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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

* Traditional models of work experience have served to reinforce inequalities in society. Schools with good levels of parental involvement and families who have access to high quality placements have been at an unfair advantage.
* Schools could do more to challenge young people to consider non-traditional work (in relation to gender, disability, ethnicity, socio-economic status) but this requires development of skills and confidence for teachers, careers advisers and others involved in the process.
* There is existing good practice which could be showcased more efficiently.
* Work experience opportunities should be identified and marketed with care, taking health and safety into account but creating guidelines to support employers and schools identify hands-on activities that can be undertaken – especially in relation to STEM.
* Well planned programmes of activities, with strong leadership, inclusive practice and resources to encourage career thinking and planning, work best. Ad hoc arrangements where young people are not supervised properly or supported in their workplace learning are unhelpful.
* Work experience works best when linked with a wider programme of careers education, with well brief staff and businesses who are clear about the outcomes for the young people and their own staff.

1.What does “good quality work experience” look like?

What do young people and businesses expect to get from it?

My focus in relation to work experience has been linked to encouraging under-represented groups (young women, young people from Black, Asian, Minority Ethnic groups and those from ‘disadvantaged’ backgrounds) to consider STEM (Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths) careers. Working with the Royal Air Force (RAF) since 2008, we developed a programme of residential work experience weeks, based on previous research and development activities. In our opinion, the main tenets of a good work experience (residential or otherwise) include:

* Hands on activities, particularly in STEM areas where young people often have limited access to engineering related tasks
* Meeting a range of positive role models, including men and women, people from different backgrounds and with varied experiences
* Participating in team building activities
* Completing a bespoke workbook, tailored to the organisation with exercises to encourage reflection on personal learning
* Having exposure to, and some understanding of, organisational culture
* Meeting some new entrants to the organisation, as well as senior managers
* A final day celebration event with families, teachers and other guests invited

Good quality work experience is well planned and all staff should be aware of what the organisation hopes to achieve through the activities, whether it is linked to corporate social responsibility, recruitment of future employees or broader aims.

The RAF team and colleagues at Sheffield Hallam University presented at conferences and acknowledged the benefits to the organisation and to the young people. The RAF has an extensive network of STEM Ambassadors, who they call on for input to the residential weeks and the involvement and commitment of staff in the delivery of activities is highly successful[[1]](#footnote-1). An evaluation of the first three years of the RAF work experience programme for young women into STEM is available here: <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/8369/1/Final_RAF_Report_2013.pdf>

2.How important is good quality work experience to a successful industrial strategy?

Young people are often unaware of the range of roles available in industry and, unless they have family members who introduce them to the world of work, they can find access to information difficult. Provision of career education, information, advice and guidance continues to be patchy and young people may not receive the support they need to expand their ideas. Good quality work experience supports the industrial strategy because it can give young people insights into the world of work, broadening their thinking and introducing them to ways in which the school curriculum links to working life. At the same time, organisations hosting work experience placements learn from their contribution to young people’s learning, keeping abreast of some of the curriculum changes and other initiatives schools and colleges are involved in.

3.What evidence is there that work experience boosts social mobility?

Hatcher and Le Gallais’ 2008 report, outlining research into Year 10 work experience, conducted in five secondary schools in the Midlands provides some of the strongest evidence. It highlights how systems and structures around the organisation and allocation of work experience placements can have a profound impact on the outcomes for young people from lower socio-economic groups and recommends ways in which schools and others can challenge this.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Subsequent research by Professor Louise Archer and the team at ASPIRES,[[3]](#footnote-3) highlights how combined factors such as option choices in Year 9, and systems for allocating work experience (particularly where families/carers are encouraged to support the young person in finding a placement) can serve to restrict social mobility.

4.How do differences between young people (eg. geographic location, socioeconomic background, ethnicity, disability) affect the work experience opportunities they people have?

