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Getting the most out of employer engagement in career guidance

Employer engagement is fundamental to career guidance. Research studies shows that school activities like career talks and workplace visits that involve people from workplaces are often linked with better employment outcomes. Many young people though have limited opportunity to engage with employers and people in work while still in school. This policy brief draws on international practice and evidence, including new analysis exploring the impact of employer engagement on student transitions into work, to ask:

- Why engage employers in career guidance?
- What does good employer engagement looks like?
- How to deliver employer engagement effectively, efficiently and equitably?

The paper also highlights ways in which schools are using online technologies to enhance student access to employers within career guidance.

Why engage employers?

Employer engagement in education is not a new phenomenon. Around the world, countries have long encouraged, enabled, and sometimes required, students to engage with workplaces and people in work as they reflect on, and plan for, their ultimate transitions into employment. Schools can be seen as making use of engagement with employers to support four related objectives for young people:

1. to enhance their understanding of jobs and careers: for example, through job shadowing, workplace visits, career talks and job fairs;
2. to provide them with knowledge and skills demanded by the contemporary labour market: for example, through work placements and enterprise competitions;
3. to provide them with knowledge and skills demanded for successful school-to-work transitions: for example, through practice interviews and CV workshops;
4. to enrich education, so underpinning pupil attainment: for example, through work-related learning where employers enrich classroom teaching (Mann, Rehill and Kashefpakdel, 2018[1]).

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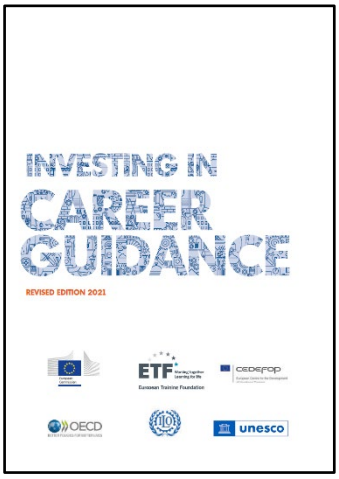
The focus of this paper is on the first of these objectives – how schools can help young people to develop their understanding of the opportunities and pitfalls presented by the jobs market. Employer engagement is now widely seen as a core element within effective career guidance. In 2021, six international organisations, including the OECD, European Commission, ILO and UNESCO came together to argue:

> *Employer engagement enriches career guidance. When people in work cooperate with schools and other providers, better understanding can be expected of the working world in all its varieties. This is particularly important for youth. It allows access to useful experiences and to new and trustworthy information which broaden and deepen career aspirations. First-hand encounters are powerful learning opportunities. Direct experience of workplaces helps individuals to develop the skills, knowledge and attitudes needed to access available work.*
>
> *Employer engagement within career guidance is a very effective means of helping employers to signal demand for labour. During a period of turbulence in the jobs market, it is especially important for guidance to be enriched through first-hand access to people in work. In an uncertain world, employers and their employees are best placed to advise future job seekers of how their workplaces and occupational skill requirements are changing.*



Employer engagement is essential for some career guidance activities (such as workplace visits, work placements, job fairs and career events) and considerably enriches others (such as practice interviews, CV workshops, enterprise competitions). This policy brief highlights new evidence on the difference career guidance enriched by employer engagement can be expected to have on the lives of young people, why it makes a difference and how it can be most effectively, efficiently and equitably delivered. The focus is on general education, rather than programmes of vocational education training where employer engagement and work-based learning are common elements of provision.

What difference does employer engagement make?

In new analysis, the OECD Career Readiness team has looked at whether career guidance activities which require employer engagement can be linked with better employment outcomes. The analysis makes use of national longitudinal studies, assessments that follow large cohorts of students through school into adulthood. Through statistical analysis, account can be taken of the factors that commonly determine how well individuals do in work such as gender, academic success and socio-economic background. Consequently, it becomes possible to understand if specific teenage experiences can be related with better (or worse) employment outcomes in young adulthood than would be normally anticipated.

National longitudinal surveys in seven countries (Australia, Canada, Germany, Korea, United Kingdom, United States and Uruguay) include questions on student participation (at age 15-16) on participation in workplace visits, career fairs and career talks. Preliminary analysis shows that in five countries, student participation in these activities is associated with positive employment outcomes at age 25-26, such as lower likelihood of being NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training), higher earnings and more satisfaction with their job or career. Full analysis, including details of the size of the positive impacts, will be published by the OECD in the autumn of 2021. The relationship has not been identified in the data from Germany, nor in this analysis from the United Kingdom. However, considerable research has been undertaken in the United Kingdom that provides insight into the complexity of the impacts that employer engagement activities can be anticipated for young people.

The findings will add to a 2018 review of international research literature (Mann, Rehill and Kashefpakdel, 2018[1]) that reviewed longitudinal studies and randomised control trials for evidence of long-term economic outcomes linked to teenage participation across all forms of employer engagement activities. The study found few studies of career guidance as it is narrowly delivered. Many occupationally-focused short programmes were identified that include both work-based learning and often guidance activities that engage employers. That paper identified 14 such assessments and found that nine evidenced largely positive economic outcomes, five mixed or negligible outcomes and none a negative outcome.

The research literature surrounding employer engagement in guidance is particularly strong in the United Kingdom. In addition to evidence of long-term benefits (see Box x), studies highlight a widespread perception among young adults that typical employer engagement activities provided genuine help to them in their career transitions.

