 2

Key Stage 3, 4 and 5: A regional approach

FutureReady Sunderland is a SHINE-funded careers education initiative designed to transform how young people across Sunderland access and experience the world of work. It aims to equip pupils aged 11-18 with the knowledge, skills, and confidence needed to succeed in a rapidly evolving labour market. Developed within a secondary school context, the programme aligns closely with the Gatsby Benchmarks and local labour market information, representing a strategic, place-based response to longstanding challenges in careers education and experiences of the workplace.

A key feature of the model is its focus on building a sustainable employer engagement infrastructure. This includes the introduction of an employer pledge system, enabling organisations to commit to meaningful, practical contributions, such as offering workplace experiences, delivering industry insights, or supporting skills development. This structured approach ensures consistency, clarity, and long-term partnership working across the city.

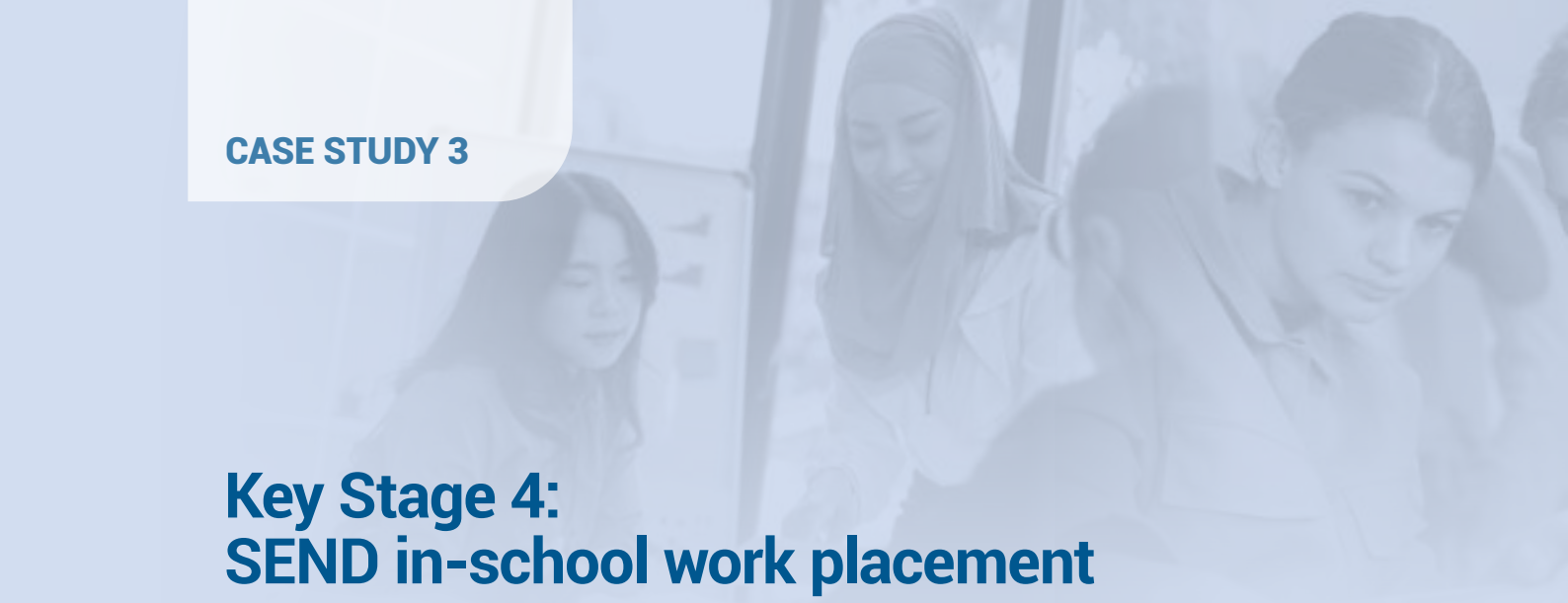
Alongside this, FutureReady Sunderland is designed to create a dynamic networking ecosystem that connects students, schools, employers, and partners. By expanding professional networks and fostering collaboration, the programme aims to open doors for young people who may otherwise lack access to industry connections and opportunities.

To further reduce barriers to access, the programme incorporates digital toolkits featuring videos that showcase businesses, workplace environments, and a wide range of career roles. These resources allow employers to bring their organisations directly into the classroom, giving students meaningful insights without the limitations of travel or capacity. The toolkits are also being developed in partnership with higher and further education providers, helping students to better understand the full range of progression routes available to them and how these connect to future careers.

Together, these elements strengthen the programme's ambition to move beyond isolated interventions towards a coordinated, scalable model for work experience that is inclusive, accessible, and future-focused. The pilot year has started with 4 mainstream secondary schools but will scale to 18 mainstream schools and 8 dedicated specialist and alternative provision schools by the end of the funding period, reaching approximately 18,000 pupils.

FutureReady Sunderland forms part of the wider SHINE Sunderland programme, a ten-year initiative investing more than £11 million into secondary education across the city. Sunderland sits within the 20% most deprived areas in the UK, and many young people have limited access to professional networks, workplace experiences, and positive role models in employment. To support long-term change, education charity SHINE has invested £671,148 into the five-year FutureReady Sunderland programme.

To further reduce barriers to access, the programme incorporates digital toolkits featuring videos that showcase businesses, workplace environments, and a wide range of career roles.



Key Stage 4: SEND in-school work placement

The Shaw Trust is funding an innovation project to support Year 10 secondary students with SEND needs and/or vulnerabilities to access work experience. The Charity has run the project five times in secondary schools in Birmingham and London and is looking to scale the project.

Co-designed with schools and local and national employers, the project brings the work experience week into the school. Groups of up to 30 students participate an industry-themed programme that introduces them to different job roles, offers structured activities to practice skills related to that industry, helps them role play workplace behaviours, and teaches employability skills such as how to look for work, apply for jobs, do mock-job interviews and create a CV. The week-long programme is designed and run with employers who work in the chosen industry. The design keeps learning outcomes clear and achievements measurable.

By running the project in schools, the Charity is able to reach students with SEND in an environment that is familiar to them. It reduces the anxiety of a work placement, while giving young people an opportunity to gain practical skills and learn about work. The pilot has so far been run around two industry themes: hospitality/catering and facilities management. On the Friday, the students apply what they have learned in during the week and run a full day activity as though they were in the workplace. In one school, for example, the students ran a café and invited their parents and carers as their guests. They organised menus, prepared food, managed orders, oversaw health and safety rules, and served their parents and carers as though they were customers.

The final event gives families an opportunity to see their young person practice new skills. After the pilot in Birmingham, parents noted their children's growth in confidence, soft skills, and ability to focus on tasks. Five of the 30 students in that programme started volunteering jobs over the summer. Families also mentioned that the programme gave them an opportunity to talk about work and share their stories about how they started their first jobs.

For employers, the project gives staff members an opportunity to use their corporate volunteering days and to create positive local impact. Shaw Trust provides support to employers and their team members to help them support SEND learners. The experience is particularly rewarding for business and employees. Clare Barnbrock from Edgbaston Park Hotel & Conference Centre said, "As an employer, I found the day hugely rewarding. It gave young people a meaningful alternative to traditional work experience – equipping them with practical tools and offering a real taste of working life that goes beyond a tick box week on site. I would love to be involved again."

In its current form, the project primarily supports Gatsby Benchmarks 3 and 5 through accessible delivery and sustained employer engagement. Planned developments, including increased school participation and additional Year 11 touchpoints, are expected to strengthen alignment with a wider range of Gatsby Benchmarks, particularly personal guidance and workplace experiences. Shaw Trust is keen to work with partners to scale this offer and to develop work experience weeks in those industries.

Schools have welcomed the week and asked for the Charity to run the event for the incoming Year 10. Sarah Murcott, Executive Head Teacher at Fortis Academy, said "My only wish was for a truly meaningful experience for our most vulnerable young people and families and what we got was, as one carer said, 'life changing'.

CASE STUDY 4

Key Stage 5: An approach to securing placements for students

Future Academies is a Trust of seven secondary academies serving around 330 Year 12 students. They place significant value on high-quality, in-person work experience and aim for 100% of students to secure a placement during designated weeks in the summer term. To support this, they dedicate time and resources throughout the year to building students' confidence and equipping them with the skills needed to approach employers in their chosen fields. This includes workshops led by central staff, followed by targeted support from school teams through enrichment sessions, ensuring students understand both the purpose and process of securing placements.

However, structural barriers persist. Many organisations are constrained by hybrid working models, capacity pressures, or concerns about the demands of hosting a student. In addition, access to professional networks is often uneven, particularly for students in the communities they serve.

In response, they have developed a proactive, centrally coordinated approach. They invest in building a Trust-wide bank of placements across a range of sectors, working with partner organisations to design meaningful and accessible opportunities. These are advertised to all students, who complete a written application, with the strongest candidates progressing to a formal interview process. This enables them to prioritise access for students who may face additional barriers, including those with SEND or who are in receipt of free school meals.

Crucially, all applicants receive detailed written feedback. By replicating elements of a competitive recruitment process, the Trust equip students with practical experience in writing applications, preparing for interviews, and refining their interview technique.

This collaborative model brings together central teams, school staff, sixth form teams, and employer partners to broaden access to high-quality placements and supports more students, particularly those from underrepresented backgrounds, to succeed and thrive.

Many organisations are constrained by hybrid working models, capacity pressures, or concerns about the demands of hosting a student. In addition, access to professional networks is often uneven, particularly for students in the communities they serve.



Further Education: Birmingham

Birmingham Metropolitan College (BMet) is a large general further education college situated across three campuses in England's second city. The work of the WEX team contributes directly to the college's strategic priorities:

1. Contributing to Skills Development
2. Providing a consistently high-quality learning experience
3. Equipping our students for the future

The team sits within the External Development Directorate as part of Marketing, Schools, and WEX. The WEX team consists of four full-time officers and one line manager.

Its primary focus is to find employers for the compulsory 45-day placement without which students cannot achieve the T Level qualification. The team is currently supporting approximately 151 students across six curriculum areas. The WEX team lead on this from placement to all the necessary associated paperwork – health and safety, employer paperwork, student paperwork, and any required reporting.

Whilst T level placements are a priority, the team also focuses on general work experience opportunities linked to relevant curriculum areas across the same sectors from which they source industry placements. In addition, they manage the general WEX learner landing page and promote all WEX opportunities to students and staff regardless of the sector.

BMet has over 5,000 learners aged 16-18 studying across a broad and varied curriculum. Most students complete an average of 35 hours of work experience per year, including placements with employers. Some students engage in longer Industry Placements lasting at least 315 hours per year, giving them a deeper insight into their chosen career.

Officers proactively identify, approach, and engage employers across a range of sectors to secure meaningful and relevant placements. They develop relationships with employers to create high-quality T Level placements and broader work experience opportunities. It supports both students progressing towards placements and those developing wider employability skills.

The Work Experience Team successfully exceeded most targets, demonstrating strong employer engagement, retention, and operational efficiency last academic year. The college engages with over 1,000 employers; not all these involve WEX but include a range of other work-related activities. For example, the WEX team also organises and supervises external WEX-led trips, employer visits, and industry events, both locally and overseas, to enhance students' exposure to real working environments and sector insight. These activities require full planning, coordination, and safeguarding oversight across the four-person team.

The number of students supported through these work-related learning events has risen from 2023/24: 34 events, supporting at least 437 students, to currently 47 events supporting at least 1,565 students. This has been achieved through an increase in staffing and better data capture.

This year new employer engagement significantly surpassed target, with 150 new employers engaged against a target of 50. Employer retention (80%), repeat placements and response times were all met, with strong repeat engagement from key employers. Employer feedback remains positive at an average of 4/5.

The WEX Team has received recognition for its strategic contribution to employer engagement, including work experience, regionally and through individual awards.

CASE STUDY 6

Higher Education: Bristol

With more than 37,000 students, UWE Bristol delivers work experience at a significant scale, requiring sustained institutional commitment in time, coordination and financial investment. A high proportion of students engage in some form of work-related learning during their studies, reflecting both student demand and the university's strategic priority to embed employability throughout the academic journey.

Professor Sir Steve West, Vice Chancellor of UWE Bristol said: "Offering all students the opportunity for quality work experience, alongside international experiences, enterprise opportunities, mentoring, and engagement with real-world challenges, is absolutely central to our strategy as a university. It's essential that our students graduate not only with knowledge but with the skills, confidence and experience needed to succeed in an evolving workforce. This real-world experience during study is critical, as it enables students to apply theory in practice, build professional networks and improve graduate outcomes in an increasingly competitive labour market."

The breadth of provision at UWE Bristol reflects the university's commitment. Opportunities range from employer guest speakers and live industry projects embedded in the curriculum, through to short-term experiences such as mentoring and one-week work shadowing, internships, and sandwich placements. Delivering this ecosystem is a whole-university effort. Dedicated professional teams manage employer relationships, partnerships and pipelines; specialist staff oversee legal agreements, compliance and risk assessment; and bursary teams support equitable access. Academics and careers professionals work together to embed employability into programmes, ensuring that work experience is meaningful, reflective and integrated into learning.

However, delivering work experience at scale also presents significant equality and access challenges. Hidden costs such as travel, accommodation and daily expenses can create further barriers. Models that rely heavily on self-sourced opportunities can disadvantage students without strong professional networks. UWE Bristol actively addresses these barriers through targeted support to secure opportunities and access to bursaries and financial support to reduce upfront costs and enable broader participation.

It's essential that our students graduate not only with knowledge but with the skills, confidence and experience needed to succeed in an evolving workforce. This real-world experience during study is critical, as it enables students to apply theory in practice, build professional networks and improve graduate outcomes in an increasingly competitive labour market.



BOARD OF EDUCATION

Report of the Consultative Committee

on

The Education of the Adolescent

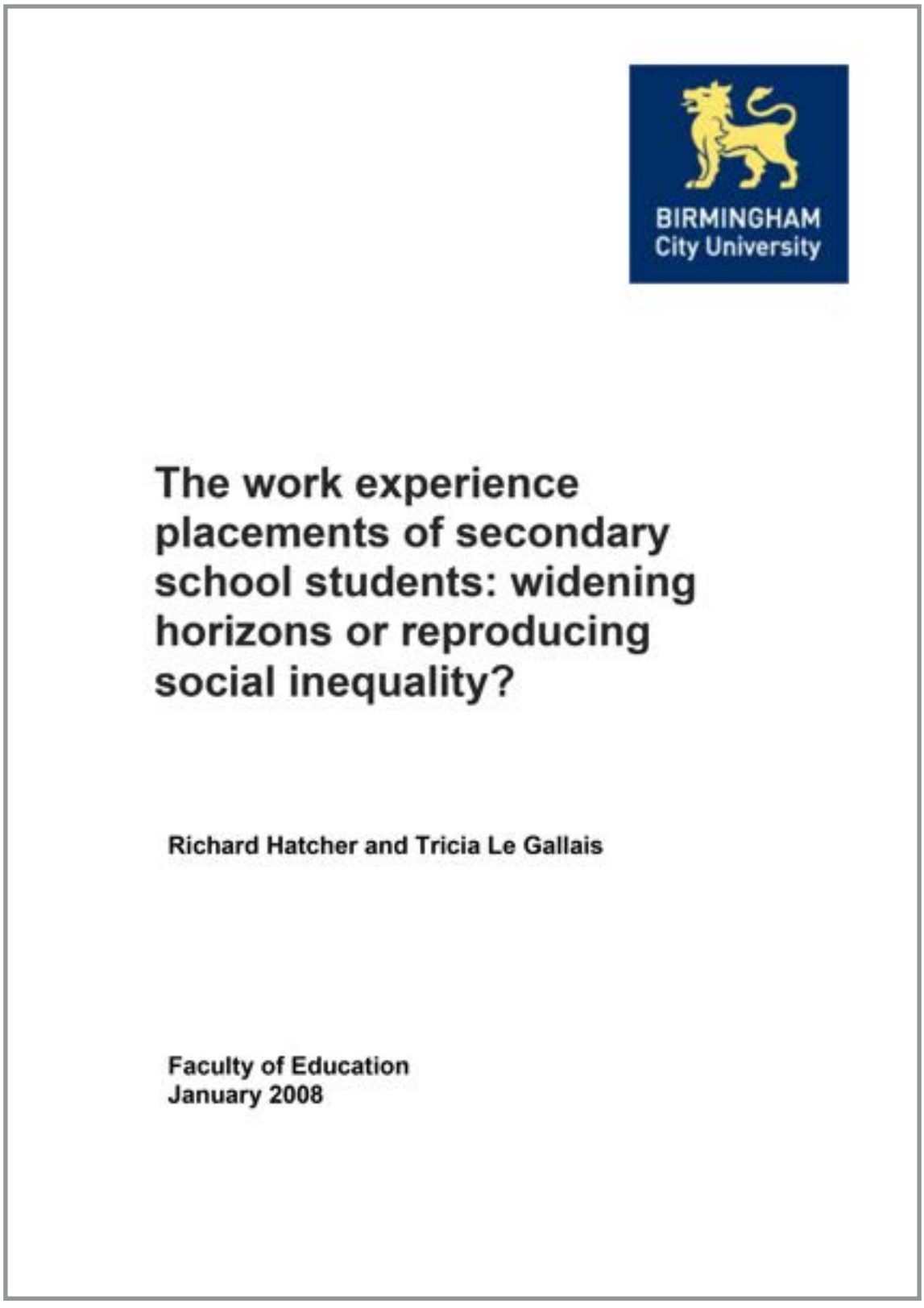
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BIRMINGHAM
City University
The work experience placements of secondary school students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality?
Richard Hatcher and Tricia Le Gallais
Faculty of Education
January 2008

Not just making tea...

Reinventing work experience



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UK COMMISSION FOR EMPLOYMENT AND SKILLS

Chapter 4

Effective employer engagement in the career development of young people

Chapter three of this paper explored the history of English government policy to enable and at times require employer engagement in the teenage career development. Such actions in the UK, as in other countries, reflects a strong belief that such provision within education would provide meaningful benefits. As noted by Prue Huddleston, policy aims have been driven by multiple objectives to improve outcomes for young people, employers and ultimately for society in general. Reviewing government policy documents, Stanley et al. (2014) identified four primary objectives behind such initiatives:

1. Improving pupils' general preparation for the world of work, including career exploration, the development of 'employability' skills, the gaining of experience relevant to future employment, better understanding of jobs and careers to inform aspirations and helping students to understand and access full-time employment, continuing education, notably university programmes demanding work-related experience as an admission requirement.
2. Addressing strategic skills shortages, including notably programmes designed to encourage more students to consider careers and educational pathways linked to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics, the skilled trades and careers as entrepreneurs.
3. Enhancing social mobility and equity, including mentoring, work experience and other programmes designed to provide socially disadvantaged youth with greater access to social networks and work-related experiences viewed as important in accessing specific employment[87], notably the professions as well as increasing opportunities for students (particularly girls) to gain insights into occupations where their gender is underrepresented.
4. Increasing pupil engagement, learning and attainment, including enabling student motivation and maturation and including extended periods of work experience as in Wales targeted at students non attending secondary education[88], development of new qualifications with stronger work-related components developed with employers, mentoring schemes aimed at supporting disengaged students as well as reading and number partners operating in primary schools.[89]

In addition, a fifth overarching objective has become prevalent over recent years and is at the heart of the expectations of the Department for Education (England) that all students aged between 11 and 16 will engage with employers and people in work for at least 10 days.

5. Reducing the risk of students becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) at 16 and at 18.

87 See for example the work of the UK Social Mobility Foundation: **https://www.socialmobility.org.uk/.**
88 Mann, A. and J. Diaz. 2025. Tailored Work Experience in Wales. OECD Publishing, Paris
89 Stanley, J. et al. 2014. Introduction, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London

This variety of objectives linked to different government departments sometimes seeking to engage the same employers runs risks of inefficiencies. During previous eras, as discussed later in this report in depth, a coherent national infrastructure enabling links between schools and employers has attracted funding from multiple government departments and non-governmental organisations. In all cases, for investment to be optimised, it is essential that there is a strong understanding of how desirable changes can be optimised. What makes for effective employer engagement in teenage career development.

Chapter two of this paper summarised the results of multiple longitudinal studies exploring teenage career development and adult employment. It showed that, after accounting for academic attainment, gender, social background and other characteristics, the great majority of studies found that teenage career development, notably when it involves engagement with people in work and workplaces, is linked in many different analyses with lower rates of youth unemployment, higher wages and greater job satisfaction. Impact sizes are often considerable, with wage premiums common: someone who prepared well for the working world while still in school can often expect to earn 5-10% more by their mid-twenties to someone lacking such career development with a comparable personal and educational background. Beneficial relationships are linked both to sustained workplace experience, most notably part-time working and community volunteering, and to shorter episodes of career exploration, such as workplace visits/job shadowing and career talks/job fairs. Understanding why beneficial results can be expected and how they support career development is important to understanding the characteristics of effective practice – and testing whether UK provision over recent years has been fully effective.

Why employer engagement makes a difference in teenage career development

In the UK and around the world, policies aimed at encouraging and enabling schools to work with employers are predicated on the assumption that schools alone cannot adequately prepare students for working life. Essentially, it is (correctly) assumed that interaction with the economic community provides students with information, insights, experiences and opportunities that cannot be offered to a comparable standard by other means.[90] When it is effective, students can be expected to learn new things and/or gain additional experiences which are valuable to their futures. The pedagogic theory of employer engagement in publicly funded career development is rooted in the unparalleled capacity of the economic community to offer demonstrably authentic access to the world of work in its different forms.[91]

Consequently, effective provision will lean into the unique value of employer engagement and enable students to gain authentic and broad understanding of the modern working world, warts and all. Where provision is effective, students will be clearly learning as they visualise potential futures for themselves, plan how they can be achieved and, in many

90 Stanley, J. and A. Mann. 2014. A theoretical framework for employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education, Routledge, London.
91 OECD. 2021. Getting the most out of employer engagement in career guidance. OECD Publishing.

cases, actively prepare for their transitions.[92] Effective provision will create tangible and cumulative change for young people as they progress through education with objectives varying for students at different times. Schools and colleges can support these learning processes by helping students to engage in personally relevant employer engagement, contextualising and critically reviewing insights and experiences within strategic processes of career development. It is consequently essential for effective practice that employer engagement is integrated into broader career education and guidance supporting student self-reflection and career exploration.

What changes for young people when they engage with employers and people in work

Young people routinely do better in work later on if their teenage career development is enriched through employer engagement. This can best be explained by looking at what happens after full-time education has been completed and considering how employers ultimately decide if someone is suitable for employment. Recruiters want to minimise the risks of appointing someone who would not work out well in a job and to reduce training costs needed to make new recruits fully productive as quickly as possible. As a result, recruiters look at the specific qualifications and experience that individuals have, want to see references that are relevant to the job role and/or are influenced by trusted personal recommendations, and they need to have confidence that a new recruit will be a good fit for their particular workplace. Sociologists and economists conceptualise these factors as resources or 'capitals' and multiple studies show that schools have valuable roles to play in helping students to accumulate them.[93]

These conceptualisations and studies are useful in the assessment of effective provision by schools. They also help us to understand why some students may need more support than others and why employer engagement is an especially effective tool to support the growth of human, social and cultural capital.

Human, social and cultural capital

Studies focus particularly on the importance of human, social and cultural accumulation as forms of career development which schools can enable, providing platforms for further development after students leave secondary education. Also important in many cases is a further type of capital, finance capital, being the money that students and families have available to enable career development.[94] This is further discussed in the chapter below on Equity.

Human capital includes the work experience, skills and knowledge (codified by qualifications) which young people use when applying for jobs. For many employers, it is important that qualifications and especially previous work experience are relevant to their

92 Plasman, J. S. 2018. Career/Education Plans and Student Engagement in Secondary School. American Journal of Education, 124(2), 217–246

93 Stanley, J. and A. Mann. 2014. A theoretical framework for employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education, Routledge, London; OECD. 2024. Career guidance, social inequality and social mobility: Insights from international data. OECD Publishing, Paris; Jones, S. et al. 2016. The 'Employer Engagement Cycle' in Secondary Education: analysing the testimonies of young British adults. Journal of Education and Work, 29:7, 834–856; Tomlinson, M. 2013. Education, Work and Identity. Bloomsbury, London; Brown, C. et al. 2020. Building career capital: developing business leaders' career mobility. Career Development International, 25:5, 445-459; Norris, E. 2011. Not enough capital? Exploring education and employment progression in further education. Royal Society of Arts, London; Raffo, C., & Reeves, M. 2000. Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion: Developments in Social Capital Theory. Journal of Youth Studies, 3:2, 147–166

94 Norris, E. 2011. Not enough capital? Exploring education and employment progression in further education, Royal Society of Arts, London. See also, McCafferty, H. 2022. An unjust balance: a systematic review of the employability perceptions of UK undergraduates from disadvantaged socio-economic backgrounds. Research in Post-Compulsory Education, 27:4, 570–593

vocational field.[95] Human capital includes technical knowledge, demonstrable skills and qualifications related to specific functions in the labour market, but also the skills that allow someone to be effective in doing their job: the communication, problem-solving and team working skills often referred to as 'employability skills' or as 'social and emotional skills'. The UK Employer Skills Survey shows that employers feel that the most common skills lacked by young new recruits are not literacy or numeracy, but a lack of working world / life experience and poor personal motivation (Table 4.1).[96]

TABLE 4.1: Employer views on the skills lacking among education leavers who have been poorly prepared for work (unprompted responses). Employer Skills Survey 2024, England.

	16-year-old school leavers	17–18-year-olds recruited to their first job from school	17–18-year-olds recruited to their first job from FE college
Lack of working world / life experience or maturity (including general knowledge)	22%	21%	15%
Poor attitude / personality or lack of motivation (e.g. poor work ethic, punctuality, appearance,	21%	20%	13%
Lack required SOFT/PERSONAL skills or competencies (e.g. problem solving, communication or team	10%	7%	5%
Lack of common sense	5%	6%	5%
Lack required TECHNICAL skills or competencies (e.g. technical or job specific skills, IT skills	2%	5%	2%
Literacy skills	1%	2%	<1%
Numeracy skills	1%	2%	1%
Poor education	1%	1%	1%

SOURCE: National Employer Survey 2024 (England): https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/employer-skills-survey-2024.[97]

As Chapter two shows, teenagers who gain first-hand experience of being in work – undertaking tasks under supervision in work environments – can consistently expect to do better in work later on in life. Multiple studies also show that in general 15-year-old participants in part-time working, community volunteering and work experience placements strongly believe that they gain new and relevant work-related skills through this workplace exposure both when asked as teenagers and when looking back as young adults.[98] Students see part-time employment especially as valuable to their own skills development, and future preparation and search for full-time jobs.[99]

95 The National Employer Survey (England, 2024) finds that 60% of employers think it is essential that a new recruit has relevant work experience, 43% that they have a relevant vocational qualification and 30% that they have completed a relevant apprenticeship. 53% say that it is important that they have passed GCSEs in English and Maths.

96 In this regard it is interesting to note the recently published interim DfE report on teachers' views of young people's opportunities and barriers to access and engage in work, education and training, and the current focus of the school curriculum. Based on a YouGov online survey of 1,004 primary and secondary school teachers, it finds that: teachers generally thought that the curriculum puts too much emphasis on passing exams (74%) and not enough focus on preparing young people for employment (73%) or teaching soft skills for employment (73%); the majority of teachers (73%) believed it possible for the curriculum to be adapted to provide a broader set of skills for work and employment while still maintaining high academic standards; and, that most teachers thought that young people had weaker soft skills (60%) and preparedness for work (66%) than 5 years ago. See: **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-report-survey-with-education-professionals/interim-report-young-people-and-work-report-survey-with-education-professionals.** See also Department for Work and Pensions. 2026. Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report.

97 For comparable findings, see Department for Work and Pensions. 2026. Independent Report – Young people and work: interim report.

98 OECD. 2025. Voluntary work in the community: A guide to delivering an effective career development activity. OECD Publishing, Paris; OECD. 2025. Teenage part-time working: How schools can optimise benefits and reduce risks for secondary school students. OECD Publishing, Paris; OECD. 2025. Internships for secondary school students in general education. OECD Publishing, Paris.

99 Payne, D. and J. Gollings. 2024. Things worth knowing: The role of assumed knowledge in youth transitions from education to employment, Social Market Foundation, London; OECD. 2025. Teenage part-time working: How schools can optimise benefits and reduce risks for secondary school students. OECD Publishing, Paris.

A Scottish research project which surveyed 10% of Scotland's entire national school population between the ages of 14 and 18, found that it is commonplace for part-time working school students to:

- undertake tasks involving cooperation with colleagues (81% agreeing that they been required to do this within their employment)
- having direct interactions with customers (76%)
- using equipment such as cash registers and computers (48%)
- working with tools and machinery (28%)
- spending time reading, writing or completing paperwork (24%), and
- for a sizeable minority, supervising and training others (22%).[100]

The study finds that such responsibilities, and opportunities for learning, increase with age as young people increase their productive capacities.[101] Students and young adults believe that real experiences of work are very valuable to them in their career development. Consequently, while important to all students, it is especially urgent that students planning on leaving education early are strongly supported in ways that will allow them to enter the competition for work with both academic credentials and work-related experiences. In the UK, competition for apprenticeships is especially severe. In 2024/25, only one person in five starting an apprenticeship was aged under 19.[102]

First-hand experience of the workplace is also very useful, sometimes essential, in enabling the ongoing accumulation of greater human capital within education and training. In the UK, many university courses ask for relevant work experience.[103] The UK Universities and Colleges Admissions Service (UCAS) is clear that relevant work experience is an essential or highly desirable requirement for acceptance onto a range of degree programmes, highlighting:

- medicine
- nursing and midwifery
- physiotherapy
- occupational therapy
- healthcare science
- teaching
- social work
- accountancy
- architecture
- civil engineering,
- media production, *and*
- town and country planning.[104]

All students moreover are prompted to draw on work-related experiences within their personal statements to explain why they would be well suited for the courses for which they have applied. UCAS also urges students applying for apprenticeships to highlight relevant workplace experiences.[105] For students with such ambitions, finding the right work-related experiences (which is often challenging[106]) while in school can mean success or failure in getting onto a post-secondary programme of choice.

100 Howieson, C. et al. 2012. New Perspectives on School Students' Part-time Work", Sociology, 46:2, 322-338
101 Howieson, C. et al. 2012. Working pupils: challenges and potential. Journal of Education and Work, 25:4, 423-442
102 **https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/apprenticeships/2024-25**
103 Rehill, J. 2016. The importance of experience of the world of work in admissions to health-based undergraduate courses at Russell Group universities: A desktop review, Education and Employers, London.
104 **https://www.ucas.com/advisers/help-and-training/guides-resources-and-training/pre-application-support/degree-courses-where-work-experience-essential**
105 **https://www.ucas.com/apprenticeships/application-guides**
106 Jones, S. et al. 2019. 'My brother's football team mate's dad was a pathologist': serendipity and employer engagement in medical careers' in Mann, A. et al. eds. Essays on employer engagement in education, Routledge, London.

Social capital relates to the ways in which the people with whom an individual comes into contact (whether close relations or more distant connections) can lead to financial benefits. The most common way that employers recruit new staff under 25 is through word of mouth or personal recommendations. The National Employer Survey 2022 shows that 59% of employers use this route, compared to 38% which advertise on their own website. When schools introduce young people to employers working in fields of interest, they increase the likelihood of them gaining access to references, recommendations and often job offers.

The 2024 Employer Skills Survey for England shows that 10% of employers had during the previous year recruited someone from a school either at the end of their work experience placement or when they had completed their education programme. Such recruitment is most common in workplaces employing 5 to 24 people. For those students planning early entry to the labour market after the age of 16, work experience can provide a very helpful bridge into employment, and it is especially important that placements are well-matched to student ambitions.[107]

Social capital also works in more subtle ways. It allows access to new and trustworthy information from people in work about jobs and careers, the operation of the labour market, its opportunities and pitfalls. Many studies have drawn on this form of social capital theory, often described as the 'strength of weak ties', to explain long-term employment benefits enjoyed by young people linked to connections with employers, such as Career Talks, which may just last a few minutes.[108] Here, it is especially important that people in work are viewed by students as providing authentic and trustworthy insights into the working world.[109]

Cultural capital focuses on the attitudes, understandings and dispositions that people express. Sociologists use phrases such as 'understanding the rules of the game' or 'being a fish in water' to describe situations where an individual becomes comfortable and confident within distinct settings.[110] Understanding of social and cultural norms and expectations, and the ability and confidence to navigate them, are important in student progression. This includes a practical dimension, such as knowing which degrees at which universities are likely to lead to the greatest chances of successful entry into a high-status profession or how to present a good CV or interview well[111], but also a psychological dimension linked to confidence in a personal vision for their future. In the field of career development, this can be understood as a sense of informed and confident agency where a young person knows what they want to do and how to achieve it. This includes how they will invest their time and energy in education and training.

As shown in Chapter two, OECD PISA data for the UK shows that rapidly increasing numbers of 15-year-old students in the UK do not have clear job plans, or if they do, interests are concentrated around a small number of professions with one in three planning on working in a job that typically requires a degree but not planning to go to

107 Mann, A. 2012. Work experience – Impact and delivery, Education and Employers, London

108 Kashefpakdel, E. and C. Percy. 2017. Career education that works: an economic analysis using the British Cohort Study. Journal of Education and Work, 30:3, 217-234; Jones et al. 2016. The 'Employer Engagement Cycle' in Secondary Education: analysing the testimonies of young British adults. Journal of Education and Work, 29:7, 834–856; Raffo, C. & M. Reeves. 2000. Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion: Developments in Social Capital Theory. Journal of Youth Studies, 3:2, 147–166.

109 Linnehan, F. et al., 2025. African-American students' early trust beliefs in work-based mentors, Journal of Vocational Behavior, 66:3, 501-515.

110 Norris, E. 2011. Not enough capital? Exploring education and employment progression in further education, Royal Society of Arts, London

111 Payne, D. and J. Gollings. 2024. Things worth knowing: The role of assumed knowledge in youth transitions from education to employment, Social Market Foundation, London

university. Where students seek to access careers or higher education programmes where they have no family knowledge on which to draw and/or where people of their gender or social background are underrepresented, building relevant cultural capital is especially important.[112] In 2003, PISA showed that 6% of UK students felt that school "was a waste of time" and 89% agreed that "school has taught me things which could be useful in a job." By 2022, these figures had changed: 25% now felt that "school has been a waste of time" and only 64% that they had been learning something useful for work. Longitudinal studies find that these forms of teenage thinking are related to poorer employment outcomes than would otherwise be expected. However, analysis of the same data shows that such career uncertainty, misaligned plans and scepticism about the long-term value of education are also significantly reduced by engagement in career development, including employer engagement.[113]

While it is very reasonable and even expected for students to change their career plans over time, it's important to be aware that longitudinal studies show that they tend to be pretty stable from adolescence and are often predictive of outcomes in adulthood.[114] Indeed research has shown that the career aspirations of 7 year olds are similar to those of 17 year olds.[115] In the absence of any future plans it is difficult for a student to know what to explore in detail or to plan for a coherent progression through education towards successful employment. Effective practice will continually encourage students to reflect on their potential futures within a culture of vocational curiosity. Employer engagement activities consistently call on students to think about their futures, and the advice and information given by people who do jobs of interest is hard to ignore. This is especially important in education systems where students narrow down their studies around the age of 16. When UCAS surveyed 27,000 UK undergraduate students they found that one in five reported that they could not study a higher education programme that interested them because they did not have the relevant subjects for entry.[116]

The virtuous cycle of career development

In effective provision, these forms of human, social and cultural capital interact to create a virtuous cycle. As one study concludes:

> 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.[117]

112 A recent quote from a state-educated NHS consultant is illustrative: "When you don't know anyone who works in medicine – or in law, academia or finance for that matter – it's hard to aspire to join the profession. You don't know what it entails, whether it's right for you, or whether you'll fit in. Often you don't even know that vocation exists. I was told I could be a doctor, dentist, vet or lawyer. I wasn't told I could be a marine biologist, investment banker, or linguistics professor: I didn't even know those careers existed. Work experience (a pre-requisite to entry into medicine) is much more difficult to obtain if your parents are not doctors or you don't know a doctor." See: **https://www.suttontrust.com/news-opinion/all-news-opinion/the-hidden-challenges-facing-state-school-medicine-applicants/.**

113 Covacevich, C. et al. 2021. Indicators of teenage career readiness: An analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries. OECD Publishing, Paris.

114 Hoff, K. et al. 2022. Adolescent vocational interests predict early career success: Two 12-year longitudinal studies. Applied Psychology, 71:1, 49-75; Low, K. et al. 2005. The stability of vocational interests from early adolescence to middle adulthood: a quantitative review of longitudinal studies. Psychological bulletin, 131:5, 713–737.

115 Chambers, N. et al. 2019. Exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world. Education and Employers, London; Kashefpakdel, E. et al. 2018. What works? Career-related learning in primary schools. Careers and Enterprise Company, London

116 UCAS. 2021. Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make. University and College Admissions Service.

117 Jones, S., et al. 2016. The 'Employer Engagement Cycle' in Secondary Education: analysing the testimonies of young British adults. Journal of Education and Work, 29(7), 834–856

A student might come into contact with someone from a profession which they had not previously encountered through a career talk, challenging their career assumptions, leading them to seek related work experience, feeling valued within it, building new social relationships, and influencing their study choices at 16 and motivation to succeed in education. But it cannot be taken for granted that work experience and other forms of employer engagement will be beneficial to young people.[118] Students need to be well prepared, and supported, to optimise benefits. It cannot be assumed that provision will be effective in supporting the career development of young people.

The characteristics of effective employer engagement in career development

Building on publications by the Education Endowment Foundation and the OECD[119], seven primary characteristics of effective provision across the breadth of employer engagement in education interventions are apparent. Effective provision is:

- authentic (in personal experiences and reflection of the labour market)
- frequent and often mandatory
- valued by students (as they recognise new and useful information and experiences)
- varied (in providing resources of different value)
- contextualised (within wider careers provision)
- personalised (acknowledging additional barriers faced by discrete groups of students), *and*
- provided through education, beginning at a young age (OECD 2021).

Authentic. Effective employer engagement will provide students with authentic insights into the reality of the world of work. The most compelling evidence of teenage career development impacting positively on adult employment outcomes in terms of number of separate studies and their results relates to part-time teenage working where young people are paid to complete tasks under supervision. Similar positive outcomes are apparent with regard to community volunteering. Schools consequently should be supported to take advantage of these forms of career development in career guidance provision, recognising that while part-time work commonly builds new skills, experience, contacts and confidence, for most students it is less likely to support exploration of career fields of interest than work experience. Effective school programmes should draw on this evidence and maximise both the authenticity of the experience of work alongside opportunities for career exploration. Some Australian schools provide models for how learning from part-time working can be used by school staff to enhance career development.[120]

Authenticity is also important in other forms of employer engagement such as career talks. It is important in building social capital that students engage with employers and people in work and that they feel that their interactions provide trusted and genuine

118 Jones, S., et al. 2016. The 'Employer Engagement Cycle' in Secondary Education: analysing the testimonies of young British adults. Journal of Education and Work, 29:7, 834–856

119 Mann, A. et al. 2018. Employer engagement in education: Review of current evidence on the most effective ways employers can support schools to improve pupil educational and economic outcomes, Education Endowment Foundation, London; OECD (2021), "Getting the most out of employer engagement in career guidance", OECD Education Policy Perspectives, No. 36, OECD Publishing, Paris

120 Billett, S. & Ovens, C. (2007). Learning about work, working life and post-school options: guiding students' reflections on paid part-time work. Journal of Education and Work, 20(2), 75–90.

insights into the working world.[121] Effective provision will provide realistic insight into actual characteristics of work in different sectors.[122] While some might imagine that they are driven only by earning potential, in fact, career aspirations are substantially more motivated by the desire to find an interesting, secure job that fits with wider plans for adult life.[123] Such desirable job attributes relate to individual circumstances and dispositions and are poorly reflected in labour market information sources which overwhelmingly focus on average salaries.

A further form of authenticity relates to the extent to which employer engagement enables students to understand the breadth of the labour market. As seen, the job plans of teenagers are highly concentrated and bear little relation to actual patterns of employment. Effective provision will work to ensure that all sectors are well represented in activities. There is reason to believe that this is not currently the case. The National Employer Skills Survey for England (2024) shows that there is considerable variation in the engagement of different economic sectors with schools. While 46% of education workplaces and 31% of those in health and social care had hosted a school student on work experience, this applied to only 8% in transport and storage, 11% of utilities and 13% in construction.[124] Similar patterns are apparent in employer engagement in 'work inspiration' activities, including activities like career talks as well as interview practice. Such data is readily available and can be used to identify key sectors which are not currently engaging well with schools with action taken to address imbalances.

Authentic provision moreover provides insights into the realities of working life, warts and all. As the influential US psychologist David Blustein reminds readers:

> Work has the potential to add a great deal of meaning and richness to our lives; at the same time, it has the capacity to wither our souls in a way that few other life activities can match.[125]

Recent studies by the University of Leeds, University of Manchester and City University have confirmed the urgent need for greater awareness of young people about their rights in work. The L-earning project draws on national administrative data and focus and groups and 1-2-1 interviews with young women aged 14-24 to explore experiences of work. The project finds that:

- Low pay is almost universal among student workers. A large minority are paid below legal age-specific minimum wages.
- Women students regularly encounter mistreatment, abuse and widespread sexual harassment – from co-workers, managers and customers.
- Low union-engagement typically means that young women seek to resolve problems individually – with limited success. They also fear retaliation and have a lack of visible examples of successful workplace contestation. Student workers have few

121 Linnehan, F. et al. 2005. African-American students' early trust beliefs in work-based mentors, Journal of Vocational Behavior, 66: 3, 501-515; Raffo, C., & Reeves, M. (2000). Youth Transitions and Social Exclusion: Developments in Social Capital Theory. Journal of Youth Studies, 3(2), 147–166

122 Kashefpakdel, E. & C. Percy. 2017. Career education that works: an economic analysis using the British Cohort Study. Journal of Education and Work. 30:3, 217-234

123 See: **https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/employmentandemployeetypes/articles/youngpeoplescareeraspirationsversusreality/2018-09-27**

124 See also, Massey, D. 2014. Work experience: the economic case for employers, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London.

125 Blustein, D. 2019. The Importance of Work in an Age of Uncertainty: the eroding work experience in America. Oxford University Press.

voice mechanisms, collective strategies of contestation, or access to representative institutions including unions. Typically, their response to problems at work is individualised, most often to 'quit'.

Moreover, they conclude that these early experiences the labour market operate:

- as a form of 'anticipatory socialisation' producing expectations and understandings of what it means to be a 'worker', including normalising bad working conditions, conceding to managerial discipline and demonstrating persistence.[126]

Teenage career development can help young people to understand their rights at work and opportunities for collective action to defend them.

In the past in the UK, trade unions have been formally involved in government funded initiatives to increase employer engagement in education. The Schools Council Industry Project, later the Schools Curriculum Industry Project (SCIP) was established in 1977 in dialogue with, and jointly supported by representatives of employees and employers, the Trades Union Congress (TUC) and the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), to develop and promote curriculum innovation through direct engagement with local education authorities and their teachers. The initiative was seen as providing "local solutions to local problems". A network of SCIP co-ordinators worked across local authorities bringing together schools, businesses and trade union partners to inject "industry awareness" into the curriculum.[127] In the 1990s, work experience provision was supported by regional Training and Enterprise Councils (TECs), organisations with geographic responsibilities which were overseen by boards representing trade unions alongside employers, educationalists, voluntary organisations, trainers and bodies responsible for economic development. TECs delivered training programmes and work experience for both school students and young adults on government training programmes and apprenticeships.[128] Currently, some UK unions fund work with schools to support the career development of students.

The Unite in Schools programme is more than just about promoting trade unionism to individuals – it is also about demonstrating their role at work and in society. It is aimed at 14-15 year olds in school years 10 and 11 and can be linked to the Stage 4 Citizenship National Curriculum.[129]

126 **https://ywworking.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/12/Rethinking-Young-Womens-Working-Lives-Report-December-2025.pdf.** See also: **https://www.tuc.org.uk/sites/default/files/2023-11/jobsandpayyoungworkers.pdf;** see also, Allen, K. et al. 2026. Student workers as proto-workers: 'Experience', quitting and the production of consent. The Sociological Review, 74 :3, 510-527.

127 **https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/History-of-Employer-Engagement-6-Aug-final-1-1.pdf**

128 Hudson, G. 1996. Dealing with Work: secondary students' work experience and the curriculum. Journal of Vocational Education and Training, 48:3, 277-294

129 **https://www.unionlearn.org.uk/blog/demonstrating-role-unions-schools.** From another perspective, Career Education Framework of the Canadian province of New Brunswick sets out the expectation that students will by the time they have left secondary education can demonstrate understanding of 'how access to desirable work is not always fair and equitable', for example being able to agree with the statements: "I can identify how individual and collective actions can help create a fairer working world (including the role of labour unions)" and "I have learned about the legislative protections that exist to ensure employment processes (recruitment, promotion, assignment, and termination) are free from discrimination."

Related research suggests that student understanding of discrimination in the adult world alongside belief that action to address can be effective supports better employment outcomes for youth at structural risk of poor outcomes. The concept of 'critical consciousness' has been positively tested in a series of longitudinal studies finding that preparation for the world as it is supports effective career development.[130]

Further in this regard, in the context of growing precarity in patterns of employment, work placements for students are an excellent opportunity for students to hear directly from recruiters about processes and requirements and to explore likely changes in patterns of demand due to technological change. As an employer representative interviewed for this project explains:

> For the kids who come to us on the longer work experience programme, we do think it's important that they understand how our recruitment process works. We do a mock interview with them in the first week and then we do a follow up mock interview with them in the fourth week. They also give us their CVs and they get 1-2-1 and 15 minute slots with one of our HR partners to go through the CV with them and show them where they can make improvements. We've got some great examples of students that come to us as career ready students who then return to us as apprentices, or even as full time employees – Interview with large employer (utilities)

Varied. Surveys of UK teachers working with students aged 14-16 and with experience of how they respond to different forms of employer engagement activities find that students can in general be expected to benefit in different ways from different employer engagement activities. Sustained engagement with working world (work experience, community volunteering and mentoring) is seen as of greatest value in developing student self-management, improving academic attainment and accessing part-time work. Career exploration activities (career talks, fairs, workplace visits and job shadowing) are seen as being of particular value in helping students to understand of the work of work, develop career thinking and decision making at 16, while enterprise activities (short- and long-form activities) are viewed as being of particular value in developing problem-solving and team working skills.[131] Young people agree that different forms of provision are useful to them in different ways.[132]

Frequent and often mandatory. The more that students engage with employers, the more likely it is that they will encounter information and experiences that prove helpful to them and go on to do better in employment later on.[133] Studies of young adults show

130 Diemer, M. & D. Blustein. 2006. Critical consciousness and career development among urban youth. Journal of Vocational Behavior, 68:2, 220-232; Pillen, H. et al. 2020. Critical consciousness development: a systematic review of empirical studies. Health Promotion International, 35: 6 1519–1530; Kenny, M. et al.2018. Combatting Marginalization and Fostering Critical Consciousness for Decent Work. In: Cohen-Scali, V. et al. Interventions in Career Design and Education. Lifelong Learning Book Series, vol 23.

