

# Practice made perfect

School and college students' perceptions of work experience

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# Foreword

Work experience has always played an exciting and integral role at schools and colleges - firstly as a mechanism for delivering careers advice, and secondly as a core component of many vocational qualifications. NUS welcomes the Government's emphasis on work experience in its Post-16 Skills Plan as a key aspect of vocational learning.

Experience in the workplace supports young people to not just gain skills that will help them get a job, but to discover what they want from their future employment and the types of roles and environments that suit them.

So getting work experience right is absolutely essential. It can mean the difference between a young person setting out on a career path that's right for them or working in roles they are unsuited to and unhappy in.

But what makes good work experience? With the Government calling for it to be a necessary component of Level 3 provision, how can we ensure work experience is an effective learning tool for students?

Our research adds to the debate around what makes high quality work experience. Much attention has been placed on the views of employers, but what do students think?

Understanding what has and has not worked for students is important in creating better work experience, from placement to assessment. Work experience must be co-designed by students, employers and educational institutions to ensure that everyone can fully benefit.

What works well for employers and colleges is not always going to be what works for students. The learning and development structures could be excellent, but if a student can't afford the transport to and from a placement, or if the choice of placement is unrelated to the course, then the student doesn't benefit.

I'm really excited by the enthusiasm students have for work experience. The research shows just how much students value the opportunities available to them to get real life experience in the workplace.

But there also remain barriers to effective work experience, and employers, schools and colleges need to work with students to tackle them. With the post-16 skills plan underway, we must do everything we can to ensure high quality work experience is fully embedded into the government's further education reforms and into developing a broad and innovative vocational pedagogy.

In Unity,

**Shakira Martin**  
**NUS President**

# Executive Summary

NUS has conducted research into students' opinions of work experience in order to help inform the debate over how to best develop work experience opportunities as part of the Post-16 Skills Plan.

The survey, which attracted over 1000 responses from students in schools, sixth form colleges and further education colleges, highlighted a number of key points in students' experiences and attitudes.

Students were largely positive about work experience. Overall, 79 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that their work experience was a worthwhile thing to have done and 72 per cent were proud of what they had achieved on their work experience.

29 per cent of students in FE colleges said that the availability of work experience had been the main factor in them choosing their course.

Students had high expectations of their work experience which were broadly met in terms of their actual experiences.

Less students actually experienced issues such as having to do "boring tasks" or being "pushed around" by other workers compared to those who had expected these issues beforehand. Students were most likely to describe their work experience as "worthwhile", "exciting", "friendly" and "educational". However, one in

ten described their work experience as "useless".

Engagement by the school or college in linking work experience to a student's wider learning and development was patchy. Half of students were not assessed on their work experience by their school or college and 40 per cent were not asked to write any account of what they had learnt.

Most students had very little direct or indirect financial support to help them complete their work experience effectively. Some were offered lunch allowance and help with transport, but 61 per cent of students received no financial support at all with their placement.

Employers seemed slightly better at engaging students. 70 per cent of employers gave students feedback and 69 per cent gave students thanks. An encouraging 35 per cent of employers offered students work after the completion of their work experience.

Students most valued the exposure to a real working environment from their work experience as well as the knowledge, skills and confidence it gave them.

Half of students wanted their work experience to be longer, while around a third would have wanted to choose a different placement if they could have.

# About the research

The work experience survey collected responses from students based in schools, sixth form colleges and FE colleges around the UK. The survey was conducted during October and November 2016.

There were a total of 1050 valid responses to the survey. Of these, 675 respondents (64%) were studying in a further education college, 290 were studying in a sixth form college (28%), 75 were studying in a school sixth form (7%) and 10 were studying in some other further education establishment (1%).

The vast majority of respondents were from England (96%), with 4 per cent from Wales.

The majority of respondents were either studying for an NVQ Level 3 / BTEC National or equivalent qualification (43%) or for AS/A Levels (40%). A smaller number were studying at NVQ Level 2 or equivalent (11%), for GCSEs (4%), or for entry level qualifications (3%).

The majority of responses came from students who were 18 or under. 35 per cent were under 17 and 47 per cent were 17 to 18.

71 per cent of responses came from women, 28 per cent from men, and 1 per cent from people who define in another way. Due to the gender skew in the survey responses, where necessary we have weighted the responses in accordance with statistics on the gender makeup in further education. We have used DfE data on participation rates across FE and have weighted the survey to reflect a population of 54 per cent women and 46 per cent men.

