THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

An Education Leader's guide to work experience reform

A suite of resources to support meaningful achievement of Gatsby Benchmark 6 and work experience reform

If you want to...	Use...
Start strategic reflection and/or discussion about work experience reform	Work experience reform: A strategic reflection tool for Education Leaders
Understand the evidence and effective work experience practice	An Education Leader's guide to work experience reform
Plan implementation and monitor progress of work experience reform in your setting	Work experience reform: Education leadership implementation map
See examples from practice of high-quality progressive work experience	Work experience reform in practice

When to use this resource

Use this resource when you want to:

- Understand evolving expectations within Gatsby Benchmark 6 and statutory guidance, and what this means for your setting.
- Understand why work experience reform matters.
- Explore the evidence underpinning effective workplace experiences.
- Understand the principles of meaningful, multiple and equitable workplace experiences.
- Consider how workplace experiences can contribute to learner engagement, inclusion, progression and wider improvement priorities.
- Build confidence and shared understanding before planning implementation.

Many Education Leaders choose to begin with the Work experience reform: A strategic reflection tool for Education Leaders before using this guide to explore the evidence, principles and characteristics of effective practice in greater depth.

For insight into how Education Leaders have approached this journey, access the Work experience reform in practice resource.

Suggested users

We suggest some or all of the following use this resource: Headteachers, Principals, CEOs, Education Leaders, Trust Leaders, Governors and Careers Leaders.

What this resource will help you do

Move beyond understanding the requirements of work experience reform to understanding how high-quality workplace experiences can support learner outcomes and wider organisational priorities.

Purpose

This guide has been designed to help Education Leaders understand work experience reform, the evidence that sits behind it and the characteristics of effective practice.

The guide draws primarily on findings from National System Review[1] , while also reflecting evolving national policy, emerging insights from modern work experience reform activity, including equalex, and wider research on workplace experiences and learner progression.

Together, these sources provide Education Leaders with practical reflections on how meaningful workplace experiences can support learner development, career readiness, successful transitions and wider improvement priorities.

Work experience reform reflects a growing national ambition to ensure all learners benefit from meaningful workplace experiences that support engagement, confidence, aspiration, career readiness, successful transitions and progression into positive destinations. Rather than viewing work experience as a single placement, the reform encourages education settings to provide a progressive programme of careers including workplace experiences across a learner's journey, helping young people develop skills, understanding and connections to the workplace over time.

The updated Gatsby Benchmarks and the meaningful definition within Gatsby Benchmark 6 provide an important quality framework for designing and delivering these experiences, while statutory guidance gives greater clarity about the scale, progression and purpose of careers including workplace experiences that learners should access throughout their education.

For many settings, this is not about starting again. It is about recognising existing strengths, understanding evolving expectations, and exploring how workplace experiences can make a stronger contribution to learner outcomes and wider organisational priorities.

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1 National System Review 3: The most impactful models of work experience | CEC Resource Directory

1. What is changing?

The government's ambition

The following wording is taken directly from statutory guidance.

From September 2026, schools should be reforming their work experience programmes according to this guidance so that all pupils can benefit from the opportunities, development and learning that work experience provides.

The delivery of 2 weeks' worth of work experience should be based on the following set of principles, building on the Gatsby Benchmark 6 definition of meaningful.

Two weeks' worth of work experience should be broken down into:

- One weeks' worth of work experience activities in years 7 to 9.
- One weeks' worth of work experience placement(s) in years 10 to 11.

Reframing the Key Stage 3 requirement

For many Education Leaders, the requirement to provide one week's worth of workplace experiences across Years 7 to 9 may feel significant.

National System Review 3 found that settings are starting from different places. Some already provide workplace experiences through careers education, employer engagement, enrichment and curriculum activity. Others may identify gaps in both the quantity and quality of opportunities available to learners, particularly at Key stage 3.

Key message

You are potentially already doing more than you think within your local community.

