EFFECTIVE PRACTICE IN EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT FOR 16/17 YEAR OLDS STUDYING BELOW LEVEL 2

RESEARCH FINDINGS REPORT MARCH 2018

CONTENTS

Executive summary

In November 2017, the Education and Training Foundation commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to conduct research to identify employer engagement activities which are effective for learners aged 16 to 17, with low prior attainment (no qualifications at Level 2) studying at Entry Level and Level 1 in Further Education providers. The work aimed to support the successful implementation of the transition year referenced in the Government's Post-16 Skills Plan, which will involve an element of employer engagement activity.

This report presents the findings of the research, along with policy and practice recommendations for the wider sector, the Education and Training Foundation and the Department for Education.

Methodology

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of effective practice in employer engagement, the research was undertaken in five stages: a literature review; a call for evidence; identification of effective practice case studies; qualitative interviews with providers, employers and learners; and analysis and reporting.

Findings

- Employer engagement activities are most effective for learners studying below Level 2 when they provide participants with a real insight into the world of work; are practical and interactive; and involve contact with employers where possible and appropriate.

- Employer engagement activities should aim to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours that learners need in order to feel more 'work ready' and able to engage with employers in a range of contexts. Decisions about which activities to run with which learners should therefore be based on their individual needs and the competencies they need to develop in order to engage effectively with employers.

- The combination and sequencing of activities is key in overcoming learners' barriers to engagement. Effective employer engagement provision for below Level 2 learners needs to involve a range of activities which can be tailored to learners' needs and gradually build their confidence and skills to engage with employers.

- Shorter, more intense activities tend to suit employers, learners and providers better than those which last for a long duration. These are easier to manage for employers and providers and prevent learners from becoming disinterested. However, this may vary depending on needs of individuals within a cohort or group of learners, as some, for example learners with SEND, may require less intense interventions over a longer period of time.

- The timing of employer engagement activities is also important, in order for them to link to learners' wider programmes, support the achievement of learning outcomes and link to external deadlines for progression opportunities.

- Learners studying below Level 2 are likely to require more support to engage in activities than those at higher levels. This may involve additional one-to-one support to tailor activities or programmes and overcome any emotional challenges to engagement, or practical support such as travel expenses.

- Decisions about which activities to deliver are most often based on providers' knowledge of the needs of learners and employers. Involving employers and learners in the design of activities enables providers to tailor activities to their needs; link these to the achievement of learning outcomes; and ensure that employers are aware of learners' support needs and the level at which they are working prior to their involvement.

- There is a lack of robust approaches to capturing the outcomes and impact of employer engagement activities. Nevertheless, there appears to be some clear benefits to learners, including improved motivation and engagement in learning; increased confidence in their abilities; greater awareness of the career opportunities available to them; and improved employability skills. Employers also benefit from improving their talent pipeline and widening the pool of young people they can recruit from, thereby potentially addressing issues around ageing workforces and skills gaps. Outcomes for providers include improved relationships with employers, resulting in wider support and sponsorship for their work, and CPD opportunities for teaching staff.

Recommendations

The following 10 recommendations are drawn from the conclusions of this research:

- The research presented here suggests that when developing the transition year model, the DfE should consider including seven key elements in their guidance to providers:

  - A baseline assessment of learners' skills, behaviours and confidence in relation to employment, education and training.

  - An initial period of employability skills development, which is focused on confidence building and preparation for the workplace.

  - A series of short and focused encounters with employers.

  - If appropriate, 'in-house' work experience.

  - Work experience with an external employer who is fully briefed on learners' employability levels and support needs.

  - Wraparound and holistic support for learners at all stages of the programme which is tailored to their individual needs.

  - Final evaluation activities to capture impact (compared against learners' baseline assessments) and any ways in which the programme could be improved.

- The transition year should aim to prepare learners for Technical Education and employment in the broadest sense equipping them with general employability skills and exposing them to a range of occupational sectors, in order to inform their decision about which technical pathway to pursue. However, there should also be opportunities to provide sector-specific activities where young people have selected a particular technical route for their personal and professional development.

  Providers consistently identified a personalised and tailored approach as a critical success factor in their current employer engagement activities. Therefore, while the transition year could follow a general structure, it will be important that this is not viewed as a 'one size fits all' model and that the programme, activities and support offered are tailored to the needs of both learners and employers. The provider resource which accompanies this report suggests how employer engagement activities can be tailored to participants interests, needs and aspirations – the DfE and the Education and Training Foundation could consider commissioning similar guidance for each element of the transition year.

- The eight Gatsby benchmarks of Good Career Guidance, which promote a tailored approach to careers education and embeds employer encounters and learning from labour market information, should inform the development of the transition year model. This could provide a link with the 20 new Careers Hubs that the Careers and Enterprise Company is set to establish in order to support schools and colleges to deliver against the Gatsby Benchmarks.

- In recognition of the wide range of activities and programmes that employers are being asked to support, including traineeships, apprenticeships, T-levels and the transition year, providers should ensure they adopt co-ordinated approaches to employer engagement across programmes, in order to minimise employer fatigue.

- Providers should research and engage with local networks, organisations and initiatives to recruit employers for their engagement activities. These might include the STEM Ambassador Network, the Enterprise Adviser Network – which is due to be rolled out to all schools and colleges in England as part of the implementation of the latest Careers Strategy – and the Teach Too programme. Smaller organisations could also explore opportunities to link in to large-scale events and activities run by local providers.

- Engaging the number of employers required for the delivery of a transition year is likely to be a challenge for providers, particularly in rural areas or in sectors which are typically comprised of SMEs. Providers will likely need additional support and guidance on effective ways of engaging employers and key messages which can be used to promote the benefits to businesses of participating in these activities. These providers could be identified through the Careers and Enterprise Company's cold spots analysis of careers education.

- Communications activities are needed to raise employers' awareness of technical reforms and the potential benefits of engaging at both national and strategic level by the DfE and the Education and Training Foundation, and at a local level by providers. Intermediary organisations such as local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and Chambers of Commerce could be useful channels of communication to smaller, local employers.

- Providers of all types working across the FE sector should consider identifying staff who can be dedicated to employer engagement, or have employer engagement as a core part of their role, to provide a coordinated and strategic approach to involving employers in their provision.

- To support the delivery of effective work experience during the transition year, the DfE should publish clear guidance for FE providers and employers on what factors contribute to successful work experience for learners studying below Level 2. This could build on the resource developed through this project but specifically focus on providing effective work experience.

- DfE should commission and publish guidance for providers on effective approaches for monitoring employer engagement activities undertaken by learners, measuring impact and tracking destinations, drawing on the case studies and findings of this research.

1. Introduction

In November 2017, the Education and Training Foundation commissioned Learning and Work Institute (L&W) to conduct research to identify what type of employer engagement activities are effective for learners aged 16 to 17, with low prior attainment (no qualifications at Level 2) studying at Entry Level and Level 1 in Further Education providers.

The aim of this work was to explore what constitutes effective practice in employer engagement in provision for 16/17 year olds on courses below Level 2, in order to support the successful implementation of the transition year referenced in the Government's Post-16 Skills Plan.