The majority of respondents (80%) identified as White British, with 83 per cent identifying as White overall. This slightly over-represents white FE students, which stands at around 79 per cent across FE. As a result, black respondents are slightly underrepresented in the sample (3% compared with 6% across FE), whilst Asian respondents (8.5%) and those of

mixed ethnicity are on par with the FE student population (3%).

9 per cent of respondents had caring responsibilities for a child and a further 5 per cent were caring for an adult. 15 per cent reported as having a disability.

# Research Findings

## Work Experience: the basics

All of the respondents to the survey had been on some form of work experience or placement. 68 per cent had been on work experience, 7 per cent in sixth form, and 25 per cent were on or had been on work experience in college.

Of those who had involvement with work experience in an FE college, 86 per cent said that this was a compulsory placement. **29 per cent of these respondents also said that the availability of work experience had been the main factor in them choosing their specific course.**

We asked respondents what type of environment they did their work experience in. The most common type of work experience was office-based (22.5%), followed by a school or childcare setting (19.5%) and in a shop or retail outlet (17.6%).

A smaller but sizable number (7.4%) were offered work experience on site at a college, usually in a college-run restaurant, salon, or garage.

It is clear that the majority of work experience did not take place in an industrial setting. Just 6.2 per cent of respondents had a placement in a factory, warehouse or garage.

Setting for work experience	%
In a college-run business based on the college campus	7.4
In an office	22.5
In a factory, warehouse or garage	6.2
In a shop or retail outlet	17.6
In a role largely based outside or travelling	7.5
Other (please specify)	8.0
Nursery or school setting	19.5

Food or hospitality setting	2.8
Veterinarian or animal care setting	2.7
Health or social care setting	5.7



**When it came to arranging work experience, almost half arranged the placement themselves.** Just under a third had the placement arranged by their school or college, leaving just over a third who arranged a placement through family or friends.

**Of the largest group who arranged their own placement, 44 per cent received help from their school or college in sorting it out, leaving 56 per cent who did not receive any help.**

Of those who had their work experience arranged by their school or college, 62 per cent said that they were asked their preferences on the type of placement and a further 19 per cent said they were offered a choice of options, leaving 19 per cent who had no choice in their placement and simply went where the school or college sent them.

Only a minority of students received any form of direct or indirect financial support during their work experience. A lunch allowance or a free lunch was provided in 18 per cent of cases,

help with transport was provided in 13 per cent of cases, while 7 per cent received a wage and 6 per cent were able to keep gratuity or tips. **However, this left 61 per cent of students who received no financial support at all with their placement.**

