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Notes on contributors:

Aidan Clerkin is a Research Fellow at the Educational Research Centre (ERC). He oversees aspects of ERC's work on large-scale assessment and leads other strands of work including outcomes associated with the Transition Year programme. He also co-edits the Irish Journal of Education. His research interests include social-emotional development, student engagement, and their relationships with academic achievement; intervention and programme evaluations; longitudinal research methods; and uses of research data to inform policymaking.

Gerry Jeffers has worked as a teacher, guidance counsellor and deputy principal at post-primary level. He was part of the team that led the mainstreaming of Transition Year nationally in the 1990s and subsequently worked as a lecturer in Education in Maynooth University. His research interests include educational inequality, transition year, leadership and global citizenship education.

Learning from employers' perspectives on Transition Year work experience

Aidan Clerkin¹ and Gerry Jeffers²

¹ *Educational Research Centre, DCU St Patrick's Campus, Dublin*

² *Education Department, Maynooth University*

Abstract

Work experience is regarded as a vital component of Transition Year (TY) by students, parents, and teachers. Despite this centrality, the manner in which placements are organised has evolved in an *ad hoc* manner, and limited attention has been paid to the perspectives of hosting organisations. This study explores the experiences and views of 11 providers of TY placements. Situating TY work experience within its historical and policy context and drawing on research on work-based learning and career development, the paper examines providers' motivations, expectations, and challenges. While organisations expressed strong commitment to supporting young people's early engagement with the world of work, the findings reveal significant ambiguities concerning the educational purpose of placements and the nature of school-employer relationships. The study argues that stronger structures, clearer shared understandings, and more systematic engagement between schools and providers are needed for the full potential of TY work experience to be realised.

Keywords: Transition Year; work experience; vocational preparation; career development; guidance; horizontal learning

Introduction

Transition Year (TY) is a distinctive feature of Irish post-primary schooling. Positioned immediately after the Junior Cycle, it is an optional one-year programme typically undertaken at age 15-16 which

is then followed, usually, by one of three Leaving Certificate options. TY is an opportunity that is designed to respond to the needs of young people in mid-adolescence:

TY offers time, space and autonomy to create enjoyable and meaningful educational experiences that support students in senior cycle. It can be a bridge to opening up a broader range of possibilities and pathways. The programme enables young people to develop a greater capacity to respond to uncertainty, manage complexity, nurture personal interests and become agents of positive, ethical change in society (DE, 2024, p.7).

Schools are afforded considerable flexibility in the design of their TY programme, and work experience placements have become one of its most recognisable elements. Although not central to the original conception of TY (Burke, 1974), work experience rapidly became embedded in practice and is now widely regarded as a defining feature of the programme (Byrne, 2024; Clerkin, 2012, 2019; DE, 1996; Egan & O'Reilly, 1979; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004; Williams, 2024). Participation in TY has expanded dramatically over the years, making work experience now a near-universal experience for Irish adolescents. Over that time, the organisation of TY placements has largely evolved informally, with practice varying across schools. Students often source placements themselves, including through family or community networks, and relationships between schools and host organisations remain loosely structured.

Although work placements occupy a central place in students' (Clerkin, 2019) and public (Byrne, 2024; Connolly, 2026; Williams, 2024) perceptions of TY, previous research has tended to focus on student and teacher perspectives on TY work experience. In contrast, the views of the organisations that provide placements have received little sustained attention.

This study explores the experiences of organisations which host TY students on placements. The paper situates work experience within broader educational developments, reviews relevant literature, outlines the research methodology, presents findings, and concludes with implications and recommendations for schools, employers, and policymakers.

Understanding work experience

Work experience refers to opportunities given to young people to gain short-term, practical experience of out-of-school working environments – unpaid and under supervision by non-teachers – in order to gain insights into workplace realities, develop work skills, and inform decision-making (ILO, 2024; OECD, 2025b). According to the International Labour Organisation (ILO, 2024, p. 10), such experiences enable young people to explore different types of work, understand organisational operations, and develop motivation, independence, and self-confidence. The ILO distinguishes work

experience from *job shadowing*, noting that the latter typically lasts only one or two days and involves students observing an employee (ILO, 2024, p. 15). Shadowing is particularly valuable in fields—such as medicine or law—where direct student participation is not feasible. Huddleston (2012) suggests that some form of work experience should be made available to all students, regardless of their pathway of study (e.g., vocational- or academically-orientated) or their career intentions, because of the broad educational benefits such experiences can confer.

Evolution of work experience in Irish second-level education

The expansion of post-primary schooling from 1967, and the raising of the school-leaving age to 15 in 1972, led to growing enrolment in second-level schools in Ireland throughout the 1970s. Early curricular responses were limited, though this period did see the introduction of pre-employment courses, vocational preparation programmes, the TY programme, and other school initiatives aimed at smoothing the transition from school to work—particularly for students at risk of early leaving. Work experience placements were integral to these programmes. These developments paralleled efforts in the UK following the 1944 Education Act, which fostered closer ties between schools and workplaces, especially through short-term placements.

Pre-employment courses evolved into Vocational Preparation and Training programmes and, by 1987/88, about 20,000 students across nearly 400 schools participated (Kellaghan & Lewis, 1991). Work experience also featured prominently in three European Commission-funded projects run in Ireland between 1983 and 1987. Teachers noted the “maturing influence” of work experience on students at this time (Ó Lionáin, 1978), and further analysis highlighted key success factors such as strong school-employer cooperation, organised placements, and robust record-keeping (Crooks, 1978). At the same time, Hannan (1986) emphasised the need for deeper integration of education, training, and job placement, and critiqued mainstream academic schools:

It is a pity then that the innovative efforts of the three pilot projects have got such an uncaring reception from the academic secondary schools, both from the point of view of the better provision of education for those who achieve so little within their current provision, as well as the richer more integrated provision for the more able (Hannan, 1986, p.62)

Early TY accounts noted placements in offices, factories, and hospitals (Ryan, 1976), gradually expanding into a broader range of work environments. However, Harris (1982) highlighted the scarcity of trade placements for students seeking work experience. While some schools today still distinguish between *work experience* and *community service*, many now group them under the single umbrella of work experience (Jeffers, 2015).

Initially, TY was experienced by a relatively small proportion of students. Only three schools took up the initial programme in 1974, and it wasn't until two decades later that a majority of schools began to offer it (Clerkin, 2013). From those tentative beginnings over half a century ago, work experience placements have become an important component of most young people's schooling today, with more than 80% of the national cohort participating in TY in 2023/24 (Foley, 2024). In addition, by the mid-1990s, the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) and Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme (LCVP) also included substantial work experience components. A working group consolidated best practice across these senior cycle programmes (DE, 1998; Department of Education and Science, 2000b) with an emphasis on thorough preparation of students, monitoring of placements by school staff, and debriefing by providers and schools.

Guidelines for work experience in Transition Year

The rationale for work experience and guidance on organising placements in TY was sparse in early programme guidelines. The impetus seemed based on broad assumptions that work placements could influence students' educational motivation, decision-making, and orientation toward employment. In the first evaluation of TY, Egan and O'Reilly (1979) visited each of the 19 schools that were running a TY programme at that time. Their report underlined student and teacher partiality to aspects of the programme such as 'transition to work' and 'education for practical living', but noted an apparent distaste for philosophy, arts and humanities, and 'education for leisure'.

