



## RESEARCH INTO EMPLOYERS' VIEWS OF QUALITY WORK EXPERIENCE

**Research commissioned by the Employability Skills Group at  
Connexions West of England**

### Introduction

Sending secondary school pupils into the workplace for a period of one or two weeks' work experience has been customary in many schools for many years. Developments in the provision of vocational education and recent changes to the National Curriculum, which have made work-related learning a requirement at Key Stage 4, have increased demand for work experience placements. This has put pressure on those organisations that already provide work experience and has made it necessary to look for ways of encouraging other employers to take school-age students for placements. In December 2004, the Employability Skills Group at Connexions West of England commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to carry out an investigation into the views of employers from the West of England area on the provision of work experience.

### Key findings

- There was strong employer commitment to the principle of providing work experience for school students, with a widespread view that it was a community service that they were pleased to provide, regardless of any challenges.
- Employers believed that there was no point in offering work experience unless it resulted in some benefit for the individual student. This they thought was essential to a quality scheme, but it required full commitment from both employer and student. In particular this entailed sympathetic personal supervision by the employer and a good matching process of students to placements by the school.
- Employee time and health and safety regulations were perceived as the main challenges in providing work experience. However, employers argued that they should not be seen as an insurmountable barrier and provided examples of how these challenges could be overcome.
- Employers valued contact with schools and welcomed teacher visits during placements. Some expressed concern about schools that did not contact their pupils at all during placements.

- Interviewees thought it was important to get more employers involved, as the volume of requests for placements was increasing all the time, while their resources were finite.
- Many employers would welcome spreading placements more evenly through the year rather than concentrating demand in the summer term.

## Research methods

The research was undertaken in two stages, with the first stage, in February and March 2005, involving in-depth, face-to-face interviews with ten employers, representing a variety of employment sectors. They gave details of their current schemes and were also asked for their opinions on what they felt constituted a quality work experience scheme and the ways in which this quality could be ensured. During June 2005, telephone interviews were conducted with a further 12 employers, selected at random, to see to what extent their views coincided with those of the first group of interviewees.

The employers in both phases reflected a range of different sizes of organisation and sectors of employment. They ranged from large companies with hundreds of employees to small professional businesses and included manufacturing and engineering, agricultural/horticultural and rural enterprises, retail outlets, hotels and a variety of professional, social and service industries.

## The findings

### Reasons for providing work experience

*It's absolutely worthwhile. My job would be much easier if I didn't do it, but I'm dedicated to it.*

There was a strongly positive attitude amongst the employers towards the value of offering work placements. All regarded it as a community service, which they felt it was important to provide, even if it brought challenges. This 'public service' ethos extended across all the employment sectors and the types of organisations, both large and small. Several interviewees made reference to their own work experience opportunities, or lack of them, or to sympathy with the schools' search for placements, having seen the process through their own children's schools. In certain employment sectors, there was perceived to be a practical advantage in terms of public image, or encouraging recruitment. For most however, they continued to offer placements, because it was to benefit 'the workforce of the future', and, as one put it, it was her 'public duty' to do so.

## What is a quality work experience programme?

### *Holistic*

*It's all about giving them time for a varied look at how a company works, giving them the whole picture. It's making sure they have a variety of tasks and hands-on experience. It's about giving them the opportunity to show themselves in a good light.*

### *Social skills*

*They can't actually do much in terms of the job, but developing their social skills is the most important part. If by the end of the week, they are not afraid to talk to people and ask about the job, then it has been successful.*

### *Stimulating*

*A good programme needs to be targeted to the abilities of each student and it needs to be stimulating.*

### *Informed choice*

*If they realise by the end of the week that this is not the career for them, then it's been a valuable experience.*

### *Being valued*

*Students need to feel wanted and welcome. A programme should be well-planned, informative, instructive and safe.*

### *Realism*

*It gives young people a personal view of the profession. Many of them have a glamourised view of it due to the media, so they need to find out that there's more to it than they think. By the end of the week they have a more realistic outlook.*

### *Motivating*

*We are providing a completely different experience, both in terms of the working environment and the insight into a career. This can provide a boost to their motivation and perhaps settle them for the future.*

All the employers interviewed were consistent in believing that the most important indicator of a quality programme was that the students had to have some sort of positive outcome. This was sometimes expressed simply in terms of the pupil having had a worthwhile experience, to more concrete results, such as improved social skills, greater confidence, increased aspirations, a better insight into the world of work, or the ability to make a more informed career choice. There was a consensus therefore, that a quality programme needed to be stimulating and informative, it needed to be targeted to the abilities of each individual and it needed to give a real flavour of the work.