The Sainsbury Review and subsequent Post-16 Skills Plan have provided a clear course to establish the 'technical' pathway for education,

supported by a framework of 15 occupational routes encompassing all technical education at levels 3-5. However, it is recognised that not all learners are ready to study at Level 2 at age 16/17. As such, the proposed 'transition year' will aim to bridge this gap for learners, offering tailored and flexible support based on prior attainment and aspirations, which will include employer-related activity.

Around 10% of 16/17 year olds start courses below Level 2 each year. While nearly 80% of these individuals make successful transitions to employment, higher level vocational education or apprenticeships during the first 36 months after leaving secondary school[1], one-in-five have entered the persistent not in education, employment or training (NEET) group. Existing research is clear that working with employers to

offer effective work-related activities (such as inspiration activities and placements) can be beneficial to young people's outcomes and progression in terms of academic, personal and social skill development, and to better understand the future opportunities available to them[2,3,4,5]. For learners studying below Level 2, work-related activities are seen as particularly important for increasing confidence and motivation and preparing individuals for their next steps into the world of work.

This report presents the findings of the research into effective practice in employer engagement activities for this group of learners, along with policy and practice recommendations for the wider sector, the Education and Training Foundation and the Department for Education.

1   http://cver.lse.ac.uk/textonly/cver/pubs/cverdp004.pdf
2   www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/625526/Work_placements_-_a_call_for_evidence.pdf
3   www.gov.uk/government/publications/work-experience-and-related-activities-inschools-and-colleges
4   www.gov.uk/government/publications/post-16-effective-curriculum-practice-belowlevel-2
5   www.gov.uk/government/publications/supporting-entry-and-level-1-students-in-post16-institutions

2. Methodology

In order to gain an in-depth understanding of effective practice in employer engagement, the research was undertaken in five stages.

2.1 Literature review

The first phase of the research involved a literature review to inform the development of the call for evidence questions and to establish an evidence base for the identification and selection of effective practice case studies.

The review was conducted in two stages. The first involved a rapid review of existing evidence to inform the terms and questions used in the design of the call for evidence. This ensured that the call built on existing knowledge in the sector and could also be launched and kept open for a substantial time period. The second stage of the review comprised a more thorough search and analysis of the literature, to inform the development of the framework for effective practice and create a sound evidence base for the practical resource and this report.

L&W drew on a range of published and unpublished materials to inform the literature review including academic reports, policy documents, research reports, journal articles, and online content. Sources were identified using known literature and references, and through keyword searches both online and in appropriate journals. Each document was assessed and categorised prior to its inclusion based on relevance, timeliness, and the robustness/ reliability of the approach used to inform the content. A proforma for the literature review was developed to assess: rationale for inclusion (including how it addressed key areas of interest, such as length of intervention, sequencing, and effective combinations of activities); key messages for the research; key criteria for the framework; and whether it included a potential case study.

2.2 Call for evidence

In order to gather examples of effective practice in employer engagement, a call for evidence was conducted. L&W worked closely with the Education and Training Foundation to design the call for evidence questions and to ensure that they were fit-for-purpose and accessible to a wide range of providers and relevant stakeholders. The questions were informed by the literature review and the identified gaps in the available evidence.

The call for evidence was administered online using Snap survey software, although potential respondents were also offered the option for an L&W researcher to collect the relevant information by phone. The call for evidence was promoted through L&W's relevant networks and contacts, and also through partner organisations such as the Association of Colleges, the Association of Employment and Learning Providers, Fair Train and others.

In total, 63 responses were received to the call for evidence. These represented a wide range of organisations which delivered employer engagement activities with the target learner group, including FE, land-based and sixth form colleges, training providers, employer representative organisations and third sector organisations.

2.3 Identification of effective practice case studies

Using evidence from the literature review and the call for evidence, L&W designed a framework of effective practice for employer engagement in provision for learners studying below Level 2. This framework informed the selection of 24 case studies of effective practice drawn from the call for evidence and the literature review. The case studies represented a range of providers and organisations, including eight general FE colleges, one land-based college, three sixth form colleges, two training providers, eight third sector organisations and two employer organisations. The case studies also represented a geographical spread across England: two worked nationally; seven were from London; six were from the south; five were based in the north or Yorkshire and the Humber; three were from the midlands; and one was from the east of England.

2.4 Qualitative interviews with providers, employers and learners

The 24 case studies were developed through in-depth qualitative interviews with providers. These were complemented, where possible, by interviews or focus groups with learners and employers involved in their employer engagement activities. Where provision had a particular focus – for example, if a provider targeted a specific learner group, or had a particularly innovative delivery approach – then their case study focussed on this aspect of their provision. This enabled L&W researchers to develop a suite of case studies which demonstrated effective practice at each stage of delivery of the employer engagement activities, and with different learners and employers, ensuring that they were relevant and engaging for practitioners and providers.

In total, 30 interviews were conducted with providers, 18 with employers and 14 with learners, either on a one-to-one or group basis. Where possible, case studies were developed through face-to-face visits to providers. However, for practical reasons, the majority of employer and learner interviews were conducted by telephone, as it was challenging for providers to ensure that researchers had access to these stakeholders during visits.

2.5 Reporting

The findings of the research have been presented in a number of different outputs. One is this report for the Education and Training Foundation and DfE, which considers the policy implications of the research and includes recommendations for the employer activity element of the transition year.

A practical guide for providers has also been developed to help them understand and draw on the effective practice identified through the project. The resource translates the findings of the research into practical ideas that providers can easily implement and use to improve employer engagement in provision for learners aged 16 and 17 studying below Level 2.

Alongside the resource is the set of 24 case studies of effective practice, which demonstrate a range of types of employer engagement activities for different learner groups, sectors, employers and provider types. The resource includes short excerpts from these case studies; the full versions are included in a separate publication.

Finally, the project has produced a framework for effective practice which providers can use to review their employer engagement provision. Providers can then use the practical guide to find ways of addressing any identified areas for improvement and ensure that they are providing high quality employer engagement activities for learners aged 16 and 17 studying below Level 2.

3. Findings

The findings of the research are presented under three main headings: employer engagement activities delivered by providers; how employer engagement activities are designed and planned; and evaluation and outcomes of employer engagement activities.

3.1 Employer engagement activities delivered by providers

This section of the report begins by detailing the type and nature of employer engagement activities delivered/facilitated by providers. It then goes on to explore the typical duration and frequency of various activity types, before examining how activities were sequenced or combined, and the reasons for this. The chapter ends with an exploration of the type and nature of additional support offered to learners, including those with particular needs, such as some individual learners with SEND or learners with low confidence.

3.1.1 The type and nature of activities

The wide range of employer engagement activities delivered include those hosted by the provider and those hosted by the employer, although both contributed and collaborated on delivery. Activities that take place in an employer's workplace were considered to provide participants with greater insight into the nature of roles available in different sectors, and they included work experience and visits to the workplace. Taking on the role of an employee through work experience was considered the most effective way for participants to gain an understanding of the workplace, and as such was the activity that participants were most likely to

take part in. Work experience took place predominantly in the private and public sectors but also in the voluntary and community sectors. The other employer-hosted activity was workplace visits, which provided learners with an insight into a broad range of roles in a single organisation, for example, a visit to a bank highlighted the variety of roles offered by the company, including, but not limited to, those in finance.

