

Work Experience Schemes: advice for educators on health and safety

Summary

Many young people benefit from taking part in work experience placements. But work can be hazardous, especially for young people. Young workers face a greater risk of accident and ill health than older workers, for a range of reasons including inexperience, lack of training, and lack of physical and mental maturity. Every year young workers die, and many more have their lives devastated by work-related accidents and illness. But there are things that can be done to control these hazards and risks effectively. As a teacher or trainer, you can help make sure that work experience placements are with employers who understand their responsibilities in relation to young people - who assess the risks that young workers face, and put in place measures to protect them, including supplying protective equipment, providing training and supervision, and working out which jobs it is safe for them to do. You can also engage with young people on health and safety issues, ensuring that they understand the risks they will face in the workplace, and what they need to do to keep safe.

Introduction

Work experience is important for young people, as it provides them with the opportunity to gain first-hand knowledge of the work environment. Research has shown that pre-16 work experience schemes, undertaken as part of vocational courses, result in the widening of young people's experiences, function as a motivational tool, and help to improve the self-confidence of those engaged in the project. Conversely, lack of work experience may make it more difficult for young people to promote themselves as suitable candidates for jobs, which can result in prolonged periods of job searching and even to long-term unemployment.

However, work experience is not always the positive experience that it should be. Work can pose risks, especially to young people who are new to it. The reasons for this increased vulnerability include: lack of experience of the work environment, lack of understanding of workplace hazards and how accidents can happen, a lack of safety and health training, and a lack of physical and emotional maturity. Young people are most at risk during the first few weeks of starting work.

For these reasons, health and safety should be considered at all stages in the planning, organisation and monitoring of work experience placements, and this summary offers some advice on how this can be done.



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Legal Aspects

While occupational safety and health is the subject of common legislation throughout the EU, education and training remain primarily the responsibility of individual Member States. That means that the law can vary between countries - two examples of different Member State approaches are given below.

In the UK, individuals involved in work experience, such as students and trainees (inclusive of children) are treated under health and safety law as employees. They are entitled to the same health, safety and welfare protection as any other employee, and companies that offer a work experience placement to students have the same responsibilities for their health, safety and welfare as for the rest of their workforce.

In Germany the state provides separate accident insurance arrangements for students (Pupils' Accident Insurance), ensuring that they are covered in the event of any accidents while on the job or while they are on the way to and from school, or if they suffer from any occupational illness.

The health and safety of young people on work experience who are under 18 is covered by Council Directive 94/33/EC of 22 June 1994 on the protection of young people at work. This sets out minimum requirements, and again the precise restrictions may vary between Member States. Companies need to ensure, for example, that students should not work more than an eight-hour day, and work for only five days a week. The working time for the placement should be agreed between the school, the employer, parents/guardians and the student. Employers need to carry out a risk assessment before a student can be placed, and to make certain that their work insurance adequately covers the student for the full time of the placement.

As a general rule *under-18s are not allowed to carry out work which:*

- exceeds their physical or mental capacities;
- exposes them to substances which are toxic or cause cancer;
- exposes them to radiation;
- involves extreme heat, noise or vibration;
- involves risks that they are unlikely to recognise or avoid because of their lack of experience or training or their insufficient attention to safety.

Exceptions can be made for young people who are over the minimum school leaving age, where work is essential for their vocational training, where they are properly supervised by a competent person, and where the risks are reduced to the lowest level possible.



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For young workers of 18 and over, employers must still carry out a risk assessment and should take account of their age and inexperience when deciding which tasks they can perform, and identifying their training and supervision requirements.

Some terms explained:

- a hazard means anything that can cause you harm;
- a risk is the chance, high or low, that you will be harmed;
- risk control involves taking steps to reduce the chance, and/or the consequences, of the hazard causing you harm;
- risk assessment involves evaluating the risks and deciding whether precautions are adequate, or whether more should be done.

Organising Work Placements

An Integrated Approach

When organising work placements there are issues for consideration before, during and after the placement has taken place. It is good practice for work placement schemes to be properly integrated into the school's curriculum, with clear aims and objectives. And health and safety considerations should be properly integrated into the planning process. It is of prime importance that the work experience placement is safe for young people, so that it can be completed without injury, and also so that it can provide an opportunity to learn about the management of occupational safety and health in the workplace.

