



## **Virtual Work Experience Evaluation**

### **Final report (February 2021)**

#### **Background**

The opportunity for young people to experience the world of work in a digital way has been growing slowly over the past few years. The onset of the Covid-19 pandemic increased the speed of development of programmes out of necessity. However, not much research has been done on the effectiveness of these encounters, and whether they achieve their aims. This report sets out to evaluate the effectiveness of digital encounters with employers and employees and young people's experiences of workplaces, based on a pilot of virtual work experience (VWEX) conducted by Cornwall Careers Hub in December 2020.

The field work took place in January and February 2021. It involved speaking with careers leaders in schools and colleges, employers that took part, large national employers and Speakers For Schools (with whom the pilot took place). It was a small pilot, and therefore a small sample, so it is difficult to draw finite conclusions as to the value of the programme, but the findings below are designed to provide a basis for further development. It is highly recommended that ongoing evaluation takes place as these digital experiences become more common in order to build a growing evidence base.

#### **The feedback**

##### The employer experience

The motivations for employers who offer any kind of work experience (WEX) differ. At one end of the spectrum, there are those that actively use a WEX programme to source a pipeline of talent who will be recruited to their business either after GCSEs, A Levels or university. At the other, there are organisations who want to support the development of skills in young people, whether or not they choose their business, profession or sector as their destination. But there is no question that there is widespread use of 'experience of work' as a distinguishing feature of candidates' applications, especially in those sectors that have a high ratio of applications to vacancies – and post-pandemic, any sector that is recruiting young people is likely to see this ratio increase.

A common thread in the interviews conducted as part of this research (and in wider conversations with ISE members) is that any business that considers this in a strategic way will have adapted their WEX programme to a digital format, intending to achieve the same outcome. In particular, those that expect to continue to grow as the UK recovers from the pandemic will have one eye on their talent pipeline. Lessons from previous recessions show that a prolonged freeze in early talent recruitment causes significant skills gaps in the business's ability to recover.

There were a number of areas explored in the interviews conducted with employers. The common thread was that all agreed there was a place for VWEX in supporting young people's development of skills, and that while there were some challenges not one employer said that they wouldn't offer this in some kind of format in the future. What they do need is more support and guidance, feedback, and forward planning.

Employers had different views on whether VWEX was more or less **time intensive** than standard WEX. This was in part due to the difference in the proportion of timetabled independent work that was carried out by students as part of the programme (see below for analysis), but that doesn't account fully for the difference in views. More likely is this reflects differences in how standard WEX programmes are managed by employers of different sizes and in different sectors. Employers have done their best to adapt their face-to-face provision to an online format and while for some it has required a similar level of investment of resources, for others it has meant considerable additional work/supervision time.

One of the perceived benefits of VWEX is the increase in **reach**, both geographically and in the range of young people engaged with. There was some feedback from employers that they got to work with students from schools they wouldn't normally see, and also with different types of young person.

There were a variety of responses on the **technology** involved. Some employers found it straightforward, others needed more support. In general though there was support for the SFS platform itself, and the challenges were more around the time available to become familiar with it. That would lend itself to continuing to use the same provider so that employers can build up some expertise.

In terms of their experiences with the students, there were varying levels of **engagement**. Where there were larger numbers taking part and therefore a number of groups doing project work, there were definite differences in engagement levels within the groups which became evident in their presentations. Some students didn't have camera or mic on for the whole experience, others became more confident over time. This makes evaluation very difficult. Just because a student has the camera off doesn't mean they aren't engaged; and just because they are in a F2F WEX doesn't mean that they are.

However, it seems expectation setting is key. To some employers, the students didn't seem 'briefed' before the session. They were unfamiliar with how to retrieve emails which made sending them attachments for the activities a challenge. Moving them between breakout groups was also a new concept for them. It was certain felt that the school needs to offer more **preparation** before the employers are working with them. This might be a lot easier next time for careers leaders that have been through the pilot – but what is important is that the employers understand what preparation has been done.

An interesting point from one employer was that there is less opportunity in a VWEX for **adjustment** to the tasks according to interests/ability compared to standard WEX. The virtual environment doesn't lend itself to observing the nuances of different students – it isn't as clear if the programme is over-ambitious, or not ambitious enough. Young people aren't likely to voice their dissatisfaction or concerns, but in a face-to-face situation employers are more able to read non-verbal signs. See below for more thoughts on students who have SEND needs.