The opportunity is to understand what already exists, identify where gaps remain, and strengthen how workplace experiences are planned, connected, sequenced and evaluated as part of a progressive learner journey.

A shift in thinking

For many years, work experience has often been associated with a single placement in Key stage 4.

Work experience reform introduces a broader perspective.

Rather than focusing solely on a placement, Education Leaders are encouraged to consider how workplace experiences can help learners build confidence, develop skills, understand opportunities, broaden aspirations and prepare for future transitions from Year 7 onwards.

Previous thinking	Emerging thinking
Work experience is a placement	Work experience is part of a learner journey
A careers activity	A contributor to wider learner outcomes
Organised by one person	A shared responsibility
Measured through participation	Measured through impact
Opportunity for some	Entitlement for all
Activity focused	Outcome focused

Emerging evidence from modern work experience reform

Alongside the findings from National System Review 3[1], equalex pilots have reinforced several important themes.

Early findings suggest that workplace experiences are most effective when they are:

- Designed around clear learning outcomes.
- Embedded within a progressive learner journey.
- Connected to curriculum learning and wider development goals.
- Supported through leadership commitment and whole-setting ownership.
- Implemented with equity and inclusion at their core.

These themes strongly align with the characteristics of effective practice identified through National System Review 3 and provide additional confidence that work experience reform is best viewed as a whole-setting improvement opportunity rather than a standalone careers activity.

> "Our evidence shows that embedding work experience within the curriculum has a transformational impact for many learners, improving engagement, confidence, behaviour, employability skills and readiness for next steps, while supporting both academic and personal development in a way that traditional classroom learning alone often cannot."
>
> **Deputy Headteacher and Careers Leader, National System Review 3 participating specialist setting**

1 National System Review 3

2. Why does it matter?

See the opportunity

The leadership question

Every Education Leader faces the same fundamental challenge:

How do we prepare learners to succeed in education and progress successfully into into further learning, training, employment and adulthood?

Work experience reform sits within this wider challenge.

For many education settings, workplace experiences are increasingly considered as one of several tools that can support learner engagement, confidence, aspiration, progression and successful transitions.

When thoughtfully designed and embedded within a wider programme, workplace experiences can help learners:

- Understand the relevance and purpose of curriculum learning.
- Strengthen engagement, attendance and participation.
- Develop confidence, motivation and self-belief.
- Broaden aspirations and awareness of future opportunities.
- Apply knowledge and skills in authentic contexts.
- Support achievement and successful transitions.
- Make informed decisions about future pathways and progression.

Evidence from National System Review 3, international insight and equalex pilots increasingly suggests that meaningful workplace experiences can contribute to these outcomes when they are thoughtfully designed, connected to learning outcomes and integrated into a wider learner journey.

For this reason, reform is not simply a compliance exercise.

It represents an opportunity to strengthen how workplace experiences contribute to the outcomes that matter most for learners.

Seeing the opportunity

National System Review 3 found that many of the most effective settings began by asking two fundamental questions:

- **What outcomes are we trying to improve for our learners?**
- **How could meaningful workplace experiences help us achieve them?**

These questions are reinforced by emerging learning from equalex pilots, which highlights the importance of starting with intended learner outcomes before designing workplace experiences. Across participating settings, workplace experiences were most powerful when they were intentionally aligned to wider priorities and designed to support specific learner outcomes.

Attendance and engagement

Many Education Leaders report that some learners struggle to see the connection between education today and opportunities tomorrow.

Meaningful workplace experiences can help learners understand why education matters by connecting learning to real opportunities, future aspirations and authentic contexts.

When learners can see purpose, engagement often strengthens.

National System Review 3 Insight

One secondary school supporting a disengaged learner recognised that a single workplace experience would not be enough to address uncertainty about future pathways. Instead, Education Leaders designed a broader programme of career-related experiences, including employer engagement alongside opportunities to explore further and higher education pathways.