However, it was emphasised that many learners below Level 2, particularly at Entry Level, are not immediately ready to undertake external work experience with an employer. Thus, providers also secure 'in-house' work experience for young people. This includes working in a college café, shop or gym. Undertaking 'in-house' work experience enables a young person to make a supported transition to external work experience, in an environment that they are familiar and comfortable with and where staff are available to offer support, if required. This may be combined with activities involving external employers or lead onto external work experience if the learner is deemed ready for this.

Providers also run a broad range of employer engagement activities that employers are invited to attend and contribute to, in order to prepare learners for external work experience. These include:

- Mock interviews (including speed interviews), which allow participants to gain experience of being interviewed by an employer. Speed interviews allow participants to rotate around multiple employers, spending a short amount of time with each one, to gain a greater range of experience;
- Careers fairs, typically hosted by a

provider or an external exhibition centre that learners attend. Careers fairs include sector-specific fairs, and those with a focus on a particular type of work, such as voluntary work or apprenticeships;

- Employer talks, informing students about careers in their sector, including career pathways and recruitment criteria. Hearing from employers who tell their own, personal story of how they became successful is a particularly effective activity for learners with low confidence, especially if they come from a similar background or have had similar experiences to the learner;

- Mentoring, whereby employer volunteers meet with individual or groups of students on a regular basis to provide advice and guidance. This interaction can be based on a specific project that participants were working on, enabling an employer to provide more general, careers-based support with tasks such as completing job applications, or to provide informal support in a participant's first few months in employment;

- Skills events and competitions, at which employers take the role of colleague or judge, providing instruction and feedback to participants. Skills events are highly varied in their nature and their design depends on the sector that learners are studying in. For example, students studying hospitality and catering at one college held themed events at which staff from local hotels and restaurants came to the college and worked alongside students in the kitchen to provide an evening dinner for paying public customers, who then provided feedback to students;

- Workshops, in which employers may participate in various ways depending on the subject of the workshop. Examples included role plays in which employers took the role of a client and participants took the role of an employee who had to 'upsell' a product to the 'client'.

  Workshops can also be focused on a particular outcome, such as creating a CV, for which employers provide guidance and information on what recruiters would look for;

- Masterclasses, in which industry professionals demonstrate their skills. For example, a local hairdresser delivered sessions with hairdressing students in their on-campus salon;

- Project briefs set by employers, which can include real commissions. For example, media students at one college pitched their solution for a new web page to an employer. At another provider, engineering students used 3D printers to create components, tools and prototypes to be used by local companies;

- Employer networking events, which typically involve students who have been invited by the college to attend, and employers who spend a short session (perhaps a lunch hour) talking to students individually.

The majority of the above activities are run by all types of providers working across the FE sector. However, third sector providers generally do not run larger events, such as networking events and careers fairs themselves, but instead take their participants to attend such events hosted by other providers.

3.1.2 Duration and intensity of activities

The duration and intensity of activities is designed to suit employer and learner capacity for engagement as well as the provider curriculum. For this reason, shorter, more intense activities are favoured over activities that last for a longer duration. For example, work experience which lasts for a one-week block was found to be easier for both employer and provider to accommodate than when it is run on a less intense basis over a longer duration. An employer can more easily provide supervision and find tasks for participants to complete over one week than over one day per week for a number of weeks. Similarly, a one-week block causes less disruption to the curriculum for college and school students, whereas a placement over a longer period might cause the student to lose focus on their college course and/or their work experience.

The duration of work experience ranges from one to two days, to one to two weeks. For school and college students, work experience typically lasts for one week. The intensity of work experience varies according to the support needs of the young person and the curriculum area. Those who do not have additional support needs generally work full-time (30-35) hours for one week. However, it is common for students with higher support needs to carry out work experience at a lower intensity and for a longer duration, for example between half a day and one day per week over a number of weeks. This was felt to be more achievable for this cohort of students, who will typically be studying below Level 1. The length and duration of work experience for learners with additional support needs is generally flexible and responsive to individual learners' needs.

Workshops and mock interviews were also found to be more effective if they took place over a short period of time (often no more than one hour) as they are high-intensity activities. Similarly, speed interviews are popular as they provide short, high intensity engagement that does not give participants time to lose focus or disengage. A further benefit of high intensity, short duration activities is that they effectively replicate the workplace environment, without being too challenging for participants.

"The sessions are very fast paced, with no activity lasting longer than 15 minutes within the two-hour session. This is effective as the intensity of the workplace is replicated." (Provider)

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They have got an employer to come in and work with [students] individually where they're in a work situation where they're an employee and they're trying to upsell a product to the customer. So, the employer was the customer in that case. So, if someone came in to ask for Parma ham, how would you upsell something else. So, the idea was that they would ask, 'How are you? How can I help you today? Is there a special occasion?'… to put them in a real situation of customer service.

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> *That [employability skills short] course is particularly important for our Level 1s, because that will go through all their CVs, and interview training. It will go through how to use the phone and do a covering letter. It's all about mindset, empowerment, because you'll get a lot of Level 1s that still have some issues within themselves or with confidence. That will bring up their confidence… It's very powerful, that course, you can see the difference between the day we get them, to when they go out on placement.*

PROVIDER

Mentoring tends to take place over five to 10 sessions on a monthly basis. However, there are also instances of one-off mentoring sessions, where employers and participants meet over a lunchtime, for example, to discuss any guidance or information that the participant is seeking.

3.1.3 The combination and sequencing of activities

Low confidence levels amongst young people studying at below Level 2 are considered a key barrier to making informed decisions about education, training and employment – more so than low motivation, disadvantage or learning difficulties. Because of this, the sequencing of employer engagement activities to gradually build learner confidence was considered essential by providers.

Where employer engagement is part of a wider programme, such as a college course or a third sector employability programme, activities are typically sequenced in order to gradually develop participants' employability skills and ability to engage with employers with greater independence over time.

Generally, a participant will receive employability skills training before taking part in their first employer engagement activity. This might involve CV development, activities to develop confidence, communication and team work skills, interview skills training, or learning about the purpose of work experience.

This course of study is typically followed by the first employer engagement activities, which take place on the provider site. Such

activities might include mock interviews with employers, talking to employers at a careers fair, employer presentations, simulated activity, or project briefs. These activities give participants experience of engaging with employers for short periods of time in a familiar environment. Activities are sequenced to become increasingly challenging over time, for example by timetabling employer presentations and simulated activities before mock interviews.

After engaging with employers at the provider site, participants then move onto work experience, the most intense and lengthy employer engagement activity. After work experience, participants are taken through a process of reflection on their experience and helped to consider their next steps.

Schools and colleges generally time work experience for mid-way through the academic year, in order to give students the opportunity to prepare beforehand, and to avoid clashes with examination periods towards the end of the year. Variations from this sequencing pattern included cases where work experience had to take place earlier in the year because it was the only time employers were able to give time for the activity. Colleges noted that they needed to be flexible and adapt to employer capacity in such instances but would not send students on work experience before they were ready. Other variations in the sequencing included third sector programmes that timetabled CV workshops and interview practice after work experience rather than before, with the view that participants then had more experience to include in their CV and to discuss at an interview.

For schools and colleges, cross-college or cross-curriculum events such as careers fairs and employer talks typically take place intermittently over the academic year at a point when the activity is most relevant. For example, a jobs and apprenticeships fair will be planned towards the end of the year when students are more likely to be looking for progression opportunities, or may be hooked onto national events such as National Apprenticeships Week.