131 Education and Employers surveyed of 390 Key Stage 4 teachers in England, asking respondents to rank the value of different employer activities over how effective they were in supporting different objectives for students, see Mann, A. et al. 2017. Towards an employer engagement toolkit: British teachers' perspectives on the comparative efficacy of work-related learning activities. Education and Employers, London

132 Mann, A. & E. Kashefpakdel. 2014. The views of young Britons (aged 19-24) on their teenage experiences of school-mediated employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London

133 Mann, A. & E. Kashefpakdel. 2014. The views of young Britons (aged 19-24) on their teenage experiences of school-mediated employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London; Percy, C. & A. Mann. 2014. School-mediated employer engagement and labour market outcomes for young adults: wage premia, NEET outcomes and career confidence, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London.

consistently better outcomes being statistically linked to greater numbers of engagement with employers.[134] Greater engagement with employers is also strongly associated with greater belief among young adults that their school prepared them well for working life.[135]

A number of these studies look at employment outcomes linked to a scale of 0 to 4+ recalled experiences of different forms of employer engagement, but others explore impacts linked to much greater numbers. Kashefpakdel and Percy (2017) for example find that adult wage premiums linked to participation in teenage career talks begin after three interventions and show no sign of diminishing after 50 talks.[136]

It is good practice to require students to take part in activities, particularly at a younger age when encouraging a mindset of critical curiosity surrounding futures in work is especially important. Students don't know what they don't know and mandatory participation in career talks can be expected to broaden career thinking and challenge assumptions and expectations that haven't been well considered. This includes stereotypical views of jobs, careers and educational pathways which form initially in childhood.[137]

Valued. Employers are engaged in career development by schools to provide students with access to trusted new information and experiences that cannot be so easily delivered within school alone. Consequently, a very good test for whether an activity has been successful is to ask students if (and what) they have learnt that is new and useful to them. Kashefpakdel and Percy (2017) found teenagers who participated in career talks through their schools at 14-16, and at the time said that the talks were very helpful to them, experienced a significantly greater earnings boost in their early twenties.[138] They also found that the more talks a young person had, the more likely they were to say that they had been very helpful. Studies of young adults reflecting on the career guidance they received in school find similar results.[139] Student capacity to see value in their employer engagement experiences may relate to both the objective quality of the experience and to the subjective ability to make sense of new insights into ongoing career development. Consequently, where activities are well contextualised by schools, greater benefits can be assumed.

Contextualised and critical. Where student employer engagement is undertaken within the context of broader career guidance provision, some studies highlight—and logic suggests—improved outcomes for young people. In the context of career talks for example, students in schools with richer cultures of guidance provision are more likely to find career talks with external speakers helpful and so can expect greater long-term

134 Percy, C. & A. Mann. 2014. School-mediated employer engagement and labour market outcomes for young adults: wage premia, NEET outcomes and career confidence, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London; Kashefpakdel, E. T., & C. Percy. 2017. Career education that works: an economic analysis using the British Cohort Study. Journal of Education and Work, 30:3, 217–234; Mann et al. 2017. Contemporary Transitions: Young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college. Education and Employers, London.

135 Mann, A. et al. 2017. Towards an employer engagement toolkit: British teachers' perspectives on the comparative efficacy of work-related learning activities. Education and Employers, London find that whereas 34% of 1,700 young adults surveyed who recalled no employer engagement while in school felt that their school had prepared them well, this figure rose to 68% among those who recalled four or more interventions.

136 Kashefpakdel, E. T., & C. Percy. 2017. Career education that works: an economic analysis using the British Cohort Study. Journal of Education and Work, 30:3, 217–234

137 Chambers, N. et al. 2018. Drawing the future – Exploring the career aspirations of primary school children from around the world. Education and Employers, London; UCAS. 2023. Where next: What influences the choices of would-be apprentices? Sutton Trust and Universities and Colleges Admissions Service; OECD. 2021. The Future at Five: Gendered Aspirations of Five-Year-Olds. OECD Publishing, Paris.

138 Kashefpakdel, E. & C. Percy. 2017. Career education that works: an economic analysis using the British Cohort Study. Journal of Education and Work, 30:3, 217–234

139 Moote, J. et al. 2024. More is more: exploring the relationship between young people's experiences of school-based career education, information, advice and guidance at age 14–16 and wider adult outcomes at age 21–22 in England, Research Papers in Education, 40, 1, 72-95

financial returns.[140] From another perspective, OECD PISA data show that students who combine both work experiences placements with speaking with a career counsellor and hearing from employers about jobs and careers are significantly more likely to express attitudes towards education and employment which are strongly linked with better ultimate outcomes (such as clearer jobs plans which match with educational plans) than those who just did a placement.[141] In another example, an influential study of the experiences of 1,000 students in five schools in England completing work placements finds that socially disadvantaged students who spoke with a guidance counsellor before confirming their placement were more likely to complete a placement in a professional setting than peers.[142] In schools, this means that space must be found in the curriculum for students to prepare for and reflect on their experiences, particularly work experience placements which represent the single most significant experience of work most teenagers in the UK will have before the age of 16. Successful contextualisation will help develop emerging student interests and plans for post-16 and contributing to their successful achievement. The historic challenges of providing professional career guidance within England is discussed in depth by Deirdre Hughes elsewhere in this paper.

Personalised. Notably with regard to securing work experience placements, effective provision in career development always reflects the personal interests, ambitions, abilities, resources and constraints of individuals. Students at different stages in their career development can have different if often overlapping objectives for placements. These include:

- clarifying and confirming career and educational plans
- securing experience to enable early entry into desirable employment, including apprenticeships
- gaining experience of value to university entry
- enhancing engagement in education
- enhancing student maturation.

As Prue Huddleston notes, the following questions are at the heart of effective practice:

- what is to be learned? (setting learning objectives with associated learning outcomes)
- how this learning might be achieved? (where are opportunities within the placement)
- what sort of evidence will be used to confirm learning? (diaries, logs, examples of completed work tasks, videos of presentations, witness statements by workplace supervisors)
- how this evidence will be assessed? (reports from workplace supervisors, teacher reviews of pupils' learning through feedback and debrief, teacher visits to students on placement).[143]

Personalised provision also relates to consideration of the needs of distinct groups of students. The next section of this report looks at Equity in employer engagement and identifies students with shared characteristics who require additional support. Student

140 Percy, C. & E. Kashefpakdel, 2018. Insiders or outsides, who do you trust? Engaging employers in school-based career activities, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Essays on employer engagement in education. Routledge, London.

141 Mann, A. & J. Diaz. 2025. Tailored Work Experience in Wales. OECD Publishing, Paris

142 Le Gallais, T. & Hatcher, R. 2014. How school work experience policies can widen student horizons or reproduce social inequality in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding Employer Engagement in Education Theories and evidence. Routledge, London

143 Huddleston, P. 2012. Pupil work experience, in Huddleston, P. and J. Stanley eds. Work-related teaching and learning: a guide for teachers and practitioners. Routledge, London

vulnerabilities relate both to their personal characteristics, their career aspirations, and to additional barriers that can be expected in early adulthood. Young people vary a lot in the extent to which they can draw on useful non-school resources (such as the social capital provided by parents and family friends) to visualise and plan their futures. Most young people in the UK with a career plan expect to attend university and to become professionals for example and the children of graduate professionals have access to immediate resources of value which are significantly less available to their peers with parents working in different parts of the economy.[144]

This variation in social capital is especially clear when it comes to finding work experience placements which most students are expected to do themselves with the help of their families. As studies show, this can easily support social reproduction.[145] A good example relates to health professions. With relevant work experience an essential requirement for medical degrees, demand is great among students. When Professor Steven Jones and colleagues (2018) surveyed 835 medical school students, they found that those from comprehensive schools found it considerably more difficult than peers from independent schools to gain work-based experience. They also surveyed 707 English state secondary schools. Respondents working in schools with low levels of Free School Meals were more than twice as likely to agree that their students had access to trusted and useful advice from medical professionals on how to become a doctor when compared to peers in schools with greater levels of poverty.[146]

Moreover, students from families which are struggling financially face additional challenges in transport and lunch costs when considering placements. Access to desirable work experience is also constrained by geography with students attending school in rural and isolated areas at notable disadvantage. Students with Special Education Needs and Disabilities face common additional challenges in securing work experience and recent studies further highlight growing understanding of neurodiversity (notably ADHD and autism) and of anxiety among students impacting negatively on capacity for social engagement.[147]

As explored in the next chapter, some distinct groups of students can expect additional barriers and discrimination in the labour market. Students expecting to work in professions where people who share their characteristics are not well represented can be expected to require support to develop confidence that such workplaces will not be hostile to someone of their background. Consequently, effective practice will recognise and respond to predictable additional needs. In Wales for example, students with poor attendance and engagement in school have opportunity to participate in tailored, extended work experience placements, a programme that is viewed as reducing the risk of NEET after the age of 16.[148] Greater investment in career education helps schools to understand – and respond to – these student characteristics.

144 Payne, D. & J. Gollings. 2024. Things worth knowing – The role of assumed knowledge in youth transitions from education to employment. Social Market Foundation and Speakers for Schools

145 Le Gallais, T. & Hatcher, R. (2014) How school work experience policies can widen student horizons or reproduce social inequality in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding Employer Engagement in Education. Routledge, London.

146 Jones, S. 2019. 'My brother's football teammate's dad was a pathologist': serendipity and employer engagement in medical careers, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Essays on employer engagement in education. Routledge, London.

147 NatCen Social Research & SQW. 2016. Work experience and related activities in schools and colleges. Department for Education, London.

148 Mann, A. & J. Diaz.2025. Tailored Work Experience in Wales. OECD Publishing, Paris.

Continuous and iterative through primary and secondary education.

The process of capital building is continuous and iterative through education. When asked, children as young as five commonly have a job ambition. Very few expect to be superheroes or fairies. Rather, they articulate jobs and careers which they see around them and these are strongly shaped by gender.[149] Many children in primary school are also already thinking about whether they will attend university, with attitudes shaped by social class.[150] Effective provision supports the early exploration of the labour market, helps students to build understanding of the relationships between education and employment, and challenges stereotypical thinking about jobs which are suitable for women and men. It supports a culture of critical curiosity about individual preferences, interests and abilities and how they can relate to adult life.[151]

> In too many systems, guidance provision happens only towards the end of schooling. The most important decisions that students make – about their engagement in education – happen continually from the earliest years of education. *Andreas Schleicher, Director of Education and Skills, OECD.*

SOURCE: Mann, A. et al. 2025. The state of teenage career preparation. OECD Publishing, Paris

The Australian educationalist Dave Turner describes ways in which effective employer engagement changes as young people get older.[152] In effective provision, each stage of career development lays the foundation for making productive use of the next. It is a model which begins with extensive exposure, deepens with informed exploration and completes with experience that enables preparation for transitions at the conclusion of secondary education. This staggered approach is also apparent in Finland where over three school years students first gain one day's experience of work, then a week and finally two weeks (confirm) as they confirm their plans at age 16.[153]

149 OECD. 2021. The Future at Five: Gendered Aspirations of Five-Year-Olds. OECD Publishing, Paris; Percy, C. & A. Amegah. 2021. Starting early: Building the foundations for success. Education and Employers, London.

150 UCAS. 2021. Where next? What influences the choices school leavers make.

151 Percy, C. & A. Amegah. 2021. Starting early: Building the foundations for success. Education and Employers, London.

152 Turner, D. 2020. The WE3 Continuum and Activities Scaffolding vocational education and successful youth transitions through Work Exposure, Work Exploration and Work Experience. Eastern Bay of Plenty Economic Development Agency, New Zealand.

153 Kettunen, J. et al. 2023. Work Experience Placements in Lower Secondary Education in Nordic Countries. Nordic Journal of Transitions, Careers and Guidance, 4:1, 29–42.

TABLE 4.2: Turner's Work Exposure/Exploration/Experience (WE3) model

Work Exposure Activities that present ideas, information and concepts about the world of work and career development, helping children to begin to see the relationship between education and employment, broadening career understanding and challenging stereotypical career thinking. **Largely aimed at young people aged 5 to 12**	**Work Exploration Activities** in which young people actively explore and investigate the world of work, helping young people explore, clarify and confirm post-16 plans for education, training and employment. **Largely aimed at young people aged 13 to 16.**	**Work Experience Activities** that offer young people close and more sustained opportunities for observation and participation in one or more workplaces, helping young people to prepare for progressing into desirable post-18 employment and/or training and education. **Largely aimed at young people aged 16 to 18.**
Typical activities include: ■ discussions of parental occupations ■ career talks from people in work about the jobs they do and the value they find in them ■ discussions of the gendered character of work ■ workplace visits ■ integration of workplace examples within related curricula	**Typical activities include:** ■ career talks from people in work about the jobs they do and how to access them ■ student research into specific occupations, access to them and their likely future characteristics ■ development of CV writing and interview skills with employee volunteers ■ job shadowing ■ career conversations with working individuals about the future development of occupations	**Typical activities include:** ■ community and workplace-based work placements, undertaking supervised work for one week ■ work shadowing focused around specific research questions ■ student enterprises supported by employee volunteer coaches ■ student work-related projects addressing local community challenges with volunteer coaches ■ employer forum organised by students to bring together students and employers to discuss expectations and opportunities

SOURCE: Adapted from Turner, D. (2020), The WE3 Continuum and Activities – Scaffolding vocational education and successful youth transitions through Work Exposure, Work Exploration and Work Experience, D J Turner Consulting and Eastern Bay of Plenty Economic Development Agency, New Zealand (Turner, 2020). See also, resrep70100.32.pdf Career ready? (EN)

How effective is recent employer engagement in England?

This section draws on new evidence gathered for this project, notably the Survey of Young Adults which questioned 804 individuals aged 19-26 who completed secondary education in UK and a Schools Survey of 350 school staff with responsibilities for student career development between the ages of 14 and 16.

Surveyed respondents feel that the work experience and other forms of employer engagement they participated in made a positive difference

Historical UK studies have surveyed teenagers[154] and young adults[155] about work experience and other forms of employer engagement. Consistently, surveys show that participants agree with researchers and believe that their experiences were beneficial to their career development. Further studies show that school staff and employers concur.[156]

154 Hillage, J. et al. 1996. Pre-16 work experience in England. Institute for Employment Studies, University of Sussex; Ipsos Mori. 2009. Young People Omnibus: Wave 15 – A Research Study on Work-Related Learning Among 11-16 Year Olds on Behalf of the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA); National Support Group for Work Experience and the National Education Business Partnership Network. 2008. Students' Perceptions of Work Experience by the National Support Group for Work Experience: Report of Impact Measures. Commissioned by the Institute for Education Business Excellence and the Department for Children, Schools and Families.

155 Mann, A. & E. Kashefpakdel. 2014. The views of young Britons (aged 19-24) on their teenage experiences of school-mediated employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London; Mann et al. 2017. Contemporary Transitions: Young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college. Education and Employers, London; Kashefpakdel, E. & C. Percy. 2022. Work Experience For All: Exploring the impacts of work experience on young people's outcomes. Futures for all, London.

156 Eddy Adams Consultants Ltd with Smart Consultancy (Scotland) Ltd and Training and Employment Research Unit, University of Glasgow. 2008. Work Experience in Scotland. Scottish Government; QCA. 2004. Work-related learning baseline study 2004. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

The Survey of Young Adults finds further evidence related to six activities which might have brought them into contact with workplaces and people in work (Table 4.3). Between half and three-quarters of respondents who reported that they had had some experience of the different activities agreed or strongly agreed that their experiences had provided opportunity to learn things which were new and useful, improved understanding of jobs and careers, clarified career thinking, while enabling interactions with people who made a lasting impression, collectively examples of human, cultural and social capital accumulation. Both activities which bring employers and people into work into educational settings (such as career talks) and those which bring students into workplaces (such as work experience placements) are strongly valued by participants within them years after they were undertaken.[157]

TABLE 4.3: Young adults (19-26) perceptions on the value of school-managed employer engagement activities. Survey of Young Adults, 2026.

Statement (% agreeing)	Work Experience	Workplace visit	Job Shadowing	Career Talks	Career Fair	Mentoring
I learnt something that was new and useful to me	74	73	69	63	61	70
It helped me to understand more about the sorts of jobs which I might like to do	73	71	70	63	63	67
It has proved useful to me in someway	72	70	72	61	64	73
It helped me understand the range of jobs and opportunities	72	70	70	68	65	71
I encountered someone who made a lasting impression on me	58	55	60	48	48	64
It helped me to think more clearly about what I wanted to do in the future	73	70	69	60	60	71
Number (with some experience)	606	533	485	633	583	378

Looking specifically at perspectives on work experience placements undertaken prior to the age of 16, the Survey of Young Adults found further evidence that with the benefit of hindsight placements were positively viewed as helpful in building understanding of the world of work and enabling progression through education and training towards employment (Table 4.4).

157 See also comparable studies of young adults in the United States and Spain which reveal similar results. OECD (2023), Career Readiness Review: The Commonwealth of Virginia, United States, OECD Publishing, Paris; Mann, A. and J. Diaz. 2024. Career development in the community of Madrid and Spain: Insights from PISA. OECD Publishing, Paris.

TABLE 4.4: Young adults (19-26) perceptions on the value of pre-16 work experience placements. Survey of young adults, 2026.

Statement (% agreeing)	Very helpful	Quite helpful	Agree (all)
It helped me in maturing as a person	37	47	84
It helped me in finding out what the world of work is actually like	38	43	81
It helped me to decide what I would like to do as a job in the future	31	50	80
It helped me in understanding the usefulness of education and qualifications	34	45	79
It helped to increase my confidence	36	43	79
It helped me to understand myself, my interests and aspirations	34	44	78
It helped in meeting people who would be helpful to me	36	42	78
It helped me to think more clearly about what I wanted to do in the future	29	44	73
It helped me to understand more about the sorts of jobs which I might like to do	30	43	73
It has proved useful to me in someway	28	44	72
It helped me understand the range of jobs and opportunities	31	41	72
It helped me decide what I wanted to do after Year 11/S3	25	44	70
It helped to change my thinking about the types of jobs that it is reasonable for women and men to do	30	37	67
It helped me to get onto a course after Year 11/S3	27	37	64
It helped me to get a part-time job when I was a student or later on	26	38	64
It helped me in understanding the role of trade unions in the workplace	28	36	63
It helped me get a full-time job later on	30	32	62
I encountered someone who made a lasting impression on me	23	35	58

Notably, more than two-thirds of respondents felt that their work experience helped them both to decide on what they would do after the age of 16 and to achieve their preferred pathway. In this way, these workplace experiences can be understood as significantly building knowledge and understanding of the world of work in ways that underpin agency and progression through education and training towards ultimate employment with many being clear that placements has helped them to get a full-time or part-time job.

New statistical analysis of the links between employer engagement and smoother outcomes post-16

The Survey of Young Adults asked respondents:

- how easy or difficult was it for you to decide on what to after you finished Year 11 (S3 in Scotland)?
- How easy or difficult was it for you to achieve what you wanted to do after Year 11 (S3 in Scotland)? (e.g. get onto the course or job/apprenticeship you wanted)

It also asked what the main thing that the young adults were doing between the ages of 16 and 18, including an option for being NEET, and whether the activities that they had pursued between these ages had ultimately proved useful to them. The data was analysed to see if statistically significant relationships could be found between the employer engagement recalled before the age of 16 and;

i How easy they felt it had been to decide on and to achieve post-16 goals, and
ii Whether it was more or less likely that they reported being non-NEET between 16 and 18.

To make sure that the results were not a mask for other factors that might drive the outcomes, a wide range of controls were used within the statistical analysis: age, gender, FSM, SEND, parental education, ethnicity, nativity, LGBT status, school type (private or other) and location models. The study also collected respondents into four groups based on the overall volume of employer engagement which they recalled during school. In conclusion, the analysis found:

- Participation in pre-16 work experience (all forms) are associated with more positive outcomes at 16+. Those who reported that they had completed a work experience placement had 62% lower odds of being NEET between ages 16 and 18 than someone with comparable characteristics. In addition, the analysis shows that they were:
  - more likely to report that it was easy (and especially very easy) to decide what to do after Year 11
  - more likely to say it was easy (and especially very easy) to achieve what they wanted
  - more likely to agree that the activity which they undertook between the ages of 16 and 18 was useful (and especially very useful) in helping them to achieve what they want to do in life.[158]

- When breaking this down by type of work experience (in-person vs virtual), the results are much less consistent and often not statistically significant. This is likely due to the small size of the virtual sample and overlaps between types. No firm conclusions can be drawn.
- Strong and consistent findings also come from looking at overall volume of employer engagement. Higher engagement scores are positively associated with better outcomes across all measures (decision-making, achievement, usefulness and lower NEET risk):
  - Recalled participation in each additional employer engagement activity is positively linked with approximately 24% of lower odds of being NEET at 16-18
  - Comparing young people in the highest engagement quartile with those in the lowest, the highest-quartile group had:
    - around twice the odds of reporting that they achieved their post-16 goals easily
    - around 80% lower odds of being NEET between ages 16 and18
    - around three times the odds of reporting that what they did between ages 16 and 18 was useful.

Quantitative evidence on the impact of employer engagement on immediate post-16 transitions is very rare, and the analysis provides important new data on positive connections between pre-16 employer engagement, notably work experience, and better outcomes. Full details of the analysis are set out in Annex 3 of this report.

158 The NEET rate in the sample (around 5%) is comparable to national figures for this age group but represents a relatively small number of survey participants. Consequently, while the overall pattern is consistent, estimates should be interpreted with some caution.

The views of school staff

As noted, historic studies show that most school staff with first-hand experience of supporting student career development agree that student engagement with employers and people in work will be beneficial to them. The Schools Survey undertaken for this project found comparable results.

Asked specifically about the plans of the Department for Education (England) to expand employer engagement at ages 11-16, the majority of respondents from England felt that they understood the government's expectations well and, in general, agreed that their students would benefit from them (Table 4.5).

TABLE 4.5: School Survey. Percentage agreeing that students will benefit from the new expectations of the Department for Education (England)

Do you think that the students that you work with will benefit from these new expectations? (% agreeing) (N=334)	All (334)
Yes, a lot	29
Yes, a bit	26
All 'yes'	55
No, they won't benefit much	7
No, they won't benefit at all	2
I am not sure	22
I don't think much will change	14

As will be discussed in depth elsewhere in this report, while school staff feel in general that greater employer engagement for students aged 11-16 is desirable, very many are very concerned about how realistic the delivery of it is under current arrangements.

Respondents from schools which had not recently expected students aged 14-16 to undertake work placements were clear that this was not because that the benefits were not apparent. Only 16% of these 113 respondents agreed that they "did not think that the outcomes for students are sufficient" and fewer still that there was a lack of interest from students and their parents (6%) or from within their school (6%). Rather, they cited practical difficulties, most frequently that appropriate placements were too difficult to find (79%) or that it was "too difficult to do well without additional resource" (69%).

Similarly, when asked about the expectations of the Department for Education that students aged 11-14 would participate in greater employer engagement to support their career development, respondents focused on practical barriers hindering the feasibility of the aspiration, rather than its desirability (Table 4.6). Only 6% felt that the age of students meant that they would not benefit.

TABLE 4.6: Schools Survey. Percentage strongly agreeing the different barriers would prevent schools from enabling employer engagement activities for students aged 11-14.

To what extent would you agree or disagree with the following statements in relation to students aged 11 to 14 taking part in such activities with employers within their career development? % Strongly agreeing that it is a problem	All (319)
Releasing school staff to accompany students on visits and activities outside of school	66
Finding employers to engage in such activities is a problem.	54
Finding employers willing to participate in in-school activities lasting a few hours is a problem	37
The travel costs of getting students to workplaces are a problem.	33
The students are generally too young to benefit from such activities	6

Not all provision is as good as it could be

While the Survey of Young Adults found that most students felt at least something of value had come from their employer engagement experiences, this was not always the case. Around one-third of respondents felt that each of the six different activities had been "a waste of time" (Table 4.7). These attitudes are further discussed in the following section on Equity.

TABLE 4.7: Percentage agreement that different pre-16 employer engagement activities were "a waste of time." Survey of Young Adults, 2026.

Statement (% agreeing)	Work Experience	Workplace visit	Job Shadowing	Career Talks	Career Fair	Mentoring
It was a waste of time	34	29	32	35	37	39

Equally, comparable proportions of respondents felt that they had not secured discernible value from the employer engagement activities which they recalled having taken part in (Table 4.8).

TABLE 4.8: Percentage of students **not** agreeing that they had benefited from employer engagement activities. Survey of Young Adults, 2026.

Statement (% not agreeing)	Work Experience	Workplace visit	Job Shadowing	Career Talks	Career Fair	Mentoring
I learnt something that was new and useful to me	26	27	31	37	39	30
It helped me to understand more about the sorts of jobs which I might like to do	27	29	30	37	37	33
It has proved useful to me in someway	28	30	28	39	36	27
It helped me understand the range of jobs and opportunities	28	30	30	32	35	29
I encountered someone who made a lasting impression on me	42	45	40	52	52	36
It helped me to think more clearly about what I wanted to do in the future	27	30	31	40	40	29
Number (with some experience)	606	533	485	633	583	378

These findings are in line with the results of earlier UK surveys of teenagers and young adults which show that many do not feel that their employer engagement experiences were valuable or were of demonstrable poor quality.[159] Surveys undertaken by Confederation of Business Industry (2007) (1 034 respondents)[160] and YouGov (2010) (1 123 respondents)[161] of students aged 15-16 who had completed a work experience placement found that many felt the experience had provided them with little opportunity to gain trusted insights of value, to gain skills, meet new people, or to learn more about themselves:

- 42% felt that their work was not meaningful (YouGov, 2010)
- 40-41% were not given feedback on their work or progress (CBI, 2007; YouGov, 2010)
- 38% did more or less the same thing every day (YouGov, 2010)
- 38% received no introduction about the organisation (YouGov, 2010)
- 32% met people in only one small part of the organisation (YouGov, 2010)
- 32% did only mundane or routine tasks (YouGov, 2010)
- 29% felt that their manager or supervisor was not supportive (YouGov, 2010)
- 27% did not discuss with anyone the skills needed for a particular task (CBI, 2007)
- 26% did not discuss with anyone the skills needed for work (CBI, 2007)
- 25% did not receive feedback on how good their skills needed for work were (CBI, 2007)

Such findings highlight both the need for the effective design and management of work experience placements, with schools actively working employers to optimise learning opportunities, but also for the need to embed work experience within wider career guidance and education that prepares students well to take advantage of their experiences.

Lack of confidence in virtual work experience

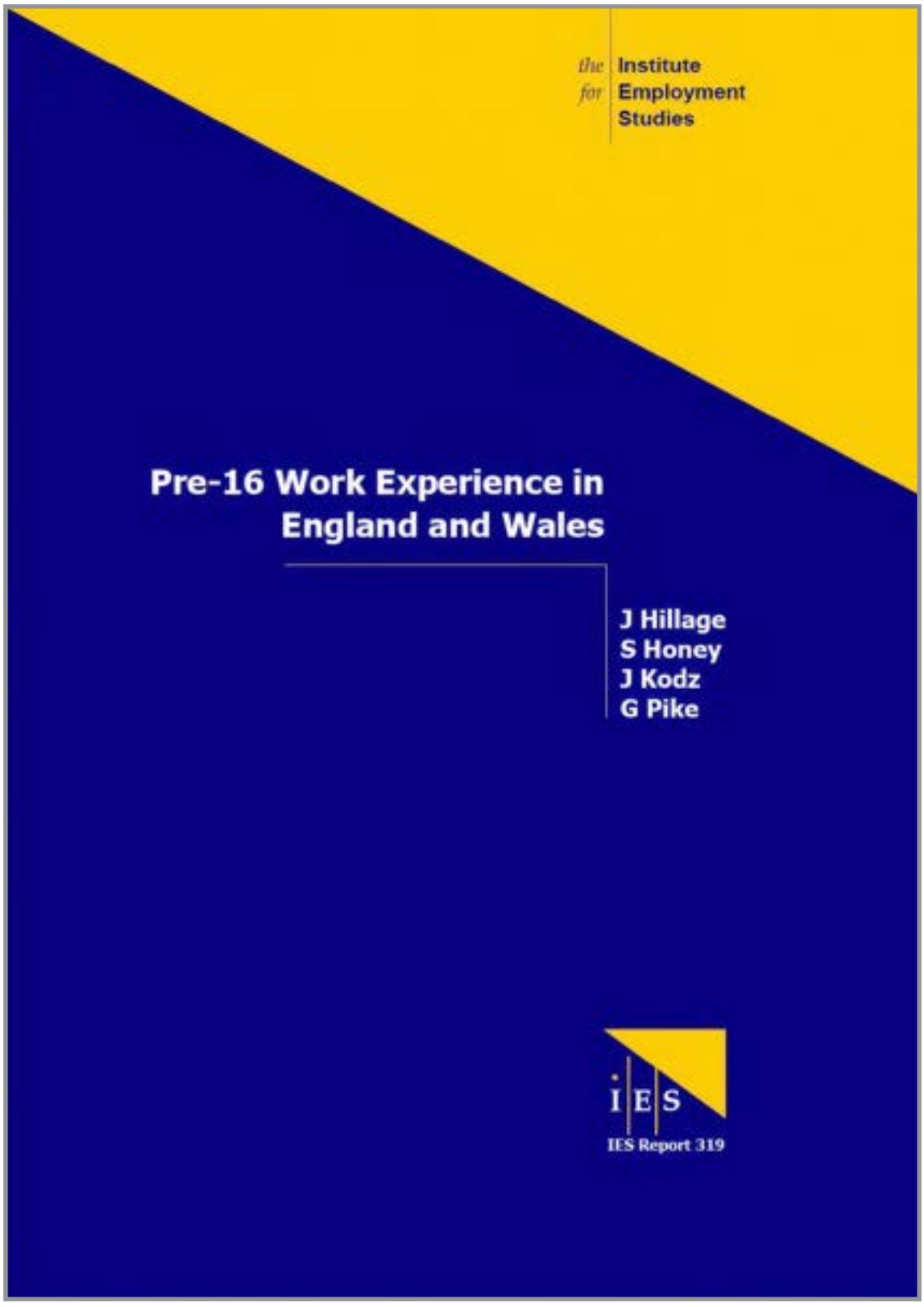
Due to technological change and the COVID-19 confinements, education systems are increasing turning to digital technologies to deliver career guidance, including work experience placements. In general, the OECD argues strongly that there is a considerable need for greater robust, independent research to understand the likely expected impacts of all forms of virtual provision in comparison to traditional, face-to-face provision and between different forms of virtual delivery.[162]

159 Jones, S., et al. 2016. The 'Employer Engagement Cycle' in Secondary Education: analysing the testimonies of young British adults. Journal of Education and Work, 29:7, 834–856; Mann, A. & E. Kashefpakdel. 2014. The views of young Britons (aged 19-24) on their teenage experiences of school-mediated employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London.

160 CBI (2007) Time Well Spent: Embedding Employability in Work Experience. Confederation of British Industry, London.

161 YouGov (2010) EDGE Annual Programme of Stakeholder Surveys: Report. Edge Foundation.

162 OECD. 2024. Digital technologies in career guidance for youth: Opportunities and challenges. OECD Publishing, Paris.


the Institute for Employment Studies
Pre-16 Work Experience in England and Wales
J Hillage
S Honey
J Kodz
G Pike
IES
IES Report 319



Harnessing AI to support young people's experience of the world of work

How might how artificial intelligence might be harnessed constructively, alongside human careers support, to expand young people's exposure to and experience of the world of work.

Artificial intelligence offers genuinely new possibilities for expanding young people's exposure to and experience of the world of work – possibilities that, if realised thoughtfully, could begin to address some of the structural inequalities in access that have long characterised work-related learning in England. AI-powered tools can now simulate workplace environments, provide personalised labour market intelligence, and support young people in exploring occupational pathways that they might never have encountered through school networks or family connections alone. For young people in areas of labour market disadvantage, or attending schools with limited employer engagement, these tools represent a meaningful expansion of horizon.

Conversational curated AI, in particular, holds promise as a complement to teacher and careers adviser expertise. Available at any hour and responsive to individual pace and preference, AI careers tools can help young people rehearse interview scenarios, explore the demands and rewards of unfamiliar occupational sectors, and begin career explorations that underpin informed decision-making. Used well, they can extend the reach of qualified careers professionals – not substitute for them – creating a more continuous thread of support between formal guidance appointments and the moments of everyday curiosity and uncertainty in which career thinking actually happens.

Emerging applications also include AI-facilitated virtual work experience, where young people can engage with simulated professional environments, take on role-based tasks, and receive structured feedback – offering a form of workplace exposure that is not contingent on geography, parental connections, or the willingness of local employers to participate in school partnerships. While no digital simulation fully replicates the relational and affective dimensions of a real workplace, these tools can meaningfully lower the threshold of familiarity, reducing the anxiety and informational deficit that often accompany a young person's first steps into employment.



Teachers occupy a distinctive and underutilised position in this landscape. As the adults with the most sustained and structured contact with young people across their secondary school years, teachers are uniquely placed to help contextualise work experience – before, during, and after placements. AI tools can support this role meaningfully: helping teachers draw on real-time labour market intelligence when framing curriculum links to the workplace, equipping them with structured conversation prompts for pre-placement preparation, and enabling them to guide post-placement reflection in ways that connect experience to longer-term career thinking. Subject teachers, in particular, are often underestimated as carriers of occupational knowledge; AI-assisted chatbots and resources can help them make those connections explicit and relevant to their students. What is required is not that teachers become careers specialists, but that they are supported – through professional development and accessible AI-powered tools – to play their part in a coherent, school-wide approach to work-related learning.

The greatest opportunity lies in combination. AI can widen access, deepen engagement, and ensure that no young person is left without support simply because of where they live or which school they attend. And when it works alongside a trusted adult – a qualified careers professional who can help young people navigate complexity, challenge unhelpful assumptions, and develop the self-awareness that underpins sound decision-making – the potential is genuinely transformative. The evidence base on career guidance is clear: the human relationship at the heart of effective support is not a luxury; it is what turns information into insight, and insight into action. The exciting task for educational leaders and policymakers alike is to build the conditions in which technology and human expertise work in tandem – investing in both, and recognising that together they can offer every young person something that neither could achieve.

Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE

The School and Young Adult surveys gathered new perspectives on virtual work experience. While the surveys did not dig into variations in the specific design of online placements, they find in general a clear preference for traditional placements among both groups. The Survey of Young Adults finds that 77% of respondents between the ages of 14 and 16 completed a placement in a real place of work, 14% online only and 9% both forms. Asked to compare their experiences, 69% of the 54 respondents who had completed both face-to-face and virtual work experience felt that the former "was better", 20% said that they were both the same, and 11% that the online provision "was better."

Among school staff with experience of virtual work experience (70% of the total sample), a minority (40%) agreed that "virtual work experience is a good alternative to face-to-face work experience for all students (14-16) in general." Within this group, only one in four (10% of all with experience of virtual WX) 'strongly agreed' that virtual placements were good alternatives to traditional work experience. Overall, 54% disagreed that virtual work experience was a good alternative for all students, including 21% who disagreed strongly. However, majorities did agree that virtual provision could be a good alternative for certain groups in certain circumstances:

- for students who will struggle to complete a traditional placement due to anxiety/emotional, behavioural or other difficulties (86% agreeing, including 30% agreeing strongly)
- for students who are uncertain about their career aspirations and who wish to explore a number of different careers (79% agreeing, including 21% strongly agreeing)
- for students who struggle to find a desirable traditional placement locally (75% agreeing, including 20% agreeing strongly)
- if it includes lots of live interaction (72% agreeing, including 17% strongly agreeing)
- if it relates to workplaces that operate mainly online (72% agreeing, including 12% strongly agreeing);
- if the placement is done in school under supervision (54% agreeing, including 13% strongly agreeing).

Around one-quarter of school respondents (26%) with experience of virtual work experience felt that it was suitable for students aged 16+ but not for younger students (26% agreeing, including 7% strongly agreeing). Within the sample, respondents from schools in the countryside or isolated areas expressed slightly strongly confidence in virtual work experience as a good alternative to traditional work experience.

The Schools Survey gave respondents the opportunity to provide written comments. Respondents primarily chose to highlight concerns with virtual work experience placements:

> All placements should be meaningful and just like the world of work each day. Virtual WEX is no substitute for the real world of work!

> We are always telling students to get off their devices and get out into the real world and yet increasingly the only work experiences being offered to them are virtual. It just doesn't make sense.

To my mind, online WEX should never be a substitute for in person. This post-pandemic, digital-human generation needs more experience with face-to-face interactions, not fewer. Also, I can justify pulling students out of lessons to visit construction sites etc. but not to sit online.

In my school, we have been told as an organisation we cannot use VWEX at all even for IT course pathways.

Our school is a specialist provision for you people with physical disabilities some of those being particularly complex / PMLD. Finding WEX placements is extremely difficult for this cohort. Virtual/online engagement is not engaging for our students.

Our pupils do not like virtual experiences (Pupil Referral Unit)

Some of the employers interviewed also had experience of providing both face-to-face and virtual work experience and similar perspectives were apparent.

Compared to the traditional work experience, the virtual work experience won't give them the comparable experience, but it would allow us to scale the work experience and give people the awareness of the jobs that we have in the company. It doesn't replace it. We're very aware that these are two very different sets of experiences. And we intend to run both, but the only way to way to scale is through the virtual work experience. So we hope to replicate some elements of the real work experience, for people to benefit in their awareness of the company's culture, the jobs we have, career options, and maybe get some idea of the projects that they could be working on and some of the skills that we can build from there – Interview with large employer (IT)

We are considering the virtual experiences. We do some virtual sessions which allow us to target more locations and locations where we don't necessarily have an office, but the question is do you actually get the experience of work when you do everything virtually? I don't know if it would necessarily give the right impression because you're trying to show what a work environment is and a work environment is not virtual. There might be some other jobs that are purely virtual. You know, if you're talking to one of our developers where they're sitting in a hotel room in Dubai. They can still do their job and do it very well. So maybe from that point of view – Interview with large employer (Finance)

As discussed in the Efficiency section, it is increasingly common for larger employers to offer virtual work experience. Whereas provision can be expected to support career exploration, concerns are clear over the extent to which it provides authentic, interactive insights into working life, opportunities to build social networks, and grow the confidence

that comes from needing to be personally effective in undertaking tasks within a professional environment. Schools will welcome both further independent evaluation and government guidance.

What is the best age for work experience?

Since the Wolf Report (2011), there has been a debate over which age it is better for students to undertake work experience.[163] Prior to 2010, between 80% and 90% of students reported having completed placements overwhelmingly between the ages of 14 and 16. The Wolf Report led to the English requirement for work-related learning at key stage 4 (underpinning work experience provision) being repealed and for work experience to be systematically introduced at 16+. The Survey of Young Adults finds only partial agreement with Alison Wolf, the report author: 43% of respondents agree that work experience should only be offered at 16+, 46% at both 16+ and pre-16, and 10% only at 14-16. Only 1% of young adults say that if it was up to them, they wouldn't have students do work experience at all.

A survey by Teacher Tapp conducted specifically for this report of nearly 6,000 UK teachers and school leaders undertaken in March 2026 supports the idea that work experience placements are ideally completed both before and after the age of 16.

TABLE 4.9. TEACHER PERSPECTIVES ON THE BEST AGE FOR WORK EXPERIENCE PLACEMENTS.

If you could choose, which year groups *should* have work experience placements?	
	N=5,864
Y7	2%
Y8	3%
Y9	15%
Y10	76%
Y11	19%
Y12	55%
Y13	13%
None of them	3%
Not relevant / cannot answer	5%

SOURCE: Teacher Tapp survey undertaken on behalf of Education and Employers .

163 DfE. 2011. Review of Vocational Education: The Wolf Report. Department for Education, London.

Social capital and variations in work experience

Eight out of ten school staff agreed that "some students benefit more than others from their work experience." Asked why, overwhelmingly they agree (78%) that the primary reason for this is the social networks of students and their families. The significance of this social capital is underpinned by the fact that most students find their own work placements. The Survey of Young Adults finds that 71% found their own placement or it was found for them by their parents, relatives or family friends. The Schools Survey finds a comparable results with 81% of respondents stating that in their school all or most students were required to find their own placements.

Students requiring additional personalised support

94% of Schools Survey respondents agreed that some 14-16 students require additional personalised support for work experience (e.g. help in finding a placement, student and employer preparation for the placement, travel to and from the placement, support while on placement). Asked to estimate the percentage of students requiring additional support, on average across the whole sample (N=309) respondents estimated 48% of students required additional support. Respondents working at Special Schools (N=41) estimated that in excess of 80% of students (often 100%) required additional support. If these are set aside from the sample, the average percentage of students estimated to require additional support falls to 42%.

Asked about the "typical characteristics of students who require additional personalised support to benefit from an appropriate placement", school staff reported that while students with SEND and from low-income families required additional support, so too did other categories of students, including those with anxiety, those finding it difficult to find a placement, or wishing to explore a career where their gender is underrepresented. Such findings prompt deeper exploration of the role of career guidance in supporting the mental health of students, contributing to lower later NEET outcomes.[164]

As discussed further in the section on Equity below, labour market information shows patterns of discrimination within the world of work, and employers surveyed for this study are frank about their reluctance to accept students with certain characteristics. When asked if they would value additional support at a local, regional or national level, the Schools Survey shows that the number one priority of career staff was to have access to a database of employers willing to offer work experience for students requiring additional support. On a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being 'extremely useful'), 87% of 350 respondents gave this option a mark of 5. Consequently, most respondents responsible for careers provision in secondary schools do not feel that effective provision is available to all students without additional external support.

164 Redekopp, D. & M. Huston. 2020. Strengthening Mental Health Through Effective Career Development: A Practitioner's Guide. CERIC, Toronto; Robertson, P. 2019. The casualties of transition: the health impact of NEET status and some approaches to managing it. British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 47:3, 390–402.

Critical contextualisation within wider professional career guidance

In effective provision, students are well prepared to benefit from their employer engagement. The Survey of Young Adults shows that a significant minority did not indicate good preparation for pre-16 work experience:

- 30% felt that they did not have a clear idea about the type of placement they wanted to do
- 27% did not find their preferred placement, and
- only 57% recalled speaking to a member of school staff, such as a guidance counsellor, before confirming their placement.

The findings are broadly in keeping with results from the Schools Survey which found that in 10% of schools, no students speak with a member of staff to review their choice prior to confirming it and in a further 30% of schools only some students do so. One-third of young adults (36%) either were sure that they did not, or could not recall, whether they had spoken to school staff after 14-16 work experience to reflect on it.

The Schools Survey also revealed a lack of confidence that careers provision at 11-14 provides a strong foundation for students for later career exploration. Only one in five strongly agreed that provision prepared students well for work experience choices and one in three that provision was adequate to meet student needs. As discussed below, variation in perceptions by type of school raises concerns for the equity of provision.

TABLE 4.10: Percentage strongly agreeing that career guidance provision for students aged 11-14 was effective. Schools Survey.

% strongly agreeing that the career guidance provision undertaken by students aged 11-14 at my school...	All (319)
...encourages them to explore a wide variety of possible careers.	50
...encourages them to consider careers which people of their social background do not usually do.	44
...encourages them to consider careers which people of their gender do not usually do.	42
...helps them to make informed options choices at 14.	37
...is well established and sufficiently adequate to meet student career development needs.	34
...supports them to prepare for, and reflect on, experiences with employers in light of their changing self-knowledge, interests and aspirations.	26
...prepares them well to identify desirable work experience between the ages of 14 and 16.	21

As noted by Deirdre Hughes below, if work experience is to be fully effective, it must be integrated with professionally delivered career guidance (see Box 1 and Annex 2). As she argues, a placement without the reflective, expert support of a qualified careers adviser before and after the encounter is simply an experience rather than a developmental intervention. The Schools Survey suggests strongly that enhanced provision is required to support the career guidance of students through lower secondary education to ensure that provision is fully strategic, iterative and personalised with benefits optimised through preparation and reflection.

Work Experience as a Developmental Entitlement: Three Conditions for Effective Implementation

Three structural conditions are necessary – and currently absent – if the Work Experience requirement is to fulfil its potential.

The government's commitment to guaranteeing two weeks of work experience for every young person is a welcome statement of intent, but intent alone will not deliver the transformational outcomes that are needed. Three structural conditions must be met if the Guarantee is to fulfil its potential – and all three are currently absent.

First, the requirement (new Guarantee) must be placed on a statutory footing, with funding, clear accountability arrangements, and an inspection regime that gives it teeth. The cautionary precedent here is the post-2011 careers guidance duty, which placed a legal obligation on schools without the enforcement mechanisms or resources to make it meaningful – resulting in a well-documented deterioration in provision that took years to reverse. A defined legislative timeline, with the statutory duty formally commenced once funding is confirmed and pilot evidence published, would provide schools with the certainty they need to plan, and government with a credible accountability framework.

Second, the Guarantee must be adequately and equitably resourced through a national funding mechanism that reaches schools serving the most disadvantaged communities. The evidence is clear: young people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have significantly narrower employer networks than their more advantaged peers. The young people for whom exposure to and experiences of the world of work matters most are precisely those whose schools are currently least equipped to deliver it without targeted financial support. A per-pupil premium for disadvantaged schools, combined with strengthened brokerage capacity centrally and through Careers Hubs, would begin to close that gap.

Third, work experience must be integrated with – not run parallel to – professionally delivered career guidance. A placement without the reflective, expert support of a qualified careers adviser before and after the encounter is an experience rather than a developmental intervention. The distinction matters: coordinating logistics is the role of a Careers Leader; helping a young person to make meaning of what they have encountered, connect it to their aspirations, and translate it into informed next steps requires the skills of an independently qualified guidance professional. The DfE's own statutory guidance already recognises this distinction through Benchmark 8, which explicitly requires personal guidance from someone holding a careers guidance qualification. Extending that expectation to work experience – as a before-and-after entitlement, not an optional add-on – would transform the inferred direction of travel towards a work experience Guarantee from a scheduling commitment into a genuinely career-developmental one.

These three conditions are interdependent rather than parallel: without a statutory footing, equitable resourcing cannot be guaranteed; without equitable resourcing, impartial career guidance support will not reach those who need it most. Addressed together, they offer a route from ambition to impact.

Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE

Conclusions: predictable challenges (and responses) to the effective delivery of employer engagement in secondary education

Compelling evidence now exists showing that the engagement of students in their mid-teens in career development activities, notably including forms of employer engagement, can be expected to improve their outcomes on average in early employment. This begs the question of why such outcomes can be expected. What is the added value that engagement with employers offers?

In terms of career exploration, the evidence is clear that in the UK young people's understanding of the world of work is extremely limited, career uncertainty very high and confusion about what achievement is required in education to secure career goals commonplace (especially among the most disadvantaged). For students going through secondary education, encounters with people in work and workplaces provides opportunity to broaden, deepen and challenge understanding of the world of work in ways that are difficult to ignore. The greater the engagement of students with employers and people in work, the better the outcomes that can be expected.

Looked at from the perspective of their ultimate potential recruiters (in places of employment and higher education), teenage employer engagement fills a gap that schools alone struggle to offer. Recruiters value not only the knowledge and intellectual abilities of young people (as codified by qualifications), but also (and often more importantly for employers) evidence that indicates that they would be a safe choice: that they have some relevant experience, that they can be recommended by someone whose verdict that can be respected (because they have some understanding of the realities of working life in a relevant environment), and that they have a reasonable understanding of the profession and what it values. As students approach the labour market, the need to demonstrate such human, social and cultural capital becomes increasingly urgent. Through education, employer engagement can support long processes of career exploration, self-understanding and informed agency in light of trustworthy insights into the true character of the working world.

Reviews of studies which explore the process of employer engagement in teenage career development highlight links between better outcomes and provision being authentic, frequent and varied, often mandatory, valued by students, contextualised by guidance professionals and delivered through primary and secondary education. Reviewing UK survey evidence collected for this study and wider research notably with regard to work experience placements, it is apparent that while much provision shows important indications of effectiveness, this is not always the case:

- Many students are not well prepared through Key Stage 3 to make informed choices about their preferences for work experience (which in many cases will be the most substantial experience of the working world that they will have while in secondary education)
- Many students do not discuss their work experience choices with school staff before they are confirmed and after placements are completed, limiting opportunities for the full value to placements linked to personal career development objectives to be achieved
- On placement, many students receive very limited feedback and limited exposure to the wider operation of an enterprise, limiting opportunities for learning

- Many students, not just those with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) and in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM), require additional support if they are to secure a good quality experience
- Virtual work experience does have a role to play, but both school staff and young adults agree it is not a reasonable substitute for face-to-face experiences
- Opportunities to explore the breadth of the labour market are limited – not all professional sectors engage with schools to the same degree, leading to a partial view of the world of work
- Opportunities to prepare young people for the precariousness of the modern labour market and understanding of their rights in work are limited

Students can be expected to benefit from authentic insights into the world of work which provide them with new and useful insights into their career development (how they visualise, plan and prepare for ultimate transitions into employment in light of confident self-understanding). Consequently, the effectiveness of provision can be tested. Did students feel that they gained authentic insight into the world of work? Did they learn something new and useful? Can provision be seen to enhance or enable human, social or cultural capital accumulation? Has provision influenced their career thinking (career certainty)? Has provision influenced their thinking about how education and training engagement can be expected to enable career aspirations (career alignment and instrumental motivation)? In this regard, OECD identification of predictors of better employment outcomes related to different forms of teenage career development are valuable tools for professionals working with students.[165] Feedback from students and young adults, as well as from career professionals, moreover provides essential information for assessing the quality of provision.