As the learner developed a clearer understanding of future opportunities:

- Lesson engagement improved
- Attendance improved
- Attainment improved
- Aspirations increased

Education Leaders attributed this change to helping the learner understand the connection between education, future opportunities and long-term success.

Confidence and self-belief

National System Review 3 identified confidence as one of the most frequently reported outcomes associated with meaningful workplace experiences. Education Leaders consistently describe confidence as helping learners engage more fully with opportunities, navigate transitions and take positive next steps in learning and work.

Workplace experiences can provide opportunities for learners to experience success, take responsibility, develop independence and recognise their own potential.

For some learners, confidence becomes the foundation upon which wider engagement and progression are built.

National System Review 3 Insight

A Year 10 learner receiving Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) support lacked confidence and had little belief in what he could achieve. Following preparation and support, he successfully completed a two-week workplace placement.

Staff reported that he became:

- More confident
- More focused
- More ambitious
- More determined to succeed

The experience helped him recognise his own capabilities and increased his belief that he could achieve more.

Aspiration and opportunity awareness

Some learners have limited exposure to opportunities beyond their immediate family, community or social networks.

Meaningful workplace experiences can help broaden horizons, challenge assumptions and enable learners to make decisions based on a fuller understanding of the opportunities available to them.

National System Review 3 Insight

One secondary school serving a community affected by longterm industrial decline, concluded that a Year 10 placement alone was insufficient to challenge narrow perceptions of future opportunities.

In response, the school introduced employer encounters from Year 7 onwards, helping learners meet employers, explore different sectors and develop awareness of pathways they had not previously considered.

The aim was simple: to help learners see futures that previously felt beyond their reach.

Progression and decision making

Successful transitions are the outcome of a process through which learners gradually develop confidence, self-awareness, skills, experiences and an understanding of the opportunities available to them.

Meaningful workplace experiences can play an important role in that process. By helping learners explore pathways, test assumptions, apply learning in real contexts and reflect on their strengths and interests, they support progression over time rather than simply preparation for a transition point.

When workplace experiences form part of a progressive learner journey, learners are better equipped to make informed decisions about further learning, training and employment because those decisions are informed by experience, not assumption.

National System Review 3 Insight

An FE college embedded work experience within learning programmes and developed strong employer partnerships to provide substantial curriculum-linked workplace experiences.

The college reported:

- 92% participation
- 96% learner satisfaction
- Strong progression into apprenticeships and employment

Education Leaders highlighted the importance of connecting workplace experiences to intended career pathways rather than treating them as isolated activities.

Inclusion and equity

National System Review 3 found that learners who may benefit most from workplace experiences are often the least likely to access them.

Work experience reform presents an opportunity to review who is accessing opportunities, where barriers exist and how provision can be designed to support meaningful outcomes for all learners.

"Risk is identified early. Poor school readiness, persistent absence, low attainment, SEND, family adversity, poor mental health and weak exposure to work are not mysteries. These are signals that are seen. They are recorded. Often, they are measured. But they are not acted on."[1]

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National System Review 3 Insight

Across participating settings, Education Leaders frequently reported that learner need extended beyond SEND and disadvantage.

Low confidence, limited aspirations, anxiety, disengagement and uncertainty about future pathways were often identified as important factors when deciding which learners might benefit most from workplace experiences.

The most effective approaches adapted provision around those needs rather than assuming the same experience would deliver the same outcomes for every learner.

Reducing the risk of becoming NEET

Workplace experiences can help learners develop direction, confidence and a clearer understanding of future pathways.

As part of a wider approach, they can support informed progression decisions, stronger transitions and greater readiness for life beyond education.

National System Review 3 Insight

Specialist settings, specialist colleges and alternative provision settings frequently reported successful progression into:

- Apprenticeships
- Supported internships
- Further Education
- Paid employment

Leaders described workplace experiences as helping learners develop confidence, independence, realistic aspirations and a clearer understanding of their next steps.

