



Employer perceptions of work experience and sector-based work academies

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Background

Work experience and sector-based work academies are key elements of the Government's Youth Contract measures. As part of the Youth Contract which was implemented from April 2012, it was announced that an extra 250,000 work experience or sector-based work academy places would be made available over three years. This will offer at least 100,000 opportunities a year and will offer a place for every 18-24 year old who wants one, before they enter the Work Programme.

These findings are based on a quantitative survey of 3,000 employers who were involved in either the work experience scheme or with sector-based work academies.

Involvement in the schemes

The majority of employers who took part in this survey were sampled as being involved in the work experience scheme. During the interview, seven per cent of these employers said they had also been involved with a sector-based work academy. In the sample of employers involved with a sector-based work academy, almost half (47 per cent) said they had also been involved with the work experience scheme¹.

¹ This was as reported by respondents during the interview. Because of possible confusion between the two schemes, these percentages should be seen as indicative rather than as precise figures for take-up of the schemes.

Of the employers who reported involvement with a sector-based work academy, 52 per cent said they were involved with all three 'core' elements: sector-specific training, work experience placement and guaranteed job interview². The sample also included employers who were only involved in some elements: nine per cent offered a placement and training only, eight per cent offered a placement and interview, seven per cent offered training and an interview, and 21 per cent offered just one element³.

Employer characteristics

Overall, the employers who were involved in the work experience scheme had more diverse characteristics than those involved with a sector-based work academy. Sector-based work academy employers were mostly large organisations (59 per cent had 250 or more employees) and 76 per cent were multi-site organisations. This is likely to be due to the nature of the scheme. A number of vacancies

² Sector-based work academy opportunities can offer help with the application process in lieu of a job interview; however, questions were not asked about this element of support.

³ It is important to note that the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) definition of a sector-based work academy is that it must contain all three 'core' elements. Some of the employers included in the survey were not involved in all elements and, therefore, may not meet the full criteria of a sector-based work academy. This should be taken into account when considering the findings within this report and any conclusions made about the policy.

may be required to make it worthwhile to set up a sector-based work academy so large employers were more likely to be targeted by Jobcentre Plus (see below). By contrast, while 38 per cent of work experience employers were large organisations, 36 per cent were micro-organisations (with fewer than ten employees).

Similarly, while most sector-based work academy employers were in the private sector (70 per cent), the proportion was lower among work experience employers (57 per cent), with 19 per cent in the public sector and 20 per cent in the non-profit/voluntary sector.

The majority of employers in both schemes were in 'service' sectors (76 per cent for work experience and 67 per cent for sector-based work academies), most commonly SIC Group G (the wholesale and retail trade; repair of motor vehicles and motor cycles).

Getting involved in the schemes

It was more likely that employers were approached by Jobcentre Plus about taking on a work experience opportunity (58 per cent), rather than the employer approaching Jobcentre Plus (32 per cent). Similarly, for sector-based work academies, 48 per cent were approached by Jobcentre Plus staff, while 24 per cent made the initial approach to Jobcentre Plus, and eight per cent became involved after being contacted by a training provider⁴. Overall, the findings indicate that large, private sector organisations were often targeted by Jobcentre Plus about sector-based work academies, whereas for the work experience scheme there was a more even spread of employers and a greater emphasis on the public sector.

The most commonly reported reason for involvement in the schemes was to give young or unemployed people a chance (57 per cent for work experience, 43 per cent for sector-based

work academies). Another main reason was to get extra resource at no/low cost (22 per cent for work experience, 23 per cent for sector-based work academies). This was the sole driver for six per cent of work experience and 12 per cent of sector-based work academies

The main concern for employers prior to participation in either scheme was the quality of candidates (31 per cent for work experience, 24 per cent for sector-based work academies).

Setting up placements

The majority of work experience employers (81 per cent) and sector-based work academy employers (82 per cent) thought that Jobcentre Plus did a good job in identifying suitable candidates for placements. Views were less positive where placements were not completed.

Sector-based work academy employers were more likely than work experience employers to say that there had been a great deal or a fair amount of work for their organisation in setting up the placement (54 per cent compared with 42 per cent).

A large majority of employers (91 per cent for work experience and 87 per cent for sector-based work academies) thought that the process of setting up placements went well. Similarly, a large proportion in both schemes thought that Jobcentre Plus were effective in supporting the set-up of the placements (83 per cent for work experience opportunities, 82 per cent for sector-based work academy placements). Views were particularly positive among those with a larger number of placements (often larger employers), despite the greater burden that these employers felt.

⁴ Note that 'training providers' is used to represent all learning providers including both colleges and training providers.

Placement details

The number of participants taken on by sector-based work academy employers was higher, on average, than for work experience employers. In total, 44 per cent of sector-based work academy employers took on ten or more participants, and this was particularly high (67 per cent) where employers offered all elements of the academy. By contrast, 20 per cent of work experience employers had ten or more participants, while a similar proportion (22 per cent) took just one person on.

Less than two in five work experience employers (37 per cent) saw all recruits complete their placements. An additional 45 per cent said that most, or at least half, completed their placements, while 18 per cent said that most or all of the placements were not completed. The figures for sector-based work academy employers were similar: 38 per cent said that all placements were completed, 50 per cent said half or most were completed, and 12 per cent saw few, if any, placements completed.

