

Learning from experience

How to make high quality work
experience a reality for all

Niamh O Regan
Aveek Bhattacharya



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Kindly supported by



FIRST PUBLISHED BY

The Social Market Foundation, March 2023
3rd Floor 5-6 St Matthew Street, London SW1P 2JT
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CONTENTS

Acknowledgements	4
About the authors	4
Executive summary	5
Chapter One – Introduction	10
Chapter Two – Not so fast	20
Chapter Three – The way forward	31
Chapter Four – Coordinating the chaos	38
Endnotes	47

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The SMF is grateful to Speakers for Schools for funding the research. The Social Market Foundation retains full editorial independence with respect to its research.

The authors would like to thank all who participated in expert and practitioner interviews as part of this project and would like to thank Speakers for Schools for providing insights and testimonials on work experience from their youth panel.

Speakers for Schools is a UK-wide youth social mobility charity that empowers young people from less privileged backgrounds to expand their horizons, enrich their lives and achieve their potential. It provides a much-needed bridge between employers, high-profile guest speakers, educators from UK state secondary schools, colleges and Independent Training Providers (ITPs). Together, through the charity's core programmes – Inspiration, Enrichment and Experience – they deliver innovative and impactful youth-focused activities and interventions that demystify careers, build young people's self-belief and fuel their ambition.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are growing calls for universal work experience in English schools

- Work experience can bring a range of benefits to school students, in terms of future employability, insight into the world of work, self-confidence, emotional development, and even academic outcomes.
- Between 2004 and 2011, schools were effectively under a mandatory duty to offer work experience, but following the Wolf review this was removed.
- Since then, the prevalence of work experience has declined, with less than half of young people in England receiving work experience today.
 - Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) in mainstream schools are even less likely to have received work experience.
 - By contrast, independent school students are more likely to receive work experience, and often get multiple opportunities.
- Organisations like Federation of Small Businesses and Speakers for Schools have called for every student to have access to work experience, a measure supported by the Labour Party.
- Speakers for Schools commissioned this research to generate evidence on the practicalities of rolling out universal high quality work experience, and how any barriers to such an objective might be overcome.

Work experience for all is achievable and affordable: we estimate it is likely to cost around £75 million a year to deliver

- The government should work towards a goal of universal mandatory work experience that is the equivalent of two weeks across a student's school career.
- Work experience in this context can be understood as a short placement with an employer that a student undertakes to gain a sense of the world of work and explore possible career options.
- At a minimum, a placement should be well-structured, designed to give students a true picture of the world of work and a genuine understanding and experience of the tasks and responsibilities associated with a given role.
- Generating and coordinating high quality work placements for every student requires time and resources for school career leads, as well as brokerage services that connect employers to schools.
- We estimate this would cost around £75 million a year to deliver
 - Our expert interviews suggest a benchmark figure for organising a placement is £60, which we have multiplied by the typical number of students in two academic years.
 - This figure also includes £3 million for an online platform (see below).
- This represents the full cost of building a universal programme from scratch, though in reality some existing school spending would be displaced.
- Even so, this is a relatively modest cost for a program with such potential benefits for education and social mobility:

- Analysis of work experience programs for young unemployed people has found they bring a net benefit of £150 per placement to the Treasury, which offers some encouragement regarding school work experience.

Building the necessary infrastructure to ensure placements are high quality will take time, so it is critical to start now to ensure another generation does not miss out

- It may take a full parliamentary term to achieve high quality provision for all.
- In order to get to that destination, it is imperative to improve a) the coverage of specialised careers support; and b) the number of employers engaged with the careers system.

Proactive outreach, reduced administrative burden and greater flexibility is needed to get more employers to participate in work experience

- A campaign of sustained and personalised outreach is necessary to ‘sell’ employers on the benefits of work experience, and to minimise the hassle for them.
- Employer engagement with the education system is low and weakened during the pandemic:
 - The share of employers offering placements to school students fell from 19% to 7%, and only 4% of small businesses have a relationship with a school.
- Yet there is latent employer interest in work placements that needs to be unlocked:
 - 11% of employers do not offer work experience because they have never thought about it, 7% because nobody has asked yet.
- Reducing hassle is also key – brokers can guide employers through the process and/or lift some of the administrative burden.
- Greater flexibility would help, too – for example, schools could be less prescriptive about where in the calendar or timetable placements can occur.

This outreach should be led by local brokerage organisations, with clearly assigned responsibility for coordinating work experience and employer relationships in each area

- Local brokerage organisations should be tasked with engaging employers in every area with work experience, and the education system more broadly.
- Duplication and a lack of specialisation are obstacles to effective and efficient work experience delivery – clearer delineation of responsibilities is needed:
 - Employers have to engage with too many institutions.
 - A range of organisations with overlapping remits, including schools, colleges, Careers Hubs, Education Business Partnerships, and dedicated careers services, all try to link the labour market to the education system.
 - Individual schools lack capacity, resources and contacts.
- A better system would be to have a single point of accountability for local coordination. Formalising this role will extend brokerage services where they do not already exist and hold services to the same standard across the country.

- Careers Hubs seem best placed to take the lead – they are widely spread, well established and many already take on this function.
 - 65% of state schools and colleges are part of a Career Hub, a figure that has been rising.
 - Careers Hubs also have a proven track record of improving outcomes: schools in Hubs achieve more of the Gatsby Benchmarks of good career guidance, which in turn is associated with reducing economic inactivity.
- If Careers Hubs are given responsibility for coordinating work experience, they should not necessarily be the ones that deliver it. In some cases, they may sub-contract the role to existing institutions with more established employer relationships, such as Education Business Partnerships and charities. Through local partnerships, more high quality opportunities may be delivered.

To exploit economies of scale, responsibility for organising work experience should revert to the highest possible level – a sort of ‘reverse subsidiarity’

- Economies of scale can be extremely powerful when it comes to coordinating work experience:
 - Permit specialisation, improving efficiency.
 - Expands the pool of employers a coordinator works with, and so increases the likelihood of each student within their ambit to find the right opportunity for them.
 - Reduces the number of organisations each employer has to deal with.
- Perhaps most importantly, it has the ability to improve equity, giving students to access opportunities that are more physically distant from that.
- We therefore propose that work experience should be arranged according to a principle of ‘reverse subsidiarity’: activity should always be pushed up to the highest possible level, to make the most of economies of scale.
- This logic applies at the local level, which is why it is so important to have local brokers to take the burden of arranging work placement off schools.
- It also applies at national level: we believe central government and other national organisations could do more to generate high quality work experience placements.

The government should do what it can at a central level to increase supply and coordination of meaningful placements

- While the bulk of work experience activity will inevitably require local, on-the-ground presence, central government has a number of roles to play in building towards universal work experience.
- First and foremost, the government should provide funding and resources to create necessary infrastructure inside schools and the broader brokerage network.
- It should set standards and expectations by developing a toolkit setting out what constitutes meaningful work experience, and thus what counts towards the two week target, with separate resources for students with SEND.

- To reduce employer burden, the government should commission a review of the bureaucratic requirements of work experience, clarifying what exactly is necessary and providing standard forms where appropriate, as occurs in Northern Ireland.
- To ensure additional resources are being well spent, the government should strengthen the role of Ofsted, and add careers support as a separate 'key judgement' on which schools are rated by inspectors.

The government should oversee the establishment of a single platform to collate work experiences accessible to young people across the country

- Coordinating work placements is a highly relational activity, and so the vast majority will be organised locally by brokers and school career leads.
- However, in the interests of efficiency and equity, central government and national organisations should do what they can to organise and collate opportunities.
- The government should lead by example, encouraging the civil service and public sector organisations to identify as many placement opportunities as possible.
- There is an important role for national charities like Speakers for Schools to work with such public sector organisations as well as large private sector employers, to develop meaningful work experience placements.
- The government can support the effectiveness of such activity by overseeing the development of a national platform: a single quality-assured clearing house for placements arranged at a national level
 - The platform would act like a marketplace, allowing the providers to list their work experience activities. A relevant model is the National Tutoring Programme website.
 - The government's role would be that of a convener, funding and supporting the platform, but not engaging in direct brokerage of placements.
 - It would not replace the shoe leather work of identifying employers, working with them to develop effective placements, briefing and debriefing, learning and iterating, just collect the fruits of that labour.
- A core function of this platform should be to generate and collate virtual work experience opportunities.
- Virtual work experience opens up more options that would not be physically accessible to students, especially in rural or deprived parts of the country. The experience of the pandemic suggests such opportunities are valued by young people and employers alike.
- The platform could also have a role to play in quality assurance:
 - Providers could be accredited by a professional body, such as the Careers Development Institute, with such badges highlighted on the platform.
 - The platform could also include an element of user rating, with careers leaders providing feedback on placements to help guide their peers.

- Given the challenges of government IT projects, and the fact that providers have already built existing platforms, it is likely to be quicker and more efficient to contract out construction and maintenance of the platform.

Working up to universalism means that work experience can be rolled out to prioritise the disadvantaged

- The careers system struggles to overcome socio-economic inequalities – given the rivalrous nature of some work experience placements (e.g. medicine), poorly prioritised rollout could make things worse.
- Universal work experience should be rolled out initially in ‘pathfinder’ areas which are those with strong careers infrastructure and networks already – likely ones with effective existing Career Hubs.
- These pathfinders should be selected to vary in their characteristics – different regions, urban and rural places, with different economic circumstances – in order to learn what works in different contexts.
- The overriding objective, though, should be to ensure support is prioritised for disadvantaged students (who may not live in disadvantaged areas) to prevent the scheme becoming regressive.
- As work experience for all is rolled out, progress should be assessed using the ‘What Works’ framework, with feedback used to adjust the implementation as needed.

Universal work experience is a good idea, but pushed through hastily, it could have negative unintended consequences

- Forcing schools to roll out a universal offer too quickly risks creating a ‘tick box’ exercise, with a dilution of quality – meaningful work experience ought to be carefully planned, integrated into wider education, and relevant to the individual.
- A major concern, as we have emphasised, is the supply of employer placements:
 - Schools and colleges have had difficulty sourcing enough placements for T Level students, putting their qualifications at risk. Expanding school work experience risks crowding out of T Level placements.
- If required to generate too many work placements too quickly, schools are likely to fall back on parental networks, which will exacerbate inequality.

CHAPTER ONE – INTRODUCTION

Work experience: a worthy endeavour

Work experience has long been seen as an important tool to help students to do better in education, to orientate them better in the labour market, and to ease the transition to the world of work. Yet though there is broad consensus over the potential benefits of work experience, the past decade has brought a decline in the number of school students participating in work experience. This situation has prompted some organisations – and most prominently, the Labour Party – to call for universal access to work experience.

