



Experiencing the workplace: the importance and benefits for teenagers

The OECD Career Readiness project makes use of quantitative evidence to identify how teenage career-related activities and attitudes are linked with better adult employment outcomes. Review of multiple national longitudinal datasets confirms that teenage experiences of the workplace through part-time working and volunteering are routinely associated with better prospects in work during adulthood. While the evidence base is much weaker, it is also likely that students who undertake workplace placements through their schools can have much to gain. This policy brief draws on evidence from longitudinal studies and beyond to explore the following questions:

- Why is it important for secondary school students to have first-hand experience of work?
- What difference does workplace experience make?
- And how can schools and education systems best optimise its benefits?

About the OECD Career Readiness project

The OECD Career Readiness project reviews existing research literature and undertakes new analysis to explore the relationship between teenage career-related attitudes and activities and better employment outcomes in adulthood. The project confirms 11 teenage indicators of better employment outcomes and clusters them into three themes: young people can expect to do better in work if they, as teenagers in school related explore, experience and think about potential futures in work. This policy brief pulls together results relating to first-hand experience of the world of work where young people fulfil tasks that people are normally paid wages to undertake. The ways in which students experience potential future workplaces is especially important as they can be expected to offer students particularly powerful insights into the working world. Analysis of multiple longitudinal surveys reveals that in three or more countries, strong evidence exists of better employment prospects if students by the age of 15 have:

- Worked part-time alongside their full-time studies
- Participated in volunteering

In addition, some evidence (in the United Kingdom and Germany) points towards school-managed work placements being related to better outcomes, though in others significant relationships are no identified.

Understanding of the long-term impacts of placements is undermined by a general lack of data. While it is likely that work placements can often be effective and studies suggest ways in which positive impacts are more likely, further study is required to confirm work placements as an indicator of teenage career readiness.

Measuring teenage workplace experience: does it matter?

For me, it's crazy that we didn't get chance to see what work is like while we were still at school. You have to work in life. You need to get ready for the routine. I was in a bit of a shock when I first started working. Work experience would have been really beneficial, especially if it is the sort of thing you want to do. You need to be able to check that it really is something for you. You can't beat hands-on experience to get a feel for a job, to get a real understanding. The only way to learn properly is through experience.

Mark, 21 from the United Kingdom who left education at 16 and has worked in the construction and hospitality industries

This policy brief investigates relationships between part-time working, volunteering and work placements and better employment outcomes. Details of the full results reported here are available in two OECD working papers:

[\(Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^{\[1\]}\)](#). "Career ready?: How schools can better prepare young people for working life in the era of COVID-19",

(Covacevich et al., 2021^[2]) "Indicators of teenage career readiness: An analysis of longitudinal data from eight countries",

The Career Readiness project undertook new analysis of national longitudinal datasets in ten countries (Australia, Canada, China, Denmark, Germany, Korea, Switzerland, United Kingdom, United States and Uruguay). The datasets include answers that tens of thousands of students gave to researchers as teenagers (typically aged 15) and their responses to follow-up questionnaires (most commonly age 25). As the datasets also include plentiful details about the academic achievement, social background and the personal characteristics of participants, it is possible to isolate career-related teenage experiences and check whether they are related to better outcomes after having controlled for these aspects of young people's lives that so strongly influence adult employment outcomes. In addition, the project looked at existing research literature that makes use of such longitudinal data. In all, the project looked at:

27 new and existing studies from six countries which looked for evidence of beneficial employment impacts linked to teenage part-time working and found that 20 studies in Australia, Canada, United Kingdom and the United States were associated with better outcomes. For example:

- In Canada, teenagers who worked part-time at age 15 earned 5% more at age 30 than those who did not work part-time.
- In the United Kingdom, teenagers who had experience of paid work by age 16 earned 6% more at age 26 than those who had no experience of paid work.
- In the United States, individuals who did not work part-time at ages 14-16 were 1.28 times more likely to be unemployed (Not in Education, Employment or Training or NEET) at ages 27-28 than those who had worked part-time as teenagers (Covacevich et al., 2021^[1]).

Nine new and existing studies from five countries have looked for evidence of beneficial employment impacts linked to teenage volunteering and eight studies in Australia, Canada, Germany, United Kingdom and the United States, are found to be associated with better outcomes. For example:

- In Australia, teenagers who volunteered at age 15 earned 8% more at age 26 than those who did not volunteer.
- In Germany, individuals who at age 14-16 were part of a group or club outside of school (including, typical volunteering activities but not exclusively so) were 0.41 times less likely to be NEET at age 23-25 than those who were not.
- In Australia, individuals who volunteered at age 15 scored 0.22 points higher on a 0 to 10 work satisfaction scale at 26 compared with those who did not volunteer.

Five new and existing studies from four countries looked for evidence of beneficial employment impacts linked to teenage participation in school-mediated work placements. However, only two studies, in Germany and the United Kingdom, were found to be associated with better outcomes.

Why can a workplace experience be expected to make a difference to young people?

When young people experience workplaces at first-hand, positive long-term benefits can often be anticipated. The research literature and the OECD's own Career Readiness study suggests that this may be for one of a number of reasons. They might be gaining in one of three important areas of human development that have been related to better employment outcomes. As first articulated by Stanley and Mann (2014), first-hand workplace experience can serve to enhance an individual's:

Human capital	technical or employability skills deployed in work
Social capital	personal contacts and social networks of ultimate relevance to employment
Cultural capital	in terms of work-related attitudes and perspectives, including confidence in visualising and planning a future ¹

Human capital

Through first-hand experiences of workplaces, it can be imagined that students are gaining skills of long-term value which are hard to replicate in the classroom or at home. Surveys of employers after all often say that the most important thing that young people lack when they apply for jobs is experience (Winterbotham et al., 2018^[2]). While still in school, they may gain experience of value in later job hunting. (McKechnie, 2014^[3]) for example, drawing on data from a large-scale, multi-faceted Scottish research project, find it to be commonplace for working students to:

- cooperate with colleagues
- deal directly with customers
- spend time reading, writing and administering paperwork
- use equipment such as cash registers and computers
- work with tools and machinery
- and, for a sizeable minority, supervise/train others.

