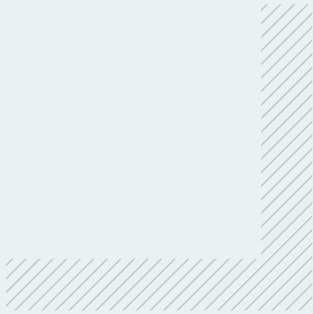


Work Experience Readiness in Alternative Provision

A guide for Careers Leaders and delivery teams



Setting the Context

Work experience can be a powerful catalyst for change in alternative provision (AP). For many learners, it provides opportunities to build confidence, develop employability skills, reconnect with learning and gain valuable insight into future pathways. However, effective work experience in AP requires careful planning and a different approach to traditional models.

Learners in AP often bring a wide range of strengths, experiences and support needs. As a result, readiness for work experience cannot be viewed as a fixed threshold that learners must meet before participating. Instead, readiness should be understood as a developmental process, supported through appropriate preparation, flexible design and meaningful employer engagement.

This guide has been developed to support Careers Leaders, senior leaders and delivery teams in creating work experience opportunities that are inclusive, ambitious and impactful. It brings together key principles from the Gatsby Benchmarks, The Careers & Enterprise Company's equalex framework, and evidence-informed practice within alternative provision settings.

The guide encourages practitioners to move away from asking, "Is this learner ready for work experience?" and instead consider, "What support, adjustments and opportunities does this learner need to access a meaningful workplace experience?"

Throughout the guide, readiness is positioned as a vehicle for inclusion rather than a gatekeeping mechanism. It explores how Careers Leaders can identify barriers, plan proportionate support, maintain high expectations and design progressive workplace experiences that contribute to a learner's wider Careers Learning Journey.

The guidance is intended to support strategic planning, operational delivery and collaborative working between careers, pastoral, SEND, curriculum and employer partners. By adopting a developmental approach to readiness, AP settings can ensure that all learners have access to meaningful experiences that support personal growth, progression and positive long-term outcomes.

Resources referenced throughout this guide are listed in full within the Key Resources section at the end. This is intended to support uninterrupted reading and encourage leaders to engage with the guide as a whole before exploring additional resources and support.



Contents

Contents

1 Why readiness matters in AP	4
2 Defining readiness: A Developmental Approach	4
3 equalex	5
4 Core Components of Readiness	7
5 Assessing Readiness: A Proportionate Approach	7
6 Designing Work Experience for AP Learners	8
7 Flexible Models in Practice	9
8 Meaningful	10
9 Supporting Learners	11
10 Progression	11
11 Impact	11
12 Leadership	12
13 Supporting Work Experience (WEX) Readiness	13
14 Readiness for Impact	14
15 Resources and Further Reading	15



Why readiness matters in AP

Work experience can be a powerful tool for re engagement, confidence building and future progression in alternative provision (AP). It should be understood not only as a progression activity, but as a key mechanism for tackling disadvantage, raising aspirations and supporting positive long-term outcomes.

However, without appropriate preparation, experiences can feel overwhelming and risk reinforcing disengagement.

For Careers Leaders and their teams, the priority is not to determine whether learners are “ready”, but to design experiences that are accessible and meaningful from each learner’s starting point.

In AP, readiness should be understood as a planned and supported pathway, not a threshold. When approached effectively, it becomes a mechanism for inclusion, enabling all learners to benefit from workplace experiences as part of a wider Careers Learning Journey, where skills, knowledge and confidence develop over time.

In this context, readiness is not a gateway to access, but a vehicle for inclusion.

Defining readiness: A Developmental Approach

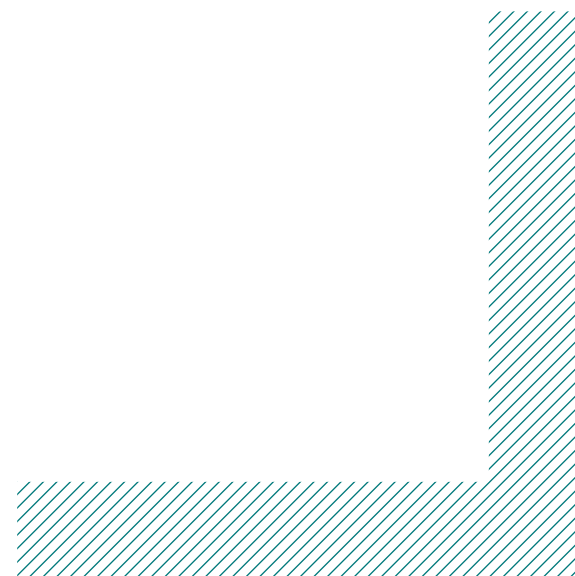
Work experience readiness in AP is developmental, contextual and individual.