Over the next 20 years, the central role of work placements in students' TY experience became increasingly apparent. By 1986, guidelines issued by the Curriculum and Examinations Board (the forerunner of the modern-day National Council for Curriculum and Assessment) held that "work experience, whether real or simulated, should be an integral part of all TY programmes" (CEB, 1986, p.15). The purpose of work experience placements in TY was clarified as having both broad and specific learning functions – namely, that work experience "should be seen as providing the basis for general education as well as giving young people an insight into the concept of work, how work is organised and the skills and qualities it requires" (*ibid.*). It was also viewed as having a more practical role to play in linking their experiences in school with the outside world by providing students "with real opportunities to develop and apply many of the skills they have acquired in school" (*ibid.*).

Subsequently, the guidelines issued in 1993 prior to the national mainstreaming of TY built on this understanding:

It is intended that the Transition Year should create opportunities to vary the learning environment and to dispel the notion that learning is something that happens only, or

even most effectively, within the classroom. One of the ways of doing this, and of providing an orientation towards the world of work, is to include a component of actual work experience (DE, 1993, p.7)

An associated checklist emphasised briefing and placing students; parental support; school co-ordination; employer/community commitment; insurance cover; record-keeping and progress reports; and visits to placement centres by school personnel (DE, 1993). A 1996 evaluation by the Department of Education Inspectorate noted that:

Most schools saw work experience as a vital element of the Transition Year Programme, providing pupils with alternative learning environments, acquainting them with the world of work and offering positive opportunities for personal growth and development (DE, 1996, p.2)

Noting a point of particular relevance to the current study, regarding providers of placements, the Inspectorate observed that:

Employers were, in most instances, co-operative and provided schools with feedback and sometimes advice, at the end of the placement period. It was felt, however, that it would be of extra benefit to have employers more deeply involved, especially in the planning, assessment and evaluation stages of the work experience (DE, 1996, p.16)

The 1993 TY guidelines remained in place until 2024, when a new programme statement was issued (Behan & Geraghty, 2025; DE, 2024). The 2024 document gives less explicit attention to work experience than earlier versions, which might suggest that work experience is now a taken-for-granted element within a broader career guidance framework. The new guidelines state that “TY can enable students to make more informed choices by raising awareness of further education, apprenticeships, and through direct experience of work and community participation” (DE, 2024, p.6). This is envisaged to occur through working with local or national organisations and businesses, and through volunteering and community work (DE, 2024).

Overall, the 2024 programme statement emphasises a balanced, multi-dimensional TY with schools having autonomy to design their programme within broad parameters (*ibid*, p.7). While the articulation of work experience’s purpose, and the practice of its enactment, have evolved over the decades, its foundational role in linking education with the realities of working life remains a consistent and valued component in Irish senior cycle education.

International and Irish perspectives on work experience and expected outcomes

A foundational observation about work experience placements is the emphasis on the student as *learner* rather than *employee* (ILO, 2024; Miller et al., 1991). Short-term placements differ from actual work (including paid part-time work or volunteering) as students only experience part of the reality. In that context, a helpful distinction to observe is the difference between learning that is hierarchical, academic, passive and ‘vertical’; and learning that is social, peer-based, active and ‘horizontal’ (Bernstein, 2000; Bourdieu, 1988; Bruner, 1996; Dewey, 1916; Freire, 1970; Vygotsky, 1978). According to Guile and Griffiths (2001), treating vertical and horizontal learning in isolation tends to undermine the learning potential of work experience programmes. In this vein, Moynihan (2015, p.205) highlights Engeström and Kerosuo’s (2007) contention that “learning how to cross social and cultural borders is one of the main challenges faced by people and groups in modern society”. Work-based learning, central to TY, therefore differs significantly from traditional classroom learning. A key insight is that work-based learning should revolve around reflection on real work experiences (Jeffers, 2014; CEB, 1986), a point echoed by Boud (2008), who underscored the importance of debriefing and reflective thought.

A work experience placement within a school programme can offer a stark contrast between very different social and sub-cultural milieus. One way of looking at the various TY learning frameworks over the decades (CEB, 1986; DE, 1993; DE, 2024) is as attempts to design a school programme that integrates vertical and horizontal learning. Evaluations and critiques of TY (Clerkin, 2012, 2019, 2020; Clerkin et al., 2022; DE, 1996; Jeffers, 2011; Smyth et. al., 2004) suggest struggles within schools to value and implement the practices of horizontal learning, a not-unexpected tension given the more widespread traditions associated with vertical learning.

Mann, Stanley and Archer (2014) highlight that first-hand work experience can enhance technical skills (human capital), expand personal networks (social capital), and build confidence in understanding workplace culture (cultural capital). McKechnie et al. (2014) found that students on placements commonly engage in tasks that can foster valuable ‘employability skills’, including communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. This would include tasks such as dealing with customers, handling paperwork, using tools or machinery, co-operating with colleagues, and even sometimes supervising or training others.

Granovetter’s ‘strength of weak ties’ (1973) – the theory that casual acquaintances (weak ties) are more valuable for accessing new information and opportunities than close friends (strong ties) – suggests that these real-world experiences provide authentic, practical insights not easily accessed

elsewhere, with such experiences often being trusted more than advice from teachers or parents (Mann et al., 2020). These opportunities can be particularly relevant for marginalised young people. Employers can also highlight key qualifications and pathways to students who might otherwise have been unaware of their options (OECD, 2021), while first-hand experiences of a workplace setting can clarify and confirm students' career-related aspirations and options (Kim, 2015; OECD, 2024b). In particular, gaining insights into working life may be particularly important in helping students to crystallise their intentions towards a broad career direction, serving an important developmental function in middle adolescence (Kim, 2015; OECD 2024b).

Kettunen et al. (2023) point out that, as participation rates in full-time schooling have risen across Nordic countries and the full-time employment of teenagers declined, placements within general education have tended to serve more complex purposes. There is now a focus on exploring career and further educational aspirations to deepen understanding of the working world, along with recognition of how placements can enhance maturity and self-confidence. There is also increased awareness of how placements can enhance students' ability to search for a job and for valuable experiences (Kettunen et al., 2023). Developments within the TY programme resonate with these observations.

Features and challenges of work experience programmes

Within the Irish senior cycle, in addition to TY, work experience placements are a strong feature of LCA and both programmes can learn from each other. A national evaluation of LCA (Department of Education and Science, 2000a) highlighted the value of preparation before and debriefing after the actual placements. Preparatory learning activities included role-play, visiting speakers, seminars on employers' expectations, health and safety issues, and support for compiling CVs, job applications and interviews. In that LCA evaluation, students were found to be involved in procuring their own work experience placements in 76% of schools, with active parent councils often playing a key role. Guidance counsellors were directly involved in 55% of schools, assisting with work context selection. Inspectors found monitoring to be "inadequate" in 12% of schools, describing it as "a matter of grave concern [requiring] urgent attention by the relevant schools" (Department of Education and Science, 2000a).

In international terms, a more damning view of how work experience manifests itself in practice has been expressed by Hatcher and Le Gallais (2008, p.73): "if work experience is about learning about labour, it is about how working-class kids get working class placements and middle-class kids get managerial and professional ones." Their study distinguished between independently sourced, school-supported, and school-directed placements, and revealed minimal gender or employer bias but a strong correlation between school socioeconomic status (SES) and the

educational value of placements. Notably, students from high-SES schools undertook fewer menial tasks, experienced more responsibility and mentoring, and were more likely to shadow professionals (Hatcher & Le Gallais, 2008).