While multiple surveys indicate strong stakeholder belief that participation in work experience placements specifically enables better outcomes for young people, reliable longitudinal studies which can firmly evidence this are rare. However, it is very clear that teenage part-time working and community volunteering are firmly related to better long-term employment outcomes. Consequently, policy and practice should actively encourage and enable students to get such real-world experience, bearing in mind the desirability of limiting student hours in part-time employment, and to help students to use these experiences to support their career development. A clear lesson from the data is that authentic teenage experiences of work make a positive difference to young people. School-mediated work experience placements should recognise the importance of students undertaking tasks under supervision within places of employment in confirming desirable provision.

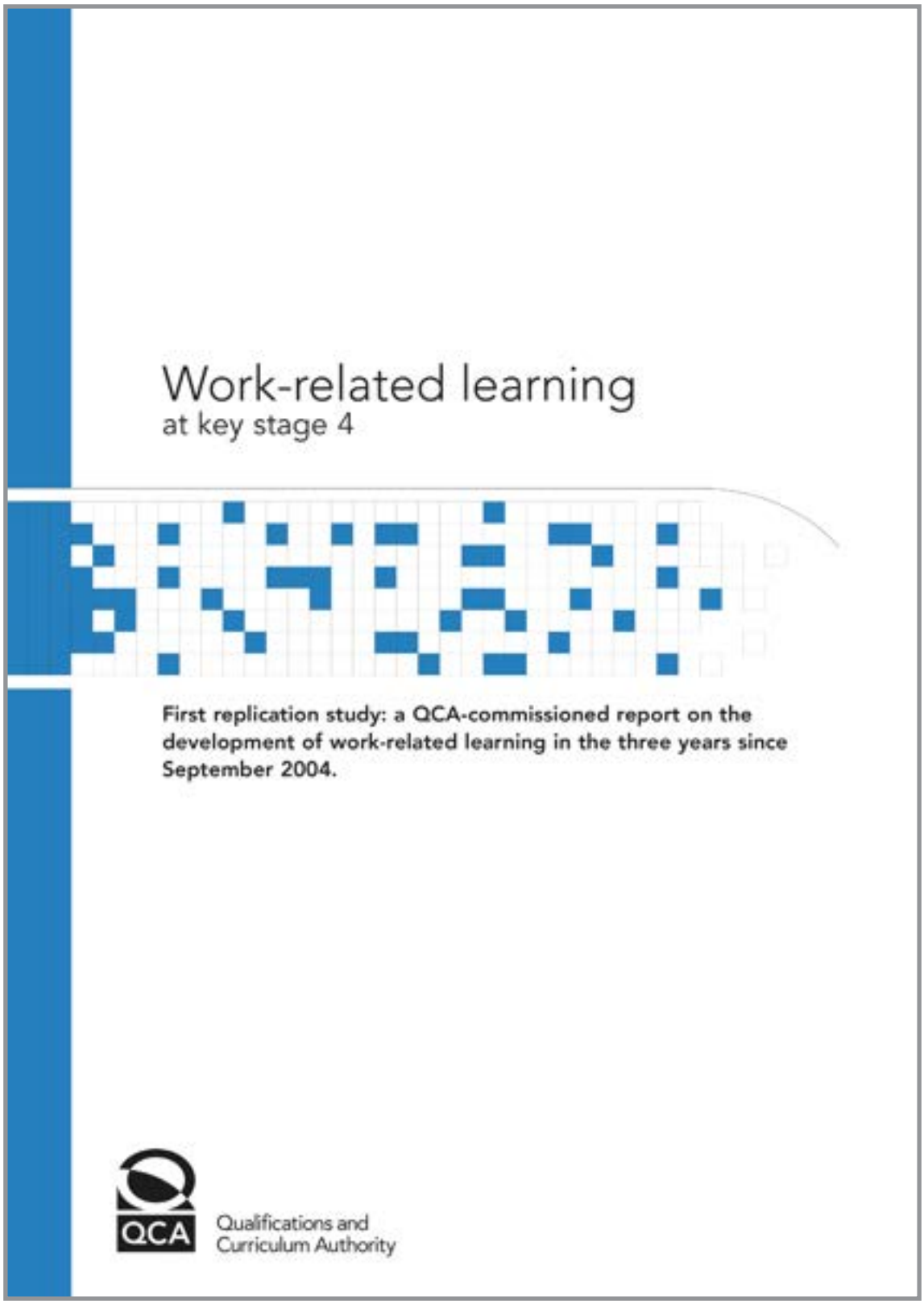
Public policy must also act to ensure that the labour market is comprehensively engaged with schools to support the range of different activities. Sectoral engagement varies considerably, constraining student opportunities to explore the breadth of the labour market. It is highly desirable to collect data on patterns of engagement by sector leading to interventions to enhance engagement where it is insufficient.

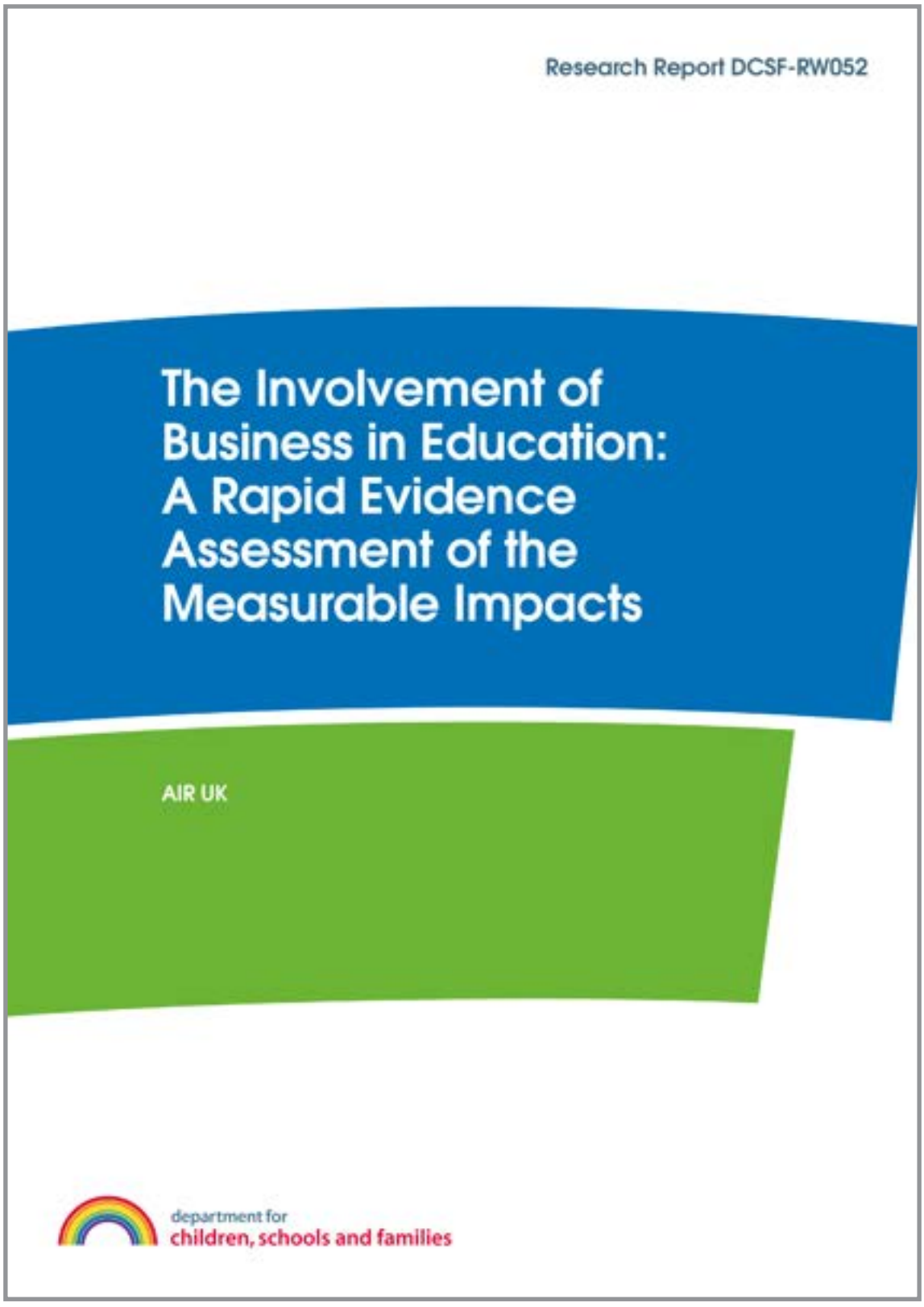
165 https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/indicators-of-teenage-career-readiness_6a80e0cc-en.html

There is no definitive answer to how much is enough for young people in terms of employer engagement. Available research suggests a minimum of four meaningful activities by the age of 16 should be seen as an absolute baseline for all students, with more engagement, notably in terms of career exploration activities (such as Career Talks), extremely desirable. Appropriate provision will vary by student and link to characteristics which can be expected to enable or hinder career development and ultimate progression into employment. Multiple empirical studies provide valuable insight into the indicators which provide confidence surrounding student career development, including attitudes based on genuine exploration and understanding linked to the ways that students think about their futures. These include greater career certainty/clarity (even if plans change), greater alignment of educational and career plans, the confidence that investment in education will support career progression (instrumental motivation) and high personal ambition. Harnessing these insights in combination with demonstrable understanding of relevant skills development (e.g., recruitment skills) and relevant workplace experience provides the basis for assessments of student career readiness that combine understanding of desirable outcomes as well as outputs.

Policy and practice should anticipate and respond to the fact that discrete groups of students, many with shared characteristics, will require additional support to ensure that their provision responds to predictable additional barriers in career development and transitions into employment. Opportunity exists moreover within policy approaches aimed at reducing NEET numbers to deeply explore the links between employer engagement activities and the well-being of students, the relation between good mental health and clarity and confidence in future plans and third-party validation.

Effective career development takes place over the educational lifecycle of children and young people. Effective employer engagement will build on experiences that nurture a culture of critical curiosity about the world of work and build skills to actively explore it and reflect on new information. This findings of this study suggest that will require greater professional career guidance as well as employer engagement through the whole of lower secondary education in England.


Work-related learning
at key stage 4
First replication study: a QCA-commissioned report on the development of work-related learning in the three years since September 2004.
QCA
Qualifications and Curriculum Authority


Research Report DCSF-RW052
The Involvement of Business in Education: A Rapid Evidence Assessment of the Measurable Impacts
AIR UK
department for children, schools and families

Chapter 5

Equitable employer engagement in the career development of young people

Within an equitable approach to career development, it would be expected not that every student receives the same provision from their schools, but that students can achieve comparable outcomes according to their needs. This assumes that in good practice, consideration will be given to understanding whether some students need more or different support to ensure that they are reasonably well-prepared for their future careers through the different stages of education. An equitable approach is at the heart of the Universal Design approach to education. In the field of career development, it is important to consider three primary factors.

Firstly, studies which look at the employment outcomes of young adults show that distinct groups often experience significantly different outcomes even after controlling for their academic achievement.

Secondly, it is clear that students from groups with shared characteristics are commonly (but not always) at a disadvantage in securing forms of employer engagement to support career development, notably access to effective work experience placements.

Finally, some schools are at a structural disadvantage when seeking to engage their students with employers and people in work.

Structural disadvantage

It is harder for some students than others to succeed in the labour market.[166] Using the UK Government's Longitudinal Educational Outcomes dataset which allows researchers to look at experiences from childhood through to adulthood by linking different information about individuals, a recent report by Impetus finds that factors including socio-economic background, qualifications, special educational needs and disabilities (SEND), ethnicity, gender, and geography each contribute to young people's employment outcomes.[167] While higher levels of qualification reduce the risk of poor outcomes, by no means do they do so completely. Where young people have multiple characteristics of disadvantage, the employment challenge is all the greater.[168] Multiple studies find that the socio-economic background, gender and ethnicity/migrant status of comparably achieving young people shape their employment backgrounds.[169] A recent UK study for example finds that "working class applicants are 32% less likely to get an offer to a

166 OECD. 2024. Challenging Social Inequality Through Career Guidance: Insights from International Data and Practice. OECD Publishing, Paris.

167 US longitudinal studies find that school-age work experience is of long-term benefit in employment to students with severe disabilities. See Carter, E. et al. 2011. Factors Associated With the Early Work Experiences of Adolescents With Severe Disabilities. Intellectual and Developmental Disabilities, 49:4, 233–247; Luecking, R. & E. Fabian. 2000. Paid Internships and Employment Success for Youth in Transition. Career Development for Exceptional Individuals, 23:2, 205-221.

168 Baloch, A. 2025. Youth Jobs Gap: Exploring compound disadvantage. Impetus.

169 Friedman, S. & D. Laurison. 2020. The Class Ceiling: Why it Pays to be Privileged. Social Forces, 99:1; Friedman, S. and D. Laurison. 2020. The Class Ceiling: why it pays to be privileged. Policy Press, University of Bristol; Sutton Trust/Social Mobility Commission. 2019. Elitist Britain; Robson, J. et al. 2025. Comparing inequality and outcomes across post-16 education in the UK, Nuffield Foundation; Outhwaite L. & L. Macmillan, 2025. What are the evidence-based ways to equalise opportunities? UCL Centre for Education Policy and Equalising Opportunities, revised May 2025 finds that "50% of the variation in earnings can be explained by the circumstances in which individuals grew up. This is higher than in most other developed countries."

graduate training programme than an applicant from a professional background, and even when comparing applicants who look similar on paper, working class applicants are still 18% less likely to receive and offer."[170]

Many 'correspondence studies' have further found that when researchers create fictitious job applications for real positions, 'applicants' from migrant backgrounds or ethnic minorities are less likely to be called for interview.[171] This is also the case for LGBTQ+ adults.[172]

Further barriers are apparent for lower academic achievers, people with learning and physical disabilities and in relation to geographic location. With regard to gender, despite young women consistently leaving education more highly qualified than young men, labour segmentation contributes strongly towards poorer overall outcomes in the world of work.[173]

Implications for career guidance

There is consequently strong evidence that discrimination exists within the UK job market, making it more difficult for some people rather than others to succeed in the competition for work. For school career guidance, effective practice will recognise and address additional barriers drawing notably on insights from studies of critical consciousness, but schools are constrained in terms of what they can do about discrimination. However, other factors also contribute towards inequitable labour market outcomes. These include variation in the career aspirations of young people in ways that are strongly linked to their personal characteristics (notably in the UK context by ethnicity, gender and social class[174]) and evidence which indicates variation in patterns of engagement in career development, often suggesting that those in greatest need of support are not getting it. This is especially important because it is clear that success in competition for work is not just due to exam success, important as that is, but also to wider resources (summarised as human, social and cultural capital in chapter two). As Oliver Groves and colleagues explain:

> Successful navigation of post-school pathways requires specific capitals which students from low SES [Social and Economic Status] backgrounds might not have access to. Social capital might include personal contacts and networks of people who know about preferred pathways and careers. Economic capital might include access to reliable transport and time off work to attend external information days. Cultural capital might include knowledge about careers; skill in accessing and interpreting career information; job searching and application ability; and personal experiences of different jobs, institutions, and geographic locations. Quality career education has the potential to enable access to cultural, economic and social capital required for educational and career success. For example, career education which includes work experience, industry visits, open days, career expos,

170 Macmillan, L. & L. Outhwaite. 2025. Briefing Note: What are the evidence-based ways to equalise opportunities? UCL Centre for Education Policy & Equalising Opportunities

171 OECD. 2024. Challenging Social Inequality Through Career Guidance: Insights from International Data and Practice. OECD Publishing, Paris.

172 Drydakis, N. 2015. Sexual orientation discrimination in the United Kingdom's labour market: A field experiment. Human Relations, 68:11, 1769-1796.

173 OECD. 2024. Challenging Social Inequality Through Career Guidance: Insights from International Data and Practice, OECD Publishing, Paris.

174 Moote, J. & L. Archer. 2017. Failing to deliver? Exploring the current status of career education provision in England. Research Papers in Education; Musset, P. & L. Kureková. 2018. Working it out: career guidance and employer engagement. OECD Publishing, Paris.

networking, and mentoring builds the cultural and social capital of students and enables students from low SES backgrounds to access such opportunities. It can contribute to increased education and employment outcomes for students from low SES backgrounds. However, when limitations in career education are combined with aspects of students' backgrounds, disadvantage is promoted, rather than alleviated.[175]

Consequently, schools have important roles to play through career guidance in providing equitable preparation for ultimate transitions into working life and effective provision will recognise that some students need greater support than others.

Most students in England now expect to work one day as a professional or senior manager, but those who are the children of people doing such jobs are at an inherent advantage. The OECD PISA 2022 survey shows for example that whereas 38% of the most socially disadvantaged students in England who expect to do such a job do not plan on completing a university education, this applies to only 15% of the most socially advantaged. As a recent survey of 1,053 young people aged 15-21 found, indicators of disadvantage are strongly related to poorer understanding of the education system and how it relates to employment.[176] Guidance before the age of 16 is especially important for those who plan on entering work early and young people who are especially vulnerable due to very low levels of academic achievements, and learning and physical disabilities and challenges, including neurodiversity. For students, employer engagement is an opportunity to explore the labour market and build the resources which they will need to draw on in the competition for work.

Patterns of labour market segmentation are reflected in the career ambitions of young people. Personal experience, media representations and social norms can dissuade students from considering atypical education and employment pathways and exploring whether they will be personally confident of succeeding in working environments which may feel unfamiliar or hostile. A wealth of evidence exists showing that young people's aspirations and educational and occupational choices tend to be patterned by social class, gender and ethnicity. Gender notably shapes career goals from a very young age.[177]

Work experience placements

The research literature highlights two primary concerns with relation to equitable student access to work experience. In an influential study by Tricia Le Gallais, the experiences of 1,000 Year 11 students in five schools enrolling students from different social backgrounds were reviewed. Le Gallais concluded that:

Work placement distribution is determined primarily by student choices. It is also shaped to a greater or lesser extent by schools, depending on whether they adopt more or less directive policies. (There is also in some cases an element of employer

175 Groves, O. et al. 2023. 'One student might get one opportunity and then the next student won't get anything like that': Inequities in Australian career education and recommendations for a fairer future. The Australian Educational Researcher, 50:519–536

176 Payne, D. & J. Gollings. 2024. Things worth knowing: The role of assumed knowledge in youth transitions from education to employment. Social Market Foundation and Speakers for Schools

177 OECD. 2015. The ABC of Gender Equality in Education: Aptitude, Behaviour, Confidence, PISA, OECD Publishing, Paris; OECD. 2021. The Future at Five: Gendered Aspirations of Five-Year-Olds, OECD Publishing, Paris.

selection, though this is a minor factor.) Our findings cumulatively demonstrate that these processes of individual choice and school policy combine in ways that reflect and reproduce clear patterns of social class differentiation. If work experience is about learning about labour, it is about how working-class kids get working class placements and middle-class kids get managerial and professional ones.[178]

Le Gallais also found that the quality of work experience varied with the social background of the students with working-class considerably more likely to undertake mundane and repetitive tasks.

To Le Gallais and other researchers[179], it is the tradition in UK students that students (and the families) being asked to find their own work placements that drives this inequity in experience. It is social capital that is the primary determinant of who gets what by way of placement. However, Le Gallais finds that where students are counselled by school staff prior to confirmation of the placement, it is likely that working-class students gain access to higher quality placements. For a contemporary description of such an approach, see the case study from Future Academies This stems from the fact that as well as depending on student social connections, their participation in work placements also stems from school support and the extent of their informed understanding of how different sorts of placements might benefit them in different ways and their confidence to actively seek out such work experience.[180] Le Gallais' finding align with UK surveys of young adults which show that former pupils of grammar and private schools are consistently more likely to agree that their work experience was helpful to them in deciding on a career, getting a job or getting into higher education.[181]

A second concern apparent in the research literature relates to a lost opportunity to challenge highly gendered transitions. Increasingly, it is also understood that career guidance systems can do much more in helping young people to consider occupations in which their gender is under-represented. One of the most important studies in this field remains Francis et al. (2005). Reviewing 91,288 work experience placements, they found that in 12 of 24 occupational areas 80% or more (sometimes 100%) of participating students were from just one gender. A survey of 566 Year 11 students within the same study however found that 14% of boys and 36% of girls would have liked to have had opportunity to have tried a 'non-traditional' placement and many others were undecided whether they would want to have a go.[182] A later UK study asked 1,733 young adults aged 19-24 if they would have "welcomed more help from their schools in understanding how common it is to do a job which people of your gender do not normally do." In all, 21% agreed (25% of girls and 16% of boys).[183]

178 Hatcher, R. & T. Le Gallais. 2008. The work experience placements of secondary school students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality? Birmingham City University.

179 Norman, J. et al. 2025. Towards universal opportunity for young people. IPPR; Eddy Adams Consultants Ltd with Smart Consultancy (Scotland) Ltd and Training and Employment Research Unit, University of Glasgow, 2008, Work experience in Scotland, Scottish Government. Jones, S. et al. 2014. 'My brother's football teammate's dad was a pathologist': serendipity and employer engagement in medical careers, in Mann, A. et al. eds., Essays on employer engagement in education. Routledge, London; Waller, R. et al. 2014. Undergraduates' memories of school-based work experience and the role of social class in placement choices in the UK. Journal of Education and Work, 27:3, 323–349.

180 Hatcher, R. and T. Le Gallais, Tricia. 2008. The work experience placements of secondary school students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality? Birmingham City University.

181 Mann, A. and E. Kashefpakdel. 2014. The views of young Britons (aged 19-24) on their teenage experiences of school-mediated employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds. Understanding employer engagement in education, Routledge, London.

182 Francis, B. et al. 2005. Gender equality in work experience placements for young people. Equal Opportunities Commission, London.

183 Mann, A. et al. 2017. Contemporary Transitions: Young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college. Education and Employers, London.

Variation in experience

In its reporting of data returns from one quarter of English secondary schools in 2025, the Key Group finds patterns in Year 10 student participation in work experience. Whereas 50% of Year 10 students in receipt of FSM were reported as having completed a placement, 61% of students without FSM had done so. From a different perspective, it was also found that 49% of students living in areas of greatest deprivation (IDACI 5) had completed work experience, compared to 60% living in areas with the lowest levels of deprivation (IDACI 1).

The Key Group also reports that work experience placements were completed by:

- 51% of students with SEND, compared to 59% without SEND
- 54% of students with English as an Additional Language (EAL), compared to 59% without EAL
- 64% of students living in rural areas, compared to 57% in urban areas.[184]

However, other studies suggest more complex ways in which equity is apparent in placement participation. The February 2025 DfE (England), pupil and learner voice survey found that work experience had been completed by or was anticipated by:

- 60% of boys and 67% of girls
- 58% of SEND students and 65% of students without SEND
- 68% of students with FSM and 62% of students without FSM
- 63% of students whose parents attended higher education and 61% of students whose parents did not
- 59% of White students and 73% of Ethnic Minority students
- 63% of urban students and 66% of rural students
- 62% of Children in Need and 64% of other students.[185]

OECD PISA 2022 data provides further insight into patterns of variation in participation (Table 5.1). Notably, socially disadvantaged students are less likely to participate in employer engagement activities than their socially advantaged peers (a pattern that is found across all the forms of career development recorded), a result that cannot be easily explained by academic performance.[186]

TABLE 5.1: Percentage of students, by personal and school characteristics, who had participated in three forms of employer engagement career development activities. OECD PISA 2022, England data.

% having completed:	Girls	Boys	Social Disadvantaged	Social Advantaged	Low performers	High performers	Native born	Foreign born	City >100k (UK)	Rural <3k (UK)	State school	Private School
Work placement	36	39	37	40	45	34	37	41	32	37	35	38
Job shadowing or worksite visit	25	33	25	35	36	26	28	33	31	26	37	27
Job fair	61	58	52	65	57	60	60	59	53	45	66	56

SOURCE: OECD PISA 2022 database.

184 Key Group. 2025. How many pupils are getting work experience?
185 For data table see: **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/parent-pupil-and-learner-voice-omnibus-surveys-for-2024-to-2025.**
186 Mann, A. et al. 2024. Teenage career development in England: A Review of PISA 2022 Data. OECD Publishing, Paris

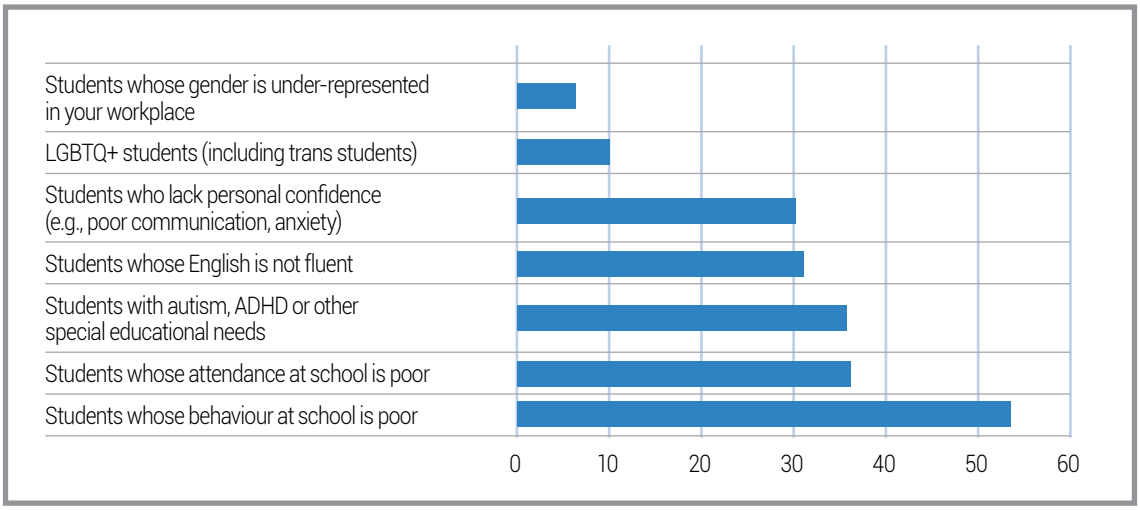
New evidence on equity

The three surveys which were conducted within this project provide timely and significant new evidence on the ways in which student and school characteristics shape engagement in work experience.

Do employers discriminate in who they are willing to accept for work experience?

Historic studies suggest that employers have discriminated against some students in their willingness to take them on work placements.[187] In the new Employer Survey of 220 owners, managers or HR professionals from workplaces employing fewer than 50 people (organisations which collectively provide the great majority of work placements in the UK), new evidence is found (Table 5.2). Respondents were asked whether "there any types of students you think that your workplace would be reluctant to host on a work experience placement?" The results find that many workplaces have clear preferences about whom they are willing or unwilling to take. While employers might argue that there is a business case for these preferences, at times this is very difficult to see (one in ten would be reluctant to host a LGBTQ+ student) and the result is that for many students it is more difficult for them to find placements.

TABLE 5.2: What types of students are employers reluctant to take on work experience placements? Employer Survey.



Do participation rates in work experience vary by school and student characteristics?

Table 5.3 sets out the results from the school survey with regard to student participation in work experience at 14-16. On average across schools which include students aged 14-16, 52% expect all or most of students to complete a placement and a further 15% some students. Breaking down the results by school type identifies characteristics that are linked with higher and lower levels of recent student participation in pre-16 work experience. Rural schools, special schools and schools with high levels of FSM and SEND are less likely for all or most of their students to complete work placements.

187 Francis, B. et al. 2005. Gender equality in work experience placements for young people. Equal Opportunities Commission, London.

TABLE 5.3: Percentage of respondents reporting that their school expects most or all of students to complete a pre-16 work experience placement. Schools Survey.

% agreeing	Urban (269)	Rural (61)	Low FSM (105)	High FSM (104)	Low SEND (139)	High SEND (118)	Special school (41)	Comprehensive (229)
Pre-16 WX (any) – some, most or all students	54	43	57	43	53	40	12	58

NOTE: Urban combines responses identifying school location as city or large town, rural refers to rural or isolated locations. Schools with reported levels of Free School Meals of less than 15% are designated Low FSM and those with more than 35% High FSM. Schools with reported levels of students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities of less than 15% are designated Low SEND and those with more than 26% High SEND.

The Schools Survey did not ask about current practice in expectation that students will engage with employers in other activities aside from work experience but did collect data on how easy or difficult different respondents felt that it was (or would be) to deliver such activities. In recent DfE announcements, such provision would be described as 'Work Experience Activities' primarily aimed at students aged 11-14 (Key Stage 3). Overall, respondents (N=319) agreed that activities taking place in workplaces were either difficult or very difficult:

- 94% in the case of job shadowing;
- 82% workplace visits

and that in-school activities were less challenging:

- 56% In-school project/ activity with involves employers taking part in person;
- 55% In-school projects or enterprise activities which involve an employer;
- 43% Virtual employer talks from their workplace;
- 35% In-school career talks which include student participation.

Asked what it is that makes such activities so difficult, some variation is apparent in responses (Table 5.4). Very few respondents feel that such activities are not relevant to students at Key Stage 3, but practical barriers exist notably with regard to releasing school staff to take students out of school and finding employers willing to engage. Challenges are especially great for schools in rural and isolated areas which consistently strongly agree that finding employers and travel costs are a problem.

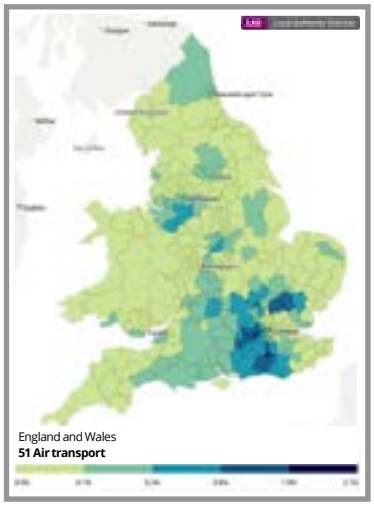
TABLE 5.4: Percentage of respondents strongly agreeing that different potential barriers are a problem for the engagement of KS3 students with employers

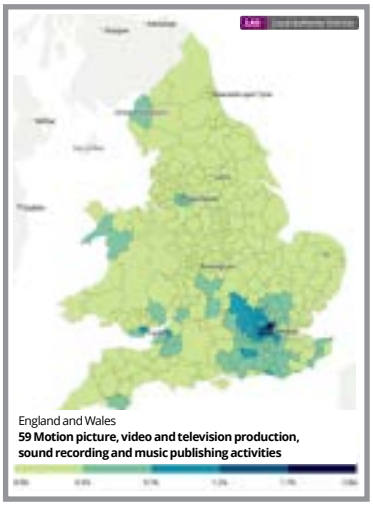
% Strongly agreeing that it is a problem	All (319)	Urban (256)	Rural (53)	Low FSM (63)	High FSM (91)	Low SEND (130)	High SEND (103)	Special school (36)	State comprehensive (210)
Releasing school staff to accompany students on visits and activities outside of school	66	66	58	69	68	62	58	45	70
Finding employers to engage in such activities is a problem.	54	51	68	58	56	52	50	45	54
Finding employers willing to participate in in-school activities lasting a few hours is a problem	37	34	47	40	43	33	41	33	36
The travel costs of getting students to workplaces are a problem.	33	29	53	35	40	49	47	13	38
The students are generally too young to benefit from such activities	6	7	4	5	8	3	7	8	6

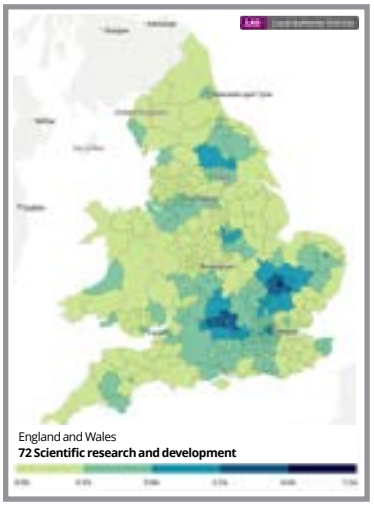
NOTE: For definition of FSM and SEND groups see Table 5.3 note.

Place and equitable access to employer engagement activities

The distribution of different sectors and occupations differs widely by region and even more sharply by local geographic areas as can been seen in the 2021 census data maps. Sector concentration maps show different pockets of activity across the country, such as around Manchester, Leeds, and Newcastle (among others) for air transport, Cardiff, Cambridge, and Oxford (among others) for scientific Research & Development, and Plymouth, Bristol, and Carlisle (among others) for TV, film, and music.







Using the ONS census data the presence and absence of sectors can also vary widely from area to area. New analysis for this paper looks the relative size of sectors by Gross Value Added (GVA) across 179 areas, finding striking differences.[188]

188 Gross value added (GVA) is the value generated by any economic unit that produces goods and services. It reflects the value of goods and services produced, less the cost of any inputs used up in that production process. GVA is a standard measure of the economic activity taking place in an area.

TABLE 5.5: Largest and smallest industries by local area (example local areas)

Local Area	Largest industry relative to national average*	GVA share locally	GVA share national	Ratio local: national	Smallest industry relative to national average*	GVA share locally	GVA share national	Ratio local: national
York	Social work activities	5.0%	1.5%	330%	Manufacture of textiles, wearing apparel and leather	0.0%	0.4%	0%
Conwy and Denbighshire	Accommodation	2.0%	0.5%	419%	Repair of computers, personal and household goods	0.0%	0.2%	0%
Tower Hamlets	Financial service activities	35.2%	4.3%	812%	Agriculture, forestry and fishing; mining and quarrying	0.0%	0.9%	0%
Isle of Wight	Social work activities	16.5%	1.5%	1093%	Insurance, pension funding and auxiliary financial activities	0.0%	4.4%	1%
West Cumbria	Manufacture of machinery and transport equipment	13.9%	1.9%	722%	Insurance, pension funding and auxiliary financial activities	0.0%	4.4%	1%
Leicester	Manufacture of textiles, wearing apparel and leather	6.9%	0.4%	1922%	Agriculture, forestry and fishing; mining and quarrying	0.0%	0.9%	1%
Armagh City, Banbridge and Craigavon	Manufacture of textiles, wearing apparel and leather	1.7%	0.4%	463%	Publishing; film and TV production and broadcasting	0.0%	1.5%	2%
Liverpool	Gambling and betting; sports and recreation activities	2.3%	0.9%	250%	Agriculture, forestry and fishing; mining and quarrying	0.0%	0.9%	2%
North and North East Lincolnshire	Manufacture of petroleum, chemicals and other minerals	17.7%	2.5%	709%	Publishing; film and TV production and broadcasting	0.1%	1.5%	4%
Angus and Dundee City	Manufacture of textiles, wearing apparel and leather	1.4%	0.4%	392%	Office administration and business support activities	0.0%	1.1%	3%
Milton Keynes	Motor trades	12.8%	1.45%	880%	Agriculture, forestry and fishing; mining and quarrying	0.0%	0.9%	4%

SOURCE: ONS data published May 2022 "Regional gross value added (balanced) by industry: all International Territorial Level (ITL) regions.

To pull out from table 5.5 a few examples of the geographic diversity in sector focus across the UK:

- In Leicester, textiles manufacturing is represented almost 20x more than the national average (6.9% of GVA vs 0.4% the national sum of GVAs), whereas agriculture is barely 1% of the national average.
- In the Isle of Wight, social work is 10x more significant as the national average but insurance and pensions scarcely represented at all.
- Publishing and broadcasting is about a 25th of the national average in parts of Lincolnshire and Hull.
- Motor trades are an important part of the Milton Keynes economy (13% of GVA compared to just over 1% nationally), but agriculture rare with little economic value-added overall.

In London, agricultural and veterinary work is about 0.1% of gross regional value added, compared to 6% for legal and accounting activities. In Cornwall it is reversed: 6% for agricultural work/veterinary and below 1% for legal and accounting.[189]

New analysis done specifically for this report looks at data from the Bar Council, the Law Society the DfE's Schools, pupils and their characteristics data. It looks at how many barristers and solicitors are working in different parts of the country and compares this with the number of young people attending school in those location. It shows a considerable geographical variance (Table 5.6). For example there are:

- 23 times as many barristers per young person in London compared to Eastern England
- 34 times as many barristers working in London compared to the North East

Pupils in London are more than 5 times more likely to meet a solicitor than those living in the rest of England

TABLE 5.6: Distribution of solicitors and barristers across England by distribution of students

	Solicitors	Barristers	Pupils in state schools (Jan 22 school census; all ages)	Number of pupils per solicitor	Number of pupils per barrister
City of London	33,190		227	0.0068 (146 lawyers for every pupil)	
Rest of London	31,079				
All London	64,269	10,919	1,309,401	20	120
South East	13,953	803	1,325,842	95	1,651
Eastern	7,250	338	952,510	131	2,818
South West	9,062	763	769,105	85	1,008
West Midlands	8,996	770	945,862	105	1,228
East Midlands	5,006	355	725,862	145	2,045
Yorkshire & Humberside	8,839	856	848,244	96	991
North West	14,929	1577	1,140,787	76	723
North East	3,145	317	397,026	126	1,252
Total	**135,449**	**16,698**	**8,414,639**	**62**	**504**

* assuming equally engaged in outreach and outreach mostly within region

Recognising this geographical imbalance of opportunity the Supreme Court have developed a programme where students in Years 11-13 can meet and talk to Justices virtually and get an insight into their work.[190] Priority is given to schools located a considerable distance from the London and in areas of multiple deprivation.

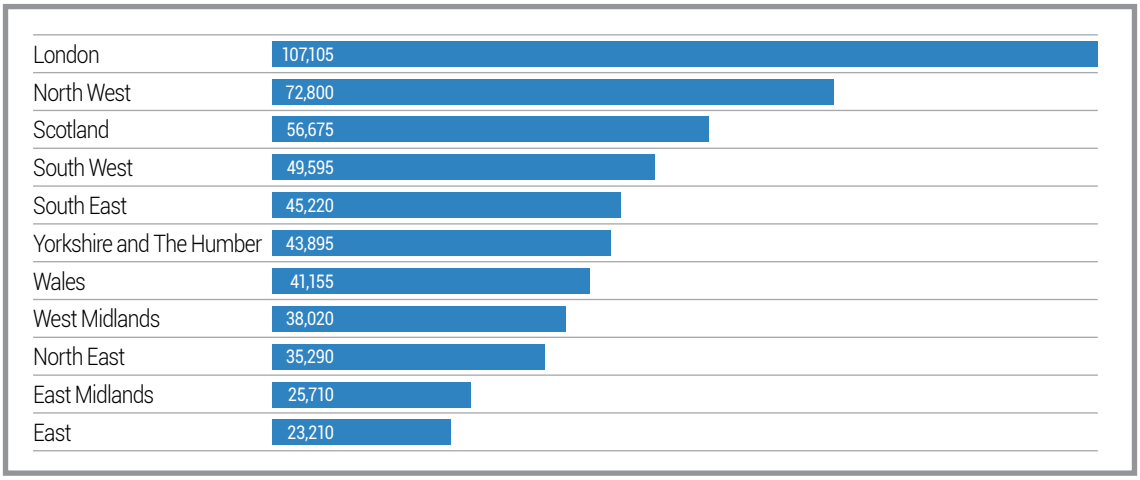
189 May 2022 data release of **https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/grossvalueaddedgva/datasets/nominalandrealregionalgrossvalueaddedbalancedbyindustry.** Numbers based on 2020 current price estimates for Cornwall and Isles of Scilly (ITL2), using SIC07 A + M75 and M69.

190 **https://supremecourt.uk/education/ask-a-justice**

This free programme is in sharp contrast to that being offered by a private company who are advertising the chance this July to have 'The Ultimate Work Experience in Law in London'. It promises that 'over the course of 2 weeks, students aged 15-18 will get to step into the shoes of a lawyer working in London, through a range of immersive career simulations and exclusive professional sites... work with corporate lawyers in the city, and more. Plus, gain a qualification in work experience to boost your university application!' The cost is £3,725.

Equally, over recent years jobs in the civil service have increasingly become more regionally based there are still significant variances (Table 5.7).

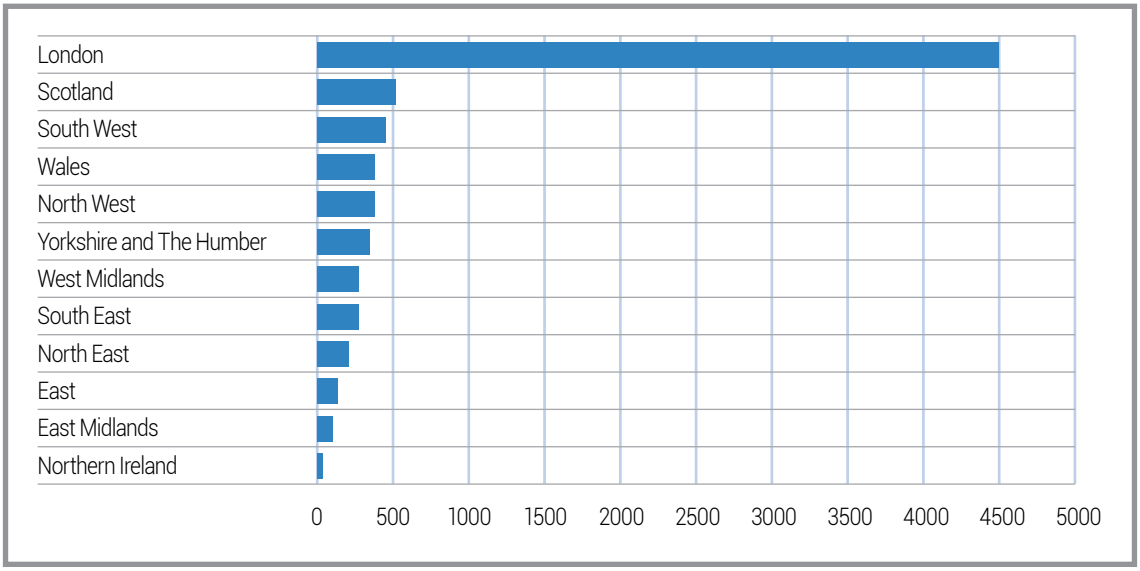
TABLE 5.7: Distribution of civil servants across England by region (headcount) 2025[191]



SOURCE: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/civil-service-statistics-2025/statistical-bulletin-civil-service-statistics-2025

The variance is particularly significant at the senior levels with 4,470 senior civil servants in London compared to 275 West Midlands – and only 105 in the East Midlands.[192]

TABLE 5.8: Distribution of senior civil servants across England by region (headcount)



SOURCE: https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/civil-service-statistics-2025

191 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/civil-service-statistics-2025/statistical-bulletin-civil-service-statistics-2025
192 https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/civil-service-statistics-2025

Young people living in rural areas face particular barriers to engagement in work experience due to the availability and cost of transportation. As a 2019 Department for Transport review noted:

> The impacts of transport poverty are worst for poorer people in rural areas. Services are further away in rural areas, while incomes are often lower, and transport costs higher, partly reflecting low rural population density which makes it harder to run public transport.[193]

While virtual experiences can respond to lack of local opportunities, as noted in chapter four on effective delivery, it cannot be taken for granted that provision will be of a suitable quality.

Do personal characteristics shape the engagement of students in different forms of employer engagement?

Table 5.9 reports data from the Survey of Young Adults. The survey collected data with regard to personal characteristics that include gender, parental education level, place of birth, receipt of FSM in school, SEND diagnosis, Neurodiversity (Autism, ADHD, Dyslexia) diagnosis, School location, school type (private/public, selective/non-selective), highest level of qualification, Ethnicity and LGBT+ status. Reviewing participation levels across different forms of employer engagement career development, the study finds notable variation. On average across the different types of activity:

- Young women were 6% less likely than young men to have participated
- The children of non-HE graduates were 28% less likely than the children of HE graduates to have participated
- Rural students were 15% less likely than urban students to have participated
- Young people leaving education with less than Level 2 (5 GCSEs or equivalent) were 16% less likely to have participated than peers with higher levels of qualification
- LGBT+ students were 18% less likely to have participated than non-LGBT+ students.

193 Gates, S. et al. 2019. Transport and inequality: An evidence review for the Department for Transport. Natcen, London.

TABLE 5.9: Percentage of young adults recalling participation in employer engagement career development activities

	Gender		Parental education		School location		Highest level of qualification			Sexuality and gender identity	
	Female (367)	Male (435)	Both parents with HE (226)	No parents with HE (349)	Urban (397)	Rural (85)	Less than L2 (76)	L2/L3 (478)	L4+ (250)	LGBT (123)	Non-LGBT (670)
Pre-16 in-person WX	68	74	76	64	72	61	68	70	73	59	73
Workplace visit	60	72	76	56	67	59	57	73	68	54	69
Job shadowing	54	66	71	51	62	48	47	61	62	49	63
Career talks	81	77	85	71	79	74	55	83	80	75	80
Job fair	76	70	76	70	72	74	58	80	72	69	73
Mentoring	43	50	59	36	48	40	42	47	48	37	49
Post-16 WX (any)	48	46	54	41	49	36	48	44	45	44	48
Average participation levels across all activities	**61.4**	**65**	**71**	**55.6**	**64.1**	**56**	**53.6**	**65.4**	**64**	**55.3**	**65**

Do some students benefit more than others from their work experience?

Further reviewing the responses from the Survey of Young Adults, it is apparent that members of some distinct groups demonstrate stronger appreciation than others about the value of work experience. Table 5.9 sets out the percentages of young adults who strongly agreed with a serious of statements about their views on the placements which they completed before the age of 16. Theoretical approaches discussed earlier in this paper suggest that some young people might be better placed to secure beneficial work experience (notably through social and cultural capital that underpins access to opportunities and confident understanding of how they can best be exploited for personal advantage) and/or that students with a comparative lack of such resources may gain more from them as they are more likely to gain new and useful information and experiences.[194] Consequently, employer engagement activities can either reinforce social reproduction and support social mobility and social justice.[195]

The most compelling result given in Table 5.10 is that young people with no parents who attended higher education were 30% less likely to agree on average across the different statements that their work experience placement had been of great value to them. This finding drawing on relatively large numbers for both groups would provide support for the social reproduction hypothesis. Other findings also suggest poorer outcomes for students in rural areas, students attending state comprehensive schools

194 J. Stanley and A. Mann. 2014. A theoretical framework for employer engagement, in Mann, A. et al. eds., Understanding employer engagement in education. Routledge, London.

195 See notably, Mann, A and E. Kashepakdel. 2014.Socialised social capital? The capacity of schools to use careers provision to compensate for social capital deficiencies among teenagers, in Mann. et al.. Eds., Essays on employer engagement in education. Routledge, London. The chapter looks at results from the British Cohort Study and finds that (disproportionately disadvantaged) students with low levels of social capital (those who did not know someone who could help them get a job after leaving education) earn significantly more ten years later from career talks than (disproportionately socially advantaged) students who did know someone who they thought could help them. The study illustrates the ways in which schools can increase access to social capital that enables access to new and trustworthy information about jobs and careers, increasing equity in outcomes.

(as opposed to private schools) and LGBT+ students. On the other hand, greater benefits are reported by young people stating that they had been diagnosed with autism and who had left education with lower levels of qualifications. However, low numbers for these groups demand caution in interpreting the findings while signalling the desirability of further studies.

TABLE 5.10: Percentage of respondents finding pre-16 work experience placements to have been of high value in different fields of career development. Survey of Young Adults.