In this report, we examine the practicalities of implementing such a scheme, and the potential pitfalls of rushing it through too quickly. We have spoken to experts and practitioners around the country to understand how to roll out universal work experience in a way that is equitable and does not compromise quality. In the pages that follow, we argue that work experience should be expanded carefully and cautiously, with a focus on developing the infrastructure and employer relations necessary to make it a success.

Work experience has potential benefits for both students and employers

Career leaders, educators, employers – and students themselves – recognise the potential benefits of high quality work experience. What we mean by work experience, in this context, is a short placement with an employer that a student undertakes while in full-time education, with the aim of giving the student insight into the world of work and potential careers.¹ Work experience is distinct from an internship, vocational training or an apprenticeship² which tend to provide a longer, more in-depth experience of a career, are often paid and/or lead to a qualification.ⁱ

The main goal of work experience is to help students understand how workplaces operate, and the tasks and responsibilities involved in different types of roles.³ It can also be a tool for raising aspirations and thus, hopefully, promoting social mobility. A well-designed placement can help students to both broaden and refine their career ambitions, with a positive knock-on effect on decision-making. Work experience can help students make more informed choices about which subjects to study and which pathways to follow in the education system and beyond.⁴

ⁱ Some of the people we spoke to suggested that perhaps there *should* be a qualification associated with school work experience. Accrediting work experience could help to make it a more established practice in schools, who do not always prioritise work-related learning.

In general, surveys of students and teachers indicate that they *believe* work experience to be highly valuable. A rapid evidence review carried out last year by SQW for Speakers for Schools found a range of studies in England and abroad identifying a range of perceived benefits. Students that have completed work experience feel they have a better appreciation of the realities of working, and stronger employability skills (such as problem solving, initiative, planning and teamwork).⁵ There is evidence to suggest that work experience can not only raise educational and career aspirations, but also ensure students are more realistic in their expectations.⁶ Schools and colleges – as well as students themselves – also report that work experience can improve students' confidence, contextualise learning, and have a positive effect on academic outcomes.⁷ The box at the end of this section offers some student perspectives on how work experience has affected their skills, confidence and career journeys.

SQW reports that the evidence is more limited, and more mixed, when it comes to harder outcomes. Perhaps the most positive of these is the evidence that work experience seems to reduce the likelihood of becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) in later life. Analysis carried out by Speakers for Schools suggests that attending work experience reduces the probability of becoming NEET from 11% to 7%, controlling for socioeconomic background,⁸ a finding replicated in other studies.⁹ However, different studies reach different conclusions on whether work experience translates to better academic attainment. While there are some encouraging findings in relation to the effect of work experience on employability and wages, again this is far from conclusive.¹⁰

Though evaluation of the benefits of work experience is often focused on the student undertaking the placement, many employers also see work experience as a positive for their organisation. It gives them the opportunity to help shape and build their future workforce, and to give back to their community.¹¹ Work experience can also help employers to develop the skills of their existing staff by giving them supervisory experience.¹²

Student reflections on work experience

For some first-hand student perspectives on the value of work experience, Speakers for Schools provided testimonials from their Youth Panel:

“Work experience has taught me that everyone has their path and that no two paths are alike, so being a young Black woman from a working-class family and wanting to study economics is a good challenge... Black people in positions of power inspire me and serve as role models for me because, prior to my work experiences, I believed I was almost entirely on my own. Doing the work experiences has definitely broken the stereotype of a ‘White man’ in finance.” (Current A-Level student)

“My work experience with British Airways was particularly useful in contributing to my choice of further education, showing me just how passionate I am about the tourism industry, and supporting my aspirations to improve the industry from a sustainable perspective. Whilst learning more about British Airways’ operations and exploring their prospects for future sustainable improvements and adaptations, I also had the opportunity to share my thoughts and ideas with others, coming up with suggestions to reduce negative environmental impacts caused by flights.” (Current college student)

“I appreciate my virtual work placement opportunity... because I had no ‘in’ to the world of law without it. It was a sector left mainly to those with the best connections or the ability to make those connections... Something like a virtual work experience with an international company being accessible to someone like me is crucial because we don’t have access to London or quick routes to more prominent places than ours, but we mostly have mobile phones.” (Current student)

The proportion of students receiving work experience has declined

Having become established and essentially universal through the 1990s and 2000s, the proportion of students in England receiving work experience has declined over the past decade or so. In the early 1980s, the value of work experience was recognised and embedded in the Technical Vocational Education Initiative (TVEI), which sought to link school curricula to the world of work through short work placements.¹³ It was the first time that funding was provided to ensure that all students had access to work experience placements.¹⁴ The perceived success of the TVEI ensured that it continued to be funded beyond 1997, when the scheme was originally supposed to end. A report from 1996 indicated that at that stage, 94% of Year 11 students in England and Wales received work experience.¹⁵ In 2004, the then Labour government made "work-related learning" a mandatory requirement at Key Stage 4 (Years 10 and 11, typically children aged 14-16). While this did not explicitly refer to a work experience placement, it was interpreted as such by the majority of schools and thus work experience became de facto mandatory.¹⁶ We do not have official statistics on the prevalence of work experience, but a survey from 2012 found that 90% of 19-24-year-olds that attended

comprehensive schools, and 86% of those that attended grammar schools could recall going on work experience.¹⁷

Following the election of the Coalition government and its tighter budgets, the 2011 Wolf report concluded that the statutory duty was too expensive to maintain. The review argued that the work experience would be of better value to both employers and students if it focused on older year groups, ages 16-19 (Key Stage 5), rather than ages 14-16.¹⁸ As well as concerns over cost, the quality of statutorily required placements were also questioned, and they were not seen as securing *meaningful* experiences for all students.¹⁹ Consequently, in our interviews, when we raised the possibility of a return to mandatory work experience, many participants associated that prospect with variable quality. In many cases the focus became on securing a placement, any placement, resulting in little more than a rubber stamping or box ticking exercise.

In 2012, the statutory requirement for work related learning at Key Stage 4 (KS4) was removed, and with it the associated funding. This time marked significant change not only for the provision of work experience but career guidance policy as a whole. Where previously local authorities were tasked with securing careers guidance for schools students, in 2012 responsibility was devolved directly to schools.²⁰ In line with the Wolf Report, the focus of work experience shifted to 16-19-year-old study programmes. With the costs of organising career guidance (including arranging work experience at KS4) falling on school budgets, many institutions decided to withdraw their work experience offer for all students.²¹ Other schools continued to offer work experience placements, but the costs associated with the placements was transferred to families, raising questions about the equity of experiences.²²

The decline in careers provision – including work experience – drew attention from experts and, in due course, policymakers. In 2014, the Gatsby Charitable Foundation commissioned a review of good practice in career guidance. What emerged were the ‘Gatsby Benchmarks’, a guide for schools, colleges and providers on what “good career guidance” looks like.²³

The fifth and sixth benchmarks, respectively, set out the expectation that students will have encounters with employers and employees, and experiences of workplaces.²⁴ Benchmark six is intended to ensure students get first-hand knowledge and understanding of workplaces. However, it is deliberately open to interpretation, allowing for such experiences to take the shape of site visits or job shadowing, as well as traditional work placements.

In 2015, the government-funded Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) was established, initially to help the coordination between schools, colleges and employers around Benchmarks five and six. In 2017, the Department for Education’s Careers Strategy set the expectation that all schools and colleges should be working towards achieving the eight Gatsby Benchmarks.²⁵ To help achieve this, all schools have a statutory duty to name a Careers Leader. The Careers Leader does not need to deliver career guidance, but takes ownership of the careers programme in their school.²⁶ Ofsted inspectors are also supposed to make reference to the Gatsby framework in evaluating schools’ support for student personal development.²⁷

Though the duty for careers guidance remains with schools, a number of different types of institution and organisation have emerged to help schools to achieve the Gatsby Benchmarks. Some of these focus on careers support more broadly. Others are focused solely on work experience. The resulting picture is a rather cluttered environment, which can be difficult to negotiate.

Mapping the education-employer nexus

There are a number of overlapping institutions and organisations that, in different ways, try to connect the education and skills system to employers and the labour market:

- **Schools** may maintain their own individual networks of local employers, particularly insofar as it is necessary to organise work experience placements.
- **Colleges** tend to have more direct employer relationships to inform their post-18 further education provision – by one estimate, the typical college works with over 600 businesses.²⁸
- **Employer organisations** (e.g. Chambers of Commerce) exist to coordinate and represent employer interests in an area, and as part of this may seek to influence the activities of local educational institutions.
- **Education Business Partnerships (EBPs)** are organisations whose role, as the name suggests, is to broker relationships between employers and educational institutions. Since 2011, when their public funding was withdrawn, most have closed, though a number still exist and sell their services to schools, colleges and local authorities.
- **The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC)** is a national government-funded organisation established in 2015 in order to coordinate schools, colleges and employers in the provision of careers information, advice and guidance. It seeks to identify and spread good practice in careers support but does not deliver it directly. It also maintains a network of ‘Enterprise Advisers’ – business volunteers that work with schools to ensure their careers provision reflects business needs.
- **Career Hubs**, which are convened and supported by the CEC, are groups of schools, colleges, employers and apprenticeship providers in an area that collaborate to support each other in providing careers guidance. Around 65% of state schools and colleges are in a Careers Hub.
- **Dedicated careers/work experience services** provide specialist careers support to schools and colleges. The extent of their offer varies; some provide broad careers information advice and guidance (CIAG), others are focused on specific aspects of CIAG, such as work experience. Providers come in the form of charities, not-for-profit social enterprises and for-profit businesses.

They can be categorised as follows:

- **National providers offering broad support.** These frequently come in the form of a platform that schools sign up to, and students can access. They have tools and resources to help students identify career areas of interest, develop their skills, and match them to programmes of study or training. Some may also facilitate in arranging work experience, although this is less common. Examples of this type of support include *Unifrog*, *Success at School*.
- **National providers offering dedicated work-related learning support.** These usually focus on helping schools achieve Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6 and often do so in a digital format. They provide or help to arrange virtual work experiences and employer encounters. Some of these providers also offer support for in-person activities, but this is usually a smaller element of the offer. *Speakers for Schools*, *Springpod* and *Education and Employers* are all examples of national providers.
- **Local providers offering dedicated work-related learning support.** These also focus on primarily on Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6, but their reach is more limited geographically. Often, they will provide face-to-face support, though they are increasingly offering digital services. Providers operating in this space include *Adviza*, *CareerPilot* and as stated earlier, some EBPs.
- **Providers offering sector-specific work-related learning support** These organisations tend to focus on helping students gain understanding of and experience in particular industries, and can operate both locally and nationally. Examples include *STEM Learning*, *TechSheCan*, *The Institute of the Motor Industry*, and *Cornwall Marine Network*.
- **Local Skills Improvement Plans (LSIPs)**, first piloted in 2021, are employer-led forums that seek to map out the skills requirements of a local area, and to ensure that post-16 education and training provision meets these needs.

