

Summary

Employer involvement in schools

A rapid review of UK and international evidence



Against a backdrop of economic recession, high youth unemployment, and a sustained reduction in public funding, the task of supporting young people to make effective post-16 transitions is highly challenging.

This literature review is one of four produced under *The NFER Research Programme*, as part of the From Education to Employment theme. Collectively, they identify strategies for assisting young people at risk of becoming not in education, employment or training (NEET) to make effective post-16 transitions into learning or employment. The reviews build upon recent NFER research on the reasons for young people's NEET status, and the identification of three discrete sub-categories of NEET young people (Spielhofer *et al.*, 2009).

- 'Open to learning' NEETs – most likely to re-engage in education.
- 'Sustained' NEETs – characterised by a negative experience of school, high levels of truancy and exclusion, and low academic attainment.
- 'Undecided' NEETs – similar to 'open to learning' NEETs, but dissatisfied with available opportunities.

This review explores the ways in which employers engage with schools, the features and principles of successful employer involvement and the impact of employers' involvement on young people's progression.

In these four reviews, the NFER offers a unique perspective on the research and evidence-based practice of the last five years in this area and identifies the gaps for future research.

Types of engagement

Employers engage with schools in a variety of different ways. We have grouped these types of engagement into three themes, which reflect a number of the priority areas for business engagement in primary and secondary schools.

Leadership and governance

Employers are using their skills and experience to support the leadership and governance of schools, according to the research evidence. This may involve employers volunteering as school governors and using their commercial skills to contribute positively to the leadership of schools. The evidence also indicates that employers support staff development, providing leadership guidance to teachers and the wider leadership of the school. The report highlights the value of good relationships between teachers and employers, as teacher recommendations can lead to student work opportunities.

Curriculum support

The research evidence shows that employers are supporting school curricula in several ways, contributing to curriculum planning and providing specific learning activities, thus extending the range of learning experiences for students. Surprisingly, there were few reports detailing employer involvement in business education specifically, however when involvement became embedded, it correlated with excellent teaching and positively affected achievement and engagement with the subject.

Skills and awareness

Employers also work directly with students to develop skills and awareness. The evidence suggests that this involvement raises student aspirations as well as helping them to develop skills that are important to employers. These are the most frequently mentioned ways of developing skills and raising awareness.

Work experience and work-related learning – work experience was found to be the most common type of employer involvement with schools. Successful work experience placements should involve the student in varied work, with employers being fully prepared for the placement. Work-related learning provides students with a link between theory and the real world.

School/workplace visits – these were shown to raise students' awareness of career options, however the quality of careers guidance in general is thought to be variable and there are calls for improvement.

Apprenticeships/training schemes – the research evidence on these schemes refers to employer involvement in specific qualifications, helping young people develop new skills and adjust to a work environment.

Mentoring – there are various schemes whereby professionals mentor pupils. The evidence found that these tend to be ad hoc and uncoordinated although they are seen to contribute greatly towards students' feelings of engagement towards careers. One-to-one mentoring rather than group mentoring is seen as more effective.

Features of successful employer involvement

The research identifies ten key features of successful employer involvement.

- A clear vision
- Good communication
- Strong partnerships and connections
- High level of commitment, cooperation and leadership
- Sufficient time and capacity to flourish
- Flexibility to evolve and react
- Integration of curriculum and the 'real world'
- Well-structured and credible
- Reflective of local needs and opportunities
- Student career awareness is started early

The research also identified the key elements of successful work experience placements.

- Students should be prepared appropriately, and undertake varied work which includes different experiences.
- Students should be given clear and realistic expectations of their placements, and be aware of the importance of the skills they are developing.
- Work placements should be linked to students' own skills and interests, and they should be given time to reflect and evaluate on their experience.
- There should be tangible outcomes provided from the work students undertake, and they should be rewarded for good quality work.

With regard to successful career education, rather than work placements, the research showed that schools should build relationships with employers, make it easy for them to contribute, offer different options for contribution, and ensure clear communication.

Impact of involvement

Employers' involvement with schools is seen to affect young people's progression to education, employment or training in several ways.

Outcomes for students

The research literature does not commonly discuss student outcomes, but it does suggest that employer involvement can have a positive impact on young people by contributing to raised attainment, increasing confidence in terms of career choices and by expanding their understanding of the world of work.

Outcomes for schools and teachers

Most of the evidence concentrates on student and employer outcomes, but outcomes identified for teachers and schools are: revenue and resources; governance support; innovative curriculum delivery options marrying practical and theoretical work; improved community profile; improved leadership, management and marketing skills; greater professional development opportunities for teachers; and higher staff morale.

Outcomes for employers

The research identified three main outcomes for employers themselves:

- enhanced recruitment and retention, giving employers access to potential employees
- better awareness of their business and improved reputation within the local community
- improved skills and competencies of employees involved in the school partnership.

Summary and next steps

This review provides an overview of the ways in which employers and businesses engage with schools. The evidence suggests that this involvement is beneficial for students, however this evidence is often based on the perceptions of stakeholders rather than empirical data. There is also suggestion of a lack of clarity on the main objectives of employer-school interactions, which may impact on the success of such programmes.

The review also highlights a lack of robust evidence on the impact of employer involvement on harder outcomes, such as achievement and post-16 destinations, although there is evidence of perceived benefit on softer outcomes such as vocational skills, knowledge and understanding, academic and learning outcomes, health and well-being, and enjoyment and engagement.

There is a lack of evidence in the literature linking employer engagement to 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEETs.

This suggests a current gap in research evidence on how employer involvement with schools can enable those susceptible to becoming 'open to learning', or 'undecided' NEETs to progress in education, employment or training. This gap will be the focus of the *From Education to Employment* theme within The NFER Research Programme. Key features will be:

- the development and implementation of indicators to assist in the identification of young people who are 'open to learning' or 'undecided' NEET
- the trialling and evaluation of specific strategies
- the validation and dissemination of good practice.

Through this programme of research, we hope to go some way towards reducing the gap in what is known about effective NEET prevention strategies, and to make a difference to the lives of learners.

References

Spielhofer, T., Benton, T., Evans, K., Featherstone, G., Golden, S., Nelson, J. and Smith, P. (2009). *Increasing Participation: Understanding Young People Who Do Not Participate in Education or Training at 16 and 17* (DCSF Research Report RR072). London: DCSF [online]. Available: <https://www.education.gov.uk/publications/RSG/Youthandadolescence/Page7/DCSF-RR072> [20 October, 2011].

The NFER Research Programme

This Programme was set up in 2011. Funded by NFER and partners, it is developing partnerships with organisations and individuals who share our commitment to solving unanswered challenges young people face in education. The Programme targets key areas of education, highlighting gaps in existing evidence and conducting new research to provide evidence to fill the gaps. Current areas of focus are: *From Education to Employment, Developing the Education Workforce and Innovation in Education.*

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