

Many would argue that preparing young people for the workplace is one of the most important tasks a school can fulfil, which is why curriculum managers consider it a priority to pay close attention to their work-related learning programme to ensure it gives their students the best preparation possible for when they head out into the world of work. This month's Case in Point looks at how to approach this with success.

Preparing students for the world of work

Now that work-related learning has a higher profile within the curriculum, there are more elements for curriculum managers to consider so that they can be sure to plan the right provision for their students. Prue Huddleston unpicks misconceptions that exist concerning the purposes of work-related education across the 14–19 landscape to give you a clearer understanding of the core issues you need to address to ensure your students are ready for the workplace

Work-related learning (WRL) is an important part of the school curriculum and is a statutory requirement for all Key Stage 4 learners. A new framework from the Qualifications and Curriculum Development Agency (QCDA), formerly the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority (QCA) – *Economic wellbeing 11–19: career, work-related learning and enterprise* (QCA, 2008) – replaces the nine-element framework for work-related learning developed in 2003 to support the statutory requirement at KS4.

Preparing for work, or preparing for life?

The Education Act 2002 defines work-related learning as:

... planned activity designed to use the context of work to develop knowledge, skills and understanding useful in work, including learning through the experience of work, learning about work and working practices and learning the skills for work. (DfES, 2002)

A major strand of current Government policy for the reform of 14–19 education and training is predicated on increasing

WRL experiences

- Curriculum-linked visits to workplaces
- Visitors from business and the community into school, including former students
- Industry days and challenges
- Careers fairs and information
- Work simulation and roleplay
- Work-shadowing
- Mentors
- Enterprise projects
- Mock interviews
- 'Live' projects from external organisations
- Specifically designed vocational programmes

exposure of young people to the realities of the workplace, including aligning qualifications more closely to the needs of employers. This emphasis on both work-related and work-based learning puts pressure on a range of stakeholders, not just on employers, although they are expected to assume significant responsibility:

Career, work-related learning and enterprise education is essential to the preparation of young people for transition to adulthood. It provides the connection between learning and earning, equipping young people with the knowledge, skills and attributes needed to enter and thrive in the working world. (QCA, 2008, p2)

However, work-related learning is not specific to this age range. It has long been integrated within aspects of the primary curriculum, and it is here that many exciting and innovative approaches have appeared (see, for example, the work of Rotherham primary schools at: www.rotherhamready.org.uk). It is also a feature of post-16 education: the rationale for much of the work of further education (FE) colleges is the centrality of work-related learning and work-based learning. According to DCSF (2007):

Work-related learning enriches the curriculum and learners' experience by providing a broad range of learning activities that have been shown to help to raise standards, improve participation, increase attainment and support the delivery of improved outcomes for young people. (p4)

These are significant claims and suggest that the impact of work-related learning has potentially far-reaching consequences beyond simply an 'experience of work'. Herein lies much of the problem, since advocates of WRL appear to 'protest too much' in terms of its efficacy 'in reaching those parts that other (education) does not

reach' (Huddleston and Oh, 2004). For this reason we must be far more rigorous not only in our approaches to the delivery of WRL, but also in the ways in which we seek to evaluate it and to measure outcomes – not just by the 'light in the eye', or the 'feelgood factor', but in sustained tracking over time:

Where the literature yields less is in studies relating to pupils' learning. There is an absence of large-scale longitudinal research in the field, and therefore, it is difficult to quantify with any accuracy the real long-term learning outcomes. (Centre for Education and Industry [CEI], 2002, p11)

Planning a positive work-related learning programme

Given that work experience at Key Stage 4, in terms of time commitment, takes up to about half a GCSE programme, then the opportunity cost of engaging in such activity is substantial, particularly if that experience is poorly planned, has no clear learning outcomes, and is inadequately debriefed. If done well, with all the appropriate quality benchmarks in place, it can be a highly motivating experience for learners, particularly where such learning has clear curriculum links, appears to have relevance for the learner and speaks to their interests.

Ofsted (2007) makes reference to the types of work-related experience that are more likely to provide positive outcomes. It reports that students interviewed in its survey were positive about their work experience when they were able to make links between study and work, and when they could identify new skills development.

These things need to be planned for, just as you would for any other aspect of curriculum development:

Progress was most often good in schools with an energetic and thoughtful approach to curriculum development and work-related learning. (Ofsted, 2007)

CBI competency-based framework for developing employability

- Self-management
 - Teamworking
 - Business and customer awareness
 - Problem-solving
 - Communications and literacy
 - Application of numeracy
 - Application of information technology
- (CBI, 2007, p6)

Experience of WRL

Work experience is just one form of work-related learning, albeit the most extensive with approximately 95% of 14 to 16-year-olds undertaking work experience of one or more weeks, but there are many other ways in which young people gain experience of, for and about work. They include the examples listed in the box bottom left on page 3.