Box 1. UK studies on the value of employer engagement in guidance activities.

(Kashefpakdel and Percy, 2017[12]) use data from the British Cohort Study, a dataset that follows thousands of people from childhood to adulthood. They find that students (particularly those from the most disadvantaged backgrounds) who took part in three or more career talks with external speakers at 14-16 earn significantly more at age 26 than comparable peers. Earning boosts are greatest where students found the talks to be 'very helpful' which were delivered in schools with a rich general culture of career guidance.

(Mann and Percy, 2014[13]) and (Mann et al., 2017[3]) survey representative samples of young adults aged 19-24 and find significant relationships between the volume of participation in recalled teenage guidance activities that engage employers (such as work experience placements and career talks) and better adult employment outcomes (earnings, NEET rates and career satisfaction). When (Jones, Mann and Morris, 2016[14]) made use of the same data, they found that economic benefits can better be explained through changes in the capacity to visualise and plan futures, rather than in the development of technical or 'employability' skills.

Table 1. How useful did young adults (aged 19-24) find employer engagement activities undertaken in school (at ages 14-18)? Results from a UK survey.

Activity	Percentage of surveyed young people undertaking the activity	Deciding on a career	Getting a job after education	Getting into higher education
Work experience	90%	58% (20%)	27% (9%)	27% (7%)
Career talks (1-2 times)	37%	55% (8%)	33% (4%)	32% (6%)
Career talks (3+)	13%	84% (28%)	54% (16%)	52% (20%)
'Business' Mentoring	19%	78% (28%)	60% (23%)	62% (18%)
Enterprise competition (one day)	18%	35% (8%)	25% (5%)	28% (4%)
Enterprise competition (long-form)	15%	50% (3%)	34% (7%)	50% (8%)

Note: The first figure represents the total percentage of adults who said they took part in the activity between and found it to be either quite helpful or very helpful (the second figure in brackets, the percentage of adults who undertook the activity and found it to be very helpful).
Source: (Mann and Kashefpakdel, 2014[2])

The study shows that students who recalled activities taking place between the ages of 16 to 18 or at both before and after the age of 16 were much more likely to find the provision offered by their schools to have been useful to them. For example, over a third of young adults who took part in three or more career talks at both ages found them to be very helpful in getting a job.

There is reason moreover, to believe that participation in employer engagement activities helps to change student perceptions of their education. In a similar survey to that highlighted above, 1 744 students were asked if their secondary school had prepared them well for adult working life, only one-third of adults who recalled no employer activities agreed, compared to two-thirds of peers who recalled three of more such activities (Mann et al., 2017[3]).

Table 2. Relationship between young adults' perceptions of how well their school prepared them for working life and the extent of school-managed teenage employer engagement

	"Looking back, how well do you feel that your school/college prepared you for adult working life?"	
"Between the ages of 14 and 19, did your school or college ever arrange for you to take part in any activities which involved employers/local business people? E.g. work experience, mentoring, enterprise competitions, careers advice, CV or interview workshops, workplace visits. If so, on how many different occasions (more or less) did it happen?"	Very well / Quite well	Very poorly / quite poorly
Never	34%	66%
Once	40%	60%
Twice	52%	48%
Three times	65%	35%
Four times or more	68%	32%

Source: (Mann et al., 2017[3])

The results are reinforced by analysis of 2012 PISA data for Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Finland and Ireland which find significant relationships between participation in employer engagement activities and more positive attitudes towards schooling. Students who reported taking part in job fairs for examples are found to be significantly more likely to agree with statements like 'school is useful for jobs' or 'school helps to get a job' (Kashefpakdel, Mann and Schleicher, 2016[4]).

In England in response to such evidence, it is now a requirement that all students in England have at least one 'meaningful encounter' with an employer over each of the seven years spent in lower and upper secondary education (UK Department of Education, 2017[5]).

Why can employer engagement be expected to make a difference to young people?

Studies show that employer engagement can be expected to have a positive impact in guidance not so much because it provides more resource to schools to do more of the same (although this can be a function of employer engagement), but because it offers students something different in terms of both desired learning outcomes and how they are achieved.

Something new and different

People from the world of work bring with them diverse knowledge and skills that are not easily found in schools. They are a source of information and expertise that is of value to young people as it relates to how knowledge and skills are actually used in workplaces.

Insights that are difficult to ignore

It is important to students that such sources of information are neither teachers, nor parents. Employee volunteers are perceived to provide authentic insights that are not easily replicated. When a speaker has nothing to sell and can be trusted to 'tell it straight,' students are more likely to be attentive to what they have to say (Linnehan, 2004[6]).

Consequently, a good question to ask any student after any interaction is: what did you learn that was new and useful to you? It is the point of employer engagement that it offers something that is not easily replicated in schools. While traditionally, schools have more often engaged students with employers to build their technical and employability skills (for example, through work placements for students approaching labour market entry), studies suggest that the most powerful effects are likely to relate to changes in how students see themselves and how they visualise and plan their futures.

> *To me, school was a nuisance, same thing every day. It drove me mad just sitting there all day. I needed a real-world release. I would have loved for my school to have arranged for us to have visited places people work. It could have made such a difference to kids like me, who struggle to concentrate in class, to see what the point was.*
>
> *Jazzo, 19 from Ireland who left full-time education at 18 and is now training to be a butcher.*

What does good employer engagement in career guidance look like?