Teacher attitudes to work placements have also sometimes been mixed. In Ahier et al.'s (2000) study, careers and work experience coordinators prioritised work experience but subject teachers were less enthusiastic. Few teachers had formal training in work-related learning, and "many did not want to receive any". Despite these challenges, teachers generally agreed that work experience developed students' personal and social skills, boosted motivation, and exposed them to the workplace. Yet, teachers struggled to find a direct link between what was learnt in school and what was learnt outside. Tellingly, one year-head remarked: "I can't see the point of wasting time sending a potential straight-A student on work experience, but it's probably beneficial to less able pupils" (Ahier et al., 2000, p.278). Similar perspectives are found in Kamp and Black's (2014) study of the views of teachers on workplace learning in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland.

In contrast to teachers, Ahier et al. found that students were largely positive about their placements. Benefits cited included learning new skills, gaining insight into the workplace, and testing job suitability. They valued having responsibilities, working with diverse age groups, and determining whether a job suited them. However, monitoring of placements was found to be weak and unsatisfactory. The study concluded that "for employers, as much as teachers, the dominant orientation to [work experience] could be termed 'pastoral' rather than economic" (Ahier et al., 2000, p.281). Placements were often arranged informally, with parents or acquaintances securing positions. In larger companies, responsibility typically devolved to local branches, despite national policies, as employers preferred flexibility and avoided formal procedures due to wariness of the "bureaucracy" involved (*ibid*, p.284).

Ahier et al. (2000) further noted several reasons why some companies avoided work experience altogether, including concerns regarding health and safety, quality control, organisational complexities, time demands, and the advanced skills required in certain sectors. High-tech companies were most resistant, while those in the financial services sector were most receptive.

Outcomes associated with work experience

International evidence suggests that successful work experience placements are often associated with increased motivation and enjoyment of learning among student participants, as well as increasing knowledge of potential career opportunities and increasing aspirations (Mann et al., 2010). In turn, longitudinal research from several countries indicates that these features tend to be associated with better employment outcomes in adulthood (Covacevich et al., 2021), while the OECD (2021) also reports that students who worked part-time or volunteered by age 15 had better

subsequent employment prospects. This may be because direct engagement with employers provides students with authentic insights into the workplace that they are more likely to trust, enhances their knowledge and skills, and increases their social and professional networks (OECD, 2025a). Previous work has also indicated that workplace training offers a robust environment for developing both technical and interpersonal skills (OECD, 2010, p.127).

The evidence suggests that, when well-executed, work experience can be an immersive learning opportunity; i.e., one that involves “being deeply absorbed or engaged in a situation or problem that results in mastery of a complex and demanding situation” (Boud, 2008, p.1). Even if full mastery isn’t achieved, students can still experience meaningful learning from placements. When TY students enter the workplace, they engage in a new community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991), meaning the social learning process that takes place when people are actively involved in a common pursuit. Wenger (1999) emphasised interaction as a key feature of these communities, which is clearly evident in TY work placements and broader programme activities.

In a rare study focused on this topic in the Irish context, Moynihan (2013) found that students with pre-existing career aspirations often had their career choices reinforced through work experience, especially when those aspirations had been long-held. This was particularly so among female students. Similarly, Jeffers (2012) reported stereotypical differences in the types of placements experienced by boys and girls; work placements in the automotive and services sectors were dominated by boys, while those in education, public service, and hair and beauty were dominated by girls. Moynihan (2013) found that a minority who regarded work experience as a waste of time were typically students with lower self-esteem, poor academic records, and poorly-chosen placements. Nevertheless, most students were found to have made thoughtful selections and recognised their mistakes if they didn’t. While most either confirmed their career interests or discovered new ones, a significant number – more often boys – realised that certain careers were not for them (Moynihan, 2013).

Qualitative interviews in Moynihan’s study highlighted students’ overall positivity toward work experience. Even those disappointed with their placements acknowledged valuable learning, with many describing how their experience clarified or reshaped their career goals. The interviews also revealed a stronger-than-expected connection between work experience and Leaving Certificate subject choices. An important finding was that students reported increased awareness of the importance of academic study following their work experience, even into their final school years. Moynihan’s research highlighted work experience as a powerful component of TY, concluding that it “helps students fashion a clear focus on their future career possibilities while in some cases causing students to generate entirely new career paths or directions” (Moynihan, 2015, p.208).

A range of other evaluations show a growing understanding of work experience benefits. Smyth et al. (2004) found that TY students' experiences, including work placements, varied between schools, with structured exposure to work being a key success factor. Students increasingly saw placements as central to TY and identified work experience specifically as being among the most satisfying and most valuable aspects of TY (Clerkin, 2019; Moynihan, 2015). In addition, career uncertainty itself has been identified as a predictor of students' choice to participate in TY, indicating that the promise of work experience placements and related activities are an important motivator for participation in TY (Clerkin, 2018b).

In another example from Irish education, a survey of 517 students in their second year of the LCA programme found that 90% agreed that they were better prepared for work following placements (Department of Education and Science, 2000a). Similarly, teachers reported that the realism of work experience enhanced learning, boosted students' self-esteem, and fostered community awareness and better student-teacher relationships. Inspectors underlined the need for strong guidance counsellor involvement, effective monitoring, and diverse placements. More recently, the *Chief Inspector's Report for 2016–2020* (DE, 2022, p.132) affirms that TY "has been one of the major innovations in Irish education", with the work experience component of the programme being a key feature and a strong attraction for participants.

In summary, work experience placements have generally been found to be highly valued by TY students, their parents, and teachers (Clerkin 2018a, 2018b, 2019; Clerkin et al., 2022; Jeffers 2007, 2011, 2015; Moynihan 2015; Smyth et al., 2004). However, providers' perspectives on TY student placements – both positive and negative – are less clear and have received little attention in previous research.

Employers' perspectives on work experience

Previous studies from other jurisdictions suggest that employers' rationales for taking part in work experience programmes vary. Ahier et al. (2000) identified the primary motive as performing 'good work' for the community, reflecting an altruistic aim of 'putting something back into the local community'. Building positive relations and improving company image were also considerations. Some employers, particularly in the financial services sector, admitted they saw work experience as a good way of winning new customers amongst young people. A further motivation was the potential to recruit future employees, which has also been identified by the OECD (2025b) as a primary motivation of employers providing placements.

Similar findings have been reported by a UK taskforce, which summarised the benefits to employers of providing placements primarily in terms of (i) recruitment, (ii) motivation and retention of current staff (e.g., arising from pride in 'volunteering' or community involvement), (iii) developing

the skills of current staff (especially in terms of communication, adaptability, leadership, and teamwork skills), and (iv) in building public awareness of the organisation and promoting a positive reputation (Mann et al., 2010). Overall, then, the potential for both direct and indirect instrumental benefits to the organisation tends to feature strongly in their decision to facilitate work placements.

Purpose of this study

Building on the existing evidence base relating to the operation and outcomes of work experience placements (Ahier et al., 2000; Clerkin, 2019; DE, 1996; Egan & O'Reilly, 1979; Huddleston, 2012; ILO, 2024; Jeffers, 2014; Kamp & Black, 2014; OECD 2025b) – much of which has prioritised the views of students and teachers– the current study seeks to gather and examine providers' perspectives on work placements in Ireland that are provided to TY students.

Specific topics of interest include the perceived benefits of work placements to both employers and students, the challenges of providing placements, motivations for providing work placements, the extent to which employers engage passively or actively, the nature of activities and supervision/mentoring that students receive on placements, and the level of engagement from (regular) employees at workplaces in facilitating meaningful placements for students.

