



HS2 Ltd - Virtual work experience programme 2021

Summary:

In February 2021, HS2 Ltd delivered a virtual work experience programme for young people aged 16-20. The programme was initially designed for students who had deferred a university place due to the Covid-19 pandemic, but was later opened up to other students.

27 students took part in the programme, with 53% of participants identifying as BAME and 53% as female. The majority of students were from London and the West Midlands, but the virtual model allowed students from other regions, who would not normally have been able to travel to our office, to participate.

Students worked with teams from their chosen career focus area of engineering, environment or finance to complete short work-based projects in the mornings, before coming together as a group in the afternoon for skills focused sessions. At the end of the week, each specialist group presented to a panel of senior leaders, giving a summary of how their chosen career area contributes to the HS2 project.

The programme was co-ordinated by the Skills, Employment and Education team, and supported by 53 volunteers from across the business.

Objectives:

Our overall aim was that the programme should recreate the feel of a traditional work experience as closely as possible.

We wanted students to be able to:

- complete a work-related tasks
- experience working in a team
- gain knowledge of the range of roles in our sector
- find out about apprenticeship routes into work
- meet relatable role models

- develop [Essential Skills](#)
- see how different curriculum subjects are used in practice in the workplace

Structure of the placement:

This was a one-week placement divided into 10 half day modules.

In the morning students worked in groups of up to 10 for a specialist session linked to their selected career focus area of engineering, environment or finance. On the Friday morning students gave a group presentation to a panel of senior leaders, summarizing how their career focus area contributes to the wider HS2 project.

In the afternoon all students worked together on more general skills sessions. Each day ended with a short reflection session in groups of up to 5, in which students worked with the same two volunteers each day and completed activities in the [MePLC personal branding workbook](#) and a reflection logbook, leading to a 29 second pitch at the end of the week.

Overall timetable:

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
9.00 - 12.00	Induction	Specialist session	Specialist session	Specialist session	Presentation Panel
12.00 - 13.00	Lunch break				
13.00 - 15.00	Skills: Time management & goal setting	Skills: Price negotiation	Skills: Inclusive design	Skills: Branding and Presentations	Skills: Applying for work
15.00 - 15.15	Afternoon break				
15.15 - 16.00	Reflection session	Reflection session	Reflection session	Reflection session	Reflection session

We assigned the students HS2 IT accounts, so that they could use our Office 365 package, including Microsoft Teams. This is an online platform that can be used without downloading software, and while easier to use on a computer or tablet, is compatible with smartphones.

We planned for a maximum capacity of 30 students for each placement week, with 10 students in each career focus area. We ended up with 27 students taking part, with all completing the full week. This compares favourably to our usual in the office placements, which would normally involve a maximum of 5 students in each office in any given week.

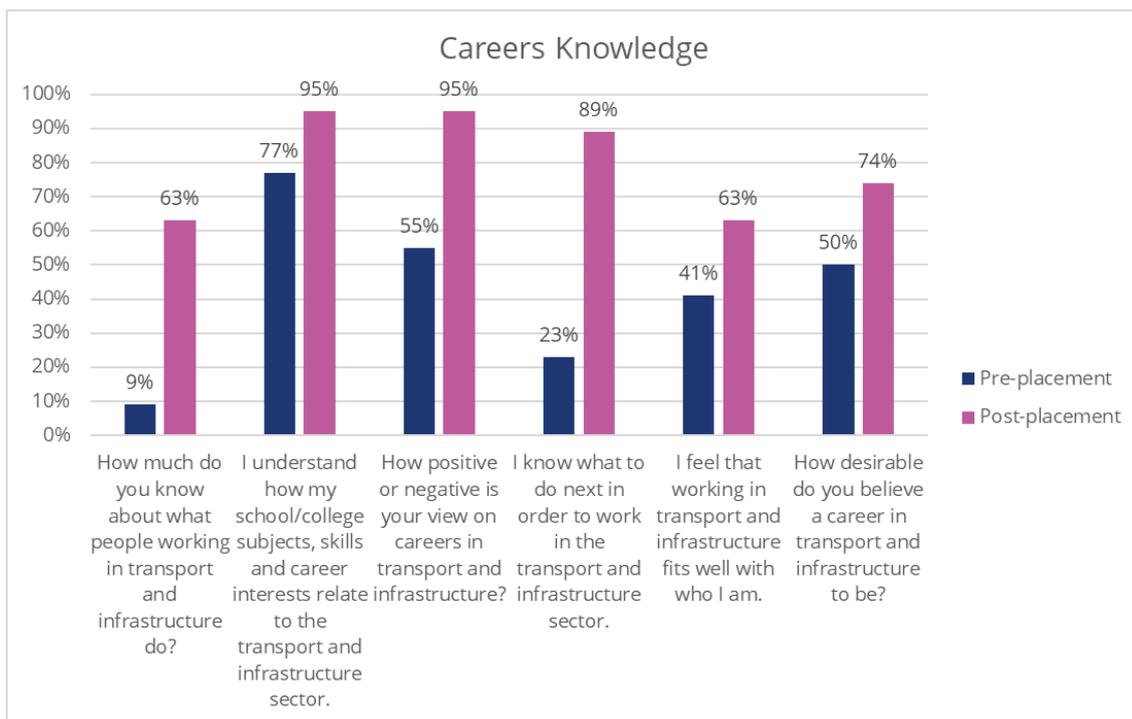
Students were recruited through a number of partner organisations, local schools and colleges. They didn't know each other before the placement so an important part of the experience was getting to know each other's strengths and weaknesses so that they could work effectively as a team.