Without consistently reported data, it is unclear exactly how many students now participate in work experience during school.²⁹ Studies examine different populations. They cover different age groups – some focusing on 14-16, others 16-18, others still the whole school. Some ask current students about existing provision, others ask those who have since left school to recall the provision they received. Others still ask teachers what they provide. Studies also vary in their definition of work experience, as to whether they count only placements, or broader work-based learning.

A pattern that does seem to emerge, however, is that those who have been in secondary education more recently are less likely to recall receiving work experience. Despite the Wolf review's proposed pivot to Key Stage 5, increased opportunities for older students have failed to offset the decline in work experience at ages 14-16. In a 2021 Sutton Trust survey, only 30% of final year students said that they had completed any school-organised work experience, with the figure even lower for younger students.³⁰ That figure may have been suppressed by the consequences of the pandemic, but a recent Speakers for Schools survey, covering respondents aged 18-30 (so ranging from those who left school before the election of the Coalition to those who have only just left) shows how far we have come from near universal coverage. That survey found that 69% recalled receiving work experience between the ages of 14 and 16, and 40% between the ages of 16 and 18.

There tends to be a discrepancy between student and teacher reports of work experience provision – teachers tend to say there is more on offer than students recall receiving (see Table 1). It may be that students and school staff have a different understanding of work experience, or that students do not remember work experience they undertook. Either possibility does not say much about the meaningfulness and level of communication around work experience. Even using the more optimistic teacher assessments, however, it is still the case that almost half of students do not have work experience available to them.

As the range of estimates in Table 1 show, it is hard to quantify the proportion of students that receive any work experience. But the fact that even schools' own reporting suggests that just over 50% make work experience or encounters available to their students suggests that it could well be under half.

Even where students still have the opportunity for work experience, overwhelmingly this is a one-off. Access to work experience is particularly limited for those who live in rural areas, and those with lower socio-economic status. Students that attend independent schools are almost twice as likely to report that they had had three or more work experience opportunities than peers in state schools.³¹ Students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities are also less likely to have opportunities for work experience.³² Taken together, these trends have concerning implications for future social mobility and could heighten the risk facing students vulnerable to leaving school NEET (Not in Employment, Education or Training).

Table 1: Overview of studies assessing uptake and availability of work experience

Year	Survey population	Measure	%	Source
2016	Current Year 11 students	Received work experience while at school	< 50% ³³	CEC
2021	Past students up to age 24 still in full time education and current students ages 11-18	Received work experience while at school	37.5% ³⁴	Youth Census
2022	Past students up to age 30 still in full time education and current students ages 11-18	Received work experience while at school	36% ³⁵	Youth Census
2022	School and college senior leaders	Work experience available to students	55% ³⁶	Sutton Trust
2022	Current Year 11 students	Completed school arranged work experience	7% ³⁷	Sutton Trust
2022	Current Year 13 students	Completed school arranged work experience	30% ³⁸	Sutton Trust
2022	Past students ages 18-30	Received any work experience age 14-16	69% ³⁹	Speakers for Schools
2022	Past students ages 18-30	Received any work experience age 16-18	40% ⁴⁰	Speakers for Schools
2022	Schools and colleges	Fully achieved benchmark 6 (experiences of workplaces)	52% ⁴¹	CEC

Some – most notably the Labour Party – want to return to universal work experience

Some have responded to the decline in school work experience by calling for a return to the Labour-era mandatory and universal approach. Most notably, Keir Starmer used his 2021 party conference speech to pledge that Labour would “reinstate two weeks of compulsory work experience” for every young person.⁴²

That commitment echoes proposals from a range of stakeholders. A 2016 joint report of the House of Commons Business, Innovation and Skills and Education Committees was more cautious, recognising that the statutory duty undermined flexibility and often resulted in low-quality placements. Nevertheless, it concluded that “all students should have the opportunity to take part in work experience at both Key Stage 4 and Key Stage 5”.⁴³ The British Chamber of Commerce has also suggested that mandatory work experience be brought back in, but on a more flexible model than the two week placement that was previously the standard model.⁴⁴ The call for two weeks of work experience has also previously been made by the Federation of Small Businesses, which sees it as a useful recruitment tool and way to build career readiness.⁴⁵ In September 2022, work experience charity (and funders of this report) Speakers for Schools launched their Work Experience for All campaign, with an ambition to ensure every student receives a minimum of two quality work experience placements by age 18.⁴⁶

How can work experience for all be made a reality

While there is clearly widespread interest and appetite for the reintroduction of mandatory work experience, a number of questions remain around the feasibility and logistics of implementing such a policy:

- How can capacity be built to deliver effective work experience for every student?
- Who should take responsibility for coordinating and delivering work experience?
- How can provision be expanded without compromising quality, and what do we mean by ‘high quality’ work experience?
- What is the appropriate role of online provision?
- How much would universal work experience cost, and how might we pay for it?

The remainder of this report seeks to answer those questions, based on discussions with a range of experts and practitioners in the field. Over the following pages, we aim to provide a clearer picture of the barriers to work experience for all, the concerns it generates, how these might be addressed and the path forward to ensuring more students reap the benefits of work experience.

To explore these topics more fully, we conducted a rapid review of the existing literature. This helped us gain an understanding of the inequalities that currently exist in work experience provision, to map the key actors and institutions involved in providing and delivering work experience, and understand the impact of past policy. Over the course of November and December 2022, we conducted 17 expert interviews, speaking to 22 people involved in delivery of careers guidance and work experience: career leaders and practitioners (7), employers and business representatives (5), career experts and researchers (5), and local government and policy makers (5). This allowed us to better understand the picture of work experience on the ground as it stands, and how it compares to previous regimes. It also gave us the opportunity to test some of our policy proposals and explore whether a policy of mandatory work experience would be welcomed and if there were any specific concerns with introducing such a policy.

CHAPTER TWO – NOT SO FAST

Pushed through hastily, compulsory work experience is likely to have negative unintended consequences, at least in the short run

Commitment to work experience, and recognition of its value, is widely shared. Yet many people we spoke to that were evidently dedicated to work experience were daunted by the practicalities of making it mandatory and universal – even if they were sympathetic to the objective.

While we appreciate the moral urgency of securing meaningful work experience for all as soon as possible, it seems clear to us that trying to force through work experience for all too quickly could be detrimental and counterproductive. Schools and employers need time, space and resources to source and deliver placements which are suitably high quality, appropriately personalised, and equitable. That requires some progress from a system that already struggles to provide sufficient placements to those that need them.

There is a shortage of employers taking on work placements as it stands, and mandatory work experience could make this worse

A system of mandatory work experience relies on an adequate supply of employers stepping up to provide quality placements. Yet most employers do not do so, and participation appears to be falling. Prior to the launch of T Levels (see below), only 30% of employers said they offer some form of work placement for those in education, despite purporting to recognise its importance.⁴⁷ According to the Department for Education's employer survey, 19% of employers offered placements specifically for school students in 2019. That fell substantially in the pandemic, to 7% in 2021. The share of employers offering "work inspiration activities" also fell, from 11% to 7%.⁴⁸

Getting small businesses to participate in work experience presents another unique set of challenges – and a major issue, given that they account for the largest share of employers. Pre-pandemic, 85% of employers with 250+ employees provided some sort of work placement, compared to 43% of organisations with 5-24 employees and 24% of those with 2-4.⁴⁹ The Federation of Small Businesses (FSB) has highlighted the extent of the disconnect between small businesses and the education and skills system. Between 2019 and 2022, they have found that that small business engagement with local education and skills organisations nearly halved, from 33% to 17%.⁵⁰ Moreover, such engagement as it occurs is generally with local training providers, FE colleges and universities – only 4% of small businesses in the FSB survey has a relationship with a school.

These figures fit with the findings of our interviews. The growing challenges of maintaining relationships with employers – especially since the pandemic – was a common theme:

“The pandemic’s made it [employer engagement] worse... it’s like they’ve forgotten what they used to do.... But they are much more willing to do shorter things. So I had speed networking on the last day, because that was only an hour. They were more willing to do things like that than have anybody on site... Everything was just very complicated this year. And employers are harder to work with.” (School careers leader)

Given the range of demands made of employers, offering training opportunities across apprenticeships, T Levels, supported internships, Kickstart and so on, this decline in engagement is concerning for the future of work experience. In some contexts, it may be challenging to maintain pre-pandemic provision, let alone expand to a universal offer.

The advent of T Levels has highlighted the difficulty of sourcing placements on a large scale.⁵¹ Launched in September 2020, T Levels are vocational qualifications equivalent to A Levels, that include an industry placement of approximately 45 days. A third of new T Level providers have struggled to find placements for their students, with some industries much more difficult to source placements in than others. No study area in the evaluation of the T Level pilot secured placements for every student, with one area only successfully securing placements for 35% of students, and others securing placements for around half.⁵² Some employers have also cancelled or withdrawn placement offers, leaving providers and students stranded, struggling to find alternatives.⁵³

The difficulties raised by T Levels left a few of our interviewees wary of introducing mandatory work experience across the school system, fearing that this could pull the already stretched system to breaking point. On one side, if work experience becomes mandatory for all school students, employers may opt to favour the shorter, and easier school experience placements. This would have severe negative consequences on T Level students, who would miss out on the placements they need to complete their study programme.

