

# School Pupils' Experience of Work

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Work experience is an established part of the secondary school curriculum and seen as a way to enable pupils to learn about the working world and how to operate in an adult environment. Many pupils, however, also experience the working world through the paid part-time work that they undertake. This *Briefing* considers the implications of pupils' part-time employment for work experience and the possible relationship between the two experiences. It draws on evidence from a national study of pupils' part-time employment commissioned by the Scottish Executive.

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- ▶ Work experience is a valued part of the curriculum but local authorities and schools face a number of challenges in organising and delivering work experience programmes for pupils.
- ▶ Going on work experience and having a part-time job while at school are each common experiences for pupils; over half of S4-S6 pupils had undertaken both activities.
- ▶ Staff in education tend to underestimate the extent of part-time work among pupils and the level of demands made on pupils in their jobs. Much part-time work provides opportunities for learning especially in respect of certain core and employability skills.
- ▶ There is a need for staff in the education sector to gain a greater understanding of the school pupils' part-time employment.
- ▶ The prevalence of part-time work among pupils raises a number of questions for the aims, allocation and delivery of work experience: schools cannot assume that work experience is pupils' first, or only, encounter with the working world.
- ▶ A common concern of educationalists is that part-time work may have a detrimental effect on pupils' attainment but part-time working is not of itself associated with a poorer academic performance.
- ▶ The current legislative system governing the employment of under-16s is ineffective and needs attention if schools are to take more account of pupils' part-time employment.

## Introduction

Work experience has been a feature of the secondary school curriculum for many years and recent guidance on work experience points to its core role in meeting the objectives in respect of work-based and work-related learning of Determined to Succeed, the Scottish Executive's strategy for enterprise in education (LTS 2006). The guidance also recognises its potential to help young people develop the four competences as outlined in the Curriculum for Excellence. However local authorities and schools face various challenges in delivering work experience and the question of its relationship to the paid part-time employment that many young people undertake while they are still at school has been raised. This *Briefing* outlines the extent and nature of school pupils' part-time work and considers the possible relationship with work experience drawing on evidence from a national study of pupils' part-time employment commissioned by the Scottish Executive (Howieson *et al* 2006).

## Work experience today

School work experience is expected to, variously: provide pupils with an experience of the workplace during which they may observe work roles, undertake some straightforward tasks, learn about responsibilities and see how core skills and other skills gained at school are used in work. It may also be used as "a taster", providing an opportunity for young people to test out their career ideas.

The most common system for organising work experience has been for schools to access local authority or Careers Scotland databases of employers willing to provide work experience. However, the recent re-focusing of the work of Careers Scotland is likely to mean its withdrawal from supporting work experience databases. This poses a considerable challenge for schools and makes it even more timely to explore the possible relationship between part-time work and work experience.

## Work experience and part-time employment: a common experience for pupils

The national survey of pupils showed that part-time work and work experience were both common experiences for school pupils. Participation in part-time employment rose in line with pupils' age and stage of schooling: well over half of pupils had had experience of part-time work by the end of S4 (56%), and by S6 pupils who had never had a part-time job were the exception (table 1). But the research also found that teachers and some local authority staff generally under-estimated the extent of part-time working by pupils. Over three quarters of pupils undertook work experience (78%, table 2).

**Table 1:** Extent of school pupils' part-time work

|     | All     | S3     | S4     | S5     | S6     |
|-----|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|     | %       | %      | %      | %      | %      |
|     | 59      | 48     | 56     | 64     | 83     |
| (n) | (18207) | (5936) | (5847) | (4099) | (2325) |

**Table 2:** Extent of school pupils' work experience

|     | All     | S3* | S4     | S5     | S6     |
|-----|---------|-----|--------|--------|--------|
|     | %       | %   | %      | %      | %      |
|     | 78      | n/a | 72     | 82     | 85     |
| (n) | (12293) |     | (2319) | (4110) | (2319) |

\*S3 pupils were not asked about work experience since they were surveyed before they could have been on it

The extent to which part-time work and work experience were separate or overlapping experiences for pupils is illustrated by table 3: just over half of S4-S6 pupils had undertaken both activities (51%); for over a quarter their experience of the working world was solely through work experience while for a smaller proportion, their experience was through part-time work alone (13%). A small minority did not experience the working world through either type of opportunity (9%).