Before the Work Experience Placement

There are various things that can be done before the work experience placement begins, which can contribute to a smoother and more effective process. These include:

Arranging Pre-placement Visits

Schools should try, if possible, to arrange a pre-placement visit for their students to the organisations they will be working with. This can help in matching the needs, interests and capabilities of students to the organisation's requirements. Schools should take account also of any limitations that the students may have. The visit could help therefore in matching the right student to the right job.



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The Importance of Meticulous Preparation

In any situation, rigorous preparation helps to improve your chances of success. With work experience, you should ensure that:

- students are properly prepared and briefed on the hazards of the workplace, and measures in place to reduce or eliminate the risk of injury, before they start work;
- employers, workplace supervisors and other employees know exactly what is expected of them and are aware of their legal responsibilities;
- the school is clear about its responsibilities in arranging placements for students and introducing them to issues of health and safety at work, prior to their placement.

You should also ensure that:

- organisers are given relevant information regarding students, regarding health concerns, learning disabilities, language problems etc;
- the provider has appointed someone to take overall responsibility for work experience students;
- the provider has arrangements in place to ensure that work experience students are properly supervised, and that they receive health and safety induction and training;
- the provider has outlined the type of work that the students will be doing, and provided any personal protective equipment that is required;
- the provider has made arrangements for students with special needs;
- the provider has appropriate procedures for handling any accidents or other emergencies.

Carrying out a Risk Assessment

The use of risk assessments is essential when organisations wish to employ young people. The risk assessment needs to take account of:

- the young workers' lack of experience;
- their limited awareness of risks;
- their immaturity, both physical and mental.

Moreover, those responsible for assessing the suitability of a work experience placement should check that:

- a suitable health and safety management system exists in the organisation;
- the employer has identified the hazards present in the workplace and has taken suitable precautions;
- the work is suitable for young people;
- the employer will provide adequate supervision to young people during their work experience, to prevent harm.



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Engaging with the Students on Health and Safety Issues

Discussions should be held with students prior to the work experience placement, covering such subjects as:

- identifying and reporting hazards, accidents and ill health;
- the use of personal protective equipment and other protective measures;
- the need to follow instructions carefully.

Addressing Students' Concerns

The prospect of working in a new and unfamiliar environment may make students experience a range of emotions. Any concerns should be addressed before the students start their work experience placements.

Feelings: These can range from excitement at starting something new, to nervousness about the situation or feeling slightly daunted, wanting to perform well and not make a mistake.

Attitude: Having a positive or negative attitude to the experience.

Bullying: Fears of bullying when at work and concerns about how to address it.

Travelling to work: Concerns about travelling to and from work, especially on the first day. A test run could be made the day before.

At the Start of the Work Experience

The following examples of good practice are recommended, although some are more relevant to larger organisations and some to smaller ones.

Induction Programme

A suitable induction programme and a monitoring scheme at the employer's premises helps to promote a health and safety, and help students make the most of their learning opportunity.

The training should cover the health and safety hazards in the workplace, prohibited areas, safety precautions, emergency procedures, first aid and accident reporting, key safety people, distribution and explanation of any safety literature, checking that students have understood the rules and the importance of following them, the importance of asking questions if in doubt, and who to contact if supervisors are not available .



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After the Work Experience

Any programme, on its completion, should incorporate an assessment of its successes and failures, so that adjustments and improvements can be made.

De-briefing

Following the work experience placement, a de-briefing session should be conducted. This ensures that there is a sharing of experience among the students, and emphasises the importance of a healthy and safe working environment. It also enables lessons learned during the work placement to be absorbed fully. In addition, this feedback session provides the school or college with information on the standards of health and safety of the specific organisation involved, and is particularly useful in detecting any deterioration that may have occurred following previous placements.

Lessons Learned

The students should be given the opportunity to highlight any of the lessons that they have learned while on the placement. These lessons could be to do with the way the placement related to the curriculum and to the student's career choice. The lessons could also relate to any key skills that may have been developed, and students' experience of health and safety on the placement. This session could provide the opportunity for the students to assess the employers, and for employers to assess the students.

Evaluation

Evaluations of the work placement schemes should be carried out periodically, to ensure that they are meeting their aims and objectives, and to assess how best to improve the placements.

Ways to Improve Work Experience

Schools and educators should maintain regular contact with the organisations providing the work experience. This allows them to check that the general standards of the respective organisations are upheld for future placements.

