

What makes for an effective work experience placement? **Dorothy Lepkowska** looks at the findings of recent research into overcoming common barriers to placements and innovative approaches

What makes work experience effective?



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The implementation of 16 to 19 study programmes two years ago was intended to improve the learning experience and prospects of post-16 students to enable them to progress successfully to employment, Apprenticeships or higher education.

School sixth forms and sixth form and further education colleges were expected to offer coherent programmes that were tailored to individual needs, education and employment goals.

This might include progress towards a GCSE at grade C for young people who had yet to achieve this in English and maths, at least one substantial qualification or a Traineeship or extended work experience for those not ready for more formal study, and non-qualification activity such as tutorial time and work experience.

The provision of work experience by schools and colleges has sometimes been a challenge, with efforts hampered by claims of bureaucracy, a lack of time and resources, and too few suitable placements being offered by local employers.

In her annual lecture in 2014, Lorna Fitzjohn, Ofsted's director for further education and skills, said most providers "didn't use work experience effectively", and added that despite the implementation of 16 to 19 study programmes there was "slower than expected progress at institutional level".

However, some institutions are creating innovative, purposeful and effective work placement experiences for their students, and have made them a key part of their overall learning provision – while also overcoming many of the challenges of running such a scheme.

The active involvement of employers in preparing young people prior to sending them out on work placements enhances the whole experience for maximum effect

A recently published report from the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER), entitled *Sharing Innovative Approaches and Overcoming Barriers in Delivering 16-19 Study Programmes Principles*, commissioned by the Department for Education (DfE), examines work experience.

Effective and valuable work placement experiences, where these form an integral and formalised part of study programmes, are explored. In every case, the schools and colleges have developed distinctive features that meet the needs of students, as well as employers.

The report found that schools and colleges that offer the best provision for work-related activities are proactive in their response to the needs of local employers and show a willingness to establish relationships with leading firms. They have also developed structured programmes of work experience, enterprise and/or work placement activities.

One institution doing this effectively was Birmingham Metropolitan College, where every student is engaged in a World of Work programme, comprising both work experience and activities to help boost young people's employability skills.

To meet a local shortage of skilled workers in the professional skills industry, the college set up a Professional Services Academy (PSA), one of the first of its kind in the country, which is open to students studying AS and A levels in areas such

as law, accounting, economics, business studies and mathematics and those on Apprenticeships in accounting, business administration and legal studies.

The PSA programme comprises a structured package of work enterprise and work placement activities that have been developed in partnership with local employers. It aims to ensure that students gain "hands-on" experience and develop the skills to meet employers' needs.

The NFER study also found that the creative development of work experience models, where programmes provide potential mutual benefits for all concerned – providers, young people and partners – are particularly effective.

It said that the active involvement of employers in preparing young people prior to sending them out on work placements enhances the whole experience for maximum effect.

This is particularly true of Oldham Further Education College, which has set up an Employers Advisory Board of 20 local businesses to work alongside its Digital and Creative Centre to strengthen relationships.

Prior to embarking on a work experience placement, students at the college work with employers on workshops, master-classes and other forms of employability-related support and guidance, to prepare them for placements. This includes employers asking students to submit CVs and be interviewed for their placements, to reflect the competitive nature of finding a job.

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One student from St Brendan's College in Bristol, for example, evaluated the graduate trainee programme of the insurance firm with which he served a six-week placement during the summer holiday at the end of year 12.

Students from the college who are successful in applying for an internship are matched with a mentor, who acts as a critical friend, and are asked to complete a project that will provide something of value to the employer.

Meanwhile, at Chichester College, all student work experience is monitored, with hours of activity logged and every student having an on-line Enterprise Passport. This allows them to reflect on their achievements and the skills they have learned, and acts as a reference for job or university applications. Additionally at Walker Technology College in Newcastle, sixth form work experience placements are designed to mirror the "real world of work" as far as possible to achieve maximum benefit for students and employers.

And in the sixth form at Pimlico Academy in London, students are supported by a Raising Aspirations Team of staff, who create belief and help young people to develop self-confidence and broaden their horizons. Additionally they monitor and record impact of the work placements. The aim is for no student to rule anything out or to close any doors with the choices they make.

The best work experience, the NFER report said, is tailored to the needs of students and employers, and is backed up with dedicated staff or teams of staff who develop and monitor the programme across the institution to enhance the provision on offer.

SecEd

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Further information

- A top-tips document for senior leaders in schools and colleges, *How to Provide Meaningful Experience of the World in Work for Young People as Part of 16 to 19 Study Programmes*, can be found at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/DFIA02/DFIA02_home.cfm
- The NFER report, with full details of the case studies, can be found at www.nfer.ac.uk/publications/DFIA01/DFIA01.pdf



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