Rather than asking “Is this learner ready?”, a more effective question is: “What does this learner need to access a meaningful work experience?”

Readiness may include:

- Attending for a short, supported period.
- Managing new environments.
- Building trust with unfamiliar adults.
- Sustaining engagement over time.

Careers Leaders should ensure that readiness is not used as a gatekeeping mechanism and that learners are not excluded from opportunities due to perceived gaps in readiness. Instead, approaches should recognise that readiness develops over time, with small steps and early experiences valued as meaningful progress that contribute to long term development.



The equalex framework, developed by The Careers & Enterprise Company, supports Careers Leaders to design equitable workplace experiences by identifying and removing barriers to access, with a focus on inclusion, flexibility and progression. It also provides a set of progressive learning outcomes, supported by learner-level objectives, which help Careers Leaders plan not only for access, but for impact in work experience.

While the Gatsby Benchmarks define what makes an encounter or experience meaningful, the equalex framework supports Careers Leaders to plan for the learning and impact that should result from those experiences.

Within alternative provision, equalex can be used to:

- Identify barriers.
- Plan proportionate adjustments.
- Maintain ambition.
- Identify gaps in curriculum and learner development that workplace experiences can address.
- Maximise existing employer relationships, building on connections AP settings already have to create relevant and supported opportunities.

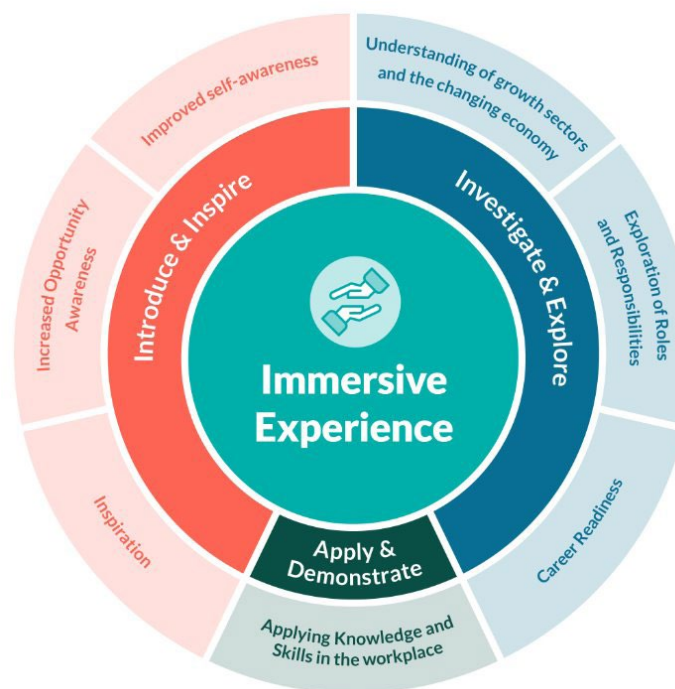
Together, these elements ensure that work experience is both accessible and meaningful, while supporting progression over time. This aligns directly with Gatsby Benchmark 6, ensuring that all experiences are purposeful, structured and lead to meaningful learning outcomes.

Each of these elements is developed further in the sections that follow.

Identify Barriers

Work collaboratively with pastoral, SEND and teaching staff to understand factors that may affect a learner's ability to engage successfully. These may include:

- Anxiety or emotional regulation needs.
- Communication differences.
- Previous negative experiences.
- Practical barriers, such as transport, routines or environment.



Plan Proportionate Adjustments

Use this understanding to adapt placements in ways that enable participation. For example:

- Phased or reduced hours.
- Clear routines and expectations.
- Quieter or more structured environments.
- Pre placement visits or opportunities for familiarisation.