**Expectations of work experience**

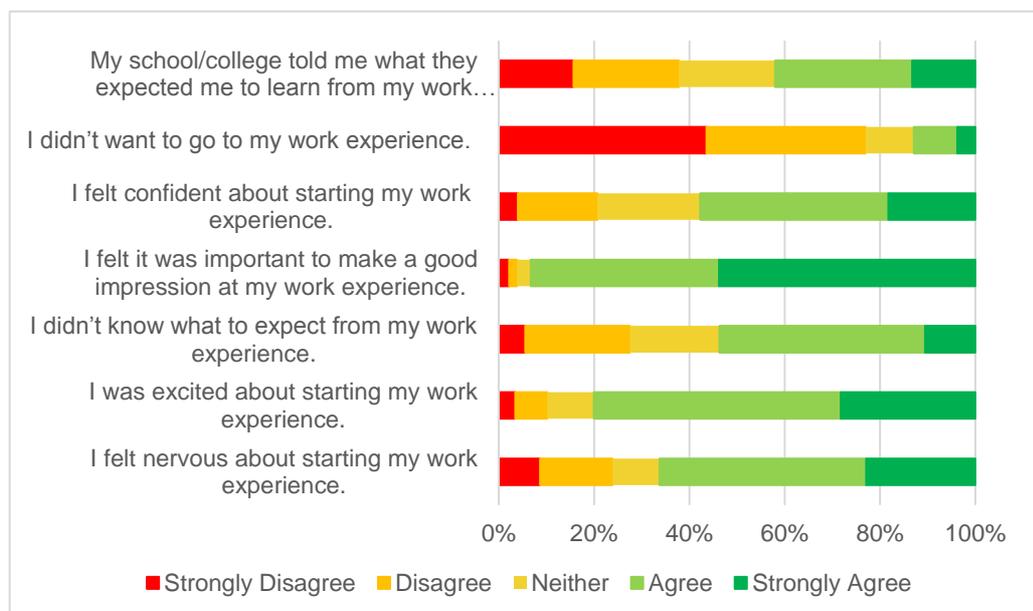
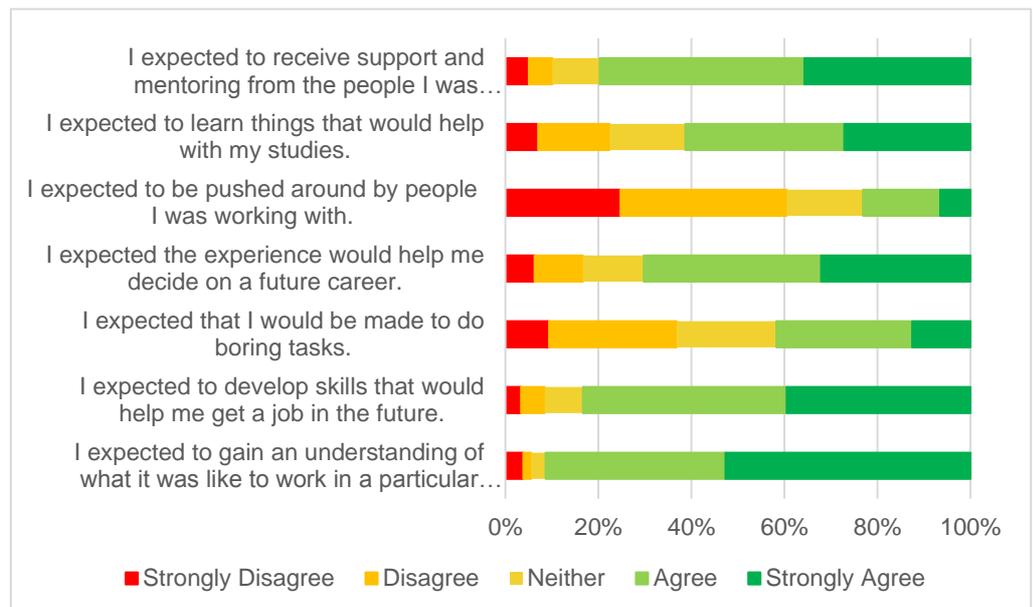
Students’ expectations of work experience were broadly positive although there was some apprehension and a lack of understanding of what to expect. The latter suggests that the positivity of some students may have not been based on any concrete information or knowledge of work experience.

An overwhelming majority (90%) agreed or strongly agreed that they expected to gain an understanding of what it would be like to work in a particular industry. A large majority (82%) also expected to gain skills that would help them with their career in the future, and there were similar high numbers (78%) for those expecting to receive support and mentoring from those who they would be working with.

**There were also expectations by over two thirds (69%) that work experience would help them decide on a future career, and three out of five (60%) expected that their work experience would help them with their studies.**

Figures were slightly less positive in a couple of areas. 41 per cent expected that they would be made to do boring tasks and 23 per cent expected that they would be “pushed around” by the people they were working with.

Despite the students’ positive outlook, there were concerns over the level of information and support that the students receive prior to taking up work experience. **The figures below show how over half of students (53%) didn’t know what to expect from their work experience which is probably linked to the fact that only 40 per cent were told what to expect from their work experience by their school or college.**



It is not surprising, therefore, that almost two thirds of students felt nervous about starting their work experience. Those who agreed that they didn't know what to expect were more likely to be nervous about starting.

### Experiences while on work experience

When we asked students what their actual experiences were while they were on their work experience, we found that, again, they were broadly positive and tended to live up to expectations.

**87 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they gained an understanding of what it would be like to work in that industry, very close to the 90 per cent who expected this.** The number who felt they developed skills to help them get a job in the future was slightly lower, but still high at 72 per cent.