More than this, they may gain what are commonly described as 'employability skills' – the communication, team-working and problem-solving skills that allow someone to be personally effective in a job (International Labour Organization, 2021^[4]); (UK Commission for Employment and Skills, 2009^[5]). Indeed,

¹ In their discussion of cultural capital, Stanley and Mann (2014) draw on French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' as socially derived shared knowledge, norms and attitudes that influence individual behaviour and link to long term outcomes. As utilised by British sociologist Louise Archer, the term can be used to exemplify 'the taken-for-granted knowledge of "how things work" and an instinctive field for the unspoken "rules of the game" that can help individuals families to navigate education systems and transitions into employment.

studies show that young people commonly testify that they gain both technical and employability skills which they feel will be of long-term benefit to them in work ((Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[6]) for a summary of research studies).

By way of example, the OECD’s Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) survey questions hundreds of thousands of students aged 15 in dozens of countries every three years, and provides some insight into the ways in which such experience can help student prepare as they approach their transitions into work. The 2018 PISA questionnaire asks students about their confidence in dealing with unfamiliar situations – a key employability skill. Cross-referencing with statistical controls in place for academic achievement, social and personal background, students with first-hand experience of the labour market are often significantly more likely to agree that they are comfortable with being adaptable.

Table 1. Relationships between confidence in ability to adapt to changing situations and teenage participation in workplace experience.

Statement	I can deal with unusual situations	I can change my behaviour to meet the needs of new situations	I can adapt to different situations even when under stress or pressure	I can adapt easily to a new culture
Worked part-time	63%	69%	61%	53%
Did not work part-time	56%	67%	56%	48%
Undertook voluntary work	62%	69%	60%	54%
Did not undertake voluntary work	55%	66%	55%	46%
Undertook internship	60%	66%	57%	50%
Did not undertake internship	55%	65%	55%	48%

Note: Statistically significant relationships (P-value less than 5%) highlighted in bold.

Social capital

Another possible explanation for the benefits seen is that young people have the opportunity to interact with people (who they had not previously known) who bring with them knowledge and resources that can be valuable in school-to-work transitions. Indeed, one of the primary conclusions from the Career Readiness project is that students will often gain much from their interactions with employers or people in work in school-based guidance activities. (Covacevich et al., 2021^[6]) shows that students who take part in workplace visits or job shadowing and who hear from employers/employee volunteers in career talks or job fairs often do better than would be expected in work. The same applies to participation in practice interviews or application/CV workshops which commonly, but do not always, involve employers. Through these activities, researchers have argued that students have the opportunity to gain new and useful information of relevance to their transitions.

Described by US sociologist Mark Granovetter as the ‘strength of weak ties’, these interactions are effective because they offer students information that is not easily accessed elsewhere (Granovetter, 1973^[10]). Moreover, because it comes from people who work for pay in the labour market, it can appear more trustworthy than any promotional material they might encounter or from teachers or parents (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[7]). Through their first-hand experiences in work, students have the opportunity for multiple new learning opportunities. Employers and people in work can provide helpful information on pathways into professions, highlighting experience and qualifications that are most highly valued in recruitment. They also have the opportunity to meet people who can provide recommendations or references to another employer or to hire them themselves when they leave full-time education. One Australian survey shows

that it is not unusual for teenagers to move from part-time employment to full-time employment with the same employer after leaving secondary education (Smith and Green, 2005^[8]).

Cultural capital

A third potential explanation for the benefits experienced by young people relates to how they think about themselves and their futures. Cultural capital as described by (Stanley and Mann, 2014^[9]) describes the way in which teenage socially-derived attitudes about their lives and potential futures can have important long-term consequences. It relates to the ways in which cultural knowledge, attitudes and dispositions are socially conditioned and serve important functions in helping individuals to traverse social and economic systems. In relation to school to work transitions, this can be understood as enabling students to learn more effective cultural approaches that enable agency towards different fields of economic opportunity. By way of example, schools often seek to change the work-related thinking of young people in order to broaden or raise ambitions or challenge stereotypical assumptions. Programmes for example, aimed at giving girls confidence to consider becoming engineers or scientists try in part to change the attitudes and assumptions of girls about what is 'reasonable' or 'natural' for them to pursue in education and work. Other approaches include programmes designed to encourage students to consider university attendance or considering applying for an apprenticeship.

Perhaps surprisingly, one helpful study argues that it is in this realm of cultural capital – changing teenage thinking – where young people can be expected to gain the greatest benefit from their experiences. (Jones, Mann and Morris, 2016^[10]) analysed 488 written statements from adults aged 19 to 24 about the experiences they had engaging with employers through their secondary schools. Using textual analysis, they classified what young people said they most valued about their experiences in terms of human, social and cultural capital accumulation. Overwhelmingly, it was aspects related to cultural capital that were most highly regarded. Students reported greater personal confidence in their decision-making, used experiences to eliminate options and better visualise their future journeys into work and argued that they returned to school more motivated to achieve academically. In all, students gained a greater sense of personal agency as a result of the new experiences they encountered.

Where workplace experience do not provide long-term benefit to young people

While longitudinal studies show that teenage workers and volunteers can often expect lower levels of unemployment, higher wages and greater career satisfaction in adulthood, this is not always the case and much still needs to be learnt about the circumstances under which benefits are more likely. It may well be that workplace experiences are more beneficial if they are closer to when students actually leave education, are undertaken on multiple occasions or relate closely to a student's career ambitions. The above framework based on human, social and cultural capital however helps to make sense of gains and prompts three simple questions:

- Are students learning demonstrable new skills?
- Are they engaging with people who can provide them with new and useful information and support through their transitions?
- Are they using their experiences to enhance their career thinking (whether rejecting possible career paths, broadening ambitions or confirming plans)?

Schools are well-placed to encourage and enable students to understand these potential benefits, preparing and supporting them to gain new skills, meet new people and to reflect on their experiences.

Part-time working

I worked a lot of part-time jobs when I was in secondary school. I was lucky to have family in the building trades – they helped me find jobs. It really boosted my confidence, working with people who were much older, and I learnt a lot of useful skills. I got to see what making money was like.

Jazzo, 19 from Ireland who left full-time education at 18 and is now training to be a butcher.