“the lowest risk option for the employer is just to have someone in for a week or two weeks... a T Level placement which has to be genuine work... That’s a much higher bar than it is for just one or two weeks at work experience. So again, I can see that being a bit of a tipping point for some employers in both directions.” (Education researcher)

On the other hand (though we suspect this is less likely), a squeeze on employers might go the other way. If employers see the longer, more structured T Level placements as more likely to bring recruitment benefits, they could favour those over school placements. Previous research has shown that having a clear business case for supporting work-based learning is one of the key motivators for offering it.⁵⁴

“If it's mandatory at Key Stage 5 because they're in education until they're 18... Yeah, then I can see it being completely squeezed out for Key Stage 4. They're going to prioritise the oldest students who are generally a little bit more mature, a bit more work ready” (School careers leader)

A third possibility is that T Levels are just so different from school work experience that they are not in competition. This might imply that T Level placement shortages are a poor guide to school work experience availability. T Level placements are longer and more demanding of employers – requiring more detailed feedback and monitoring and review of attendance and performance.⁵⁵

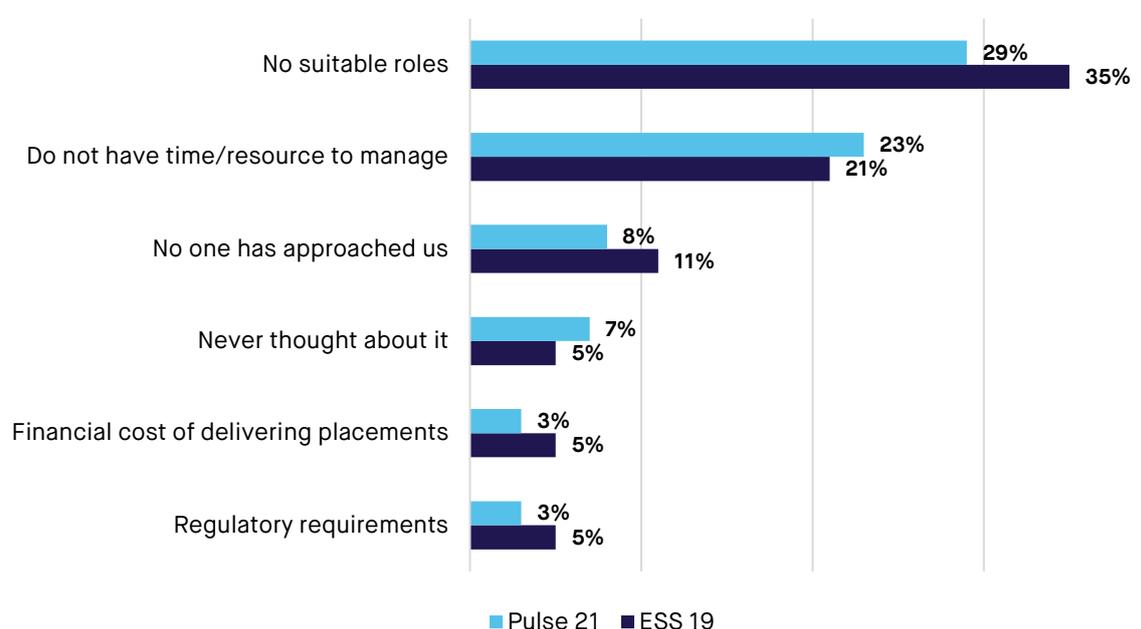
“It could go either way. But I think the thing with the T Level placements is quite different in some ways, because a six week placement is quite different to two weeks. And I think two weeks is very much ‘this is what work is like, and quite kind of basic things’” (Business representative)

Supply may be further constrained by the logistical challenge of arranging work experience placements at a time that best suits employers and providers. Most commonly, schools that offer work experience tend to set aside a block of one or two weeks dedicated for work experience.⁵⁶ Often, this is at the end of the school year toward summer holidays, when schools have greater capacity and they may feel there is less need for classroom time to complete the curriculum.⁵⁷ This has obvious logistical benefits for schools, particularly those with larger cohorts. Yet this tendency to arrange work experience in a single block in the summer puts schools in competition with each other for placements. For employers this could mean being bombarded by all local schools seeking work experience at the same time. Moreover, while early summer may be convenient for schools, it may not be optimal for employers who may be better placed to offer work experience at a busier or quieter time. Indeed, employers may prefer to offer work experience in a more episodic or spread out fashion rather than the traditional one or two week block. Employers’ desire for flexibility and schools’ desire for structure are both understandable and in many cases the conflict between the two cannot be resolved. Yet anything schools could do to make things easier for employers would make them more likely to participate in work experience.

While supply of placements is a key concern for educators in providing work experience for all, employers themselves face many obstacles in being able to offer it. The first issue is one of capacity. Designing and organising a quality work placement that is both meaningful for the student and rewarding for the employer is a time-consuming exercise. Even once designed, time needed for the associated paperwork and supervision can act as a serious obstacle for employers. Smaller businesses especially struggle here to navigate the “red tape” associated with arranging placements.⁵⁸ The administrative burden of arranging a placement has previously been cited by Ofsted as a deterrent to employers engaging with work experience.⁵⁹

As Figure 1 shows, 23% of employers in England who have not offered work experience opportunities in the past 12 months say they have not done so because they do not have the time or resources to manage a placement. Smaller businesses of 2-4 employees are more likely to cite issues with time and resources than businesses with 5 or more staff (23% compared to 17%).⁶⁰ By contrast, employers seem to be less concerned about the financial cost of arranging work experience. Only 3% of all employers cited this as a barrier to placements in 2021, down from 5% in 2019.⁶¹ We should note that this does not seem to be biased toward larger national companies: 73% of the establishments interviewed for the 2021 report had less than 50 employees. While not its main focus, the survey does provide valuable insight on the barriers for small businesses.⁶²

Figure 1: Employer reasons for not offering work experience opportunities in the last 12 months



Source: Department for Education, Employer Pulse Survey 2021; Employer Skills Survey 2019

Even where employers want to offer experiences, some may not know where to start and need tailor-made support in constructing a placement. Helping employers to build their administrative capacity to design and deliver placements therefore seems to be a fundamental part of growing the supply of placements.

“Quite a lot of time [to develop a placement]. Really, I don't think I could tell you in hours but a considerable amount of time... I think from a central perspective, there's a lot of work we can do to make that much easier. So whether that's kind of templates of case studies, you know, tips like this, this property does it like this just to kind of save each property starting from scratch” (Large national employer)

Security and confidentiality are also obstacles to delivering work experience. For many businesses, ensuring client confidentiality and satisfaction is paramount, and not something they wish to jeopardise at the hands of teenagers. Some of these issues can be alleviated through carefully designing and developing a placement, although as stated previously, this takes time and can be daunting for employers who have not done it before. The Department for Education and the Careers & Enterprise Company both have resources available on how to design a placement and what it should include, which can help with this uncertainty, but awareness of these forms of support seem to be low.

“If you want to do anything that involves a laptop, you have to have a login and getting a login involves phone calls for hours to our IT service desk... practical issues like that can take a bit out of it” (Large national employer)

Employers, particularly smaller employers, may also find it difficult to physically host a placement, either because their workspace is small, or as has become more evident over their pandemic, their workspace is their home and not a suitable or appropriate environment to bring a student into.

“[a particular issue for business is] space and appropriateness of having a young person in that space... For instance, I'm currently sitting in my spare room at home.” (Business leader)

“We had one where it was a games designer, he worked from home and wanted to take the young person on placement... No, the risk is too high. A lone adult with a lone young person in a house. Even if you have DBS checks in place, I still wouldn't want that to happen” (Careers Hub & LEP representative)

Finally, schools themselves could do more to engage with employers, and make the process easier for them. Engaging with the panoply of institutions and organisations we described in the previous chapter can be demanding and bewildering for employers. For some there is confusion over whom exactly they should be contacting, and how they can help them. Feedback from employers to Ofsted suggests that the most successful placements occur when the school or college is clear on their objectives and the expected time commitment.⁶³ However, educational institutions are not always as transparent or flexible as they could be. As discussed above, the heavy administrative burden of coordinating work experience, as well as the practicalities of school timetabling, mean schools often understandably prefer to offer work experience in blocks, although this is not always what might best suit employers. In order to secure the number of employers needed to increase the supply of placements, schools should ideally be more flexible around when their students can take on their experience, and should be given the appropriate support which improves their capacity to arrange work experience and enables much needed flexibility.

“Given constraints, schools don't often do things they don't see the value in. But what are the barriers now? The Ofsted annual report suggested employers were struggling to offer placements. Equally, I hear some employers implying that schools don't always have the capacity to engage. You have to see it from both sides...” (Careers expert)

“I suppose the last barrier to employers is, if you're in a large town, all the schools seem to do work experience at the same time, and they just don't have

capacity. So employers would much prefer the schools to be staggered, and to know when they can expect to receive young people and their work.” (Careers Hub & LEP representative)

“We've had really fairly strong feedback from employers around the demands of work experience and how they just get flooded, particularly in that first few weeks of July.” (Careers Hub lead)

Among those we spoke with, there were also some who were more optimistic about the potential to increase the supply of placements, and to do so through a mandatory approach. Interviews and survey results indicate that there is some latent interest among employers in providing work experience that could be galvanised. The Department for Education’s Employer Pulse Survey shows that 11% of employers do not offer work experience because they have never thought about it, and 7% say they have not done so because nobody has asked.⁶⁴ With greater information, and a more proactive and aggressive effort to engage such organisations and sell them on the benefits of work placements, it seems likely that many more could be generated. The parent networks used by so many schools also show that employers do have the capacity and interest in offering placements, but this needs to be harnessed in a formal way. Above all, the fact that universal work experience has been achieved in the past should give us confidence that we can do it again, even if it takes time. The challenge is ensuring it is of adequately high quality and equitably shared.

“I think sometimes with employers, it's not because they don't want to engage. The fact is that they need supporting. For an employer, you know, or even employees, that have never been out and in a school before or even worked with them, that can be quite daunting.” (Careers Hub strategic lead)

There is a counter-argument that, rather than squeezing the system, developing the infrastructure for mandatory work experience could in fact help to expand it. By adding to the range of ways in which employers can engage with the education system, it makes it easier for them to do so, at a level of commitment with which they feel comfortable. It is easy to imagine a system by which newer employers work their way up what one of our interviewees called the “ladder of opportunity”. Perhaps they start with an hour-long presentation to students about their business, a workplace tour, or a shorter placement of a few days up to one week, and then as they grow more confident (and possibly see the benefits), they might gradually move up to a two-week placement and then a T Level. The existence of the local and national work experience providers referenced in the previous chapter could be particularly useful in helping employers to get on, and move up, the ladder. These providers can work with employers to develop a range of opportunities and show them how they can gradually build their engagement,

“if you've got an employer who is brand new to the whole concept of taking young people and is maybe a bit nervous about it, then having a two week work experience placement... they get to dip their toe in the water, you as an employee get to dip your toe in the water. That seemed like a potentially useful space to explore for new participants.” (Education and skills researcher)

Critical to realising this vision is being adequately flexible about what we mean by work experience. A risk with a rushed and narrowly conceived approach to work experience is that employers that are not ready for a full one or two week placement, are ignored or turned away by careers leaders or coordinators, or pressurised to hit their target of securing two weeks for every student. Conversely, a more gradualist approach could build up a strong careers ecosystem that provides smaller encounters for more students that employers are comfortable providing, and by increasing that comfort, builds a pipeline for the longer placements of the future.

Building these relationships with employers as well as building up their confidence and capacity to take on work placements however will take time and cannot happen overnight. It is important to remember too that employers, particularly small businesses, are still recovering from the pandemic and are now contending with the cost of living crisis. Piling further pressure on to employers could risk alienating them and deterring them from engaging with work experience.

Quality of placements may be compromised and diluted in favour of quantity

A particular risk of expanding work experience too quickly is that quality may be compromised in the pursuit of securing an adequate number of placements. While different people have different conceptions of what constitutes ‘high quality’ or ‘meaningful’ work experience, there are some consistent elements across most informed accounts.