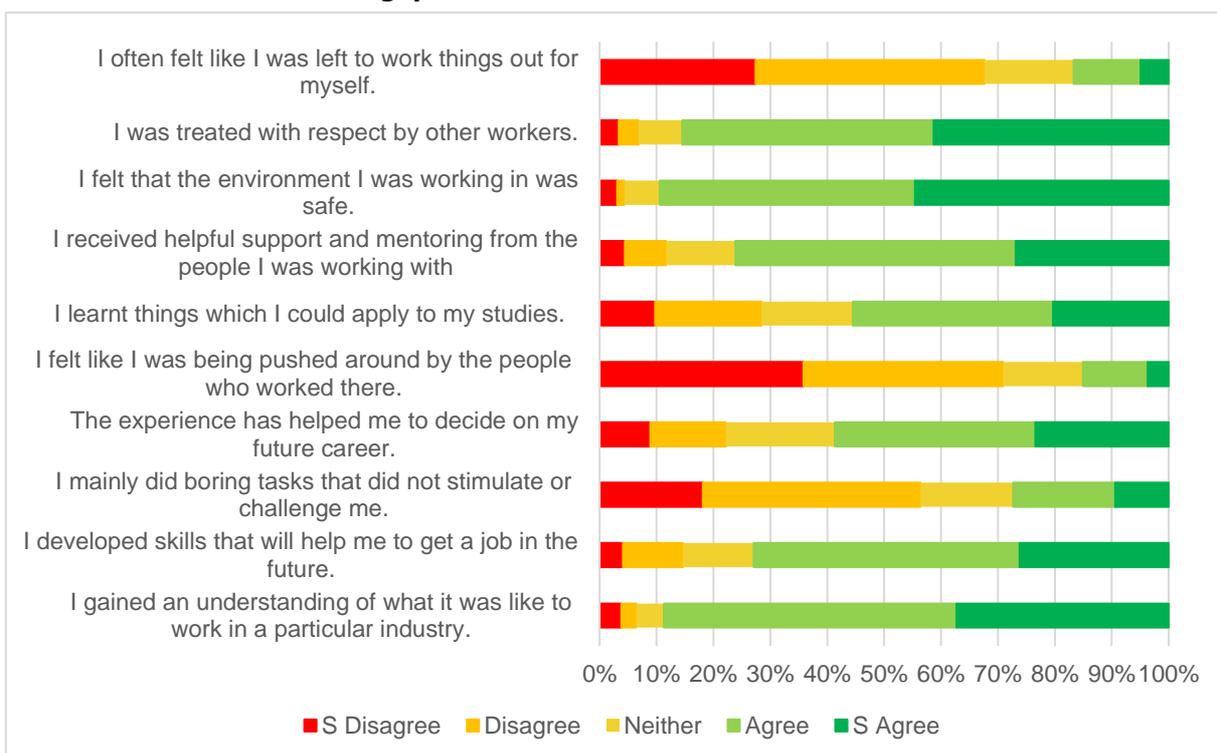
While, beforehand, 41 per cent had expected to be doing boring tasks, only 27 per cent said that they mainly did boring tasks when they were actually on their work experience. Similarly, while 23 per cent had expected to be pushed around in their work experience, only 15 per cent experienced this once they were actually on the placement itself.

It remains a concern that some students did not receive a more stimulating experience, but it is good to see that for many others, their experience actually exceeded their expectations. In fact, 83 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that they were treated with respect by other workers, with just 7 per cent disagreeing, and 75 per cent received helpful support and

mentoring from other workers.

Some of the key areas for improvement were in linking work experience to a students' studies and to careers advice and guidance. Whilst it is promising to find that over half (54%) of students learnt things that they could apply to their studies, that leaves almost half who did not. We did find, however, **that students were far more likely to find their work experience helpful to their course if they were studying a vocational qualification** and more of those who disagreed were on GCSE or AS/A-Level courses.

There were also less students who felt that their work experience had helped them decide on a future career (57%) compared to those who had expected it to help them decide (69%). There could be a number of reasons for this. Students' experiences may have led them to change their minds about their career path rather than the experience being of no help at all. However, it is important to note the difference in expectations and outcomes here. **Many students would have expected to get some clarity over their futures but did not, meaning that schools and colleges may need to do more to provide good information, advice and guidance to fill the gap.**



We asked students to pick from a set of words which best described their work experience. Again, the results were positive. The most commonly chosen word was “worthwhile” (chosen by 58%) followed by “exciting” (chosen by 53%), “friendly” (chosen by 51%) and “educational” (chosen by 42%).



However, there was a small but significant group of students who were clearly disappointed with their work experience, with 10 per cent choosing the word “useless” to describe it.

### After work experience

We asked students some questions about what happened at the end of their work experience to get an understanding of the support that was received and how students reflected on the overall experience.

The picture we got in terms of support from schools and colleges was sporadic. 39 per cent of students were assessed by their school or college on what they had learnt but 48 per cent were not. 50 per cent of students were asked to write an account of their work experience by their school or college while 40 per cent were not. 37 per cent were encouraged by their school or college to share their experiences with other students while 51 per cent were not.