Methodology

To address these questions, the authors compiled a purposive sample of approximately 30 employers known for offering highly-structured and well-regarded work experience programmes for TY students — particularly larger programmes hosting multiple students at a time. This list was developed based on recommendations from prior conversations with TY coordinators, guidance counsellors, and school principals, as well as general awareness of high-profile organisations with strong reputations for providing quality work placements. In addition, and following a limited response to our initial efforts to contact the purposive sample, an invitation was sent to large and medium companies listed on the Great Place to Work website (<https://greatplacetowork.ie/>).

To reflect the range of placements sought by TY students, the sample aimed to include organisations across diverse career sectors, including the arts, technology, construction, business, law, healthcare, hospitality, the charity sphere, and the public sector. The goal of this study was not to conduct a representative survey of all employers, but rather to examine examples of good practice and draw insights from them. Therefore, the focus was primarily on larger organisations with national profiles that demonstrated clear policies and systematic approaches to TY work placements. Nonetheless, we acknowledge the valuable contributions made by many smaller local employers, who also offer meaningful TY placement opportunities throughout the country.

The study received ethical approval from Maynooth University. Once approval was granted, the selected employers were contacted via publicly available email addresses (typically directed to a HR representative or education officer) or through ‘contact us’ forms on company websites. These initial communications outlined the purpose of the study, asked prospective participants to confirm their informed consent, and invited participants to complete an online questionnaire about their organisation’s TY work experience programme. Eventually, responses were received from 11 organisations, which are described in Table 1. We have assigned pseudonymous identifiers to all responding organisations, which will also be used in discussing the subsequent findings.

Table 1: Participating Organisations

Org.	Sector	Approx. number of workers (in Ireland)	Number of TY students annually
A	International development and humanitarian aid organisation	325	80
B	Housing and homeless charity	550	300
C	Business representative and lobbying body	300	15
D	Professional body representing practitioners	80	100
E	Recruitment company	1000	40
F	Arts/cultural institution	200	50
G	Multinational company leading corporate social responsibility in Ireland	50+ in Ireland (15,000 global)	6
H	Car sales company	170	20
I	Construction and property	380	20
J	State agency promoting Irish industry	161	12-17
K	Software development company with an educational focus	4000	5-10

Given the lack of previous research on this topic from employers’ perspectives, this study was primarily exploratory in nature, aiming to offer providers of TY work placements with an opportunity to identify the issues of greatest relevance or concern to them. In exploring the perspectives of providers of work experience placements, the focus was on how they saw the aims of placements, how students are selected, internal arrangements for supervision and briefing of placements, and perceived strengths and challenges of placements based on their own experiences. Informants were

also asked what recommendations about TY work experience they would give to other placement providers and to schools (see the Appendix for the list of questions presented to providers).

The questionnaires yielded extensive qualitative (text-based) data, which were analysed using a general inductive approach (Thomas, 2006). The authors read and re-read the data, identifying meaningful segments of text which were then grouped into coherent categories that could be meaningfully described as representing distinct (albeit often interrelated) ideas or themes. The purpose of this process is *“to create a small number of summary categories (e.g., between three and eight categories) that in the evaluator’s view capture the key aspects of the themes identified in the raw data and are assessed to be the most important themes”* given the objectives of the research (Thomas, 2006, p.242). Given the exploratory nature of the current study in seeking to understand the perspectives of work placement providers in the context of TY, themes were not pre-defined in advance and were derived inductively based on the observed data. Evidence of the dominant themes are presented below, including direct quotations from respondents as appropriate to illustrate key points.

Findings

The findings presented next are structured around each of the core questions of interest that were put to the providers of work experience placements. We address each in turn, describing the key themes of interest relating to each question, and subsequently draw out the links between these themes in the discussion that follows.

Aims of the work experience programmes

Employers’ descriptions of the aims of their TY work placement programmes generally related to one or more of four broad (and at times) overlapping themes, which are summarised next and then presented in turn:

- 1) Increasing students’ awareness of the workplace and potential career paths generally.
- 2) Giving students opportunities to develop transferable skills and gain insights.
- 3) Increasing students’ awareness of the organisation’s specific sector.
- 4) Increasing students’ awareness of broader social issues relevant to the organisation’s work.

Increasing students’ awareness of the workplace and potential career paths generally: An introduction to basic workplace realities was articulated in various ways. For example, Organisation C reported that the aims of their programme were *“to give them experience of a dynamic office environment and to let them talk to a broad range of people in different professions so they can see*

the range of careers available for them in the future”, while Organisation E hoped that students would *“gain an insight into a number of potential career paths, e.g. HR, ICT, Marketing and Recruitment.”* In some cases a particular cognisance of the backgrounds of the students being taken on placements was shown, as in Organisation G: *“To provide disadvantaged young people with real world work experience and skills.”*

Giving students opportunities to develop transferable skills and gain insights: Beyond a basic introduction to workplace realities, some providers have identified specific skills which a placement can develop. The importance of communication and teamwork received strong emphasis in the responses provided. For example, Organisation K reported that their programme *“helps instil the attitudes and behaviours expected at work [and] enables students to learn about and prepare for ‘the world of work’ and develop effective employability and communication skills.”* Organisation J highlighted similar skills, as well as the potential for developing and showcasing students’ creativity: *“To develop practical skills in areas such as teamwork, communication, and project management through hands-on activities and projects [and] to encourage creativity and innovation by engaging students in product development and marketing challenges.”* Some providers, such as Organisation H, described the aims of their work experience programme in relation to corporate life, but notably also reflecting closely many of the core aims of the TY programme itself: *“Transition Year should provide students with an experiential learning approach that encourages personal and social development, fostering independence, self-confidence, and critical thinking skills. We want to give them a real insight into what corporate life is like”* (Organisation H)

Increasing students’ awareness of the organisation’s specific sector: The generality of an introduction to broad workplace realities was often explicitly linked to students’ gaining knowledge of the provider’s specific type of work. Examples of this motivation expressed by providers included: *“increase awareness of roles available in our industry”* (Organisation I); *“to promote [this] career and assist students in developing their understanding of the [sector]”* (Organisation D); and *“The TY Programme aims to educate and inspire students about the [sector, including] to raise awareness among students about the importance of the [] sector in Ireland's economy and culture [and] to provide students with insights into various career opportunities within the [] industry, including roles in marketing, production, quality control, and more.”* (Organisation J).

Increasing students’ awareness of broader social issues relevant to the organisation’s work: Providers that engage actively with community service activities made it clear that educating young people about the issues they address is seen as an important aim of the placements they offer to students. These issues often reflected socially-important and politically-relevant themes, but also could be seen as another manifestation of raising awareness of the sector and the core focus of the

organisation itself. This can be seen in the following selection of responses describing the providers' aims for their work experience programmes:

- *“To educate student on global issues, root causes of problems and tackle stereotypes about global poverty”* (Organisation A)
- *“Raising social awareness and awareness into homelessness, addiction and mental health. Creating change of negative perception.”* (Organisation B)
- *“Understand the importance of managing their digital footprint”* (Organisation E)
- *“Offer opportunities to young people to connect more broadly with arts and cultural sector* (Organisation F)

How are TY students selected for placements?

Organisations reported a wide variety of practices, often outlining a general approach while noting variations or exceptions. In Organisation A, students apply directly and placements are offered on a first-come, first-served basis. Organisation B accepts applications either through schools or via parents/guardians. In Organisations C and H, placements are typically arranged through an existing person within the organisation, though Organisation H occasionally accepts external applications. However, a number of places in A, C and G are reserved for students from a socially disadvantaged location in a scheme run through a higher education institution.