**Table 3:** Pupils' part-time work (PTW) and work experience (WEXP)

|                      | S4-S6   | S3*    | S4     | S5     | S6     |
|----------------------|---------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
|                      | %       | %      | %      | %      | %      |
| WEXP only            | 27      | n/a    | 31     | 26     | 14     |
| PTW only             | 13      | 48     | 15     | 11     | 11     |
| Both WEXP and PTW    | 51      | n/a    | 42     | 54     | 71     |
| Neither WEXP nor PTW | 9       | n/a    | 13     | 8      | 3      |
| (n)                  | (12187) | (5936) | (5798) | (4078) | (2311) |

\*S3 pupils were not asked about work experience

Staff in education generally thought that work experience and part-time work are different:

*"work experience is more directed to what they want to do in their lives whereas the part-time work I'm aware of is a way to earn money but there may be by-products"*

[Enterprise in Education Teacher]

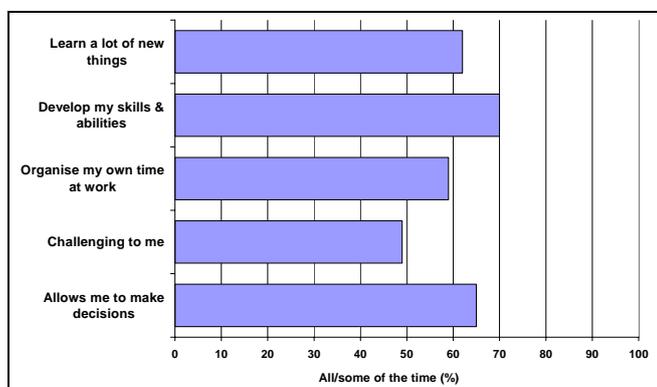
Educationalists saw work experience as allowing pupils greater scope than part-time work to use their initiative and as offering opportunities in a more varied range of occupational areas. Some did think that part-time work was more 'genuine' especially compared with enterprise or other activities where schools create 'false working conditions'. In contrast, the majority of employers believed part-time work to be more valuable to pupils than work experience: the young people had found the job for themselves; they had to turn up on time; it was for a longer period and gave a more accurate view of the workplace, "*part-time work is more real*".

## What do pupils do and learn in their part-time work?

The picture of the pupils' part-time work and its scope for learning that emerged from the research is different from the perception of many of the educationalists involved in the research. Delivering newspapers or milk is the traditional stereotype of pupils' part-time work but the research showed that pupils work in a wider range of jobs. Retail and catering sectors were significant employers of school pupils; smaller proportions were employed in delivery work which was predominately carried out by S3 and S4 pupils. There was a move out of less structured employment in S3 and S4 to more formal types of employment in S5 and S6.

Traditionally, pupils' part-time work has been viewed as low-skilled, providing little opportunity for learning and this was the view expressed by many of the education staff in the research. Pupils' perceptions of their part-time work contrasted with this negative view. The majority of working pupils thought that their part-time job gave them scope to learn and develop, including self-management and decision-making skills (figure 1). The research also indicated that at least some part-time employment provides opportunities for learning and attaining skills, especially certain core and employability skills (figure 2).

**Figure 1:** Pupils' view of the scope of their part-time job



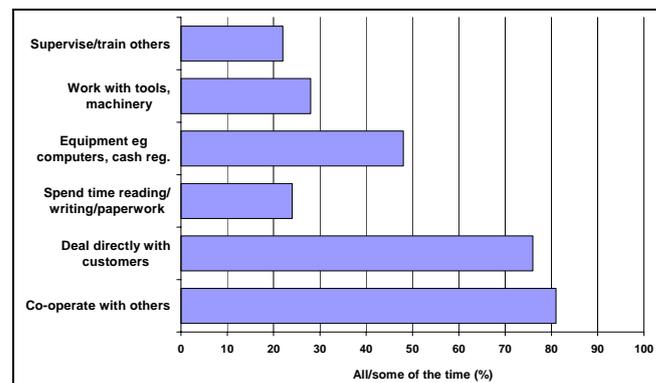
## The implications of part-time work for work experience

The research demonstrates that a majority of pupils undertake part-time work and that it can provide a useful learning experience. We suggest that the issue is not whether part-time work is better than work experience or vice versa but that in the current educational context where the value of work-based and work-related learning is increasingly recognised, there is a need to think about how the two experiences of part-time work and work experience might relate.