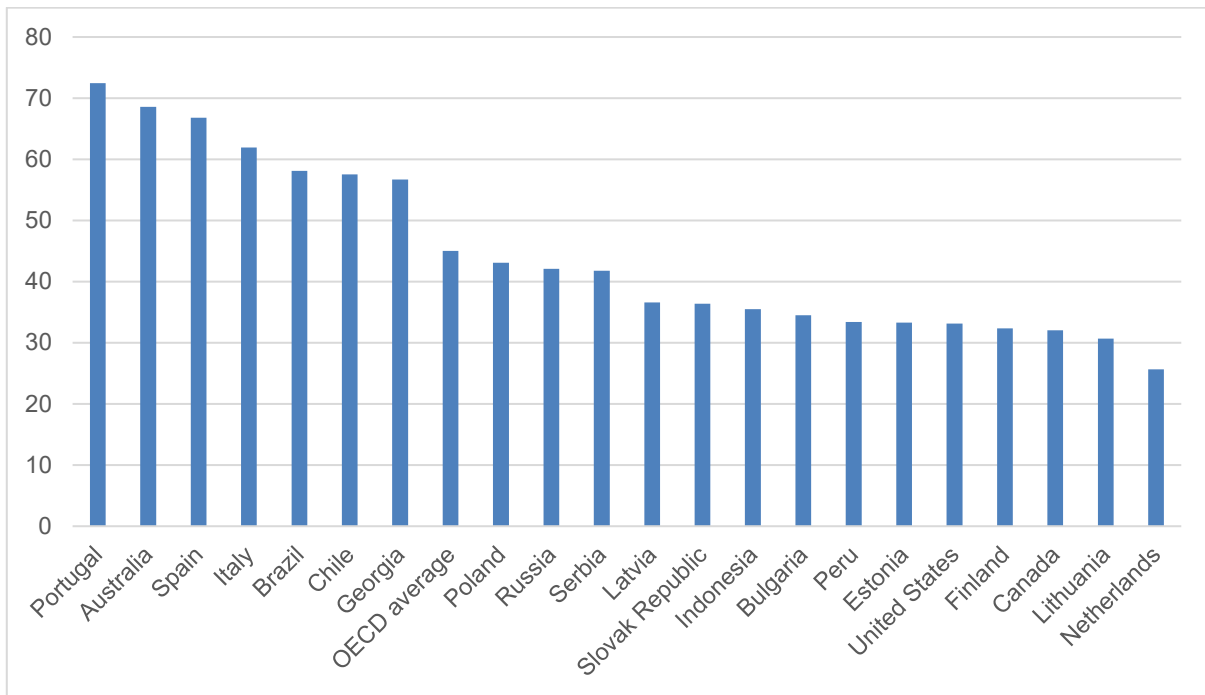
I had a part-time job as a swimming instructor while I was in secondary school. It was a very rewarding experience because it helped me with my communication and transferable skills. It also provided me with qualifications to put on my CV before becoming an adult, which was very helpful.

Maria, 23, from the United Kingdom, who found a job soon after graduating from university with an agriculture degree with a unique specialisation in pigs.

Who works part-time alongside their full-time secondary education?

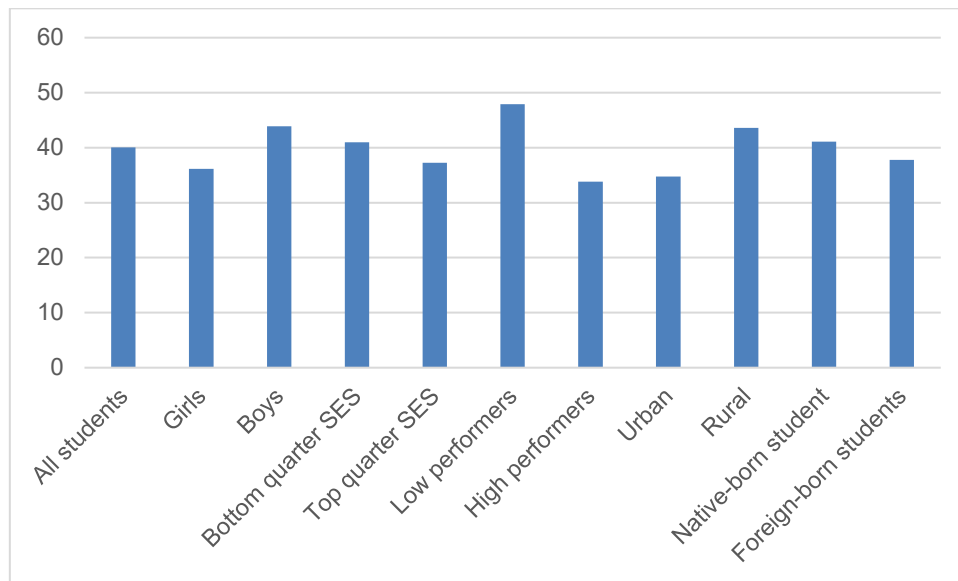
PISA 2018 finds that, on average, 40% of respondents in OECD countries agreed that they earn money from working outside school hours in more formal part-time employment. The results vary significantly between countries, with 62% of 15 year-olds in the Netherlands reporting that they had worked in a form of part-time or temporary employment, compared to only 16% of respondents in Portugal. Other students work less formally: on average across OECD countries for which data is available, 18% of 15 year-olds say that they earn money in a family business and 36% from occasional employment such as babysitting or gardening. Looking across the results, an average of 45% of students say that they have no experience of part-time work by the age of 15. However, this average hides considerable variation between countries for which data is available.

Figure 1. Percentage of 15 year-olds agreeing they had not undertaken any form of part-time employment.



Source: OECD PISA 2018 Database, <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> - (accessed on 18 October 2020). See also: (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[8]).

Focusing on more formal employment, on average across the OECD is more often boys, from lower socio-economic backgrounds, lower academic performers, rural and native born students who are more likely to work part-time.

Figure 2. Characteristics of teenage part-time working.

Source: (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[6]). OECD PISA 2018 Database - <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> (accessed on 28 January 2020), Average from participating OECD countries..

One interesting finding from the PISA 2018 survey is that students are much more likely to report part-time work if they had taken part in a career development activity. It may be that students who have greater exposure to the workplace within school become more interested in earning money alongside their full-time studies.

Table 2. Relationship between participation in school-mediated career development activities (CDA) and student likelihood of undertaking part-time work.

Percentage reporting experience of more formal part-time working.

Career development activity (CDA) undertaken	..having undertaken the CDA	..having not undertaken the CDA
Internship	51%	32%
Job Shadowing/Workplace visit	48%	33%
Job fair	46%	33%
Meeting a career counsellor in school	42%	34%
Meeting a career counsellor outside of school	49%	33%

Source: (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[6]). OECD PISA 2018 Database - <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> (accessed on 28 January 2020).

Is too much part-time work a problem?

While studies generally show that working part-time as a teenager is linked to better employment outcomes, a number of studies have looked at whether excessive hours can be detrimental to academic achievement. It is possible to imagine a young person who works every evening and weekend is taking on commitments that come at the expense of school work. Studies tend to show that more than 10-15 hours a week part-time work is likely to undermine academic achievement. Students who work more than this can expect in general to do worse academically than would otherwise be expected given their backgrounds and prior attainment (for a summary of research, see (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[7])). Studies also

tend to show that students who work fewer hours but on a more regular basis can expect better employment outcomes later on.