Third sector providers generally deliver engagement programmes for shorter periods of time and with a more defined timetable of activities than colleges and schools. They therefore have less flexibility around when to run activities than colleges and schools that can schedule activities any time across the academic year. Some third sector providers have a fixed programme of activities that they follow for all participants, such as building a race car for an engineering project, or renovation work for a volunteering programme. However, these are still tailored to learners' needs and interests where possible; for example, by allocating particular roles to young people according to the skills or experience they want to develop.

3.1.4 Additional support offered to learners

Young people studying at below Level 2 often face a range of challenges that impact upon their engagement in learning and their readiness for employment. Some young people face particular forms of socio-economic disadvantage, for example they might be in local authority care or from a family with a long history of worklessness. Others may have learning difficulties, physical or mental health needs or lead chaotic lives. A high proportion of young people studying at below Level 2 have low levels of confidence and self-esteem, which, as discussed previously is a key barrier to learning and work readiness.

To overcome these barriers, providers offer a range of support to learners, some that is aimed at all learners at any level of study, and other types of support designed for learner cohorts with particular needs, such as students with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND). Much of this is in line with Ofsted's key considerations for provision for learners with high needs, which judges the extent to which learners "develop skills to enhance their employability and independence in their everyday lives in real-life situations, including meaningful work experience"[6].

All learners on work experience have access to an overarching support structure offered by their provider. All providers have staff who are available for the student to contact at any time if they need support while on work experience. In addition, provider staff typically contact the student and employer (either by phone or through a face-to-face visit) while the student is on placement to check progress and resolve any issues. While not used by any of the providers involved in this study, assistive technologies can be an effective way of providing this support – for example, Brain in Hand enables support staff to monitor learners' anxiety levels and put additional support in place if needed. Learners also tend to be supported in meeting any financial costs of their work experience, such as travel costs.

Often, providers encourage learners to source their own work experience opportunities with employers. This is seen to promote independence and increase learners' confidence when they are able to secure a placement. However, research has found that this can cause challenges for some learners, particularly those from lower socioeconomic or disadvantaged backgrounds who lack contacts in industry or have very limited options available to them . To overcome this, providers have work experience coordinator staff who intervene to assist students with contacting an employer and securing work experience if the student is struggling to do so on their own. These staff also review students' work experience choices to ensure they are appropriate and sufficiently challenging. Some providers run their

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6   Ofsted (2018) Further education and skills inspection handbook, April 2018, No. 150076.

own 'job shops', linked to the local Jobcentre and employers, that allow learners to discover local employment opportunities. One college involved in this study ran a 'job centre' for vacancies in their on-site retail outlets which were targeted at learners who may not yet be ready for work experience with an external employer. These opportunities aimed to enable students of all abilities to work with each other and thus foster peer-to-peer mentoring.

For learners with particular support needs, such as a physical disability, staff discuss their individual needs with the employer when organising a placement, to ensure the employer is able to support the learner in the workplace. For example, they will explain to the employer whether the learner needs to take regular breaks, avoid standing for long periods, or need information and instructions provided in specific formats.

> "We had a girl who had OCD, but we factored it in and said, 'Well, we need all of this checking,' and she did it to the last penny…if we gave her something too complicated to do, she'd probably just lose the plot and storm off, whereas, if we told her that it was really important and it needed to be done by the end of the day, it'd be done by 12 o'clock." (Employer)

There is a view among providers that having staff who are trained in working with SEND learners is critical as it allows staff to provide brokerage between employers and learners, enabling learners to understand employer expectations of them in the workplace and employers to have realistic expectations of learners. One college had developed a relationship

with Mencap which provided details of local employers that had registered themselves as having the capacity to take SEND students on work experience. This helped the college to provide students with additional support needs with a wider range of options of employers that they could undertake work experience with.

SEND students who have a learning support assistant (LSA) at school or college also have their LSA accompany them on their work experience if necessary. LSAs might also accompany SEND school or college students on employer engagement activities provided by third sector organisations.

Training providers also have sufficient staff resource to provide a particularly high level of one-to-one support for individual learners, enabling staff to support the learner's holistic needs to ensure the success of the employer engagement activity.

> "I had a learner who was transitioning from female to male. She had no support from her family. She had an overdose. I went to go and visit them in hospital. I'd say, 'Have you spoken to your councillor?' 'Oh, well, no. I've not told them.' I said 'Here's my phone. I'll sit here while you phone them.'" (Provider)

For learners who are not considered to be ready for external work experience, colleges provide internal opportunities, such as working in the college café or gardens. This provides learners with experience of a workplace in a more familiar, less intimidating environment.

> "If we think that they're not ready to go out on placement, we will say,

> 'Okay, before they even go out on that placement next year, let's make sure that they have some kind of a placement.' They might be frightened of it. Their anxiety might be too high, but we don't want to completely reject them, we will do those internal placements, if that's the case." (Provider)

Similarly, group work experience is offered to students who are not ready (often due to low confidence) to undertake work experience on their own. This will typically be for a group of students who already know each other, such as several students in one class, and is generally only provided for students below Level 1 with particular learning support needs.

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> *It may be that we ask them to allow the learner to record them telling them the instruction on their phone, so that when they've forgotten what they were asked to do, they can just replay the message on their phone. It might be that we work with the employer to create prompts for them that suit their needs, or do larger printing, or simplify the language so that, if they're non-English speakers, they can understand it.*
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7   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.

3.1.5 Summary points

- Employer engagement activities are most effective for learners studying below Level 2 when they are practical, interactive and provide participants with a real insight into the world of work.

- Work experience is a particularly effective way of enabling learners to gain an understanding of the workplace, but many learners studying below Level 2 are not ready for this level of activity.

- Shorter, more intense activities tend to suit employers, learners and providers better than those which last for a long duration. However, this may vary depending on the needs of individuals within the learner cohort, as some learners may require less intense interventions over a longer period of time.

- The combination and sequencing of activities is crucial. Providers need to offer a range of employer engagement activities which can be tailored to learners' needs and gradually build up their confidence and employability skills, culminating in work experience with an external employer.

- The timing of employer engagement activities is also important, in order for them to link to learners' wider programmes, support the achievement of learning outcomes and link to external deadlines for progression opportunities.

- Learners studying below Level 2 are likely to require more support to engage in activities than those at higher levels. This may involve additional one-to-one support to tailor activities or programmes and overcome any emotional challenges to engagement, or practical support such as travel expenses.

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> *What we usually do is request to suit the curriculum and the learner, but we have to be flexible, so we will say to the employer, 'This is the ideal scenario. However, if that doesn't work for you, or if you think you are going to be recruiting later in the year and would like to trial a few students, then let us send you them as they develop, and you might be able to see how they progress.*
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3.2 How employer engagement activities are designed and planned

This chapter begins with an exploration of how providers decide which activities to deliver, including when to run them, and which employers and learners they decide to involve in activities. The chapter then goes on to look at the ways in which providers involved employers and learners in the design of their activities, and lessons learned from activities which providers had found to be ineffective.

3.2.1 How decisions about which activities to deliver are made

Providers base their decisions on which employer activities to deliver or facilitate with which learners on a number of different factors, including

the extent to which activities link with relevant courses and curriculum areas, organisational policies, learner and employer capacity to engage, and the potential benefits and outcomes for learners.