Most young people take part in work experience at the end of their 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> year at secondary school but as table 3 shows, around a half will already have

encountered the working world through a part-time job **before** their work experience placement. But we found that this was seldom taken into account by schools in the planning of work experience and the briefing sessions held with pupils. We would suggest that schools should discuss pupils' part-time work in such briefing sessions and encourage them to reflect on these different insights into the working environment.

**Figure 2:** Pupils' activities in their part-time job



The prevalence of part-time work among pupils raises other questions for work experience. If someone has a part-time job, do they also need to go on work experience in a context where there may be a shortage of placements? The answer depends partly on the aims of the particular work experience programme. If the central aim is to provide some insight and experience of the working environment, then it might be argued that pupils in part-time work have already gained this. If the aims of work experience focus more on allowing pupils to experience an occupational area relevant to their career ideas then they are less likely to gain this from their part-time work. Should work experience be differentiated in its aims depending on pupils' involvement in part-time work? For those with part time employment, for example, the focus of work experience might be more career-related while for the others, it might be more geared to providing a general insight into the working world.

## Issues

There is a strong case for schools to take more account of pupils' part-time employment in the planning and delivery of work experience but they need more information about pupils' part-time work if they are to understand and draw on its potential contribution.

Another issue is the common concern among staff in education about the possible adverse effect of part-time work on pupils' attainment and that if schools were to take more account of pupils' part-time work, this might encourage greater participation. However, there is a consistent body of evidence from a range of studies that simply having a part-time job is not of itself associated with a negative impact on attainment.

The critical factor in respect of the effect of part-time work on academic performance is the number of hours worked: for under-16 year olds working for more than 10 hours a week is associated with poorer attainment while the figure is around 16 hours or more for older workers (McKechnie and Hobbs 2001). But some studies have found that working for a small number of hours is actually associated with a positive effect on attainment. In this research we found that around two-thirds of working pupils were working at a level unlikely to have a detrimental effect on their attainment. Clearly this leaves a significant minority whose working hours must be a cause of concern.

School and local authority staff also voiced concern about the potential exploitation of young workers. Child employment legislation exists to provide some protection to young employees under 16 including the requirement for under-16s in part-time employment to have a work permit issued by their local authority. The surveys of pupils and of local authorities demonstrated, however, that most of the younger pupils were working without the required work permit.

We would suggest that the answer is not for schools and local authorities to ignore the part-time employment that their pupils undertake but for them, and others, including the Scottish Executive, to be proactive. This includes ensuring pupils are well-informed of their rights and obligations as employees and helping them to make informed decisions on part-time work and how to balance part-time work, schooling and other aspects of their lives. This could be covered within social education programmes.

Employers need to be encouraged to develop good practice in employing school pupils; this might be pursued through Determined to Succeed as well as through employer organisations and the trade unions. The current system of monitoring and controlling the part-time employment of children under 16 is ineffective and there is an urgent need for the Scottish Executive to address this. There is also a need for guidelines on the part-time employment of older pupils.

## References

Howieson,C., McKechnie,J. and Semple,S. (2006)  
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### About this study

The research was commissioned by the Scottish Executive to investigate the extent, nature and implications of school pupils’ part-time employment and to examine and make recommendations on how pupils’ part-time work might be linked to their formal schooling.

The research was wide-ranging and combined quantitative and qualitative approaches. It involved: a survey of a nationally representative sample of S3, S4, S5 and S6 pupils in secondary schools across Scotland (18,403 pupils); a survey of all local authorities and review of legislation; interviews with members of the Scottish Councils Education Industry Network; interviews and group work with a range of teachers (46 participants); pupil focus groups (376 pupils); survey of parents/carers (275); interviews with Careers Scotland staff; a survey of employers (42); and case studies of pupils in their part-time employment.

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