Maintain Ambition

Adjustments should enable access while maintaining high expectations for progression. Flexibility should support engagement without lowering aspirations or limiting future opportunities.

Identify Curriculum and Development Gaps

Use insights from readiness assessment and tools such as the Future Skills Questionnaire to identify gaps in learners' skills, knowledge and confidence. Consider how work experience can be designed to address these gaps, providing opportunities for learners to develop and demonstrate key employability skills in context.

Maximise Employer Relationships

Build on existing employer relationships to create opportunities that are relevant, flexible and appropriate for AP learners. Developing strong, trusted partnerships with employers is key to creating sustainable opportunities and ensuring learners can access meaningful experiences that meet their individual needs.

Work collaboratively with employers to co-design experiences, adapting roles, tasks and support arrangements where appropriate. This may include providing a range of engagement opportunities that build progressively towards more sustained workplace experiences over time. Through ongoing dialogue, employers can develop a better understanding of learners' strengths, needs and aspirations, enabling them to create inclusive and supportive environments in which young people can thrive.

Embed Review

Review underpins all aspects of readiness planning and should be embedded throughout. Readiness planning should be ongoing. Use regular reflection to review what is working, adapt support where needed, and build learner confidence and independence over time.

Core Components of Readiness

Effective readiness planning typically includes four interconnected areas. These components should be developed progressively and revisited throughout a learner's journey.

Core Component	Learner Focus	In Practice
Emotional and relational readiness	Managing anxiety, engaging with new people and environments, feeling safe	Gradual exposure, trusted adult support, consistent routines.
Practical and routine readiness	Travel, timekeeping, structured routines	Rehearsal, visual supports, explicit preparation.
Communication and interaction	Asking for help, following instructions, interaction	Modelling, role play, prompts or scaffolds.
Understanding the workplace	Expectations, roles, behaviours	Employer encounters, visits, structured reflection.

Assessing Readiness: A Proportionate Approach

Assessment of readiness should be:

- Ongoing and formative.
- Based on professional judgement and learner voice.
- Used to inform support, not restrict access.

This assessment can draw on a range of evidence, including pastoral and SEND insights, observations in different contexts, tools such as the Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ), and EHCP outcomes where appropriate. The FSQ can be used not only to understand learner readiness, but to identify gaps in skills, knowledge and confidence that work experience can be designed to address, as well as to monitor progress over time.

Careers Leaders should also make use of the Careers Impact System, including tools such as Compass+ and OnTrack+, to record, monitor and review learner participation and progression. These systems support a more strategic, evidence informed approach to planning and evaluating work experience in AP.

This ensures that assessment supports inclusion rather than acting as a barrier to participation.

Designing Work Experience for AP Learners

Work experience in alternative provision should be designed around the learner, rather than expecting the learner to fit a fixed model. This requires Careers Leaders, curriculum teams, pastoral colleagues and wider staff to adopt flexible, responsive approaches that reflect individual needs, starting points and levels of readiness.

Work experience should not sit in isolation from the wider curriculum. Instead, it should be planned alongside curriculum and support teams to help learners make connections between their education, future aspirations and the world of work. For many learners, meaningful workplace experiences can help re-engage them with learning by demonstrating the relevance, purpose and value of the topics they study.

In practice, this often includes a combination of:

- Responsive provision (experiences available to all learners).
- Targeted provision (additional support for specific groups).
- Personalised provision (bespoke approaches based on individual need).

In doing so, leaders should ensure that all encounters with employers and experiences of workplaces are meaningful, in line with Gatsby Benchmarks 5 and 6.

The Careers & Enterprise Company's How To Guides provide practical support for Careers Leaders and education settings in developing progressive and responsive careers provision. The suite includes guidance on embedding careers in the curriculum and creating meaningful, progressive approaches to employer encounters and work experiences, making it a valuable resource when designing work experience programmes for AP learners.



Flexible Models in Practice

This often means moving away from traditional block placements and instead offering a range of flexible models, such as shorter placements, part day or part week experiences, project-based work or supported opportunities within the provision itself. Blended approaches, combining in person and virtual elements, can also help broaden access.