In the 2018 international literature review exploring the impact of employer engagement activities, the authors identify seven characteristics of more effective employer engagement:

- *Authentic*. It will enable first-hand encounters between students and individuals from the world of work. Anything which appears inauthentic to young people, will appear less trustworthy and so easier to ignore.
- *Frequent and often mandatory*. A good metaphor for employer engagement in guidance is throwing mud at a wall. The more that is thrown – the more experiences that students have – the more likely it is that they will encounter information and experiences that prove to be helpful to them – and the more effective employers as a group will be in signal future employment opportunities. It is good practice to require students to take part in activities, particularly at a younger age. Students don't know what they don't know and mandatory participation in career talks can be expected to broaden career thinking and challenge assumptions and expectations that haven't been well considered.
- *Valued*. As noted, a good test of whether employer engagement is working is to ask students themselves if they learnt something new and useful. Where young people themselves testified that episodes of employer engagement were valuable to them, some studies suggest that they were right and better outcomes followed.
- *Varied*. Both teachers and students say that different types of activity are useful in different ways. If the ambition is to equip students with the knowledge and skills needed for a successful transition into work, activities like practice interviews, CV workshops and work placements have higher value. Alternatively, where the objective is to enhance student understanding of jobs in the labour market, activities like career talks, job shadowing and job fairs are especially valuable. In all cases, exposing students to a variety of different people in work – ranging from apprentice or trainee through to CEO - will help deepen and broaden lessons drawn from encounters.

- *Contextualised*. Where provision is undertaken within the context of effective careers provision, some studies highlight—and logic suggests—improved outcomes for young people. (Percy and Kashefpakdel, 2018[7]), for example, find that students in schools with richer cultures of career provision are more likely to find career talks with external speakers helpful and can expect greater long-term financial returns. Employer engagement is best overseen by well-trained career guidance professionals who are well-placed to optimise its benefits.
- *Personalised*. Employer engagement theory acknowledges that young people vary a lot in the extent to which they can draw on useful non-school resources (such as parents and family friends) to visualise and plan their futures. While need will relate to socio-economic background and schools in areas of greatest disadvantage should expect higher levels of resourcing, it is not a simple relationship.
- *Begun at a young age*. With benefits appearing to be more driven by changes in attitude and expectation than the growth of human capital, interventions should begin in primary schooling where identity formation (including the challenging of gender stereotypes) can be supported through career learning activities within and outside of the classroom (Percy and Amegah, 2021[8]).

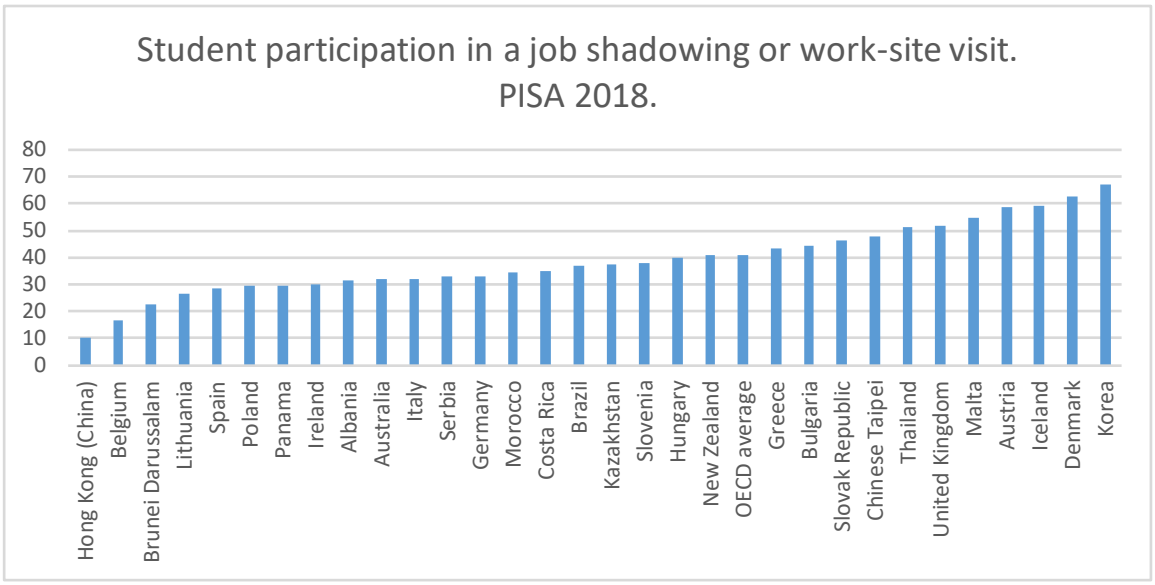
How common is employer engagement in career guidance?

In spite of the strong benefits of employer-enriched guidance activities, PISA 2018 provides evidence that suggests comparatively few students benefit by the age of 15. PISA 2018 asks students in thirty countries whether they had taken part in three common types of guidance activity. It finds that among participating OECD countries, an average of:

- 41% of students reported taking part in a job shadowing or work-site visit,
- 39% of students reported taking part in a job fair, and
- 35% of students reported taking part in an internship.

