



Department
for Education

Evaluation of the Work Experience Placement Trials

Research brief

October 2013

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Executive summary

Introduction

This summary presents the findings, conclusions and recommendations from an independent evaluation by the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) of the Department for Education (DfE) Work Experience Placement Trials. The trials aimed to test different work experience placement models for 16 to 19 year olds. The models were as follows:

- Model 1: Removing cost barriers for employers (for example, by providing materials or financial incentives).
- Model 2: Investigating specific challenges faced by small to medium-sized employers (SMEs) when offering work placements.
- Model 3: Providing extra resources to colleges (for example, to employ staff to organise work placements and liaise with employers).
- Model 4: Exploring the timing of placements for students (for example, investigating whether a block of time or individual days throughout a course is most effective and why).
- Model 5: Supporting students with learning difficulties and disabilities (LLDD) or vulnerable/disadvantaged students (for example, considering support employers need to employ young people with specific needs).

Twenty-five colleges tested one or more of the models and each of the colleges was allocated a sum of £80,000 in 2011-2012 and £97,000 in 2012-2013 for this purpose. The colleges were located in specified areas with high levels of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET) and high proportions of students at level 2 or below.

Background

The Wolf Review of Vocational Education (2011) made a strong case for reforming the vocational education system in order to equip young people with the knowledge and skills that will enable them to prosper and progress in their working lives. The government accepted the review's recommendation that 16 to 19 study programmes be introduced to offer students breadth and depth without limiting their options for future study or work. Reflecting Wolf's suggestion that work experience 'should be one of the highest priorities for 16-18 education policy in the next few years' (p.130), work experience will be an integral part of the 16 to 19 study programmes which will be introduced from September 2013. Wolf recommended that 'DfE should evaluate models for supplying

genuine work experience to 16-18 year olds who are enrolled as full-time students, not apprentices, and for reimbursing local employers in a flexible way, using core funds' (Recommendation 21, p.131). The Department launched the Work Experience Placement Trials in response to this, allocating funding to 25 institutions across 2011-12 and 2012-13 to test models for providing placements for 16 to 19 year olds.

Methodology

The DfE commissioned the NFER to undertake an independent evaluation of the Work Experience Placement Trials between May 2012 and July 2013.

The evaluation methodology comprised the following activities:

- A **scoping study**: carried out June-November 2012, including analysis of pilot colleges' action plans and progress reports, an email survey of colleges, and MI submitted by colleges.
- **Case studies**: in-depth investigations carried out in January-March 2013 with staff, students and employers linked to ten colleges offering varied approaches to work experience. Interviews were undertaken with 49 staff across 10 FE colleges, including senior leaders, work experience coordinators and teaching and learning support staff. In addition, 14 employer interviews were undertaken. We conducted focus groups with 59 students participating in work experience placements and 33 students not participating in work experience. Students undertaking work experience were also asked to complete a survey about the employability skills they felt they needed to develop and their perceptions of the skills valued most by employers. A total of 35 students completed the survey.
- **Analysis of MI collected from pilot colleges**: explored, for example, the *number* of placements provided overall, the number and size of *employers* who had participated, the length of *placements* (for example, the number of hours/days), total expenditure, and the cost of placements.
- **Assessment of value for money**: including a descriptive analysis of financial data, alongside qualitative assessments

Key findings

The key findings are drawn from the evaluation evidence base comprising MI, case-study data and VfM information.

Delivery of the work experience trial

- At least 9,725 placements were provided during the two-year trial. The number provided across the colleges ranged from 40-1,742 (with an average of 389). Although it is unclear how many placements would have been provided without the

trial, case-study evidence suggests that work experience had expanded in trial colleges and therefore this number is likely to have been much lower.

- Numbers involved depended greatly on the approach adopted in the college and the students being targeted.
- All ten case-study colleges offered students external placements with an employer, while nine colleges also placed students in internal commercial enterprises which colleges felt constituted genuine work experience.
- Case-study evidence suggests that work placements were predominately *vocational* (focussing on a particular vocational area to contribute to a study programme) and aimed to give a 'real world' experience.
- There were examples of 'extended' external placements for LLDD, following the 'Supported Internship' model, whereby they are supported during their placement by a Job Coach or Learning Support Assistant employed by the college.