A system of quality work experience should be part of a broader system of good career guidance, well-planned and integrated into the wider curriculum. Work experience itself can help to inform learning, but can also help students to see how the skills they develop in their classes apply to the world of work, setting them up for a more fulfilling experience. As careers education researcher Tristram Hooley points out, to maximise career learning the experience itself should be commensurate to student level; what a year 11 needs and what a year 7 needs are going to be different.⁶⁵ Pre-placement preparation is important for the student to understand what they want to get out of a work placement, and helps those coordinating work experience to personalise it to the student. Different students may want or need different things from a placement, be that exploring a career they are interested in or testing their existing skills in a workplace environment. Following the placement, students should reflect on the experience and detail of what they learned, what went well and what didn’t. Not only does this provide valuable feedback to the school and the employer, the Careers & Enterprise Company suggests that this debrief is helpful to the student to retain key insights about their experience.⁶⁶ A high quality placement therefore is one which is structured with clear outcomes, provides a true picture of work, and is aligned with student ambitions.⁶⁷ A placement should not only suit the student but also the employer. Like students, employers should be encouraged to reflect on the placement afterwards to understand what worked well, assess what outcomes were achieved, and what they learned from the experience.

“[high quality work experience is] Being very clear at the outset what's supposed to be achieved over the programme is really important... So much of these things comes down to purpose and objectives” (Education researcher)

“Sometimes the information both ways isn't really sufficient. So the information to be received by the employer maybe isn't enough for them to feel that they're able to be informed, you know, provide a relevant experience. And also, the employer needs to feed back to wherever the young person's coming from, in terms of what's realistic and practicable.” (Business leader)

This sort of support – identifying a placement that fits with the student’s learning needs and career goals, prepping both student and employer, facilitating effective debrief sessions – requires time and resources.

For students with additional needs, greater resources may be required, both for the school and to help employers to ensure placements are still meaningful.⁶⁸ Many of our interviewees observed that many employers may in principle be willing to host students with SEND, but may be unsure about the necessary adjustments they ought to make, or unaware of the support available to them. The Careers & Enterprise Company for example has guidance for employers on working with young people with SEND.⁶⁹ A toolkit designed at helping implement the Gatsby Benchmarks for students with SEND also includes tips for how employers can be involved in implementing benchmark 6.⁷⁰ Resources such as this can may be a good place to start for those not used to taking students with SEND on placement. Employers equally may need to engage with schools more directly when preparing to host a placement for students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND), to ensure that a placement is suitable and lines up with their needs, abilities and ambitions.⁷¹

“The first question [we asked] was, in your in your workplace now, do you have people with additional needs or special educational needs?... For those that did, we asked what additional requirements they had to put in place to facilitate that person. And they explained those and... the employers that don't [have employees with SEND] just didn't know about it. So there was a little bit about communicating the amount of support that is there.” (Careers Hub & LEP representative)

The fear is that overloading the system with the expectation of getting placements for every student risks work experience becoming a numbers game or a ‘box ticking exercise’, with students receiving the bare minimum of a placement, and not the wider elements that make it more likely that their experience will be a worthwhile one. This concern is partly based on the experience of mandatory work-based learning in the 1990s and 2000s, where the meaningfulness of placements varied.⁷² Some interviewees recalled this policy era and the ‘rubber stamp’ culture that evolved around work experience:

“I think it was inconsistent. The schools that valued the opportunity would plan it appropriately. Other schools wouldn't necessarily, it was a tick box exercise and doing it for doing it sake... The children that have got to pull on family networks and so on, very often, they would be able to do that. But those that couldn't, would just get allocated something...I think in some schools, it became a just a process” (Combined Authority representative)

A broader worry is that a target-driven focus on work experience could end up narrowing careers provision away from other forms of support and guidance. If careers leaders' primary function becomes organising placements, that could divert them from the other important functions that they have – for example, helping to integrate an understanding of the labour market into the curriculum, or providing personalised advice and guidance to students. In recent years, there has been a shift away from full one- or two-week placements towards more employer 'experiences' and 'interactions' – things like one-on-one conversations, talks, site visits – all of which can be valuable. There is an argument to say that this move represented a lowering of expectations – such interactions are easier to organise than a full work experience placement. But most people we spoke to believed that this more holistic vision of what careers provision can offer is a better one in principle. It would be a shame, therefore, to squeeze such activities out – not just because students benefit from a variety of experiences, but also for the pragmatic reason that more employers could be engaged with more different options, as we suggested in the last section.

“We visit local and regional workplaces. And they do work shadowing in small groups, generally, groups of 10... Part of their tasks are that they are to meet a variety of professionals at all levels, sort of from apprentice to graduate scheme, long serving employees. And they find out about the range of professions available in that workplace... Gatsby 6, that gives us flexibility to make things work for the cohorts that we've got” (School careers leader)

A lack of capacity in schools could lead to reliance on parental networks, exacerbating inequalities

Capacity is not just an issue for employers, but a major constraint for schools in delivering work experience. Schools are concerned that they do not have the resources to deliver personalised placements for all, and there is a lack of infrastructure to support them in doing so. At present, responsibility for careers activities in schools lies in the hands of the careers leader, and this includes arranging experiences of workplaces and where provided, work experience.⁷³ This is not a trivial exercise, especially considering that many careers leaders are not specialists, and have to combine their responsibilities with teaching and/or other administrative roles.

The coordination of work experience is highly relationship driven, requiring trust and mutual understanding between employers and educational providers that can take years to develop. When a careers leader or teacher moves on, the connection to and relationship with an employer can be lost. Considering the significant crisis in recruitment and retention of teachers, continued loss of connections could be very detrimental to a school's level of employer engagement. Where available, Career Hubs, Enterprise Business Partnerships, and others can provide a valuable connection between education and employers, but ultimately the buck stops with schools themselves.

“The effort, the cost of finding those placements? It's an absolute industry in itself. And we don't have the structures in place.” (College representative)

Given these constraints and limitations, it is unsurprising that schools often turn to the personal and professional networks of their students' parents and carers in order to source placements. This practice is already widespread, and there is a risk it could become more prevalent if the demands on schools to find work experience placements are increased without a concomitant increase in resources. The 2020 Youth Census report found that, of those who had undertaken work experience while at school, 38% had been helped by a parent/carer, a relative, or a friend.⁷⁴ A 2015 report on work experience by the Department for Education examined approaches to making arrangements for work experience. While most schools and colleges had a centrally coordinated system for organising work-related activities, students and their families are still very much involved, sharing responsibilities with the school or college. An average of 65% of students (and their parent/carers) at Year 10-11 played a role in making work experience arrangements, with this figure dropping only slightly to 63% for years 12-13.⁷⁵

Contacting employers and applying for placements can be a way of building independence and resilience in itself.⁷⁶ However, relying on students' and their families' social capital to secure placements risks reinforcing inequalities.⁷⁷

"I think often because schools have got no money and they're trying to be creative and they use their parent base, then actually what you do is perpetuate social mobility issues." (Careers charity lead)

Such placements may not be suitably personalised or of interest to the student but merely reflect what is easily available, with work experience once again becoming a box ticking exercise.

"Some schools, it's literally a case of find your own, you know, and that tends to be parent-led... it is great they're getting out there, my worry is it might not be meaningful." (Careers Hub representative)

Secondly, and perhaps more importantly, relying on a personal network can damage opportunities for more disadvantaged students, who do not have access to the same networks as more affluent peers.⁷⁸ Students may not receive opportunities which stretch them and their conceptions of what a career for them could look like, beyond their current context.⁷⁹ To a significant extent, work experience is intended to raise aspirations and advance social mobility by exposing students to unfamiliar options. Relying on existing cultural capital of students and their families undermines this objective, and may even be counterproductive – enhancing the opportunities of advantaged students at the expense of those with weaker social networks.

Recent years have seen additional stresses placed on schools that may perpetuate this practice, even before any sort of mandatory work experience is introduced. One of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic is that students have experienced significant learning loss. The Department for Education has provided additional financial and educational support to help students catch up with their learning, but such funding is time limited, and some of it has already come to an end. Schools may understandably prioritise their resources on mitigating any impact on students' academic attainment, rather than enhancing careers provision. On top of this the current dual crises of cost of living and energy prices have meant that schools may be diverting already limited resources to other areas of school and student need, such as feeding their students and heating buildings.⁸⁰ Some schools have already suggested that they intend to cut back on the recruitment of teachers in order to cope with increased energy costs.⁸¹ Given these challenges, without additional support (financial and administrative) it is likely that work experience provision will continue to be inadequate.

CHAPTER THREE – THE WAY FORWARD

It is clear from the first two chapters that work experience in its current form is not working for all students in England. The good news is that we can do much better, and at an affordable cost. Universal work experience is eminently achievable. Yet ensuring that work experience is high quality means that expansion of work experience must be carried out carefully, avoiding putting undue pressure on schools and employers. To get to the destination we want, we need to build the infrastructure necessary to generate work placements more efficiently and distribute them more equitably. Critical to that task is reducing the fragmentation of the current system and taking more advantage of economies of scale.

In the next chapter, we set out what we consider to be a practical set of proposals for moving towards universal mandatory work experience. Before that, in this chapter, we start by assessing the cost and feasibility of universal experience, followed by two guiding principles for that task. First, that the rollout of work experience should be done through a *phased approach* to implementation that focuses on the process as much as the destination. Second, school work experience should follow the principle of ‘*reverse subsidiarity*’: activities should occur at the highest possible level.

Work experience for all is achievable and affordable: we estimate it is likely to cost around £75 million a year

As we will detail further in the coming chapters, achieving universal work experience will depend on creating supportive, enabling infrastructure. Establishing these structures needed for work experience will not be free, although the cost is not especially high in the context of multi-billion pound public budgets and programmes.

As noted in Chapter Two, inadequate resources are a deterrent to schools engaging in universal work experience. Staff time required to contact employers and source individual placements can be considerable and the paperwork that follows to assess the suitability of a placement and ensure child safety is no less arduous. The scale of the challenge, and the cost of doing so, can mean some schools outsource arrangements to an external provider. Not all schools can currently afford to do this however, and in the case where work experience placement is mandatory, some schools would struggle to cover the costs of arranging work experience without additional funding.

“It would also cost us a lot of money to do the extra checks that are needed for whenever a child goes out... I’m not qualified to do those kinds of risk assessments. So we would be paying local rates is something like £25 a child for a basic workplace check. And you’re looking sort of £30, £40 £50 per child for a workplace to be sourced. When we have more than 200 children in a cohort, that expense is something that we can’t afford.” (School careers leader)

“It’s quite a substantial resource...the Industry Placement person, that is a salary of about £30,000. And then the couple of administrators, they will help out with our employer facing work” (FE college lead)

Experts we interviewed estimated the cost of arranging a placement varied from £25 to £70. For the lower end of costs, this only covered a basic health and safety check or risk assessment. The higher end tended to also include the costs involved with sourcing a placement. Based on these conversations, we estimate a conservative financial cost to schools of £60 per student for a placement. We assume that each student will undertake two placements in their school career – we envisage one in Key Stage 4 and one in Key Stage 5. There are approximately 600,000 students in a single year group, so if the equivalent of two year groups are out on placement in any given year that amounts to 1.2 million placements.⁸² That would imply the total cost of the program is £72 million.