## What helps to provide a quality scheme

There was a common view that this depended on input from both sides. The employers accepted that it was essential for them to provide close personal supervision, a well-planned programme, including a thorough induction, good personal feedback to the student and an atmosphere in which students felt able to ask questions and were given real insight into the nature of the work. Thorough feedback to pupils was taken very seriously by employers, sometimes involving several hours' appraisal, or a presentation by the student, to which parents and teachers were invited. Some employers gave students certificates for health and safety training or to prove successful completion of their placement.

### *Supervision and rewards*

*Treat them as adults, but remember they are young and inexperienced. Experienced staff are needed to look after them. I also make sure they have a sample or exhibition piece to take away with them to show their parents and school.*

### *Useful tasks*

*They need to be given a role that is beneficial to their understanding, not just stuffing envelopes.*

### *Individual focus*

*It needs a dedicated person running it, getting to know them and treating them as individuals. The students need to be able to interact with staff.*

### *Feedback*

*They are monitored continuously and given feedback, with the main debriefing on the last day. They can take drawings and information away with them and are given a certificate by the company.*

Employers also believed that there had to be a positive attitude and commitment from the pupils themselves, and by extension, from their schools. The majority of interviewees made the point that proper matching between pupils and placements was an important means of achieving a positive attitude on both sides and linked this back to the issue of communication with schools. Employers felt that most schools undertook the matching process successfully and this was why placements usually worked well. The complaint of one interviewee, that a few schools treated them 'like a baby-sitting service' was rare, although a small number of others also thought that there was sometimes a mismatch between pupils' aptitudes and the placement, or had a suspicion that as long as pupils were placed somewhere for a week, it did not matter much where it was.

As one commented:

*They need to have an interest in what goes on here. I suspect that sometimes students are sent because there's nowhere else for them to go, or they are friends who don't want to be split up.*

Several employers pointed out that they knew they were not always the student's first choice of placement, but that even if there was no direct interest in the work, there were still generic skills that could be acquired and a positive attitude was likely to result in some sort of personal development. A number of employers had now introduced an interview process as a means of ensuring that they were taking students who were likely to benefit from the placement.

*Interest*

*The students need to have some interest, they need to make an effort. We do our best, but in the end, it's only as good as the pupil.*

*Purpose*

*They have to want to be here and they need a purpose and a goal.*

Reference was also made to the value of schools providing some preparation for work experience, and generally employers thought that schools did this well. They said that students usually came with the Log Book supplied by the Employability Skills Group at Connexions, which encouraged the young people to think about the whole process, before, during and after their placement. Sometimes, however, students had been given the booklets, but had not looked at them before they arrived, and there were occasional reports of students arriving on the first day dressed inappropriately and apparently without realising they would have to stay longer than a school day. Pre-placement interviews were seen as one way of avoiding this, as was sending information to the pupil before the placement, while other interviewees had built up a good relationship with certain schools and knew that they could be relied on to match and prepare pupils well.

*Preparation*

*Some schools are much better than others. The pupils have been told about sensible dress and a positive attitude and they blend in well. A few schools have not been through the booklets with them or told them what to expect.*

## Benefits of offering work experience

When asked to consider any particular advantages in providing work experience, the interviewees' answer was generally not a practical benefit, but the more intangible one of personal satisfaction. Many of the interviewees talked about the development of individual students over the course of a week and agreed with this view: 'Personally I find it very worthwhile seeing changes in attitudes and aspirations'. There was felt to be particular value in taking students who had a poor reputation at school and finding that they responded well to a different environment.