Should schools encourage students to work part-time?

Overwhelmingly, longitudinal studies have identified positive economic outcomes for adults who worked part-time while still teenagers while in full-time education. Positive outcomes include higher adult earnings, a reduced risk of unemployment/NEET status and greater career satisfaction compared to non-working peers. However, it should be noted that the great majority of studies are based on data from three countries (Australia, United Kingdom and the United States) and it may be that in other education systems and labour markets, impacts will be different. Schools should resist the temptation to actively discourage part-time working, but encourage students to avoid excessive hours. Schools can also actively help students to secure part-time employment, providing support with applications as seen in an example from North Carolina in the United States highlighted in the policy brief, [Getting a job: how schools can help students in the competition for employment](#).

Can schools make use of student's part-time working in career guidance?

Part-time work is an opportunity to explore what it is like to be given responsibilities and to provide a taste of employment in a particular occupational area. It is an opportunity moreover for students to reflect on the skills and attributes that are valued by employers and the opportunities presented by teenage employment to demonstrate to future employers what they are able to accomplish. Effective guidance systems will see part-time working as a learning opportunity. Students are not always aware of how valuable their part-time employment, whether more formal and informal, can be when applying for full-time employment after school. Guidance session and practice interviews – with volunteer recruiters from workplaces - can be especially useful in helping students to identify skills they have developed and the responsibilities they have undertaken and learn how they give a potential employer the confidence needed to hire someone.

Volunteering in the community

I did quite a lot of volunteer work during secondary school, which ended up being very useful for when I applied for jobs. Along with strengthening my communication and soft skills, volunteering definitely helped in filling in some gaps in my CV. It was also great to have something additional to talk about at interviews, and it makes you seem like a more well-rounded and interesting person to work with.

Bianca, 22 from the United Kingdom, who completed an undergraduate degree and now works in finance.

I did various external volunteer experiences, and they were very useful experiences. I was able to meet and have conversations with employers and senior members of my communities – which I think was very helpful towards my development.

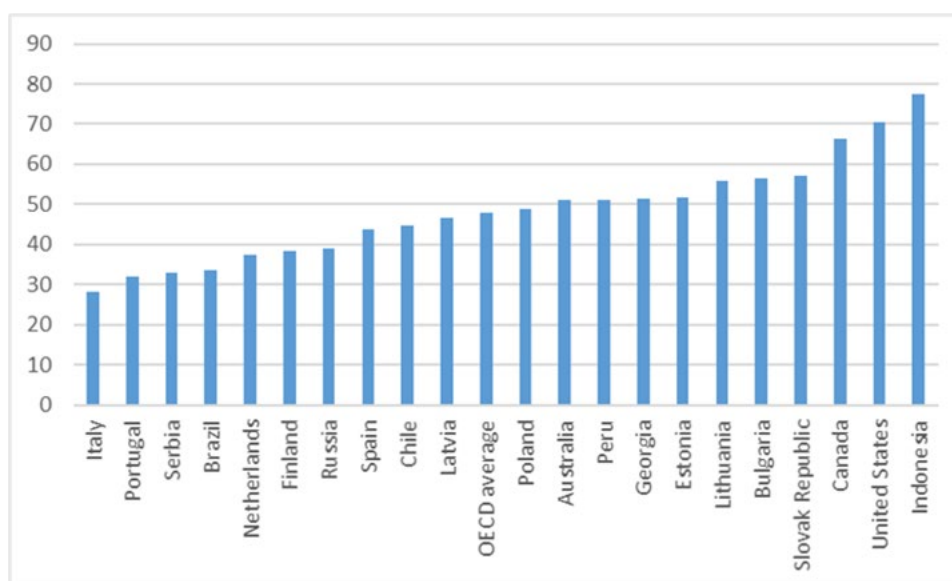
Everly, 19, from Chile, who could not find work after graduating from secondary school during the pandemic, and decided to pursue higher education.

Volunteering provides a further opportunity for students to gain a first-hand experience of the labour market undertaking roles that would be paid and working with paid professionals. In contrast to part-time working which tends to be concentrated in a small number of sectors such as retail and hospitality, volunteering provides a greater opportunity for a student to explore a career of potential interest.

Who volunteers?

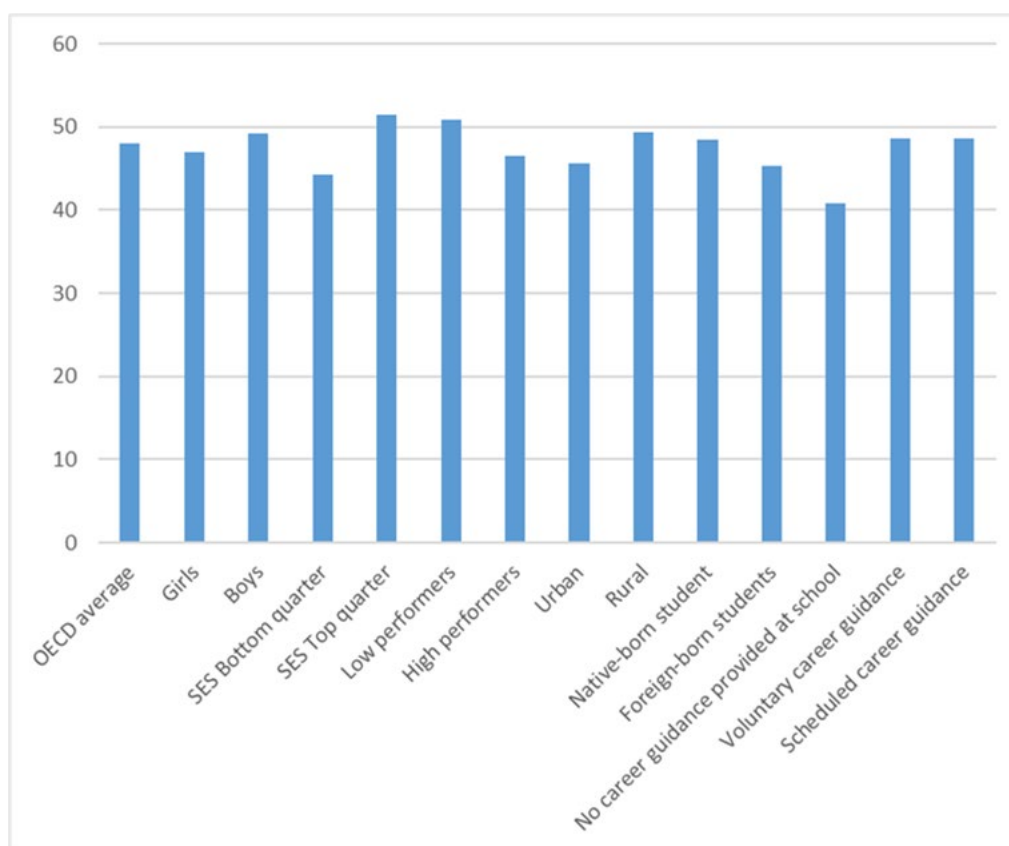
Student volunteering varies considerably between and within countries. On average, about half of students in participating OECD countries (48%) agreed that they had undertaken volunteer work, with participation ranging from 77% in Indonesia to 28% in Italy. While there is very little variation, on average, along gender and migrant background lines, teenagers who are most economically advantaged were more likely to undertake voluntary work: 51% of those who from the most advantaged socio-economic quarter agreed that they undertook voluntary work, as opposed to 44% in the most disadvantaged quarter.

