THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

Work experience reform: A strategic reflection tool for Education Leaders

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

A suite of resources to support work experience reform

When to use this resource

Use this resource when you want to:

- Start leadership discussion about work experience reform.
- Build shared understanding with governors and Education Leaders.
- Identify strategic questions and priorities.
- Consider how workplace experiences could support wider learner outcomes.

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

Reflect on your current approach to workplace experiences, understand evolving expectations within Gatsby Benchmark 6 and statutory guidance, and identify priorities for strengthening provision within your setting.

Work experience reform is likely closer than you think

Build on what already works: the updated Gatsby Benchmarks and statutory guidance reflect a growing recognition that meaningful workplace experiences can play an important role in improving learner engagement, broadening aspirations, strengthening career readiness and supporting successful progression into further learning, training, employment and adulthood.

Work experience reform is about increasing access to those meaningful workplace experiences for all learners, while strengthening the quality, coherence and impact of what is delivered.

For many education settings, this will mean building on existing careers, curriculum and employer engagement activity, expanding opportunities where needed, and ensuring workplace experiences are progressive, integrated and intentionally designed around learner need.

Over one million young people are not in education, employment or training (NEET).[1]

"Work experience is too often an afterthought. The young people who most need exposure to work are the least likely to receive it."

Alan Milburn, Young People and Work: Interim Report[2]

National expectations, growing evidence and learner need are now aligning around a common ambition:

Every learner should benefit from meaningful workplace experiences that support successful progression into adulthood, further learning and meaningful work.

What is already established through the updated Gatsby Benchmarks?

- ✓ Meaningful workplace experiences.
- ✓ Progressive learner journeys.
- ✓ Employer engagement linked to learning.
- ✓ Equity and inclusion.
- ✓ Preparation and reflection.
- ✓ Connections between careers, curriculum and learner outcomes.

1 Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK Office for National Statistics
2 Young people and work: interim report GOV.UK

The central shift

Previous thinking	Emerging thinking
Work experience is a standalone placement	Work experience is an integrated of a learner journey
A careers activity	Work experience contributes to school improvement priorities and to wider learner outcomes
Organised by one person	A shared whole-setting responsibility
Measured through participation	Measured through impact
Opportunity for some	Entitlement for all
Activity focused	Outcome focused

Three principles for successful reform

The updated Gatsby Benchmarks and statutory guidance reinforce a clear ambition: every learner should benefit from meaningful workplace experiences that support exploration, career readiness and informed decisionmaking.

National System Review 3 found that settings demonstrating the strongest practice often shared three common characteristics:

1| Progression

2| Integration

3| Intentional design

1. Progression

Meaningful workplace experiences are not isolated events. They form part of a progressive learner journey that builds knowledge, confidence, skills and career readiness over time.

Learners move from awareness and exploration to application, reflection and informed decisionmaking, with experiences developing progressively rather than being concentrated at a single transition point.

2. Integration

Meaningful workplace experiences are connected to curriculum learning, personal development and wider organisational priorities.

Rather than sitting alongside the learner journey, they help learners understand the relevance of their learning, develop confidence and skills, and prepare for future transitions.

3. Intentional design

Meaningful workplace experiences are designed with a clear purpose and intended outcomes.

Education Leaders consider what learners need to gain from experiences, how opportunities will meet those needs, and what support may be required to ensure equitable participation and meaningful outcomes.

A leadership journey for strengthening work experience

The table below provides a suggested leadership journey for strengthening work experience across your setting. It is designed to support strategic reflection, planning and decisionmaking. The prompts encourage Education Leaders to consider current practice, identify opportunities for development and take a wholesetting approach that delivers meaningful and progressive experiences for every learner.

Stage	Strategic Reflection
Understand the change: What is changing and why?	• Do our leadership team and governors understand the ambition behind work experience reform? • Do we still view work experience primarily as a placement, or as an integrated part of a wider learner journey? • How well do we understand what is already happening across our setting?
See the opportunity: Why does this matter for our learners and priorities?	• Which learners need us to get this right most, and what tells us that? • How could meaningful workplace experiences support our priorities around engagement, attendance, inclusion and progression into positive destinations? • What outcomes are we trying to improve for learners?
Build Capacity: What will it take to make this happen here?	• What do we know about learner need? • What intelligence do we use to identify barriers and opportunities? • How effectively do different teams (e.g. pastoral and inclusion teams) work together, using both cohort-level trends and individual learner data, to target support where it will have the greatest impact?
Strengthen practice: What should effective workplace experiences look like?	• How effectively are experiences connected to curriculum learning and wider priorities? • Are workplace experiences shaped by learner need and linked to intended outcomes?
Review impact: What difference is it making?	• What difference are workplace experiences making for learners? • Which learners appear to benefit most? • Where is there evidence of improved confidence, engagement, attendance, aspiration or progression? • Can learners explain how workplace experiences develop throughout their educational journey?
Plan forward: What should we do next?	• Which learners remain underserved? • Which aspects of provision are making the greatest difference? • What should we strengthen, adapt or do differently next?

Work experience reform is now part of statutory guidance.

From September 2026, schools should be reforming their work experience programmes to provide a minimum of two weeks' worth of work experience by the end of Year 11, delivered across Key stages 3 and 4. For the latest guidance, practical resources and examples of effective practice, visit Modern Work Experience

The opportunity for leaders

Evidence from National System Review 3 suggests that meaningful workplace experiences can contribute to improved:

- Engagement and attendance
- Curriculum relevance and motivation
- Confidence and selfbelief
- Aspiration and opportunity awareness
- Successful transitions
- Progression and destination outcomes

The strongest examples demonstrated greater coherence. Workplace experiences were progressive, integrated and intentionally designed around learner need and desired outcomes.

The Careers & Enterprise Company's equalex framework provides practical tools to help education settings design, sequence and evaluate meaningful workplace experiences.

equalex helps educators translate the ambitions of Gatsby Benchmark 6 into progressive learner experiences, clear learning outcomes and coherent work experience journeys. By providing a common framework and shared language for educators, employers and providers, it supports stronger collaboration, more consistent quality and a clearer focus on the outcomes workplace experiences are intended to achieve for learners. Find out more here.

What does successful work experience reform look like

- **All learners.**
- **Progressive workplace experiences embedded within a whole-setting approach.**
- **Meaningful, multiple and equitable opportunities linked to learner need.**
- **Improved confidence, engagement, aspiration, attendance and readiness for transition.**
- **Stronger progression, destinations and learner outcomes.**

Continue the conversation

Use this resource to explore how workplace experiences currently contribute to your learners' development and how your provision aligns with evolving expectations within Gatsby Benchmark 6 and statutory guidance.

For most settings, the challenge is not to create something new, but to strengthen, connect and build on what is already in place so that more learners benefit from meaningful workplace experiences over time.

This strategic reflection tool for Education Leaders is supported by:

- An Education Leader's guide to work experience reform.
- Work experience reform: Education leadership implementation map.
- Work experience reform in practice.

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Our Impact **Our evidence**