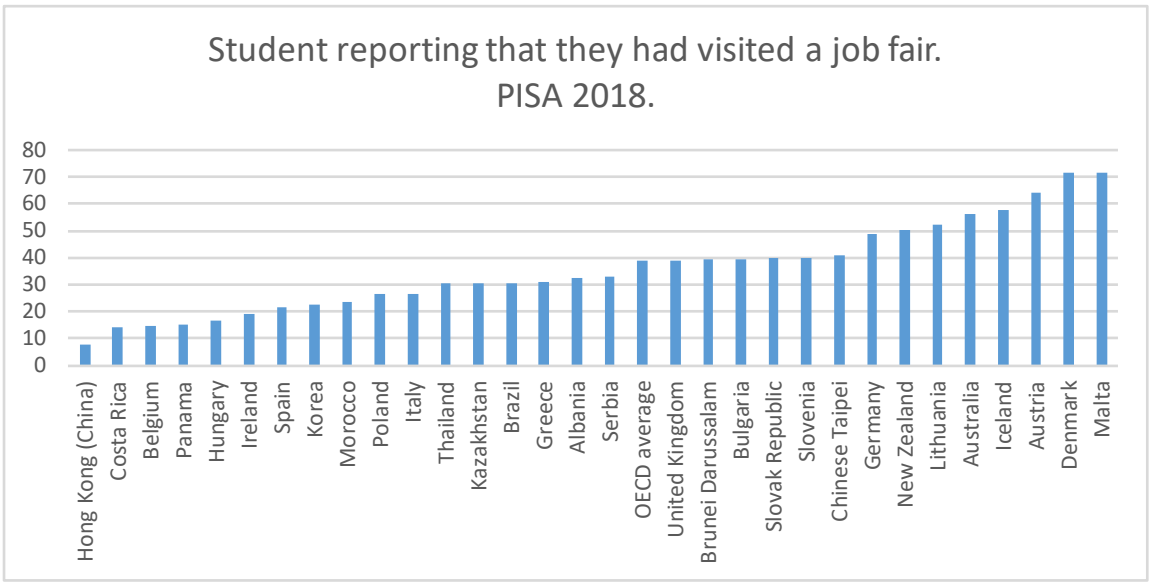
Students across the OECD are consistently more likely to take part in activities such as completing career questionnaires or researching the internet, that do not involve employers (Musset and Mýtna Kureková, 2018[9]).

Figure 1. Student participation in a job shadowing or work-site visit. PISA 2018.



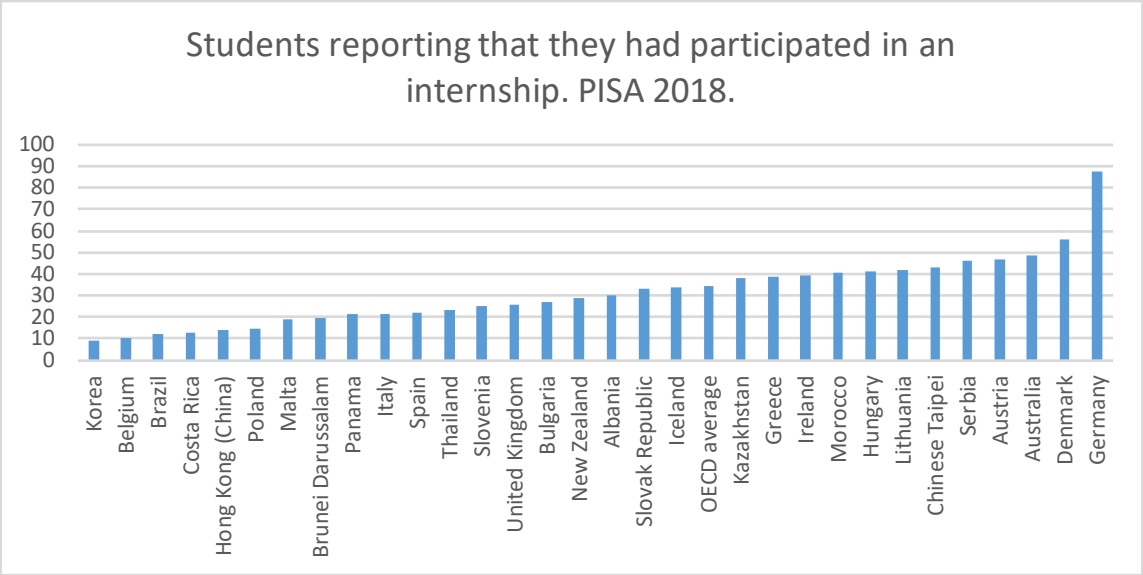
Source: OECD PISA 2018 Database - https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database (accessed on 1 July 2021).

Figure 2. Student reporting that they had visited a job fair. PISA 2018.



Source: OECD PISA 2018 Database - https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database (accessed on 1 July 2021).

Figure 3. Students reporting that they had participated in an internship. PISA 2018.



Source: OECD PISA 2018 Database - https://www.oecd.org/pisa/data/2018database (accessed on 1 July 2021).

Key issues in delivering employer engagement in career guidance activities

When to start?

Guidance activities enriched by employer engagement can be expected to be particularly intense by the final year of schooling, but should begin much earlier. By upper secondary education, students will have substantially accumulated the knowledge, skills and sometimes qualifications on which they will rely to support them through their transitions out of secondary schooling. Effective guidance helps students to make sense of their education while they are going through it, making decisions that will be of lasting value.