% strongly agreeing or finding very useful	All (606)	Both parents attended HE (186)	No parents attended HE (234)	Autism diagnosed (48)	No autism (466)	Urban (315)	Rural (56)	Private school (50)	State comprehensive (439)	Less than Level 2 quals (54)	Level 3 quals (362)	Level 4+ quals (190)	LGBT (100)	Non-LGBT (516)
I learnt something that was new and useful to me	30	38	27	31	30	33	23	54	27	39	27	33	21	31
It helped me to understand more about the sorts of jobs which I might like to do	30	33	28	35	29	31	27	33	29	35	30	29	25	31
It has proved useful to me in someway	28	31	24	33	28	32	23	44	26	31	26	31	29	28
It helped me understand the range of jobs and opportunities	31	34	30	40	29	34	16	40	28	35	27	37	29	32
I encountered someone who made a lasting impression on me	23	22	23	29	22	24	18	29	21	22	21	26	16	24
It helped me to think more clearly about what I wanted to do in the future	29	34	27	42	27	32	20	27	27	31	28	32	26	30
It helped me to decide what future job I would like to do	31	34	25	29	31	34	30	37	28	44	27	33	24	32
It helped me to decide what to do after Year 11/S3	25	33	19	31	26	27	21	42	22	28	23	29	18	27
It helped me to get onto a course after Year 11/S3	27	31	25	31	27	27	23	31	25	35	24	28	21	28
It helped me to get a part-time job while a student or later on	26	31	21	29	26	27	20	35	23	35	24	29	24	27
It helped me to get a full-time job later on	30	34	26	29	30	32	29	42	27	46	26	32	24	31
It helped me to mature as a person	37	43	35	35	39	40	27	44	35	39	35	41	33	38
It helped me to understand the usefulness of education and qualifications	34	39	29	38	35	37	16	42	31	39	32	36	30	35
It helped to increase my confidence	36	38	35	43	36	37	27	44	33	37	34	39	24	38
It helped me to meet people who would be helpful to me	36	43	31	35	37	41	16	48	33	48	34	36	24	38
It helped me to understand myself, my interests and aspirations	34	38	31	40	36	38	14	50	30	46	31	36	30	35
It hepled me to find out what the world of work is actually like	38	44	34	58	36	38	34	42	35	59	35	36	33	39
It helped me to understand the role of trade unions in the workplace	28	33	22	35	29	32	16	37	24	48	24	29	16	30
It helped to change my thinking about the types of jobs that it is reasonable for women and men to do	30	33	29	38	30	33	20	31	28	37	29	30	25	31
Average strongly agree/very helpful	**31**	**35**	**27**	**36**	**31**	**33**	**22**	**40**	**28**	**39**	**28**	**33**	**25**	**32**

The power of social capital

Looking at this question from a different perspective, School Survey respondents with recent experience of work experience were asked whether "based on your experience, would you say that some students, more than others, secure work experience placements which they find to be much more beneficial to them?" On average, 79% agreed that this was case.

Asked why this was the case, respondents with recent experience of work experience overwhelmingly point towards the social contacts that students and their families possess. It is this social capital that is very strongly related to the perceived benefit of the placement. However other factors were also seen as being important including student confidence, clarity of career aspirations and importantly where they had been supported by a member of school staff.

TABLE 5.11: Percentage of respondents with recent experience of pre-16 work experiences agreeing that some students find them to be much more beneficial

Students who secure WX placements which are much more beneficial are more likely...	All (178)
...to have relevant contacts (e.g. through their family) who can provide a placement.	78
...to be confident about going into a place of work.	33
...to have clear ideas about their career aspirations.	31
...to have been supported by you or another school colleague.	26
...to be from higher income backgrounds.	25
...to have researched opportunities well.	24
% strongly agreeing	

How common is it for students to find their own placements?

Both the Schools Survey and the Survey of Young Adults explore how placements were found. Among respondents with recent experience of their school requiring work experience at pre-16, 81% said that all or more students found their own placements. Only in Special Schools this was the case for fewer than half of schools.

TABLE 5.12: Percentage of schools where all or most students find their own work experience placements. Schools Survey.

	All (225)	Urban (184)	Rural (34)	Low FSM (68)	High FSM (70)	Low SEND (83)	High SEND (79)	Special school (26)	State comprehensive (149)
All or most students find their own placements (%)	81	82	80	98	57	96	59	12	95

From the perspective of young adults, looking across the different characteristics around 70% of students from all groups of students who said that they had completed a placement before the age of 16 (with the exception of foreign-born students) 59% reported that they had found their placements themselves or through their family.

Within the student responses, on average 37% said that they had found the placement themselves and 34% that it had been found for them by a parent, relatives or friends of the family.[196] The results highlight that some groups were more likely to report that their placement was found through their family. This was the case with 50% of respondents who had attended private school (N=64) compared to 32% of the former students of state comprehensive schools (N=597). It was also the case for 40% of students whose parents had both completed higher education (N=226), compared to 25% of students neither of whose parents had gone to university (N=349).

The influence of parents is seen moreover with regard to whether young adults recalled getting their preferred work experience placement. On average, 73% of respondents agreed that they had. However, 81% of the children of parents who had both attended universities agreed that this was the case, compared to 64% of the children neither of whose parents had this level of education. Moreover, 81% of the former students of private schools got their preferred placement (albeit based on a small sample of 52 responses) compared to 71% of state comprehensive alumni.

Which types of students require additional support from their schools?

The discussion to date highlights the fact that some students, often with shared personal characteristics require additional support from their schools. School respondents were asked what percentage of students would require such help ("e.g. help in finding a placement, student and employer preparation for the placement, travel to and from the placement, support while on placement"). On average, they estimated that 49% of the student body required additional support. If responses from Special Schools (where typically between 80% and 100% of students require additional support) are excluded, the figure falls to 42%. Asked more specifically, what were the typical characteristics of students who would require additional personalised support to benefit from an appropriate placement (whether or not the school was able to provide it), respondents identified student groups with shared personal characteristics (SEND, anxiety, low-income, care, neurodiversity, LGBTQ+), but also students with particular needs with regard to career development (uncertainty, early labour market entry and interest in working in an atypical field by gender).

TABLE 5.13: Percentage identifying groups of students requiring additional support for pre-16 work experience placements. Schools Survey.

Most or all require additional support (%)	%
Students with SEND	79
Students who suffer from anxiety	71
Students who find it difficult to secure a relevant placement	69
Students from low-income families	66
Students in care	62
Students who are very uncertain about their plans after the age of 16	60
Neurodiverse students	57
Students planning to begin work at 16/17	41
Students who want to work in an occupation where their gender is under-represented	23
LGBTQ+ students	11

196 On average, 2% said that they could not remember.

School perspectives on the complexity of the equity challenge

In interviews with school staff with responsibilities for KS4 career development and in written comments in the Schools Survey, practitioners shared their perspectives on opportunities and challenges related to plans in England to require five days of 'Work Experience Activities' at key stage 3 and a five-day work experience placement for all students at key stage 4. Specifically, survey respondents were asked: "Please do let us have your thoughts on work experience and the new requirements to engage employers more in the career development of students aged 11 to 16. What advice would you give to the Government?" From an equity perspective, many highlighted additional barriers preventing easy and effective employer engagement. Recurring challenges highlighted include:

- A lack of employers able and willing to offer placements in rural and isolated areas
- Family poverty preventing students travelling to an appropriate placement
- SEND students being poorly suited to work experience and reluctance of employers to host them
- Student neurodiversity and anxiety limiting student willingness and ability to complete placements
- Employer reluctance to accept excluded students who may be poorly suited to placements
- Additional demands linked to supporting students with English as an Additional Language

Place limiting opportunity

> In a rural area with limited infrastructure, where are these placements supposed to come from? – Written survey comment

> Might be ok for city schools but not for rural schools. – Written survey comment

> A school in a small town in a rural county with limited public transport where students rely on buses to commute to school for up to 20 miles is a significant barrier to these proposals. – Written survey comment

> We are in a rural area with poor transport links. We have no big cities near us, the closest is around 40 miles away. We are a huge school with roughly 420 students per year group and trying to find work experience placements for all of these in a small rural town is next to impossible, especially when local employers on the whole are reluctant to even consider taking students on placement. We struggle to find placements for our Year 12 students as it is, never mind trying to persuade employers to take 14/15 year olds and provide them with a meaningful placement. – Written survey comment

More funding is needed for transport costs to workplaces. – Written survey comment

Family poverty limiting opportunity

It's a 45-minute commute on the train, but then we're saying to parents, we've got this great placement in London for your child, suited to what they want to do in finance, but you'd have to pay for the train for them for three days. The parents are like, well, I don't want to. Can you pay for it? And then we're like, we don't have a budget to pay for it. – Career lead, 11-18 school, Kent

Students with learning and physical disabilities

Consideration for young people with additional needs who cognitively, behaviourally, socially and emotionally are far younger than their biological age; who lack the understanding e.g. around health and safety; who struggle to learn by auditory means along, needing kinaesthetic, hands on work which is rarely available to young people on work experience; who need staff support when there is no funding available within school for that support; employers need an understanding of student needs which requires training, who is to provide that training and at what cost and to whom?; there is still huge resistance to working with young people with additional needs and disabilities – Written survey comment

Our school is a specialist provision for young people with physical disabilities, some of those being particularly complex / PMLD. Finding WEX placements is extremely difficult for this cohort. Virtual/online engagement is not engaging for our students. Therefore, we tend to use Enterprise activities to learn about the world of work, even then getting local business people to engage is difficult. – Written survey comment

Our SEND students are working at ability levels much lower than their chronological age. Putting a student aged 11 into a workplace potentially could be like putting a 7 year old into the workplace. In KS3 and 4, students complete internal work experience to help prepare them for external work experience when in KS5. The majority of our students will need school staff support during wex which can cause issues with space. Students need to focus on employability skills and working independently before considering them for a wex placement. – Written survey comment

How appropriate is this for students who may never enter the open labour market? This needs to be meaningful, not compulsory. – Written survey comment

As a SEND school, we have found it extremely challenging in previous years to secure employers who are able or willing to offer work experience placements to our students. Our young people often face very limited options beyond the age of 16 in terms of college pathways or employment opportunities. We hope that work placements could help broaden these opportunities, but at present many employers are unable to accept our students due to their age and individual needs. – Written survey comment

We would fully support these new requirements for our young people but feel it is the lack of employers willing to take children with SEND that will affect us. Unless there are changes to employers and their expectations, I cannot see this being successful in a special school. – Written survey comment

Special schools should be thought about in terms of being able to access placements. All of our students are brought into school in taxis and most don't come from homes where they would be able to get to their placements independently. The school doesn't have many employers locally which makes students accessing this from school difficult. – Written survey comment

Last year I had a child with an EHCP, but we got him a placement at the local National Trust and they agreed to pay for a taxi to get him there because it's about a dozen miles from home. Mom didn't drive and didn't have a car, so that was great, but we had to accompany him in the taxi. We had to lose a member of staff due to communication challenges with the taxi driver. God forbid, the taxi ran out of petrol or something. It would have been disastrous. It was half an hour drive there, half an hour drive back, and then at 2 pm, the same again. The end result was fantastic. He had an amazing time... He got offered a volunteer role. And he's now moving, I know. I was in his annual review this week and we built him a solution. He's leaving GCSEs to go to a college to do an animal course and part of his week is going to be back at this National Trust place. I mean wonderful, wonderful solution. But the money and the resource that went into solving that ... It's just it's not within the framework of what's budgeted for. And you know, when you've got 200 kids, you can only give so much goodwill. One person's goodwill can only go so far. – Career lead, 11-18 school, Kent

Some of our special needs schools struggle sometimes to find employers who are confident to take on young people with additional needs – Careers lead, large national MAT

There needs to be some incentives for employers. We have 330 SEN learners. They need more opportunities than their mainstream counterparts. We are one school, but we will need a huge commitment from local employers. We offer training to support employers to become Disability Confident – what are the government offering to employers to work with us and our students? – Written survey comment

ADHD/ASD

It is well and good to have requirements, but there are hardly any opportunities for learners with ASD to take on work experience. Employers do not have the resources to carry it out and we don't have the time to hound employers – Written survey comment

Employers are not prepared for the level of neurodivergence that will be hitting their workplaces in the next few years which then has a knock-on effect for their ability to support my students with SEND. – Written survey comment

Anxiety

We had someone in year 10 who found her own placement. She gets really bad social anxiety and for two of her three days, she was just mute and didn't ask a single question… And she still had an amazing time. She still learned a lot from it, but it's like, then we've got to go to an employer and say, OK please don't ask them any questions or, you know… Then an employer is going to be like, well, I don't really know what to do. – Career lead, 11-18 school, Kent

We've got about 50 students that won't get a placement. They won't travel. They would be mute if not sitting there crying, you know, just so they can't go out. – Career adviser, 11-18 school, West Midlands

On the ground I'm seeing rising social anxiety among students, many feel nervous about entering professional environments and "putting themselves out there." I'm also seeing limited horizons: young people often don't have a clear view of the range of careers available, or how their strengths and passions could translate into real work. Work experience can change that — especially for disadvantaged young people — but only if it's intentionally matched to their interests, skills and employers who can provide quality work experience – helping students to see genuine entry pathways. – Written survey comment

Students struggling with mental health and anxiety that cannot travel alone, face the thought of work experience and refuse to do it. In their eyes it is mostly seen as slave labour. Their families have never worked, they have never seen parents get up and go to work. The whole idea and thought is alien. Many times I find a brilliant connection and students let me and themselves down. We have been told as an organisation we cannot use VWEX at all even for IT course pathways. It is a stressful and unsung hero job with senior managers not understanding the barriers and with huge pressure from them to increase data and numbers on a spreadsheet. With no supportive help or help. – Written survey comment

Excluded students

Our pupils are pexed [permanently excluded] and come to us at different times during the year, many have SEN support plans or EHCPs, most are anxious. Some do not remain on site and will move around provisions. This means that it is very difficult to ensure they have work experience, some of our pupils are also too high risk to allow to complete work experience. Our pupils do not like virtual experiences. – Written survey comment

Pupils in PRUs lack the necessary soft skills for WEX. Most are not ready for WEX. Attempts to engage them in WEX have mostly failed due to the pupil rejecting authority / employers' expectations. Students with anxiety should not be pressured to meet this expectation. There's no additional support available to help vulnerable students. – Written survey comment

Students with English as an Additional Language

We have a lot of kids with EAL challenges. It's a real barrier for work experience and the time that I have to give and willingly give to students, because they deserve it, to find those places that will both best suit them and to propel them forward is phenomenal. I don't have to see them just once. It's two, three, four times to make sure that I've supported them. You need to develop a trusting relationship that also means conversations with parents and other teaching members of staff. It's huge. It's a phenomenal piece of work to do, and it's so right that it happens, but I feel that there is not enough direction and structure to support us, to allow and facilitate this to happen. It's the same with our SEND kids – Career Lead, 11-16 school, South West

Conclusions: predictable challenges (and responses) to the equitable employer engagement in secondary education

Work experience has many complexities. Some students go into the experience well prepared to make informed decisions linked to their career aspirations, many secure placements in preferred vocational areas, some are clearly supported by their schools, preparing for and reflecting on the experience to enhance ongoing career development. The experience in the workplace itself varies considerably in terms of what they do and how they are supported by workplace staff, but also in how students respond to the situations in which they find themselves. However, through this complexity, it is possible to identify some distinct patterns that illustrate the ways in which comparative advantages and disadvantages impact on the quality of the experience.

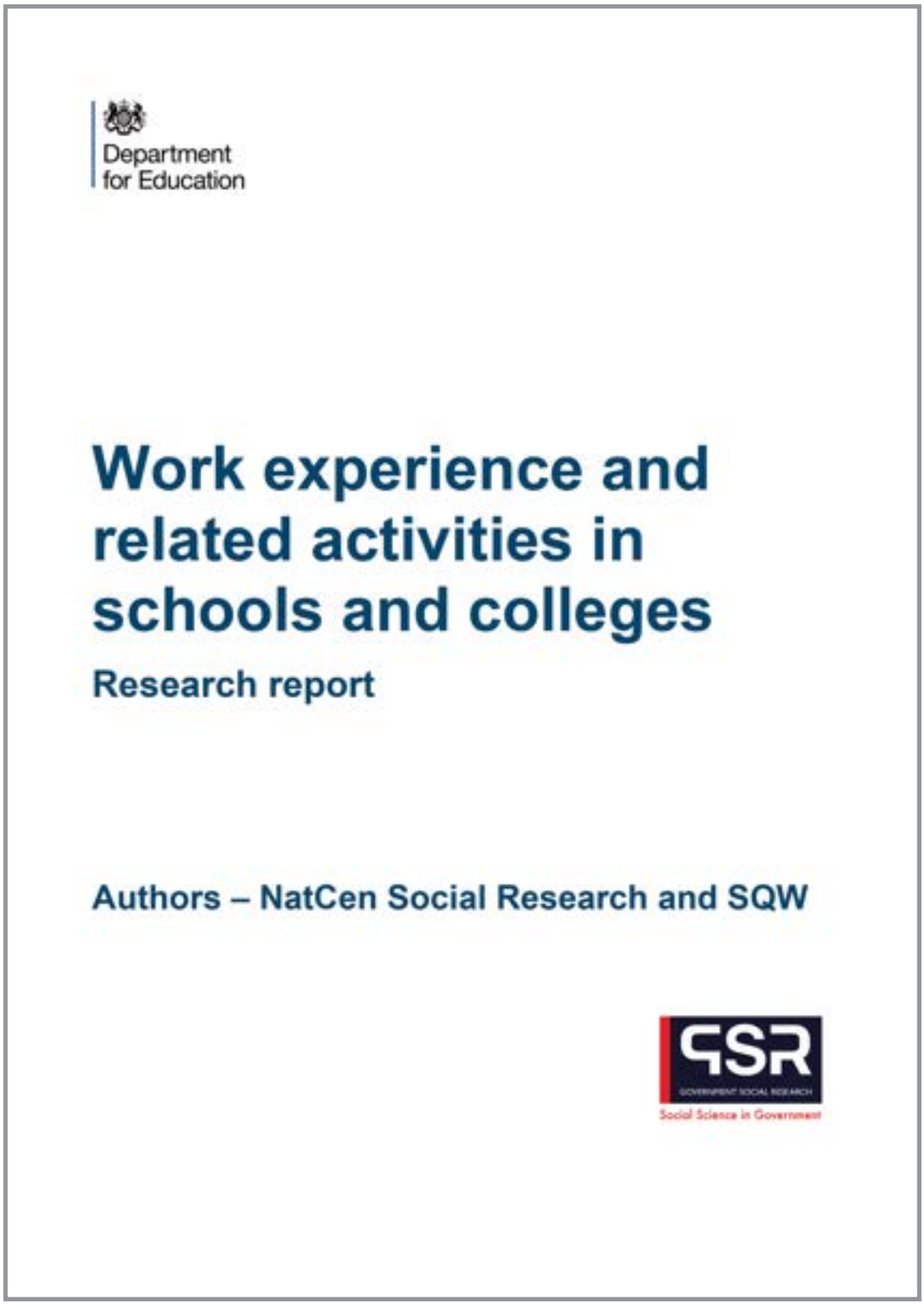
The new surveys for this study highlight some key insights of relevance to the equitable delivery of work experience at pre-16.

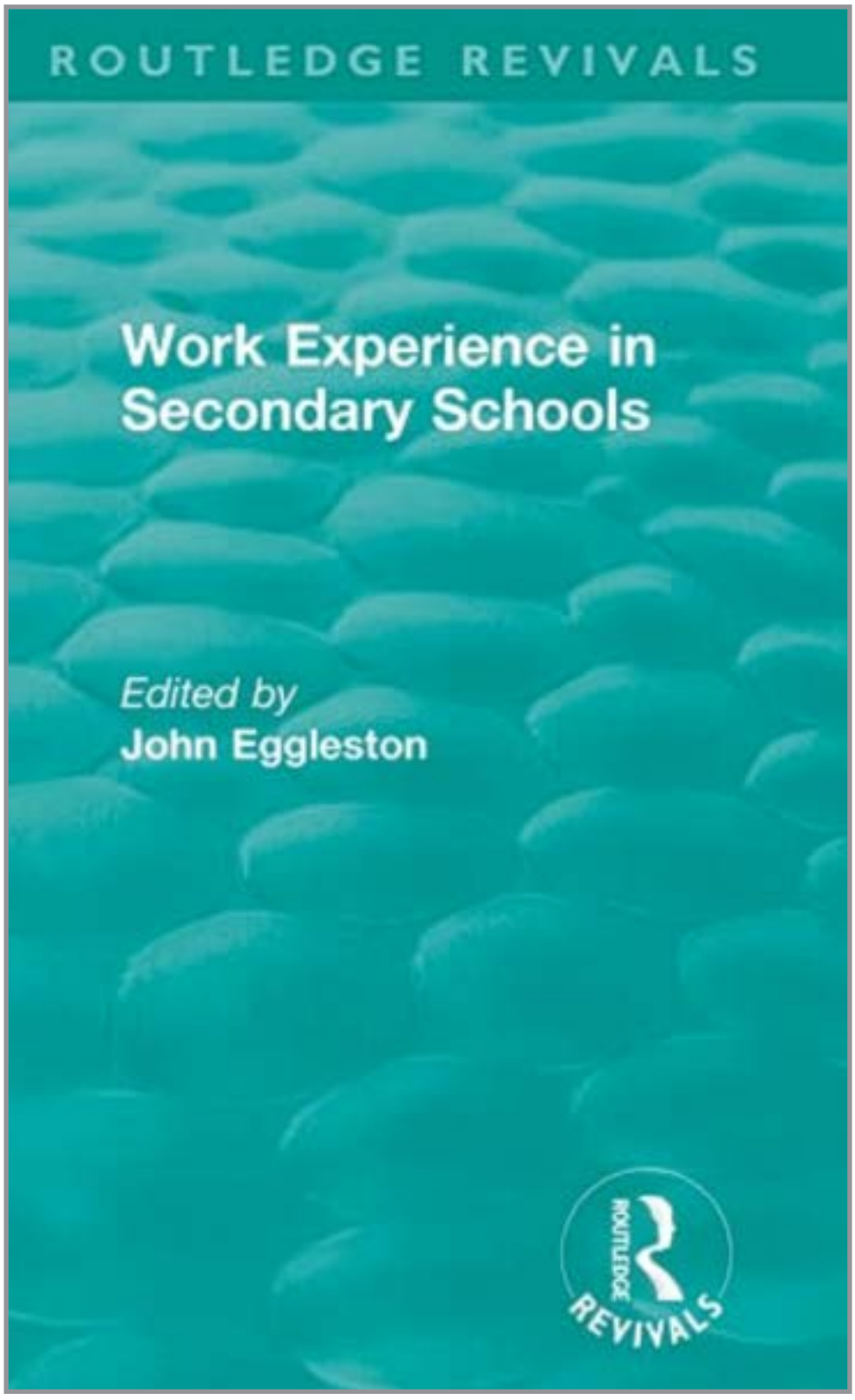
- Some schools can expect to face greater challenges than others in securing appropriate work placements. This is most notably the case with schools in rural and isolated areas, areas of high poverty, Special Schools and Pupil Referral Units. For schools in rural and isolated areas, lack of vibrant, diverse local economic communities restricts opportunities for students, with local transport provision costly, a barrier for both workplace visits and student work experience. Many schools do not feel that virtual work experience provides an appropriate alternative.
- Some students can expect to face greater challenges than others in securing work placements from which they will benefit. Overwhelmingly, work experience placements are found by students themselves or through their families. More socially advantaged families, benefiting from stronger social capital linked to employment, are more likely to provide active help to students in finding a work placement. This is notably an issue for the two-thirds of UK 15 year-olds who expect to work as a professional, a vocational area that employs only one-quarter of the working population.
- Schools are clear that some students require greater support than others if they are to secure a beneficial placement. The need for greater support relates to personal circumstances and to the character of student career development. It is not just SEND or FSM students who can be expected to require additional support, but also students whose challenges are less likely to be recognised in public funding formula. These include students with anxiety and neurodiversity as well as LGBTQ+ students (including Trans students) who may anticipate discriminatory workplaces. Other students often needing additional support include students who plan on beginning work at 16/17, who are uncertain about their career plans and who want to work in a profession where their gender is underrepresented.
- The challenges facing schools are heightened by the fact that employers do discriminate with regard to the types of students they are willing to have on placement.
- Testimony from schools highlights the fact that it is often a demanding (and sometimes costly) process to ensure that students participate equitably within provision.

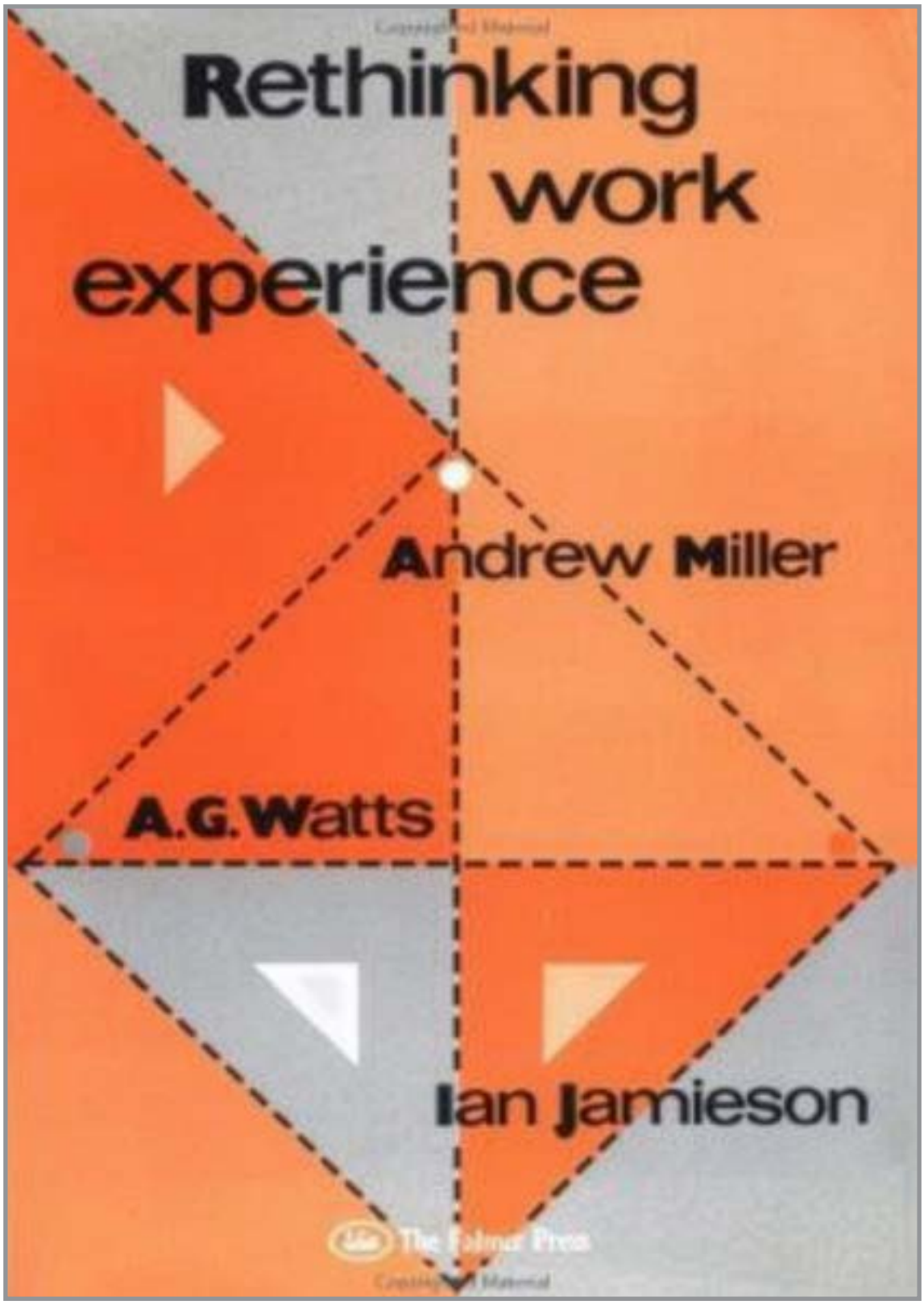
Effective national policy designed to significantly enhance equity in the delivery of pre-16 work experience will:

- Recognise that some students require additional support to ensure equitable outcomes within national policy.
- Recognise that additional needs relate both to personal and school characteristics, some of which are easily assessed within public data (school location, SEND), but others which are not (anxiety, uncertainty).
- Support activity to better prepare employers to support students with additional needs.
- Acknowledge that additional needs are best assessed by qualified guidance professionals working in schools close to students.
- Provide an appropriate ring-fenced budget, focused around greater needs (linked to the school population and notably to school location), to empower guidance professionals to support students requiring greater support.
- Allow guidance professionals and their schools the flexibility to offer students work-related provision appropriate to their stage of career development, rather than age.
- Provide external support that has a strong focus in securing placements which serve the needs of students requiring additional support, such as from employers who welcome students with SEND and neurodiversity, LGBTQ+ students, and students interested in working in professions where their gender is under-represented.
- Address employer discrimination in work experience, building on the strengths and weaknesses of earlier approaches to supporting equal opportunities.[197]
- Collect data on student experiences to continually assess whether student experiences are genuinely equitable.

197 Francis, B. et al. 2005. Gender equality in work experience placements for young people. Equal Opportunities Commission, London.


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Research report
Authors – NatCen Social Research and SQW
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ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS
Work Experience in Secondary Schools
Edited by
John Eggleston
ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS


Rethinking
work
experience
Andrew Miller
A.G.Watts
Ian Jamieson

Chapter 6

Efficient employer engagement in the career development of young people: understanding and minimising costs

Efficient delivery of employer engagement in secondary education will ensure that effective and equitable provision is delivered at the lowest cost to the public purse. Understanding of efficient provision demands consideration of the barriers preventing such engagement between the educational and economic communities. It also draws upon previous practice within England and international practice to assess the desirability of different models. As a part of education policy, work experience and other forms of employer engagement are distinctive in that they require considerable commitment from very large numbers of employers, overwhelmingly given on a voluntary, unpaid basis.

Essentially, schools (and often students individually) must find employers and people in work willing to consider supporting a career development activity. The costs involved in such a process can vary considerably from thousands of members of school staff searching google maps and other resources to identify and contact potential employers and then contacting them individually to different models where intermediate organisations find interested employers and then make them available to schools. To ensure student safety on work experience placements, it is essential moreover that appropriate health and safety checks are undertaken, that insurance provision is confirmed and, in some circumstances, that safeguarding checks are carried out. Typically, schools expect students' families to bear travel costs related to work experience placements, but these fall squarely on the shoulders of schools for workplace visits. In addition, appropriate numbers of adults must be available to support visits. Within school activities involve lower costs but still must be managed internally with staff time devoted to identifying employer participants and arranging activities.[198]

198 North East Ambition. No date. Guidance to consider when offering work experience placements. North East Combined Authorities; Mann, A. & B. Virk. 2013. Profound employer engagement in education: What it is and options for scaling it up. A report for the Board of Trustees of the Edge Foundation. Education and Employers Taskforce, London. See also, **https://www.hse.gov.uk/young-workers/employer/work-experience.htm.**

The scale of the new employer engagement challenge in England

In England, every year group in key stages 3 and 4 includes around 650,000 students.

TABLE 6.1: Number of students in (headcount) years 7 to 11, England 2024/25.

	Non-maintained special school	State-funded AP school	State-funded secondary	State-funded special school	Total
Year 7	427	357	635,815	16,949	653,121
Year 8	437	1,355	646,045	17,058	664,458
Year 9	457	2,701	638,066	16,978	658,202
Year 10	482	4,133	624,039	16,437	645,091
Year 11	474	5,859	609,100	15,221	630,654

SOURCE: https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25?subjectId=0b888b70-db35-4653-4f44-08dd736a5cea

In addition, recent and planned Government policy anticipates other groups of young people undertaking work placements.

TABLE 6.2: Anticipated minimum requirements for work experience days in 2027/28 in England *(Please note: figures are estimates*)*

Policy	Estimated student days*
New Key Stage 3 requirement: 5 days per student (c. 650k per cohort)	3m
New Key Stage 4 requirement: 5 days per student (c. 650k per cohort), preferring 5 days in work experience placement	3m
6 week placements for unemployed youth (300k announced), with uncertainty over ramp-up speed, duration and steady state. The placements include an unspecified mix of in-workplace and in-learning days.[199]	2m-9m
T-level placements (standard 45 days[200], but with significant uncertainty over number of annual starts – estimated based on a 25k-75k range).	1m-3m
Placements in the Sector-based Work Academy Programme (SWAP). Placements are up to six weeks with variation in the number of in-workplace days and uncertainty over the future number of starts (latest delivery target for 2025/26 is 100k). [201]	1m-3m
Total (of those identified)	**Highly likely to exceed 10m days per year**
In addition, conservative estimates across further areas could add a further 10m days per year to total requirements.	
Key Stage 5 (c.600k per cohort). Gatsby Benchmark 6 requires every student to have at least one further meaningful experience. Courses in FE are typically expected to include work experience. Exact duration can vary and expectations vary widely by course, but in general the volume and quality of work experience is expected to be higher than at Key Stages 3-4.	
HE. Work experience forms an important part of many courses and some universities expect (or strongly recommend) students to undertake work experience outside of their course. With 2.8 million students, the number of days required will be considerable.	

***NOTE ON ESTIMATES:** Estimates are uncertain, depending on policy and delivery design. We consider these estimates to be conservative given other pressures on employers to provide work experience to teenagers via education providers, local government, and community organisations, such as vocational courses, students at risk of NEET outcomes, and possible emerging requirements for V Levels. Note that placement types, participants, structures, delivery mechanisms and channels vary widely between the different policies listed.

199 DWP (Dec 2025). **https://www.gov.uk/government/news/almost-a-million-young-people-to-benefit-from-expanded-support-new-training-and-work-experience-opportunities**

200 Updated DfE guidance in May 2026 increases the flexibility over these placements, an indication of the difficulty in sourcing single employers to provide the full placement in person in all cases. **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/t-level-industry-placements-guidance-for-providers/t-level-industry-placements-guidance-for-education-providers**

201 DWP (Oct 2025). **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sector-based-work-academies-employer-guide/sector-based-work-academies-employer-guide.** DWP (Apr 2026). **https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sector-based-work-academy-programmes-swaps-management-information-april-2021-to-march-2026/note-about-the-sector-based-work-academy-programme-swap-management-information**

What proportion of Key Stage 4 students in England currently complete work experience placements?

It is difficult to know with certainty what proportion of KS4 students currently complete a work experience placement. This is part due to variance in the way work experience is defined and reported so that actual in person work placements are often combined with broader employer engagement activities. Available data however point towards between half and two-thirds of students participating.

- In the 2026 our Schools Survey of 350 Career Guidance leads in secondary schools undertaken for this study, 67% respondents confirmed that their school had, in recent years, had some (15%) or all or most (52%) of its students aged 14-16 complete work experience placements.
- A March 2026 survey of 5,503 secondary school teachers by Teacher Tapp undertaken for this study found that 69% of respondents agreed that their school "does work experience for KS4 pupils" (overwhelmingly one-week placements).[202] This figure had risen from 53% in 2022.
- The Careers and Enterprise Company reported in 2025 that it had been informed by schools that the majority of students in 74% of schools and colleges with students under 16 had "an experience of a workplace" by the end of Year 11.[203]
- The Key Group maintains a widely used student record system that records attendance, including participation in work experience. It reports that during the 2024/25 school year that 85% of the 1,019 secondary schools in England using their system (around one quarter of all schools) recorded some pupils as having done some work experience in year 10 with 58% of year 10 pupils being recorded as having been on a placement during the year. On average, students were recorded as having completed four days on placement. Placements overwhelmingly were recorded as taking place in July of Year 10. No analysis was undertaken as to Year 11 students.[204]
- In the survey of 804 young adults, aged 19 to 26, undertaken for this study, 75% said that they had completed a placement before the age of 16 while in secondary school. Of respondents aged 19-22, 71% agreed that they had done this, compared to 80% of respondents over the age of 23.
- The February 2025 parent, pupil and learner voice survey of Department for Education (England), polled 848 KS4 students and found that 26% had already participated in a work experience placement and 37% intended to do so, while 30% said they had not and do not intend to participate and 6% did not know. In total, 64% were likely to have completed a placement within KS4.[205]
- PISA data for 2022 indicates that 35% of students aged 15-16 had completed a placement, but participation at that time may have been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.[206]

202 **https://www.linkedin.com/posts/lauramcinerney1_two-week-work-experience-remains-rare-for-activity-7436674707128598528-cmhx/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=member_desktop&rcm=ACoAABDr3K8BXE6Y-CUTnvcutb0SYJSzDy4gMzs,** accessed 13 March 2026.

203 Careers and Enterprise Company. 2025. Insight Briefing: Gatsby Benchmark results for 2024/25.

204 Key Group. 2025. How many pupils are getting work experience?

205 Verian. 2025. Parent, Pupil and Learner Voice Technical report: 2024 to 2025 academic year. Department for Education, London.

206 **https://www.oecd.org/en/data/dashboards/teenage-career-readiness.html.** In the PISA 2018 study, 47% of UK respondents said that they had completed a work experience placement of one or two weeks during the school term.

If averages are taken for all these figures, it is found that 74% of secondary schools have recently required at least some students to complete a work experience placement and that 58% of students have done so. Given that each KS4 year group includes 650,000 students, an additional 42% of students completing work experience placements would require an additional 273,000 students finding a placement.

With the exception of PISA 2022 on workplace visits (30% of UK students aged 15 saying that they had completed one) and participation in career fairs (55%), information is less available for student engagement in other employer engagement activities such as workplaces visits and career talks as planned by the Department for Education (England) for KS3 students.

What proportion of workplaces provide work experience placements

The best assessment of the number of the total number of workplaces where placements are undertaken is provided by the UK government's Employer Skills Survey (ESS).[207] The ESS is the best assessment available on the total number of workplaces in the UK. These are recorded as discrete places of employment: the ESS counts individual branches of a large employer separately. In 2024, the ESS calculated that there were 1,674,822 workplaces in England. Overwhelmingly, these employ fewer than 25 people (Table 6.3).

TABLE 6.3: Total number of workplaces (employing 2+ people) in England by number of people employed, Employer Skills Survey 2024.

Establishment size by number of workers	2 to 4	5 to 24	25 to 49	50 to 99	100-249	250+
Number of establishments	910,213	589,373	92,331	46,775	24,258	11,872
By percentage of all establishments	54%	35%	6%	3%	2%	1%

SOURCE: Employer Skills Survey England 2024. See Chapter one, methodology.

Since 2012, Employer Skills Surveys and related Employer Perspective Surveys have regularly asked if workplaces have hosted people on work experience placements during the previous 12 months. As Table 6.4 shows, it is not just school students who seek placements with employers. Since 2012, the proportion of workplaces offering placements has grown with growth concentrated in placements for people over the age of 16. In total in 2024 in England, around one-third of workplaces had hosted someone on a work placement.

TABLE 6.4: Percentage of employers offering work placements in the previous 12 months, England, 2012 and 2024.

	2012	2024
Placements for people at school	18%	18%
Placements for people at college	9%	12%
Placements for people at university	7%	8%
Internships, either paid or unpaid	3%	4%
Placements targeted at giving work experience to the unemployed	4%	1%
Work trials for potential new recruits	3%	9%
Other type of placements	2%	1%
Do not offer placements	73%	66%

SOURCES: Employer Perspectives Survey 2012; Employer Skills Survey 2024. See Chapter one, methodology.

207 For details of the surveys, see Chapter 1 (methodology).

Expectations on employers of providing work placements for young people over the age of 16 are significant and set to increase in the years ahead.

Stage	Age	Work experience expectations
Key Stage 3/4 Years 7-11	11-16	**Current DfE guidance** By the age of 16, every pupil should have had meaningful experiences of workplaces (Gatsby Benchmark 6).
Key Stage 3 Years 7, 8 & 9	11–14	**New DfE requirement – 5 days** (as referenced in the careers statutory guidance) Multiple, varied and meaningful employer-led activities to explore different industries and careers, with active engagement with a diverse range of employers. Activities include: ■ Multi-day work visits involving employer-set tasks or projects ■ Employer talks, including technical demonstrations or tours of working premises **Delivery:** ■ Individually or as part of a group or class-based activity ■ Preference for in-person and in workplaces, but scope for some flexibility across the five days
Key Stage 4 Year 10 & 11	14–16	**New DfE requirement – 5 days** (as referenced in the careers statutory guidance) Work experience placements for pupils to experience a real working environment and begin to develop work-based knowledge, skills and behaviours. **Delivery:** ■ With one or more employer ■ Undertaken individually ■ Expect this in-person and in the workplace
Key Stage 5 Years 12 &13	16–18	**Current DfE guidance** By the age of 18, every pupil should have had at least one further meaningful workplace experience (Gatsby Benchmark 6). Students on 16-to-19 study programmes in a school sixth form are expected to do work experience or some form of work-related training as part of their study programme's non-qualification activity – the same expectation as FE college.
Further Education	16-19+	**Current DfE guidance** **Work experience undertaken as non-qualification hours** All 16 to 19 study programmes are expected to include work experience to give students the opportunity to develop their career choices and to apply their skills in real working conditions. It is listed as one of the four core principles every and whilst there is no single prescribed form acceptable activities include: ■ Traditional block placements (typically 1–2 weeks) ■ Extended placements spread across the year (one or more days per week) ■ Industry insight or taster days ■ Voluntary work ■ Virtual work experience programmes **Work experience undertaken as qualification hours** ■ Work placements are often an integral part of students' qualification hours and will be undertaken in a workplace that is relevant to their course ■ T Level students must complete a mandatory industry placement of at least 315 hours (roughly 45 days) ■ For some students, work experience can be the core aim of the study programme.
Higher Education	18–21+	No statutory requirement but strongly encouraged. Varies by institution and course. Typical formats: ■ Sandwich year / placement year (12 months) ■ Summer internships (6–12 weeks) ■ Degree apprenticeships (work-integrated)
Post education		**Department for Work and Pensions** On 29 May 2026 the department announced that young people across the country will be helped onto the career ladder thanks to the creation of 300,000 new work experience and training placements in sectors including construction, health and social care and hospitality. The new placements are part of a £2.5 billion youth employment support package, will see young people gain hands-on experience, build real skills and move into sustained work. The 300,000 placements will be made up of work experience and Sector-based Work Academy Programmes (SWAPs), reaching young people in every corner of the country. SWAPs are short government-funded programmes for jobseekers claiming benefits, offering training, hands-on experience of the workplace and a guaranteed job interview.

Percentage of UK workplaces hosting work experience placements for school students

The Employer Skills surveys do not distinguish students by age, but by the type of educational institution they attend. It distinguishes between 'college students' and 'school students' of whom some certainly, and many possibly, may be older than 16. Some students may have completed placements with more than one employer, raising the risk of some double counting. Across the UK, since 2012 there has been a trend towards placement hosting declining (Table 6.5).

TABLE 6.5: Percentage of workplaces which have hosted a 'school student' on work experience in the previous 12 months, UK nations 2012-24.

	England	Northern Ireland	Scotland	Wales
EPS 2012	18%	18%	17%	16%
EPS 2014	20%	28%	20%	23%
ESS2019	19%	24%	20%	17%
ESS2022	13%	12%	10%	9%
ESS2024	18%	18%	15%	13%

SOURCES: Employer Perspectives Survey 2012; Employer Perspectives Survey 2014; Employer Skills Survey 2019; Employer Skills Survey 2022; Employer Skills Survey 2024. See Chapter one, methodology.

The surveys also ask employers about the number of students they have had on work experience placements. This average number has fallen noticeably. In 2024, the average number of students per workplace offering work experience was 2.6. Ten years earlier, this figure was 3.4. As a consequence, ESS data estimate that the number of 'school students' participating in a work placement fell by a quarter between 2014 (when the data was first collected) and 2024 (Table 6.6). Over the same period, the proportion of 'college students' so participating is estimated to have fallen by around one-fifth.

TABLE 6.6: Estimated numbers of 'school students' completing a work experience placement, England, 2014, 2019 and 2024.

	2014		2019		2024	
Student type	School	College	School	College	School	College
Estimated number of establishments hosting students	295,499	181,478	296,524	193,793	294,605	196,199
Average number of students hosted per workplace	3.4	2.9	2.5	2.5	2.6	2.2
Total number of numbers on placement (estimated)	1,004,696	526,286	741,310	484,483	765,973	431,638

SOURCES: Employer Perspectives Survey 2014; Employer Skills Survey 2019; Employer Skills Survey 2024. See Chapter one, methodology.

The ESS shows that the larger an enterprise is, the more likely it is to host school students on work placements: only 12% of workplaces employing 2-4 people do so, compared to 48% of workplaces employing 100-249 people. Larger workplaces are also more likely to take a greater number of school students on placement and have dedicated staff to organise and manage placement activities. However, because the overwhelming majority of workplaces in the UK employ fewer than 50 people, they play a disproportionately large role in providing work experience placements.

Data from ESS 2024 (England) shows that, as with work experience placements, while larger employers are more likely to participate in such career development activities, the great majority of individual workplaces which support schools in this way are small: 35% employ 4 or fewer people, 75% fewer than 25 people, and 84% fewer than 50 people (Table 6.7). Workplaces in the charity/voluntary sector and in local government are especially likely to provide such support as are employers with a track record of offering work experience placements.

TABLE 6.7: Distribution of work experience students by workplace size, England 2024.

		Establishment size (workforce)					
	All	2 to 4	5 to 24	25 to 49	50 to 99	100-249	250+
Average number of students hosted on WX per workplace	2.6	2.3	2.1	2.9	3.7	6.1	*not given*
Estimated total number of workplaces hosting school students on work experience	294,605	111,382	119,937	29,414	18,661	11,343	*not given*
Estimated total number of students hosted	765,973	256,176	251,868	85,301	69,046	69,192	34,390
Percentage of all estimated students hosted by workplace size		34%	33%	11%	9%	9%	5%

NOTE: Estimates are not provided for the average number of school students undertaking work experience placements in workplaces employing more than 250 workers. Other ESS data indicate that an estimated 34,390 students undertook a work experience placement in a workplace employing more than 250 people.

SOURCE: Employer Skills Survey 2024. See Chapter one, methodology.

Employer engagement in other forms of career development with schools

The Employer Skills Surveys also ask workplaces about other ways in which they might engage with educational institutions to support the career development of young people. Over the last three rounds of the surveys, respondents have been asked whether they have "engaged with educational institutions to offer 'work inspiration' activities (e.g. careers talks, mock interviews etc.) to students in the last 12 months." In England, the percentage of respondents agreeing that they had done so has remained broadly constant: 2019 (11%), 2022 (9%), 2024 (10%).

The 2014 survey approaches the question from a different perspective, asking employers in England if they had supported a range of specific activities, including hosting site visits (7%), going into educational institutions to deliver career talks (7%), providing mentoring (7%), conducting mock interviews (4%), helping design and/or set coursework for students (3%), or sponsoring, supporting or participating in any enterprise competitions (3%). The 2014 survey alone asks workplaces to distinguish between different types of educational institutions they had worked with, with 54% in England saying they had supported 'schools' in this way (an alternative category related to 'Further education or sixth form college').

The schools' perspective: challenges to engagement with employers

Work experience placements

The Schools Survey provides new insights into the barriers facing schools. Respondents were asked "On a scale of 1 to 5 (1 being minimal and 5 being very important), how challenging are the following barriers which might prevent students in general aged 14-16 from securing desirable work experience placements?" Table 6.8 reports the percentage of respondents who gave an answer of '5' for the different potential barriers.

The results highlight an overarching struggle to find employers in the local area (notably in rural areas), able to provide authentic experiences and to respond to the needs of students with additional needs. However, they also note administrative challenges (employer insurance costs; health and safety requirements); competition from other schools and older students; and, for a meaningful number, student unwillingness to travel and travel costs (notably in schools with high numbers of FSM and SEND students).