The most effective approaches adapted provision around those needs rather than assuming the same experience would deliver the same outcomes for every learner.

1 Young people and work: interim report GOV.UK

The leadership opportunity: establishing greater coherence

The most effective settings in National System Review 3 demonstrated greater coherence.

Workplace experiences were:

- Connected to learner need
- Informed by local context
- Aligned to wider priorities
- Intentionally designed around outcomes
- Embedded within a progressive learner journey

For leaders, the opportunity is to strengthen how existing workplace experiences contribute to the outcomes that matter most.

The challenge leaders face	The opportunity work experience reform presents
Attendance and engagement	Connect learning to purpose and future opportunities.
Confidence and selfbelief	Create opportunities for success, responsibility and personal growth.
Raising aspirations	Broaden horizons and increase opportunity awareness.
Progression and transitions	Support informed decision-making and career readiness over time.
Inclusion and equity	Improve access to meaningful opportunities, particularly for learners whose needs may go unmet.
NEET prevention	Strengthen readiness for future pathways and destinations.

3. What does the evidence tell us?

Evidence from National System Review 3[1], international learning explored through the Churchill Fellowship report Purposeful Progression[2], and emerging insights from equalex[3], suggests that the most effective workplace experiences are rarely isolated activities or one-off events.

Instead, they form part of a broader, progressive approach that helps learners develop confidence, purpose, skills, aspirations and informed decision-making over time.

While these evidence sources were generated for different purposes, they consistently highlight the importance of progression, integration, intentional design and equity in achieving meaningful outcomes for learners.

As implementation progresses, further insight from equalex, including equalex pilot findings[4], will provide additional evidence about how progressive workplace experiences are being designed, delivered and embedded across different contexts. Together, these sources can help Education Leaders understand not only what effective practice looks like, but also how work experience reform can contribute to learner development, career readiness, progression and wider education improvement priorities.

National System Review 3 found that:

- Learners who stand to benefit most from workplace experiences are often the **least likely** to access them.
- **Learner need cannot be understood through attainment, SEND status or demographics alone**. It includes low confidence, anxiety, disengagement, limited aspirations and uncertainty about the future, highlighting the importance of meaningful work experiences as an entitlement for all learners.
- **Work experiences benefit learners across the attainment spectrum**, including those who are academically successful.
- **Higher impact models are intentionally designed for progression**. They integrate work experiences into learning and enable learners to build knowledge, skills and confidence through a sequence of connected experiences.
- **The greatest impact comes from a progressive learner journey**. Work experiences are most effective when they form part of a planned sequence of learning and development over time, rather than isolated activities linked only to transition points.

Three principles appeared repeatedly in impactful approaches:

- **Progression:** work experiences build over time. Learners move from awareness and exploration towards participation, application and informed decisionmaking.
- **Integration:** work experiences are connected to curriculum learning, personal development and wider improvement priorities.
- **Intentional design:** work experiences are informed by learner need and linked to clear intended outcomes.

Across settings, impact appeared strongest where all three features were present.

1 National System Review 3: The most impactful models of work experience | CEC Resource Directory
2 Purposeful Progression: From Differentiated Work Experience to WorkConnected Learning and Pathways for Every Young Person The Churchill Fellowship
3 equalex | CEC Resource Directory
4 equalex | CEC Resource Directory

4. What does effective practice look like?

National System Review 3 found that the most effective education settings shared several common characteristics.

They started by understanding learner need and identifying the outcomes they wanted to improve.

They viewed workplace experiences as part of a progressive learner journey rather than a oneoff activity. Opportunities were connected to curriculum learning, personal development and wider improvement priorities, helping learners build knowledge, confidence and readiness for future transitions over time.

Education Leaders paid particular attention to equity, recognising that different learners may require different levels of support to benefit from meaningful workplace experiences. They also used a range of evidence, including learner voice, attendance, engagement and destination information, to review impact and continuously strengthen provision.