Employer engagement activities begin at a young age (in primary school) with a focus often on broadening career understanding, challenging gender stereotyping and helping children to see the relationship between education and ultimate employment. Programmes like Primary Futures in the United Kingdom and its equivalent Inspiring the Future in New Zealand bring volunteers into school to talk to children about the jobs they do and how they got into them. The aim is to deepen understanding of the relationship between education and employment and to broaden career thinking. Studies show that children often develop career thinking in primary school and that the ideas that emerge then are often at the forefront of students' minds as they go through secondary education (OECD, 2021[10]).

Should employer engagement be mandatory or optional?

In secondary schools, programmes like the WE3 Continuum delivered in some New Zealand schools moves from activities designed to build understanding of the breadth of the labour market to a more intensive approach focused on occupations of interest. In keeping with such an approach, it would be expected that younger students would be more likely to take part in mandatory activities. As the OECD has demonstrated through analysis of PISA data, the career thinking of children and young people is embedded in their personal characteristics and social identities (gender, socio-economic status, migrant background) which can play a powerful constraining or facilitating role in their career development (Musset and Mýtna Kureková, 2018[9]). In particular, when students are part of a marginalized community, their

social identities can be constrained in multiple overt and covert ways. Mandatory activities, particularly relating to exploration and understanding of jobs and careers will optimise the chances of students learning something new and useful from their activities. Pre-conceptions can and do get in the way of students exploring occupations that they are not familiar with. As students get older, it becomes more pressing to support them in actively exploring occupations of greatest interest, to initially confirm the strength of their ambition and then to deepen understanding of the culture of work and to develop work-related experiences and social networks of potential long-term value.

Table 3. WE3 Continuum, New Zealand: examples of practical activities.

Work Exposure	**Work Exploration**	**Work Experience**
Activities that present ideas, information and concepts about the world of work and career development. Largely aimed at young people aged 10 to 14. *Typical activities include:* discussions of parental occupations career talks from people in work about the jobs they do and the value they find in them discussions of the gendered character of work workplace visits integration of workplace examples within related curricula	Activities in which young people actively explore and investigate the world of work. Largely aimed at young people aged 13 to 16. *Typical activities include:* career talks from people in work about the jobs they do and how to access them student research into specific occupations, access to them and their likely future characteristics development of CV writing and interview skills with employee volunteers job shadowing discussions (career conversations) with people in work about the future development of occupations	Activities that offer young people close and more sustained opportunities for observation and participation in one or more workplaces. Largely aimed at young people aged 16 to 18. *Typical activities include:* community and workplace based work placements, undertaking supervised work for one week work shadowing focused around specific research questions student enterprises supported by employee volunteer coaches student work-related projects addressing local community challenges with volunteer coaches employer forum organised by students to bring together students and employers to discuss expectations and opportunities

Source: https://www.oecd.org/education/career-readiness/New%20Zealand%20WE3%20for%20Web.pdf

Should employer engagement be integrated into subject teaching?

In many countries, subject teachers are encouraged and helped to bring people working in industries linked to programmes of study into the classroom. In this way, employee volunteers provide students with confidence that the theory, knowledge and skills that they are learning will be relevant to adult working life. Volunteers can help set challenges, support project learning, provide feedback on projects as well as answering student questions about the uses of different aspects of learning. For teachers and schools, the key challenge is in finding the right person, available to help in the right ways at the right time. In this, there is a transaction cost that must be minimised in order to ensure the attractiveness of employer engagement.

Delivering employer engagement in career guidance

PISA shows how students are systematically more likely to take part in career guidance activities that do not involve employers (Musset and Mýtna Kureková, 2018[9]). This is partly due to the additional costs that come with employer engagement. Costs can vary considerably for both parties. For schools, events that require students to leave the premises to visit workplaces incur additional costs in terms of transport and, in some countries, legal requirements to assure the health and safety of students. For employers, activities that involve students coming into a workplaces tend to be seen as the most demanding, due to the need for supervision and disruption to normal working practices. Costs will also vary in light of how contact with employers is structured. Three principles can help guide schools and education systems in determining how to get the most out of their employer engagement.

Three principles to guide the best employer engagement: effective, efficient, equitable

High quality employer engagement is **effective**. It optimises the chances of positive results by ensuring that the right young person engages with the right employer or employee through the right activity at the right time during their school life. This means that the school guidance counsellor and/or subject teacher, based on their understanding of student aspirations and needs, should drive employer engagement. Without the engagement of teaching staff, employer engagement will struggle to deliver positive results. Employer engagement draws ultimately from the idea that schools can deliver more for young people if they open their doors and involve members of the economic community. The point of engagement is to enhance and enrich traditional approaches to teaching and learning, not to challenge or replace them. For engagement to be effective, schools should always be in the driving seat, if working within a collaborative environment. Programmes consequently, that are designed and delivered with the support of staff trade unions and representative bodies are likely to be more effective.

One easy place for schools to start is to draw on the help of parents or to establish an alumni network, maintaining contacts with former students with a view to drawing on their interest to support current learners.

> *One of the most useful things that my school did was its weekly career talks with alumni. My school would invite alumni from a wide range of careers to come in and speak for between 30 minutes to an hour about their occupation and career path. These talks took place every Friday morning and were attended by the entire school (ages 11-18). It was very useful in highlighting careers that many of us previously didn't know of.*
>
> *Bianca 22 from the UK, who completed an undergraduate degree and now works in finance.*

Box 2. Engaging with alumni.