A range of factors often dictate access to good quality work experience placements. In the past I have worked with schools who struggle to find work experience opportunities because of their location, in one Norfolk college, staff were keen to access STEM placements but the rural setting of the school and the limited public transport presented particular challenges which were difficult to overcome. In that case, young people with supportive parents, who could re-organise their working pattern to give their children a lift to the placement, were able to take advantage of placements (whether STEM focused or otherwise).

Many schools find placements by encouraging pupils to ask their families for help and this reinforces existing socio-economic patterns. I have worked in private girls’ schools where young women can ask their parents (dentists, doctors, engineers, solicitors, academics, etc) and find extremely good quality placements through their family’s networks. I can recall young women in those schools working with a ‘horse physiotherapist’, at the BBC, with marine biologists and the like. At the same time I worked in a comprehensive school on the other side of the city where young people were returning to their primary school to help out as that was the only work experience they could access – their parents/carers often did not have the necessary networks or confidence levels to help find placements. It is, of course, natural for schools to seek the support in finding work experience opportunities, and some families/carers prefer their children to work with them so that they know they are safe. In the Hatcher and LeGallais research, one school in particular, took action to address this, recognising that if young people are left to choose for themselves they will probably select traditional placements and self-stereotype.

More could be done by schools to support young people and their families in thinking about broader options for work experience, so that those from lower socio-economic groups, people from BAME background, young people with disabilities and those in particular locations, may feel able to try different things – as evidenced by ‘Essex’ school in the Hatcher and Le Gallais report.

5.How could resources to help young people find out about and access work experience be improved?

Most work experience providers should be aware of the need to advertise placements using inclusive language and imagery but this can look formulaic if care is not taken. Using real examples of employees (or past work experience participants) is better than resorting to ‘stock’ images. Marketing and PR departments in organisations should be briefed about the need to reinforce positive messages about equality, diversity and inclusion in materials that are produced for work experience, as young people will often access the information online through company websites.

In previous European Union and government funded projects, I have had the opportunity to work with organisations on developing work experience models that engage employees in the recruitment process. For example, staff Connaught plc were recruited as ambassadors and worked with local schools on STEM projects, were involved in designing and advertising work experience placements, interviewing the young people and, once on placement, acting as a workplace mentor. The company developed a bespoke workbook with information about the construction industry, exercises for young people to start development of a CV and signposting to other sources of information.

Organisations such as the NHS have excellent work experience materials and these exemplars should be used as the standard to which other organisations can aspire.

6. Should compulsory work experience for under-16s be reinstated? What is the right age for work experience within compulsory education: 14-16 or 16-18?

As a professionally trained careers adviser I have witnessed the power of positive (and negative) work experience placements. Good quality work experience can raise aspirations, open young people’s eyes to the possibilities that await them and help them re-engage with the curriculum. Many young people have no experience of workplaces through weekend and evening work and planned work experience, delivered through fair and supportive school systems, can help young people develop a sense of self within a broader context of education, training and work environments. The system of providing work experience in Year 10 provided an opportunity for young people to assess their strengths, skills and knowledge, allowing them to focus on the final years of compulsory schooling with some idea of their own preferences and the needs of employers. I think that it is helpful to offer work experience between 14-16 years.

7. How could schools and colleges be better supported to help their students access quality work experience?

The local enterprise partnerships and other organisations involved in brokering relationships between schools/colleges and employers should continue to create innovative and engaging programmes of activities. Simply providing young people, teachers and others with information about work and local opportunities is helpful but it is not the whole picture. Teachers and others should be supported in understanding how they can help young people to develop a sense of self, an awareness of their own strengths and weaknesses and to identify where they may thrive in the world of work. Work experience provides a platform for some of this activity. More could be done to encourage schools and colleges to engage with professionally trained careers advisers to develop robust career education programmes, using work experience to support personal and professional development of young people.