TABLE 6.8: School perspectives on the most significant barriers in delivering pre-16 work experience placements. Schools Survey.

% giving 5 response	All (338)	Urban (256)	Rural (56)	Low FSM (66)	High FSM (104)	Low SEND (137)	High SEND (111)	Special school (41)	State comprehensive (229)
Employers find it difficult to support authentic work-based experiences for students under the age of 16	51	53	39	58	58	49	56	54	51
Employer insurance costs for students under 16	45	47	36	42	54	45	50	59	41
Lack of employers in the local area able to provide placements	44	40	59	47	53	45	46	44	44
Lack of employer willingness/ability to respond to the needs of vulnerable students	41	41	36	36	54	32	56	66	38
Too much competition from other schools	39	41	25	39	40	41	38	44	38
Lack of employer interest in supporting the career development of students	39	39	38	41	46	37	42	49	39
Health and Safety concerns	38	39	27	36	42	36	43	49	33
Employers not having tasks for students under 16 to do	36	35	30	41	37	39	41	34	35
Too much competition from older students	31	33	18	33	29	33	29	34	28
Student unwillingness to travel independently	25	24	25	17	40	13	40	49	21
Confidentiality requirements in the workplace	24	25	16	32	24	24	22	20	23
Too many people work from home	22	25	13	26	18	28	14	17	21
Travel costs for students	19	15	34	18	26	15	22	17	19
The reputation of your school and its students	6	6	7	3	13	3	12	17	3

Finding employers

In written survey contributions and in interviews with school staff with responsibilities for KS4 career guidance, a frequent theme was the difficulty of finding appropriate employers.

> How difficult is it to find employers? On a scale of one to ten, I'd say 11 – Careers Adviser, Alternative Provision school, South East

> Many employers won't take 14-15 year olds anymore, especially in manufacturing and there's a big squeeze due to working from home, companies don't have the staff in the office any more. Insurance is becoming more and more a barrier – we have charity shops that say they can't insure anyone under 18. – Careers Adviser, 11-18 comprehensive, West Midlands

> It would be easier if the government gave employers an incentive or paid for the 16 year old insurance. Equally it would be helpful if the Government sourced employers who are willing to take on students for work experience and this list was accessible by local schools. – Written survey comment

> The support needed to source these placements is urgent. We currently have KS5 students on placements and give them 8 months to find an employer. Most of them, without fail contact over 15 employers each. Lots of employers say no because they're under 18. Now we have to get under 16s out in the same economic climate. – Written survey comment

> Contacting companies to enquire about work experience is a massive use of time, but without me, many pupils wouldn't have a placement. – Written survey comment

In practice, most schools resolve the challenge by putting the responsibility on students to find their own placements, using family connections. There is recognition however that while this is easier, this can lead to very different student experiences.

> Students without family networks are disproportionately disadvantaged, so the programme risks widening inequalities unless Government provides travel bursaries and targeted support. – Written survey comment

> It is easy when they find the placements with family and friends, it just makes life a bit easier. Risk assessments, very light touch. – Careers Adviser, Alternative Provision school, South East

I have two socio economically deprived areas in our catchment. I've got some students who are getting work experience at [a large, advanced manufacturing employer] because their parents work there and it's fabulous. Huge jump up the ladder and then they're being invited back to apply for apprenticeships and so on. I mean just amazing. … But then at the other end, I've got these students whose parents have no cars. They have no money. They have nothing. So the student can only go to where they can walk to… And they end up if they're lucky, in their primary school. OK, that's maybe fun for a day, but they're not getting anything out of that for a week going back there… – Career adviser, 11-18 school, West Midlands

[The Government should] think about the location of business and local infrastructure. Work out a way that FSM students can still access their meal without needing to come into school each morning. Be realistic about distances and transport and the fears of young people and their families in using public transport. – Written survey comment

A specific issue raised by schools, notably in more urban areas, within the review relates to competition from other schools and older young people who are required by government programmes to spend times in workplaces.

It is so difficult for a school to find meaningful in-person placements, we are not only in competition with other schools in the borough but with FE Colleges where many courses have a mandatory work experience element to their programmes – i.e. T levels. Schools have very low priority with companies. – Written survey comment.

How easy is it to approach large employers to ask for work experience? A desktop review.

Prior to 2011, the government in England funded every local authority area to provide an Education Business Partnership Organisation (EBPO) which actively supported schools at no or little cost to connect with employers to support work experience placements and other forms of employer engagement.[208] Over years of operation, EBPOs built databases of hundreds of thousands of workplaces providing a resource for schools seeking to find placements for students in addition to self-sourced opportunities. For schools and students seeking to find placements for the first time, it is difficult to find ways to approach relevant staff within enterprises, especially in larger employers. Individual schools now frequently build their own databases of contacts.

208 Mann, A. & B. Virk. 2013. Profound employer engagement in education: What it is and options for scaling it up. A report for the Board of Trustees of the Edge Foundation. Education and Employers Taskforce, London.

For this study a desktop review was undertaken of 223 prominent employers in England, including large private companies, large public sector employers and government departments, national professional/trade associations and trade unions operating in the field of employer engagement in education, and employers working in the most aspired to professions identified by school students in three medium-sized towns.[209]

Large national employers

The study searched the websites of 130 of the country's largest employers, each employing more than 5,000 people.

TABLE 6.9: Percentage of 130 large national employers providing details about work experience availability on corporate websites

No information about work experience	69%
Work experience offered, but only to young people over 16	6%
Work experience is clearly available to young people under 16	22%
Work experience is offered, but any restrictions are unclear	3%

In interviews, a representative of one large national employer recognised the barrier.

> We've heard about the changes in England and are expecting more demand from schools and that we need to be more professional. We always knew we could do better with our work experience offering. From next year, my priority is getting information out there that we offer it because at the moment if you were to go through the company website or our careers website, there's no mention anywhere of how a young person can get in touch to ask for work experience. So we're almost shooting ourselves in the foot a little bit because the only people who contact us are people who might know an e-mail, people who might know someone who already works here – Interview with large employer (construction)

Regarding to the national government, the study reviewed the websites of 18 central government departments, agencies and public bodies. It found that 78% included no details of how a young person might apply for work experience, including that of the Department for Education.[210]

TABLE 6.10: Percentage of 18 national government departments, agencies and public bodies providing details about work experience availability on corporate websites.

No information about work experience	78%
Work experience offered, but only to young people over 16	11%
Work experience is clearly available to young people under 16	1%
Work experience is offered, but any restrictions are unclear	3%

With regard to local government, the study reviewed the websites of 12 randomly selected municipalities and combined authorities. It found that 10 did not include details of how to apply for work experience on their websites.

209 The review was undertaken from January to March 2026.

210 A blog from 2023 does describe the work experience placement of a Year 13 student: **https://dfedigital.blog.gov.uk/2023/11/15/work-experience-in-the-department-for-education/.**

For three medium-sized towns (Barnsley, Poole and Stafford), the study reviewed the websites of employers in two sectors: engineering and law, these being the two most common occupational expectations of boys and girls in the OECD PISA 2022 study of England. Of 27 employer websites reviewed, 25 (92%) included no information about how to apply for a work experience placement, one stated that placements were available only for students over the age of 16 and one that placements were available without offering any information on any age restrictions.

Finally, the study looked at the websites of 42 national not-for-profit organisations working in the field of education and professional development. These include trade bodies, professional associations, trade unions (in the education sector), employer representative bodies and skills councils. Of the 42, 37 (88%) included no information about work experience on their websites; 5 did so, in all cases being clear that students under the age of 16 were welcome to apply.

TABLE 6.11: Percentage of 42 national not-for-profit organisations working in the field of education and professional development providing details about work experience availability on corporate websites.

No information about work experience	88%
Work experience offered, but only to young people over 16	0%
Work experience is clearly available to young people under 16	12%
Work experience is offered, but any restrictions are unclear	0%

Administrative requirements for work experience

Once a suitable placement has been secured for a student from a willing employer, checks are necessary to ensure that students and employers will be protected from risk. Confirmation is required that the health and safety of the student will not be put at unreasonable jeopardy through a risk assessment, it must be confirmed that the employer's public liability insurance covers work placements (including for young people under 16) and any safeguarding concerns addressed. The Schools Survey highlighted significant concerns related to both insurance and health and safety with 45% and 38% respectively (Table 6.7) of respondents saying that these were extremely significant barriers to securing work placements. This was confirmed in interviews and written comments provided by survey participants responding to an invitation to share perspectives with the Department for Education.

> Simplify the Health & Safety/Insurance system – possibly offer employers a Government backed insurance policy etc. as this is the biggest reason for rejection. – Written survey comment

> The children who attend here want vocational careers but our biggest employer in the region is construction – we can't get them to offer work experience placements for bricklayers, electricians etc due to Health & Safety laws and insurances. – Written survey comment

> Government clarity on regulated activities is needed, safeguarding too often used as barriers to WEX. – Written survey comment

> Give schools a ring-fenced budget for careers – especially for transport costs; make it a requirement for businesses over a certain size to work with schools (optional for those under this size). I don't see how the KS3 requirements are going to work – you can add a careers element to a trip; but is that really meaningful? Is watching a video of someone's place of work really an experience of a workplace? Better to have the KS3 as experience of different jobs/careers; that way we can get speakers into school much more easily to give students an understanding of some of the careers out there. – Written survey comment

For larger employers interviewed within this study, pre-16 work experience was seen by many as being more challenging to arrange than for older students.

> I'll be honest with you, we've had the odd request for younger people to come in and we've declined it, because it's just a bit more of a complex procedure in terms. At that age [11-16], we'll do things with them in schools or through programmes run by one of our partners. – Interview with large employer (utilities)

> We sometimes can't take a 14-15 year old on a site, but sometimes we do bring it into the classroom. I have a colleague who did a week's work experience programme, but delivered every single session in the school and every day for five days had a different person from the local project come in and talk about it and got a set of practical tasks and then at the end of the five days it all culminated all the way from the very initial planning stages of a project up to completion. – Interview with large employer (construction)

> We have historically orientated work experience to be year 12 only because when we did year 10 and year 12 as a mixed group, the year 10s weren't engaged. We had maybe two or so of the students engaged and the rest felt that it was just a week off school, so for our employees to not have to learn to be able to manage the behavioural considerations for work in laboratory and also for the students to get the most out of a work experience, we'd narrowed it down to year 12s only. – Interview with large employer (manufacturing/STEM)

Additional concerns are apparent with regard to student safeguarding and a potentially significantly growing expectation[211] that employers complete DBS checks.

> Our trust has questions regarding DBS for under 16's. This means they will only allow us to go on work experience for two days in year 10, hard to fulfil government requirements. More clarity needed over DBS – Written survey comment

211 https://consult.education.gov.uk/independent-education-and-school-safeguarding-division/keeping-children-safe-in-education-2026-revisions/

Finding placements for a three-day work experience in Year 10 (14-16 year olds) is challenging. Being able to secure five-day placements for them I envisage to be extremely difficult. In addition, the Keeping Children Safe in Education Guidance states that a child working with one adult who is not DBS checked should do so for no more than three days per month. Where is the funding to provide DBS checks for employers to authorise five days, or will the guidance in KCSiE change, therefore weakening safeguarding. Will it become necessary for any adult working alone with a child to be DBS checked, regardless of the length of time? To ensure robust safeguarding, this should be the case, but where does the funding come from and how is this communicated to employers. – Written survey comment

"In my dealings with employers, there is generally a greater willingness to host a 16 to 17 year old than a 14 to 15 year old. The prospect of hosting an A Level student who is interested, engaged, and motivated to gain insight into a sector is often more appealing than working with a younger student and the greater regulatory burden this can entail. There is also the question of student expectations. Many of our students actively seek out these opportunities, particularly those pursuing competitive pathways such as medicine, and it would be difficult to expect employers to restrict opportunities"

The DBS requirements may get more significant due to the new Crime and Policing Bill which is now in its final stages. Initiated by the Home Office in response to the recommendations of the Independent Inquiry into Child Sexual Abuse[212] it is understood that the Bill as currently drafted would remove the exemption for supervised activity meaning all of those in close frequent contact with young people (supervised or not) could be eligible for the highest level of checks at the school's request. This could have significant implications to employers and their employees offering Work Experience placements. Currently employees who are 'supervised' while interacting with young people on work experience are not in scope to be DBS checked. The change could mean employers being asked to have employees hosting work experience placements DBS checked. This would add considerable barriers and uncertainty to employers from hosting placements.

For larger employers interviewed, concerns over safeguarding were also apparent.

We now have a work experience guide document for managers. We have an agreement form. We have a checklist, we have a placement plan, a template of what a good week could look like and to support that as well. Just recently, we created a safeguarding policy. We had help from the NSPCC. We've bought 3 training sessions with the NSPCC. We're putting people through safeguarding training so that when we have young people on sites or in offices, if safeguarding concerns do arise, they can handle it in the most meaningful way. The training is a one-day course. The

212 https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/crime-and-policing-bill-2025-factsheets/crime-and-policing-bill-independent-inquiry-into-child-sexual-abuse-recommendations

manager on the site has to do a one hour online training module as well before they can have someone young with them and we know who's done it and who hasn't. – Interview with large employer (construction)

The use of external organisations to support the delivery of work experience

Over the last fifteen years a fragmented marketplace of private, not-for-profit and (in some areas) local government providers have emerged which provide services to schools in supporting their engagement with employers, notably regarding work experience. The Schools Survey explored how common it was for schools to make use of such providers and how much they paid for support.

Respondents were asked "Have you recently used an external organisation to help students (of all ages) find and/or undertake work experience placements (including their administration) or other forms of engagement with employers within career development?" Of the 225 respondents from schools which in recent years had expected at least some of their students aged 14-16 to complete work placements, 52% (116) replied that they had used an external organisation.

Asked why, these schools overwhelmingly used the providers to complete administrative requirements and to a lesser extent find placements for at least some students, support which was made available prior to 2011 by a national network of Education and Business Partnership Organisations at limited cost to schools.[213] On average ("roughly speaking"), the schools reported that they spent £5,212 annually on external providers.

TABLE 6.12: Why schools fund external providers to support employer engagement in career development. Schools Survey.

	All	Urban	Rural	Low FSM	High FSM	Low SEND	High SEND	Special school	State comprehensive
Finding placements for most students	19	22	0	18	22	16	25	21	15
Finding placements for some students	24	28	11	21	38	27	23	29	24
Finding placements for a small number of students	16	15	21	9	19	14	23	29	13
Finding placements for any students	59	65	32	47	78	57	70	79	51
Completing administrative requirements with the employer (e.g., health and safety, insurance)	71	68	84	71	65	66	73	79	71
Planning placement activities, including provision of log books	19	21	11	21	19	25	18	29	16

Costs to schools

Historic studies show that schools which made use of external organisations to support the delivery of work experience placements could expect to make significant savings. Drawing on data from the 2009/10 Education and Employers comprehensive review of expenditure on employer engagement in education (discussed in detail below), it was found that:

213 Mann, A. & B. Virk. 2013. Profound employer engagement in education: What it is and options for scaling it up. A report for the Board of Trustees of the Edge Foundation. Education and Employers Taskforce, London

an average unit cost for a two-week placement of £62 (including estimated school costs) where managed through an Educational Business Partnership Organisation operating within a single Local Authority area, reducing to £55 (again including estimated school costs) where operating over two or more authority areas. Best data available to the review suggested that the average unit cost to a school of managing the whole work experience process itself rises to an average of £138.[214]

Such variation was further reported in a substantial research project commissioned and published by the Department for Education and Skills in 2000. The study surveyed secondary schools to assess the extent and character of time demands in terms of the work experience. It concluded that on average teachers spent 120 hours, and administrators 43 hours, in managing work experience. However, when schools made use of intermediaries/brokers to facilitate work experience this average fell 108 hours (in total), while those who made all arrangements themselves needed 240 hours (in total).[215]

In both studies, engagement with external intermediaries more than halved the costs falling on schools. It is timely for new assessments to be undertaken to confirm the most efficient ways of delivering the planned new expectation that all students at Key Stage 4 in England will complete periods of work experience. An analysis for this report found that costs varied notably (Table 6.13).

TABLE 6.13: An analysis for this report found a range of costs:

Source:	Cost per student*
Key Group interviews with schools in 2024[216]	£75 (full brokerage) £20 (for health and safety check)
Expert Interviews by Social Market Foundation in 2023[217]	£60 (full placement organising)
Work experience policy from an academy trust in Birmingham for 2025/26[218]	£50-£100 (health and safety checks for out of area placements, supported by a provider)
Leicester Education Business Company (LEBC) charges reported by Redmoor Academy 2019[219]	£60 (full brokerage)
Essex County Council Proposed Fees for 2023/24[220]	£118 (bespoke matched placements, non-subscriber rate, reduced to £94 for subscribers) £17 (health and safety assessment)

These costs typically reflect one week of in-person work experience with a single employer, undertaken during Key Stage 4 in the traditional format in England. The costs typically cover brokerage and coordination with employers already signed up to offer work experience, sometimes including a health and safety check or risk assessment. Costs can be significantly higher for support for specialised placements, such as for students with adjustment needs or particular task/role requirements. Costs are also

214 Mann, A. 2012. Work experience – impact and delivery. Education

215 Hillage, J. et al. 1996. Pre-16 work experience in England. Institute for Employment Studies, University of Sussex.

216 **https://thekeygroup.com/news-insights/less-than-half-of-all-gcse-pupils-do-work-experience**

217 O'Regan, N., & Bhattacharya, A. (2023). Learning from experience: How to make high quality work experience a reality for all. London: Speakers for Schools. **https://www.futuresforall.org/research-reports**

218 King Edward VI Academy Trust Birmingham – Education Committee's Work Experience Policy last reviewed in May 2025. **https://nsg.kevibham.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/Work-Experience-Policy-2025-26.pdf**

219 **https://www.redmooracademy.org/futures-for-year-10-students/** (accessed May 2026)

220 Cabinet Report Paragraph 1 – Appendix 9 – Fees and charges

higher for services that include mentoring, preparation, placement-design, and/or integration support for the young person and employer, e.g. efforts to ensure a high quality work experience. These costs do not include the full social cost of providing work experience, which typically involves significant additional time from employers and from schools, as well as costs such as transport that are typically managed by participants.

Costs for specific groups can however be considerably higher. For example thanks to funding of £3.3m from JPMorganChase the Careers & Enterprise Company is overseeing the organising of 10 days of work experience for 3,700 disadvantaged young people (FSM, SEND, NEET risk). Equating to £892 per student this is expected to involve multiple employers per young person as well as setting up new process, organisation and evaluation, setting up a new process etc. And the Department for Education have also awarded the Careers and Enterprise Company £8.5 million for a new Aspiring Pathways programme[221] for workplace experiences for learners in Alternative Provision across Years 7–11 which is expected to reach around 330 AP settings nationally.

Employer engagement to support career exploration

The Schools Survey asked respondents how easy or difficult it was (or would be) for their school to organise a range of career exploration activities (labelled 'work experience activities' by the DfE) which are being proposed by the Department for Education primarily for students aged 11-14. The results (Table 6.14) show clearly that activities taking place in workplaces are considerably more challenging for schools to manage than those taking place inside of the school.

TABLE 6.14: In general, how easy or difficult would you say it is (or it would be) to arrange the following types of activities with employers to support the career development of students aged 11 to 14? Schools Survey.

Combined difficult/very difficult *(Just very difficult)*	All (312)	Urban (256)	Rural (56)	Low FSM (96)	High FSM (99)	Low SEND (130)	High SEND (103)	Special school (40)	State comprehensive (224)
At an employer: Work/job shadowing	94 *(58)*	94 *(57)*	94 *(58)*	92 *(60)*	94 *(61)*	93 *(62)*	97 *(53)*	100 *(48)*	92 *(59)*
At an employer: Workplace visits	81 *(42)*	82 *(41)*	79 *(45)*	87 *(50)*	77 *(42)*	84 *(47)*	78 *(41)*	68 *(28)*	83 *(44)*
In-school project/ activity with involves employers taking part in person.	56 *(14)*	54 *(12)*	66 *(13)*	63 *(7)*	58 *(15)*	59 *(9)*	62 *(9)*	60 *(15)*	54 *(14)*
In-school projects or enterprise activities which involve an employer	55 *(10)*	53 *(10)*	64 *(11)*	66 *(9)*	56 *(18)*	58 *(9)*	57 *(13)*	60 *(45)*	52 *(10)*
Virtual employer talks from their workplace	43 *(10)*	42 *(9)*	45 *(13)*	48 *(7)*	47 *(15)*	46 *(9)*	48 *(9)*	55 *(15)*	41 *(9)*
In-school career talks which include student participation	35 *(5)*	34 *(6)*	38 *(4)*	52 *(3)*	37 *(11)*	38 *(5)*	39 *(8)*	45 *(10)*	33 *(4)*

221 https://www.careersandenterprise.co.uk/news/85m-work-experience-boost-young-people-furthest-labour-market

Those respondents who identified any of the above activities as being either difficult or very difficult to arrange, were further asked for their views on some specific challenges. Table 6.15 highlights potential challenges with which respondents strongly agreed. For all, but Special Schools, a majority of respondents highlighted the challenge of releasing school staff and of finding employers in relation to external activities. Finding employers to support more substantial activities in-school were also seen as a major problem by more than one-third of all respondents. Engaging with employers is a greater issue for schools in rural and isolated locations which are also faced with the greatest challenges in meeting travel costs.

TABLE 6.15: Greatest barriers preventing the participation of students aged 11 to 14 in taking part in 'work experience activities' with employers. Schools Survey.

% Strongly agreeing that it is a problem	All (319)	Urban (256)	Rural (53)	Low FSM (63)	High FSM (91)	Low SEND (130)	High SEND (103)	Special school (36)	State comprehensive (210)
Releasing school staff to accompany students on visits and activities outside of school	66	66	58	69	68	62	58	45	70
Finding employers to engage in such activities is a problem.	54	51	68	58	56	52	50	45	54
Finding employers willing to participate in in-school activities lasting a few hours is a problem	37	34	47	40	43	33	41	33	36
The travel costs of getting students to workplaces are a problem.	33	29	53	35	40	49	47	13	38
The students are generally too young to benefit from such activities	6	7	4	5	8	3	7	8	6

Workplace visits

The Schools Survey highlighted consistent concerns about workplace visits.[222] Respondents noted the high costs of transportation which many found had increased considerably over recent years. In some schools, parents are asked for contributions to travel costs, but in areas of poverty, this was not seen as an option. Interview participants and survey respondents highlighted:

> The price of coaches is horrendous. Yeah, really, really challenging.... the coach costs are really significant and are a barrier to scale. Additional resources are required especially for workplace visits – we need to remove the financial barrier to support the school for things like visits. Or making travel for this free of charge and some devolved combined authorities have piloted that I know. – Careers lead, large national MAT.

> I booked a coach recently for 72 passengers to travel 18 miles and back was £780! We need ring fenced money! – Written survey comment

222 The Sutton Trust School Funding and Pupil Premium 2026 survey finds that 47% of 336 senior leaders surveyed in secondary schools agree that their school had cut back on trips and outings for financial reasons – **https://www.suttontrust.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/School-Funding-and-Pupil-Premium-2026.pdf.**

With 200 plus kids, you're then looking at 6, 7, 8 trips to get all of them to that workplace. … it's coaches and it's how do you get them there and back because it's not a simple case of saying we'll just take the minibus and we'll take 10 kids to this workplace because you'd have to do that 20 times and then for an employer, 20 dates to run the same activity is really hard for them to do . … We have to look at big places, so we take all of our year eight to Harry Potter world because we can do it over two days, we can take the whole cohort, they've got loads of kind of career themed stuff there. It's a workplace, and we do before and after stuff to help. …But that's still only a day out of the, you know, five days you're asking for in key Stage 3. This is the thing, and that the amount of work that goes into organising that one trip for that whole cohort again, it's a resource thing. You know, you've got members of staff that are doing coach quotes, that are checking all the healthcare plans…. It's a week's worth of work for somebody to organise one trip on two days for a cohort. And now you've got to do that five times. And the cost of coaches now as well, you know, six years ago, you'd hire a coach for £350. Great, now £900. – Careers lead, 11-19 comprehensive, South East.

There needs to be a budget provided to schools. Transport costs are extortionate and we cannot fund this for students in KS3 to travel to employers. We also cannot ask parents due to the high levels of deprivation in the local catchment area. We would love to be able to offer this to KS3 students but at present it is logistically impossible. – Written survey comment

If you work in a small town with mainly sole traders, how to you deliver KS3 WEX to large numbers of students? Who will pay for coaches to larger cities so that students can access larger companies who can accommodate class size numbers? – Written survey comment

Many schools particularly in the poorer funded areas do not have the funding or opportunity to accommodate the hugely inflated costs of transport that have occurred in the last few years let alone the cost of providing cover in schools. – Written survey comment

Challenges are also found in ensuring sufficient numbers of staff accompany students.

More needs to be done to incentivise companies to open their doors for workplace visits. However, the government needs to consider the logistics of whom they're incentivising. Small startups are not ideal, as they limit the number of students who can visit. Larger organisations should be targeted, as they can accommodate at least 20 students plus 2-3 school staff members, which aligns with the typical school ratio of 1:10. For example, if 2 companies accept only 15 students, 4 staff members are needed for 30 students. But if 2 companies accept 20 students each, the same 4 staff members can manage 40 students. – Written survey comment

> I also think workplace visits are difficult in terms of taking staff out of school – every day of cover costs £150 – and transport – a coach for the day is £1000. We have three minibuses but then we need drivers – the number of staff with minibus driving licences are limited. – Written survey comment

As discussed below, the majority of smaller employers surveyed in this study state that they would not be able to host more than 10 students on a workplace visit. Other concerns highlighted relate to employer reluctance to devote time to students under the age of 14 who will not be available for recruitment for many years.

> The logistics of ensuring an entire year group at KS3 can access the same opportunities is prohibitive (e.g. 150 students visiting a local employer – how would the employer accommodate that many visitors? Would it mean multiple visits, which would be logistically challenging). – Written survey comment

> I wonder how we are meant to provide 5 days of experiences for ALL students in KS3? Businesses may (and do) take 15 or so for sessions, and I have some of these running already, but how are we meant to offer something to all students in all years that they actually want to do? – Written survey comment

> The KS3 element is the most frustrating – companies (armed services as an example) are not willing to participate for KS3 as the students they will see won't be eligible to apply for positions with them for many years – Written survey comment

Interviewees from large employers for this study recognised that visits were often challenging to arrange.

> We've offered to have students from our local high school visit the workplace and actually the challenge has been on their side in terms of getting the resource, the staff to bring students into our office. So it's actually something we haven't done, but we have offered and we can accommodate it. What I've seen in the past is schools love the idea, but they just don't have the resource for teachers to physically bring a class group into a business. That means they're not at the school teaching, and they need a certain number for the number of students coming in. You need businesses that are up for it and within that you need individuals in businesses that are really pushing for it – Interview with large employer (utilities)

In these circumstances, the study heard from schools planning to build careers dimensions into external visits which were already planned for large cohorts, such as visits to the theatre and to zoos where efforts would be made to build career development activities in the event.

Job shadowing

The Schools Survey finds that the single most challenging activity identified by school staff in terms of external career exploration is job or work shadowing.[223] In all, 94% of school respondents agreed that this was difficult to arrange (58% strongly agreeing).

The findings demand investigation as this is a form of career development which is common in other countries. Job shadowing is distinctive from work experience in that employers are not required to identify work tasks for students or supervise them in work. Instead a student is usually assigned to an individual employee and shadows them for a period of time. Consequently as they are viewed as workplace visitors rather than as workers, the preparation on the part of the employer is reduced together with administrative requirements. The new legislation on DBS checks may well have implications on this for any student having one to one unsupervised time with an adult. However, a small group of students visiting a workplace having a tour and meeting a range of people and exploring different job roles is likely to be much easier to arrange.

International examples include:

In Canada, Take Our Kids to Work Day has been in operation since 1994. Annually, thousands of students typically aged 14-15 (but often younger) will visit workplaces to shadow people in work over a full day. Many, but by no means all, shadow their parents. In the province of New Brunswick, schools have participated in Engagement Days. Over one day, students from grades 3 through to 12 are eligible to take part in a workplace visit structured around a series of career conversations with working professionals.

In Germany, job shadowing is very common. A specific form of job shadowing was introduced in 2011. Girls' Day was launched as a means of challenging barriers preventing the more equal distribution of people in work by gender. Girls have the opportunity to spend a day meeting people and observing work in a field where women are traditionally under-represented. In the same year, Boys' Day was introduced providing boys with the same opportunity.[224] Activities are aimed at students aged 10-18.

In Latvia, Junior Achievement has run national job shadowing days which include an expectation that participating students will share their experiences through videos and presentations.

In Malta, the Career Exposure Experience is aimed at Year 10 students aged 14-15. Every year, the great majority of students in the grade spend up to five days in workplaces exploring vocational areas of interest. Each day is structured around a student engaging with a different host often within the same workplace. Over the week, students learn about individual occupations and how they interact within a vocational area.[225]

Chicago Public Schools is one of the largest networks of schools in the United States and has a long tradition of encouraging and enabling job shadowing. Aimed at students aged 14-18, over a half day the student visits a workplace to shadow a professional working in an occupation of interest.[226]

223 For an international overview of job shadowing as a form of career development, including studies on its effectiveness, see OECD. 2022. Job shadowing: A guide to delivering an effective career development activity. OECD Publishing, Paris.

224 See also, **https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/edu/career-readiness/Germany-Girls-Day-and-Boys-Day.pdf.** Many countries, including Austria, Belgium, Egypt, France, Korea and the Netherlands have followed the German model and created their own Girls' Days and Boys' Days.

225 See also, **https://euroguidance.gov.mt/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/CEE-Policy-May-2019-.pdf** and **https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/edu/career-readiness/Malta-Career-Exposure-Experience-for-Year-10-Students.pdf.**

226 See also, **https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/edu/career-readiness/United-States-Job-Shadowing-at-Chicago-Public-Schools.pdf.**

Job shadowing is not unknown in England. As one respondent to the Schools' Survey noted in written comments:

> We had in place take your child to work day and Work shadow days for years 8 and 10, so we have tweaked these to offer 5 days across years 7-9 when they go with family or family friends to work for either one day or two days. This has worked very well and just built on what we had in place already. We are getting a good percentage going out – e.g. year 8 last week we had 100 go out – approx. half the year group.

Job shadowing through family networks can be expected to be more challenging in areas of lower employment and certainly can be seen to support social reproduction if managed through relatives, but it remains an under-utilised tool for supporting career exploration. In other countries, national programmes actively encourage and enable parents to take classmates of their children and employers to take students who are not related to employees on job shadowing days in order to offer opportunities more equitably. In Canada, Take Our Kids to Work Day is a national event and teacher resources provided to help support the growth of critical career curiosity among young people.[227] This could be part of a concerted national effort to get employers to open up their place of work, perhaps an open day (half or full day) and enable young people to go and visit, see what they do and meet and chat to people working there.

The employers' perspective: challenges to engagement with schools

Barriers to engagement with schools are also apparent from the employers' perspective. Ideally, engagement will be easy, free and important to them.[228] For most employers, altruistic motivations are stronger than economic rationales for supporting schools. This means that employers are inherently reluctant to engage in activities which are costly or time-consuming. Surveys conducted with employers for this project find that it is possible to enhance the business case for employers and there is a clear interest in intermediaries facilitating connections and simplifying the process.

What motivates employers?

A number of UK studies have explored the motivations of employers in working with schools to support the career development of students.[229] Studies highlight two primary collection of motivations. On the one hand, altruism drives much engagement. Employers, including smaller enterprises, are often happy to 'do their bit' in giving students support.[230] On the other, employers have also identified selfish interests which fall primarily into four major categories: future staff recruitment, corporate reputation, staff development and staff engagement (staff happiness at work).[231] In many cases, there will be an overlap of altruistic and self-interested reasons for engagement.

227 https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/about/projects/edu/career-readiness/Canada-Take-Our-Kids-to-Work-Day.pdf.

228 Chambers, N. 2020. Four principles that guide the best employer engagement in education, in Mann. A. et al. Dream Jobs – Teenagers' career aspirations and the future of work. OECD Publishing, Paris.

229 Eddy Adams Consultants Ltd with Smart Consultancy (Scotland) Ltd and Training and Employment Research Unit, University of Glasgow. 2008. Work Experience in Scotland. Scottish Government

230 Federation of Small Businesses. 2007. Social and Environmental Responsibility and the Small Business Owner.

231 Corporate Citizenship. 2010. Volunteering – the business case. The benefits of corporate programmes in education. City of London.

> Our motivations are twofold. As a responsible business, we ask what we can give back, there's that element, but there's another element to it as well. Our industry isn't going anywhere. So we also want to be building a strong future pipeline and inspiring young people to consider STEM careers, careers in utilities or careers specifically in our sector – Interview with large employer (utilities)

> Thinking about how we hire our apprentices, for me personally 5 days of work experience outweighs an hour long interview for a role, so we should be trying to pipeline those people. – Interview with large employer (construction)

> Our education programme was born out of wanting to do something to rebuild the morale of people on site after a difficult period. The staff voted on what they wanted to do, and they wanted the company to work with schools. – Interview with large employer (manufacturing)

The National Employer Skills Survey asks large, representative samples of employers why they are willing to offer work placements and internships to students in secondary and higher education and in response to other government programmes. NESS analysts conclude that 70% of the reasons cited are best described as altruistic and 37% described as being in the self-interest of the enterprise (Table 6.16).

TABLE 6.16: Main reasons that employers give for offering work experience placements or internships (unprompted). Only those employers with such recent experience. England, 2024.

Gives them experience	44%
Helps us with recruitment / use it as a trial period	26%
Moral reasons / benefits to young people / doing our ""bit""	23%
Part of formal Social responsibility / CSR policy	7%
Asked/approached by student/school/university	5%
Raises our profile in the recruitment market	5%
Favour for family member/friend/friend or family of colleague	5%
An extra pair of hands/help with the workload	4%
Requirement of qualification/essential part of their studies	3%
Existing links/partnerships with educational institutions/training providers/job centre	2%
Beneficial to the company (e.g. fresh ideas/up to date skills etc.)	1%
Do not need to pay them	>1%
Government grant / funding (Incl. part of a government scheme)	>1%
Don't know	5%

SOURCE: Employer Skills Survey 2024. See chapter one, methodology.

In the survey of 220 enterprises employing fewer than 50 people carried out for this study, respondents were asked about the importance of working with schools to support career development. Respondents were asked "On a scale of 1 to 10 (with 1 being not at all important and 10 being extremely important), in your opinion how important is it to the people who make the decisions about how your workplace is run that it works with local schools to support the career development of students?" On average, assessed the importance at 6.7.

While some employers will be constrained by the specific circumstances of their work in the extent to which they can work with schools, the results indicate a strong latent willingness among employers of all sizes to work with schools, but this does not automatically translate into school engagement. After all, the Employer Skills Survey for England shows that only 18% had recently hosted a student under 16 on a work placement. However, most enterprises do not see self-interest as the driving reason behind their motivation. More often, they feel they are acting altruistically, more giving than taking from the arrangement. Consequently, it is very important that burdens on employers are minimised.[232] Even the large employers interviewed for this project, most of which had a history of working with schools, felt that more could be done to make the process easier:

> For the senior management, they're interested in understanding what's the return on investment for the resource that's going in now. One of the key returns, which is an easy metric to understand is how many people come onto an apprenticeship from the work experience. And this is an issue with the younger kids. From a stakeholder point of view, if they're looking at what's returning investment, they'll put their money on the year 12 because we see greater return going into apprenticeships rather than putting into year 10s where we don't see any return. The things that would make it easier for the company as a whole to get more engaged are tax breaks, grants, financial incentives will definitely make an impact, but for us I would say the financial incentive is less important. The thing that is more important is the ability to track. It would also be very helpful to know if when students get exposed to a company in their education does that lead to a sort of authority for the company. Because the students understand how that company does things and they've seen it in their school work, are they more likely to trust their products and brands? That would be a return on investment I could sell to my higher ups. To get companies engaged, you need to make it easy and you need to look at it not just in terms of ease on the day-to-day, but it's that return on investment. So if they're going to invest their own money, they need to see a return on that money. Otherwise, they're not going to want to do it. – Interview with large employer (manufacturing)

> It would make a difference If we had more evidence on whether people who do work experience are more likely to be hired and then to stay longer because they know what it's all about. – Interview with large employer (construction)

232 Mann, A. & C. Glover, 2011. Employer engagement in schools: The business case. Local Economy, 6:3, 214-220.

We do a lot with schools already, but we would really welcome clearer guidance and training around safeguarding, health and safety, insurance, things like how to start the programme? How to set up your business for work experience? How to deliver the good quality work experience? How to link to the curriculum? What you should do on the different days? It would be great to have a website where you can download all the templates, policies, procedures, case studies, maybe ambassadors to share about what they do and how they make it happen in their organisation. Maybe some curriculum templates, examples of how large employers have overcome health and safety risk challenges, things like that. – Interview with large employer (IT)

I would love some help in persuading people of the business benefits of the programme that we offer, the long-term returns that the industry can expect in terms of better recruitment because of it. – Interview with large employer (media)

An intermediary body could be doing a lot of impact assessments that probably employers would have very little time and to a certain extent willingness to do. It would be very helpful if a central organisation could help us to develop the business case and help us to make our system better. – Interview with large employer (finance)

For a company like ourselves where we've actually got a very well established outreach programme, introduction of new elements for the under 16s within that is going to be very difficult based upon resource allocation and funding. Senior management are already questioning the return on everything that we're doing with the year 12 because we're not seeing the return on it. So, for us to add in something extra they'd be questioning well: what's your day job? Is it working with the school kids or is your day job actually making products? – Interview with large employer (manufacturing/STEM)

As discussed below, opportunities do exist to increase the business case for engagement.

The Employers Survey collected information from 220 owners, managers or HR professionals working in enterprises employing fewer than 50 people. The survey explored barriers to working with schools. On a scale of one to ten, employer respondents were asked to assess how challenging different activities were for them and their enterprises.

TABLE 6.17: Employer perspectives on how challenging different engagement activities with schools are for their workplace on a scale of 1 (very easy) to 10 (very difficult). Employers Survey, 2026.

Hosting a 5-day work experience placement for someone under the age of 16	6
Hosting a workplace visit from school students aged under 16	5.9
A member of staff developing a work-related project for students at a school	5.6
Hosting a 5-day work experience placement to someone between the ages of 16 and 18	5.5
Hosting a workplace visit from school students between the ages of 16 and 18	5.5
Hosting 1 or 2 students at the workplace for job shadowing	5.5
A member of staff participating in an enterprise competition at a school	5.5
A member of staff mentoring a student	5.4
Hosting a student as part of a volunteering scheme	5.3
A member of staff going to a school to help students to develop a CV	5.3
A member of staff going to a school to help students to develop their interview skills	5.3
A member of staff going into a school to talk to students about their job and career	5.2
A member of staff participating in a job/careers fair	5

Across the sample, employers felt that activities taking place in their workplace would be more difficult for them. The easiest things for them to do is to send staff members into schools to engage with students through job fairs (5.0) or to give career talks (5.2). The most challenging relate to the provision of work experience (6.0) and workplace visits (5.9) for students under the age of 16. The results are similar to findings from a 2012 survey conducted by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development which explored the same question, in this case using a scale of 1 to 5 (Table 6.17).

TABLE 6.18: How demanding are different forms of employer engagement with schools, using a scale of 1 (not demanding) to 5 (very demanding). Survey of 780 HR professionals by the Chartered Institute for Personnel and Development, 2012[233]

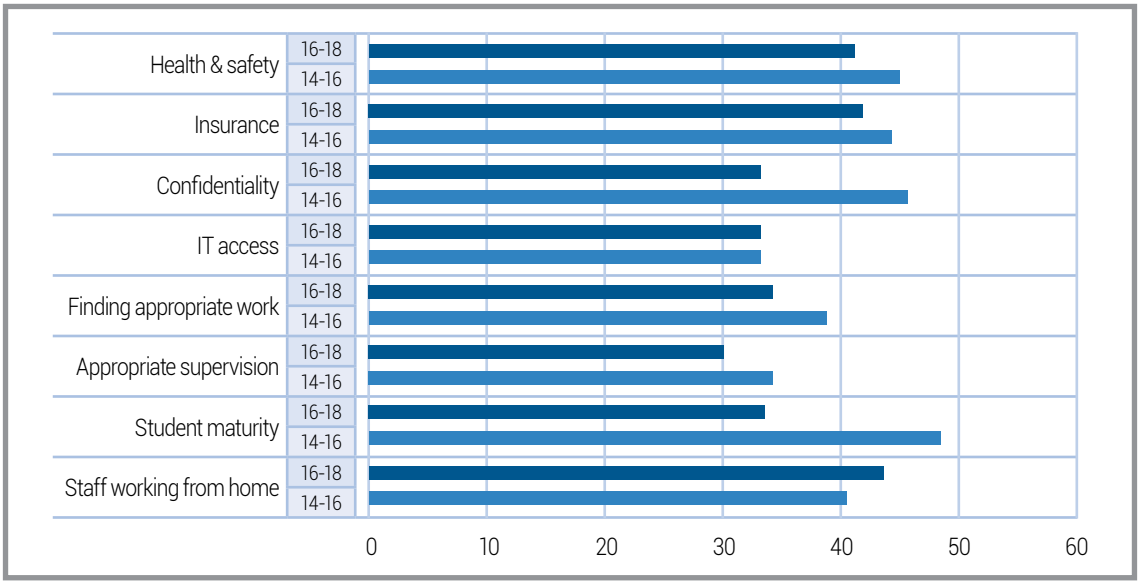
Organising work experience	3.27
Workplace visits	3.08
Staff volunteering to be mentors	3.06
Job shadowing	3.03
Staff volunteering to be governors	3
Staff volunteering to give mock interviews/CV feedback	2.93
Staff volunteering to take part in enterprise competitions	2.88
Staff volunteering to be reading or number partners (usually at primary schools)	2.84
Staff going into schools to talk about their organisations or the jobs they do	2.72

In relation to workplace visits, the employers responding to this project's 2026 survey were asked what would be the maximum number of students that their workplace would be able to accommodate at any one time. For 72% of the 220 respondents, the maximum number was 10 or less.

233 Mann, A. & B. Virk. 2013. Profound employer engagement in education: What it is and options for scaling it up. A report for the Board of Trustees of the Edge Foundation. Education and Employers Taskforce, London.

The Employers Survey further explored attitudes towards supporting school students under and over the age of 16 in relation to eight areas of potential concern. Table 6.16 shows the percentage of respondents who felt that the area of concern would prevent, or make it difficult for their workplace to host a student. Across the results, a consistent if generally small variation is apparent with the notable exception of issues of confidentiality and student maturity. On the whole, the results endorse the schools' perspective that workplaces do prefer hosting older students, but they are not substantially more against hosting younger ones.

TABLE 6.19: Percentage of employers who feel barriers prevent or make it difficult to offer work experience placements to students of different ages. Employers Survey, 2026.



How flexible are employers on the duration of work experience?

Historic UK studies suggest that employers tend to favour one week's duration for a work experience placement if with a significant minority expressing a preference for two weeks.[234] The Employers Survey explored how workplaces would respond to requests for a work placement of a single day's duration. Across the sample of 220 small and medium-sized workplaces, 35% said that such duration would prevent or make it difficult for their workplace to accommodate the request (Table 6.20). For slightly over half (58%), a single day's work experience would not present a problem.

TABLE 6.20: Employer perspectives on whether a work experience placement of one day's duration would present them with problems. Employers Survey, 2026.

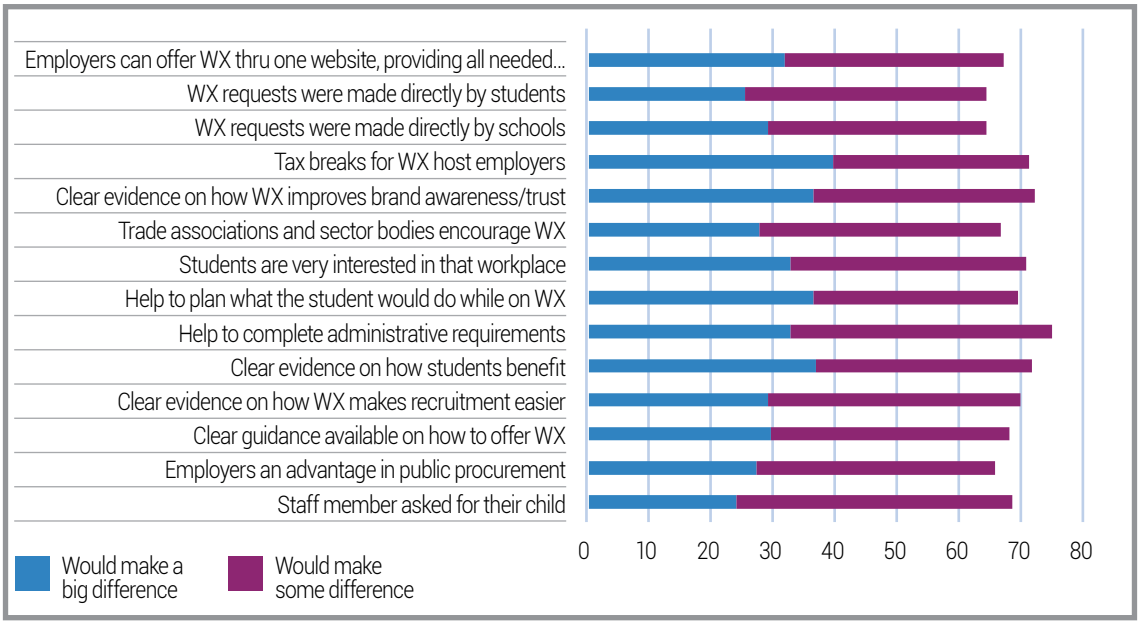
% agreeing with statement	All respondents (220)
This would prevent us from hosting a student	10
This would make it difficult for us to host a student	25
This would not be a problem for us in hosting a student this age	58
Unsure /don't know	8

234 Eddy Adams Consultants Ltd with Smart Consultancy (Scotland) Ltd and Training and Employment Research Unit, University of Glasgow. 2008. Work Experience in Scotland. Scottish Government

What would make it more attractive to employers to offer pre-16 work experience

Having identified perceived barriers, the Employers Survey explored potential responses. Table 16.21 highlights a strong openness on the part of employers to provide work experience to students aged 14-16 if the economic business case for them was stronger (tax breaks, procurement advantages, easier recruitment), if the process was easier (an online one-stop-shop, administrative support), clear support from relevant institutions (trade associations, schools) and greater confidence of impact (student impact, evidence on benefit).

TABLE 16.21: Employer perceptions on factors which would make them more willing to offer pre-16 work experience (WX) placements. Employers Survey, 2026.



Breaking down the data, there is no clear variation in responses between employers with recent experience of providing work experience to younger students and those which no such experience.

From the employers' perspective, there is considerable interest in greater external support which would address related challenges to smooth and effective engagement. Among the leading factors which would make a difference in the provision of greater work experience for students under the age of 16 are:

- Help available to make it easy to complete administrative requirements (74% saying it would make some or a big difference)
- Clear evidence available on how students benefit from work experience placements (71% saying it would make some or a big difference)
- Clear evidence available on how hosting work experience students could make future recruitment easier (69% saying it would make some or a big difference)
- Help available to make it easy to plan what the student would do while on work experience (69% saying it would make some or a big difference)
- Clear information and guidance available on how to offer a work experience placement (67% saying it would make some or a big difference)

- Workplaces/employers being able to register their willingness to host a student on a national website that provided all necessary guidance (66% saying it would make some or a big difference).

As summarised in chapter three of this paper, strong significant evidence is now available to show that students can be expected to benefit from work experience placements.

The Survey of Young Adults provides relevant new data with regard to two further possible ways in which the business case for work experience placements can be strengthened. In all, 72% of the 220 employer respondents agreed that it would make a difference if "clear evidence was available on how hosting work experience students could improve brand awareness and trust." The responses of young adults will make encouraging reading to many employers. Table 16.20 shows that two-thirds of young adults with placement experience felt more positive about the employer after their placement: they were more likely to buy a product, use a service or recommend the enterprise.

