

Work Experience Providers want closer links with Schools



Gerry Jeffers

Almost everyone, inside and outside schools, seems to have anecdotes to tell and opinions to share about work experience placements in Transition Year (TY). There are occasional stories of life-changing insights being gained. You may have listened to horror accounts of blatant exploitation.

In between, a great variety of tales abound, revealing how work experience has become a feature of the lives of almost all Irish teenagers. However, little is known about how host organisations – employers and those providing community services – view placements. That prompted Aidan Clerkin of the Educational Research Centre in Drumcondra, Dublin and myself to explore this issue¹.

Existing research into TY reveals that young people identify work experience as among the programme's most valuable aspects. For many 15–16-year-olds, opportunities to gain short-term, practical experience of out-of-school working environments – unpaid and supervised by non-teachers – can be very beneficial. Placements provide insights into workplace realities, develop work skills, and inform educational and career decision-making. According to the International Labour Organisation, such experiences enable young people to explore different types of work and develop motivation, independence and self-confidence.

Perhaps because each school has freedom to shape their own TY programme, work experience placements have evolved in an ad hoc manner over the past five decades. Sometimes, students source placements themselves, including through family or community networks, and sometimes the school plays a more active role. Often, the

relationships between schools and host organisations remain loosely structured.

Our study explores the experiences of eleven organisations hosting TY students. While these organisations could be described as 'large', the valuable contributions made by many smaller, local employers, who also offer meaningful TY placement opportunities throughout the country, should not be ignored.

There is a strong sense of goodwill and civic responsibility among placement providers to support young people in engaging with workplaces. However, the findings reveal significant ambiguities concerning the educational purpose of placements and the nature of school-employer relationships.

VALUABLE LEARNING

During placements, host organisations enable young people to interact with customers, work in a team, solve problems and lots more. When placements work well, students often gain a vital insight: learning is not something that happens only, or even mostly, within classrooms. This highlights a key point about work experience: the student should be seen primarily as a *learner* rather than an employee.

The hosting organisations see placements as assisting students' awareness of workplace realities and potential career paths, and as opportunities to develop transferable skills such as communication, teamwork and problem-solving. In specific occupations, employers see placements as a way of raising their sector's profile among young people. Among socially-oriented organisations, placements are also

seen as deepening young people's understanding of broader social issues.

While not necessarily using the same language, employers appear to agree with the Department of Education's view that TY "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".

CHALLENGES

Despite the positive dispositions of hosting organisations, our informants point to some serious challenges which underline the fragility of current work experience arrangements. Getting staff members to participate as mentors can meet resistance. Finding appropriate tasks for students can be difficult. Ethical, legal, child protection and insurance considerations were also raised, primarily in the sense that constraints are placed on the types of activities in which students can participate.

Compliance with regulatory concerns is one factor contributing to the observation made by some employers that organising work placements can be a time-consuming task, and that providing work placements requires balancing the needs of the organisation with those of students. On top of that, workplaces themselves are changing, with more people working remotely – implying limited opportunity for mentoring – and the growth of artificial intelligence into many sectors.

Unfortunately, placements can also replicate existing social inequalities. A recurring challenge is that some young people on placements engage only in basic tasks, while others experience more responsibility, mentoring, or are given opportunities to shadow professionals at work. Employers indicated some awareness of equity and access, referring to fairness in how placements are allocated and to whom. Some operate on a 'first come, first served' basis; others have a lottery system; and others take specific measures to reserve opportunities for more marginalised young people.

Perhaps the loudest message from host organisations is a desire for closer links with schools. There is little evidence of a common understanding of the goals of work experience. In particular, the social and emotional learning benefits of work placements do not appear to be well understood. As one respondent put it:

"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 made earlier regarding 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".