The different types of sessions were planned so that students would be able to meet a range of role models and gain insight into different specialisms through the specialist and skills sessions, but also benefit from a closer mentoring relationship through the reflection sessions.

Evaluation:

Students were asked to complete a survey before and after the placement.

Students reported large increases in their knowledge of what is involved in a career in rail and infrastructure, and how they would get into a career in rail and infrastructure. The proportion of students answering with one of the two positive options on these questions was well below 50% pre-placement and more than 90% post-placement.



Students were asked to consider a series of statements about their experience during the placement. Responses were very positive, with 89% or more students ‘agreeing’ or ‘strongly agreeing’ that they:

- Found the Microsoft Teams platform easy to use
- Developed new skills
- Improved their confidence
- Considered the placement useful for their career

Comments from students:

“It wasn't just a work placement online, I felt like I was working with a team and the HS2 team made it feel like a family”.

“My favourite part of the work experience was the independent project. I felt like I learnt a lot from working on this and I was able to develop many skills.”

“It was really rewarding to receive feedback and engage with experts in the field we were researching”.

“Being able to work in a team was interesting because we were all from different backgrounds and thought differently”.

Reflections and lessons learned

While overall the programme was a big success, it was not without challenges and there is always room to improve.

Lack of preparation time

Running a placement during February half term was a challenge in terms of preparation and planning. In December volunteers were more focused on Christmas and then after returning to work in January we had a little over a month to get everything ready. This was exacerbated by the escalating situation with Covid-19, which resulted in many volunteers having to again supervise children learning at home.

In addition, while we provided volunteers with lots of guidance information, this was quite piecemeal, with updates coming each week. Feedback suggests that some volunteers struggled to keep track and this may have contributed to difficulties to deadlines for content being missed.

We have learned from this, and for our next placement in late August, we started the recruitment and briefing of volunteers in April and will aim to give volunteers more information at the start of the process, so that they are clear about their role, responsibilities and any deadlines when they commit to being a volunteer.

IT issues

On the whole the IT went quite smoothly, but the use of breakout rooms proved to be a problem. On Microsoft Teams, only the person who sets up a call is able to operate the breakout rooms, and for a week long programme it is not practical for that member of the SEE team to be present on all calls – especially when there were multiple calls running at the same time for the specialist sessions. A workaround is to set up multiple calls within a Teams channel, but hopefully Microsoft will design a better fix in a future update.

Student confidence

Many students were reluctant to use their mics and cameras, making it difficult for volunteers to lead a two-way discussion. We could not make camera use mandatory, as some students had IT problems and for safeguarding reasons, we had advised students not to use their camera if they were not in an appropriate space.

We tried to address this by arranging a pre-placement session so that the students could familiarise themselves with the IT platform and get to know each other informally, but while this did reduce IT problems, it didn't have much impact on mic and camera use. We also encouraged volunteers to use ice breakers to create informal opportunities to speak but effectiveness was varied.

In future we will look to improve the pre-placement session, and would consider a hybrid approach where safe and practical to do so. If a placement could begin with an office-based induction session, hopefully these would help students to build relationships and confidence, for the following online sessions.

Looking forward

Virtual delivery brought benefits, for example being able to include young people from the North East and North West who wouldn't have been able to travel to our offices. We were also able to cater for more students in one week, bringing opportunities for group work and to hear from senior colleagues including our CEO and Chair.

In future we plan to offer both in office and virtual work experience opportunities, and to develop a digital platform to widen access to our virtual offer.