Figure 3. Student participation in volunteering.



Source: (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[8]). PISA 2018 Database - <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> (accessed on 28 January 2020).

Figure 4. Characteristics of student volunteers.



Source: (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[8]). OECD PISA 2018 Database - <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> (accessed on 28 January 2020). Average from participating OECD countries.

Volunteering as an opportunity for schools and students

As an activity, volunteering is difficult to define tightly. It is the assumption behind this paper that volunteering will take place in the community with a young person undertaking tasks which provide the opportunity to develop work-related skills. However, volunteering may vary considerably by activity, duration and regularity. One common question about volunteering is whether it simply serves as a mechanism for identifying more confident and perhaps more extrovert students who might always expect better employment outcomes because of their personal characteristics. An important US study suggests that this is not the case. (Kim and Morgül, 2017^[11]) looked at the long-term experiences of teenagers who said they were made to volunteer and others who chose to volunteer. Both experienced better employment outcomes later on.

A number of studies have questioned young people about their experiences of volunteering and identified commonly held beliefs that the experience helped to develop skills which would be of ultimate value in employment (see for example, (Kay and Bradbury, 2009^[12])). Different studies highlight student perceptions of developing greater human, social and cultural capital through their volunteering. (Sikora and Green, 2020^[13]) for example, looks at survey answers from 6 500 17 year-olds in full-time education in Australia and finds that half felt that their volunteer activities gave them new skills which could be applied in a job or a business (with one in six feeling this a lot). A quarter of the students in the survey felt that their volunteering had already helped them get a paid job. Other studies highlight the development of students' social and cultural capital and find that students frequently argue that their volunteering was

connected to improvements in self-confidence, self-esteem, self-organisation, communication and skills which involve the ability to be effective when working with others in unfamiliar situations (Kay and Bradbury, 2009^[12]); (National Youth Agency, 2008^[14]); (Ockenden and Stuart, 2014^[15]); (Walsh and Black, 2015^[16]). In Costa Rica, PISA 2018 data shows that one quarter of students had undertaken volunteer work in a profession of interest for future employment.

A number of education systems require or strongly encourage students to volunteer. [The Department of Education of South Australia](#) offers an array of guidance and resources regarding volunteering including lesson plans. Among its recommendations are secondary schools should facilitate opportunities for all students to volunteer, as part of the curriculum and/or school life.

In the United States and Canada, many schools require students to meet a minimum number of volunteer community service hours before they can graduate from secondary school. In Washington DC, students have been required to undertake a minimum of 100 hours of volunteer community service with opportunities for virtual volunteering being made available during the pandemic. Volunteering opportunities are at times linked to subjects of study, providing students with clearer opportunities for career development and helping them to see the connections between classroom study and workplace experience. In the Canadian province of Ontario, students must complete at least [40 hours of community service](#) as a secondary school graduation requirement. Typical activities include many which provide some taste of potential future work in adulthood:

- Supporting Sports (e.g. timekeeping, managing a team or coaching)
- Fundraising
- Community Events, Festivals or Fairs
- Community Projects (e.g. tending a community garden)
- Youth Programs or Mentorship Programs
- Volunteer Work with Seniors
- Camp Leader or Counsellor
- Office Work for a non-profit organisation
- Committee Work (e.g. the Literacy Committee at your local library)
- Advisory Board

In Alberta, Canada a clear connection is drawn between community volunteering, career development and the wider curriculum.

Volunteering in-school provision in Alberta, Canada

High schools in the Alberta province of Canada make it easy for students to access volunteer learning opportunities through a number of extracurricular programs. One of these opportunities is the Career and Technology Studies program, which is designed to provide students (ages 14-18) with opportunities to explore their abilities and interests, and to develop skills through volunteering in the community.

The programme offers three courses that focus on volunteerism:

1. **Community Volunteerism I** – where students examine the role of volunteers in a community, perform as volunteers and evaluate their volunteering experience.

2. **Community Volunteerism II** – where students evaluate the basic structure and function of non-profit organisations in society. Students perform as volunteers with a non-profit organisation and evaluate their volunteering experience.

3. **Community Enhancement** – where students examine social change in the context of community building and apply inclusive leadership skills while participating in a specific community enhancement project. In this course, students are expected to perform at least 15 hours of volunteerism with a teacher-approved community enhancement project.

Scope for students developing skills, building social networks and enhancing career thinking through volunteering will differ with the characteristics of both the volunteer and what it is they do. For schools, volunteering represents more than scope to demonstrate the civic commitment of students, it also offers an excellent opportunity to develop career readiness, particularly if linked to a career of interest and is prepared for, and reflected upon, with a framework of career guidance.

Work placements/internships

My school had us do a week-long work experience in year 10. However, they didn't help much in getting us there. I worked at a trekking stable for a week. We didn't receive sufficient direction for it. The experience was fine, it gave me an idea of how the world of work is, but it could have been a lot better.

Grace, 24, from the United Kingdom who completed undergraduate and post-graduate degrees after leaving secondary education at age 18.

We did work experience at school, but we didn't have to apply ourselves to get the placement. They sorted it for you. I would have valued having to find my own work experience. It would have been a useful experience.

Michael, 23, a university graduate who has been looking for, and now found, full-time work in finance in the UK.

A work placement or an internship?