TABLE 16.22: Perceptions of young people on the reputation of employers with whom they did work experience placements. Survey of Young Adults, 2026.

% agreeing with statement	All (606) respondents
I felt much more positive about the employer	32%
I felt a bit more positive about the employer	36%
I felt a bit more negative about the employer	5%
I felt much more negative about the about the employer	2%
It didn't change the way I thought about the employer	25%

The Survey of Young Adults provides further results of interest in relation to potential later recruitment. As noted, the National Employer Skills Survey shows that one in ten employers with experience of hosting work placements say that they have recruited a work experience student after the completion of the placement. The Young Adults' Survey shows that many young people are also keen to work for an employer with whom they have completed a placement. One in three say that the experience made them more likely to want to work for the host employer and a further 40% in the same area of work one day.

TABLE 16.23: Perceptions of young people on whether they would like to work in the future for an employer with whom they did work experience placements. Survey of Young Adults, 2026.

% agreeing with statement	All (606) respondents
It made me more likely to want to work for that employer in the future	33%
It made me more likely to want to work in that area of work one, but not for that employer	40%
It made no difference to the way I thought	15%
It makes me less likely to want to work for that employer and in that type of work in the future	21%

The findings represent one way in which the business case for employers can be strengthened, increasing the importance of engagement with education.

The desirability of an intermediary organisation: schools' perspective

The surveys show that schools as well as employers are clear that they would strongly welcome greater external support to make it easier for them to work together to support student career development. Based on the results of project interviews, 17 options for additional external support were offered in the School Survey with respondents signalling their usefulness on a scale of 1 to 5 (with 5 being extremely useful). All 17 options were strongly supported by the majority of respondents with some variation by school type.

Of greatest importance is the provision of databases of employers willing to provide work experience placements (for some or all students) and other activities (supported by more than 80% of respondents). A communications campaign aimed at employers is also strongly supported (74%).

Also, extremely useful would be:

- action to make provision more efficient, including greater clarity in expectations for schools and employers, including a shared menu of activities (70%) and standardised documentation (61%) and articulation of the outcomes expected of well-prepared students at 14 and 16 (67%)
- provision to build school capacity, including a ring-fenced school budget (80%), support on activity administration (63%), liaison between local schools to stagger work experience (61%), personalised support (61%) and opportunities for intra-school learning (52%)
- support to increase the case for strategic provision, including better labour market information (67%) and research on the value of engagement for students and employers (64%).

1997 A better way to work, TUC

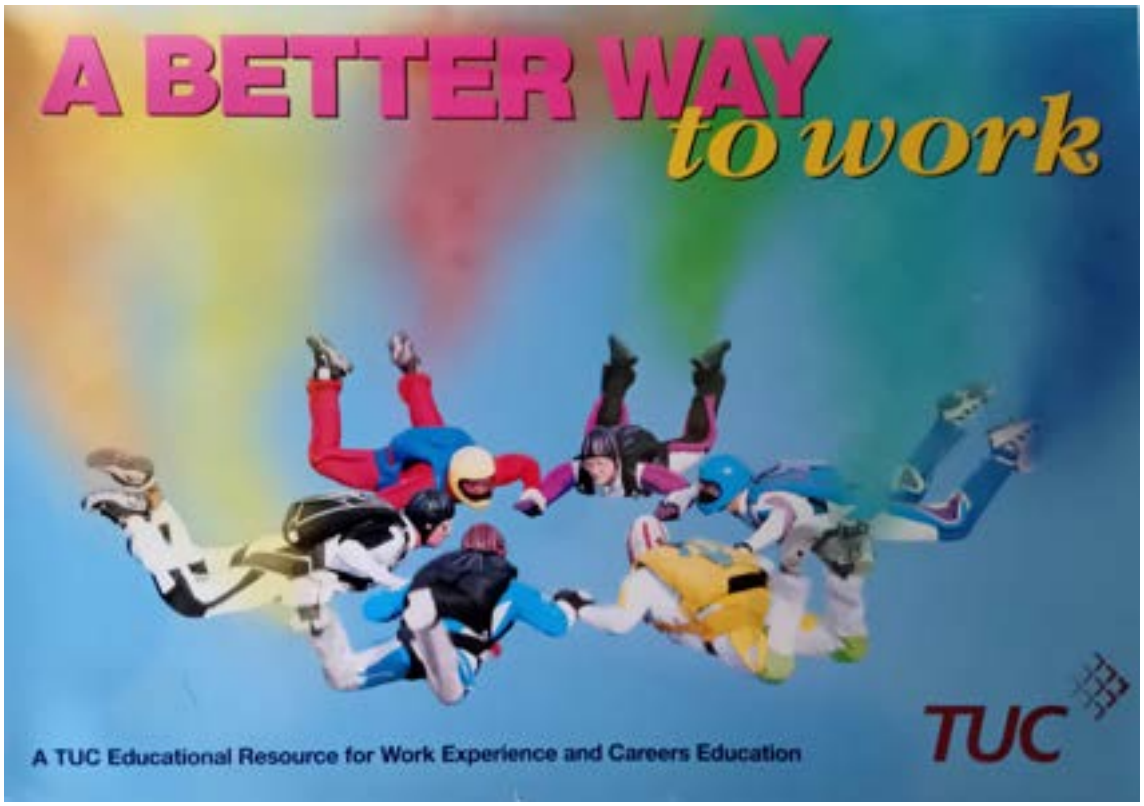


TABLE 16.24: Schools' perspectives on sources of support available at a local, regional or national level which would be extremely useful to them in supporting employer engagement activities. Schools Survey.

% saying that the following would be 'extremely useful' at local, regional or national level	All (350)	Urban (278)	Rural (63)	Low FSM (109)	High FSM (106)	Low SEND (139)	High SEND (118)	Special school (44)	State comprehensive (231)
A database of willing employers which have agreed to provide work experience placements, including contact details – for some students (e.g., those requiring additional support)	87	86	88	90	92	82	91	95	87
A database of willing employers which have agreed to provide work experience placements, including contact details – for all students	86	85	90	86	91	81	89	93	86
More support for finding willing employers to support other activities, e.g. career talks/workplace visits	81	80	84	80	92	78	90	90	81
A very clear description by government of its expectations for work experience	80	82	71	81	85	78	82	79	79
A ring-fenced budget to support those students requiring additional support	80	80	79	80	87	78	81	81	81
A communications campaign to encourage and prepare employers to be open to approaches from schools	74	75	71	68	80	72	78	83	73
An organisation which would manage access to local large employers to ensure fair access for all local schools	73	74	74	70	82	71	78	86	74
A shared menu of activities which schools and employers would both use to understand what is meant by different activities	70	69	71	72	77	67	74	81	68
Clear guidance on what it means for a student to be well-prepared in terms of career development at 14 or at 16, focused on the outcomes expected for the student	67	69	57	72	73	63	78	81	64
An organisation which would provide easy-to-use details of local labour market demand and skills priorities	67	67	67	71	76	62	73	79	67
Accessible, robust research on the value of such activities to both students and employers	64	66	53	68	71	63	69	71	61
An organisation which would take responsibility for managing the administrative aspects of work experience (e.g., health and safety, insurance)	63	63	64	64	72	64	65	69	63
An organisation you could call on for personalised advice	61	60	71	58	75	58	70	86	58
Standardised administrative documentation for when students do work experience or engage with employers in other ways (e.g., health and safety, insurance)	61	62	57	55	72	62	66	76	60
An organisation which would liaise between schools to stagger work experience dates	61	62	57	62	67	58	68	76	61
A means to share learning and increase collaboration with counterparts in other schools	52	52	50	49	61	46	62	74	47

Conclusions: predictable challenges in the delivery of efficient employer engagement and how they can be responded to

The process of employer engagement to support career development depends upon schools and their students identifying willing employers to offer appropriate activities. This is not a straightforward task.

For most employers, there is not a clear self-interest in engaging with schools. Currently, while a minority of employers can see a business interest in engagement, for most it is a matter of 'doing their bit' responding to ad hoc requests. Consequently, for employers, including the great many of smaller enterprises which provide the greatest proportion of work experience placements, engagement must be simple and low cost. New research undertaken for this project highlights ways in which engagement can be made easier. It also finds that self-interested perceptions of the importance of engagement might be changed, showing that provision of work experience can be expected to bolster corporate reputation and recruitment interest among young people.

For schools and their students, identifying the right employers comes at the cost of significant wasted time. Even large, national employers (including in the public sector) do not make it easy. Very few describe online if and how students can apply for work experience placements. Additionally, schools are under an important duty of care to ensure that students on work placements are safe and protected generating further costs in time and money.

For schools other employer engagement activities also come with significant costs in time and money. Transportation for school visits has become substantially more expensive in recent years and finding staff to accompany students is often very difficult. It can be expected that costs are greater for schools in rural and isolated areas. Finding employers willing and able to host such visits is a significant concern. Currently, schools find it very difficult to generate workplace exposure through job shadowing a practice common in other countries. This raises an important question for policy makers: why is job shadowing so much more difficult in England compared to other countries? And what more could be done to promote work place visits.

For both schools and employers, it is significantly easier to engage through in-school activities which bring many benefits to students (see chapters two and four).

As discussed earlier in this work, scores of UK and international longitudinal studies show that there is very strong reason to believe that teenage career development, notably when informed by employer engagement is strongly linked with better employment outcomes. It has become easier than ever for governments to make assessments of the returns generated by school guidance programmes in terms of long-term savings to the public purse which can be expected through lower NEET rates and youth unemployment, lower social welfare spending and greater tax revenue. Return on Investment analyses (discussed in chapter two) assess the full costs and benefits of policy interventions, identifying savings that can be reasonably anticipated across national expenditure, making it easier for Government as a whole (not just the Department for Education) to assess the value of school-age interventions.

This study finds that both employers and schools would strongly welcome greater assistance in making the process of employer engagement easier:

- Clarifying expectations, standardising key documentation and activities;
- Finding one another through a single mechanism
- Support in completing administrative requirements.

In both finding employers and managing administrative responsibilities, studies show that costs to schools can be reduced by external organisations. Many schools, half in this project's survey, pay external providers to help them find placements notably for those students facing greatest challenges in securing an appropriate work placement and to reduce the administrative burdens on school staff. On average, schools spend £5,212 on external provision related to work experience. As discussed below, in the recent past a national infrastructure of publicly funded supporting bodies (Education Business Partnership Organisations) undertook these roles, building extensive databases of employer contacts, health and safety assessments and insurance details, enabling almost universal participation in work experience placements while addressing the specific needs of discrete groups of students. While this coordinated, coherent and strategic approach was abandoned in England in 2011, it has continued in other UK nations, and it is timely to review the most efficient ways of ensuring equitable and effective provision.

It is currently impossible to run an effective national communications campaign encouraging greater employer support for career development. There is no single portal to which employers can be directed to signal their willingness to engage (notably with regard to those students requiring additional support). The successful approach used in establishing Inspiring the Future is worth consideration. It was developed following extensive consultation with the leaders of organisations representing education and employers in partnership with government. This ensured that the needs of the key stakeholders were met and that the mechanism developed was effective and scalable. Cited as a global exemplar by the OECD, it enables employers and people in work to signal their willingness to work with schools across a range of activities, providing key information linked to equity questions, subjects of study and vocational pathways. The system uses mapping technology to identify volunteers who are local to schools across the country. 'White labelling' technology allows existing and new employer engagement schemes and programmes, operating locally or nationally, to make use of the technology. It is a methodology that allows for strategic communications activity to build engagement from across the employer community linked to priority economic areas, geographic locations and equity concerns. Through the single portal, key transaction costs can be substantially reduced.

Historically, in England intermediary organisations have operated at a local authority level. Immediately below are the summarised results of a detailed study of the costs and outputs of the national delivery model which was in place until 2011 (Annex 1). It describes a structure which enabled additional funding from other government departments, from employers and the third sector and delivered close to universal work experience and many other activities.

There is a strong argument for a national intermediary organisation focused specifically on work experience placements. An efficient vehicle would map employer availability against school demand and enable and support the continued operation of existing local, sub-regional, regional and national programmes. It would also allow the channelling

of sector specific programmes, provide dedicated support to schools and students in greatest need, and a mechanism for managing overlapping demands within specific locations where multiple schools compete for employers' attention. Working with professional bodies and trade associations, such a one-stop-shop would be well placed to champion employer engagement, notably in sectors which are currently poorly represented, strengthening the case for self-interested employer engagement. In liaison with the Department for Education, the role might include the promotion of national events, like "Take Our Kids to Work Day". To ensure that the intermediary meets the needs of the stakeholder community, governing oversight should be shared between representatives of the educational workforce, employer and trade union bodies and government. It would also need to harness and support organisations, many of which are charities which are currently organising work experience placements and encounters with the world of work. Care would need to be taken to ensure that government funding is not spent competing with such organisations and replicating what they do. Instead it should seek to build on their expertise and enhancing what they are doing.

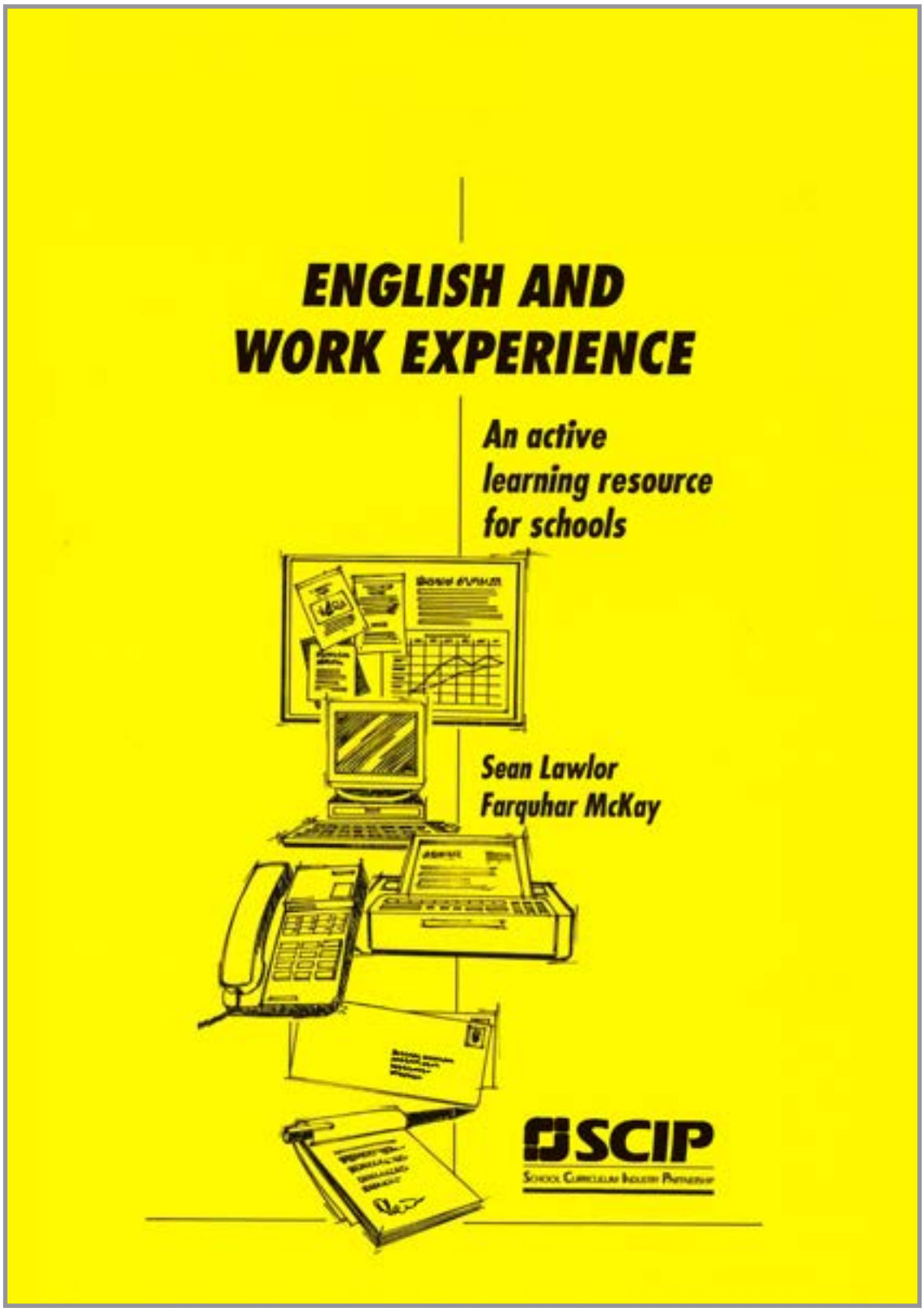
A key priority in returning to universal levels of employer engagement is to ensure that appropriate support is in place to address the additional needs of large numbers of under-served students who need extra help if they are to benefit from provision.

Fully efficient provision is best described as the lowest cost means of ensuring effective and equitable provision. As this study has illustrated, and expert commentary from Deirdre Hughes (Annex 2) further describes, it is likely that many schools do not resource career guidance sufficiently from internal resources.

Some schools face inherently greater challenges than others linked to geographic location and student characteristics. A ring-fenced budget linked to such additional barriers will help to drive more equitable provision, trusting the professionals closest to students to address additional needs. Consistent collection and review of appropriate data, including student perceptions of the value of their experiences (rather than simple participation), will further focus attention on the continuous improvement of provision.

Analysis of new data presented in this report presents new evidence of the ways in which pre-16 work experience participation can be expected to reduce NEET rates at 16-18 (see chapter three). It is timely in light of NEET rates exceeding one million young people aged 16-24, for Government to undertake a comprehensive Return on Investment study to assess the benefits that can reasonably be expected from greater school-age employer engagement/career development for both individuals and the state. Considerable data already exists linking such activities to better employment outcomes, including lower NEET rates, and new studies can look to further confirm the strength of results. Some opportunities will exist to enhance the evidence base through greater analysis of administrative data, but this is likely to give a limited picture of the breadth of teenage employer engagement. A quick, adaptable and low cost means of gathering more comprehensive new data is to commission a large-scale survey of young adults. Such studies can further explore the extent to which experiences and outcomes can be seen as equitable.[235]

235 Moote, J. et al. 2024. More is more: exploring the relationship between young people's experiences of school-based career education, information, advice and guidance at age 14–16 and wider adult outcomes at age 21–22 in England. Research Papers in Education, 40:1, 72-95; Mann et al. 2017. Contemporary Transitions: Young Britons reflect on life after secondary school and college. Education and Employers, London


ENGLISH AND
WORK EXPERIENCE
An active
learning resource
for schools
Sean Lawlor
Farquhar McKay
SCIP

Annex 1. An intermediary model: employer engagement in education investment and outputs 2009/10 – published for the first time

As noted by Professor Prue Huddleston in her historic overview of employer engagement in education in the UK (see chapter four), connections between schools and employers have frequently been actively facilitated by publicly funded programmes which resourced intermediary organisations. These include:

- The School Curriculum Industry Partnership (SCIP) tasked with working with Local Education Authorities to promote curriculum development in the field of education-industry links (1980s)
- The appointment of Schools Industry Laison Officers (SILOs) within local education authorities funded by the Department for Trade and Industry (DTI) (1980s)
- A network of 147 Education and Enterprise Advisers tasked with linking schools and business and securing target work experience numbers (1998-91)
- Education Business Partnership Organisations in every local authority (1990s/2000s).[236]

Public information on both the funding of these initiatives and outcomes is relatively rare. Moreover, at any one time since the 1970s public money has been dedicated to a range of further initiatives, often focused on specific career development activities which required collaboration between schools and employers.

In 2011, a unusually comprehensive study of public funding of employer engagement, and the outcomes it secured, was undertaken by Education and Employers with the cooperation of the Department for Children, Schools and Families (now Department for Education).[237] The unpublished review was completed with the support of DCSF officials who liaised with other government departments to confirm investment figures.

Published here for the first time for this study the review provides important insight into a costed model for the delivery of provision at a time when it was a statutory requirement for all students at Key Stage 4 in England to participate in work-related learning, most commonly (but not exclusively) work experience placements.

The review defined employer engagement as:

> voluntary (free of charge) support offered by employers to support the learning and progression of young people (aged 5-19) and the effective governance of the institutions they study within. Consequently, the report focuses on activities such as work experience, enterprise education, business mentoring, workplace visits, careers talks and provision of employee governors.

236 https://www.edge.co.uk/documents/210/Learning_from_the_past_Paper_No._5-2_mxZTVxW.pdf

237 The review benefited from considerable pro bono support from You Gov (polling), Ernst & Young (economic analysis), Baker Tilly (economic analysis) and the members of the Taskforce Research Group (notably, Professor Prue Huddleston). The report is available on the Education and Employers website.

Given the complex nature of the subject, the review provides an exceptionally well-evidenced estimate of expenditure and sources of funding that went into employer engagement in education to support the learning and progression of students in England in 2009/10, against a number of specific engagement activities, facilitated by this investment.[238] The review was based on review of government spending, public accounts and returns from third-sector organisations working in the field and EBPOs.

In total, the study estimated that investment in employer engagement could be reasonably calculated at £599,311,173 of which contributions came from:

- employers (including calculations for time given) 76%
- government (national and local) 17%
- schools and colleges 7%
- And, third sector organisations 1%.

The estimate is based on calculated engagement of 749,290 employers/employees over a total of 10,693,470 hours participating in engagement activities with schools.

The large employer contribution included an assessment of both the salary and on-costs of dedicated school liaison staff (in large employers) and a calculation of staff costs volunteer employees spent working with schools and students. As set out in table A1, public funding (totalling £53,764,984) came from eight different government departments and was dispersed through 25 funding streams.

Funding to support work experience and other employer engagement activities

The DCSF spent a total of £46,413,938[239] on employer engagement activities in 2009/10. It contributed to a wide number of activities, covering the areas of enterprise, school governors, Modern Foreign Languages (MFL), Science Technology, Engineering and Mathematics education (STEM), work experience, as well as a number of generic programmes.

238 Within the scope of the study were careers advice, enterprise activities (involving employers), literacy, business mentoring, numeracy, work experience, workplace visits and subject specific activities (Modern Foreign Languages and STEM subjects). Also in scope is employer engagement to support the institutional performance of schools and colleges through provision of employee governors. The Review did not include financial contributions made by employers, in the form of philanthropy, to schools and colleges within its scope.

239 Equivalent to £73,056,925.97 in 2026 using the Bank of England's inflation calculator: **https://www.bankofengland.co.uk/monetary-policy/inflation/inflation-calculator**

TABLE A1.1: Spending on Employer Engagement Activities in 2009/2010 by Central Government Departments

Department	Activity area	Programme	Provider	Sum	Detail
DCSF/ DfE	Generic	Black Country Challenge / Business Class	BITC	£45,000	To support school-business partnerships in a specific geographic area.
DCSF/ DfE	Generic	DfE staff costs	---	£1,000,000	Estimate. Personnel with responsibility for oversight of policy design, implementation and monitoring related to employer engagement in education across range of DfE funded programmes.
DCSF/ DfE	Generic	EBPO funding	YPLA	£25,000,000	Funding through YPLA for LA EBPOs to engage employers primarily to support WRL at KS4.
DCSF/ DfE	Generic	Education and Employers Taskforce	Taskforce	£450,000	To increase employer engagement in education, across ages 5-19. (Evenly distributed across all activities).
DCSF/ DfE	Generic	IEBE	IEBE	£602,947[i]	DCSF Contract. DCSF assess contract at c.£900k for academic year 09/10 – to improve quality of EBPO delivery.
DCSF/ DfE	Generic	Young Apprenticeships (SSCs)	SSCs	£81,518[ii]	Funding for Sector Skills Councils to engage employers in programme development and quality control.
DCSF/ DfE	Enterprise	Enterprise Education (schools grant)	---	£12,057,754	Proportion of £55m enterprise education element of school grant funding spent by schools on activity involving employers. See note: Estimating Whitehall funding for enterprise activities engaging employers, 2009-10 (Appendix 1)
DCSF/ DfE	Enterprise	Evaluation of enterprise education (central top slice from enterprise budget)	Research consultancy	£50,000	£100k total. Proportion estimated to relate to employer engagement in enterprise activity, see note: Estimating Whitehall funding for enterprise activities engaging employers, 2009-10 (Appendix 1)
DCSF/ DfE	Enterprise	London Organising Committee of the Olympic Games (LOCOG) (central top slice from enterprise budget)	LOCOG	£150,000	£300k total. Proportion estimated to relate to employer engagement in enterprise activity, see note: Estimating Whitehall funding for enterprise activities engaging employers, 2009-10 (Appendix 1)
DCSF/ DfE	Enterprise	SSAT Enterprise Network (central top slice from enterprise budget)	SSAT	£2,700,000	£5.4m total. Proportion estimated to relate to employer engagement in enterprise activity, see note: Estimating Whitehall funding for enterprise activities engaging employers, 2009-10 (Appendix 1)
DCSF/ DfE	Enterprise	Teaching Award for Enterprise (central top slice from enterprise budget)	Teaching Awards	£100,000	£200k total. Proportion estimated to relate to employer engagement in enterprise activity, see note: Estimating Whitehall funding for enterprise activities engaging employers, 2009-10 (Appendix 1)
DCSF/ DfE	Enterprise	Young Chamber (central top slice from enterprise budget)	Young Chamber	£2,500,000	Enterprise education – all activity assessed as involving employers

Department	Activity area	Programme	Provider	Sum	Detail
DCSF/ DfE	Governors	School Governors One-stop Shop (SGOSS)	SGOSS	£790,000[iii]	To encourage and enable employers to support staff becoming school governors.
DCSF/ DfE	MFL	Business Language Champions	CILT	£536,275	To increase MFL take-up and achievement. Delivered through CILT.
DCSF/ DfE	STEM	Engineering Development Trust (EDT)	EDT	£76,000[iv]	STEM. To support enhancement and enrichment activities in two programmes: Go4SET and Engineering Education Scheme.
DCSF/ DfE	STEM	Smallpeice Trust	Smallpeice Trust	£174,444[v]	STEM . To support enhancement and enrichment activities.
DCSF/ DfE	Work experience	Big Conversation	BITC	£100,000	National campaign to improve the quality of work experience.
BIS	STEM	STEMNET ambassadors Smallpeice Trust		£2,687,359[vi]	Employee volunteer enhancement and enrichment activities. Funding for Smallpeice Trust (£222,559) routed through HEFCE
DCLG	Enterprise	LEGI	LA partnerships	£3,333,333[vii]	See note: Estimating Whitehall funding for enterprise activities engaging employers, 2009-10 (Appendix 1)
Home Office	Mentoring	Mosiac Mentoring Programme	BITC	£50,000[viii]	Ethnic minority mentoring programme.
NWDA	Generic	Business Class in Burnley	BITC	£91,196[ix]	To support school-business partnerships in specific geographic area.
OGD (non-DfE)	Generic	OGD staff costs	---	£1,000,000	Estimate. Personnel with responsibility for oversight of policy design, implementation and monitoring related to employer engagement in education across range of non-DfE OGD funded programmes.
'Public sector income'	STEM	Industrial Trust		£139,158	May relate to funding from other UK nations.
'Government contract'	Enterprise	Young Enterprise		£50,000[x]	May relate to funding from other UK nations.
TOTAL:				**£53,764,984**	

KEY.

[i] Annual accounts

[ii] Correspondence with YPLA, 25/02

[iii] Annual accounts

[iv] Correspondence with EDT, 11/02

[v] Correspondence with DfE, 25/02; Annual accounts 2009

[vi] Correspondence with BIS, 08/03

[vii] National Evaluation of the Local Enterprise Growth Initiative Programme (DCLG, 2010), 35-38

[viii] Annual accounts

[ix] BITC submission

[x] Annual accounts

Funding for work experience and related activities in secondary education

DfE funding to support employer engagement activities covered a range of activities, including some provision not directly related to 11-16 provision. Activities aimed at this group were primarily enabled through the national network of Education Business Partnership Organisations (EBPOs). In 2009/10, the then DCSF provided £25,000,000[240] through the Young People's Learning Agency (YPLA) as core funding to enable every local authority to run an EBPO. EBPOs also secured funding from other sources, notably to support specific programmes, much (but not all of which) included provision aimed at students aged 11-16. Reflecting the statutory right to work-related learning at Key Stage 4, the primary focus of the work of EBPOs was on lower secondary education, particularly in ensuring the delivery of work experience placements.

By way of illustration, the review published data from the YPLA on the numbers of employers engaged by EBPOs. EBPOs funded through the YPLA in 2009-10 were required to return management information on the number of activities undertaken to support work-related learning in schools and colleges. Data returns give figures for the total number of students involved in individual employer engagement activities (1,528,971). The study reviewed data to provide an assessment of the total number of employers engaged in supporting the career development of school students through EBPOs. This provides a guide to the range of employer engagement activity delivered in return for the £25m investment. Figures for both students and employers inevitably included some double-counting and activities include some students younger or older than 16.

TABLE A1.2: Employers engaged in engagement activities with schools as a result of YPLA funding of Education Business Partnership Organisations

Activity type	No. of employers
WEX	502,833
WEX-other	21,111
WEX-Extended	24,100
WEX-Extended-other	2,762
Careers advice	71,780
Enterprise	17,894
Governors	-
Literacy	12,270
Mentoring	3,584
MFL	34
Numeracy	8,042
STEM	1,332
Workplace visits	6,812
Other Activities	9,255
Total	**678,205**

240 Equivalent to £39,350,747.38 in 2026.

YPLA data for 2009/10 stated that 523,553 students were recorded as taking part in work experience placements, of which 24,100 were recorded as extended (more than 10 days duration). Additionally, 1,002,038 students were recorded as taking part in other work-related learning activities. While the YPLA data include some discrepancies, these are modest.

With regard to work experience, EBPO responsibilities commonly included confirmation that Health and Safety, insurance and any other administrative responsibilities were completed in addition to sourcing some placements. Additionally, during the tax year, the Department for Children Schools and Families provided funding of £602,947 to support the national Institute for Education Business Partnership which worked to enhance quality across the sector and £100,000 to support a local work experience partnership run by Business in the Community (BITC), a charity.

Based on reviews of the accounts of a representative sample of EBPOs, the review estimated that these organisations received in total an additional £9,388,540[241] from schools annually. An advantage of the national EBPO network was that is created a primary and convenient vehicle for school-employer relationships, and in addition during 2009/10, EBPOs were also estimated to have received significant further contributions from other government departments, from employers and from third sector organisations often for specific projects (c.£3m). Local authorities are also known to have provided funding for EBPOs, likely to be in the region of £40,000,000. This is likely to include significant sums covering the costs of premises.

In addition, the review calculated the costs of school staff time for managing work experience placements. Research commissioned and published by the Department for Education and Skills in 1996[242] surveyed secondary schools to assess the extent and character of such time demands in terms of the work experience. The study estimated that on average teachers spent 120 hours, and administrators 43 hours, in managing work experience. This division of labour was calculated as a ratio: 73:27. The report subsequently differentiated the demands on schools which use intermediaries/brokers to facilitate work experience (108 hours in total) and those which make all arrangements themselves (240 hours in total). No breakdown of the relative demands on teachers and administrators was given for such differentiated approaches.

In 2009/10, overwhelmingly schools used brokers (EBPOs) to facilitate work experience. Applying the 73:27 ratio to the 108 total hours assessment of time demands, it can be estimated that an average school would require 78.8 hours of teacher time and 29.2 hours of administrator time to oversee the internal school management of work experience. Based on then typical salaries of £35,000[243] (teachers) and £20,000[244] (administrators), this led to an assessment of school staff costs for secondary schools at £13,764,843.52.[245]

241 Equivalent to £14,777,842.63 in 2026.
242 Hillage, J. et al. 1996. Pre-16 work experience in England. Institute for Employment Studies, University of Sussex.
243 Equivalent to £55,091.05 in 2026.
244 Equivalent to £31,480.60 in 2026.
245 Equivalent to £21,666,275.20 in 2026.

Finally, at this time, the DCSF included funding of £55,000,000 in the core grant to schools to support Enterprise Education, which often (but not always) included employee volunteers supporting activities, typically taking place within schools. Research commissioned by the DSCF showed that in effect most of this funding was spent on other activities by schools. It was estimated by the review that £12,057,754 of the £55,000,000 directed to schools within their grant formula in 2009/10 was used to support enterprise education was spent on enterprise activities.

Given the ambiguities about student ages and the nature of employer engagement activities, it can be reasonably assessed from the report that confirmed maximum annual expenditure for the delivery of employer engagement to support career development in secondary education was c.£100m in 2010 (equivalent to £158m in 2026).

TABLE A1.3: Maximum public expenditure on enabling employer engagement in career development in 2009/10.

		2009/10 expenditure	2026 cash equivalence
DCSF	Core grant to fund the work of a national network of Education Business Partnership (one per local authority)	£25,000,000	£39,350,748
DCSF	Additional funding related to local BITC project and IEBE	£702,947	£1,106,460
DCSF	Enterprise education expenditure by schools	£12,057,754	£18,979,265
Schools	Funding for EBPOs	£9,388,540	£14,777,843
Schools	Staff time for managing work experience	£13,764,844	£21,666,275
Local authorities	Estimated contributions to EBPOs	£40,000,000	£62,961,196
	Totals	**£100,914,085**	**£158,841,787**

What did this investment buy?

Contemporary data shared by the Young People's Learning Agency which through Education Business Partnership Organisations collected information on work experience placements showed that:

> In 2009/10, a minimum of 525,000 young people aged between 14 and 19 went on a work experience placement organised through their school or college.[246] Of these, the overwhelmingly majority undertook a two-week placement of five to ten days duration during Year 10. Over the year, some 400,000 employers took young people on placements, including approximately 60,000 new employers which had not done so the previous year.[247]

A number of surveys at the time provide an indication of the impact of funding on student provision. Surveys are available which both polled students on whether they had participated in activities and teachers on their provision within their schools (Table A1.4).

246 In 2010, there were 560,000 14 year olds enrolled in English secondary schools: **https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/schools-pupils-and-their-characteristics-january-2010**

247 **https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/work_experience_report__april_2012_.pdf**

TABLE A1.4: Student participation levels in employer engagement activities – survey data, 2007-2011.

	Ipsos Mori (2007) [248] Y11 students	Ipsos MORI (2009)[249] Y11 students	YouGov (2010) [250] Young people 14-24	YouGov (2010) [251] KS4 Teacher survey	YouGov (2011) [252] Young people 19-24
Sample size	461	368	1,710	712	681
Work experience	88%	83%	65%	88%	90%
Workplace visit	60%	58%	19%	50%	---
Career Talk	59%	46%	---	38%	55%
Mentoring	---	---	---	26%	19%
Workshops	---	---		23%	
Enterprise projects	---	---	18%	52%	35%
Mock interviews	---	---	24%	46%	---

A note re Diplomas

It is worth noting that this excludes the money spent on the development of 14-19 Diplomas where employers were expected to contribute to qualification development and act as "champions" and to provide work experience

248 **https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/young-people-omnibus-2009-ipsos-mori1.pdf**

249 **https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/young-people-omnibus-2009-ipsos-mori1.pdf**

250 **https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/you-gov-reseach-paper.pdf** Question: 'Which, if any, of the following activities have you taken part in while in school/ college?'

251 **https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/you-gov-reseach-paper.pdf** Question: In the last TWO years, has your school been involved in any of the following activities with businesses?

252 Respondents attended state schools. Question: 'Did you ever do a work experience placement? This is where you would spend some time with an employer (possibly for a week or two) to get experience of the workplace between the ages of 14 and 19.' Placements were overwhelmingly undertaken before 16 years of age. Question: 'How often if ever did you get careers advice directly from local employers or business people (e.g., career talks, careers fairs)?' Question: 'Did you experience some form of mentoring from people in work where 1-2-1, group or e-mentoring?' Question: 'Did you undertake any enterprise activities involving employers?'

Annex 2. Careers Education, Information, Advice and Guidance – Historical context, current position

A commentary by Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes, OBE

1. Introduction

Careers guidance and work experience are two sides of the same coin. For young people navigating the transition from education to employment, the quality of the advice they receive and the quality of the experiences they are offered are inseparable – each shapes how they understand, pursue, and make sense of the other. To understand work experience policy in England, we must therefore understand the careers guidance context in which it sits.

That context has been shaped by decades of recurring policy reform, structural change, and persistent tension between professional practice and political expediency. Successive governments have sought to reshape careers provision — often with unintended consequences, particularly for young people facing disadvantage. This section traces the key developments from the pre-2012 landscape through to the current Labour government's investment commitments, including its new Work Experience requirement and Youth Guarantee, drawing on published policy reports, primary government sources, and academic and professional journal literature.

Analytically, this history can be understood through the lens of what Lindblom (1979) termed 'disjointed incrementalism' – policymaking that proceeds not through comprehensive rational planning but through successive limited comparisons and gradual adjustments. In England, career guidance for young people (and adults) has developed through incrementalism, with different government departments addressing needs in disconnected ways, making small adjustments based on immediate pressures rather than implementing unified strategies. This cross-departmental fragmentation exemplifies what Atkinson (2011) describes as 'the persistent pull of the status quo': incremental adjustments reinforce existing divisions rather than resolving them.
The policy history set out below provides the English context for situating how work experience for young people has recently moved up the government's policy agenda.

2. The Pre-2012 Landscape: From the Careers Service to Connexions

For much of the twentieth century, careers support for young people in England was delivered through a publicly funded, professionally staffed Careers Service operating at local level. This service had its origins in the Juvenile Employment Service established in the early twentieth century and evolved over decades into a recognisable professional infrastructure. As studies of the profession's history have argued, decisions taken early – specifically, its complete separation from adult employment services – were to have fateful long-term consequences for its vulnerability to political change (Roberts, 2013).

The introduction of a 'quasi-market' in career guidance services during the 1990s marked a significant shift, as competitive contracting replaced direct public provision. The Careers Service was provided from 1974–1994 by Local Education Authorities; from 1994–2001 by careers companies under contract to the Secretary of State; and from 2001–2012 by Connexions Partnerships and Local Authority Connexions Services as part of their wider youth support service functions (Quality in Careers, 2019).

In 2001, the Connexions Service[253] replaced the Careers Service in England, merging careers guidance with a broader personal adviser model targeting young people aged 13–19, with a particular focus on those at risk of becoming NEET (not in education, employment, or training). Connexions was, however, a short-lived experiment. In 2011, England's career guidance profession lost its own public service organisation and its former dedicated stream of public funding (Roberts, 2013).

3. The 2011–2012 Reforms and reduction in funding

The Education Act 2011 (HMG, 2011) transferred the statutory duty for careers guidance from the Secretary of State to individual schools, requiring them to secure independent and impartial guidance for pupils – but providing no ring-fenced funding to do so. This represented a fundamental restructuring of the system, placing responsibility on individual institutions at the very moment that specialist infrastructure was being dismantled.

The coalition government claimed to be re-routing financial support for career guidance through secondary schools, yet no ring-fenced nor any discernible new stream of income for schools was created. This decision had immediate consequences: redundancies among careers advisers, a decline in professional institute membership and the withdrawal of DfE funding for Education Business Partnerships from 31 March 2011 (Careers England, 2013). The Education Select Committee evidence submitted at the time was unambiguous: no additional funding was devolved to schools to discharge this new duty, and increasing the number of decision-makers affecting access to careers provision from 152 Local Authorities to approximately 4,000 head teachers exacerbated, rather than diminished, the likelihood of a postcode lottery in provision (House of Commons, 2012).

Understood through the theoretical framework advanced by Hughes and Percy (2025, forthcoming), career guidance policy in England operates across three interdependent dimensions:

- **i** legislation and accountability mechanisms determining whether career guidance is compulsory, optional, or discretionary;
- **ii** strategic narratives embedding its purpose around economic competitiveness, social equity, or lifelong learning; and
- **iii** funding allocations determining provision's reach, sustainability, and inclusivity.

The 2011 reforms effectively weakened all three dimensions simultaneously – reducing the statutory force of the duty, subordinating career guidance to labour market activation, and removing dedicated investment – while generating feedback loops that have taken more than a decade to partially correct.

253 Government funding from 2001 – 2004 – Financial investment (at least £450 million per annum during these 4 years had been made by government and local services to establish a new Connexions 'brand', a cadre of around 8,000 Personal Advisers, a series of one-stop shops, and sub-regional partnerships that are, in many areas, coterminous with local Learning and Skills Councils. Source: Centre for Guidance Studies – Occasional Paper – Connexions: Options and Opportunities, Hughes, D. 2025

The National Careers Service: 2012 onwards

The National Careers Service (NCS) was established on 1 April 2012 to provide information, advice, and guidance through face-to-face and telephone advice, web chat, and email, with local, community-based, in-depth support primarily aimed at adults, though young people could also access the NCS website and telephone advice (DfE/BIS, 2017). The NCS was funded through contracted provision managed initially by the Skills Funding Agency, and from April 2017 by the newly created Education and Skills Funding Agency (ESFA). The ESFA closed on 31 March 2025, with all functions returning to the core Department for Education.

The National Careers Council (2012–2014)

The National Careers Council (NCC) was established in May 2012 by the Skills Minister to advise government on improving careers provision for young people and adults in England. This brought together leaders from business, education, and the careers sector to provide independent scrutiny and recommendations during this critical transition period.

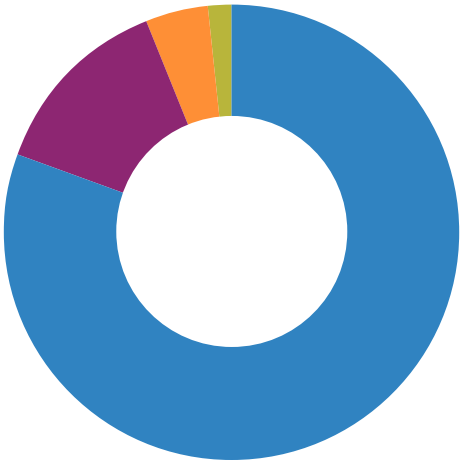
The NCC's first report, An Aspirational Nation: Creating a Culture Change in Careers Provision (Hughes, 2013), set out a compelling case for systemic reform, highlighting the fragmentation of provision and the risk of a lost generation of young people without access to quality guidance. In 2012/13 government allocated funding totalled £106m, which comprised £84.4m provided by Department of Business Innovation and Skills (BiS), £14m from the Ministry of Justice, £4.7m from Department for Education (DfE) and £1.5m from the Department for Work & Pensions. (NCC, 2013 p.13).

In responding to the challenges facing careers provision in England, the Government established the National Careers Service in April 2012 . It was a joint initiative of the Department of Business Innovation and Skills and the Department of Education and created for the first time an all-age careers service, a development which was widely welcomed.

National Careers Service Budget 2012/13

BIS	£84.4m
MoJ	£14m
DfE	£4.7m
DWP	£1.5m

(Source: SFA, 2013)



One of its most notable findings was that the all-age National Careers Service didn't actually provide any face to face support for young people. Less than 4% of the total NCS spend was for supporting young people compared to 16% for prisoners. All young people were only entitled to a telephone helpline, webchat and email – and only 4,000 young people in the whole of England used them. The NCC also recommended that the National Careers Service should significantly expand its work with schools, young people and provide schools and colleges with free and/or subsidised access to independent and impartial career development professionals' expertise. And that to oversee this and ensure value for money for the taxpayer that the National Careers Service should

be overseen by an Employer-led Advisory Board comprising senior representatives from employers, education and the career development profession to help guide its work and ensure it delivered value for money and met the needs of young people, adults and employers.

Young people: During the period April 2012 to March 2013 the National Careers Service handled:	
Telephone calls	33,560
Web chats	26,792
Texts	1,647
Emails	5,384

These numbers represent the total number of young people and not necessarily the total number of individual young people as some may have phoned, texted etc on a number of occasions. The number of people aged 13-18 is approximately 4-5 million.

Key recommendations of the NCC included:

- A culture change is needed in careers provision for young people and adults in order to address the mismatch of skills shortages and high unemployment.
- The development of the National Careers Service should be assisted by the creation of an Employer-led Advisory Board comprising senior representatives from employers, education and the career development profession to help guide its work and ensure it delivers value for money and meets the needs of young people, adults and employers.
- The National Careers Service should significantly expand its work with schools, young people and parents.
- Employers should encourage their employees to volunteer to go into schools and colleges to give students insights into different careers, enthuse them about the world of work and provide access to active experience of work, in particular to help address mismatches in young people's career aspiration.
- The National Careers Service should develop and extend its on-line services and bring together key partners in order to consolidate other on-line careers information and tools, enabling trusted information to become more accessible for young people, parents, carers and adults.

The NCC's second report, Taking Action: Achieving a Culture Change in Careers Provision (NCC 2014), monitored progress and made four further recommendations: establishing an employer-led advisory board; providing schools and colleges with free or subsidised access to career development professionals; improving the National Careers Service website for young people; and establishing a careers investment fund administered by the Department for Education. Very few of the recommendations were implemented.

4. The 'English Careers Experiment'

The period following the 2011 reforms has been characterised in the academic literature as an ongoing and contested policy experiment. Hughes (2017) provided a five-year historical synopsis of how central government policies were impacting careers work in England's secondary schools, highlighting attempts to reshape and re-engineer careers provision through an evolving careers experiment – and examining the extent to which such arrangements were facilitating or impeding progress towards independent careers guidance for young people. A blame culture and evidence-based rhetoric crept into England's policy discourse during this period, with the career development profession largely left on the periphery of the experiment.

England's approach diverged markedly from the devolved nations: Northern Ireland, Scotland, and Wales maintained more stable and professionally supported systems, preserving dedicated careers infrastructure that England had dismantled. England's unique experiment placed schools and colleges under a statutory responsibility for ensuring independent and impartial career guidance without any direct government funding, while an all-age National Careers Service telephone helpline was delivered by a contracted provider on behalf of the Education and Skills Funding Agency (Hughes, 2018). This fragmented, market-driven architecture was widely critiqued as, at best, a 'do-it-yourself' approach – one that ran contrary to national ambitions on social mobility and productivity.

This fragmentation also has implications for the professionalisation of the careers workforce, including teachers and professionally trained and qualified careers advisers. In England the Department for Education's statutory guidance recommends – but does not mandate – that careers advisers hold qualifications at Level 6. This signals an expectation of professional standards while leaving flexibility for schools and providers in implementation. The contrast with regulated models in jurisdictions such as Iceland, where the role of Educational and Vocational Guidance Counsellor must be fulfilled by a licensed professional authorised by the Minister of Education, illustrates the consequences of England's approach: inconsistent requirements, confused access pathways, and an absence of powerful ministerial champions for the profession.

5. The Careers and Enterprise Company, the Gatsby Benchmarks, and the 2017 Careers Strategy

The establishment of the Careers and Enterprise Company (CEC) in 2014–15 marked a further attempt to broker employer engagement and build an evidence base for provision. But this didn't have a remit to provide independent careers advice and support for schools. Instead, its role was to coordinate activities, where appropriate. It was designed not be a direct delivery organisation, or act in competition with the many existing providers in the market.

Announcing the creation of the company in 2014, the then Secretary of State for Education Nicky Morgan, said that "in the longer term the company will sustain itself." But this has not proved to be the case. But CEC's new sustainability plan, revealed the government had ditched this ambition (FE Week, 2019). Initially announced provided with a £5 million investment fund to support innovation and stimulate good practice, the CEC's government funding grew substantially, reaching approximately £60 million for the period 2015–2018 (Hughes, 2018). Since 2021–22, the Careers and Enterprise Company has received an average annual grant of approximately £29 million from the Department for Education based on figures drawn from published Grant Funding Agreements and FE Week reporting. To date, the annual investment was focused primarily on brokering employer encounters and supporting strategic development rather than funding direct career guidance for young people – a distinction widely noted in the academic and professional literature as a significant structural gap.

The Government's Careers Strategy, published in December 2017, built on the framework set out by the Gatsby Charitable Foundation to improve the quality of career guidance available to young people in England (Holman, 2017). The eight Gatsby Benchmarks became the primary quality framework against which schools and colleges were measured. The strategy set out a series of measures to be implemented between 2018 and 2020, including the introduction

of benchmarks for careers education, an investment fund for disadvantaged pupils, and a named Careers Leader in every school and college. Enterprise Coordinators – co-funded with local delivery partners – work with clusters of schools and colleges to connect them with local employers and support achievement of the benchmarks.