Additionally, in the following chapter we propose the government establish a national platform for work experience opportunities. This would incur both an initial development cost, plus additional maintenance costs over time. As a benchmark, Skills Development Scotland's My World of Work costs approximately £2.2 million to maintain.⁸³ As this provides a much broader range of support than our proposed national platform, this represents an upper bound of what we might expect the cost to be.

Taking a conservative £3 million for the platform and adding it to the £72 million cost of arranging placements, **our central estimate for the cost of universal school work experience is £75 million.**

This is a highly uncertain figure, so to triangulate our method, we estimate the cost of school work experience using an alternative method, based on the Wolf review. By speaking to a number of headteachers, the report determined that arranging work experience cost at least half of a full-time senior teacher's salary, plus substantial administrative support.⁸⁴ There are approximately 3,473 secondary schools in England and 231 FE colleges.⁸⁵ Taking the average salary of a senior teacher (such as a deputy head teacher) at £45,000, the cost of work experience would amount to just over £83 million.

We can further triangulate these estimates by looking at the cost of other careers infrastructure in the past. Prior to the final removal of core government funding in 2011, in 2007-08 Education Business Partnerships (EBPs) received £25 million to support their activities, approximately £32 million in 2020 terms.⁸⁶ The intention of EBPs was to build partnerships between education and business and supporting work experience and work-related learning was their core function.⁸⁷ This equates to a little under what we have estimated for the costs of work experience for a single cohort. Annual funding for the Careers & Enterprise Company fluctuates but is in the region of £25-30 million a year.⁸⁸ Both figures give us confidence that establishing the infrastructure necessary for universal work experience is in the low tens of millions, and combined with additional funding for schools, the total cost of the program should be comfortably less than £100 million. As such, they help corroborate our cost estimates.

Overall then, we estimate the cost of universal work experience to be somewhere in around £75 million a year, and certainly less than £100 million. It is important to emphasise that these figures relate to the full cost of work experience provision – essentially what it would take to build a new system from scratch. Yet that is not the reality – many schools do provide work experience, paying for it out of existing budgets. We should also note that, as per the actions taken following the Wolf review, 16-19-year-old study programmes are already expected to include a minimum level of work experience (although not all of them do), and funding for these programmes should already be included in school budgets. With this being the case, improvements to the system could mean that schools may save on existing provision.

We will not, in this report, attempt to calculate exactly how this funding should be split between schools, brokers and other institutions. If Career Hubs are indeed given an expanded brokerage role, they will need additional funding to reflect those greater responsibilities.

We would expect schools to receive additional direct funding enabling them to engage with external providers and fund staff, but are hesitant to recommend money should be ringfenced specifically for work experience. Rather we believe it should be incorporated as part of a wider careers or overall school budget. We hope the combination of increased resources, clearer expectations around work experience provision and enhanced accountability through Ofsted will ensure that funding intended for work experience is used on it.

At less than £100 million a year, phased in gradually, the cost of universal work experience is manageable, even in a time of straitened public finances. To illustrate the point, it would represent a small fraction (around 5% or so) of the £1.7 billion that Labour expects to raise from putting VAT on private school fees.⁸⁹

Moreover, this is not a pure cost, but should generate some positive return to the government, economy and wider society. It is beyond our scope here to try and quantify the potential benefits of universal school work experience, let alone carry out a full cost-benefit analysis.

There is some suggestive evidence that work experience brings potential economic benefits. Analysis by Speakers for Schools found that those who had multiple work experiences reported a 3.4% higher wage, although how far this can be causally attributed to work experience is unclear.⁹⁰ It is also worth noting that a cost-benefit analysis of a work experience program for young unemployed people found that the net benefit to the Exchequer was £150 per placement, with income tax receipts, reduced benefit claims and lower healthcare demands offsetting the cost of administering the placement.⁹¹ That analysis is far from perfect as a guide to the impact of school work experience – the placements were longer than most school placements, at 2-8 weeks, and the population is quite different. Yet it offers some encouragement. With good reason to think that it can facilitate a better-functioning labour market, improve student outcomes and enhance social mobility, and a relatively modest cost, work experience for all looks like a compelling investment.

Universal work experience should be seen as a medium term goal, with policy focused on building necessary infrastructure

As described in Chapter Two, there is some trepidation around making work experience mandatory, especially if government does so without a clear vision or without developing appropriate infrastructure to help implement it. The ultimate fear is that schools are landed with more responsibilities and obligation without the necessary increase in resources and capacity to deliver them.

To avoid such a scenario, the government must recognise that it cannot just announce mandatory work experience for all and expect it to happen immediately. Rather, it should establish a framework and phased approach which sets universal work experience as the end goal. Given the extent of infrastructure required, it may take a full parliamentary term to achieve universalism.

Part of this process requires a clearer definition of what we mean by work experience, what it is, precisely, that we want to make universal. The trap to avoid here is becoming too rigid and prescriptive. Schools ought to be encouraged to be more flexible and innovative in their approach to work experience, primarily because that is likely to produce better experiences for students, but also because it will make participation in work experience more convenient and attractive to employers. The government should emphasise to schools the viability of work experience that takes different forms from the traditional two week block placement and encourage them to experiment with different models.

Our preference would be for the government to work towards a goal of universal mandatory work experience that is the equivalent of *two weeks* across a student's school career. What counts towards this target should be clarified in a toolkit for schools, careers professionals, brokers and employers detailing what makes for meaningful work experience and how to design it. A similar resource has been developed for T Levels by the Department for Education and many careers and specialist work experience providers also have resources which could form the basis of such guidance.⁹² Schools should be given separate resources on organising placements for students with SEND.

In preparing the toolkit for schools and employers, the government should commission a review of the paperwork that is required for undertaking work experience. As we have seen, bureaucratic requirements are a major barrier to employers interested in offering work experience. Our conversations with stakeholders and practitioners indicate that while a certain degree of administrative work is inevitable, the requirements vary from school to school and much of it may be unnecessary. The Department for Education could improve things by providing standard forms for schools and colleges to use, as the Education Authority in Northern Ireland does.⁹³

Having defined the objective and communicated it to educational institutions and employers, the next task is to develop the necessary infrastructure to achieve it. That requires increasing the coverage of specialised careers support and reducing the barriers faced by schools and employers in accessing and offering opportunities. In particular, it depends on developing a bigger and stronger network of employers offering placements, and better brokerage services and resources that connect them with career leaders in schools.

This should be rolled out across the country in stages with progress assessed using the “What Works” framework with feedback used to adjust implementation as needed. We hope that by adopting this phased approach, and giving time for it to be tested, any problems can be ironed out before they become entrenched issues. Scotland’s seven year Youth Employment Strategy, “Developing the Young Workforce” (DYW) provides a good template that government can learn from in designing a roadmap to make the phased introduction sustainable. The Strategy sets out the changes that will be seen and milestones that should be achieved year on year, as well as a number of Key Performance Indicators against which performance can be measured. The DYW strategy is a more expansive strategy, so a work experience roadmap may not have quite as many steps, but recognition of the length of time it took should anchor expectations for policymakers in Westminster.

Additional resources for schools should be combined with inspections to ensure they are being appropriately used. As we argued in our previous report *Achieving its potential?*, government should match this with a strengthened role for Ofsted.⁹⁴ There, we suggested that careers information, advice and guidance should be added to the list of ‘key judgements’ inspector ratings presented on the front cover of school and college Ofsted reports, as a fifth judgement.ⁱⁱ Quality and effectiveness of work experience placements should form part of that judgement. Such regular and high-profile evaluation should help to set and maintain standards of work experience, and hopefully drive up quality.

In our research and interviews, we considered the merits of offering financial incentives to encourage employers to offer work experience placements, as was the case for T Level placements from summer 2021 to summer 2022.⁹⁵ Yet that scheme does not seem to have been particularly successful, using only 8% of the allocated budget.⁹⁶ Moreover, as we highlighted in Chapter Two, only a very small minority of employers cite financial costs as a significant barrier to offering placements. There is also a concern that providing financial incentives for new entrants to work experience sets an expensive precedent. If the government establishes an expectation that (some) employers will be paid, it may be harder to motivate others to do it for free, or ever to return to the pro bono system.

ⁱⁱ As it stands, there are four key judgements in Ofsted reports: Quality of Education, Behaviour and Attitudes, Personal Development, Leadership and Management. Assessments of the provision of Careers education can be done as a part of each judgement, although Careers Education is most emphasised in the “Personal Development” section of the Inspection Handbook.

“For T Levels, they did have over the pandemic, there was an employer incentive... the challenge is that we’ve had it and so now people are going, ‘Oh, we haven’t got any more, so we can’t do it’” (College representative)

Rather than providing financial incentives, our belief is that the priority should be on sustained and personalised outreach, to ‘sell’ employers on the benefits of work experience, and on trying to minimise the hassle – in terms of time and bureaucracy.

Responsibility for organising work experience should revert to the highest possible level, exploiting economies of scale and following the principle of ‘reverse subsidiarity’

As noted in Chapter Two, the work experience ecosystem, much like the wider careers ecosystem, is very fragmented, resulting in inefficiency, a lack of specialisation and significant duplication of effort. This is a pity because economies of scale can be extremely powerful when it comes to coordinating work experience. First, because it allows those doing the coordinating to specialise – for work experience to be their main or only role, one they can become well-practiced and efficient at. Second, because it means that these brokers can build relationships with a greater number of employers, giving each student within their ambit a better chance of finding the best opportunity for them. As we have seen, some organisations already exist that attempt to leverage scale: Career Hubs and Education Business Partnerships pool contacts across a number of schools, giving each institution access to a wider network than they would have by going it alone. Almost all our expert interviewees spoke about the need for improved coordination, particularly at a regional level.

Such coordination has other benefits. As it stands, businesses and employers have to engage with too many institutions. There is no established single contact point for businesses who are interested in engaging with local education providers. Interested employers are forced to get in touch with each provider individually setting out what they can offer. Separately, this information is also being sought by a plethora of local organisations. Careers Hubs, Education Business Partnerships, Local Enterprise Partnerships, and Local Skills Improvement Plans may all perform different functions, but all share the overlapping aim of connecting the local labour market to the education system. To add further confusion, some of these institutions themselves overlap. For example, the staff working the Careers Hub may be the same as those in the local EBP but have slightly different responsibilities depending on which hat they are wearing.