In 2018, an average of 35% of young people across participating OECD countries had taken part in 'an internship' by the age of 15. However, it may be that terminology used in the 2018 PISA questionnaire led to some under-reporting of participation in such placements in English-speaking countries. In this survey, countries had the opportunity to ask an additional national question. In the United Kingdom, students were asked additionally whether they had undertaken 'a one or two week work experience placement during the school term?' and 47% agreed that they had, but only 25% agreed that they had undertaken an 'internship'. In some countries, the word 'internship' is associated more closely with placements undertaken after the end of compulsory education, by university students or by unemployed young adults seeking to access a particular profession. 'Internships' are much more likely to be paid than placements arranged by secondary schools and be of longer duration.

The evidence on work placements

This project only confirms an indicator of career readiness if evidence exists in three or more countries that the activity, attitude or experience is associated with better employment outcomes. In the case of work placements, analysis of national longitudinal datasets highlights such positive relationships in two countries.

In Germany, new analysis reported in (Covacevich et al., 2021^[11]), looks at evidence from the National Educational Panel Study that follows students from age 14-16 (in 2010) to ages 23-25 (in 2018). The analysis finds that work placements were significantly associated with a decreased likelihood of being NEET later on in Germany. In Germany, in the overall sample, individuals who had undertaken an internship of several days in a company by age 18 are a quarter less likely to be NEET at age 23-25 than those who did not do a placement.

In the United Kingdom, evidence also exists. It was reported in (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[7]) and presents new analysis by independent analyst Chris Percy. Looking at an older dataset, the British Cohort Study, it was found that participation in placements by age 16 (if they were found to be useful at the time) were significantly and positively associated with greater life satisfaction. Women from more disadvantaged backgrounds were also found to be more likely to be in work at age 26 if they taken part in a placement. One interesting findings was that students without any previous experience of working part-time gained greater long-term benefits from their placements.

Another more recent study in the United Kingdom which also controls for the personal and social characteristics of students also finds evidence of work placements being linked with better employment outcomes. (Mann et al., 2017^[17]) undertook a survey of a representative sample of 1 733 young adults aged 19 to 24 and asked participants to report on their current activities in education, training or work and the school-age career-related activities they recalled. Participants who did not recall undertaking work placements reported unemployment levels (not being in education, employment or training) nearly 50% greater than those of comparable peers who had spent some time in a workplace due to their school.

Within the Career Readiness project, longitudinal data was also looked at in Australia and the United States but no associations were found of better (or worse) employment outcomes.

Levels of participation in work placements vary considerably across OECD and non-OECD countries. Participation is noticeably high in countries with stronger systems of Vocational Education Training (VET), and 15 year-olds undertaking placements are, in general terms, considerably more likely to be enrolled on programmes of VET than general secondary education (Musset and Mýtna Kureková, 2018^[18]). Work placements within the context of general education are typically designed to enable students to gain a more generic experience of the workplace. They are often seen as a tool for career exploration, and are usually administered for two weeks or less per school year (Musset, 2019^[19]). On the other hand, work placements within VET school-based programmes are typically of longer duration and linked closely to an occupationally-focused programme of study. Their main objective is to apply vocational skills within a workplace. These placements also allow employers to get to know potential recruits and for students to learn about and form connections with potential employers. Consequently, the OECD recommends that the all students enrolled on school-based secondary programmes of vocational education and training should include periods of such work-based learning (Musset, 2019^[19]).

In this policy brief within the Career Readiness project, the focus is on the former – work placements within general education as a mechanism for career exploration. Here, evidence from Australia shows that scope for securing useful information is stronger than in the case of part-time working (see table 3). (Fullarton, 1999^[20]) drew on a sample of many thousands of 15 and 16 year-olds who had both worked part-time and undertaken a one or two week work placement. She found much similarity in student perceptions, save for the helpfulness of placements in helping to inform long-term career thinking.

Table 3. Mean Ratings for Beliefs* about the Value of Work Experience and Part-time Employment, Year 10 Students, 1996

Item	Work Experience	Part-time Job
What work is really like?	3.48	3.44
Getting along with other people?	3.47	3.54
Following instructions?	3.56	3.64
Thinking for yourself?	3.38	3.50
Being confident?	3.49	3.55
Particular skills needed in that job?	3.55	3.50
Work conditions?	3.51	3.45
The career you would like after school?	3.10	2.31

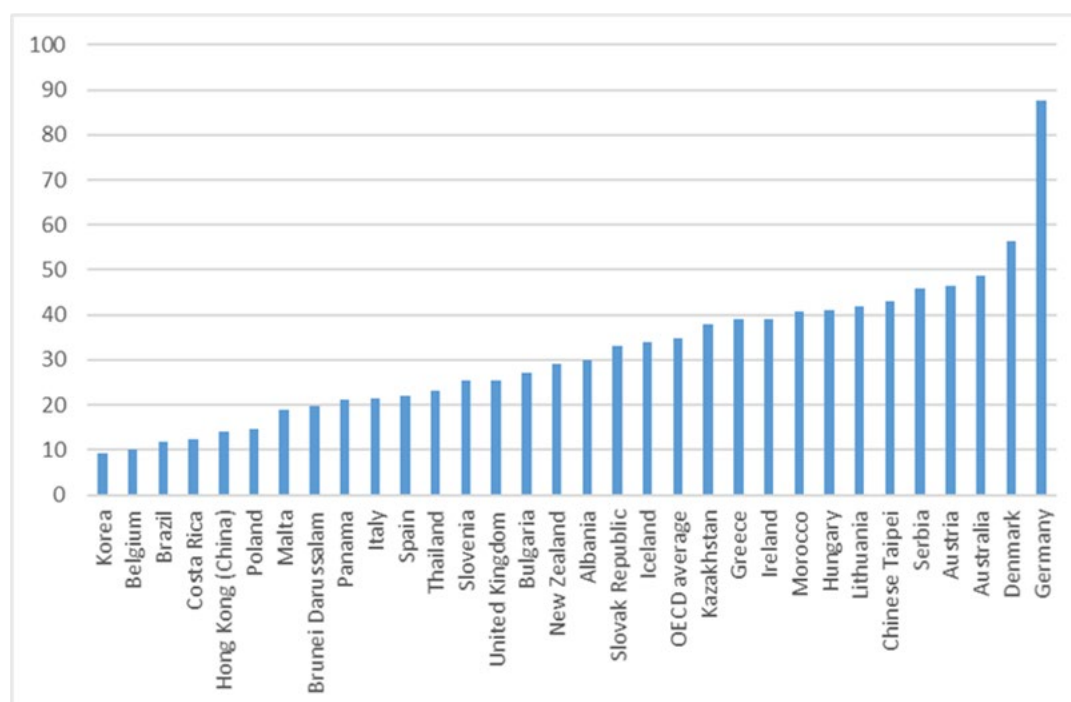
Note: These items are rated on a four-point scale where 4 = quite a bit, 3 = a fair bit, 2 = not much, 1 = nothing, so the higher the mean, the more positive the assessment of the experience.