National System Review 3 suggests that impact is strongest where workplace experiences are progressive, connected and intentionally designed around learner need.

Emerging implementation insight

equalex pilot activity suggests that successful implementation also relies on wider system conditions, including:

- Sustained senior leadership team commitment.
- Collaboration between careers, curriculum, pastoral and inclusion teams.
- Employer engagement built around shared outcomes.
- Structured preparation and reflection.
- Use of evidence to review and strengthen provision over time.

Education Leaders identified and were clear about:

- The learners most likely to benefit from workplace experiences.
- The barriers learners were experiencing.
- The outcomes they were seeking to improve.
- How workplace experiences could contribute to those outcomes.

National System Review 3 highlighted the value of combining different sources of intelligence to better understand learners and inform decision-making.

Leaders drew on a range of evidence sources to identify priority learners, barriers and intended outcomes.

Examples of the types of evidence that can support this process include:

- ✓ Attendance and engagement data.
- ✓ Learner voice.
- ✓ Career readiness insights from approaches such as the Future Skills Questionnaire (FSQ).
- ✓ Indicators of disengagement or risk of becoming NEET from systems such as OnTrack+.
- ✓ Destination and progression data.
- ✓ SEND, safeguarding and pastoral intelligence.
- ✓ Parent and carer insights from approaches such as Your Child's Future Questionnaire (YCF).
- ✓ Findings from Careers Impact internal leadership reviews and peer-to-peer reviews.

No single source provides the full picture. National System Review 3 highlighted the value of combining different sources of intelligence to better understand learners and inform decisionmaking.

Education Leaders used these sources collectively to identify patterns, inform decisionmaking and shape provision.

For insight into how Education Leaders have specifically approached work experience reform, access the Work experience reform in practice **resource**

5. Designing meaningful, multiple and equitable workplace experiences

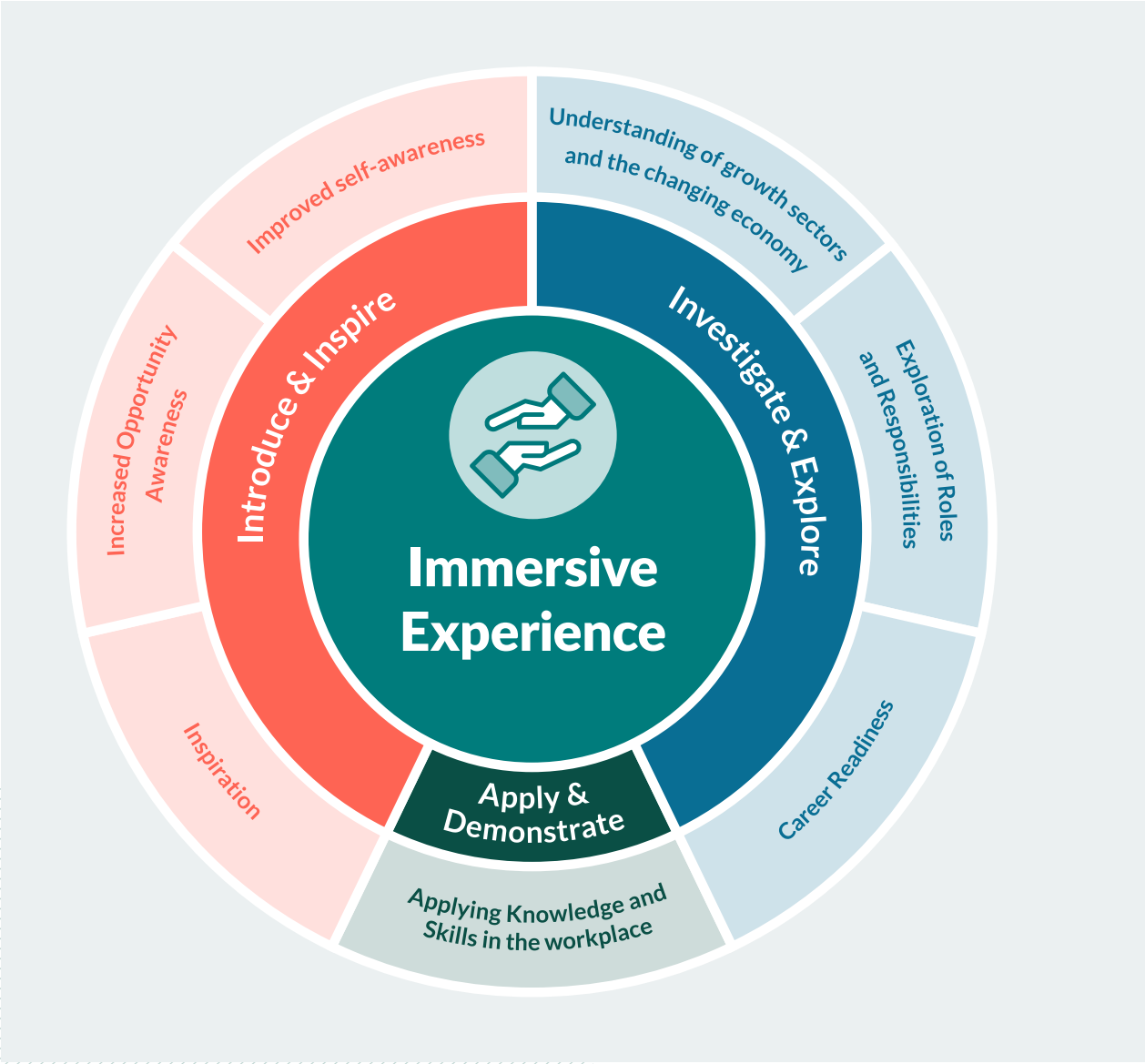
The Careers & Enterprise Company's equalex framework provides a practical model for designing meaningful workplace experiences.