Finally, employers struggled to get quality **evaluation** from the students. There were differing approaches to securing this, from regular verbal feedback throughout the programme to a more structured feedback session at the end. It would have been helpful for employers to understand the

mechanisms that feedback was going to be obtained, and to have an opportunity to follow up with the school post-programme.

**Recommendation 1:** Support employers to have a connection to the careers leaders – help with expectation management, and management of the cohort when the experience is live

**Recommendation 2:** Encourage employers not to assume students will be digitally competent in a professional way, particularly if the VWEX is happening in the home environment.

**Recommendation 3:** Share the programme of activity in advance with schools to help them prepare – even if on a website

### The school/college experience

The careers leaders spoken to were very enthusiastic about the opportunities the VWEX pilot offered their students ahead of the programme, and remained so afterwards. While acknowledging it might not suit every young person, there was a consensus that there was a benefit in stretching their horizons beyond taking the 'easy option' and opting to work in a family business or one very local to them. The opportunity to provide VWEX in businesses outside of Cornwall was hugely appealing. It was suggested that more could be made of the fact that this is an 'outside school' activity – the credibility of Speakers for Schools/employers will help students to engage more, especially in the face of genuine concerns about the potential for employment in the current environment.

There were some challenges though. A delay in placements going live has a big impact on a school. As applications need to be done online (and teachers had no sight of the forms ahead of time), computer rooms need to be booked. There is a limited amount of flex in a timetable to change this. Also, there was no clear timeline on the approval of placements – some were very last minute. Careers leaders certainly felt there was a lack of **communication** and **coordination**, and that increasing this would make the experience significantly easier for them.

In general, there were also more issues with the **technology** and **logistics** for schools than there were for employers. Again, this does depend on the technical competence of those involved, but the common theme was that the logistics were difficult and time-consuming. Teachers need to have more control/knowledge over the communications and the back end of the system. They had no way to know which students were logged in when the programmes were live, which caused a lot of running around/contacting or relying on students to provide updates. One school reported that in Google classroom, all are logged on as equals so students could mute and evict anyone. In general, more portal training is needed for schools, for careers leaders to have the confidence that the student experience is valuable.

Other points of note were that the day was too long for students to be on a screen and kept engaged, but this feedback was isolated. Also schools and employers have different times for breaks and lunches – for those that are having to undertake the experience in a classroom (with students on different programmes) this can be disruptive, but it is also challenging to manage for those in groups and for the employers.

**Recommendation 4:** Timings need to be made clear at the outset and stuck to: eg. when placements will go live, how long from application to approval.

**Recommendation 5:** Some 'buzz' needs to be created around the experience to inspire students to take part; there is a lot of apathy driven by low expectations of the labour market (driven by media reports). That should ideally come from the Careers Hub – certainly external to the schools/colleges.

### The student experience

Comments from employers about the level of **preparedness** of students suggests that more could have been done to support them to get the most out of their experience. While much of the feedback from students was positive (see below), it was a new experience for many. There is a concern that it is easy to assume all young people are digitally competent, but while this might be true on a social level, their experience of work in a digital environment is likely to be non-existent. The preparation that would normally be undertaken for WEX needs to be supplemented with guidelines on how to 'work' from home, how to communicate professionally by email and how to engage through a digital interface.

The Speakers for Schools process allows for teachers to share details of students with **SEND needs**. However for at least one school this was not permitted, due to internal processes and (legitimate) GDPR concerns. The impact of this is that employers had no sense of who might need adaptations or extra support, and that consequently the experiences of those with SEND needs would have been compromised. There is no evidence to share on this, but it is a logical supposition, and one that would be managed better in a standard WEX process.

As mentioned above, some employers felt meaningful **evaluation** and feedback was difficult to come by in a VWEX environment, compared to standard WEX. Speakers for Schools did conduct their own evaluation, which 38 students completed. This researcher created an online survey for one of the colleges involved, as they hadn't had the desired quantity of feedback, but unfortunately only one student responded (as this was eight weeks after the pilot took place, that is not a surprise). However, longitudinal studies on the impact of experiences of work would be helpful in general).