Source: Work experience and work placements in secondary school education)(Fullarton, 1999^[20])

Who does a placement (or internship?) within their full-time secondary education?

Across countries for which data exists in the 2018 OECD PISA study, there was considerable variation between countries in the extent to which students participated in work placements.

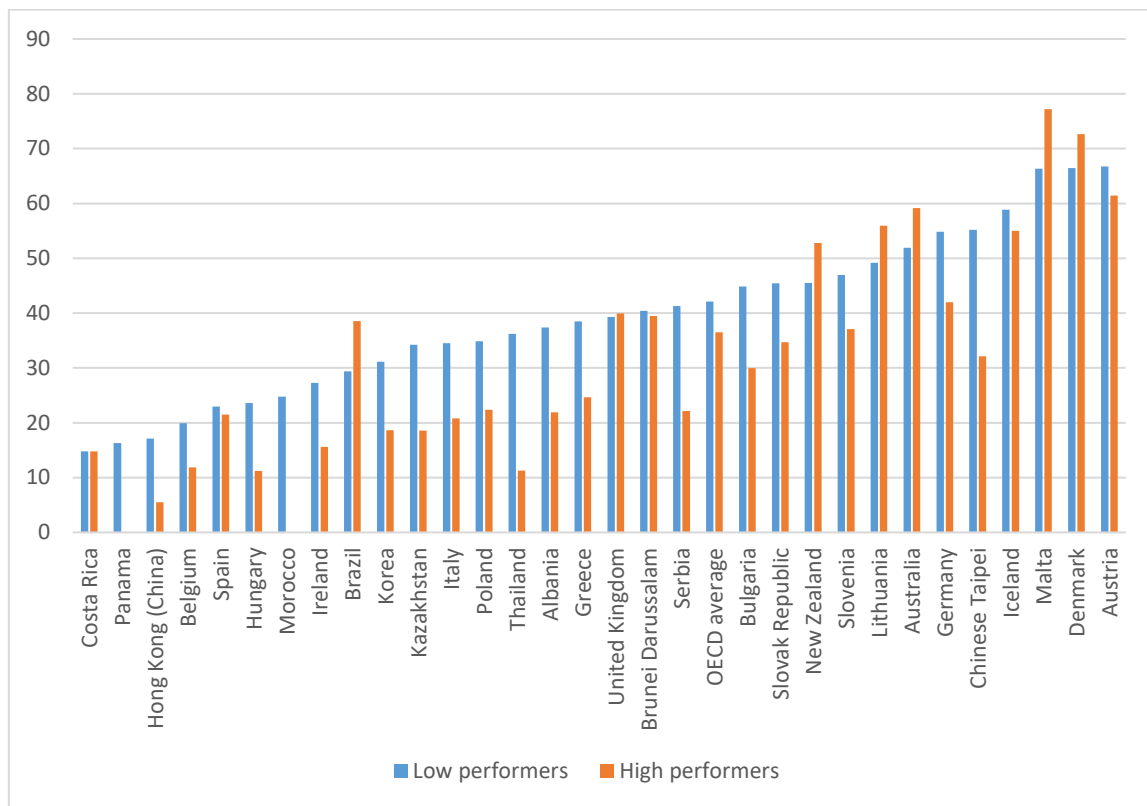
Figure 5. Participation in internships.



Source: (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[8]) OECD PISA 2018 Database - <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> (accessed on 28 January 2020).

On average, it is more commonly lower achievers (the quartile with the lowest performance on the PISA academic assessments) who are more likely to take part in this form of workplace experience. However, this is not always the case.

Figure 6. Characteristics of student participants in internships – by performance on PISA assessments in Mathematics (highest and lowest performing quartiles).



Source: (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020^[8]) OECD PISA 2018 Database - <https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database/> (accessed on 28 January 2020).

Should schools require students to undertake a placement?

It is a conclusion of the Career Readiness project that students who leave education with first-hand experience of participating in workplaces can expect smoother transitions into full-time work. The evidence around the benefits of experiences from part-time work and volunteering is particularly strong. In some countries there is little tradition of teenage employment, in others teenage participation in part-time working has sharply fallen in recent years (Bauer et al., 2019^[20]); (Conlon, Patrignani and Mantovani, 2015^[21]). (Conlon, Patrignani and Mantovani, 2015^[21]) look at the UK and identify three main reasons for the decline which may have resonance in other countries: “increasing preferences of people to focus solely on studies, a changing labour market affecting the opportunities for young people to get part-time jobs, and institutional difficulties with the incorporation of work into study timetables.”

In such circumstances, where opportunities for part-time work are becoming more challenging for students, work placements (as volunteering) becomes more important as a mechanism for ensuring that students leave education equipped with some experience of the workplace.

How can schools optimise beneficial outcomes for young people?

Studies show that while many students feel that they gain a lot from their workplace experiences, others do not. These perceptions are echoed in the longitudinal data. Research into more effective provision is limited. However, it does include important pointers towards practice that is likely to be more effective in securing long-term gains for individual students. Fundamentally, students are likely to gain greatest benefit

if the objective and character of their placement aligns with their needs. As students stay in education longer than ever before, for many a primary objective for a placement will be to help inform their career thinking and decision-making through secondary education. A taste of the workplace in an area of career interest can be a powerful experience in confirming or contesting emerging career ambitions. Jazzo from Ireland for example interviewed as part of the Career Readiness study found that taking part in two different placements helped him to better understand his own preferences for his future in work.

The best thing take my school did for me was to get me to go on two work placements. After the first one, I knew that I did not want to work in an office. The second one was in a hardware store and that made me realise that I really like to deal with people and do more hands-on work.

Jazzo, 19, from Ireland who left full-time education at 18 and is now training to be a butcher.

In such circumstances, it can be especially effective to ensure that placements include time spent job shadowing as well as undertaking a series of tasks typical of employment. For other students, there is a more immediate need for a placement to be closely aligned with a confirmed career ambition. This is the case for students enrolled on programmes of vocational education linked to specific occupational areas and for students planning early entry to the labour market. Here, effective placements can be expected to be of longer duration and closely linked to occupational ambitions. Through their placements, students can anticipate building skills that clearly demonstrate capacity and suitability for such employment, developing social networks of long-term value. For students planning on continuing their studies in an occupationally specific area such as medicine or law, placements can moreover strengthen university applications and are at times requirements for entry into tertiary programmes of study (Jones et al., 2019^[22]).