Students with Learning Disabilities

While the majority of students on work placements may not require additional attention, those students with learning disabilities may need greater assistance. Learning disabilities may be defined as "experiencing difficulty with literacy and numeracy skills and having restricted social skills."



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Some of the support systems that have been used throughout the EU include:

Cyprus

- The provision of regular workplace supervision and close liaison with local employers, in the last two years of compulsory special schooling;
- The provision of a 'job coach' whose role is to support students with learning disabilities in the workplace until such time as they are confident enough to cope unaided.

France

- The availability of a training team to aid in finding housing, negotiating public transport routes to work, managing budgeting and establishing community links.

UK

- The establishment of a 'User's Forum' in which trainees support one another through shared experience;
- The use of an external facilitator to avoid there being competing loyalties, which might arise if internal staff members were used.

Checklist of good practice for including health and safety in work placement arrangements (adapted from ref. 3)

- do employers have the necessary health and safety arrangements in place, and the necessary insurance arrangements?
- have pre-visits been made by a competent person to see how health and safety is dealt with in the workplace, to identify any hazards that students might face, and ensure that competent persons will supervise the work experience?
- are periodic re-visits planned, depending on the severity of risks present?
- has the employer been asked to specify the processes and machinery that students should be kept away from? Have they made a written undertaking to prohibit students from carrying out tasks that are too hazardous for young and inexperienced people, or which are prohibited by law, to make a risk assessment before the student starts, and to put in place all the protective measures necessary for young employees?
- is there a clear understanding and agreement established between school or college and the placement provider, regarding responsibilities? This includes deciding which activities students will undertake and will not undertake, dealing with any special needs that students have, or behavioural difficulties, and making arrangements



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- for briefing, instruction, training and supervision (including during breaks). Employers are best placed to brief on specific precautions related to specific tasks, and to ensure that line managers are properly briefed. The school or college should cover with students their general responsibilities to co-operate on health and safety and to follow instructions, and caution them about their inexperience;
- are the age of students and the risks they may face taken into account when planning and deciding the suitability of placements? Are employers informed of the student's precise age when they start work, so they can take account of age-related prohibitions and the student's inexperience or immaturity when assigning tasks?
 - how are parents to be informed of the outcome of risk assessments and measures in place to protect young people (this is required of employers, though schools and colleges can help with it)?
 - do students have an opportunity to meet their supervisor before starting the placement? Are they informed of the outcome of the employer's risk assessment?
 - especially where there are several consecutive placements, is a formal agreement made which specifies and clarifies arrangements?
 - do any briefing sessions involving students and teachers include health and safety risk assessments? Is health and safety included in briefing sessions on individual placements, including the student's own responsibilities?
 - if the student reports any health and safety issues to the school, are there arrangements for following this up with the employer and getting them to revise their risk assessment? Are there arrangements for contacting the appropriate authority if a serious incident occurs?
 - are student preparation and feedback used as an opportunity to promote the teaching of risk awareness to students (which may be required by the school curriculum)?
 - is a discussion of the student's experience of health and safety included in debriefings and evaluations?
 - do records of progress on individual student placements cover health and safety responsibilities?
 - do staff with a responsibility for co-ordinating training placements have a basic knowledge of health and safety?
 - have you obtained and are you following any guidance, policies and procedures on health and safety on placements from your Member State Health and Safety Authority or Education Authority?



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Essential questions to ask employers providing work experience regarding their health and safety management

(Adapted from ref. 20)

- do you have a health and safety policy? How do you implement it?
- are your risk assessments up-to-date? Do they cover risks to young people on work experience?
- what measures have you taken to control risks to young people on work experience?
- who is responsible for work experience students?
- how will work experience students be supervised and given health and safety induction training?
- can you provide a clear plan for the work experience placement?
- can you make the necessary arrangements for young people with special needs? (Work experience organisers will need to provide employers in advance with relevant information so they can take this into account in their risk assessments).

Additional questions that will help you assess how well employers pay attention to health and safety include:

- what are your procedures for dealing with accidents and emergencies?
- what fire safety training do you provide for staff and work experience students?
- what first aid arrangements do you have (personnel trained in first aid, equipment, procedures, record keeping)?
- what are your procedures for reporting and recording accidents?
- do you consult employees on health and safety, and do you have appointed worker safety representatives?
- do you provide the necessary protective equipment?

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