DEIS¹ schools are also given consideration in Organisation D's placement process: schools apply online, with one-third of places allocated to DEIS schools in the first phase. The remaining slots are distributed randomly among other schools. Once a school is selected, it nominates a student to take up the placement. Organisation E casts a narrower net, distributing placements among employee relatives, children of clients, and a local DEIS school. Organisation F operates an open call lottery each autumn, with reserved places for students from underrepresented or marginalised groups, including those facing socio-economic, ethnic, or disability-related barriers. Organisation I allocates placements through school partnerships and internal employee referrals, while Organisation J advertises its TY placements both internally and externally. Finally, placements at Organisation K are generally not available to the public.

¹ DEIS refers to the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools scheme. This is a government-funded programme that directs additional funding, resources, and other support to schools serving areas with high levels of socio-economic disadvantage (Department of Education and Skills, 2017).

Profile of participants on placements

Gender

Most of the providers (seven out of 11) described their TY programmes as broadly gender-balanced. Three (from the charity, software, and sales/motor sectors) reported a majority of male participants. One of these (Organisation H) noted that they wish to attain a more balanced gender profile in future years, acknowledging that *“our industry is historically male dominated, particularly at management level”*. The arts-based employer (Organisation F) reported more female applicants but noted a steady rise in male and non-binary applications.

Socioeconomic background

Employers reported varied profiles of students on placement. Four (charity, recruitment, motor/sales, and tech sectors) described most students as coming from economically affluent backgrounds—often friends or family of staff. Four described their intake as having a mixed socioeconomic profile, with some also describing outreach efforts being made to promote inclusivity. For example, Organisation D reserves a third of places for students from DEIS schools. Similarly, Organisation F reported receiving more applications from affluent students but that they balance their final selection through reserved places and targeted pathways for students from less affluent areas. One employer (Organisation G) reported that students on placement mostly came from disadvantaged backgrounds.

Outreach efforts

Five providers said they reserve places or run outreach initiatives for under-represented students (such as students whose backgrounds were immigrant or refugee, Roma/Traveller, or socio-economically disadvantaged). This is often through links with DEIS schools or community programmes.

It should be noted that similar partnerships were also cited by some respondents who answered ‘no’ to this question, suggesting that the concept of outreach and the level of effort involved are regarded differently by different employers. Analysis of the specific responses received indicates that several employers have links with a common third-party organisation that seeks to promote positive outcomes among students in a particular large urban disadvantaged area, with some employers categorising these links as part of their outreach efforts while others did not.

Two employers responded that they do not currently have any measures in place to promote participation by students from under-represented backgrounds but that they could consider doing so in future. A further two employers responded that they do not have any such measures, without

elaborating. Organisation F remarked that their experience suggests that outreach is most effective when supported by strong relationships with schools and community organisations.

Geographical distribution

Most employers (nine out of 11) reported that TY students typically live at home during their placements, although some travel long distances and stay with family or commute from nearby counties. Two employers (Organisations D and F) reported that they regularly accommodate students from all around Ireland, with their programme structures deliberately being adapted to minimise travel demands (e.g., requiring in-person attendance for only two days).

Duration and structure of programmes

Placements generally lasted for one week, with one organisation reporting one to two weeks and another reporting four days. It is worth noting that some respondents provide structured programmes that include some classes or lectures, which may differ from the experience of students on placements consisting mainly of 'slotting in' to a regular workplace role. None of these organisations reported a one-day-per-week arrangement.

What do TY students do on placement?

The tasks and learning opportunities offered to students during placements varied widely. Reflecting the breadth of the 11 respondents, activities ranged from legal observation and artistic exploration to hands-on programming and data analysis, in formats ranging from workshops and site-visits to work-shadowing and mini-tasks.

Organisations whose work centres around social change and advocacy tended to design placements that reflect these values. In Organisation A, students engage deeply with issues like climate change through interactive workshops, staff meet-and-greets, and collaborative group tasks. These include replicating communications work such as producing videos and designing campaigns to promote global citizenship, which they present to staff. Similarly, Organisation B provides experience that includes ice-breakers, staff talks, educational videos, site visits and presentations from previous TY participants, all tailored to highlight the organisation's societal role.

Placements in legal or civic organisations offer more specialised insights. Organisation D delivers a hybrid experience: two days of online learning about the legal system and related career paths, followed by court visits, mock trials, and guided legal tours. Organisation C also offers students a multifaceted programme, including career talks across departments, CV and mock interview support, a mock podcast, and a project that mirrors public affairs work.

Students placed in cultural institutions such as Organisation F are immersed in a rich blend of departmental learning and hands-on creative activity. The experience spans three pillars: department visits on topics such as curation and conservation, each with mini-tasks; workshops focusing on group projects, discussion, and real-world work skills; and wider exploration through tours, art-making, and sessions on creative careers. These three pillars culminate in a final group presentation.

Organisations with more technical leanings provide highly practical and specialised placements. At Organisation G, students receive a full induction followed by a data science project using open-source tools, involving data analysis, visualisation, and project reporting. With a focus on programming, Organisation K offers hands-on experience working alongside a tech team—supporting teaching, setting up activities, and engaging directly with student learners.

A number of organisations emphasise exposure to business processes. Organisation H provides a structured week managed by HR, including department rotations (e.g., IT, legal, marketing), a CV workshop, and a final-day visit to their training centre—capped with a certificate of completion. Organisation I offers insights into construction and design-related activities such as setting out, research, and cost planning. Organisation J blends trend-spotting tasks, finance workshops, quizzes, CV work, and staff shadowing into a business-focused placement rooted in consumer insights and global development. Organisation E includes a classroom-based TY programme, enriched with shadowing opportunities to give students a real-world taste of professional life.

Some of the 11 providers are quite large organisations that offer placements to groups of TY students simultaneously. Thus, it should be noted that the group workshops and classroom-type activities that are offered in these environments would not be features of a workplace where an individual is the only student on placement.

Supervision and debriefing arrangements

Supervision arrangements for students on placements were generally clearly defined. Specific arrangements varied, but the following response was broadly typical: “[Students are] continuously supervised by the HR/Talent Intern. For outings, additional interns, [graduates] or staff members are assigned” (Organisation J). An exception was Organisation B, which indicated that they had no specific supervision arrangements but that students could speak with the facilitator at any time. In most cases, the students on placements interacted with numerous people, ranging from four (Organisation G) or five (Organisation K) staff up to 45 staff (Organisation E).

All organisations reported that staff involved with TY student placements receive some form of preparation in advance. In most cases, this took the form of a briefing prior to the placement –

often a week beforehand – typically facilitated by a HR department or a designated schools liaison officer. These briefings serve several purposes, including ensuring that content is age appropriate (Organisation A), reviewing materials and providing colleagues with guidance (Organisation C), clarifying expectations around knowledge sharing (Organisation H) and covering child protection protocols and expected learning outcomes (Organisation G). Organisation H also noted practical steps to support the student’s arrival, such as informing the receptionist to ensure a warm welcome.

Debriefing practices for students on placements varied more widely. Some, for example, Organisation B, conducted daily check-ins at the end of the day and the following morning to reflect on experiences and address any emerging questions. Others held debriefs at the end of the placement week, either through wrap-up sessions or by inviting students to give presentations on their experience. The level of formality or duration of debriefing sessions is not clear from the responses.

In several cases students were also asked to provide feedback to the hosting organisation. However, these feedback processes were often framed more in terms of benefit to the organisation than as reflective learning opportunities for the student.