Applying the Multiple Streams Framework (Kingdon & Thurber, 2011) to this period, the Gatsby Benchmarks represented a notable policy window: concerns about inconsistent provision and poor youth transitions (problem stream) coincided with the availability of a clear, evidence-based solution (policy stream) at a time when government priorities strongly favoured employability and employer engagement (politics stream). This alignment allowed careers education and career guidance as "reform to move rapidly onto the national agenda and become embedded in statutory guidance."

6. Legislative Strengthening: 2021–2025

The Government's Skills for Jobs white paper, published in January 2021 (DfE, 2021), included further plans to strengthen careers advice, informing changes included in the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022. The White Paper made the following commitments on careers: requiring schools to provide independent career guidance from Year 7; publishing updated statutory guidance for careers; supporting and strengthening the Baker Clause; continuing the rollout of Careers Hubs; investing in more training for Careers Leaders; and revamping the National Careers Service website. It also set out longer-term plans, including asking Ofsted to undertake a thematic review of career guidance, and asking John Holman to review the alignment of the Careers and Enterprise Company and the National Careers Service as part of an all-age careers system. Despite these commitments, the White Paper was criticised for its limited ambition (Hooley, 2021). Although it made the unambiguous statement that "we need impartial, lifelong careers advice and guidance available to people when they need it, regardless of age, circumstance, or background", the White Paper offered no attention to where people should get such advice or from whom, and almost 40% of schools were unable to guarantee access to personal guidance for all their students.

The Baker Clause – introduced in January 2018 as an amendment to the Technical and Further Education Act 2017 by Lord Baker – required all state secondary schools to give FE colleges, University Technical Colleges, and apprenticeship providers access to pupils in Years 8 to 13 to discuss technical education and vocational pathways. Its purpose was to counteract the well-evidenced tendency of schools, particularly those with sixth forms, to channel students towards academic routes at the expense of technical and vocational options. However, compliance proved deeply problematic from the outset. A landmark evaluation by the Institute for Public Policy Research found that one year after its introduction, two-thirds of secondary schools were still failing to comply with its requirements, with providers reporting a near-total absence of meaningful consequences for non-compliance (Hochlaf and Dromey, 2019).

The Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act 2022 (c. 13) came into force on 1 September 2022, extending the statutory duty to provide independent careers guidance to all pupils in state-funded secondary schools from Year 7 onwards – lowering the previous threshold of Year 8 – and establishing consistency across education settings by extending the duty to academy schools and alternative provision academies for the first time (Education (Careers Guidance in Schools) Act 2022; House of Commons Library, 2024). The Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 simultaneously strengthened

the provider access legislation (PAL), building on the original Baker Clause by specifying that schools must provide at least six structured encounters with providers of technical education and apprenticeships for all pupils across Years 8 to 13. Of these, four encounters – two in Years 8 or 9 and two in Years 10 or 11 – are mandatory for all pupils to attend; the remaining two, offered in Years 12 to 13, must be made available to all students but attendance is optional for sixth-formers. The provider access provisions of the Skills and Post-16 Education Act 2022 came into force on 1 January 2023, with updated DfE statutory guidance published on 5 January 2023 to reflect the new requirements (DfE, 2023).

By September 2024, 93% of schools and colleges in England were part of a careers hub, and 3,708 careers leaders had completed fully funded initial training to fulfil the role effectively (DfE, 2025). However, the fundamental structural issue – the absence of direct, ring-fenced funding for independent careers guidance delivered by trained and qualified careers professionals (referred to in Gatsby Benchmark 8 as personal guidance) – remained substantially unresolved.

The DfE's statutory guidance was revised again in May 2025 to reflect further changes in legislation, incorporating the updated Gatsby Benchmarks and guidance on support and intervention for non-compliant schools (DfE, 2025). Despite this legislative strengthening, evidence of compliance remained mixed. The Education, Children and Families Committee's report on Further Education and Skills (2025) noted that while compliance was improving, "it remains a mixed picture", and recommended that the DfE report annually on intervention action taken – a recommendation accepted by Government, with the Careers and Enterprise Company tasked with publishing national compliance data from 2025–26 onwards (House of Commons Education Select Committee, 2025).

7. The new work experience requirement and the updated Gatsby Benchmarks: 2024–2025

One of the most significant developments in careers policy under the current Labour government is the introduction of a Work Experience Guarantee. The Labour Party's 2024 manifesto explicitly committed to guaranteeing two weeks' worth of work experience for every young person (Labour Party, 2024). In Government, this commitment has been embedded in the DfE's updated statutory careers guidance published in May 2025 (most recently in June 2026) and formally aligned to a strengthened Benchmark 6 (Experiences of Workplaces) within the revised Gatsby Benchmarks framework, which came into force in September 2025 (DfE, 2025; Gatsby Foundation, 2025). However, the Guarantee has not yet been placed on a statutory footing, representing a significant gap between the manifesto commitment and its legislative realisation.

The updated statutory guidance sets out the following expectations: schools should plan for the equivalent of five days of 'workplace experience activities' for pupils in Key Stage 3 (Years 7 to 9) and a further five days of work experience placement for pupils in Key Stage 4 (Years 10 and 11) – a total of ten days, or approximately 50 hours, across secondary education. The guidance specifies that KS3 activities need not involve traditional block placements; they may encompass multi-day workplace visits with employer-set tasks or projects, in-person or virtual employer talks and technical demonstrations, and other meaningful, employer-led activities. KS4 provision should include at least one substantive work experience placement (DfE, 2025; CEC, 2025).

It is unclear if the Work Experience 'Guarantee' will be made a statutory requirement. As the DfE's own guidance makes clear, as of the Spring 2026 schools are expected to plan towards it and begin implementation, but it remains a policy expectation rather than a legal duty, and there is as yet no confirmed national funding mechanism to support delivery (CEC, 2025; Changing Education, 2025). The operational details – including funding models, employer engagement frameworks, and quality assurance arrangements – are being tested through pilots led by the Careers and Enterprise Company, with ten delivery models being trialled across different institution types. The evidence base informing these trials draws in part on research demonstrating that four or more encounters with the world of work can halve the probability of a young person becoming NEET (Education and Employers, 2025).

The historical context for this development is significant. Work-related learning was last a statutory requirement at Key Stage 4 in England in 2004, but that duty on schools was subsequently removed as part of the broader dismantling of the careers infrastructure post-2011. The reintroduction of an expectation – moving towards a guarantee – represents a meaningful policy reversal, albeit one that mirrors the incremental pattern identified throughout this paper: ambitious in intent, cautious in statutory force, and under-resourced in implementation.

The updated Gatsby Benchmarks more broadly represent the most significant revision of the framework since its introduction in 2014. Developed following two years of research and consultation, and incorporated into revised DfE statutory guidance from September 2025, the updated benchmarks place greater emphasis on inclusion, the shared responsibility of all school staff for careers education, and the requirement for careers programmes to be evaluated with input from subject staff, support staff, and employer partners. Headteachers, principals, and governing boards are explicitly called upon to champion the benchmarks by backing their careers leaders and investing in high-quality, evidence-based provision (DfE, 2025; Gatsby Foundation, 2025).

However, DfE officials have acknowledged a likely short-term drop in benchmark scores as institutions adapt to the updated framework, alongside ongoing concerns about the cost-effective provision of Careers Leader training given high staff turnover. These challenges reflect the tension between raising expectations across the system and sustaining the capacity of schools and colleges to meet them.

8. The NEET Crisis, the Youth Guarantee, and the Labour Government's Response: 2024–2026

England – alongside the rest of the United Kingdom – faces a deepening crisis in youth employment and participation. According to the latest Office for National Statistics data (May 2026), 1,012,000 young people aged 16–24 were not in education, employment, or training (NEET) in the UK, representing 13.5% of all young people in this age group (ONS, 2026). The proportion of young people who were NEET has been rising since 2021 and is now close to its highest level since 2014 (House of Commons Library, 2026; ONS, 2025). Analysis by Impetus (2026) reveals that the post-pandemic surge in NEET numbers is costing the UK economy nearly £21 billion a year in lost GDP – a figure that underscores the moral as well as economic urgency of policy action. PwC's Youth Employment Index (PwC 2025) places the potential GDP gain from reversing NEET levels at up to £26 billion.

The scale of this crisis prompted a sequence of substantial Government interventions. The centrepiece of the Labour Government's response has been the Youth Guarantee –

a commitment to ensure that every young person aged 16–24 who is out of work for 18 months or more will be offered a six-month placement in sectors including construction, health and social care, and hospitality. The Youth Guarantee also encompasses the expansion of Youth Hubs to over 360 locations across Great Britain, providing young people with access to CV support, skills training, mental health support, and housing advice in accessible local settings (DfE, 2025). in summary, career guidance appears as a supporting element within the delivery infrastructure of the Youth Guarantee but is not named as a standalone entitlement within the guarantee itself – a gap that the Career Development Institute (CDI) and others have explicitly called out as a significant omission.

In December 2025, these commitments were backed by an £820 million funding package, creating 350,000 new training or workplace opportunities for young people (DfE, 2025). A further £34 million was invested in a new Risk of NEET indicator tool, giving local areas more accurate data to target support before young people drop out of the system entirely. In March 2026, a further £1 billion youth employment drive was announced, designed to create 200,000 new jobs through employer wage subsidies – including a £3,000 Youth Jobs Grant for businesses hiring Universal Credit claimants aged 18–24 – alongside a major reform of the apprenticeship system, refocusing public investment towards younger people and those not yet in employment (DWP, 2026). The Jobs Guarantee element of this package was extended to ages 18–24, with foundation apprenticeships introduced in hospitality and retail. A separate independent review of the barriers to youth employment, led by Alan Milburn, was also commissioned.

Critically, however, independent analysis has questioned both the scope and the orientation of these measures. The Institute for Fiscal Studies estimated that the combined wage subsidy measures could cover approximately 180,000 jobs – yet three-quarters of NEET young people are not on out-of-work benefits, placing them beyond the direct reach of activation measures focused on Universal Credit claimants (Learning and Work Institute, 2026; IFS, 2026). The House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee launched a dedicated inquiry into the NEET crisis in January 2026, examining causes, impacts, and the adequacy of current support (House of Commons Work and Pensions Committee, 2026). Its inquiry launch statement noted that AI is expected to displace more entry-level tasks, and that the number of retail and hospitality jobs – traditionally employing large numbers of young people – has declined significantly (ibid).

A recurring concern across this period has been the tendency to frame the policy response primarily in terms of employment activation rather than career development. A fundamental question remains: should career guidance principally help individuals adapt to prevailing labour market conditions, or should it cultivate the critical consciousness and agency that enables young people to make informed, long-term career decisions? Schools and teachers have an important role, but cannot be expected to discharge this responsibility alone. Activating young people into employment without adequately supporting informed decision-making risks repeating the structural failures of earlier interventions – privileging short-term throughput over the quality of individual career development and sustainable long-term labour market outcomes.

9. The Shift to a Jobs and Careers Service: Reform or Rebrand?

One of the most significant structural changes proposed under the current Labour government is the planned replacement of the National Careers Service – housed within the Department for Education since its inception in 2012 – with a new Jobs and Careers Service, to be delivered in conjunction with a reformed Jobcentre Plus network under the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP). This proposal was announced as part of the Get Britain Working White Paper and confirmed on 16 September 2025, when the Prime Minister formally transferred responsibility for adult careers from DfE to DWP (Work and Pensions Committee, 2025).

The rationale for the change is to create a more joined-up employment and skills support infrastructure, combining careers advice with job-matching, benefits navigation, and skills brokerage within a single service. The government allocated £55 million for 2025–26 to develop pathfinder pilots, with the first launched in Wakefield, West Yorkshire. The phased implementation plan runs from 2025–26 (trials and pathfinders) through to 2028–29 (full roll-out of the new service, including a 'Jobcentre in your pocket' digital offer) (Work and Pensions Committee, 2025).

The response from the parliamentary scrutiny process has been sharply critical. The Work and Pensions Committee's report, published in September 2025, described the current adult careers system as a "confusing and fragmented" patchwork arrangement and warned that DWP had yet to set out how it would bring together Jobcentres and the NCS, putting service delivery at risk (Work and Pensions Committee, 2025). NCS providers were described as operating in an "information vacuum", with NCS contracts extended only to September 2026. The specialist press characterised the reform as a "rebrand, not reform" (FE Week, 2025).

Of particular concern to the careers profession is the near-total absence of meaningful engagement with careers practitioners, managers, leaders and academics in the design of the new service. This mirrors a pattern – when career guidance's cross-departmental relevance leads to its being absorbed into larger employment or social policy frameworks, accountability becomes diffuse, careers guidance risks falling between policy silos, and it loses the powerful single-department champion essential for sustained investment. As observed, career guidance's breadth – spanning education, employment, economic development, and social inclusion – is simultaneously its greatest strategic strength and its most acute institutional vulnerability.

The Career Development Institute (CDI) noted that public statements by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions have focused predominantly on employability and job activation rather than on the higher-value function of independent, impartial career guidance: supporting individuals in making informed, long-term career decisions across the life course (CDI, 2025). The unanswered question – as one commentator noted – is how young people in schools and colleges will continue to access professionally trained and qualified careers advisers to meet the statutory Gatsby Benchmark requirements when some of those advisers transfer into a DWP employment-focused structure (FE Week, 2025). The government has promised to publish a detailed transition plan for transferring up to 1,000 sub-contracted careers advisers and staff into DWP by April 2026.

10. The Devolution of Skills and Careers Funding

Running in parallel with these structural reforms is a significant and accelerating trend towards the devolution of skills and careers funding to mayoral combined authorities and strategic authorities across England. The Adult Skills Fund – the primary source of public funding for adult further education – has been progressively devolved since 2019, with the majority of its value now allocated directly to existing Mayoral Strategic Authorities. By May 2025, 51.49% of England was covered by mayoral devolution (MHCLG, 2025).

The English Devolution White Paper, published in December 2024, set out an ambitious programme to extend devolution to 77% of England's population, with Mayoral Strategic Authorities gaining joint ownership of Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs) and significant influence over the delivery of employment support (MHCLG, 2024). Under the proposals, ring-fences on Skills Bootcamps and Free Courses for Jobs funding are to be removed, creating consolidated funding pots with greater spending flexibility. Integrated Settlements – multi-year, consolidated budget allocations across housing, transport, skills, and regeneration – have been confirmed for seven areas from 2026–27, including Greater Manchester, West Midlands, the North East, West Yorkshire, South Yorkshire, Liverpool City Region, and the Greater London Authority (MHCLG, 2025).

While the devolution agenda offers genuine opportunities for more locally responsive skills and careers infrastructure, it creates significant risks of uneven provision across England. Areas without mayoral devolution – which still account for nearly half the country – risk falling behind in their capacity to build coherent, employer-connected careers support systems. This risk is compounded by the absence of a national framework guaranteeing minimum standards of access to independent careers guidance, irrespective of geography. Hughes and Percy (2025, forthcoming) argue that building coordinated national and regional careers systems demands sustained political commitment, adequate resourcing, and governance structures enabling cross-departmental cooperation – precisely the elements that England's incrementalist, devolved approach has consistently struggled to deliver.

11. Careers labour market information gap

Underpinning all effective careers guidance is access to high-quality, current, and locally relevant labour market information (LMI). LMI provides the knowledge and understanding of how the labour market functions, enabling learners, advisers, institutions, and policymakers to make informed decisions about skills investment, career pathways, and provision design (DfE, 2025). Yet in England, a significant and largely unacknowledged structural gap exists in the free and publicly accessible provision of granular LMI. Government sources — including the Office for National Statistics, the National Careers Service's Explore Careers tool, and the recently established Skills England, provide broad national and regional data. However, the most granular, near-real-time LMI – covering local job postings, occupational skills demand, salary trends, and employer profiles – is not freely available from public sources.

12. Seeds of hope: opportunity or a missed opportunity?

There are, nonetheless, signs of renewed policy intent. During the 2024 election campaign, Labour's shadow education team explicitly committed to training 1,000 new careers advisers – a pledge that would, if delivered, represent a meaningful investment in the professional workforce that underpins any careers guarantee (Phillipson, 2024). However, this commitment was not included in the final published manifesto, which referred only to improving careers advice in schools and colleges. In government, it has been further scaled back, with the focus shifting towards continuing professional development for existing staff rather than the recruitment of newly qualified practitioners. The distinction matters: CPD improves the skills of those already in post, but it does not address the structural shortfall in career guidance adviser capacity that has accumulated since the Connexions service was wound down in 2011.

In March 2026, the Department for Education published a market engagement notice signalling a significant potential restructuring of how careers education, information, advice and guidance is funded and delivered in schools and colleges from the 2027–28 academic year onwards. The notice indicated current funding estimates of between £90 million and £180 million for a new three-to-five-year agreement, raising fundamental questions about the future role and funding of the Careers and Enterprise Company, which has received approximately £30 million per year in grant funding since 2015. While the DfE emphasised that the notice was not a binding statement of intent or a formal call for competition, the publication of a supplier engagement event and the explicit reference to "testing bidder appetite and delivery viability" signalled a possible move towards open procurement of careers support services for young people in schools and colleges from 2027–28. Sector commentators described the development as "raising significant questions about the future of the CEC" (Schools Week, 2026).

The announcement is open to two competing interpretations that the sector will need to watch closely. On one reading, a longer-term funding agreement – replacing the current pattern of annual contract renewals with the CEC – could provide greater stability and flexibility at a regional level, enabling Careers Hubs to set their own local area priorities and embedding careers education more firmly as an institutional commitment within schools and colleges. On another, the move towards open procurement may represent less a structural reform of how careers guidance is delivered than a mechanism for securing the CEC's position through a more commercially defensible multi-year contract. Whether this amounts to a genuine reframing of careers education policy – one that places professionally qualified, independent careers guidance at the centre of a school-led entitlement – or a repackaging of existing arrangements under a new contractual model, will depend on the detail of any tender specification, the weight given to professional standards and the role of qualified careers guidance professionals within the new framework, and the degree to which schools and colleges exercise genuine ownership over provision. At the time of writing, the outcome of the market engagement process had not been confirmed and no formal tender had been published (DfE, 2026).

13. Conclusion: Moving Beyond Incrementalism

The history of careers support for young people in England since 2012 is characterised by a recurring tension between political ambition and structural under-investment. The transfer of statutory responsibility to schools without ring-fenced funding; the

fragmentation of provision across multiple agencies and departments; a deepening NEET crisis now affecting close to one million young people; the Youth Guarantee's activation-focused orientation; the proposed integration of the careers service into a DWP-led employment framework; and the introduction of a Work Experience Guarantee that remains a policy expectation rather than a funded statutory duty. All raise questions about the extent to which professional impartial careers guidance is treated as a public good warranting sustained and strategic investment – an approach that has found firmer footing in a number of the other home nations of the UK.

The Work Experience Guarantee is not yet a statutory duty – it is a policy commitment and an expectation rather than a legal requirement. The intent has been made clear by the DfE through updated statutory guidance on careers provision (May 2025), and schools and colleges are expected to begin planning now, even though operational details such as funding and delivery models are still being tested through pilots. The statutory guidance outlines five days' worth of workplace experiences across Key Stage 3 and a further five days across Key Stage 4, to be arranged in a format determined by the school as part of curriculum planning.

The Work Experience new requirement for post-primary schools is perhaps the most instructive example of this pattern in the current period. In short, it is framed as an ambition and expectation, not yet a legally enforceable requirement. Its ambition is clear and the evidence base for its potential impact is strong: research consistently demonstrates that four or more meaningful encounters with the world of work can significantly reduce the probability of young people becoming NEET, and that early workplace exposure widens aspirations, improves informed decision-making, and builds the social capital that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are least likely to acquire through informal networks (Education and Employers, 2025).

The Work Experience Guarantee was initially introduced without statutory force, without a confirmed national funding mechanism, and without clear guidance on how schools – already operating under considerable resource pressure – are expected to deliver the equivalent of ten days of structured, employer-led workplace activity for every secondary school pupil in England. With statutory guidance anticipated in Spring 2026, the policy framework is beginning to take clearer shape; whether this translates into consistent practice will depend significantly on the resourcing and implementation support that accompanies it – and on whether the geographic inequalities in access that the policy seeks to address are actively monitored and mitigated [see chapter four: Work Experience as a Developmental Entitlement: Three Conditions for Effective Implementation].

The wider policy challenge may be understood through an analogy any school leader would recognise: incrementalism shuffles the timetable, adds a period here, and redistributes teaching hours there to manage immediate pressures; transformation acknowledges that the underlying structure of provision is no longer adequate and reimagines it from the ground up. England currently faces AI-driven disruption to the labour market, a NEET crisis of significant scale, and a growing marketisation of labour market intelligence that disadvantages the least-resourced institutions. Devolution offers seeds of hope for more tailored place-based delivery and online careers support approaches, including young people's exposure to and experiences of the world of work. Taken together, these converging pressures make a compelling case for structural – rather than incremental – reform.

It can be argued that career guidance must be understood as 'critical infrastructure' for uncertain futures: not a peripheral add-on to teachers' workloads and/or employment activation, but a foundation for lifelong learning, equitable participation, inclusion and progression outcomes prosperity – education and training have to feel worthwhile.

The Youth Guarantee, the proposed Jobs and Careers Service, the Work Experience Guarantee and the forthcoming DfE tender for a provider or providers to deliver improved careers provision in schools – currently led by the Careers & Enterprise Company – represent meaningful moments of potential policy change. Whether they amount to genuine transformation will depend on the government's investment in the professional and technical infrastructure that gives each of these commitments real substance.

Associate Professor Deirdre Hughes OBE

TABLE A2.1: Government Financial Investment in Careers Guidance for Young People in England, Pre-2001 to 2025

Period	Service / Mechanism	Estimated Investment	Notes and Sources
Pre-2001: The Careers Service			
1974–1994	LEA Careers Service	Not disaggregated	Delivered by Local Education Authorities as part of general LEA budgets; no separate national funding line published.
1994–2001	Contracted Careers Companies (Secretary of State)	~£303m (2010 prices) in 2000/01	Competitive contracting replaced direct LEA provision. Watts (2012) cites £303m at 2010 prices in 2000/01 as the funding level at peak of Careers Service delivery (Watts, 2012, HC 632 written evidence).
2001–2012: The Connexions Service			
2001–2004	Connexions Service (DfES)	~£450m per annum	NAO (2004) confirmed Connexions was launched with an annual budget of £450 million, delivered through 47 Connexions Partnerships. Funding fell in subsequent years as service expanded but budget was constrained.
2004–2010	Connexions Service (DCSF/DfES)	Declining from ~£450m to ~£196m (2010 prices)	CDI written evidence to HC 632 (2012) confirmed government funding of over £200m per annum before 2011. Watts (2012) cites decline to £196m at 2010 prices by 2010/11, representing a real-terms reduction of ~35% from 2000/01 peak.
2010/11	Connexions (final year) / Local Authority Services	~£196m (2010 prices)	The £196m was neither transferred to the new National Careers Service nor ring-fenced for schools – it was effectively removed from the system (Watts, 2012). DfE funding for Education Business Partnerships was also withdrawn from 31 March 2011.
2012 Onwards: National Careers Service and Schools			
2012/13	National Careers Service (NCS) + DfE schools duty (no ring-fenced funding)	£106m total (all-age)	NCC (2013) reported total all-age government careers funding of £106m: £84.4m BIS + £14m MoJ + £4.7m DfE + £1.5m DWP. Young people received only telephone/web access to NCS; less than 4% of NCS spend supported young people (NCC, 2013).
2013–2015	NCS (ESFA/BIS) + schools (no ring-fence)	Not disaggregated for young people	NCS funding continued through BIS/SFA contracts. Schools gained statutory duty (Education Act 2011) but received no additional funding. NCC (2014) recommended a careers investment fund – recommendation not implemented.
2015–2025: The Careers and Enterprise Company Era			
2015–2017	CEC established + NCS	~£5m initial CEC grant	CEC announced by Nicky Morgan with initial £5m innovation fund. DfE stated CEC would 'sustain itself' commercially in the longer term – an ambition later abandoned (FE Week, 2019).

Period	Service / Mechanism	Estimated Investment	Notes and Sources
2017/18	CEC + NCS + DfE Careers Strategy	CEC: £18.8m NCS ?	Government Careers Strategy published December 2017. Gatsby Benchmarks introduced as the quality framework. CEC grant £18.8m (FE Week/Schools Week, 2019).
2018/19	CEC + NCS	CEC: £30.2m NCS ?	CEC grant increased by nearly two-thirds in a single year (FE Week, 2019). Total CEC cumulative funding exceeded £95m by this point. DfE confirmed CEC would remain grant-dependent.
2019/20	CEC + NCS	CEC: £24.3m NCS ?	Grant reduced from 2018/19 peak. CEC sustainability plan revised – original target of 50% non-government income formally abandoned (Schools Week/FE Week, 2019).
2020/21	CEC + NCS	CEC: ~£29m NCS ?	From 2021/22, CEC received an average annual DfE grant of approximately £29m per year, based on published Grant Funding Agreements and FE Week reporting. COVID-19 disrupted delivery but funding maintained.
2021/22 – 2024/25	CEC + NCS (transferred to DWP from Sept 2025)	CEC: ~£29m per annum average	Consistent annual grant averaging ~£29m. NCS sub-contracted careers adviser provision continued; contracts extended annually. ESFA closed 31 March 2025; DfE assumed all functions. NCS responsibility transferred to DWP September 2025.
2026 Onwards: Proposed New Funding Framework			
2027 – 2032 (proposed)	New DfE procurement (TBC)	Est £36m per annum	DfE market engagement notice (March 2026) indicated indicative funding of £90m–£180m for a new 3–5 year agreement from 2027/28, equivalent to approximately £36m per annum depending on contract duration. Nature of procurement, provider(s), and scope not yet confirmed at time of writing (DfE, 2026).
		plus £1.2m	DfE market engagement Careers Advisor CPD – Design and Delivery of National Continuing Professional Development Programme £1.2m (DfE, March 2026)
		plus £8.5m	DfE is investing £8.5 million in a new Aspiring Pathways programme, which will expand access to meaningful workplace experiences for learners in Alternative Provision across England. (June 2026)

NOTES ON INTERPRETATION:

1. Figures are nominal unless stated otherwise. Where Watts (2012) cites figures 'at 2010 prices', these are real-terms comparisons, not nominal spend.

2. Investment figures for the Careers Service (pre-2001) and Connexions (2001–2011) represent total provision for young people, including personal adviser services, careers education support, and NEET tracking – not careers guidance alone.

3. From 2012 onwards, no ring-fenced national funding was provided directly to schools for careers guidance. The NCS budget is an all-age figure; the proportion spent on young people was less than 4% (NCC, 2013).

4. CEC funding figures are drawn from published Grant Funding Agreements, FE Week Freedom of Information disclosures (2019), and Schools Week reporting. They represent DfE grant income only and exclude any additional employer or matched funding.

5. Amber shading indicates a significant policy inflection point or funding discontinuity.

6. The proposed 2027/28 figure (£90m-£180m total) is indicative only, drawn from the DfE market engagement notice published March 2026, and does not represent a committed funding settlement. On a per annum basis this equates to approximately £18m-£60m depending on whether the contract runs for 5 or 3 years respectively.

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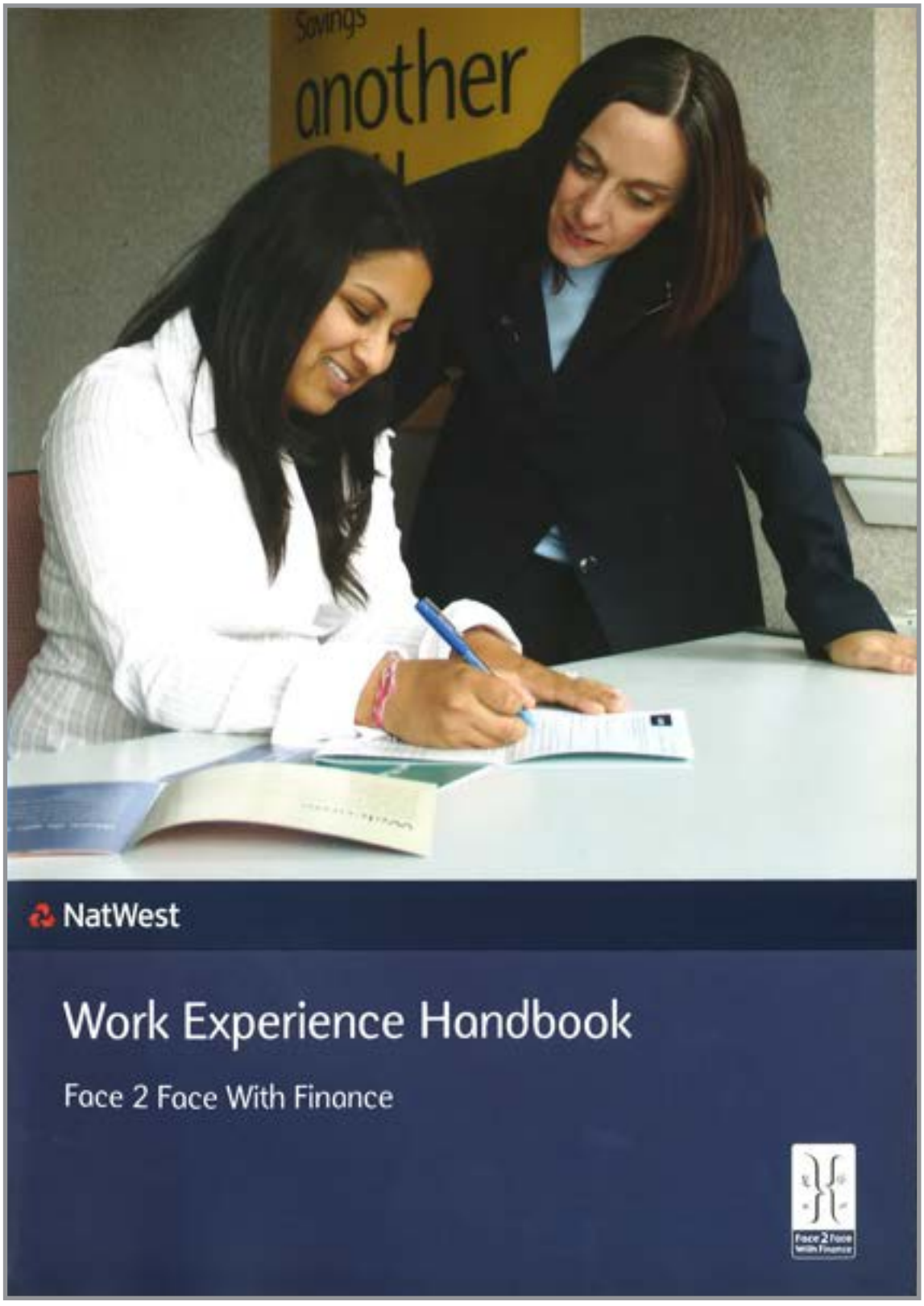
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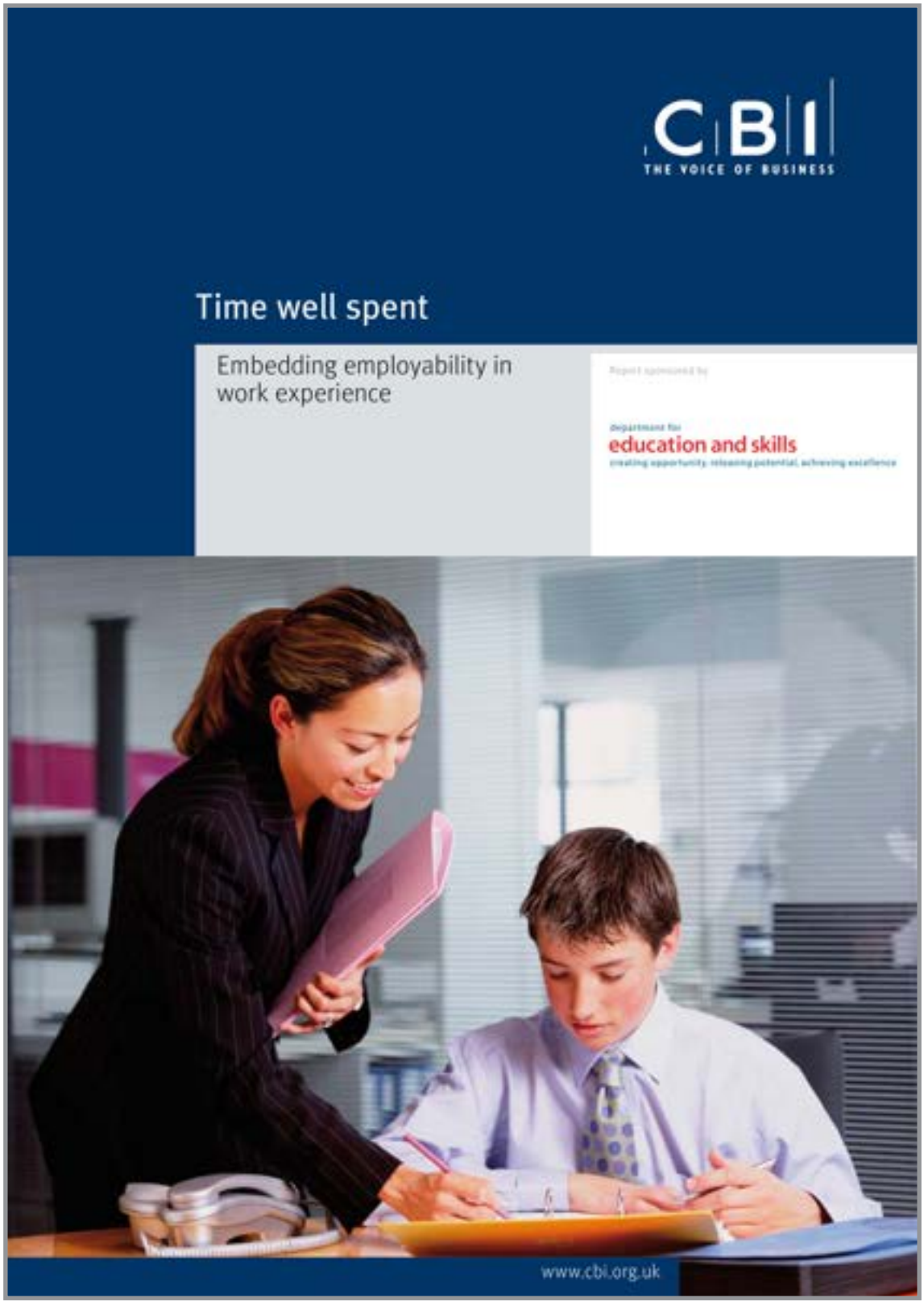
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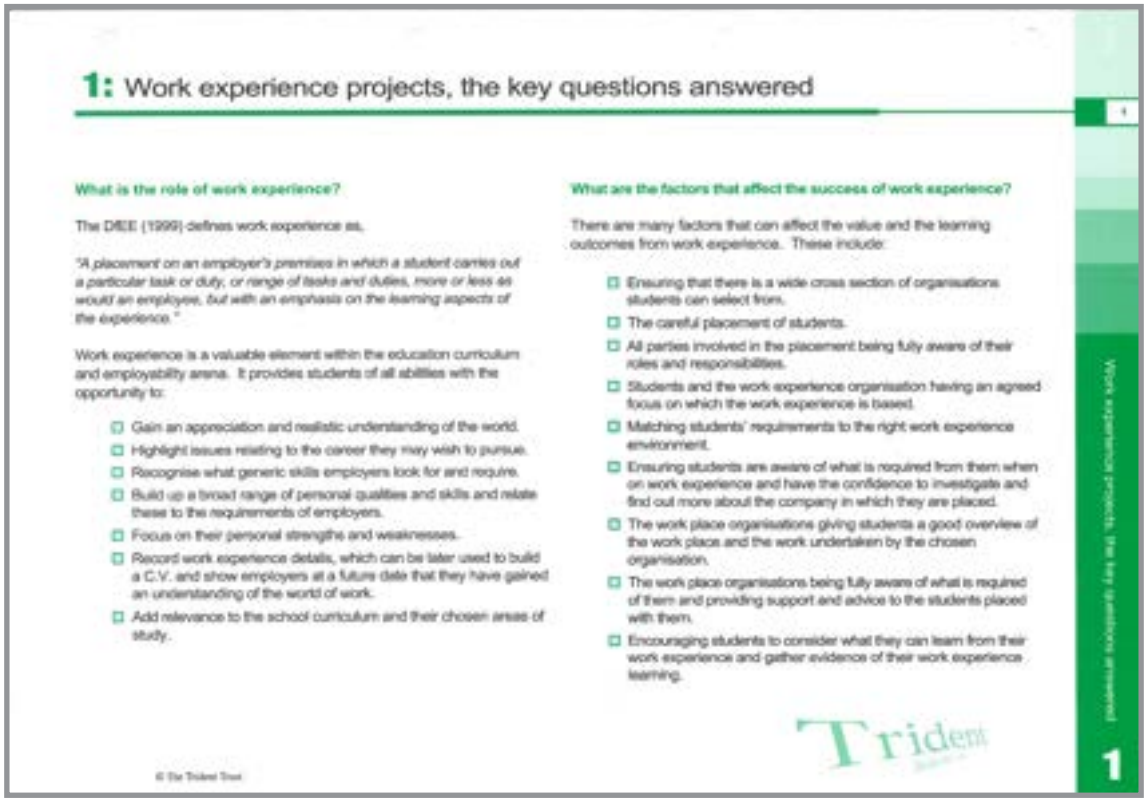
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1: Work experience projects, the key questions answered

What is the role of work experience?

The DfEE (1999) defines work experience as,

"A placement on an employer's premises in which a student carries out a particular task or duty, or range of tasks and duties, more or less as would an employee, but with an emphasis on the learning aspects of the experience."

Work experience is a valuable element within the education curriculum and employability arena. It provides students of all abilities with the opportunity to:

- Gain an appreciation and realistic understanding of the world.
- Highlight issues relating to the career they may wish to pursue.
- Recognise what generic skills employers look for and require.
- Build up a broad range of personal qualities and skills and relate these to the requirements of employers.
- Focus on their personal strengths and weaknesses.
- Record work experience details, which can be later used to build a C.V. and show employers at a future date that they have gained an understanding of the world of work.
- Add relevance to the school curriculum and their chosen areas of study.

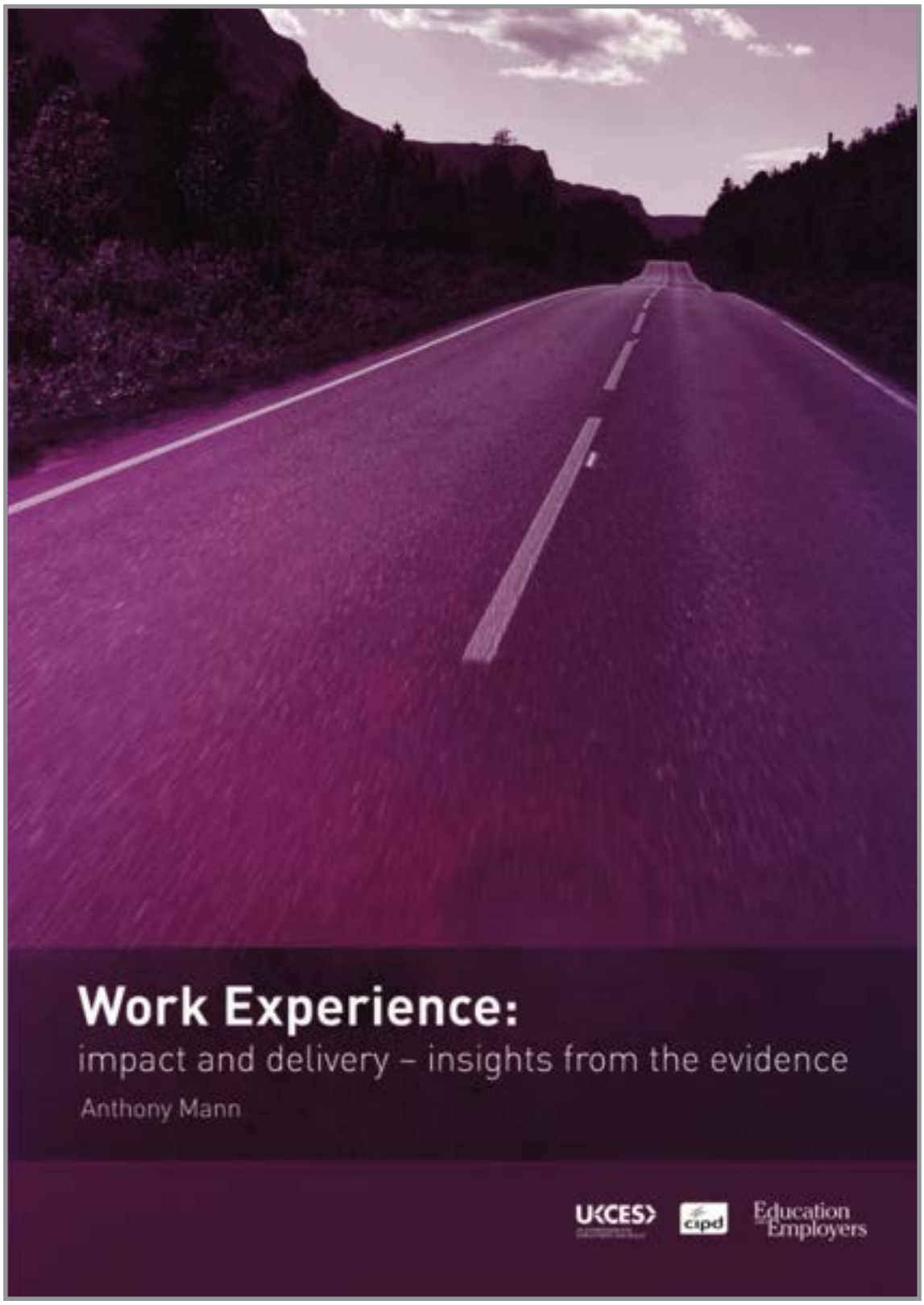
What are the factors that affect the success of work experience?

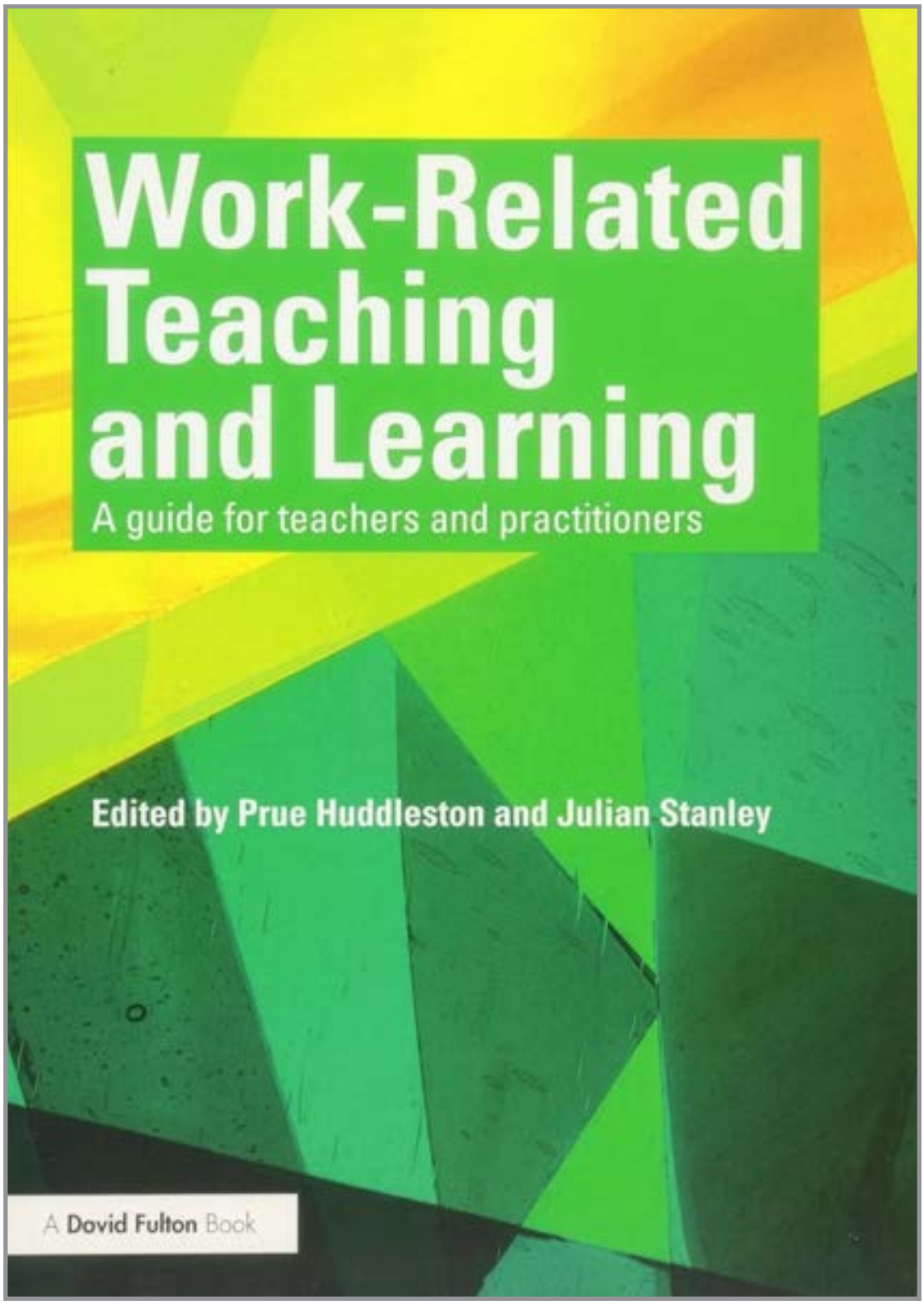
There are many factors that can affect the value and the learning outcomes from work experience. These include:

- Ensuring that there is a wide cross section of organisations students can select from.
- The careful placement of students.
- All parties involved in the placement being fully aware of their roles and responsibilities.
- Students and the work experience organisation having an agreed focus on which the work experience is based.
- Matching students' requirements to the right work experience environment.
- Ensuring students are aware of what is required from them when on work experience and have the confidence to investigate and find out more about the company in which they are placed.
- The work place organisations giving students a good overview of the work place and the work undertaken by the chosen organisation.
- The work place organisations being fully aware of what is required of them and providing support and advice to the students placed with them.
- Encouraging students to consider what they can learn from their work experience and gather evidence of their work experience learning.

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Work Experience:
impact and delivery – insights from the evidence
Anthony Mann
UKCES
cipd
Education and Employers


Work-Related Teaching and Learning
A guide for teachers and practitioners
Edited by Prue Huddleston and Julian Stanley
A David Fulton Book

Annex 3. Statistical analysis: Young Adults Survey – Employer Engagement and Post-16 Outcomes (UK)

1. Analytical Overview

This analysis examines the relationship between recalled participation in employer engagement activities during secondary school (ages 11–16) and post-16 outcomes (ages 16–18), based on a sample of young adults aged 19–26 who attended secondary school in the United Kingdom. The objective is to better understand how early exposure to the world of work through (i) recalled participation in pre-16 work experience and (ii) greater levels of recalled engagement across six pre-16 employer engagement activities is associated with young people's subsequent transitions into education, training, and employment.

Statistical controls. Results are based on logistic regression models that control for a wide range of individual and background characteristics, including:

- Age
- Gender
- Free School Meal eligibility (FSM)
- Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND)
- Parental education (0/1/2 parents attended higher education)
- Ethnicity (White / Non-White)
- Nativity (UK-born / Foreign-born)
- LGBT status
- School type (Private vs Other)
- School location (City vs Rural or isolated area)

These controls are included to account for differences in background that may influence both access to employer engagement and post-16 outcomes. Sample sizes:

- Full sample: n = 804
- Adjusted models: typically n ≈ 784

The relatively small reduction in sample size reflects low levels of missing data across control variables.