All providers tend to have one or more members of staff who lead on employer engagement activities, acting as the main point of contact for employers and making decisions about which activities to deliver and when. Larger colleges and training providers are particularly likely to have a central employer engagement team that coordinates activities and keeps records of all employer engagement on a central database. These staff members typically lead whole-college activity such as general careers and apprenticeship events and base decisions about which of these to

run and when on external timetables and deadlines, such as applications deadlines for apprenticeships and other progression opportunities. In colleges, curriculum staff tend to lead on the design of curriculum-specific employer engagement events, such as masterclasses and guest speakers, to ensure that content links to course requirements and supports the achievement of learning outcomes. Consequently, decisions about employer engagement activities are made based on their knowledge of the skills that learners develop at each stage of their course. Similarly, in training providers and third sector organisations, delivery staff tend to lead on employer engagement and decide which activities to run based on the aims and content of their course or programme.

Colleges also tend to have policies on employer engagement which set out expectations of how activities should be planned for each programme and level of study. This guides each curriculum area to plan employer engagement for the year for their provision and learners.

A key factor that providers consider when deciding which activities to run is the needs and capacity for engagement of both employers and learners. Employer needs and capacity for engagement is typically discussed in annual review meetings between providers and employers (generally during summer holidays for colleges and schools) during which they consider the upcoming year's timetable and format of the range of the engagement activities they intend to run, and how and when the employer can be involved. Employers also advise on the nature of skills that they need in their workforce, which providers use to design the content of activities that learners engage in. Furthermore, discussions explore any recruitment drives that employers want to align the timing of activities with, and the level of engagement that it is realistic for employers to commit to.

In some instances, written documents such as memorandums of understanding had been drawn up between providers and employers, detailing the plan of engagement activities. This was considered to help manage expectations of both parties, defining the scope and duration of activities.

Decisions around which employers to engage with depend on the curriculum subject area and curriculum staff's contacts in the sector, many of whom have experience of working in industry. Colleges and schools generally have a pool of employers who they have worked with for many years. One provider took advantage of the Teach Too programme to recruit employers for their engagement activities. These contacts link providers to further employers through recommendations, and together with networking activities in business and industry communities, expand their pool of employer engagement contacts over time. Through experience of employer engagement, providers learn which employers provide better-quality experiences for learners, so that employer selection becomes more targeted and effective over time.

However, some providers had to be more opportunistic in taking up offers of engagement from employers, as they found it a challenge to engage enough employers to deliver activities for all of their learners studying below Level 2, or in particular curriculum areas. As a result, their decisions about which activities to deliver and when were based on the employers who were available and willing to offer their time, rather than the ways in which activities met their learners' needs. This challenge is only likely to increase as technical education reform implementation progresses, requiring further employer engagement across provision. Providers will therefore need a coordinated approach to engaging employers to ensure that they are involved in activities which are most relevant to them and learners, secure maximum impact for both parties, and to avoid employer fatigue in engaging.

"The employers we work with is shaped by two factors: relationships we have with employers through previous work placements, and sheer luck and practicality; whatever works for the employer around their other commitments and whichever employers respond positively. The college tries to target a large number of employers in accordance with relativity [SIC] to their curriculum, however, it is often pot-luck. The main factor is to ensure there is a strong relevance to the interests of the students." (Provider)

Learner readiness to participate also informs decisions about which employer activities to deliver. For example, at a college or school, this might determine whether or not a learner takes part in mock interviews with employers or curriculum staff, and whether or not they undertake internal or external work experience. Learners' capacity to engage with employers is also assessed by third sector providers. For example, one third sector organisation uses comprehensive diagnostic tools to assess whether a young person is ready for certain employer activities. Across providers, if a participant is not considered to be ready to engage with employers then activities will be delayed. This is to avoid employers and/or learners having a poor experience, which can impact on their engagement in future activities.

Furthermore, the design of work experience is adjusted where necessary to better suit learners with particular support needs. For example, work experience might take place at a lower level of intensity but over a longer period of time, such as one day a week over many weeks rather than a one-week block. This design is considered to be more effective for learners with additional support needs as it gives them more time to settle in and gain confidence in the work environment. In addition, running work experience later in the academic year is deemed to be more suitable for learners who need longer to gain the employability skills to be ready for work experience. Again, this design is generally only used for learners below Level 1 with additional learning support needs.

A further factor in providers' decisions about which activities to deliver is their potential impact on the skills that learners most needed to improve. This is often determined by an assessment of their competencies and behaviours. For example, a third sector provider found that learners needed to improve their interview skills and gain practical work experience. As a result, they decided that mock interviews with employers would be a good facilitator and designed an on-site pop up café activity for learners to run to help them gain customer service skills and experience. Training providers tend to carry out particularly detailed initial skills assessments of each individual learner, with one using a robust information, advice and guidance (IAG) process, which included learner completion of soft skills and learning styles questionnaires, work-readiness assessments and personality profiling. Results from these assessments are used to decide what training learners need and what type of work

experience would best meet their needs. Once on work experience, employers are generally able and willing to tailor activities to the particular needs, interests and strengths of individual learners.

> *"We ask the student, 'What are you particularly interested in?' Although we're an airline, we've had students say things like finance or law, so we'll try and set some time up with the finance team to come and talk to them, we want them to get the most out of it."* (Employer)

In instances where providers are unable to source work experience in the industry that students want to work in (for example due to health and safety regulation prohibiting under-18s to work on construction sites), a non-industry specific work placement activity is arranged instead, to support the development of their general employability skills such as reliability, time keeping, communication and personal presentation. Although not mentioned by providers involved in this research, the Construction Industry Training Board (CITB) runs highly innovative, virtual and immersive vocational learning experiences to overcome these challenges and engage learners in construction-specific work activities.

3.2.2 Learner and employer involvement in the design of activities

The majority of providers spoke about the ways in which they involve learners and employers in the design of their employer engagement activities and the benefits of doing so.

The most common way in which providers involve employers and learners in the design of provision is through feedback on previous activities. Providers of all types

discussed using feedback forms, undertaking phone calls with employers and carrying out focus groups with learners to identify what worked well and what could be improved. This information is then used to develop future activities.

However, many providers go further than this. Some colleges convene employer advisory boards or networks on at least an annual basis, at which employers share information on their skills gaps and the competencies they look for when recruiting young people and help to shape the college's employer engagement provision for the next year. These are often sector specific. This involvement helps to ensure that activities are tailored to the needs of individual employers and provide learners with the skills and competencies they need for the relevant sector.

> *"We work with 2,000 employers in the form of employer advisory boards. Employer Advisory Boards (EAB) at the moment cover five of the available curriculum areas. The boards are chaired by industry members, and so have a real added benefit of experience and insight… The boards spend their time looking at the curriculum provision of the college, and shaping this in a way which ensures the learners are being taught to meet employer's expectations, and use this to opportunity to shape the curriculum by bringing in units which reflect the employer's needs."* (College)

One provider worked with their local Enterprise Advisor who provided valuable input to their careers and employability strategy and helped their careers team to make strong and sustainable links with other local employers and organisations which

could contribute to their employer engagement activities. While not mentioned by providers involved in this research, other initiatives such as the STEM Ambassador Programme could provide a valuable and effective way for providers to involve employers in the design and delivery of their engagement activities. Run by STEM Learning, this programme provides organisations across the FE and skills sector with valuable free employer support for their activities, including talks, visits, work experience, mentoring, skills competitions and contributions to careers fairs.