The list is not exhaustive and does not include the significance of part-time work for young people at 16+. At the end of October 2008, the *Annual population survey – workplace analysis* (Office for National Statistics, 2008) revealed that a total of 663,700 young people aged 16-19 were in part-time employment in England, a substantial proportion of whom are likely to be students. The figures do not reveal the extent of any 'casual' employment of this age group. Serious questions should be asked about the extent and nature of work-related learning that is being acquired in this way, but so often little attention is given to it.

As John Dewey reminds us: 'example is notoriously more powerful than precept' (Dewey, 1916, p21). These experiences can be used in the school context, for example, to:

- enrich learning in business studies
- contribute to understandings of workplace rights and responsibilities in citizenship
- develop financial capability through earning one's own money.

It is also recognised that young people in such part-time employment may also receive training, certainly in health and safety, food hygiene, where applicable, and often in customer service. How much of this is being transferred into classroom practice to inform learning? This type of experience also provides opportunities for young people to develop those 'employability' skills much lauded by employers.

Do employers speak with forked tongue?

Employers' alleged dissatisfaction with the skills of school-leavers is a familiar litany. It gets a reprise in the report from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI) *Time well spent – embedding employability in work experience* (CBI, 2007). In it we read the all-too familiar dissatisfaction that employers (proxy CBI) have with school-leavers and graduates too, we are told. Nevertheless, whole sectors of the economy are happy to run on part-time labour, many of whom are students, and yet complain about young people's lack of 'employability' skills. Are these the same employers, or are they just seeing things differently?

There are some problems here. The CBI represents, in the main, large employers; the majority of work experience placements are provided by small enterprises, whose views are difficult to canvass. The numbers of school-leavers, say at age 16, directly entering the labour market has dwindled over the past decade, and is likely to reduce further given the raising participation agenda. So who are these school-leavers?

Developing skills

There is a need to differentiate between 'workready' and broader skills that are important in life more generally as well as in employment.

The CBI report sets out a seven-point framework of competencies that it regards as central to the development of employability ('a set of attributes, skills and knowledge that all labour market participants should possess to ensure they have the capability of being effective in the workplace') – see the box above left.

These are important for success in contexts beyond the boundaries of the work-

place and a good school would seek to develop and foster them in its young people, not simply as a preparation for employment but as a preparation for life. These should be reflected in the aims of the school and find expression within the specifications for functional skills, currently being piloted, and personal learning and thinking skills (PLTS), which are integral to the new diplomas and indeed should be for all qualifications.

Programmes designed for pre-16 learners are often very different in their character from those designed for post-16. Research carried out by Stasz and Wright (2004) helpfully makes distinctions between pre-16 and post-16 vocational, so-called, learning programmes in terms of their orientation and anticipated outcomes. For the pre-16 group programme goals are often very wide, including:

- 'understanding the world of work'
- 'learning how businesses operate'
- 'improving motivation and attendance'
- 'developing awareness of employment opportunities and their diversity'
- 'developing skills for enterprise and employability' (Stasz and Wright, 2004, p4).

For the post-16 group, goals are more likely to be framed in terms of:

- 'achieving vocational qualifications'
- 'facilitating transition to FE, higher education (HE) or employment'
- 'greater labour market orientation' (Stasz and Wright, p4).

Often this distinction may be reflected in terms of weaker (pre-16) or stronger (post-16) vocational offerings.

These programmes involve different types of learning, some of which may be quite superficial, whereas others require 'deep learning' and 'knowledge transfer'. We

Opportunities for skills development

Through their subject work, pupils can develop and present their ideas through discussions, presentations and debates. For example:

- In design and technology, young people develop their ideas, work to a brief, either alone or with others, and bring projects/artefacts to fruition, thus developing problem-solving and teamwork skills
- In business studies, there are opportunities to identify market opportunities and associated promotional techniques both theoretically and through engagement in a Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship

(NFTE) programme (offered by the Enterprise Education Trust – see: www.nfte.co.uk) or through Young Enterprise

- There are plenty of opportunities too in science subjects (for more information of the range of activities available see: www.stemnet.org.uk)
- In the performing arts there are limitless opportunities to bring together the skills of the communicator, the organiser, the designer, the business manager, the problem solver, the negotiator, and yet such teamworking opportunities may not always be recognised

Characteristics of effective WRL provision

- Excellent management and support from the school leadership team
- A clear policy and strategy for WRL, including clear aims and learning objectives that are recognised by all staff
- Appropriately trained and qualified staff, supported by a programme of external and in-house professional development
- Adequacy and sufficiency of resources to support WRL, internally and externally
- A defined and coherent entitlement for all students that is well integrated across the curriculum, as well as allowing for extra-curricular opportunities, with recorded learning outcomes
- Monitoring of levels of student and staff satisfaction with work-related learning activities and delivery
- Involving business and community partners in a meaningful and authentic manner

(Adapted from CEI: *Excellence in Work-related Learning Award* – see: www2.warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/cei/awards/workrelatedlearning)

need to know much more about how and what pupils learn in work-related contexts.