Over recent years, many secondary schools have systemised approaches for developing relations with alumni in order to enhance guidance-related activities. The EU-funded project "Advancing Graduate Tracking and Alumni Relations in VET Schools – TRACKTION" focuses on strengthening graduate tracking capacity and fostering alumni relations in VET secondary institutions. A how-to guide is based on action research in five countries (Estonia, Italy, Netherlands, Spain and the United Kingdom). The guide which is also relevant to schools offering general education, provides a strategic approach to engaging alumni and provides a series of templates that can be used or adapted: https://tracktionerasmus.eu/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/O2_TRACKTION_AlumniRelations_How-To-Guide.pdf.

Systems for engaging employers can be based at a national, regional or institutional level. Systems that are fully owned by individual schools will benefit from a close proximity to students and understanding of their needs, but they run the risk of offering provision that is unduly narrow. Effective provision will reflect the breadth of the economic community, as it serves as both a mechanism for signalling the range of potential labour market opportunities and reflecting the diversity of student ambitions. Employer relationships that focus only on a small number of larger employers from a select group of industries are unlikely to be successful in speaking to the needs of students or of the wider employer community. Equally, systems for engaging employers which are based in individual schools will run the risk of providing limited opportunities to students as they will depend a limited institutional capacity to engage employers across a limited geographic area. They may also prove to be unduly expensive. For many schools however, there is a lack of national or regional intermediary bodies to address local needs.

Tricks of the trade: how to engage local employers from a school perspective

Arlane Gordon-Bray is responsible for engaging employers in two public schools serving students aged 11 to 18 in Edgecombe County, North Carolina. She uses community organising and 'design thinking empathy' techniques to understand student interests and then involve employers in supporting career guidance and work-related learning activities. Arlane advises:

1. Avoid cold calling employers. When she wants to involve a particular type of employer in a specific type of activity, her first approach is to review the connections that she either has directly or indirectly through school colleagues, friends, the parents of students and other networks.

2. Once she has identified the right person to approach, her first ask is typically modest. The bigger the ask she advises, the deeper the relationship needs to be.

3. An easy first approach is to ask an employer or their staff to come into school to participate in a short activity, for example to talk to students about their job and how they got it or how they recruit within a guidance session or job fair. Alternatively, an employee volunteer might join a subject teacher

to explain to students how something that they are learning in the curriculum is used in the working world. Such activities require little preparation by the employer.

4. Bigger asks often relate to students coming into business premises for a workplace visit or an internship. It is a bigger ask because the employer needs to spend more time helping to organise and oversee the activity. For such activities, Arlane prepares an economic argument. This might relate to helping the employer to better signal to students what qualifications and skills they most value or, as many young people move away from the county where she works, encouraging students to think about staying in the area after they leave school.

5. She personally visits the employers before any activity to ensure that the workplace is appropriate for her students and to ensure that the employer knows there is someone at the school who they can turn to if there is a problem. It is also an opportunity for Arlane to be clear about her expectations and to address any misconceptions about her students who tend to come from the most disadvantaged sections of the community.

6. Through the whole process, Arlane works hard to excite employers about their involvement. She is frank that schools can only fully prepare young people for their adult lives if employers are willing to help. Their contribution is highly valued by the whole school community.

A second principle for employer engagement in guidance is **efficiency**. Systems that engage employers more efficiently can be expected to be multi-institutional in focus. Approaches that work at a national, regional or municipal level can enjoy economies of scale and increase the likelihood of identifying workplaces and volunteers of interest. This will underpin the need for a high volume of employer engagement in schools. Intermediary bodies create databases of potential volunteers which schools can then use to identify individuals and enterprises well suited to meet student needs. Through intermediaries moreover, access to especially attractive employers can be fairly shared between schools. In Germany, all schools now have the right to make use of highly trained and qualified guidance counsellors based in Public Employment Services (PES), building institutional capacity, while enhancing access to employers in the PES's network. In Canada, one province has recognised the need to invest in making it easy for schools to connect with employers in four strategically important economic areas, sharing the costs involved in enabling connections. In other countries, national STEM initiatives are common, designed to help students see the breadth of careers linked to Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics. In Denmark and the UK, apprentices are encouraged and enabled to go into primary and secondary schools to talk to students about the realities of vocational education and employment in the skilled trades.

Centres of Excellence in New Brunswick, Canada

In the Canadian province of New Brunswick, the provincial government works with employers to help primary and secondary school students to understand, and prepare for, employment opportunities in areas of strategic economic importance. In what is a largely rural province, the strategy is driven by a desire to encourage and enable students to stay in the province after graduation and to address skills shortages. The approach is co-financed by employers in the province.

Under the umbrella of Future New Brunswick, the education department in the province has created four Centres of Excellence focused on priority economic areas identified by the province: health, energy, digital learning and entrepreneurship.

Each centre is designed to bring together key partners from government, community, employment and education to oversee activity. Centres will engage larger employers, industry and professional associations, including chambers of commerce to help reflect the voices of smaller enterprises.

The Centre acts as an intermediary to connect schools with the economic community. Dedicated Centre staff present employers with a menu of virtual and experiential learning options for engaging with schools. Student opportunities relate to three primary areas.

Career guidance in schools is enriched through greater access to employee volunteers who provide career talks (whether in person, online or through video recording) about their work. Schools also gain new access to workplace visits and mentoring opportunities.