Work experience design should also connect to Gatsby Benchmark 4 (linking curriculum learning to careers). In AP, this may involve making explicit links between workplace experiences and what learners are studying, helping them to see relevance and purpose in their learning. This can be particularly powerful for re engagement.

A staged approach to work experience is particularly effective in AP. Rather than viewing placement as a one off event, Careers Leaders should plan a sequence of experiences that gradually build readiness, offering multiple opportunities to engage with employers and workplaces over time. This approach supports the delivery of meaningful encounters and experiences, ensuring that learning is cumulative and contributes to longer-term development within a Careers Learning Journey.

The equalex framework, developed by The Careers & Enterprise Company, provides a useful model for this approach. It encourages practitioners to design workplace experiences that progress through three phases:

Introduce & Inspire: helping learners explore industries and identify their interests and strengths.

Investigate & Explore: enabling them to develop workplace skills and gain insight into different roles.

Apply & Demonstrate: where learners take part in more immersive experiences and apply their learning in authentic workplace settings.

The equalex videos and employer resources offer practical examples of how organisations are adapting and extending traditional work experience models to create more flexible, inclusive and impactful opportunities for young people. Further information, including equalex videos and supporting employer resources, can be found in the Resources section of this guide.

Employer preparation is equally important. Employers need a clear understanding of the AP context and should feel confident in what is expected of them. Providing clear, concise guidance supports employers to deliver experiences that are structured, purposeful and relevant.

Meaningful

What do we mean by "meaningful"? (Gatsby Benchmark 6)

A meaningful experience gives the young person the opportunity to explore what it is like to work in that environment, what skills are valued in the workplace, their recruitment processes and what it takes to be successful.

A meaningful experience will:

- have a clear purpose, which is shared with the employer and the young person.
- be underpinned by learning outcomes that are appropriate to the needs of the young person.
- involve extensive two-way interactions between the young person and employees.
- include opportunities for young people to meet a range of different people from the workplace.
- include opportunities for young people to perform a task set by the employer or to produce a piece of work relevant to that workplace.
- include the employer providing feedback to the young person about their work.
- be followed by opportunities for the young person to reflect on the insights, knowledge or skills gained through their experience.

Careers Leaders should refer to the [Gatsby Benchmarks website](#) for the full definition and detailed expectations associated with Benchmark 6.



Supporting Learners

Ongoing support during placement is essential to sustain engagement and ensure a positive experience. Learners benefit from regular check-ins, as well as clear communication between education settings and employers. Careers Leaders should ensure that systems are in place to respond flexibly, including adapting tasks, adjusting hours or increasing support where needed.

Equally important is preparing employers before the experience begins. Employers should be provided with relevant information about the learner's needs, strengths, interests and any reasonable adjustments that may be required. This enables employers to put appropriate support in place, create an inclusive environment and ensure expectations are understood by all parties from the outset.

By working collaboratively, education providers and employers can create supportive experiences that build confidence, maintain engagement and enable learners to succeed.

Progression

Post-placement reflection plays a key role in consolidating learning and supporting progression. This should focus on the learner's experience, including strengths, challenges and insights gained. Reflection should recognise small successes, build confidence and support learners to identify and articulate the employability skills, behaviours and personal qualities they have developed. This process can help learners understand their progress, celebrate achievements and plan meaningful next steps as part of their longer-term journey.

Impact

Traditional measures such as experience duration do not fully capture impact in AP. Careers Leaders should take a broader view, recognising indicators such as increased confidence, improved engagement, willingness to try new experiences and development of employability skills.

This aligns with the equalex approach, where impact is understood through learners demonstrating knowledge, skills and behaviours over time, rather than through one off experiences.



Leadership

Leadership is critical in ensuring that work experience in AP is inclusive, strategic and sustainable.

Careers Leaders play a central role in embedding effective approaches to work experience. This includes developing a shared understanding of readiness, applying equalex informed practice, and coordinating contributions across teams.

Senior leadership (SLT) buy-in is essential. Embedding work experience in AP requires alignment with whole setting priorities, including behaviour, attendance, personal development and post-16 progression. In many AP settings, careers provision is positioned as a key strategy for reducing the impact of disadvantage and supporting positive transitions.

When SLT are actively engaged, work experience is more likely to be prioritised, resourced effectively and integrated into the wider learner journey.