Models of work experience

- Individual colleges trialled a combination of work experience placement models. On average, three models were piloted by each college.
- Providing extra resources to colleges, for example to employ staff to organise placements and liaise with employers (Model 3) and supporting LLDD (Model 5), were the two most prevalent models.
- Work experience coordinators funded by the trial played a significant cross-college role in managing the placement process and developing a more structured and systematic approach to the organisation of work experience.
- Flexibility in the timing of placements was important in meeting the needs of students' course requirements and employers' capacity to provide work experience.

Engagement in the trial

- The students who participated in the trial were very positive about the benefits and particularly valued experiencing a real working environment and gaining skills and confidence.
- Staff in some colleges were initially reluctant to engage with work experience programmes, but this changed when the benefits for students became evident.
- There was a perception amongst all colleges that employer engagement had improved considerably as a result of the trial, but this had required much time and effort on the part of coordinators. Financial incentives for employers were unnecessary as employers did not want them.
- Colleges were pleased with the level of student engagement and thought there was increased understanding of the advantages of undertaking a placement.
- The employers interviewed felt that offering work experience was part of their 'corporate social responsibility' and saw it as contributing to their local community.

Impact of the trial

- The key benefit of additional funding was widely perceived to be enabling colleges to employ work experience coordinators who were instrumental in establishing and developing relationships with employers and in coordinating placements. In turn, this helped work experience become more holistic and centralised and changed the college's work experience ethos. The funding also provided the opportunity to extend placements to more students.
- Colleges considered it important to capture the benefits of work experience. They were developing and applying monitoring methods and tools including collating feedback from students and employers, placement visits by staff to carry out assessments to gather evidence for student portfolios and the use of individual learning plans.
- The work experience trial was widely perceived by students, colleges and employers to have helped develop the skills necessary for employment, including team work, communication and interpersonal skills, enabling students to be more work-ready.
- Some students gained or were in the process of securing employment or apprenticeships following their work experience, including opportunities associated with the placements they undertook.
- The trial had helped to maintain and develop colleges' relationships with employers.
- Employer benefits from providing work experience included increased capacity, staff development and recruitment of apprentices.

Value for money

- Eight colleges in Year 1 and 13 colleges in Year 2 reported spending over the budget allocated to them by DfE, an additional £2,633 and £15,400 on average respectively.
- Some colleges had not spent all of the funds during the trial period, although evidence from progress reports and case studies suggests that some colleges had spent considerable time *planning* for the provision of work experience which would gradually be expanded.
- The average additional cost to the college of a work experience placement in Year 2 was calculated as £236 by dividing the total number of placements by actual additional expenditure. This equates to £11.45 per day. Set-up costs are likely to have inflated the average cost of a placement in Year 1. However, the context of work experience is important when calculating costs; the average cost varied across colleges, depending on the number of students placed, their characteristics and level of support needs, and the length of placements.
- College staff thought that particular elements of the trial were essential for success, namely the role of the coordinator, support for students (particularly more intensive support for LLDD), and investment in pre-placement preparation.

Although some elements might be considered expensive, they are likely to achieve efficiencies through centralising management and organisation functions.

The future of work experience

- The principal factors contributing to successful work experience placements were: effective coordination, good matching of students to placements, ensuring students were well-prepared for placements and flexibility in timing of placements.
- All the employers who were interviewed, including those who had not offered work experience before or to students across the FE sector, planned to offer placements in future.
- Staff in all the case-study colleges were committed to making their work experience provision sustainable but most had concerns about the long-term financial implications of resourcing this.

Conclusions and recommendations

Conclusions

The main conclusion from this evaluation of the Work Experience Placement Trial is that it supported the development of a more systematic and structured approach to the planning and delivery of work experience for 16 to 19 year old students. The ten case-study colleges participating in the trial valued the additional funding which enabled them to test different placement models, innovate and assure the quality of the work experience they offered. As a result, work experience was gaining a more strategic focus and a higher status in colleges. There was seen to be a positive impact on students, who developed employability skills including teamwork, communication and interpersonal skills.