Other approaches include working with employers on an individual basis to gain an in-depth knowledge of their sector and individual needs and incorporating these into the design of employer activities. Providers who took this approach stressed the importance of being responsive and providing employers with a good quality experience, to ensure their continuing engagement. A key part of this includes raising employers' awareness about the learner cohort so that they have a realistic expectation of what learners can be expected to do and the support they are likely to require. This is particularly important if the provider works with learners from disadvantaged backgrounds and reduces the risk of employers and learners having a negative experience.

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> *Students engaged in employability development may have significant involvement in the design and development of the activity. For example, automotive students completing a winter check event, planned the event, and designed the checklist required. Social action projects both in college and for external organisations offers additional scope for students to lead in the design and development of activity, supported by their curriculum tutor. Where students are engaged in employer led live briefs, the employer will outline the project requirements, however, students will have an input in the operational delivery of the employer brief.*
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It is usual to need to explain to employers the level of these learners in detail as they are not usually familiar with the specific needs and expectations they may have… Employers are advised that short, sharp events with hands on activities will benefit the learners and be most effective. Experience has suggested that personal contact is most effective to engage employers as their awareness of Level 1 learners is usually limited.

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Other ways of involving employers in the design of activities include working with intermediary or representative organisations such as the local authority, Local Enterprise Partnership or Chambers of Commerce to gather their views on what was needed by the sector and promote engagement to employers; undertaking visits to employer sites to gain an in-depth understanding of their needs; and asking employers to provide resources, sponsorship and materials for activities.

Providers also take steps to involve learners in the design of their activities. In colleges, this often takes the approach of items on agendas of student meetings or learner voice forums, focus groups with learners studying in different curriculum areas, and learner surveys, to explore what kinds of activities and sectors learners are interested in. In training providers and third sector organisations, these discussions tend to happen on an individual basis and activities are then tailored accordingly.

A small number of providers took a more participatory approach to their employer engagement activities, working with employers to design briefs and project requirements but giving learners the opportunity to take ownership of the delivery of activities.

"Students engaged in employability development may have significant involvement in the design and development of the activity. For example, automotive students completing a winter check event, planned the event, and designed the checklist required. Social action projects both in college and for external organisations offers additional scope for students to lead in the design and development of activity, supported by their curriculum tutor. Where students are engaged in employer led live briefs, the employer will outline the project requirements, however, students will have an input in the operational delivery of the employer brief." (College)

Across providers, there is consensus that employer and learner involvement in the design of activities makes them more effective in meeting the needs of employers and learners, increases the likelihood of activities being successful, and secures greater buy-in from both parties.

3.2.3 Activities which were found to be ineffective

A number of colleges had started their employer engagement **programmes expecting all learners to undertake work experience** or other activities with employers but found that many learners studying below Level 2 did not have the skills, confidence or maturity to undertake activities with external stakeholders. Consequently, they changed their approach to **focus on confidence and skills-building activities and built in more time** to offer individualised support which prepared learners for work experience.

Some providers gave examples of delivering previous **activities or programmes which had used a standard structure** and found that these were not particularly effective in engaging learners or employers. Subsequently, they had **tailored activities to particular sectors, learner interests or employer needs** and received a much better response from participants.

Providers also spoke about the importance of ensuring that **employers had a realistic expectation of learners' employability skills** and were able to provide appropriate support during activities. If this is not communicated clearly, employers may deliver activities which are not accessible for learners, resulting in a poor experience for all participants. **Preparation sessions with employers and learners** are effective in overcoming this potential issue.

Some providers, especially those located in rural areas, had experienced **challenges in engaging enough employers** in particular sectors (for example, animal management, fashion and media) to offer activities to all of their learners studying below Level 2. This, combined with the sector-wide drive to increase employer engagement, had created some **issues in the quality of employer activities** experienced by some providers, as they were not able to be selective about the employers they worked with. To overcome this, providers had started to **recruit staff dedicated to employer engagement** in order to build relationships, raise employers' awareness of their learners' needs and improve the quality of their activities.

Providers also identified lessons learned about the **timing and duration of employer activities**.

For colleges, this focussed on when activities were run during the academic year – if they were delivered too close to holidays or exams then there was low take-up amongst learners. For third sector providers, this consideration was more about avoiding taking up too much of learners' leisure time, which could act as a barrier to engagement. Providing a **continuous programme or offer** was also seen as more effective than one-off sessions which allowed few opportunities for follow-up with learners or employers.

Overall, providers agree that the main lesson they had learned was that **the quality of activities offered is key to securing learner and employer buy-in**. They emphasise that activities need to be interactive and based on real working life wherever possible, that employer representatives understand the needs of individuals within a cohort or group of learners and can engage with young people, and that staff have the time and resources to deliver and follow-up on activities. All of these factors contribute to the delivery of high quality activities and experiences, resulting in more positive outcomes for learners and employers**.**

3.2.4 Summary points
- Employer engagement activities tend to be designed by dedicated staff or teams, working in collaboration with curriculum or delivery staff. This ensures that activities support the achievement of learning outcomes and internal and external timetables and deadlines.

- Decisions about which activities to deliver and with whom are most often based on providers' knowledge of the needs and capacity of learners and employers. This informed the type, timing and sequencing of activities, as well as the wider support offered to learners.

- Involving employers and learners in the design of activities enables providers to ensure that they meet the needs of employers and learners, increase the likelihood of activities being successful, and secure greater buy-in from both parties.

3.3 Evaluation and outcomes of employer engagement activities

This chapter explores the ways in which providers evaluate their employer engagement activities and the outcomes they have captured for participating learners and employers, as well as their own organisations.

3.3.1 How providers evaluate employer engagement activities

Although providers undertake a range of activities to evaluate their employer engagement provision, there is a lack of robust mechanisms in place to identify the outcomes and impacts for learners, employers and other stakeholders.

Many providers gave examples of the ways in which they evaluate the quality of the activities they run. The most common approach to this was gaining feedback from learners and employers through evaluation forms, surveys and post-event conversations or discussions. Other providers use more interactive approaches to evaluating activities, including post-it comments, traffic light systems and display boards. This enables providers to identify what worked well and the elements of activities that could be improved, as well as identifying gaps in their employer engagement provision.

However, providers find it more challenging to identify the impact of employer activities on the learners who take part. Most often, providers use learner rates of achievement and progression into employment, apprenticeships or other learning as a proxy for the success of their employer engagement activities. Attendance and retention data are also analysed to explore whether learners' engagement in their

programmes changes following their participation in employer activities. Yet many providers acknowledged that it is difficult to establish a cause and effect link between employer activities and any changes in these measures.

"It is impossible to really measure cause and effect, but our retention and overall outcomes have improved to above the sixth for college benchmark in the past couple of years." (General FE College)

Many providers carry out end assessments or self-assessments with learners to review their work readiness, confidence to engage with employers and their relevant skills. In colleges, learners' progress is often tracked through their individual development plans, which set targets against personal, social and skills development outcomes and enable learners, tutors and employers to record their progress against these. However, only a small number of providers spoke about carrying out full baseline assessments at the beginning and end of employer activities to measure learners' distance travelled. In many cases, providers rely on anecdotal evidence from learners, tutors and employers to capture the impact of their activities.