The rapidly changing nature of employment, including job security, requires a focus on a more generic set of skills that will enable young people to survive in an uncertain world, not just the world of work. These I would describe as ‘threshold skills’. How best can schools ensure adequate opportunities for students to develop these skills?

There are a range of opportunities available to schools, both within and beyond the curriculum, to help with such skills development – see the box bottom right on page 4 for examples.

Sometimes all that is required is to think about things in a different way. A useful starting point is a curriculum audit. This will help you to identify opportunities within subjects for integrating work-related learning opportunities. A survey undertaken by CEI (CEI, 2002) identified opportunities for work-related learning across the majority of the curriculum at Key Stage 3 and 4 as well as opportunities within specifications for GCSE and GCE. It is a *sine qua non* of vocational programmes that they are work-related; they definitely should be.

What can schools do?

Given that work-related learning is a statutory requirement at KS4, schools have

to make provision for it, but the success of such provision will be dependent on a number of factors – see the box left.

Evidence from the DCSF (2007) report *Building on the best* points to the fact that students gain their work-related learning experience in a variety of different ways, contexts, and across different subject areas, or through courses leading to vocational qualifications. This learning is not always recognised or made explicit. One of the most fundamental, and yet insufficiently addressed, questions is: ‘What has actually been learned?’ and the supplementary question put to me by a young person whom I was watching participate in an enterprise activity: ‘Just what are we supposed to be doing here?’ Judging by the way in which the activity was being conducted, I had sympathy with his question. Again, opportunity cost sprang to mind: might he have been better occupied improving his literacy and numeracy skills? At least there was compensation in the fact that he was clearly a reflective learner.

Schools frequently rely on the services of intermediary bodies, or brokers, to provide elements of work-related learning activity for them. Some of these may be Education-Business Partnerships (EBPs), but there are many which are not.

Education Business Link Organisations (EBLOs) are a diverse set of organisations, some national, others more local, that have developed over time into a veritable cottage industry of provision. The quality of the offer has been noted as ‘variable’, some of it excellent, some poor (DCSF/DIUS 2008). Because there have been no quality standards, it has been difficult for schools to make informed judgements about what they are buying.

In its drive to improve the quality of work-related learning, the DCSF has developed national quality standards for intermediary organisations and national quality standards for work experience delivery (see: DCSF 2009a, 2009b, 2009c). In future, only those organisations meeting the standards will be eligible for funding.

Given the additional demands that will be made on employers for work-related learning opportunities, including work experience with the introduction of diplomas, this emphasis on quality is important. Key success factors for diplomas will be the extent to which ‘work-relatedness’ is integrated into the learning programme, where tasks are authentic, set in realistic learning environments and delivered by staff with recent and relevant experience of the sector.

Challenges

The current 14–19 reform agenda poses significant challenges for schools, indeed for all those engaged in 14–19 education and training, faced as they are with substantial change in the curriculum, in qualifications, in institutional and organisational arrangements, funding, and in the number of young people remaining within the system. Work-related learning will be central to much of this proposed reform; the reforms will not be successful without it. However, it requires a broader definition and understanding of what is meant by WRL, not just as preparation for a narrowly defined concept of work, but as a broader prepara-

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tion for life beyond the classroom, the workshop and the laboratory. It also requires us to understand how and what young people learn from engaging in such activities; simply giving them more of it will not serve unless we know this.

A good start is to audit provision to:

- identify where and how WRL is embedded within the whole curriculum
- check policies and strategies exist for delivery
- identify resources and staff development needs
- measure learning outcomes over time
- and most importantly ask young people their views.

Benefits to young people, staff and schools

The Work-related learning guide (DCSF, 2009a) identifies a range of potential bene-

fits from work-related learning activities for young people, their teachers and schools. These include:

- 'helping young people think about career choices'
- 'developing employability skills'
- 'helping the (teachers) connect their subjects to the world of work'
- 'offer professional development opportunities' (subject updating)
- 'enhancing the learning experiences and the opportunities they (schools) provide for their students'. (DCSF, 2009a)

The guide also makes suggestions regarding 'increased levels of attainment and participation rates'. But such causality is much more difficult to attribute.

Pitfalls to avoid

Beware sellers of snake oil; there are many organisations and individuals who will offer to meet a school's WRL needs, for a fee, but who may not have an appropriate appreciation of the needs of young people and the school. Before signing up, ensure

they are quality assured, ask them where and with whom they have worked recently and ask for references, or for copies of any evaluations that were undertaken.

The same approach should apply when working with employers: just because they are employers, it does not necessarily follow that they are good at working with young people and schools.

They will need to be briefed about the aims of their involvement, what precisely their contribution should be, and crucially they will need information about the groups with whom they will be working. They should also be given some brief, contextual information about the curriculum, the current educational environment and key successes and challenges that the school is experiencing.

Most importantly, be aware that schools probably will have changed a great deal since your employer visitors were students.

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COMING UP: In next month's Case in Point, find out how best to integrate the new personal, learning and thinking skills (PLTS) across your curriculum to provide the right approach to meet your pupils' learning needs