Developed and tested through modern work experience pilots, equalex offers one approach to translating the ambitions of Gatsby Benchmark 6 into progressive learner journeys, clear learning outcomes and more coherent work experience provision.

equalex supports education settings to move beyond isolated activities and towards a progressive programme of workplace experiences that are:

- Linked to learning outcomes
- Embedded within wider provision
- Accessible to all learners
- Designed to support progression over time

Rather than viewing workplace experiences as standalone activities, equalex positions them within a broader learner journey. Through structured preparation, meaningful experiences and reflection, the framework helps Education Leaders to connect workplace experiences to personal development, skills development, career readiness and future progression, ensuring experiences are designed around intended learner outcomes and lasting impact.



The framework promotes three key features:

1. Meaningful

Experiences are designed around clear learning outcomes and learnerlevel objectives.

For example, equalex activities and workplace experiences can support learners to:

- Increase awareness of career opportunities and future pathways.
- Develop greater selfawareness of their strengths, interests and preferences.
- Understand the connection between curriculum learning and future employment.
- Recognise and challenge stereotypes relating to careers, progression and opportunity.
- Develop and apply essential skills in meaningful contexts.
- Build confidence, career readiness and informed decision-making for future transitions.

2. Multiple

Workplace experiences are designed as part of a progressive learner journey. Over time, learners move from exploring possibilities and developing aspirations to building readiness, applying their learning and making informed decisions about future pathways. This progression can be understood across three broad stages:

Introduce and Inspire

- Broaden horizons
- Increase opportunity awareness
- Develop selfawareness
- Begin to form aspirations

Investigate and Explore

Develop career readiness, enabling learners to understand their options, make informed decisions and successfully progress into further learning and work

- Explore sectors, pathways and roles.
- Understand the changing labour market.
- Practise and apply essential workplace skills.