Secondly, employers are encouraged to support work-related learning, helping to bring learning to life by provision of real-world examples and the involvement of volunteer staff in classroom-based subject learning. Within this approach, the Centres are designed to enhance teacher knowledge about current practice in these sectors and encourage them to better reflect career opportunities in the content they cover.

Finally, experiential learning is enabled through work placements and other virtual opportunities. In Canada, students in the final two years of upper secondary education have the option of enrolling in courses that reflect a vocational-focus alongside their more traditional academic studies. These 'cooperative education' programmes (of up to 360 hours duration) involve considerable work-based learning, giving students the opportunity to begin training and certification in an industry of interest within a learning environment that encourages reflective practice. Around 10% of final year students take a cooperative education programme, earning credit for their high school diploma.

Typically, the employer investment in supporting guidance activities is one of time, rather than of money. Making the ask is easier and more persuasive if it comes through existing relationships. While employers are prompted by a range of motivations to engage, including short and long-term recruitment needs, reputational awareness and staff development concerns, the most common reason that employers and employee volunteers give for supporting schools is the most simple: that someone asked them.

A great advantage of a national programme is that a simple message can be communicated to employers and people in work across a country. Such messages are accentuated if they are delivered with the support of, or better through, national representative organisations like chambers of commerce, professional associations or trade unions. National employers can lead by example and encourage engagement across their networks and supply chains. If employees are asked by their CEO or a professional body asks its members to consider making themselves or their workplaces available to schools, the chances of a positive response are greater than if the ask if made by an unknown intermediary organisation or an unfamiliar school. In these circumstances, there are strong advantages in creating a national online portal, like the Inspiring the Future model that operates in the UK and New Zealand, so that national campaigns can generate interest and identify potential supporters. However, such calls for employers to signal their willingness to engage with schools will only work if a national network of schools is already engaged and ready to take advantage of the new opportunity. Employer engagement schemes will struggle if employers come forward, but find there appears to be no immediate interest in what they have to offer. Consequently, it is of great value to engage the leading national organisations that represent employers, school leaders and teachers in the design and delivery of employer engagement programmes.

The greatest barrier preventing employer engagement is the information gap that exists between schools and potential partners from the economic community. Engaging representatives of both sides in governance structures creates a foundation for closing the gap efficiently by exploiting the power of existing networks to influence the behaviour of the people on both sides of the relationship who have it in their

power to make employer engagement work. An easy ask, like a programme of career talks – marketed in the UK as 'Can you spare an hour a year to talk to young people about the job you do?' – provides a platform on which to build deeper relationships.

Finally, high quality employer engagement will be **equitable.** Career guidance enriched by employer engagement is a resource that helps students to visualise and plan their futures. Risks of inequity exist both between and within institutions. Schools vary considerably in the location and social context where they are situated. Rural schools have a very different set of local resources to draw upon than urban schools. Schools in affluent neighbourhoods tend to have easier access to parents who are able to facilitate access to workplaces and who work in the professional and managerial occupations to which a majority of students across the OECD now aspire. Schools located in areas of high unemployment face additional challenges. Multi-institutional approaches to connecting schools with employers and workplace volunteers will help reduce inequalities between schools and can make sure that access to the highest profile or most popular employers in an area is shared between schools. It is easy for one school to create an early relationship to the detriment of neighbouring institutions. National strategies can prioritise schools in areas of higher unemployment or which are situated in areas of limited economic diversity.

Within schools, the management of employer engagement can serve to accentuate inequalities. In many schools for example, students are asked to find their own work experience placements and respond by drawing on inherently unequal family connections, leading at times to very different experiences. While students can benefit from taking part in the process of trying to find a placement and the engagement with employers that it brings, the results can serve to enhance inequalities. One solution to the challenge is to ask students to source placements in light of their collective preferences as a project and then for guidance counsellors to work with students on the allocation of opportunities. Schools can also place greater emphasis on job shadowing, an approach that is particularly relevant to occupations that do not hire school leavers. Small groups of students can job shadow, using the experience to build understanding of a professional area, clarifying career ambitions while developing potentially useful contacts.

Delivering employer engagement online

While online delivery can sometimes lose the immediacy and often excitement of face-to-face encounters, it has the important benefit of increasing access to employee volunteers. Geographic constraints, even international boundaries, disappear. It becomes easier for schools to connect with volunteers with specific knowledge to share. They might work in an area linked to a specific curriculum topic or be able to speak about an unusual career ambition. Access can also be greater to people working for the most high profile employers. Online provision consequently has the capacity to enhance the effectiveness, efficiency and equity in the delivery of employer engagement. During the pandemic, hundreds of guidance professionals working in 93 responded to a survey managed by the OECD and other international organisations. It revealed that many countries had introduced online guidance materials that involve employers. These include pre-recorded videos, online job fairs, work-site visits and some more ambitious activities (Cedefop; European Commission; ETF; ICCDPP; ILO; OECD; UNESCO, 2020[11]).

Virtual career talks

A model for delivering career talks to secondary school students has been developed by the UK programme Inspiring the Future. Director of Operation, Katy Hampshire advises:

- Include no more than five employee volunteers in a session which should not last longer than 75 minutes
- Volunteers present for five minutes each about their career journeys followed by questions from students and teachers

- Students (who can be in multiple classrooms and schools) can have their cameras turned off and ask questions through the chat function or cameras and mics on depending on safeguarding requirements
- The session is actively facilitated by a teacher to introduce volunteers, manage the Question and Answer sessions and keep to timings

Katy advises testing the technology thoroughly before an online session.