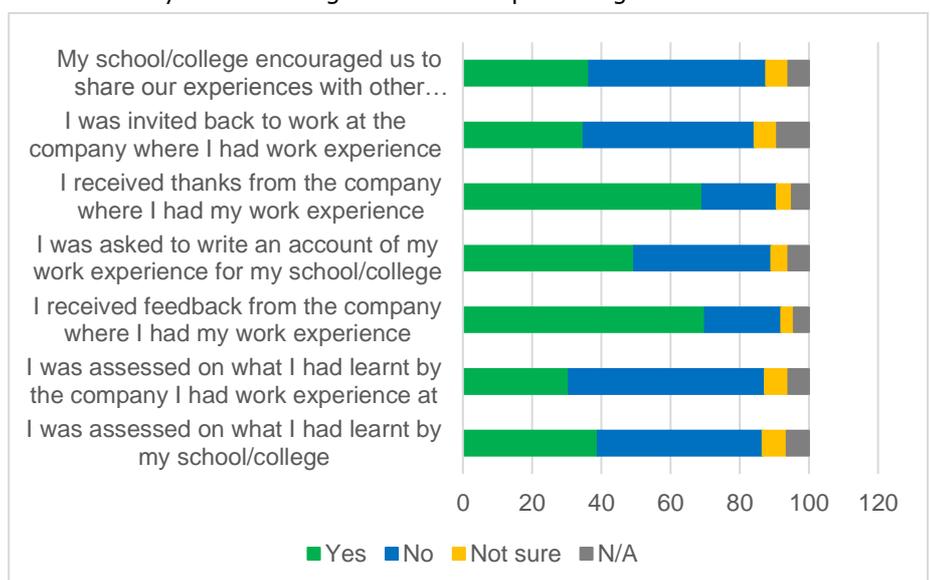
The support from employers was also somewhat patchy. Employers assessed what students had learnt in 31 per cent

of cases, but in 57 per cent did not. Feedback from the company was received in 70 per cent of cases, but 22 per cent did not receive any feedback. 69 per cent of students received thanks from the company compared to 22 per cent who did not. But perhaps most promising was that **35 per cent of students were invited back to work at the company where they had done their work experience**, suggesting that a large number of placements were very much seen as mutually beneficial and could directly help students find work.

We asked students what they most valued from their work experience looking back. The experience of a work environment was the most common response (46%), followed by the knowledge and skills they had learnt (32%) and the confidence it gave them (13%). A few said it was the mentoring they received (5%) or its relevance to their studies (4%).

**Overall, 79 per cent agreed or strongly agreed that their work experience was a worthwhile thing to have done and 72 per cent were proud of what they had achieved on their work experience.**

Interestingly, 49 per cent wanted their work experience to have been longer, suggesting that placements are perhaps too short in some cases, whilst 36 per cent would have tried to have done work experience somewhere else if they could have gone back and picked again.



# Conclusion

Overall, students see work experience as an incredibly worthwhile opportunity, offering them a crucial understanding of the work environment and generating knowledge and skills which can help them in the future. Students had high expectations for their work experience and these expectations were generally met or exceeded.

While there were undoubtedly some who were unhappy with their work experience, the vast majority found it worthwhile and beneficial to them. While we didn't survey employers, the results suggest that there is a mutual benefit and that most employers take their responsibilities seriously and put the effort in to ensure students gain from their experience.

It will be important moving forward to ensure that all students are able to benefit from work experience. **Even though the majority benefitted, there were still a significant minority, around one in ten, who did not feel that their work experience was beneficial.** Moving forward, it will be important to dig deeper into the reasons behind the bad experiences in order to make improvements.

There are clearly shortfalls in the financial support that students receive. **Students are often left to pay the additional costs associated with work experience themselves, which puts an unnecessary financial burden on them, particularly if they are from disadvantaged backgrounds.** Ensuring that the support structures are in place to enable fair access to work experience opportunities will be an important step forward.

It will also be important to evaluate the support that students receive at the end of their work experience, how well schools and colleges engage students in reflecting and evaluating on what they have learnt, and what opportunities schools and colleges create to link work experience to the courses that students are studying on, embedding classroom knowledge in practical experience.

We can summarise these conclusions into a set of key recommendations for the Government and the Further Education sector:

1. The Government should ensure that colleges have adequate funding and support to deliver high quality work placements which complement and build on the learning they do in the classroom.
2. The Government should help improve the financial support for travel and subsistence available to students to facilitate their learning during work experience.
3. Colleges should invest more time and resource into facilitating reflection and evaluation of work experience.
4. Colleges should aim to improve the links between knowledge and skills learnt in the classroom and the mastery over them in their practical application in the workplace.
5. Employers and colleges should work closely together in designing work placements and opportunities.
6. Employers should be made aware of the key aspects of a student's course and how the placement fits in with the wider learning of the student.
7. Both colleges and employers should ensure that students are involved in the decisions about their work experience.

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