### *Student appreciation*

*Students add life to the office. They can't contribute much, but most are appreciative and enjoy being out of school for a week.*

### *Student response*

*We get a lot of satisfaction from seeing students develop as a result of being in an adult environment, particularly students with disabilities and disaffected pupils who discover a purpose and motivation.*

### *Personal satisfaction*

*There's great personal satisfaction if you see a young person get a good experience out of it, especially if they have not been very successful at school.*

Some employers reported practical advantages. For example, engineering companies said that they had received an increase in apprenticeship applications and several other interviewees stated that they 'had got some good employees out of it'. Some mentioned raising their public profile – 'It helps give the company good standing in the community.' and a few had found that 'some students have been much more useful than I thought they would be'. Some also reported a 'hidden benefit' in that making an employee responsible for a placement student was good for professional development.

## Challenges

Interviewees agreed that there were challenges in providing work experience but this was taken for granted and made no difference to their belief that it was still worthwhile. The main challenges were seen to be as follows.

- Employee time and extra work – larger companies with training departments or individuals whose main role was training, found it less of a problem than smaller organisations where it was sometimes the case that 'lost time equalled lost production', or where individual employee time had to be accounted for. However, all agreed that despite this, if a placement was to be successful, it

required time and effort and this was part of the price that was worth paying for running good schemes.

- Health and safety regulations were seen as a particular issue when students were under 16 years of age and if there was machinery on the premises, as this restricted what the young people were able to do. There was, too, some confusion generally as to whether employers needed extra insurance cover for under-16s. On the other hand, some employers commented that this whole area was now so well-regulated that there was no need to make extra provision for school-age students. Generally, employers felt that while such regulations could be an irritation, they could be dealt with through an induction process and should not act as a deterrent to providing placements.
- Only a minority of interviewees had encountered bad behaviour, but several considered that a negative attitude, or simply an unwillingness to use their own initiative, was sometimes a barrier to students gaining as much as they could have done. If schools did not match or prepare pupils well, the suggested solution was to have interviews, or less formal pre-placement meetings. Most employers pointed out that the students who developed positively far outnumbered those who were a disappointment.
- Contact with schools was reported as a concern by some interviewees. While most school staff either visited their students on placement or phoned to check on their progress, a few employers were disturbed by instances of pupils left for a week (and in one case, a student who had been on an extended placement for several weeks), who had not been contacted by their schools.

## The future

Despite the perceived value of offering work experience, of the 22 employers interviewed altogether, two had now stopped providing placements because of other pressures, and several more thought they might have to reduce numbers in the future. Most of the others said they would not be able to increase the number of annual placements, although two said they could, if they were better spread over the year. As all reported the number of requests for work experience were steadily increasing, there was recognition that more employers needed to be persuaded to participate. The main recommendations for achieving this were:

- find ‘work experience champions’ amongst the committed employers who would lobby others and encourage the development of links between schools and organisations
- promote and publicise the positive benefits of work experience – service to the community, the encouragement of the future workforce and the satisfaction of seeing young people ‘blossom over the course of a week’
- be honest about the time commitment and issue straightforward guidance for employers on such issues as health and safety, insurance and child protection legislation

- encourage organisations like the Employability Skills Group at Connexions and the Education Business Group of the West of England, which already have expertise in this area, to increase collaboration between schools and employers
- persuade schools to spread their requests across the year (perhaps including school holidays), rather than concentrating them in the summer term
- pay organisations that are run as charities for taking work experience students.

*A lot of employers think providing work experience is time-consuming, which it is, and a nuisance, which it's not. It's all about showing young people what working life is like.*

*It's rewarding because it's about the success stories of individuals.*

*We're a major employer in this area. We want to give back to the community.*

*It needs to be emphasised that there are benefits not only for the young people, but for the companies too, if they are prepared to write off a few hours of people's time.*

*It's far more a worthwhile experience than a burden, otherwise we would not take so many. Once the process is set up, it runs well.*

## Conclusion

The principle of providing work experience placements for school students is strongly supported by committed employers, regardless of the size or nature of their organisation and the demands involved. In order to ensure that other young people benefit in the way that so many placed with the interviewees have, the challenge is to find ways of making their positive views more widely known, so encouraging others to make the same commitment.

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