Virtual work experience

In the UK, there is a long tradition of students aged 14-15 undertaking work experience placements of 1-2 weeks, doing tasks that people are typically paid to do in a workplace. During the pandemic, schools, employers and intermediaries have developed a new model of virtual work experience. The 'placement' involve students watching pre-recorded videos from volunteers from different workplaces about the reality of work in a particular occupation. A task, or a series of tasks, is also set for the student by workplace volunteers. After completing it, the student receives feedback by the volunteer and has opportunity to discuss the career in question. In this way, the placement is designed to be more accessible, while retaining a sense of authenticity and offering a mixture of active career exploration and task completion. See: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/lean_-_gb6_-_virtual_experience_of_the_workplace_0.pdf

The future of online delivery

Looking ahead, it is likely that guidance involving employers will be more heavily delivered online after the pandemic. Necessity has driven innovation. However, it would be a concern if countries were to rely solely on online provision. What makes employer engagement so valuable to young people is the authenticity and directness of the encounter. Studies are required to ensure that the greater convenience enabled by online technologies does not serve to undermine the power of the interaction.

Career talks: an easy and effective way to begin the process of integrating employers in guidance

> *I would have loved it if at school one day a week we'd heard from people doing different professions. It would've been brilliant to get people into school to tell us about what their job was all about, what you need to do to get into it, how the work is, what sort of life you can expect. I'd have loved that – we know so little. Seeing people face-to-face is the real deal, so much better than YouTube. There's too much information about, you need to ground it. Do it, not just read about it. And it would have been even better if we could have gone with them into where they work to see what that was like.*
>
> *Jazzo, 19 from Ireland who left full-time education at 18 and is now training to be a butcher.*

Of all the different activities that engage employers in guidance, the simplest place to start is in the provision of career talks to students (Musset and Mýtna Kureková, 2018[9]). Employers say that these are the easiest activity for them to support. As it is based on volunteers talking about their job and how they got into it in a school with teaching staff present, typically it requires neither training to be undertaken nor police checks on the volunteer (as is common in many countries for activities like mentoring).

Preliminary analysis of new OECD analysis of national longitudinal surveys in Canada and Uruguay has highlighted significant associations between teenage participation in career talks and better employment outcomes. These emergent findings supplement a rich analysis of participation in multiple career talks in

the UK. Where students participate more, they have greater chance of learning something that is new and useful to them. UK analysis also shows that is likely that students from the most disadvantaged backgrounds will have the most to gain from the activity.

Career talks can be delivered in three main ways: through a job fair, through a classroom or year group presentation and through a carousel format. It is the carousel format that a worked experiment shows can be expected to provide the greatest benefits. In a carousel, students individually or in small groups spend a short amount of time talking to an employee volunteer. When the time is up, they move table and meet someone new. In this way, over an hour students can meet several volunteers. It is an efficient way to broaden and inform aspirations and especially effective if undertaken in lower secondary as the occupational identities of students strengthen. Volunteers can be sourced from among parental and teacher networks and/or from intermediary organisations. It is a quick and easy way to kick start a culture of employer engagement in career guidance and prompt more critical student consideration of possible futures in work and they relate to their time in school. Monthly career talks can substantially increase student understanding of the labour market.

> *Students (even from the most disadvantaged backgrounds) have no lack of aspirations, but their aspirations often remain dormant at the back of their minds. It is not until you engage with them or have someone else engage with them that those aspirations come to the fore. When people come into the school to talk about the jobs they do, it allows and encourages students to voice their own ambitions perhaps for the first time. There is a magic that happens when they hear first-hand from someone in work about how they got into their occupational field and then inviting the students to talk about where they are on the same long journey. This the year, we have had small groups of 8-10 students (aged 14) join talks with four different volunteers over a morning. We realise now that more activities, beginning at a younger age will create more time for their aspirations to be raised, discussed and thought through.*
>
> *Beth Nalter, Careers Advisor, Green Bay High School, Auckland, New Zealand*

The bottom line: employer engagement considerably enriches career guidance and is not difficult to introduce into schooling

Reviews of international evidence find that secondary school students whose career guidance is enriched by engagement with employers and people in work can often anticipate better outcomes in adult employment. Employer engagement offers students something that supplements their normal schooling. It gives them opportunity to gain new and useful information about how possible futures in work link to their educational choices.

To maximise the benefits of employer engagement within career guidance, schools should:

- Provide frequent opportunities for students to engage in authentic, varied activities that are delivered within a programme of guidance,
- Require participation in activities at a younger age and provide more personalised provision later in school life,
- Make such engagement a regular part of school life.

The highest quality employer engagement will be guided by school staff to ensure its effectiveness. Through national or regional approaches, efficiencies will be optimised and equity enhanced. Use of existing networks will optimise opportunities for employers and employee volunteers to work with schools. Opportunity exists to broaden access to guidance-focused employer engagement through online technologies, but schools should be wary of undermining its effectiveness as a learning tool. For schools without a history of engaging employers, career talks are a quick and easy way to start.

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

Contact: Anthony Mann, project leader, Anthony.mann@oecd.org

See: Career Readiness in the Pandemic

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