Apply and Demonstrate

- Apply knowledge and skills in authentic workplace contexts.
- Receive feedback from employers.
- Reflect on experiences.
- Make informed decisions about future pathways.

This progression helps learners build knowledge, confidence and career readiness over time.

3. Equitable

equalex activities are adapted to learner need so that all learners can benefit from meaningful participation and progression.

The framework recognises that learners start from different places and may require different levels of support. Equity includes:

- Identifying learners who may be least likely to access opportunities.
- Adapting experiences to remove barriers to participation.
- Ensuring experiences are informed by learner need rather than assumptions.
- Supporting learners across the attainment range, including academically successful learners who may be uncertain about their future pathways.
- Using workplace experiences to strengthen confidence, engagement, aspiration and progression.

The goal is equitable access to meaningful outcomes for all learners.

6. Reviewing impact

Participation remains important.

However, many Education Leaders are increasingly interested in understanding what learners gain from workplace experiences.

We used to measure	We should now measure
Placements	Progression
Participation	Outcomes
Employer numbers	Learner development
Activities delivered	Impact achieved

The key question

Participation data tells us who took part.

Impact evaluation asks: what difference are these experiences making for learners?

Education Leaders may wish to consider whether workplace experiences are contributing to:

- Engagement
- Attendance
- Confidence
- Aspiration
- Progression
- Transition readiness
- Destination outcomes

What should Education Leaders look for?

National System Review 3 found that some of the most important indicators of impact often appeared long before destination data.

These included:

- Improved attendance
- Stronger engagement with learning
- Increased confidence and independence
- Development of essential skills
- Broader aspirations
- Clearer future plans
- Improved transition readiness
- Positive progression and destination outcomes

These outcomes were recognised as foundations for longer-term learner success.

Reviewing impact through an equity lens

Participation data provides an important starting point but may not tell the whole story.

Education Leaders should consider:

- Which learners are participating
- Which learners are benefiting
- Where participation gaps exist
- Where progression gaps exist
- Which groups may require further support

Understanding impact through an equity lens helps ensure workplace experiences contribute to meaningful progress for all learners.

7. Where next?

Work experience reform is best viewed as a process of continuous improvement.

Many education settings have already established strong foundations through careers education, employer engagement, workplace visits, enterprise activities and work experience. For most, the challenge is not to start again, but to build on what already exists.

National System Review 3 suggests that the greatest impact occurs when workplace experiences are viewed as part of a progressive learner journey, embedded within wider provision and intentionally aligned to learner needs and intended outcomes.

As implementation progresses, Education Leaders are increasingly being encouraged to move beyond questions of participation alone and consider how workplace experiences contribute to engagement, confidence, aspiration, successful transitions and longer-term learner outcomes.

Work experience reform provides an opportunity to strengthen coherence, increase equity and maximise the contribution that workplace experiences make to learner development, progression and future success.

Many education settings approach workplace experiences in the same way they approach other aspects of provision:

- Understanding learner needs
- Designing provision with clear intent
- Reviewing impact
- Refining practice over time
- Focusing on outcomes for learners

This approach helps ensure that workplace experiences continue to evolve alongside learner needs and organisational priorities.

As national implementation progresses, Education Leaders will continue to benefit from an expanding evidence base. Future insights from modern work experience reform activity, including equalex, will further strengthen understanding of how Education Leaders can build capacity, improve quality and embed meaningful workplace experiences within whole-setting approaches to improvement.

For Education Leaders who have not yet undertaken a structured review of their current approach, the Work experience reform: A strategic reflection tool for Education Leaders provides a framework to support strategic discussion and decision-making.

For Education Leaders seeking to translate strategic intent into action, the Work experience reform: Education leadership implementation map supports the planning, sequencing and monitoring of implementation activity.

For Education Leaders interested in examples of sector practice, Work experience reform in practice showcases how settings are developing progressive approaches to work experience and achieving Gatsby Benchmark 6.

THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Our Impact **Our Evidence**