Undertake more than one placement - at younger and older ages

Consequently, placements undertaken on more than one occasion, in both lower and upper-secondary education can serve these purposes, first confirming ambitions and then enabling progression towards them. Short placements or periods of job shadowing undertaken during lower secondary education can be especially helpful in decision-making before progression to upper-secondary education. By illustration, a 2012 study of a representative sample of one thousand young British adults (aged 19-24), found that work placements undertaken in school were seen as having been most helpful to students who undertook them both before and after the age of 16 years (Mann and Kashefakdel, 2014^[23]).

Table 4. Work experience – perceptions of utility

How useful was it to you in later life?	Total	Work experience undertaken only pre-16	Work experience undertaken at both 14-16 and at 17-18
Getting a job after education	27% (9%)	22% (6%)	43% (23%)
Deciding on a career	58% (20%)	50% (14%)	82% (41%)
Number	694	498	82

Note: The figures given show both the percentage of all young adults (ages 19-24) who had undertaken work placements while in school who found them to be helpful and (in brackets), the percentage (of all respondents) who found the experiences to be very helpful in getting a job after education or deciding on a career.

Source: (Mann and Kashfepakdel, 2014^[23]). “The views of young Britons (aged 19-24) on their teenage experiences of school-mediated employer engagement” in Mann, A. et al. eds, *Understanding employer engagement in education*, Routledge.

Manage access to address inequalities and enhance quality

Inequalities in access to the placements have also been seen to influence the character and utility of placements. A further conclusion of the study by (Mann and Kashfepakdel, 2014^[23]) was that young adults who had attended fee paying schools were consistently more likely to feel that their placements had proved helpful to them.

PISA 2018 shows that students have never been more ambitious in their plans for working life. Across the OECD, 62% of 15 year-olds now expect to work in a professional or managerial role in adulthood, compared to an average of 53% in 2000. This is in general a good thing and high ambitions should be encouraged by schools (ref – Thinking about the future). However, because students often make use of family connections to source work placements, social background can play a big part in determining the quality of the experience. Looking closely at the experiences of students in five British schools, (Hatcher and Le Gallais, 2008^[24]) argue that “work experience in schools tends to reflect and reproduce existing patterns of social class inequality in the school system and the labour market.” They find that students in schools where higher proportions of parents were from more advantaged social backgrounds “were much less likely to undertake menial tasks and much more likely to undertake responsible tasks and work-shadowing, and to be treated as a colleague and to receive mentoring in a professional context.” To address this risk, they find that in a school where students were more closely counselled and supported in identifying and securing placements they were more likely to gain higher quality work experiences. Schools often prefer students to find their own placements as it is cheaper to organise and helps students gain experience and confidence in approaching employers. These are not trivial considerations. One approach which would retain these advantages while addressing the problematic role of social inequalities in shaping access to placements would be to require all students in a cohort to approach employers to secure a pool placements within an enterprise activity and then for a career counsellor to work with individual students to identify the most appropriate placements for individuals. Students with special educational needs can be expected to require greater support, ensuring that placements are appropriately supportive and that the expectations of employers are well managed.

Plan before, reflect afterwards

The full benefits of placements are unlikely to be secured unless students are able to understand and conceptualise them in appropriate ways (Jones, Mann and Morris, 2016^[10]). Therefore, schools should encourage students to critically examine, discuss, and reflect upon their work placement experience. Visits to students while on placements and requiring students to keep notes about what they are learning while in the workplace can be expected to help in such reflection. They can be in the form of providing an Experience Review Form at the start of their time with the employer, to be completed throughout and after the conclusion of the placement.

Finland: Two-week practical work experience in companies

Since 1970, career education has been embedded in the Finnish educational system and its core curriculum. In Finland, students in grades 7-9 (ages 13-16) are required to complete 76 hours of compulsory career education. Additionally, since the 1980s Finnish students have been entitled to two weeks of practical work experience in workplaces. The initiative provides students with first-hand exposure to the labour market. It is part of the core curriculum and takes place on school days. Normally, work placements take place for one week in grade 8 (ages 14-15) and one week in grade 9 (ages 15-16). Placements are timed to take place prior to students making the decision (at age 16) to continue onto upper-secondary education. The programme is actively managed. Work placements are spaced out through the year with schools being allocated specific weeks with employers in order to increase student access to desirable placements and to ensure that employers do not become overwhelmed. The Confederation of Finnish Industries supports the initiative and is systematically involved in its provision.

Finland has also developed a web-based platform ('TET-tori'), which offers students (as well as school counsellors and parents) the opportunity to find and apply for work experience placements online. This platform has been operating for 20 years and was jointly designed by employers, schools, parents, and local chambers of commerce. Students receive information on the available vacancies in their region and their respective requirements and expectations, which enables them to make informed decisions on their prospective placements. TET-tori not only manages the logistics of work placements, but also develops a range of materials designed to be useful for students transitioning out of education. The website provides many resources for students, including how to apply for jobs and how to prepare for an interview. At the same time, the tool also helps employers and workplaces to easily connect with pupils and bring working life closer to school. Employers receive information on the legal preconditions for the period, insurance implications, and advice on providing supervision and how to engage their employees in the process. Employers often see the work experience placements as an opportunity to market their workplace for future prospective employees.

Students are expected to apply for themselves for placements with employers and many must interview before being confirmed for the placement. At the start of their time with the employer, students are provided with an Experience Review Form, which they complete after the conclusion of the placement. This encourages them to critically examine and explore the relationship between education and employment, and to discuss and reflect on their experience in order to develop self-understanding.

The bottom line: encouraging and enabling students to gain first-hand experience of work while in secondary education can be expected to have long-term benefits

To maximise the benefits of workplace experience, schools can help students to:

- understand the long-term value of part-time working
- volunteer in the community in areas linked to career ambitions
- participate in, and reflect, on short work placements linked to career ambitions

Career Readiness in the Pandemic

The OECD Career Readiness project provides policy makers and practitioners with evidenced guidance on how schools can best prepare young people for employment during a period of economic disruption. The project makes particular use of the results from the 2018 round of PISA and new analysis of national longitudinal datasets in ten countries.



For more information

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See: [Career Readiness in the Pandemic](#)

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This report was realised by the Career Readiness team at the OECD with the support of the JPMorgan Chase Foundation. The views expressed in this report should not be taken to reflect the official position of the JPMorgan Chase Foundation.

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