Scaling up also has the potential to improve equity, by increasing the diversity of opportunities open to schools and their students. If schools are limited to the network of employers they can individually put together, those networks are likely to reflect the socio-demographics of their student body, and of the local area. A school in rural Devon is likely to find it challenging to provide its students with opportunities to experience investment banking in the City of London, for example. Pooling with other local schools, or even better, sharing resources from other geographies can open up placements with occupations and industries that would not be so easily accessible. Schools are individually responsible for arranging work experience for their students, and there is no set support in place for helping them to navigate this. Any coordination that happens at present is entirely voluntary, depending on the goodwill of local

institutions coming together off their own backs. Schools that do have the resources can arrange meaningful work experiences for all students, but many more schools lack the capacity, resources and contacts to arrange personalised work experience for an entire cohort of students themselves.

At the same time, there are limits to how far work experience coordination can be done at a higher level of scale without the necessary granular knowledge or the opportunity to develop the trust that we have previously referred to as critical in building relationships with individual employers. In perhaps the majority of cases, there is unlikely to be any substitute for boots on the ground and organisation at the local level.

Our proposal therefore is that *activity should always be pushed up to the highest possible level*, recognising that most of the time this will still be relatively low. We call this the principle of ‘reverse subsidiarity’ – it is the opposite of the presumption in favour of decentralisation associated with the Catholic Church and the European Union, and called subsidiarity by both of those institutions.

In practice, this means that central government and national institutions should do whatever they can to identify opportunities and to spread them across the country, in order to relieve pressure on local schools and coordinators, and to make access to placements more geographically equal. Local coordinators (organisations like Career Hubs or Education Business Partnerships) should, in turn, do as much as they can to limit the expectations on individual schools.

This system of reverse subsidiarity would mean that schools are less dependent on their own resources and networks, for employers the process of engaging with education is streamlined, and there is a better division of labour among organisations. As discussed in Chapter Two, there is some evidence of latent interest from employers in providing work experience, but they need to be more actively engaged. Streamlining the process and making work experience easier to engage with should (we hope) act as an incentive for employers who do not feel they currently have the capacity. Schools similarly may be more inclined to engage with work experience for all pupils if they are better supported.

CHAPTER FOUR – COORDINATING THE CHAOS

In order to put the principles outlined in the previous chapter into practice, we need to design systems of coordination, both nationally and locally, and target rollout so that no student is left behind in having access to quality work experience. This chapter will discuss some of those logistics and practicalities.

Assigning responsibility for work experience is key, with a clear division of labour between local and national institutions

We have argued that building up to universal, mandatory work experience will require time to build the brokerage institutions and employer networks necessary to secure high quality opportunities for every student. Key to that process is assigning organisations responsibility and necessary funding for building these networks, and doing so in a way that offers maximum opportunity to take advantage of economies of scale. In this section, we consider which organisations ought to have which responsibilities at national and local levels.

The government should oversee the establishment of a single platform to convene national work experience opportunities

In the spirit of ‘reverse subsidiarity’, pushing activity to the highest possible level to minimise duplication and minimise the burden on local brokers, we should begin by asking what can be done centrally at a national level.

As a significant large national employer in its own right, the government should lead by example and start in its own back garden, engaging civil service departments and public bodies to identify as many work experience placements as they might be able to offer. These opportunities should then be rolled out in hospitals, offices, schools, and so on, across the country.

Beyond the government, there is also likely to be greater scope to centrally negotiate work experience placements in bulk with large national employers in the private sector. This would limit duplication of effort, reducing the amount of negotiation schools or local brokers have to do with particular branches of national banks or retail chains, for example. It could also streamline the process of organising work experience (for example, standardising bureaucracy, creating template activities – as discussed in the previous chapter). Perhaps most importantly, by offering opportunities that might not exist within a local labour market, it has the potential to open up new options to those that might be geographically disconnected from them.

Some interviewees ventured that the lure of good publicity might make the heads of large corporates more inclined to offer larger numbers of work placements in an attempt to outdo their competitors and attract more positive media coverage. It is also easy to imagine how, with the right central coordination, other headline-grabbing PR opportunities could be orchestrated to help entice more big corporates to get involved: for example, a visit from an education minister timed to coincide with the news of a company’s plans to create several hundred placements. In this way, high-level publicity could secure the buy-in from the top which in turn assures cooperation with schools and brokers all the way throughout the organisation.

As at local level, public and private sector brokerage already exists to some extent, but not yet at the scale necessary to ensure good opportunities for all. National charities, prominent among them Speakers for Schools, are already trying to encourage and support employers to develop good work experience placements. What we are suggesting is that the government should work with them to identify public sector opportunities, and support them to generate placements from other national employers. This may involve grant funding, though with close monitoring of results and return on investment in terms of quantity and quality of opportunities generated.

As well as encouraging employers to offer more work experience, the other thing that government can do at a central level is support better coordination. There would be a benefit to a single, government-approved, quality-assured clearing house or marketplace, where those organising work experience placements on the ground could be confident of seeing the full range of national opportunities. At present, there are a confusing array of providers and charities working in this space, and schools need to look at the options of each provider individually to see if what is offered will suit their students. Such a platform could tidy things up and ensure fewer people miss out.

To be clear, this platform would not replace the shoe leather work of identifying employers, working with them to develop effective placements, briefing and debriefing, learning and iterating. This work is still vital for connecting employers to schools and helping employers ascend the “ladder of opportunities” discussed in chapter two. The platform would merely collect the fruits of that labour and ensure it does not go to waste. The platform would convene nationally-available opportunities and allow brokers, career leaders and students to filter all available opportunities based on what would best suit their circumstances and geographies.

The National Tutoring Programme website provides a model for how a national work experience platform could operate. Designed to help school students recoup lost learning from the pandemic, it is government-funded but sector-led. The government itself does not provide tuition but collates locally available tuition providers into a single platform. Based on factors such as school location and subjects a school needs support with they are matched with a suitable provider.⁹⁷ Created in response to urgent need, the speed at which the platform was rolled out offers some grounds for optimism that a similar platform for work experience opportunities could be developed relatively quickly.

The platform could also have a role to play in quality assurance to help careers leaders and brokers identify the best opportunities for students. For example, providers on the platform could be accredited or badged by a professional body, such as the Career Development Institute, and such achievements clearly highlighted on the platform. The platform could also include an element of user rating, where careers leaders and brokers can provide their own feedback of working with providers and employers, to help inform the decisions of others and encourage improvement and competition.

There are a number of potential ways such a platform could be organised. The first option is for a platform to be funded by the Department for Education and then developed and maintained by the Department itself or by another central organisation (for example the Careers & Enterprise Company, or the National Careers Service). The second option is for the platform to be funded by the Department for Education, but the development and maintenance of the platform to be contracted out to an external provider.

Given the reputation of government IT programs, we feel a certain trepidation to suggesting that the platform be developed from scratch in-house. That said, the experience of devolved governments suggests such a project is certainly feasible. Governments in Northern Ireland and Scotland have recognised the importance of work experience within careers guidance and have developed platforms that convene work experience opportunities. “Connect to Success NI” was developed by the Department for the Economy and displays work experience opportunities available across Northern Ireland in much the same way a job listings website does, although opportunities are not necessarily national.⁹⁸ Since 2011 Skills Development Scotland have produced and maintained the national careers website “My World of Work”.⁹⁹ The Marketplace function on the site eases the interaction between teachers and employers when arranging careers talks or work placements, allowing them to see the menu of options from each employer, including those offering work placements.

While there may be lessons to learn from the experience of Northern Ireland and Scotland, it will likely make more sense for the Department for Education to contract out the delivery of a platform in England. The main reason is that there are a few providers that have already started to build their own platforms, and it would presumably be better to build on a successful existing product than to reinvent the wheel. Contracting the platform out to those with more experience is also likely to lead to faster delivery of the service, accelerating the necessary improvements to the work experience system.

My World of Work Marketplace

As part of the Developing the Young Workforce policy, Skills Development Scotland set up “My World of Work” – an online advice and information platform that is dedicated to helping Scottish people navigate their career journeys. The platform is for all ages, but has a strong focus on those in secondary school, with resources for career and skills exploration, CV building and pathway guidance on the steps to reach a chosen career.

Tools exist for parents and carers on how to support their child as they go through their careers, and for educators on how they can bring career learning into the classroom. One of the features available to educators is access to the My World of Work Marketplace, which connects businesses with schools and colleges. Employers feed in what they can offer across three opportunity types: skills sessions, inspiration events and careers insights. They can also detail who the target audience is, locations where the opportunity is available, where it fits in the curriculum and what the intended outcome is. Educators can browse across these filters, and choose the opportunity and the employer based on the needs and interests of their students.

The screenshot shows the My World of Work Marketplace website. The header includes the logo, navigation links for 'Sign in', 'Register', and 'Search the site', and a main menu with 'My career options', 'Learn and train', and 'Getting a job'. The breadcrumb trail reads 'Home // Marketplace // Opportunities'. The main heading is 'Marketplace opportunities' with a sub-heading: 'Search through the options on offer from employers. Use the filter to match your needs to the available opportunities.' Below this are several filter dropdowns: 'All opportunity types', 'All locations', 'All outcomes', 'All target audiences', and 'All curriculum areas'. There are also 'Reset' and 'Update' buttons.

Source: My World of Work website

The national platform should emphasise and support virtual opportunities

One of the biggest potential benefits of developing a national platform is to showcase the range of virtual opportunities that are available to students. Virtual placements are not entirely new, but the move to online learning and working during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic increased the demand and supply of virtual employer engagement.¹⁰⁰ Many industries now work on a hybrid basis, with some companies operating entirely remotely. Virtual work placements can also ease concerns some organisations have around physical capacity. While we do not think virtual placements are likely to supplant physical placements entirely, changes in the world of work ought to be reflected in the changes to work experience. Given the encouraging experiences many had during the pandemic, and the fact that many employers that offered virtual work experience plan to stick with it, we expect the number of virtual work placements to grow.¹⁰¹

This is an encouraging development for several reasons. Unlike physical placements, virtual experiences are not limited by geography, and so lend themselves naturally to being pooled at national level. Not needing to travel beyond school, or even beyond home, to undertake a placement could be especially valuable to rural students, who are less likely to have received school work experience at present.¹⁰² Virtual experiences also open more doors for students to explore a wider array of opportunities, to careers and industries that some students may not have had the opportunity to access through their own immediate labour market.¹⁰³ This may be particularly important for those interested in smaller more specialised fields, as well as emerging or typically “hard to reach” industries. Virtual experience may help in delivering work experience more flexibly, and thus to increase buy-in from employers and the supply of placements.