In contrast, some providers, particularly those based in the third sector, embed evaluation and outcome measurement into their employer engagement programmes. Some capture ethnographic evidence of changes through learner journals and reports which they complete throughout their participation in activities. These help learners identify the skills and competencies they gain or improve as a result of the employer activities, acting as a record for learners but also a valuable source of

evidence for providers. This approach can also provide an opportunity for learners to develop additional skills, for example by asking them to present their experiences back to their peers.

"Learning and progress is captured by way of logbooks, diaries and photographic evidence. Learners are encouraged to prepare a presentation about their experiences and present their information to their peer group. Again, all activities are related to learning and work and the benefits of the different work skills are highlighted throughout the process." (College)

Two colleges used online systems to measure learners' progress during their employer engagement programme. One college was piloting a piece of software which acted as an internal social media platform, enabling learners to log their progress through blogs, diaries and videos.

"This is a protected social-media type platform which allows learners to create blogs, diaries and videos recording their skills development and associated projects. They can tag these (in a similar way to LinkedIn) with skills they have learnt, and then collate 'evidence' of particular skills in preparation for interview. They can also send employers a link to view their skills profiles directly." (College)

The only providers who had commissioned external evaluations of their employer engagement programmes were based in the third sector. Consequently, these organisations could speak confidently about the outcomes that learners and employers had experienced as a result of their activities. The motivation for commissioning an

external evaluation was to provide robust evidence for funding bids and promotional materials.

3.3.2 Outcomes for learners

Despite lacking robust approaches to evaluating their activities, providers were able to articulate the difference that they considered their activities made to participating learners.

The majority of providers had found that progression rates to employment, apprenticeships or other learning opportunities were very high for learners who participated in employer engagement activities. While cause and effect was difficult to establish, providers' feedback from learners suggested that they felt more motivated after meeting employers, which had enabled them to gain an insight into the real world of work and a clearer understanding of the next steps that they needed to take.

"Many students return from activities motivated, confident and with improved attitude with evidence in improved attendance rates for some, successful sitting of examinations, the successful progression to a full level 2 course or apprenticeship."
(General FE College)

Providers also reported an improvement in learners' knowledge and understanding of the career opportunities available to them as a key outcome of their employer engagement activities. This included a wider awareness of the range of roles available in different sectors and a greater understanding of the skills learners would need in order to progress into these industries. This was particularly the case for providers which focussed their activities on specific sectors, for

example construction, sports and STEM industries, but was a commonly reported outcome across providers. Some providers also highlighted learners' realisation that a career path was not for them as a positive outcome, as it could potentially save young people investing time and resources into courses which would lead to a role they would not enjoy or succeed in.

A common outcome resulting from employer engagement activities was improved employability skills amongst learners, for example, team work, problem solving, communication, and the ability to multitask and prioritise workloads. Providers viewed this as crucial in enabling learners to progress to Level 2 and secure sustainable employment outcomes, as learners in this cohort were often identified as missing these skills and competencies.

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> *Employers can also 'grow their own' with the college and we have a strong track record of learners progressing into apprenticeships with our corporate partners… [One employer] has a skills gap and struggles to recruit young people so this is a good way of ensuring they get the right employees for their business.*
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I think it is all reputational on the college, and that's really hard to quantify… but I'm sure it has an effect on the decision making of some of the young people when they know the level of the work that we do and they see the success of events.

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All of these outcomes were underpinned by an increase in the confidence and resilience of learners. Providers from across the sector emphasised that learners in this cohort often lacked the confidence to engage with employers, explore their options and make decisions about their futures. The careful sequencing of employer activities for this cohort supported learners to become more self-aware and identify their skills, gain confidence in their ability to achieve their goals and raise their aspirations. In turn, this resulted in improved motivation and engagement in their wider programme and an increased likelihood that they would secure a positive progression outcome.

3.3.3 Outcomes for employers
Providers identified a range of outcomes experienced by employers who participated in their employer engagement activities with learners studying below Level 2. Many of these are common for employers who engage in activities with learners at all levels. For example, employers often mentioned the development of a wider pool of potential recruits and the opportunity for them to 'grow their own' as a benefit of activities with learners at below Level 2. Employers who engage in multiple activities with providers can have a strong influence on the content and delivery of providers' programmes, ensuring that learners are gaining the skills and attributes that they value in their workplace and providing an

opportunity for them to 'test' young people before recruiting them as an apprentice or even an employee.

Some employers viewed this as a way of addressing issues they were experiencing, such as an ageing workforce, and helping them to bring new skills and talents into their organisations. Consequently, some providers had seen a growth in the number of local employers taking on their learners as apprentices.

Other outcomes experienced by employers included the fulfilment of their Corporate Social Responsibility objectives and promotion of their own tools and services to staff and learners at providers. A few providers also reported that employers viewed their engagement activities as Continuing Professional Development (CPD) opportunities for their staff, as it gave them the opportunity to develop skills and experiences outside of their normal role. This final outcome was viewed as particularly important for employers engaging with learners

below Level 2, as their staff often had to develop knowledge and skills related to working with learners who have additional needs.

3.3.4 Outcomes for providers

Providers also identified benefits for their own organisations resulting from their employer engagement activities.

Many providers had developed good working relationships with key local employers through their engagement activities. This had often led to employers offering to be involved, and even providing funding or sponsorship for, other activities and initiatives delivered by providers. Some providers gave examples of employers sponsoring stalls at careers events, and one provider had been invited to speak about their partnership work with local employers at a business event, further improving their reputation in the local area and community.

Employer engagement was also viewed as an effective promotional tool for potential learners and their

parents/carers, acting as a reason for learners to choose one provider over another. Research[7] suggests that family and friends are the most common sources of information, advice and guidance for young people, so promoting these activities to parents/carers was viewed as highly important by providers. As a result, some had started including details of their employer activities in their recruitment materials.

Finally, providers found that contact with employers provided valuable CPD opportunities for their staff. Employer activities often reassured curriculum staff that their programmes and teaching were still in line with industry standards and practice, and employers occasionally offered training opportunities for teaching staff. For example, one provider had received donations of equipment from local firms which enabled them to not only train learners but also their staff who had not had the opportunity to use this machinery before.

3.3.5 Summary points
- There appears to be a lack of robust approaches to capturing the outcomes and impact of employer engagement activities amongst providers across the FE sector.
- Outcomes for learners from employer engagement activities include improved progression rates to employment, apprenticeships or other learning opportunities; improved knowledge and understanding of the career

opportunities available to them; improved employability skills; and increased confidence and resilience in relation to education, training and employment.
- Outcomes for employers arising from employer engagement activities included the development of a wider pool of potential recruits and the opportunity for them to 'grow their own'; the fulfilment of their Corporate Social Responsibility objectives;

promotion of their own tools and services to staff and learners; and opportunities for staff CPD.
- Outcomes for providers included improved working relationships with key local employers, resulting in further support and funding for other initiatives; improved reputation amongst potential learners and their parents; and valuable CPD opportunities for their staff.

7   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.

4. Conclusions and recommendations

The following conclusions are drawn from the research:

- Employer engagement activities are most effective for learners studying below Level 2 when they provide participants with a real insight into the world of work. Activities should be practical and have a clear 'line of sight' to work, introducing learners to different roles within sectors and how to progress into these. Contact with employers is also important in supporting learners to raise aspirations and develop clearer career goals.