Internal evaluations

Most of the participating organisations engage in some form of internal evaluation of their student placements, with some taking a formal approach and others being more anecdotal. Most responses indicated that students (or other parties such as parents or teachers) reported positive views of the programmes. In some cases, additional details were given on which parts of the programme had elicited those positive views or were seen to have been most (un)successful. These details tended to emphasise the interpersonal and interactive aspects of work experience, including *“meeting students from different schools [and] working in groups”* (Organisation A), *“active participation rather than sitting and listening”* (Organisation C), keeping students *“engaged in activities rather than [being] talked to for long periods”* (Organisation E), *“meeting new people with similar interests”* (Organisation F), and *“talking to graduates, interns, [and] hearing from speakers in the organisation”* (Organisation J).

One employer (Organisation G) highlighted the systematic and broad-based nature of their evaluations relative to some other employers, which included seeking both qualitative and quantitative feedback from students, monitoring metrics related to social media and other media coverage of the placements, and monitoring metrics related to equity, diversity and inclusion considerations. Conversely, a handful of organisations reported that they do not currently have a system for evaluating their work placements.

Providers' views: Challenges for their work experience programme

Employers also identified a number of challenges that they encounter in running their work experience programmes. A common issue raised across organisations was the difficulty of gaining (or maintaining) agreement from staff members to participate in the work experience programmes. Several employers noted that they rely to a large degree on getting a sufficient number and breadth of volunteers, and sometimes face some reluctance among staff members who have otherwise busy jobs (e.g., Organisation A, Organisation C, Organisation D, Organisation E, Organisation G, and Organisation H).

Ethical, legal, insurance, and other regulatory considerations were also raised as challenges in several cases, primarily in the sense that constraints are placed on the types of activities that TY students can participate in during their placements (Organisation D; Organisation F). Although not explicitly stated in the responses received to our survey, it seems reasonable to suppose that ensuring compliance with respect to legal requirements, child protection guidelines, insurance (and etc.) also contributes to the more general observation made by some employers that organising the work placements can be a time-consuming task for those in charge of them, and that providing work placements requires an ongoing consideration to balance the needs of the organisation versus those of the students (Organisation E, Organisation H, Organisation J, Organisation K).

Other challenges raised by specific employers included a desire for more funding to support the work experience programme (Organisation B), the difficulties of coordinating work placements when the organisation is spread across multiple sites around the country (Organisation I), and the difficulties of finding appropriate tasks for students on placement (Organisation K).

Providers' views: Recommendations to other employers and schools

Having reflected on the strengths and challenges of their programmes, respondents were invited to suggest any advice or recommendations, based on their experiences, that they would provide to other employers or schools that were involved in TY work experience placements.

Responses often emphasised the need for improved communication between schools and employers. Sample responses of this type received from specific respondents included:

- *"I would also generally say that schools, students and families could be better streamlined when approaching employers and make the process easy for the host organization, being prompt, courteous and respectful goes a long way. Particularly, as hosting work experiences is not the primary activity of any organization and there is a lot of goodwill needed for staff to support these kinds of placements."* (Organisation F)
- *"Clearer understanding of the students' pastoral and special educational needs prior to placement."* (Organisation G)

- *“We have little or no interaction with the schools themselves. Perhaps the schools could be more proactive in engaging with employers in their areas to establish relationships to provide a consistent, valuable work experience. I think this would be particularly useful, to the points earlier on those from economically disadvantaged or under-represented demographic groups, where the students may not have family members or friends in a position to offer/organise a decent work experience placement.”* (Organisation H)

The benefits of maintaining clear channels of communication between placement providers and schools were emphasised from another perspective by Organisation I: *“We have found it useful to go to schools to present what the placement offers to get students interested and helps weed out anyone who won't enjoy/value the placement.”* A variant on this theme related less to the direct contacts between schools and employers, and more towards efforts to ensure that students achieve the maximum benefit from their placements. These responses tended to draw attention to the role of schools in preparing students (briefing) before placements begin, and in following up with students (debriefing) after placements have ended. The purposes of this would be both to reflect on what they have learned and to share their insights with other students:

- *“I think some kind of follow-up activity when they get back to school would be helpful (e.g. presenting main findings/learnings to their class)... maybe this happens already. Encouraging interviews from organisations beforehand so students can learn about what it is like to have an interview.”* (Organisation A)
- *“I feel every student should deliver a talk/presentation to their classmates of what they've learnt on their work experience/placements so others can benefit from the insights gained, especially if they have the opportunity to attend a programme like ours.”* (Organisation E)
- *“I think students should be initially prepped by schools on the kind of basic skills etc. that are needed within the workplace and to take part in a programme and what kind of questions they may need to ask. I also feel that some initial prep on what the student wants to achieve on the placement would be good. Whilst we do this on the programme, oftentimes it feels it exists in a vacuum.”* (Organisation F)

Organisation K took this line of thinking a step further by recommending that students' experiences on work placements should be linked to, and contribute more directly to, a specific micro-qualification based on what they have learned: *“Develop the notion of a pathway of learning and experiences where all learning leads to some form of micro-qualification.”*

Organisation H identified a downside to their current practice of mainly accommodating students who already have a connection with the company for placements: *“In our limited experience to date, finding a suitable placement has been initiated by family members or friends and in a small number of cases the student themselves. In a high number of the placements it appeared that not a lot of thought went into seeking a placement in a particular business or industry. It often feels very much like ticking a box.”* This suggests that in these cases the placements appear to be a matter of convenience for the students, rather than being driven by interest in the work of the company or in the students’ own career interests or aspirations.

Providers’ views: Final thoughts

As a final question, participants were asked if they had any other comments to add about TY work experience that had not been covered in earlier questions. Two respondents availed of this invitation.

Organisation E reflected on a positive view of TY work experience but suggested that a different approach to the way it is currently organised could be more beneficial: *“I feel it is a crucial part of the TY year and although our programme was run over a week, I feel work experience should be a dedicated day every week with a rotation of 3 different placements throughout the year.”* Similarly, Organisation H suggested that the potential benefits of TY work experience placements are not being fully reached at present, either for students or for businesses: *“My personal belief is that this could be so much better organised. There seems to be a lack of consistency in how it is organised across different schools, which can lead to a disappointing experience for students. I feel business should see this as a way of showcasing their industry to the younger generation i.e. potential employees and customers.”*

Discussion

Some of the strongest literature relating to work experience placements relates to countries other than Ireland (e.g., Huddleston, 2012; Mann et al., 2010; OECD, 2025b) or to further and higher education settings (e.g., Jackson & Tomlinson, 2021; Wilton, 2014; Zehr & Korte, 2020). Limited specific research has been conducted on work experience placements in TY, with evidence tending to emerge from wider studies of TY generally (Clerkin, 2019; DE, 1996; Egan & O’Reilly, 1979; Jeffers, 2007; Smyth et al., 2004). The current small study is unique, to our knowledge, in its attempt to capture the perspectives of providers of work experience placements to TY students. The findings described here resonate with many points noted in previous research, but also highlight the varied understandings held by providers about what work experience placements are trying to achieve. The

evidence presented here also clearly points to providers desiring clearer structures for work experience arrangements and closer links between schools and providers.

The goodwill of employers and organisations in facilitating TY placements is confirmed in this study, and echoes findings by Ahier et al. (2000) about work placements being seen as a manifestation of civic and community responsibility. Employers have generally been generous and accommodating, with placement models evolving from single-day experiences to full-week placements that offer students deeper learning opportunities. Typically, the TY placements offered by the providers who participated in this study are of one or two weeks' duration (although one provider expressed a theoretical preference for the one-day-per-week model).² This is similar to programmes for school-going teenagers in other countries (Huddleston, 2012; Musset & Mytna Kurekova, 2018). The evidence gathered here suggests that placement arrangements vary widely across schools, often relying on local and informal networks.