Our study concludes 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.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

If schools are to respond to this *cri de coeur* from providers for better dialogue with schools, school leaders need to initiate clear lines of responsibility among staff members for adequate preparation, monitoring and de-briefing as well as for ongoing liaison with placement providers. However, as very immediate and intense places, schools – understandably – are primarily focused on the here and now and the daily demands of school life.

Out of sight (on a placement) can mean out of mind (on the part of the educators).

A central question is: 'As a school community, how are we maximising the learning opportunities from TY work experience placements'? In addition to clarifying staff roles regarding work experience, some re-thinking about the purpose of placements may be needed. For example, a valuable insight from earlier *Guidelines* is:

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).

Clarity about what schools expect students to learn from a placement is important. At a basic level, they may gain insights into the nature of a workplace that is not a school. The opportunity to interact with customers, handle tools, machinery and technology, engage in administrative tasks, co-operate with colleagues and much more can contribute to deeper and more nuanced understandings of both work environments and themselves. Placements can also assist students in clarifying, confirming or challenging career-related aspirations and options. Beyond the familiarity of the school environment and peer group belonging, learning how to negotiate and cross social and cultural borders can also provide rich learning. In the case of some marginalised young people, this can be particularly relevant.

Closer liaison between schools and providers might lead to some schools re-thinking how placements are arranged. When a school relies on going back to the same employers year after year, how big are the risks of staleness, predictability and limited learning? How can schools best stretch the ambition of poorly-motivated students who may seek 'convenient', or even 'inappropriate', placements? And what about schools located in areas with limited placement options in the immediate vicinity?

The questions mount up.

Not unreasonably, employers expect that students engage in some in-school **preparation** prior to placement. This may be about basic assumptions, behaviour and expectations. As one put it: "being prompt, courteous and respectful goes a long way". Indeed, conversations about student preparation can be a particularly fruitful interaction between schools and providers. Ideally, 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 roleplays, case studies, and other relevant learning activities.

When talking about preparation, it is also useful to ask how much parents need to be informed about the purposes of placements, as well as what is expected of students and how parents can be supportive of students' learning.

Monitoring placements can be very time consuming. If schools and providers share some common understanding about the purpose of the placements, learning can be enhanced. Listening to employers' feedback can also be of practical benefit to schools for subsequent de-briefing. Openness to hearing about placements that didn't go well is also important for schools.

De-briefing students following a placement is a vital part of the experiential learning cycle, ensuring that, through guided reflection, learning is consolidated. During a brief oral presentation about their placements to teachers and classmates, students often reveal how profound the learning is. It would be a mistake to think that learning on a placement is something that happens automatically; young people processing the experience need scaffolding and support.

Of course, before the students come to the de-briefing sessions, they have most likely already voiced reflections on their experience to their peers, parents and others; de-briefing classes can also be occasions when students' assumptions are challenged.

Some schools invite providers to engage in formal recognition of students' participation in a placement. This may involve filling in a simple form, rating, for example, a student's

attendance, punctuality, relationship with workmates, general attitude and overall performance. Formal references are also highly prized by students. Ways of providing feedback is another obvious area rich in possibilities for school-provider dialogue.

The future of TY work experience and community service placements will be enriched by closer school-provider links at local level. Additionally, the long-term viability of this valuable but fragile feature of young people's learning will be enhanced by some form of national conversations between employers, trade unions, schools and the Department of Education and Youth.

References

Department of Education (2024), *Transition Year Programme Statement*, Dublin: Department of Education.

Department of Education (1993), *Transition Year Programme, Guidelines for Schools*, Dublin: Department of Education.

1 Learning from employers' perspectives on 'Transition Year Work Experience' by Aidan Clerkin and Gerry Jeffers in *Irish Educational Studies* (2026) is available at <https://doi.org/10.1080/03323315.2026.2675305> and also through <https://mural.maynoothuniversity.ie/id/eprint/21738/>



Scan Me

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Outside Smock Alley Theatre, Exchange Street Lower, Dublin, from 1976 to 2026. Drawing and photo by Dermot Carney.