The most useful findings from the SFS survey are:

- 71% of participants said they would have had access to the opportunity without Speakers for Schools
- There was a shift from 59% to 72% who said they were now considering a future career in the industry (5 students)
- 42% said the experience was a very valuable experience, a further 50% said it was somewhat valuable
- 31% said they were much better informed, a further 58% said they were somewhat better informed
- Analysis of the verbatim responses revealed:
  - 33% mentioned it was an 'eye opening' experience (relating to the sector/range of career opportunities)

- 20% said they had developed some soft skills (eg engaging with people, working with a team, communication)
- 8% mentioned they had developed a work-related skill
- 13% left a negative comment.

Although this is a small sample of feedback, there are some interesting points to consider. Asking students to self-identify a ‘**valuable**’ experience is helpful to a degree, but leaves questions – especially when considering the verbatim responses. Valuable could mean they now have more of an idea about the sector/employer, even though it doesn’t specifically interest them (in fact, one response made that point exactly). It could be also be valuable because they developed soft or work-related skills.

On this last note, and linked to a point above, based on the sample of **programme timetables** I have had access to, there is a significant disparity between the types of activity undertaken. At the extremes of the scale, one employer timetabled 57% on group project work, whereas another had only 16%. The range of time for ‘speakers’ (presentations by staff) ranged from 10-23%, and independent work varied from none to 10%.

Two employers offered a substantial amount of time explaining apprenticeships, another did a **skills** session on interviewing skills. When raised in employer interviews, those that did no skills sessions agreed it would have been helpful to dedicate a part of the timetable to skills development – one voiced the opinion that these types of sessions would be considerably more meaningful being delivered by employers rather than within the school environment.

So it is clear that the student experience differed considerably. While it may be expected that different sector or size of employer would take a different approach, some consistency may be beneficial.

**Recommendation 6:** A set of guidelines for student behaviour/conduct in a virtual world to manage expectations. This could be in the form of a ‘contract’ between employer and student, with standard commitments on both sides.

**Recommendation 7:** In order to obtain useful feedback for employers and schools, a standard survey should be agreed, and put online. Employers should allocate time to complete prior to the end of the last day/session. Ideally this should be collated centrally, and shared with all parties (anonymously).

**Recommendation 8:** Some standardisation of programme content would make it easier for schools to prepare students, and ensure a parity of experience. Linked to this, help employers understand what a meaningful experience is when delivering virtually and create materials to show how VWEX links to Gatsby benchmarks in a clear way.

**Recommendation 9:** Gather testimonials now for promotion next time

## Safeguarding

A training session was run by the Careers Hub for the career leaders who were to be involved in the pilot on the issues of safeguarding. Speakers for Schools had created documentation that was shared

with them and it was explained that they would need to discuss certain areas with senior leaders when planning the pilot including monitoring attendance, behaviour, **safeguarding** and the quality of impact and outcomes for students.

A common theme in the feedback from both employers and careers leaders was that the safeguarding element was difficult to manage. There was no control or knowledge of students attending and leaving, and when there were no shows there was a lack of resource to follow this up. And of course there were multiple occasions where students did not have their screens and microphones on.

### **Areas for improvement**

Recommendations for improvement have been suggested above. Overall though one of the key messages is that **coordination** between schools/colleges and employers is key if students are to benefit from the experience. This is exactly the same as for a standard WEX placement, and often comes down to understanding that the way institutions operate is very different. Speakers for Schools received favourable comments for their support from employers but they seem to have more limited experience in dealing with schools and so weren't able to support in quite the same way (see above for the issue around timetabling/delays in placements going live).

As another example of this, one of the VWEX placements requires students to have software on their laptop, and expects that the school IT department would assist in downloading this. The employer in question does acknowledge that this can be a difficult process – I would argue that it is next to impossible for some schools, and the student's experience might be compromised as a result of it. From the interviews with schools, students struggled to remember log in details for the Speakers for Schools site – multiple log-ins for different software applications would cause even more problems. More realistic expectations might need to be considered, facilitated by a knowledgeable broker organisation.

**Recommendation 10:** A knowledgeable and credible broker is needed between the employers and school to ensure both sides appreciate how the other one operates. This would iron out some of the teething problems.