This study confirms that TY placements continue to operate on an *ad hoc* basis. Providers see themselves as giving young people valuable introductions to workplace realities, including opportunities to develop skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Placement providers indicate, particularly in how they see the strengths of their programmes, that students gain hands-on, practical experience in a real workplace and learn about the work of that particular organisation. These viewpoints resonate with the findings of McKechnie et al. (2014). However, recruitment and selection practices, placement arrangements, and post-placement debriefings differ considerably across providers and schools, with little evidence of standardised approaches to structure, implementation, or student activities.

The evidence gleaned from providers' perspectives highlights the fragility of work experience arrangements. No organisation is obliged to accept TY students, and staff participation in these programmes is typically voluntary. Rising concerns over insurance, liability, supervision, and the need for greater oversight can be deterrents. Additionally, the increasing digitalisation of work and the rise of hybrid working in recent years may limit the types of tasks and experiences that can be offered to TY students.

Some organisations in this study provide placements at set times during the year for groups of students. These group placements appear to be a growing development and might be described as a work experience/work shadowing hybrid. They can provide opportunities for social development by

² None of the 11 participants in this small study currently offer a placement model of one day per week. We are aware that some schools prefer this practice. Given the lack of data on the one-day-per-week model in the current study, a comparison of the relative value of such practices is beyond the scope of this paper.

allowing students from different schools and backgrounds, who share similar interests, to interact. In contrast, social interactions in solo placements are predominantly with adult employees and, in some contexts – such as customer facing roles, healthcare settings, or primary schools – with the public or with children. In both cases, the ‘horizontal learning’ mentioned earlier remains a germane consideration. The nature of social interactions on a placement typically reflects the host organisation’s core functions, as do the tasks assigned to TY students. Despite the challenges, the evidence suggests that organisations benefit from offering well-structured programmes which include interactive tasks, clear communication about the placement’s goals, defined roles and responsibilities for employees, and processes for orientation, monitoring and feedback.

The findings also reveal varying levels of understanding among organisations about the aims of TY work placements. For some, the focus is on giving students insights into specific job roles or career paths, in some cases hoping to influence future career decisions in favour of their industry or organisation. However, fewer organisations explicitly recognised the broader educational purpose of placements, such as introducing students to the general realities of working life and highlighting contrasts between school and the workplace. Similarly, the idea that placements should help students enhance their self-awareness in a more general sense — by reflecting on their own interests, strengths, and areas for growth — was rarely acknowledged explicitly.

Placement providers might argue that supporting student self-reflection is the school’s responsibility. This tension highlights concerns about the relationship between schools and host organisations. The data suggest that many employers would welcome stronger connections with schools regarding placements, with several explicitly providing comments to this effect. Current recruitment and selection practices are inconsistent, with some organisations working directly with schools and others interacting primarily with students and parents. Few organisations reported significant engagement with school staff, either during or after the placement. This issue has been identified as a recurring challenge over decades of work placements – as far back as 1986, the CEB guidelines made a point of saying that TY coordinators “will need to ensure that appropriate contact is made with employers who accept students on work experience” and that this process would be “time-consuming and may demand involvement of other members of the [TY] team” (CEB, 1986, p.16).

Nonetheless, communication between schools and providers of placements remains a source of tension. The absence of national policies or formal agreements around TY placements means that the responsibility for improving cooperation in practice largely falls to schools. It is clear that the organisations in this study would appreciate more pro-active engagement from schools. Reflecting on various studies, the OECD (2025b) also expresses concern about the school-employer relationship

and identifies a need for greater preparation on both sides, asserting that “it is important that schools, which are closest to understanding student needs, maintain ownership over the process of student placement” (p.12).

Additionally, increased employer-school dialogue could extend beyond improving the quality of placements. For example, Covacevich et al. (2021) indicate how work experience involvement allows schools to offer career guidance which is more effective than would be otherwise possible. Growing uncertainty about the future of work generally in an increasingly unstable world is leading to a renewed focus on school-employer relationships. Mann et al. (2020, p.42), for example, propose that “the employer engagement that we strive for should be effective, efficient, equitable and evidenced”. *Effective* here refers to the ‘right student’ engaging with the ‘right employer’. *Efficient* is about the openness of employers to liaise with schools and provide varied and relevant experience. *Equitable* addresses the danger of activities such as placements reinforcing existing inequalities, while *evidenced* refers to learning from previous engagements.

Generally, our informants indicate an openness and sensitivity to these four principles but limited clarity regarding purpose can be a serious drawback. The data indicate that some organisations struggle with student selection decisions, albeit often aiming for fairness and, in some cases, reserving placements for students from marginalised groups. Because TY placements have developed in an *ad hoc* manner, some practices may unintentionally reinforce existing social inequalities (Clerkin, 2013; Hatcher & Le Gallais, 2008; Jeffers, 2012). In particular, it was clear that social networks – ‘who you know’ – played an important role in securing placement opportunities among some of the responding organisations. Similar advantages accruing to children of parents from more professional or higher educational backgrounds have also been noted in relation to work placements in the UK context (Huddleston, 2012). In addition, Connolly (2026) has highlighted how children with additional needs often lose out when it comes to TY work experience opportunities. However, some providers are keen to reach out to more marginalised young people. Notably, two organisations participating in the current study mentioned an initiative led by a higher education institution, in collaboration with schools and placement providers, aimed at supporting students affected by social disadvantage and educational inequality.³ Such models could be replicated by other higher education institutions to cover a broader geographic area of the country.

³ Structural inequality is a condition where a definable group of people with shared personal characteristics systematically face additional barriers in achieving social and economic goals, leading to disparities in outcomes which cannot be explained by variation in individual ability (OECD, 2024a, p.14).

Limitations

The 11 organisations described here represent a small subset and are not representative of the full range of organisations offering TY placements each year. As noted earlier, securing organisational participation proved challenging, and these 11 organisations account for a self-selected subsample of those initially approached. Nonetheless, we expect that many providers of work experience placements, and the schools with whom they liaise, will be able to recognise the issues and challenges raised by the respondents to our survey.

Conclusions

This study set out to address a gap in the literature by examining Transition Year work experience from the perspective of placement providers, an angle that has been largely absent from existing research on work experience. By foregrounding employer voices, the findings offer new insights into how TY placements are understood, organised, and sustained in practice. TY was designed to integrate both vertical (formal, school-based) and horizontal (informal, experience-based) learning, but work placements happening off the school site tend to receive less attention. There is also little evidence that school inspection reports meaningfully address the work experience component.

Even though data on the scale, diversity, and quality of these placements at a national level are lacking, it is clear given the magnitude of growth in requests for placements (Clerkin, 2013, 2018a) that many organisations generously and voluntarily offer students valuable exposure to the world of work. Despite this, systematic evaluation and research into the educational value of these placements has remained limited.

Fragility

Overall, the evidence points to a strong commitment in participating organisations to supporting young people's engagement with the world of work. Employers articulate a broadly shared set of aims for TY placements, centred on introducing students to workplace realities, developing transferable skills, raising awareness of particular sectors, and, in some cases, fostering social or civic awareness. These aims resonate with long-standing understandings of the value of work experience placements and reflect a genuine sense of goodwill and civic responsibility among placement providers. Many organisations invest considerable time and resources in designing structured, interactive programmes that go beyond passive observation and offer meaningful learning opportunities for students.