There was a range of different types of work offered in both schemes. Work experience opportunities were most likely to be in elementary occupations (28 per cent), sales and customer service occupations (26 per cent) and administrative and secretarial occupations (21 per cent). Sector-based work academy placements were most commonly in elementary occupations (32 per cent), sales and customer service (16 per cent), personal services (15 per cent), administrative and secretarial (14 per cent) and technical operations (12 per cent). The spread of different occupations shows that both schemes were offering a range of different types of work at different levels.

Rating of people on placements

The majority of employers were satisfied with the people they took on for placements, specifically in relation to their attitude (82 per cent of work experience employers and 85 per cent of sector-

based work academy employers), skills (82 per cent and 85 per cent respectively) and overall quality (83 per cent and 82 per cent respectively). Where placements had not been completed, employers were less likely to be satisfied.

Positive views were most likely to concern the attitude and enthusiasm of people on placements and the desire to get work. Some respondents also commented on the high quality of the people they have taken on, and good attendance records. The main reasons for dissatisfaction focused on similar issues: the attitude or motivation of people, their overall quality, or their attendance record.

One in six work experience employers (16 per cent) said that they had experienced an issue with misconduct in at least one of their placements. Experience of misconduct was higher among employers involved in sector-based work academies (32 per cent)⁵. The most common problems related to attendance and behavioural issues.

If employers had also been involved in work experience before February 2012⁶, around one in four said that there had been a change in either the quality of candidates (25 per cent), the attitude of candidates (27 per cent) or drop-out rates (28 per cent). Changes were more likely to be positive rather than negative changes, in relation to the quality and attitude of candidates. However, where changes had been seen in drop-out rates, these were more likely to be negative rather than positive (14 per cent compared with 11 per cent).

⁵ Sector-based work academy employers typically had a large number of placements so they were more likely to have at least one instance of misconduct over a large number of placements.

⁶ There was a change to work experience policy at that time.

Experience of the different elements of sector-based work academies

Where employers were involved in two or more elements of sector-based work academies, the majority said that they thought the different elements worked very well together (41 per cent) or fairly well (46 per cent).

The vast majority thought that the length of sector-based work academies was about right (85 per cent), although ten per cent said it was not long enough and three per cent thought it was too long.

Where employers were involved with a course run by a training provider, a large majority were satisfied with both the quality (87 per cent) and relevance (90 per cent) of the training. If employers offered provider-led training as well as at least one other element, nine per cent said that they had experienced problems co-ordinating the different elements.

Overall attitudes to schemes

Employers were mostly very positive about the schemes. Around three in four said that there had been benefits for their organisation in taking people on work experience opportunities (74 per cent) and sector-based work academies (76 per cent). The two most common benefits were providing a way of trying people out before hiring them and getting extra resource at no or low cost.

Many employers said that they would be very likely to take on someone in the future on a work experience placement (64 per cent) or as part of a sector-based work academy (55 per cent), with most of the remainder saying they would be fairly likely to do so. In addition, a very high proportion of employers said that they would recommend work experience (91 per cent) or sector-based work academies (88 per cent) to other employers.

In both schemes, employers mostly agreed that taking part let them 'take a risk on someone you otherwise wouldn't' (77 per cent of work experience employers and 72 per cent of sector-based work academy employers).

On the different issues, views were particularly positive among work experience employers who were larger and had taken on more placements, and views were also more positive in the non-profit/voluntary sectors. Sector-based work academy employers were most positive if they had taken part in all elements. In both schemes, experience of previous work experience schemes tended to lead to more positive views, while non-completion of placements was the main factor leading to negative views.

Impact of the schemes

In total, 50 per cent of all work experience employers said they had taken at least one person on at the end of the placement, while the figure for sector-based work academy employers who offered placements was 78 per cent⁷.

In both cases, this was higher amongst larger employers who had taken on a greater number of placements. Among employers who took someone on at the end of the placement, 44 per cent of work experience employers took on half or more of the people, as did 60 per cent of sector-based work academy employers.

One concern over work experience placements is that they may be used by employers as a substitute for recruitment of paid workers. However, just six per cent of work experience employers said that they had fewer vacancies for paid work, as a result of offering work experience placements.

⁷ Sector-based work academies are designed to help employers fill existing vacancies more efficiently. Due to the demand-led nature of the scheme, it is expected that more employers will offer paid work to participants than work experience employers.

Excluding those who had only taken on people aged 25 or over (a small minority), around two in five respondents (41 per cent of work experience employers and 39 per cent of sector-based work academy employers) said that taking part in the scheme had made them more likely to recruit young people with a recent history of unemployment. The proportion was higher among employers who offered a greater number of placements. Around half of work experience employers (52 per cent) agreed that their recruitment had focused more on young people since taking part in the work experience scheme. This was somewhat lower (38 per cent) among sector-based work academy employers.

Conclusions

Most employers were happy with the two schemes as they are currently offered (with nine in ten who would recommend them to other employers and eight in ten who were satisfied with the overall quality of the candidates), with many seeing a range of benefits for their organisation and for young people that take part. The main suggested improvements tended to focus either on the quality of people on placements (15 per cent work experience employers, 11 per cent sector-based work academy employers) and the way they were prepared, or communication with Jobcentre Plus (one in ten for each).

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