Teachers are often unaware of their own networks, which they could use to source good quality work experience placements. In addition, teacher placement schemes, such as the STEM Insight programme offered through the National STEM Centre at the University of York, can help teachers and careers advisers develop their own confidence and understanding of what is available – and the role that work experience can play in supporting young people’s career choices/raising aspirations.

8. Are services to help schools and colleges develop relationships with businesses working well? How could they be improved?

9. How could barriers to businesses (including small businesses)

offering work experience be overcome?

When there was a network of education business partnerships, I often witnessed their health and safety specialists offering support to small businesses who were worried about risk assessments. It is important that businesses are aware of their responsibilities and the possibilities in relation to work experience as they often avoid ‘hands-on’ activities for fear of breaching health and safety rules, thereby making their public liability insurance void. This is particularly true of STEM placements and some insurance companies create unnecessary barriers. In my experience the education business partnerships and others who were knowledgeable about risk assessments could intervene in a positive way, resulting in a placement being created/maintained.

10. What does good practice in offering, advertising and recruiting for work

experience look like, and how can businesses be encouraged to follow it?

Examples of good practice exist, including the NHS work experience resources and other models which follow equality, diversity and inclusive approaches. The (now out of date) STEM Equality and Diversity toolkit ([www.stem-equality-and-diversity-toolkit.co.uk](http://www.stem-equality-and-diversity-toolkit.co.uk)) contains some useful examples.

11. Does work experience benefit businesses? What are the motivations for businesses to offer work experience?

The benefits to business are documented in corporate social responsibility papers and, in my experience, employers often offer work experience placements to children of current employees. This can be excluding to young people whose parents are not in employment or cannot access these networks but for the employees who can support their children/friends of family to engage in these placements it can be considered a company perk.

Companies often see the work experience placement as an ‘extended interview’, affording them the opportunity to get to know the young person and vice versa. In the RAF Evaluation of work experience we noted that young people often spoke to teachers and other pupils about their placements on return to school and this was seen as a real benefit for the RAF and it’s public image.

12. What role should the Government have in ensuring young people have access to quality work experience?

The government should fund a model similar to the roles played by education business partnerships in the past, linked to careers education, information, advice and guidance to create a holistic model. Examples of good practice should be set as the standard to which schools, businesses and others aspire to.

13. Should the Government invest in resources to help young people find work experience independently? What would these resources ideally look like?

I think that this would be helpful but young people will automatically self-select roles from a limited number of options they and their families are aware of. There needs to be a system of support in place, not just resources, so that young people are challenged to consider non traditional roles and to explore options they would not normally be aware of.

14.How could private and third sector organisations be better supported and encouraged to help young people access quality work experience?

Some of the organisations that have continued to organise work experience placements on behalf of schools and businesses should be supported financially and encouraged to share best practice. Funding should not be on a purely numerical basis (ie the number of placements secured) as in the past this has resulted in some poor practice which has done nothing to challenge employers who may discriminate against young people from certain schools or backgrounds.

15. What lessons can be learned from the approaches of the devolved administrations and other countries to work experience?

The ‘My World of Work’ model in Scotland is well established and has a reputation for delivering a sound range of information and advice. CareersWales has developed labour market information resources that are comprehensive. Northern Ireland education has a strong STEM agenda and works well to liaise between schools and business. All of these, and other resources could be harnessed across the UK.

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1. Papers from the 2016 International Conference on Employer Engagement in Education and Training (pages 30-31)

   <https://www.educationandemployers.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Papers-from-the-2016-International-Conference-on-Employer-Engagement-in-Education-and-Training.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Hatcher, Richard and Le Gallais, Tricia (2008) The work experience placements of secondary school students: widening horizons or reproducing social inequality? Project Report. Education and Employers Taskforce.

   <http://www.open-access.bcu.ac.uk/831/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. <http://www.ucl.ac.uk/ioe/departments-centres/departments/education-practice-and-society/aspires> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)