2. Sample Characteristics

The sample is diverse across key socio-demographic characteristics, allowing for meaningful analysis across different groups:

- 46% female
- 37% FSM-eligible
- 12% SEND
- 36% non-White
- 8% foreign-born
- 16% LGBT

Parental education:

- 43%: no parents attended higher education
- 28%: one parent attended
- 28%: both parents attended
- School type:
- 74% attended non-selective state schools
- 13% attended selective state schools
- 8% attended private schools
- ~5% attended other settings (e.g. college, special schools, alternative provision).

3. Employer Engagement Exposure

Work experience participation

Employer engagement is widespread within the sample:

- 75% of respondents report having undertaken a work experience placement either in in-person, online or through a combination of means before age 16.

Engagement intensity (construction of the score)

To capture variation beyond simple participation, a composite engagement score (0–12) was constructed to reflect both the **breadth and intensity** of employer engagement. The score is based on six types of recalled activity:

- Work experience (in-person and online combined into one domain)
- Workplace visits
- Job shadowing
- Career talks
- Job fairs
- Business mentoring

Each activity contributes:

- 0 points = no participation
- 1 point = participated once or twice
- 2 points = participated three times or more

For work experience, responses for in-person and online formats are combined using the highest reported frequency, ensuring that each domain is only counted once. The total score is the sum across all six activities:

- Minimum = 0
- Maximum = 12

This approach captures:

Breadth: the number of different activities experienced

Intensity: how frequently each activity was undertaken

Engagement quartiles (construction)

To analyse differences across levels of exposure, the engagement score was divided into quartiles based on the sample distribution:

- Quartile 1: Lowest engagement
- Quartile 2: Lower-middle
- Quartile 3: Upper-middle
- Quartile 4: Highest engagement

Each quartile contains approximately 25% of the sample (≈201 respondents). For regression analysis, a simplified comparison is used:

- Lowest quartile (reference group)
- Highest quartile

Distribution of engagement

- Minimum: 0
- Maximum: 12
- Mean: 5.24
- Median: 5
- SD: 2.81
- IQR: 3–7

The distribution indicates substantial variation in exposure, with many young people recalling that they experienced only a limited number of activities, while others engage much more intensively.

Composition of engagement quartiles

Although quartiles are equal in size, their composition varies across key characteristics, indicating that access to employer engagement is not evenly distributed.

- Compared to the lowest engagement quartile, those in the highest quartile are:
- More likely to be male (63% vs 44%)
- More likely to have both parents who attended higher education (41% vs 21%)
- More likely to be from non-White backgrounds (43% vs 28%)
- More likely to attend private schools (11% vs 5%)
- Slightly more likely to have SEND (16% vs 11%)
- Slightly more likely to be FSM-eligible (40% vs 36%)
- Less likely to identify as LGBT (10% vs 19%)

These differences suggest that engagement is socially patterned and influenced by background characteristics.

4. Regression Results

With statistical controls in place, the analysis tested for statistically significant relationships between (i) recalled participation in pre-16 work experience and (ii) greater levels of recalled engagement across six pre-16 employer engagement activities and responses to four following questions:

Looking back when you were in secondary school, how easy or difficult was it for you to decide on what to do after you finished Year 11 (S3 in Scotland)?

- Very easy
- Quite easy
- Quite difficult
- Very difficult

How easy or difficult was it for you to achieve what you wanted to do after Year 11 (S3 in Scotland)? (e.g. get onto the course or job/apprenticeship you wanted)

- Very easy
- Quite easy
- Quite difficult
- Very difficult

Between the ages of 16 and 18, what did you mainly do?

- I was doing an apprenticeship
- I was working
- I was a full-time student studying mainly vocational subjects (e.g. a BTEC)
- I was a full-time student studying mainly academic subjects (e.g. Maths, sciences, English, History, psychology)
- I wasn't studying, training or working (NEET)

Thinking back to what you mainly did between the ages of 16 and 18, how useful do you think it will be in helping you to achieve what you want to do now in life?

- Very useful
- Quite useful
- Not so useful
- Not at all useful

4.1 Work Experience (Any)

Outcome	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value
Decide easy	1.47*	1.04–2.07	0.030
Decide very easy	1.91*	1.17–3.19	0.011
Achieve easy	1.48*	1.04–2.09	0.027
Achieve very easy	1.92*	1.16-3.26	0.014
NEET	0.38**	0.19–0.75	0.005
Useful	2.25***	1.54-3.29	<0.001
Very useful	1.86**	1.27–2.78	0.002

NOTES: p < 0.05 = * p < 0.01 = ** p < 0.001 = ***

Participation in any work experience before age 16 is associated with a range of positive outcomes, after accounting for demographic and background characteristics:

- Higher likelihood of finding it easy to decide what to do after Year 11
- Higher likelihood of reporting that intended goals were achieved
- Higher perceived usefulness of post-16 activities
- Substantially lower likelihood of being NEET

Effect sizes are moderate to large, with odds ratios typically between 1.4 and 2.2 for positive outcomes, and a strong reduction in NEET risk (OR = 0.38).

Put another way, using statistical controls, young people who did WX before the age of 16 had 62% lower odds of being NEET between ages 16 and 18 than someone with comparable characteristics who did not complete a placement.

4.2 Type of Work Experience

When disaggregating work experience into in-person and online formats:

- No consistent statistically significant differences are observed
- Confidence intervals are wide and estimates unstable

This is likely to be due to the small numbers of young people who recalled participating in online work experience meaning that no reasonable analysis is possible.

4.3 Engagement Score

Looking at the whole sample, it is possible to assess the changes in outcomes recalled at 16-18 and participation in each additional level of employer engagement.

Outcome	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value
Decide easy	1.06	1.00-1.12	0.054
Decide very easy	1.08*	1.01-1.17	0.037
Achieve easy	1.12***	1.05-1.18	<0.001
Achieve very easy	1.12**	1.03-1.21	0.005
NEET	0.76***	0.66-0.86	<0.001
Useful	1.22***	1.14-1.31	<0.001
Very useful	1.10**	1.04-1.17	0.001

NOTES: p < 0.05 = * p < 0.01 = ** p < 0.001 = ***

The overall engagement score shows a highly consistent pattern:

Each additional unit of engagement is associated with:

- 6–12% higher odds of positive outcomes
- Approximately 24% lower odds of being NEET

These effects are statistically significant across nearly all outcomes.

4.4 Engagement Quartiles (Highest vs Lowest)

Outcome	Odds Ratio	95% CI	p-value
Decide easy	1.40	0.88-2.23	0.157
Decide very easy	1.84	0.99-3.47	0.055
Achieve easy	1.87*	1.17-3.01	0.010
Achieve very easy	2.04*	1.10-3.84	0.025
NEET	0.21**	0.06-0.59	0.005
Useful	3.68***	2.10-6.66	<0.001
Very useful	2.31**	1.43-3.76	0.001

NOTES: $p < 0.05$ = * $p < 0.01$ = ** $p < 0.001$ = ***

Comparing young people in the highest engagement quartile to those in the lowest, the highest-quartile group had:

- Around twice the odds of reporting that they achieved their post-16 goals easily
- Over three times the odds of reporting that what they did between ages 16 and 18 was useful
- Around 80% lower odds of being NEET between ages 16 and 18 (point estimate of 79%).

Annex 4: UK Longitudinal Study Evidence

This sets out the primary longitudinal study findings referenced in Chapter 2, covering UK evidence on part-time working, community volunteering, and work experience placements.

UK longitudinal studies: part-time working and community volunteering

Of eight UK studies identified or undertaken by the OECD, seven find some significant evidence of a positive benefit:

Crawford et al. (2010), Longitudinal Study of Young People in England, 7,707 respondents surveyed between ages 16/17 (2007) and 18/19 (2009):

Teenage part-time workers at age 16/17 were more likely to transition into employment or further training by age 18/19, reducing NEET risks.

Crawford et al. (2010), Labour Force Survey, 60,000 households surveyed for individuals between ages 16/17 and 18/19 between 1993 to 2008:

Teenagers who combine full-time education and work have a lower probability by 3 to 6 percentage points of becoming NEET in the short term compared to those who were in full-time secondary education only.

Crawford et al. (2010), British Household Panel Survey, 5,500 households surveyed for individuals between ages 16/17 and 18/19 between 1991 to 2008:

Teenagers who combined full-time education and work are 4.1 percentage points less likely to be NEET five years later than peers who were in full-time secondary education only at 16/17.

Duckworth and Schoon (2012), British Cohort Study, 9,872 respondents surveyed between ages 16 (1986) and 34 (2004):

Teenagers who worked part-time at age 16 are half as likely to be NEET between the ages of 16 and 18 than comparable peers who had not worked.

Holford (2020), UK Next Steps, 10,785 respondents surveyed between ages 14 (2004) and 25 (2015):

Teenage part-time work was not associated with reduced NEET rates at ages 17 or 19.

Mann et al. (2020), British Cohort Study, 5,511 respondents surveyed between ages 16 (1986) and 34 (2004):

Teenage boys who work part-time experience an increase in full-time employment of 5.8 percentage points on average, and 2.9% increase in wages, relative to non-working peers at age 34. Teenage girls who worked part-time experience an increase in full-time employment of 3.4 percentage points on average, and 5.4% increase in wages, relative to non-working peers.

Covacevich et al. (2021), British Cohort Study, 4,547 respondents surveyed at ages 16 (1986) and 26 (1996) — community volunteering:

"Have you ever taken part in any of the following spare time activities: helping old people, nature conservation, helping single parents, or other voluntary activities in the community." Volunteering in adolescence is linked with lower NEET rates and higher life satisfaction in adulthood with greater positive effects identified with regard to more intensive participation in volunteering. No association found with earnings.

Covacevich et al. (2021), British Cohort Study, 5,511 respondents surveyed between ages 16 (1986) and 34 (2004) — part-time working:

Teenage part-time work was associated with a reduced likelihood of experiencing unemployment up to age of 26, and 6% higher earnings. No relation with greater career satisfaction in adulthood identified.

UK longitudinal studies: work experience placements

The OECD study highlights two separate analyses from the UK, both related to data from the British Cohort Study.

Mann et al. 2020. British Cohort Study, 5,511 respondents surveyed between ages 16 (1986) and 26 (2004):

Young women who undertook work placements while in school were employed in higher proportions at age 26. If students saw placements as 'useful in career planning' at age 16, higher levels of life satisfaction were observed at age 26. Impacts were greater for students with no experience of part-time working.

Covacevich et al. 2021. British Cohort Study, 5,511 respondents surveyed between ages 16 (1986) and 34 (2004):

No significant associations identified between teenage work experience and likelihood of NEET or career satisfaction. However, students who described their work placements as being 'useful in career planning' earned 12% higher wages at age 34.

Annex 5: OECD Questions for Secondary School Leaders

Based on an initial substantial analysis of longitudinal studies from ten countries, the OECD identified fourteen questions for secondary school leaders seeking to enhance practice based upon findings.

1. Does your school help all students through secondary education to engage regularly with people in work through career fairs and especially career talks?
2. Does your school have a programme of workplace visits and/or job shadowing which enables all students to critically investigate workplaces for themselves?
3. Does your school teach students how to apply for a job, including interview practice?
4. Does your school help students to reflect on their existing and planned education and training choices in light of what they are learning about their career ambitions and the requirements of desired employment?
5. Does your school know if students are engaging in career conversations about their career plans?
6. Does your school have a policy to encourage and enable a culture of career conversations?
7. Does your school have confidence that all students will have first-hand experience of work before leaving secondary education?
8. Does your school give all students the opportunity to experience work of interest for themselves on two or more occasions?
9. Does your school help students to prepare for and reflect on their first-hand experiences of work?
10. Does your school know what the occupational expectations of your students are?
11. If students are uncertain, does your school have a process for investigating what is behind the uncertainty?
12. Does your school know how ambitious your students are and have policies in place to encourage and enable high ambitions?
13. Does your school know if your students' occupational and educational plans are aligned?
14. Does your school know if your students are able to see a clear relationship between their educational experiences and later employment outcomes?

Annex 6. A Brief History of Work Experience in England — Policy, Investment and Practice, 1926–2026

Period	Initiative / Policy	Policy/funding	Notes and Sources
Early Foundations (1926–1972)			
1926	Hadow Report	Recommendation	Called for a "close connexion" between school and work; advocated a practical bias for the final years of secondary education, responsive to local industries. First major national articulation of education-employer links (Hadow, 1927).
1963	Newsom Report: Half Our Future	Recommendation	Recommended experiments enabling pupils over 15 to participate in the world of work under school auspices. Aimed at re-engaging less academic pupils. By 1969, only 2% of young people had undertaken work experience (ICO, cited in Stanley, 2012).
1965	DES Guidance: Careers Guidance in Schools	Guidance	Published innovative practice in education-employer engagement including work experience, employer visits, talks, open days and careers conventions — a list bearing "remarkable resemblance to today's offerings" (Huddleston, 2012).
Legislative Foundations and Early Expansion (1973–1982)			
1972–1973	ROSLA + Education (Work Experience) Act 1973	Enabling legislation	Raising of the School Leaving Age to 16 (ROSLA, 1972) prompted the Work Experience Act 1973, making it lawful for all pupils — regardless of ability — to undertake work experience in their final year of compulsory schooling (Miller et al., 1991).
1976	Callaghan's Great Debate	Recommendation	Prime Minister Callaghan's Ruskin College speech renewed emphasis on drawing education closer to the world of work. Employer concerns about school leavers' skills intensified; tensions emerged between vocationalism and broader educational purposes.
1979	DES Guidance on Work Experience	Guidance	DES confirmed work experience "should have value for pupils of varying ability and aptitudes and should neither be designed as vocational training nor aimed at a limited range of ability" (DES, 1979, para. 8).
Schools–Industry Movement and TVEI (1983–1996)			
1983–1991	Technical and Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI)	~£900m total (pilot + extension)	Launched 1983 (pilot), extended 1987. Budget of approximately £900m across pilot and extension phases. Introduced planned work experience, combined general/vocational/technical curricula. By 1991, 71% of pupils were participating in work experience, up from under 2% pre-1970 (Stanley, 2012; Miller et al., 1991).
1980s	School Curriculum Industry Partnership (SCIP) and Schools Industry Liaison Officers (SILOs) Other organisations voluntary/charitable initiatives, e.g.: Project Trident; Understanding British Industry	DTI-funding	SCIP funded by government to promote curriculum-linked education-industry activity; the only organisation formally backed by the TUC, enabling trade union involvement. SILOs appointed within LEAs, funded by DTI. Described by Jamieson (1985) as part of a "diverse collection" of employer, union and quasi-educational projects.
1988–1991	DTI Enterprise and Education Initiative (EEI)	£8m (EE Adviser network, 2 yrs) + £14m (Teacher Placement Service, 5 yrs)	Targeted two or more weeks' work experience for all pupils in their final year; aimed at 700,000 placements per year. 147 Education and Enterprise Advisers appointed to link schools and business. In the first five months, advisers found 67,000 additional placements (Hansard, 1989). Investment curtailed when a new Secretary of State removed education from DTI's budget.

Period	Initiative / Policy	Policy/funding	Notes and Sources
Statutory Requirement and "Golden Age" (1997–2010)			
1999	Davies Report (DfEE)	Review	Recommended DfEE and DTI review work experience provision, noting "significant investment by government and business... and the lack of clarity around learning outcomes and quality." Questions still unresolved 25 years after the Work Experience Act (DfEE, 1999).
2003	Statutory Work-Related Learning at KS4 (QCA)	Funding ring-fenced via QCA/LSC;	Statutory educational requirement for work-related learning and careers education for all KS4 pupils introduced. Non-statutory Economic Well-being and Financial Capability programmes at KS3 and KS4 also included work-related elements. Brought an "abundance of guidance, curriculum materials, support, and funding" (Huddleston, 2012).
2003–2010	Education Business Partnerships (EBPs)	LSC-funded ceased March 2011	EBPs took on brokerage responsibility for ensuring virtually all 14-16-year-olds secured a work placement. CEI (2004) research highlighted significant but under-reported financial costs for schools and employers. EBP funding withdrawn 31 March 2011, removing the primary brokerage infrastructure.
2008-2013	14–19 Diploma (QCA)	14-19 Education and Skills White Paper (2005) DfES.	New composite 14–19 qualification included a substantial work experience placement requirement (principal, generic and additional learning). Placed further demands on employers beyond existing KS4 and post-16) placements. Qualification abandoned 2013 (QCA, 2008; LSIS, 2009).
Retrenchment and Marketisation (2010–2015)			
2011	Wolf Report: Review of Vocational Education	Review	Recommended removal of the statutory duty to provide all KS4 pupils with work-related learning, describing the blanket requirement as "very expensive" and often failing to involve a real workplace. Recommended prioritising longer internships for 16–18-year-olds (Wolf, 2015).
	Termination of EBP and Education Business Link funding	Funding withdrawn entirely	DfE withdrew funding for Education Business Partnerships from 31 March 2011, dismantling the national brokerage infrastructure. Wolf (2015) later described EBP support as having been essential to large-scale delivery. Work experience became dependent on school capacity and local volunteers.
T Levels, 'Modern Work Experience' and Policy Renewal (2020–2026)			
2020 onwards	Introduction of T levels	DfE student funding allocation. Employer engagement voluntary.	T Levels launched with a stipulated 45-day industry placement for all students. Placed significant new demands on employers already asked to host KS4 and post-16 placements. Targets subsequently relaxed due to under-achievement in securing placements, particularly in rural areas and specialist sectors.
2025–2026	Skills England / "Modern Work Experience" Policy Renewal	Under review	Government signals return to work experience for all, echoing pre-2011 statutory intent. CEC (2026) defines "modern" work experience as developing "transferable skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving, while helping students make informed career decisions." DfE market engagement (March 2026) for a new 3-5 year CEIAG contract (£90m-£180m total) encompasses work experience support infrastructure.

NOTES ON INTERPRETATION:

1. Investment figures are nominal unless stated otherwise. Where sources cite real-terms comparisons (e.g. Watts, 2012 at 2010 prices), this is noted.

2. "Not disaggregated" indicates that work experience funding was embedded within broader programme budgets (e.g. TVEI, LSC) and no standalone national figure was published.

3. Amber shading indicates a significant policy inflection point, a major funding discontinuity, or a statutory change of direction.

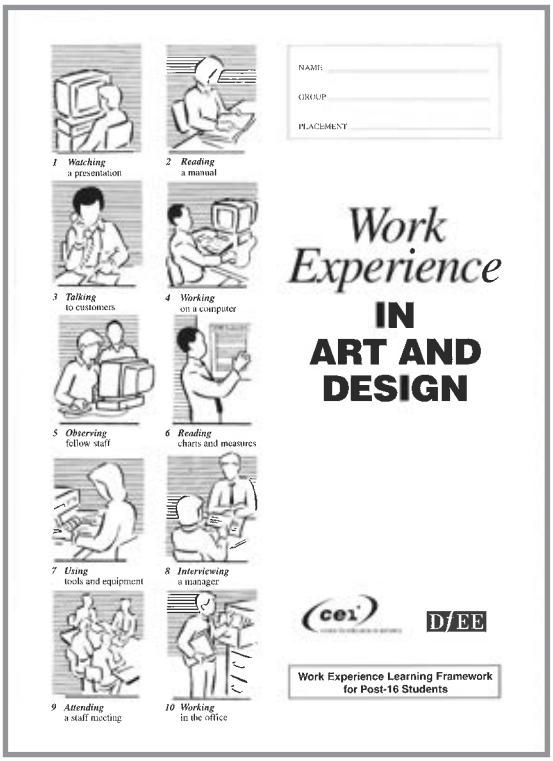
4. The table focuses on England; devolved provision in Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland followed different trajectories.

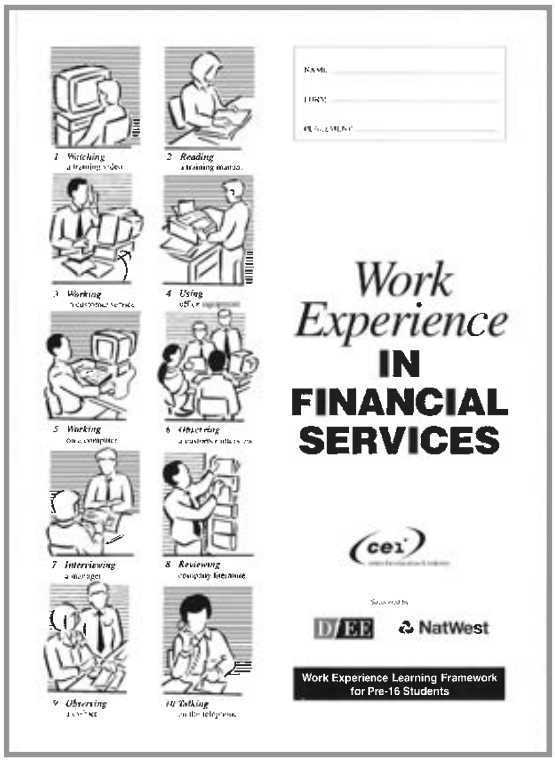
5. Employer costs of hosting work experience placements are consistently under-reported in official statistics; CEI (2004) identified significant but unquantified employer contributions throughout this period.

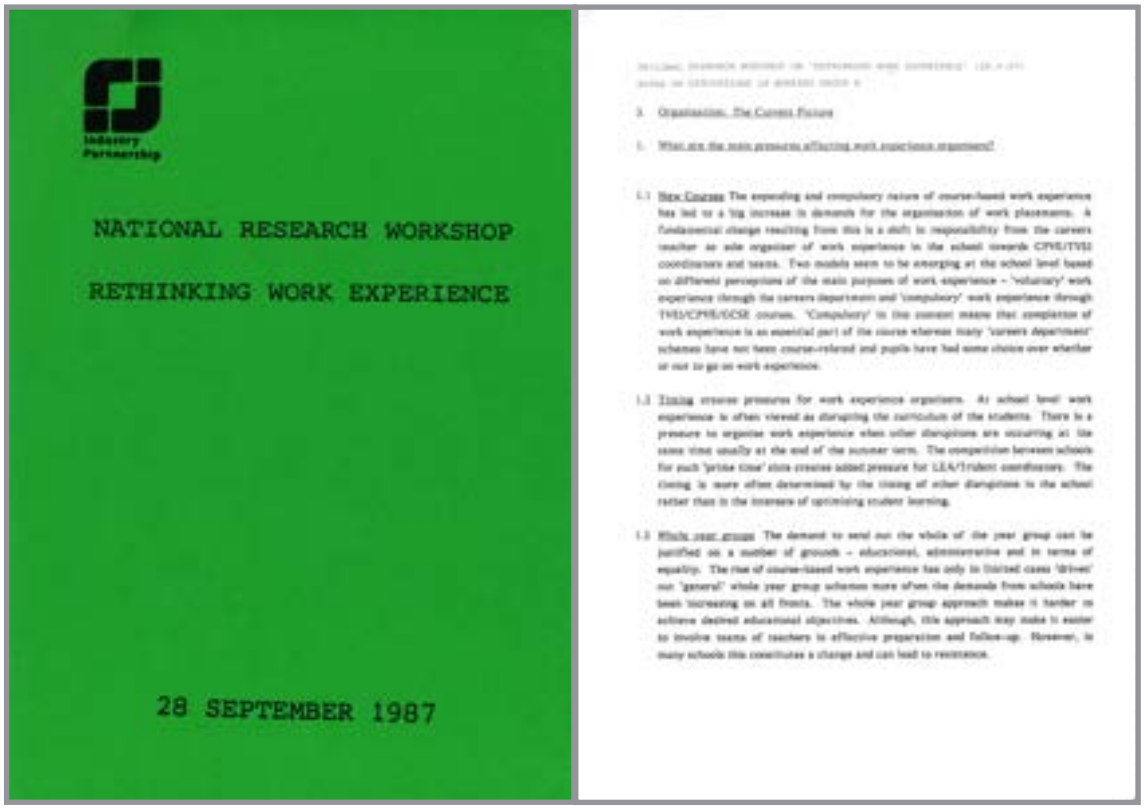
Annex 7. Examples of work experience support materials from the Education and Employers archive

1999 Work Experience: Learning frameworks portfolio pack









Industry Partnership

NATIONAL RESEARCH WORKSHOP

RETHINKING WORK EXPERIENCE

28 SEPTEMBER 1987

3. Organisation: The Current Picture

1. What are the main pressures affecting work experience organisers?

1.1 New Courses The expanding and compulsory nature of course-based work experience has led to a big increase in demands for the organisation of work placements. A fundamental change resulting from this is a shift in responsibility from the careers teacher as sole organiser of work experience in the school towards CPVE/TVEI coordinators and teams. Two models seem to be emerging at the school level based on different perceptions of the main purposes of work experience – 'voluntary' work experience through the careers department and 'compulsory' work experience through TVEI/CPVE/GCSE courses. 'Compulsory' in this context means that completion of work experience is an essential part of the course whereas many 'careers department' schemes have not been course-related and pupils have had some choice over whether or not to go on work experience.

1.2 Timing creates pressures for work experience organisers. At school level work experience is often viewed as disrupting the curriculum of the students. There is a pressure to organise work experience when other disruptions are occurring at the same time usually at the end of the summer term. The competition between schools for such 'prime time' slots creates added pressure for LEA/Student coordinators. The timing is more often determined by the timing of other disruptions in the school rather than in the interests of optimising student learning.

1.3 Whole year groups The demand to send out the whole of the year group can be justified on a number of grounds – educational, administrative and in terms of equality. The rise of course-based work experience has only in limited cases 'driven' out 'general' whole year group schemes more often the demands from schools have been increasing on all fronts. The whole year group approach makes it harder to achieve desired educational objectives. Although, this approach may make it easier to involve teams of teachers in effective preparation and follow-up. However, in many schools this constitutes a change and can lead to resistance.

1.4 Quantity vs quality There will inevitably be some trade-off between quality and quantity. This may occur because of inadequate vetting and preparation with employers. To ensure a quality placement it is important for the organiser to spend time with the employer. The result of this is that the employer will be better prepared for the arrival of the student and will be clear about the school's objectives. There is a distinction between the quality of the placement that is the potential of the working situation and the work available and how it is actually used. There may be a mismatch between the quality of the placement as perceived by the teacher and the quality of the pupil's experience.

1.5 Legal problems The vagueness of the law creates uncertainty and stress. The work experience organiser is expected to be familiar with the Factory Acts, Employment Law, Health and Safety legislation as well as local bye-laws. In the absence of clear LEA guidelines and procedures such pressures are heightened.

1.6 Resourcing School and LEA managers do not always have a full understanding of the purposes of work experience. It is often narrowly conceived and is consequently inadequately resourced. The effect of falling rolls, right sizing and diverted time is to further reduce flexibility. Adequate time for administration, visiting employers and students and follow-up work will frequently offend staffing principles. Often resources will be poured in at the start of a scheme to launch it, but there is also a need to maintain the system through continued administrative support.

1.7 Conflict of objectives Despite having firm views that the work experience is not about job tasting or vocational this view may not be shared by other colleagues, parents and students. Particularly in area of high unemployment for many pupils/parents it is still about 'getting a job' and this belief is reinforced when each year someone does get offered a job. Job sampling and the possibility of permanence remains a high expectation.

1.8 GCSE The pressures on students and teachers created by GCSE coursework demands make it harder for students to spend time 'off' on a work experience placement unless it is related to GCSE coursework. The danger becomes likely that the experience becomes data-gathering and problem-solving for subject-based assignment work. The effects of this will be to undermine other work experience objectives particularly those relating to personal development and transition to adulthood. This is largely the result of 'overloading' which is more likely to occur when work experience is 'one – off'.

1.9 YTS In some areas the YTS experience has meant that some pupils and parents have needed to be convinced that school work experience is not exploitation i.e. unpaid work depriving others of paid employment. YTS has made the job of work experience organisers easier because many employers understand the aims and organisation of a work experience placement. YTS has increased the range of placements available for schools. Establishments have already been inspected and departments are prepared for work experience students.

1.10 Equal Opportunities policies In order to implement equal opportunities policies organisers of work experience have to recruit ethnic minority employers. This may require special recruitment projects as in Hereford and Haringey.

1.11 Small business The desire to include more small businesses in work experience programmes means extra effort needs to be put in. Small businesses often lack resources, especially time, to devote to students on work experience. The rapid rate of business failure means that contacts have to be continually updated.

1.12 Territoriality This refers to the tendency for some work experience organisers to regard certain local employers as their own 'property'. This feeling may result, in part, from the time and effort invested in setting up the work placement. It may also derive from overlapping links with the school through parents or school governors. 'Twinning' arrangements which are a frequent early solution to the schools-industry problem at local level encourage 'territoriality'. The main argument for the retention of the placement by the school which established it is that the quality of the placement is a function of the school-employer relationship. The reluctance to put all individual schools placements in a common pool when coordination is being introduced stems from the belief that other schools through lack of pupil preparation and/or lack of relationship between the other schools and the employer will 'spoil the placement'. 'Spoiling the placement' in the belief on the part of teachers that individual students behaviour and/or teachers' behaviour may affect the goodwill of employers. It is probably the case that many such 'exclusive' links are more imagined than real. Schools may believe that a firm or work placement is theirs whereas, in fact, many other schools use the same firm.



2



What David Frost, Director General of the British Chambers of Commerce, has to say about work experience...

"Business and education must work together. A key way for businesses to do this, whatever their size, is through offering and supporting work experience.

"It can really help young people be better equipped for the world of work, while for employers it gives them a chance to help schools and learners gain an insight into the skills, values and attitude required in the workplace by business."

July 2008



3

What is work experience?



Work experience is an essential activity for young people between the ages of 14-19.

Work experience is a placement with an employer in which a young person carries out a task or a range of tasks and duties in much the same way as an employee, with the emphasis on learning from the experience.

Work experience gives young people the chance to learn about skills and personal qualities, as well as roles and structures in the workplace.

Almost all young people participate in work experience, representing over half a million placements every year. The Diploma is a new qualification for 14-19 year olds, which helps them in an innovative and exciting way for the future.

Part of this new qualification means that all young people following a Diploma will undertake at least 10 day's work experience and often they will do more. This does not need to be 10 days in one block or with the same employer.

What do young people get out of work experience?

It helps them to develop their employability skills, relates their learning to work, and helps them on their journey into work in later life.

Placements can be organised as either a block of one or two weeks or longer, as short placements or combinations of the two. You can decide how much you can offer and in what pattern to fit in with your own workplace.

4

What are the benefits for employers?

Employers and schools/colleges may seem worlds apart but they have lots to offer each other. Employers, whether in the private, public or third sector, multinationals or small and medium sized enterprises (SME's), have a wealth of skills and knowledge to offer. It is important that young people can tap into this and benefit from it.

However, it is not just young people who benefit, employers do too.

What employers have already told us

- It gives employers a chance to encourage future employees and improve the quality of young people entering work.
- It feels exciting to have young people with fresh ideas asking questions about what they do and why.
- It raises the profile of many career opportunities whilst breaking down stereotypical views about their sector, for example that certain careers are only for men or women.

Work experience helps employers to:

- Reduce the costs of future recruitment needs
- Contribute to the supply of skills to your sector or area
- Raise your profile in the local community and wider area
- Reinforce good health and safety practices
- Keep in touch with your customers
- Stay ahead of your competitors
- Be aware of what is happening in the education system
- Think about your own development and training needs
- Motivate your employees



5

The truth behind some of the work experience myths...

Work experience is no good

Yes, it is! The evidence is overwhelmingly positive. Reports from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI), the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA) and a study of 15,000 young people carried out by the National Educational Business Partnership Network are consistent in saying that young people get real benefits. It helps them to understand what skills they'll need to get on in the working world and to develop the 'can do' positive attitude that employers are looking for.



There is no one to help or advise employers about work experience

Yes, there is. Work experience is most effective when young people, parents, schools/colleges, partners and employers work together to make it happen. Work experience differs in many ways depending on local arrangements and needs. Employers who are interested in offering placements can contact their local school/college or speak to an Education Business Partnership Organisation (EBPO) who will be able to start the process. For the Diploma, employers have come together as part of a consortia with support from organisations such as the EBPO who can advise on the work experience element of the Diploma.

It's too time-consuming for employers to be able to offer work experience

It doesn't have to be. You can decide what opportunities to offer with the resources you have you and then make a commitment.

6

It's important to remember that all employers can get involved in one way or another.

Young people must complete a two week block work experience placement, or none at all

This is not true, even though many young people choose to do so. Schools/colleges, young people and employers all have the flexibility to agree how long and to what pattern a young person engages in work experience. Most employers are different and it is important that everyone agrees what's best for everyone.

Under 16s cannot do work experience in a industry such as some sectors

Again, this is not true, but any specific or additional health and safety checks need to be undertaken and most employers do this without any trouble. There are many examples of young people participating in construction and other sectors.

Employers and staff must be Criminal Record Bureau (CRB) checked

No, this isn't the case. CRB checks are only needed in certain situations and currently less than 1% of placements need them. Checks may be needed if the young person has special needs or if there is a residential element of the placement. More information can be found later in this booklet or by visiting www.criminalrecordchecks.co.uk

Young people with special needs cannot take part in work experience

No, this is not true. Lots of young people with special needs take part in work experience. Talk to the school/college about this if you are thinking about, or have been asked to offer a placement to a young person with special needs.



7

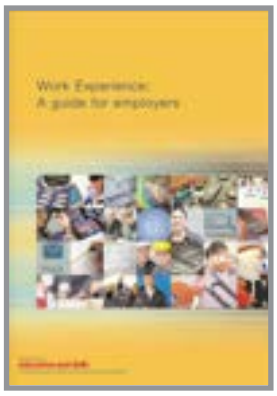


There are not enough employers providing work experience

This is not true at all, but we would like even more employers to be able to offer an ever greater range of opportunities. Over 300,000 employers are already involved in providing work experience placements, which means that there are over half a million work experience placements already taking place each year.

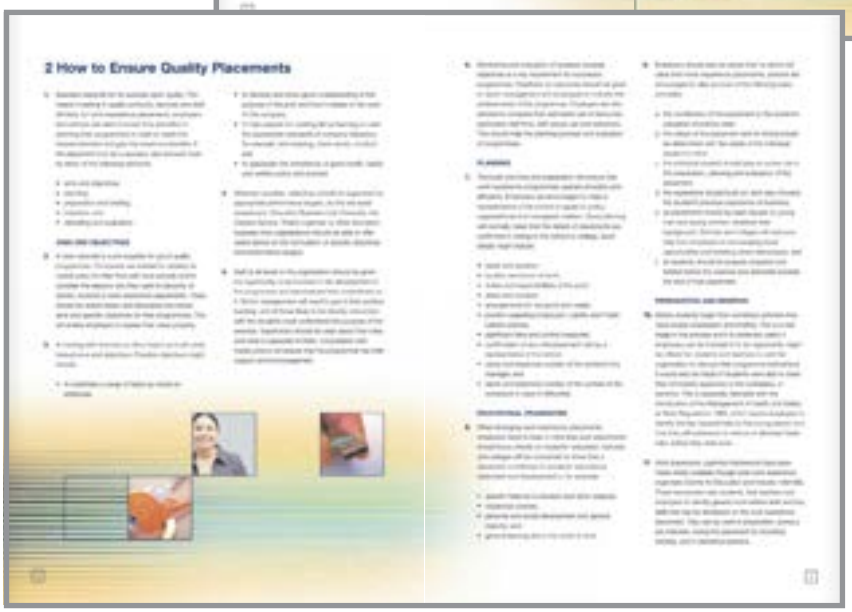
The Diploma is now available in a range of subjects and will increase over the next three years (to 17 in total by 2011). This means we need even more employers to help us deliver this.

2002 Work Experience: A guide for employers













IMPROVING
WORK EXPERIENCE

A good practice guide for employers

D/EE



FOREWORD

CONTENTS

Work experience also needs to be seen by young people as positive, challenging and relevant to their current studies and their future job prospects. The world of work is changing and there is a need for greater flexibility in workers of the future (see chapter 3). Young people need to grasp every opportunity to gain experience and acquire work-related knowledge and skills. Work experience can enhance students' employability by:

- increasing confidence, self-esteem and motivation to succeed
- helping to develop positive attitudes to work and lifelong learning
- providing opportunities to practise key skills for adult working life
- supporting projects, assignments and other work they are undertaking as part of a subject or course.

High-quality work experience requires careful planning for each stage of the programme:

- planning and organisation (see chapter 7)
- preparation (see chapter 8)
- placement (see chapter 9)
- reviewing learning (see chapter 11).

Pre-16 work experience

According to a recent study, employers have clear views about the aims of work experience for students from schools and colleges. For pre-16 students, employers regarded the three most important aims as:

- understanding of the world of work
- personal and social skills
- employability.



For many young people, work experience is their first experience of an adult working environment. It can have a very positive impact on their future development in school and at work: good-quality placements have always helped young people's motivation and improved their social skills. However, the reverse is also true: poor-quality work experience placements and negative experiences can have a lasting and damaging effect.



There are various ways in which work experience is linked with young people's studies. For example, as part of:

- **careers education** (e.g. they must investigate the changing world of work, reflect on their strengths and weaknesses, and develop a career action plan)
- **personal, social and moral education** (e.g. they have to improve their personal and social skills, their understanding of the world of work and to explore values such as honesty and fairness)
- **subject knowledge and skills** (e.g. they have to develop communication (English) and information technology skills (IT), but work experience can also contribute to several subjects including business studies and modern foreign languages)
- **General National Vocational Qualifications (GNVQ) and National Vocational Qualifications (NVQ)** (e.g. they have to demonstrate key skills and investigate aspects of businesses such as customer-care strategies, marketing or employment).

There are also a number of out-of-school study support centres being developed to provide a focus for motivating young people and aiding learning. Work experience is a common activity undertaken by students attending these centres.

Post-16 work experience

For post-16 work experience the most important aims, according to employers, were:

- investigating aspects of the world of work
- practising vocational skills
- improving employability
- developing personal and social skills.

The nature of the placements should be modified to reflect the greater maturity, experience and skills of post-16 students. Students following a level or GNVQ advanced/intermediate course will generally have specific issues that they will want to investigate, and a work-based project or work shadowing may be more appropriate than conventional work experience. However, work experience does enable work students to understand the practical applications of knowledge and concepts learnt in their courses.

- A-level students often want to investigate areas of work related to their career action plan.
- GNVQ students at advanced or intermediate level may want longer or different types of placement that allow them to gather data and produce evidence for their portfolio of coursework.

2 BENEFITS FOR EMPLOYERS

While the benefits of work experience to young people in schools and colleges are clear, many employers have also realised that it can have benefits for their own staff and organisation. This is especially the case in the competitive atmosphere of present-day business where recruiting and retaining key staff, and developing their professional skills, are increasingly important.

Work experience can benefit staff by:

- giving them experience of acting as a mentor, role model or supervisor
- making them feel that they are contributing something worthwhile to help young people prepare for working life
- raising health and safety awareness
- helping them to understand changes in educational courses and qualifications
- broadening their experience of young people from different backgrounds and cultures, and with varying abilities and special needs.

Employers report that work experience can also benefit their organisations by:

- helping to create a positive image of the organisation and their industry
- increasing the commitment of staff to the organisation as a caring employer
- making a visible contribution to the local community
- offering an outsider's view on improving working processes
- reinforcing good health and safety practices
- developing recruitment channels through links with schools and colleges and through informally assessing students as potential future employees
- helping to motivate and develop the skills of staff.

Some categories of students, for example those with special needs, the disaffected or students following vocational courses, may require one- or two-day-a-week placements over a term or a year. This approach to work experience allows students to learn the job and, therefore, to make a bigger contribution to the organisation than students on two-week placements.





Case studies

A high street store runs customer service research projects which students undertake during their work experience. The students work in different departments gathering data on working practices. On the last day, they have to make a presentation to senior management. The store has found that this works well and also provides useful information.

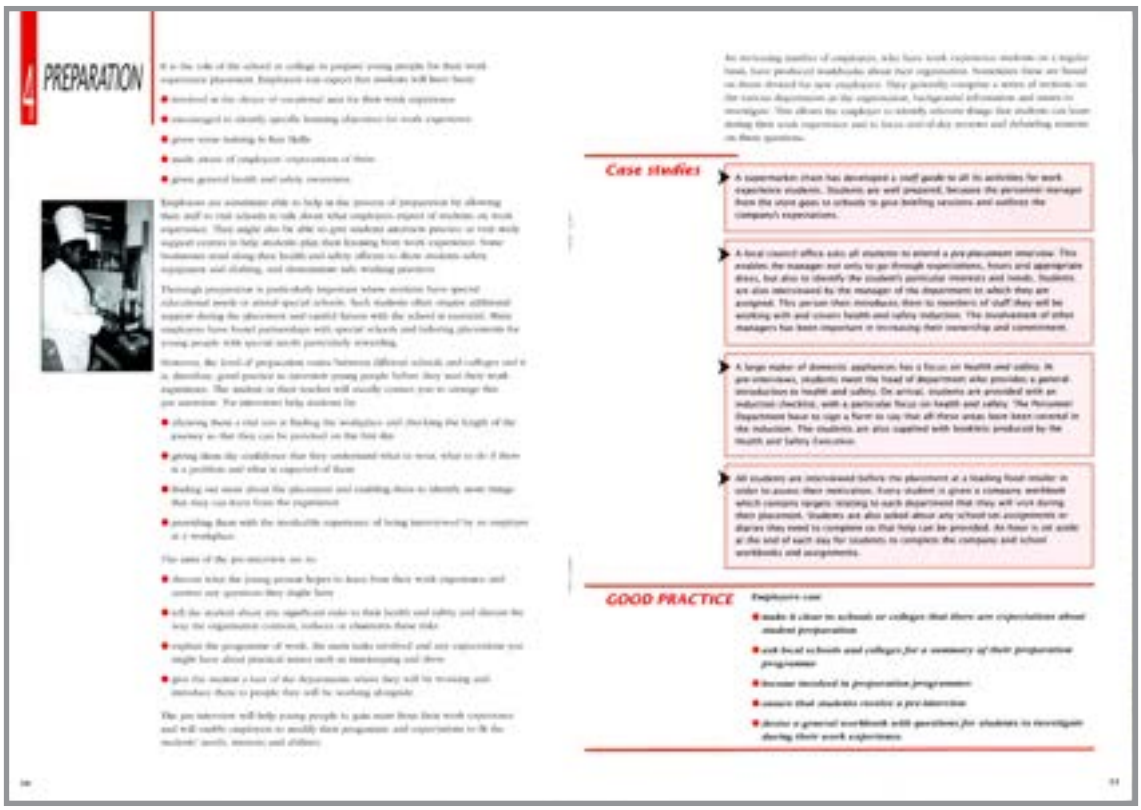
A newspaper offers work placements to students from local schools and colleges. The opportunity provided for students to contribute articles which are published and to produce a special supplement helps the paper to assess their suitability for future employment. Several students have subsequently become employees. The scheme also gives an opportunity for senior staff to develop their supervisory skills.



GOOD PRACTICE

Employers can:

- *identify the benefits to staff and the organisation from offering high-quality work experience programmes*
- *promote the self-esteem of staff by acknowledging the value of passing on their knowledge and skills to young people*
- *encourage staff to develop their own competencies through involvement in the preparation and debriefing of students in schools and colleges*
- *include work experience supervision within appraisal procedures.*



PREPARATION

Case studies

GOOD PRACTICE



REVIEWING LEARNING

Case studies

GOOD PRACTICE

7 ORGANISATIONAL ISSUES

Employers need to consider the aims and objectives of the work experience programmes they are offering. This will involve not only thinking about the outcomes for pre-16 and post-16 students, but also reviewing the aims for the organisation in hosting work placements. It is helpful to write these down. Some organisations are developing their policy statements which set out their intentions. This makes it easier to communicate the reasons for supporting work experience to staff and to education.

The increasing demand for work experience means that many employers need a policy for deciding which schools and colleges they will work with. In many areas of the country, there are central co-ordinators who provide the main database of placements. However, even in these areas, there are schools outside this system and others that encourage students to contact employers directly. The policy should set out whether the organisation operates on a first-come, first-served basis or seeks to develop partnerships more selectively.

Whatever the size of the organisation, it is important that everyone is responsible for co-ordinating work experience. This is to ensure that basic insurance and health-and-safety requirements are met (see *Work Experience: A Guide for Employers* from the Department for Education and Employment). Employers still be aware of their health and safety responsibilities under the Health and Safety (Young Persons) Regulations 1997. Details are contained in the Health and Safety Executive guidance documents, *Young People at Work – a Guide for Employers* HSG(A)30.

It is also important that staff who will be supervising students are volunteers who are prepared for their role of mentor. The supervisor should be a person who can relate to young people, help them to relax and talk, so that they can make the most of their placement. Supervisors need to be informed of any special medical or other needs of the student, as this can affect the duties undertaken and the level of supervision required.



Case studies

- A business has developed a work experience policy statement which includes the following key aims:
  - To assist student recognition of their own strengths and weaknesses and to help them develop key skills in communication, application of number, information technology, team work, improvement of their own learning and performance, internal and external customer service.
  - To benefit its staff by encouraging their participation in the work experience programme by providing them with an opportunity to develop new communication and interpersonal skills, to adapt existing skills and to contribute to the local community.
- In an large government office, there is a manager with responsibility for around 150 work experience placements each year. During the placement, the manager ensures that all pre-16 students have a mock interview with feedback on their performance. This is useful for the organisation, since, with no recruitment currently taking place, it is thought to be essential that interviewers do not lose their skills. Throughout the placement, students attend talks by other staff on equal opportunities, trade unions and health and safety.
- A company has developed a work experience supervisors' guide which provides a list of supervisors and their extension numbers, notes for interviewing students, blank timesheets, induction notes, reporting procedures, debriefing questions, evaluation proformas.



GOOD PRACTICE

Employers can:

- *develop a policy statement of key aims for their work experience programme*
- *ensure that work experience is co-ordinated*
- *take care in the selection and briefing of supervisors*
- *provide some supporting documentation for supervisors and co-workers.*

8 IMPROVING QUALITY

Many employers will be familiar with the cycle of activity – plan, do, review and improve. Many employers welcome feedback from young people on work experience and their training workers. This information has been used to gauge the level of satisfaction among the customers and to help identify ways of improving the organisation or quality of programmes. Central work experience agencies can also offer feedback and suggest possible improvements.

In order to improve the quality of work experience across the country, the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority has published National Quality Standards for:

- Schools and colleges
- Employers
- Central work experience organisers.

They should be seen as interlocking parts of the same quality assurance framework. Schools and colleges can only go so far in preparing students for work experience. High-quality work experience depends upon a collaborative approach by all of the partners involved. However, employers take major responsibility for the quality of the placement experience. Hence, the decision to publish a National Quality Standard for Employers (which is reproduced in Appendix 1) which is appropriate for large, medium and small organisations.

The purpose of the National Standards is to serve as guidance to schools and colleges, employers, central work experience organisers and to other organisations such as training and enterprise councils, education business partnerships, local education authorities, careers companies and Training Enterprise Councils. They are based on existing good practice and are not designed to replace local quality assurance systems which are working effectively. In many areas, external organisers operate certificates and awards to employers offering good-quality programmes.

The Quality Criteria can be seen as minimum specifications, which provide a broad framework that can be adapted to suit local circumstances. Large companies offering work experience in many locations or with many departments may want to use the Quality Criteria to help standardise practice. The Evidence requirements are intended as examples and are not prescriptive.



Case study

- An airline company asks all students to complete an end-of-placement feedback form. These are analysed so that the 'standard of service' can be monitored. A report is produced which includes young people's responses to the following questions: How could we improve arrangements for work experience? How could we improve the service in relation to your work experience application? How did the placement meet your expectations? How could the work experience programme be improved?



GOOD PRACTICE

Employers can:

- *gather feedback on their programmes from students, teachers and central organisers*
- *periodically review programmes and, where appropriate, take action to improve their quality*
- *audit their programmes against the National Quality Standard for Employers*
- *seek to attain local quality standards for their work experience programmes.*

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