“some employers can’t do that traditional “work in our environment” for two weeks or a week or whatever it is... there are safeguarding issues to deal with and some workplaces just aren’t appropriate. So, like nuclear power, you can’t have year 11 traipsing all around Hinkley Point or something, that’s not going to be correct. But actually, by using virtual tools, you can give people access to places that they couldn’t otherwise see or be engaged with.” (Private careers provider)

At the same time, while valuable, we should not expect virtual work experiences to entirely solve the issue of provision. They can make some contribution to expanding supply of placements, but there are limits: they are not appropriate for every industry, and nor are they appropriate for every student. Many students will still want and still need in-person placements, and access to these opportunities also needs to be supported. Moreover, they remain a relative novelty for most employers. In the 2021 Employer pulse survey, only 9% of employers would consider offering a placement where work takes place entirely remotely, rising to 20% for a hybrid placement. Larger businesses were more likely to consider offering remote or hybrid placements: 34% of businesses with 100 or more staff said they would consider offering it.¹⁰⁴ Employers need to be brought on board, and placements themselves require continued investment, testing and refinement to learn and develop a model of best practice. While we have highlighted that in-person placements can vary significantly in quality

at this point in time, the likelihood is that there is greater inconsistency in the meaningfulness of virtual than physical placements.

“I’d probably say it’s something is better than nothing when it comes to work experience. But...sitting someone in front of a computer and claiming that they’re being effectively trained and genuinely upskilling and supporting them to progress in their careers is a very contentious....if you’re genuinely learning industry standard skills, I don’t think there’s anything wrong.” (Education researcher)

“if it’s going to be meaningful virtual work experience needs to be some sort of two-way communication. And you can’t do that for every child. So we’ve looked into doing it on for a full year group. The kids that want to engage would always have engaged with it, and the ones that you need to reach the most will never touch that” (School careers leader)

“we’ve had lots and lots of work experience places with placements with young people with special needs.... but that what they needed to learn was the interpersonal stuff about how you behave at work, you know what you can and can’t say? What sort of working hours, you manage lunch times, how you manage social interactions with your colleagues, what’s appropriate, what’s not appropriate. And so the difficulty with doing that digitally is you don’t get all that soft stuff.” (Private careers provider)

Ultimately, then, while we see an expanded role for online work placements, which the government should encourage, this, too, needs to be a gradual and incremental process. Thus, for example, it may be prudent to stipulate that every student gets some in-person experience as well as the virtual placement they may receive, at least for the time being.

Responsibility for coordinating work experience and employer relationships in each area should be clearly assigned

While there is certainly scope to do more at a national level, the practical realities of coordinating work experience mean that the vast majority of placements will be locally organised. As we have argued, engaging a wider network of employers especially small and medium-sized businesses, building relationships with them, and selling them on the value of offering work experience is key to delivering meaningful placements for all. That cannot be done from on high.

Yet as things stand, it is too often left to individual and fragmented schools, reliant on goodwill, and consequently we have a patchy and incomplete system of work experience. Some areas have recognised this need for local-level coordination and have begun building work experience databases that serve their area. Formalising the coordination role will mean expanding this provision where it does not already exist, and can ensure that coordination is held to the same standard across the country. What would be better would be to have a single point of accountability within a local area, a single point of contact for employers, that will take responsibility for building the relationships and supply of opportunities necessary to deliver work experience for all. Establishing this single point should also give coordinators an overview of the various education and training schemes specific employers are involved in, helping to balance

the demands placed on them across apprenticeships, T Levels and school work experience. Distinct from the national platform, local coordination will primarily focus on helping to deliver locally available in-person placements, rather than virtual.

The question is *who* should be given responsibility for brokering work experience within a particular area. The default would be for it to revert to individual schools, but that would reinforce the fragmentation that we currently have. Another option, that would better leverage economies of scale, would be for local or devolved governments to take it on. In many ways, combined mayoral authorities would be well placed to take on such a task, combining it with their oversight of skills and local economies. The problem is that not every part of the country has a combined authority, and they vary in their capacity to take on the role. Since academisation, with schools increasingly moving out of local authority control, councils sit awkwardly in the education system and many would not be positioned appropriately to be charged with work experience. Local Skills Improvement Plans, recently created employer-led bodies that seek to map out and address an area's skills needs, are another possibility. However, they are still taking shape, and this is a bit far removed from their core activity.

We believe the two most practical options are to delegate responsibility for facilitating work experience either to Careers Hubs or Education Business Partnerships. In our interviews, there were a few people who suggested that the revival of EBPs would be a worthwhile project, that they fulfilled a function that was valuable and has been lost. There is some merit to this argument. However, the reality is that EBPs are much diminished, and that substantial effort would be required to recreate them. By contrast, Careers Hubs are increasingly widespread. Currently, 65% of all schools and colleges are part of a Careers Hub, with more joining year on year.¹⁰⁵

Careers Hubs have widespread geographical coverage already, and in many cases strong networks of employers and schools. They also have a proven track record of improving careers education outcomes. Schools and colleges in Career Hubs achieve more Gatsby Benchmarks¹⁰⁶ on average, in shorter time¹⁰⁷, than those that are not. Achievement of the Gatsby Benchmarks by a school, in turn, is associated with fewer students ending up out of education, employment or training when they graduate.¹⁰⁸

Delegating responsibility for coordinating work experience, as part of a broader strategy for universal work experience, is likely to accelerate the move towards a system where every school is part of a Careers Hub. That appears to be the direction of travel in any case, but the Labour Party has signalled its intention to make enrolment in a Careers Hub mandatory for all schools as recommended by its Council of Skills Advisers.¹⁰⁹ Given the demonstrated benefits of Career Hubs in terms of school careers provision and schools' connection to the labour market, such a move would likely have positive spillover effects beyond improving work experience. Indeed, in light of the concern we raised earlier that work experience could dominate careers provision, strengthening the Careers Hub network would hopefully ensure that careers provision as a whole benefits from the move to mandatory work experience.

If it is Careers Hubs that are to be given responsibility for coordinating work experience, that does not mean that they need to be the ones that deliver it. In some cases, Hubs may want to sub-contract the coordination role to another existing institution who may have a more established relationship with employers, for example, EBPs where they exist. In practice, the dividing line between these different organisations may not be so sharp. We spoke to organisations that had existed as both EBPs and Careers Hubs at different points in their existence – in practice, this is often just a matter of changing the sign above the door. In any case, to maximise the potential and minimise duplication of effort, Hubs will need to work well with other existing institutions, particularly ones which have overlapping aims and remits – for example FE colleges, LSIPs and local government. The hope and expectation is that, whichever body is responsible, they should work maturely and pragmatically with others rather than engaging in turf wars. However, the risk of such conflict will have to be monitored closely.

To ensure that there is consistency across all services, whether established by Careers Hubs or not, the organisation responsible for the coordination should be explicitly named and should follow a minimum level of service provision. At a minimum, coordination itself should involve maintaining a database of locally available work experience opportunities. Support should be given to employers as to how they can get involved and develop a work experience programme. Particular support should be given to both employers and schools in developing work experiences for students with additional needs. While it is important for schools to be open to a more flexible structure of work experience, this will involve some block placements. The coordinator should liaise with schools and colleges to coordinate dates for block placements to help ensure employers are not overrun. Alongside such brokerage activities, local coordinators could also take on some of the burden of health and safety checks and risk assessments. Alternatively, they could be an intermediary to specialist organisations that carry out such activities for schools and colleges who do not have the capacity to process them in house.

Working up to universalism means that work experience should be rolled out to prioritise the disadvantaged

Once the supportive structures are in place, the roll out of the work experience itself can begin. It has been noted in our own previous research, and the work of others such as the Sutton Trust, that the careers system in England struggles to overcome social inequality.¹¹⁰ Work experience is no different. More affluent schools often have better and broader connections through the personal networks of careers staff, alumni and the parents and carers of the students they teach. As discussed in Chapter Two, who you know can be the key to sourcing desirable work experience placements, especially in competitive industries such as medicine or law.¹¹¹ Conversely, disadvantaged students lacking in social capital and connections, can find their options severely constrained. If anything, work placements are scarcer and more positional in their value than other forms of careers support – for example, if Alice can use her family links to get a placement at the hospital, she has an advantage over Brian in applying to medical school. There is greater potential for work experience to embed rather than overturn social inequalities.

For that reason, we believe that instead of trying to provide “something for everyone”, government should first ensure “everything for some” and adopt a phased approach to work experience roll out. This can ensure that the disadvantaged are prioritised and support and resources will go to where they are most needed.

Owing to their wide coverage, Career Hubs are once again a good place to start. Career Hubs themselves were part of their own phased roll out, focusing initially on career ‘Cold Spots’.ⁱⁱⁱ As a result, some of the most established and highest performing Career Hubs are located in areas with the highest levels of disadvantage.¹¹² The rollout of mandatory work experience should begin with “pathfinder” Career Hubs such as these ones, places where the scheme is best set up to succeed for the most disadvantaged. Acknowledging that different parts of the country may face different issues with accessing work experience, and to show that a mandatory model can function effectively across the country, the Hubs should be selected to ensure diversity in terms of region, rurality and local economy. This will help us to develop a better understanding of what works in different types of contexts from the pathfinders, learn from them and to scale as appropriate until universal coverage is achieved.

“with a longer-term approach, there will be the opportunities to pilot different ways of doing and use that learning for the long-term rollout, depending on what was successful, but what I always think it should be with the long-term aim of ensuring that there's equality of opportunity for everyone,” (Combined authority representative)

We recognise that a gradual rollout of work experience will not stop more advantaged students from tapping their personal and parental networks for work experience opportunities. Given that reality, the overriding objective should be to ensure support is prioritised for disadvantaged students (who may not live in disadvantaged areas) to prevent the scheme becoming regressive.

ⁱⁱⁱ Cold Spots are areas where younger people from more disadvantaged backgrounds have fewer opportunities to succeed than peers from elsewhere. The Cold Spots were identified by looking at a range of indicators from both education and the labour market.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Jonathan Buzzeo and Melissa Cifci, “Work Experience, Job Shadowing and Workplace Visits” (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2017).
- ² SQW, “International Work Experience Practices,” 2022; Nat Cen Social Research and SQW, “Work Experience and Related Activities in Schools and Colleges,” 2017.
- ³ QCA, “Work Related Learning at Key Stage 4,” 2007; Barclays, “A Guide to Organising and Managing Work Experience for Teachers,” 2015.
- ⁴ Elnaz Kashefpakdel and Chris Percy, “Work Experience For All” (Speakers for Schools, 2022).
- ⁵ SQW, “International Work Experience Practices”; Will Millard et al., “More than a Job’s Worth” (LKMco, 2019).
- ⁶ SQW, “International Work Experience Practices.”
- ⁷ SQW; Millard et al., “More than a Job’s Worth.”
- ⁸ Kashefpakdel and Percy, “Work Experience For All.”
- ⁹ SQW, “International Work Experience Practices.”
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