### **VWEX v WEX**

There is no easy answer as to whether VWEX is an acceptable substitute for the standard WEX programmes. The only fair conclusion to come to is that there is room for both, and that work needs to be done to ensure a student has access to the one that will be most beneficial to them.

What VWEX does well is open up otherwise inaccessible opportunities, provide insights to an arguable greater number of roles within a business/sector and mirror the flexibility of what is fast becoming normal working life for many.

What it can't do in quite the same way is provide a nuanced experience tailored to an individual, develop professional interpersonal skills (for some) and enforce basic requirements for work such as timekeeping.

So if it is accepted that both have their place, the question remains as to how to create a blended experience. Two employers interviewed as part of this project have suggestions. Larger employers might have part of a week on site, with the remainder online. Others might have a cohort on site and a cohort online, ensuring collaboration between the two and mimicking real life work. And it was also suggested that VWEX could be a precursor – a taster – to support a full WEX programme, allowing students to make more informed decisions as to where they want to spend their full week.

### **Best practice**

In some respects, the best practice available for VWEX is exactly the same as for a standard WEX. Obviously there are some additional aspects to be considered, and/or they need to be executed in a different way, but the fundamental principles are the same. The points below are taken from content delivered by ISE, conversations with ISE employers and general desk research, tested with some of the employers who took part in the pilot.

- Students should be collaborating online to tackle real-life and contextual challenges, working their way through themed tasks designed and delivered by experts and supported by specialists in their field
- Students must be able to access the content, tasks and challenges at a time that suits them, from their smart phones, on a platform that offers an exemplary user experience. Therefore, students with limited access to Wi-Fi and a laptop don't get overlooked. (note the 'platform' aspect of this came from a provider that offers such a tool. The principle is valid regardless)
- Explore the technology available and learn to use it to its full extent. Adapt the sessions from the standard WEX to ensure that they are still engaging, consider the length and how to use the technology to create a memorable, engaging and valuable experience.
- Test the kit. Make sure there is a back-up plan. Work to the lowest known bandwidth – bright and shiny is great, but not everyone is running at the same network speed. Keep sessions short, mix them up, and use interactive tools where possible. Check in with the students very regularly. Mini-polls and quizzes are always good, and a really good icebreaker will help – for example, using interactive technology such as Trello, Mural and Cahoot.
- Employers should help careers leaders understand how they are changing the offering, the timelines they are working to, how they can help students prepare, the technology that will be used, and whether they are intending to revert back to standard WEX when things are 'normal'.
- Make sure the programme has a balanced combination of insights and experience. Understand where students are on their careers journey – at the very least the difference between the year groups if more detailed information isn't available from the school. Include at least one skills/information session
- Take the time to develop appropriate pre- and post- experience communication. Getting the on and off boarding right goes a long way to ensuring the student's experience is meaningful and will give them the confidence to make the most of the opportunity and ensure they are able to articulate the value of their experience to others.

## Opportunities

Through the discussions undertaken as part of this project, some opportunities presented themselves for consideration in future work:

- Support more SME collaboration or clusters. SMEs are generally supportive of WEX on a local level, but bringing a number together has proved successful and reduces the burden considerable (see Software Cornwall as an example). The clusters could be geographical or sector related.
- Larger employers can bring in staff from different divisions, and indeed did this successfully in the pilot. Encourage them to use that as an opportunity to showcase the non-sector specific roles (eg HR, marketing, IT) as well as their industry-specific ones. It will help young people get a sense of how businesses work and also open up other possible careers routes.
- The LEP should consider virtual experiences of work as part of a wider picture of work in Cornwall, discovering new opportunities. Linked to the recommendation above about creating a 'buzz', this could be a real campaign opportunity for some coordination across strategic areas.

## Conclusion

One of the greatest concerns for careers leaders as schools move to recover from the impact of the pandemic is the opportunities available for young people to experience work (see [here](#) for one survey). There is understandably a hope that virtual experiences will be the panacea, and indeed there are some very good opportunities for students to benefit from the rise in digital placements. But there should be caution, and some considerable effort to ensure that the right students benefit from the right type of experience, in order for it to be meaningful. As future VWEX programmes are undertaken, all the parties involved should be ensuring the feedback is shared and coordinated by a central function to keep building on the learning to date.