At the same time, the findings highlight important limitations and tensions within the current model of TY work experience. Placements have evolved in an *ad hoc* manner, shaped by local arrangements, informal social or professional networks, and organisational capacity, rather than by a shared framework or set of expectations. As a result, there is substantial variation in how students are selected, how placements are structured, and how learning is supported and reviewed. While such flexibility allows organisations to tailor placements to their own contexts, it also contributes to fragility, inconsistency, and uneven experiences for students.

Clarity of educational purpose

A key concern arising from the study is the lack of clarity around the educational purpose of TY work experience placements. Although employers are clear about what they aim to offer students, fewer explicitly situate placements within a broader educational or developmental framework, particularly in relation to students' self-reflection and learning transfer. The social and emotional learning benefits of work placements, in particular, do not appear to be well understood (Clerkin 2018a, 2020; Clerkin et al., 2022; Gilleece & Clerkin, 2025) or sufficiently prioritised. Responsibility for these aspects is often implicitly assigned to schools, yet the findings indicate limited interaction between schools and employers before, during, or after placements. This weak articulation between the two settings represents a missed opportunity to maximise the learning potential of work experience and to align workplace activities more closely with the wider aims of TY.

Equity and access

The study prompts important questions about equity and access. While several organisations have taken proactive steps to support students from disadvantaged or under-represented backgrounds, access to placements often continues to depend on personal connections, geographical proximity, or organisational resources. In the absence of more coordinated approaches, such patterns risk reinforcing and reproducing existing inequalities, despite the inclusive intentions underpinning TY and recent national policy commitments. Challenges related to supervision, insurance, digitalisation of work, and accommodating students with additional needs further underscore the pressures facing a system that relies heavily on voluntary employer participation.

While inclusion is a strong feature of recent national policy documents, arranging placements for young people with special educational needs and/or disabilities can be challenging for both schools and host organisations. One UK guide (NDTI, n.d.) suggests that employers should offer (i) induction, including an introduction to the organisation; tour of the building; outline of tasks they will be asked to undertake; a staff member to shadow initially; and contact details; (ii) support,

including a mentor or buddy; clear liaison between young person, school, workplace and family; and (iii) access to support, including finance, transport, and specialised equipment.

In building models of placement arrangements in Ireland, this guidance could serve as a practical starting point for both schools and employers to consider. In particular, dedicated financial support for students who incur costs as part of the work experience – for example, students who need to travel a distance on public transport to reach their placements, or who need to stay overnight to access placement opportunities far from their homes – deserves greater attention and should be considered as a way of mitigating inequalities in access to opportunities.

Final thoughts

Taken together, these findings suggest that the future sustainability and educational value of TY work experience depends on more coherent employer involvement and stronger dialogue between schools and employers. Clearer articulation of shared purposes and greater attention to preparation, reflection, and debriefing could enhance the benefits for students, while respecting organisational constraints. Models that promote equity by design — including targeted outreach, collaboration with third-level institutions, and practical supports such as funding for travel or accommodation — offer promising directions for development.

By illuminating how employers perceive and experience TY work placements, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of work experience in second-level schooling. As work experience placements are among the most valued aspects of TY – itself regarded as one of the most significant innovations in Irish education and an influence for reforms in other jurisdictions (Clerkin 2018a; Clerkin et al. 2022; DES, 2022; Kim 2015) – its fragility is disturbing. This points to the need for policy and practice to build on existing goodwill while providing clearer structures to ensure that TY work experience remains educationally meaningful, equitable, and sustainable in the context of growing participation and changing workplace realities.

Recommendations

Clearer structures and shared practices are needed within both schools and host organisations to support TY work experience placements.

Before placements

Before placements begin, schools and organisations should establish a shared understanding of the purpose of the placement, insurance and restricted employments, student needs, health and safety requirements, and other practical concerns. School-based preparation should frame the placement

as an educational experience, explicitly outlining learning goals – including opportunities for both social-emotional and vocational learning – student responsibilities, and expected conduct. Preparation programmes should include activities such as role-plays, case studies, and other relevant learning activities.

Host organisations should also be clear about their rationale for offering placements. Preparation should include assigning clear roles and responsibilities to staff involved, whether coordinators or volunteers. Evidence suggests that supervisors often receive little or no training prior to supervising interns (Zehr & Konte, 2020); addressing this gap is important. Well-structured programmes that actively involve TY students in meaningful, practical tasks are strongly recommended. Where placements combine work experience and work shadowing, students should clearly understand the distinction. Opportunities to ask questions and engage with employees are essential, and community service placements can be particularly valuable, aligning closely with Burke’s (1974) vision for TY.

During and after placements

From the school’s perspective, monitoring during the placement is highly desirable. This may include staff visits, phone check-ins, and oversight by a designated coordinator. Ideally, placements should conclude formally, through an exit interview, written report, or supervisor feedback. For some students, certified evidence of participation or attainment of a micro-credential may be important.

Students should be encouraged to keep a reflective diary during their placement to support post-placement presentations and discussions. Debriefing sessions should explore what students learned about the workplace, career pathways, and themselves, as well as differences between school-based and workplace learning.

Beyond student feedback, schools and host organisations should engage in post-placement discussions to review student performance, challenges, and possible improvements. Increasing constraints related to insurance, liability, supervision, and digital or hybrid work environments are making placements more complex. Similar reflective conversations may also be relevant in the context of students’ paid part-time work (Baum & Ruhm, 2014; McCoy & Smyth, 2004) and out-of-school volunteering activities (OECD, 2025b). At the same time, it should be recognised that these experiences differ, both in their nature and their purpose, from the type of work placements provided in TY.

Beyond TY

Finally, a broader national discussion on work experience and community service placements is recommended. This could involve the Departments of Education and Youth and of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, employer bodies, trade unions, The Wheel, teachers, parents, and students. In addition to strengthening TY provision, such discussions could explore how comparable experiential learning opportunities might be extended to students during the Leaving Certificate years, particularly those who do not participate in TY, LCA, or LCVP.

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Appendix: Questions to work placement providers

- 1) Briefly, describe the main activities of your organisation.
- 2) How many people are employed by your organisation?
- 3) Approximately how many TY students avail of the work experience programme offered by your organisation annually?
- 4) What are the main features of the work experience programme operated by your organisation? Please describe, for example:
 - a) The duration of placements
 - b) Tasks or activities typically assigned to TY students
 - c) Supervision arrangements
 - d) Debriefing arrangements (if any)
 - e) Any other details
- 5) What are the aims of your work experience programme?
- 6) How are TY students selected for placements in your organisation?
- 7) What is the predominant gender profile of the TY students who take part in your programme? [space for any additional information]
- 8) Do the TY students taking part in your programme tend to come from mostly economically-affluent backgrounds, mostly economically-disadvantaged backgrounds, or mostly balanced in terms of home backgrounds? [space for any additional information]
- 9) Does your organisation reserve places or have any dedicated outreach to TY students from under-represented demographic groups (e.g., students from immigrant or refugee backgrounds; Roma/Traveller students; or students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds)? [space for any additional information]
- 10) Do the TY students taking part typically live at home during the placement or travel a distance that necessitates them living away from home? [space for any additional information]
- 11) How many staff in your organisation are directly involved in the work experience programme?
- 12) What preparation, if any, do staff receive in relation to the work experience programme?
- 13) If the work experience programme has been evaluated, what were the main findings?
- 14) In your opinion, what are the strengths of the work experience programme operated by your organisation?
- 15) In your opinion, what are the challenges encountered by the work experience programme operated by your organisation?
- 16) Based on your organisation's experience of a work experience programme, what suggestions would you make to a school, other organisations and/or the Department of Education about how to maximise young people's learning from work experience placements?
- 17) Any additional comments about Transition Year work experience?