Investment in a work experience coordinator is key to making work experience a more centrally managed and coordinated college-wide process. Providing extra resources to colleges was the most prevalent work experience placement model trialled and funding the recruitment of a coordinator accounted for most of this investment. College senior managers highlighted the additional capacity work experience coordinators gave them to manage the cross-college procurement and organisation of work placements.

Coordinators played four significant roles: they managed the contact with employers to secure placements; they worked with heads of departments and programme teams to help integrate work experience with the curriculum; they coordinated the preparation of students for going on placements; and they visited students on placement.

Flexibility is instrumental in managing the demand and supply of work experience placements. College senior managers and coordinators valued the opportunities the trial gave them to innovate and try out different ways of organising placements. They used a variety of placement timings as appropriate to balance the requirements of students and

their courses on the one hand and the capacity of employers on the other. The feedback from students and employers was equally positive regardless of the approach.

Support for students undertaking placements can make a useful contribution in enabling them to benefit from work experience. Colleges were supporting students in several ways including briefing and preparation, one-to-one advice, visiting students on placement and in some cases paying for travel and work clothes. They provided enhanced support for LLDD which was the second most prevalent work experience model trialled. Coordinators, mentors, coaches and support assistants worked with these students to support them through the placement process and assist them in maximising the benefit from work experience.

Providing placements that expose students to a real work environment with an external employer is of key importance. The experience had helped them to develop employability skills such as technical, social and communication skills.

Recommendations

The evaluation findings suggest the following points for consideration by policymakers:

- DfE should continue to help employers to understand that work experience placement health and safety and Disclosure and Barring Service (formerly CRB checks) requirements are not bureaucratic processes. This would help to support the procurement and provision of placements. In readiness for the introduction of study programmes and the greater demand on employers to offer work experience placements, DfE have been committed to reducing the bureaucracy around work experience and simplifying the guidance. For more details: <https://education.gov.uk/schools/teachingandlearning/qualifications/b00223495/post-16-work-exp-enterprise-educ/creating-work-exp-opp-young-people>.
- DfE should disseminate good practice examples of internship-type models of work experience for LLDD. This would help to address employers' apprehension by showing that with the right support LLDD can flourish in the workplace.¹
- DfE should advise colleges, schools and work-based learning providers on what counts as success in work experience. For example, if a student is offered and takes up a job or apprenticeship as a result of doing work experience and does not complete their course, should this be recorded as a success rather than being counted as course drop-out?

The evaluation findings suggest the following points for consideration by colleges, schools and work-based providers who should:

¹ Supported Internships for LLDD, currently being piloted by the DfE, provide a structured study programme, based at an employer, that is tailored to the individual needs of the young person and will equip them with the skills they need for the workplace. This will include on-the-job training, backed by expert job coaches to support interns and employers, and the chance to study for relevant qualifications – where appropriate.

- Consider appointing a work experience coordinator. This is a cost-effective way of driving forward work experience and centralising the management and organisation of placements. A coordinator is an important part of the college structure for effective work experience delivery.
- Explore what they need to put in place to scale up work experience provision for their students including sourcing enough placements of the right type and integrating work experience in study programmes.
- Think about how best to share their work experience 'story' across their institutions to maximise student and staff engagement by explaining the benefits with real life examples and illustrations. This could be included in continuing professional development for heads of faculty/department and tutors. Students who have completed work experience can be used as ambassadors to describe their placement 'journey' and explain the benefits gained.
- Examine how effectively they are monitoring the quality of work experience placements including evaluating and reviewing the outcomes. For example, are learning objectives agreed at the beginning of the placement and is progress towards the objectives reviewed at the end? Are employers as well as students and college staff involved in this process? How consistent is this process across the institution?
- Consider what follow-up contact and communication is required for employers who have offered placements. This could include providing feedback on the post-placement progress made by students including qualifications achieved and their progress to higher education, employment and apprenticeships. Employers appreciate finding out about what students go on to achieve.



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Ref: DFE- RB298

ISBN: 978-1-78105-267-9

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