- Employer engagement activities should aim to develop the knowledge, skills and behaviours that learners need in order to feel more 'work ready' and able to engage with employers in a range of contexts. Decisions about which activities to run with which learners should therefore be based on their individual needs and the competencies they need to develop in order to engage effectively with employers.

- The combination and sequencing of activities is key in overcoming learners' barriers to engagement. While work experience can be highly effective in supporting learners to engage in education, employment and training, many learners studying below Level 2 are not ready for this level of activity. Therefore, effective employer engagement provision for below Level 2 learners needs to involve a range of activities which can be tailored to learners' needs and gradually build the knowledge, transferable/employability skills and behaviours they need to engage with employers in different contexts.

- Shorter, more intense activities tend to suit employers, learners and providers better than those which last for a long duration. For example, presentations that only last for 10 minutes, interviews which last for 15 minutes and work experience delivered in a one-week block. These are easier to manage for employers and providers and prevent learners from becoming disinterested. However, this may vary depending on individuals within the learner cohort, as some groups, for example some SEND learners, may require less intense interventions over a longer period of time.

- The timing of employer engagement activities is also important, in order for them to link to learners' wider programmes, support the achievement of learning outcomes and link to external deadlines for progression opportunities.

- Learners studying below Level 2 are likely to require more support to engage in activities than those at higher levels. This may involve additional one-to-one support to tailor activities or programmes and overcome any emotional challenges to engagement, or practical support such as travel expenses.

- Decisions about which activities to run and with whom are most often based on providers' knowledge of the needs of learners and employers. Involving employers and learners in the design of activities enables providers to tailor employer engagement according to their needs and link these to the achievement of learning outcomes. This also enables providers to ensure that employers are aware of learners' support needs and the level at which they are working prior to their involvement, to ensure that activities are appropriate for learners' levels.

- This research suggests that there is a lack of robust approaches to capturing the outcomes and impact of employer engagement activities amongst providers across the FE sector. Nevertheless, there appear to be some clear benefits to learners, including improved motivation and engagement in learning; increased confidence in their abilities; greater awareness of the career opportunities available to them; and improved employability skills. Employers also benefit from improving their talent pipeline and widening the pool of young people they can recruit from, thereby potentially addressing issues around ageing workforces and skills gaps. Outcomes for providers include improved relationships with employers, resulting in wider support and sponsorship for their work, and CPD opportunities for teaching staff.

4.1 Recommendations

The following recommendations for policy and practice are drawn from the conclusions of this research:

- The research presented here suggests that when developing the transition year model, the DfE should consider including seven key elements in their guidance to providers:

  - An initial assessment of learners' skills, behaviours and confidence in relation to employment, education and training. This can be conducted in a range of ways but should provide the baseline from which learners' progress can be measured.

- An initial period of employability skills development, which is focused on confidence building and preparation for the workplace. This should take account of learners' initial assessments and involve enrichment activities and enhancement courses to provide a holistic approach which addresses the wide range of challenges faced by learners studying at this level;

- A series of short and focused 'in-house' encounters with employers to build upon the work preparation activity. These should be complemented by preparation and reflection sessions to enable learners to make the most of the experience and identify what they have gained as a result;

- If appropriate, 'in-house' work experience, for example in the provider's café, library or gardens. This provides an opportunity for learners to gain an understanding of the workplace in a safe environment;

- Work experience with an external employer who is fully briefed on learners' employability and support needs;

- Wraparound and holistic support for learners at all stages of the programme which is tailored to their individual needs. This may not be directly related to the technical aspect of the programme but involve wider emotional and practical support to remove barriers to engagement; and

- Final evaluation activities to capture the impact of the programme on learners' skills, behaviours and confidence in relation to employment, education and training (compared against their baseline assessments) and any ways in which the programme design or delivery could be improved.

- Given the low levels of exposure that many young people at this level have had to different careers and job roles, the transition year should aim to prepare learners for Technical Education and employment in the broadest sense, equipping them with general employability skills and exposing them to a range of occupational sectors, in order to inform their decision about which technical pathway to pursue. However, there should also be opportunities to provide sector-specific activities where young people have selected a particular technical route for their personal and professional development.

- Providers consistently identified a personalised and tailored approach as a critical success factor in their current employer engagement activities. Therefore, while the transition year could follow a general structure, it will be important that this is not viewed as a 'one size fits all' model and that the programme, activities and support offered are tailored to the needs of both learners and employers. The provider resource which accompanies this report presents suggestions as to how employer engagement activities can be tailored to participants interests, needs and aspirations – the DfE and the Education and Training Foundation could consider commissioning similar guidance for each element of the transition year.

- The findings of this research suggest that effective employer engagement activities address the eight Gatsby benchmarks of Good Career Guidance, which promote a tailored approach to careers education that embeds employer encounters and learning from labour market information. These principles should inform the development of the transition year model. This could provide a link with the 20 new Careers Hubs that the Careers and Enterprise Company is set to establish in order to support schools and colleges to deliver against the Gatsby Benchmarks.

- In recognition of the wide range of activities and programmes that employers are being asked to support, including traineeships, apprenticeships, T-levels and the transition year, providers should ensure they adopt co-ordinated approaches to employer engagement across programmes, in order to minimise employer fatigue. DfE may consider commissioning work to identify and establish effective and co-ordinated approaches to engaging employers in this range of activity and programmes.

- Providers should research and engage with local networks and initiatives to recruit employers for their engagement activities. These might include the STEM Ambassador Network, the Enterprise Adviser Network – which is due to be rolled out to all schools and colleges in England as part of the implementation of the latest Careers Strategy – and the Teach Too programme. Smaller organisations could also explore opportunities to link in to large-scale events and activities run by local providers.

- Engaging the number of employers required for the delivery of a transition year is likely to be a challenge for providers, particularly in rural areas or in sectors which are typically comprised of SMEs. Providers in these areas will likely need additional support and guidance on effective ways of engaging employers and key messages which can be used to promote the benefits to businesses of participating in these activities. These providers could be identified through the Careers and Enterprise Company's cold spots analysis of careers education.

- Employer buy-in will be crucial to their successful engagement in the transition year and T-levels, so communications and engagement activities to raise employers' awareness of technical reforms and the potential benefits of engaging will need to be undertaken at both a national and strategic level by DfE and the Education and Training Foundation, and at a local level by providers.

  Intermediary organisations such as local authorities, Local Enterprise Partnerships and Chambers of Commerce could be useful channels of communication to smaller, local employers.

- Providers of all types working across the FE sector should consider identifying staff who can be dedicated to employer engagement, or have employer engagement as a core part of their role, to provide a coordinated and strategic approach to involving employers in their provision. This will provide a main point of contact for employers and support the development and maintenance of effective and productive relationships. These staff will also be able to identify the most appropriate activities for employers to engage in and ensure that they are not bombarded with requests, reducing the likelihood that they will disengage.

- To support the delivery of effective work experience during the transition year, the DfE should publish clear guidance for FE providers and employers on what factors contribute to successful work experience for learners studying below Level 2. This could build on the resource developed through this project but specifically focus on providing effective work experience. The guidance should include information on the preparation learners and employers require prior to the work experience; the support that both parties might need while work experience takes place; and opportunities for reflection and consolidation of learning.

- DfE should commission and publish guidance for providers on effective approaches for recording employer engagement activities undertaken by learners, measuring impact and tracking destinations, drawing on the case studies and findings of this research.