The use of the Careers Impact System supports this leadership approach, enabling Careers Leaders and senior teams to review provision, identify gaps and plan strategically for improvement.

When leadership is aligned and intentional, work experience becomes a meaningful and embedded part of the learner journey.

Senior leaders should:

- Ensure sufficient resource and staffing capacity.
- Support alignment with strategic priorities and improvement plans.
- Enable staff collaboration across pastoral, SEND and curriculum teams.
- Use internal leadership review processes to evaluate quality and impact over time.

Supporting Work Experience (WEX) Readiness

The table below outlines how different stakeholders contribute to a shared approach to readiness.

Careers Leaders	Senior Leaders (SLT)	Delivery staff (pastoral, SEND, teaching teams)	Employers
Take a developmental approach, plan for progression, not perfection. Use equalex to identify barriers, curriculum gaps and meaningful learning outcomes. Draw on tools like FSQ and Compass+ to inform planning and demonstrate impact. Build on existing employer relationships to create realistic and supportive opportunities.	Champion work experience as part of whole-setting priorities. Ensure work experience is aligned with curriculum intent, personal development and post-16 outcomes. Provide time and resource for staff to plan and deliver effectively. Use internal review processes and Careers Impact System data to monitor quality and impact.	Share insight into learners' needs, strengths and triggers. Support preparation through routines, rehearsal and relationship building. Reinforce learning before, during and after experiences. Help learners make links between experiences and their wider learning (Gatsby Benchmark 4).	Be flexible and open to adapting tasks and expectations. Focus on relationship building and clear communication. Provide structured, purposeful tasks and feedback. Work with the education team to ensure experiences are meaningful and achievable.

Readiness for Impact

In AP, readiness should be understood as a tool for inclusion and progression, rather than a barrier to participation. This means adopting a developmental approach that recognises starting points, applying the equalex framework to plan for both access and impact, and designing work experience that is flexible, meaningful and aligned to Gatsby expectations within a wider Careers Learning Journey.

When approached in this way, readiness enables access to experiences that support learners to develop and demonstrate meaningful learning over time, aligned with Gatsby Benchmarks 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7.

This shift invites leaders and practitioners to rethink readiness not as a threshold, but as an ongoing process of development and inclusion.

To support this work, Careers Leaders and their teams can draw on a range of free, evidence informed resources and training, including materials in the Resource Directory and professional development opportunities via the CEC Academy. These can support the planning, delivery and evaluation of work experience in AP.



Resources and Further Reading

The following resources can support Careers Leaders, senior leaders and delivery to plan, deliver and evaluate meaningful work experience in alternative provision.

[Future Skills Questionnaire \(FSQ\)](#): A tool that measures learners' career readiness and supports evaluation of programme impact.

[How To Guides](#): A comprehensive suite of practical guidance designed to help Careers Leaders establish a sustainable and strategic approach to careers leadership

[equalex](#): An equity-focused framework that supports Careers Leaders and education settings to identify barriers to participation, plan meaningful learning outcomes and create more inclusive careers education and workplace experiences.

[equalex videos](#): These videos offer inspiration on how to get started, whatever phase you are in.

[OnTrack+ Practice Guide](#): Provides practical tools, reflective questions and examples of effective practice to support leaders in identifying, monitoring and supporting learners who may be at risk of destination disadvantage.

[The Careers Impact System](#): A structured, evidence-led improvement cycle that makes careers a strategic driver of outcomes across institutions. It drives internal insight, external challenge and system-wide impact.

[Driving Equity and Tackling Disadvantage Through Your Careers Provision: Educator Guide](#): This guide supports schools, special schools, colleges and alternative provision settings to strengthen equity through careers provision.

[Careers Impact National System Review 3](#) – Impactful and Equitable Work Experience: This review focused on how education settings deliver impactful work experience for learners whose needs might otherwise go unmet, examining what works, for whom and how.

[Insight briefing 1: Modern work experience pilots](#): This report highlights insights from the Year 1 pilots of the equallex framework.

[Gatsby Benchmark 6](#): A guide to Gatsby Benchmark 6

[The Careers & Enterprise Academy](#): Free professional development designed to support Careers Leaders and wider staff teams.



THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Our Impact

Our evidence

