Internships for secondary school students in general education

Effective career guidance systems provide students with the opportunity to gain first hand experiences of what it is like to be in work. Students in general secondary education in many countries are encouraged and enabled by their schools to participate in short duration internships (also known in some countries as work experience placements). Undertaking tasks under the supervision of a working professional who is not a teacher in an authentic workplace provides students with considerable opportunities for career development.

This Policy Brief:

- Reviews data on the impact of such internships on the employment outcomes of young people;
- Explores why positive benefits might be expected when provision is of good quality in light of theories of human, social and cultural capital and wider research on the opportunities for learning presented by workplace exposure;
- Summarises findings from research literature on how schools can optimise positive outcomes for students;
- Draws on the OECD PISA study to present data on patterns of student participation.

Employers and people in work are widely seen as having an essential role to play in the career development of young people (Cedefop; ETF; European Commission, 2021[1]). Around the globe, schools seek to involve them in school life to achieve a range of objectives for students including the enrichment of teaching and learning, the enhancement of understanding of jobs and careers and the provision of knowledge and skills demanded by the labour market, including recruiters, which enable more successful school-to-work transitions (OECD, 2021[2]). By engaging the economic community, schools provide students with rich forms of career development rooted in authentic involvement with the working world towards which they are preparing their students. Such involvement allows schools to offer career guidance which is more effective than would be otherwise possible (Covacevich et al., 2021[3]; OECD, 2021[4]).

One important means by which students can engage with the world of work is through first-hand involvement in workplaces, undertaking tasks under the supervision of working professionals who are not teachers. Such experiences can be gained through three common means: part-time working which largely

takes place independently of schools; voluntary work in the community which often takes place independently of, but which is frequently encouraged by, schools; and, internships which are largely enabled and delivered through schools. Through all three means, students are presented with opportunities for effective career development, exploring career options in authentic settings, building trusted social networks of value, developing technical and social and emotional skills of value to working life and gaining more confident understanding of work cultures and how they can be accessed. This paper reviews research evidence on the relationships between teenage internships and employment outcomes in adulthood. It also explores the ways in which schools in different parts of the world help students to gain, and take benefit from, such workplace experience. It sits closely alongside other OECD papers on comparable forms of career development which builds on workplace exposure including part-time working (OECD, 2025[5]), volunteering in the community (OECD, 2025[6]) and job shadowing (OECD, 2022[7]).

What are internships in general secondary education?

The focus of this paper is on internships as of forms of work experience which are undertaken by a young person while still in full-time secondary education at an employer's premises under supervision. In an internship, students engage in work which contributes to workplace outputs, but within boundaries set by their educational institution. In some systems internships are known as work experience placements or work placements. Typically, they are unpaid and while participants contribute productively to an enterprise, their purpose is driven by the developmental needs of students and tasks are adapted accordingly with action taken to ensure their health, safety and well-being.

By the age of 15 in many systems, students are enrolled on either programmes of vocational education and training (VET) or of general education. Internships undertaken within school-based VET programmes typically focus on skills development ('on-the-job' training) linked to a specific occupational area for which a student is preparing and often last several months (Musset and Mytna Kurekova, 2018[8]). Internships in general education are typically of much shorter duration, commonly one or two weeks (Musset and Mytna Kurekova, 2018[8]; SQW, 2022[9]). Analysis of PISA data from both 2012 and 2022 shows that students who are enrolled in VET programmes are more likely to have participated in an internship by the age of 15 than peers who are enrolled in programmes of general education (Musset and Mytna Kurekova, 2018[8]). In 2022, for OECD countries where study pathways had diverged, 42.4% of VET students had undertaken an internship by the time they completed the PISA survey in contrast to 30.8% of students in general education who are the focus of this paper.

Internships are similar to, but different from, a number of other forms of workplace exposure in which students commonly participate. In programmes of job shadowing, students visit workplaces for shorter periods, often one or two days with the sole purpose of career exploration. Consequently, they are viewed as visitors to a workplace rather than as workers and this has implications for the regulations surrounding their health and safety and employer insurance (OECD, 2022[7]). Many students also experience working life through part-time employment, often engaging over longer periods of time and developing career-related insights and skills, but often from a narrower perspective as such employment tends to be concentrated around a small number of occupational areas, such as hospitality and retail, with more limited opportunities for career exploration (OECD, forthcoming[10]). Part-time employment is typically secured by students independently from their schools. This is often the case too with volunteering within the community which also provides opportunity for workplace exposure and which in some jurisdictions is actively encouraged, enabled and/or required by schools (OECD, 2025[6]). Across countries for which PISA data are available, students tend to engage more commonly in workplaces due to part-time working or volunteering than through internships (OECD, 2025[6]). In many OECD jurisdictions, including Australia, British Colombia (Canada), Denmark, Finland, France, Ireland, Italy, Northern Ireland, Norway, Scotland, Sweden and Wales, schools require or provide students with the opportunity to participate in an internship while still in full-time general education. In some countries, such as Australia, Denmark and Norway

internships are optional for students in others, such as France, Finland and Sweden, they are mandatory. Across jurisdictions, such work placements are generally offered between the ages of 14 and 18 with provision at 14 to 16 most commonly actively enabled by education systems (Eshaghbeigi-Hosseini, 2024[11]; Kettunen et al., 2023[12]; SQW, 2022[9]).

Box 1. Virtual internships

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted innovation in the delivery of career guidance intervention through digital means, including forms of virtual internships aimed at students within general education. In Finland, which has a long tradition of enabling student work placements, Virtual TET is a publicly funded programme aimed at students in all types of schooling between the ages of 14 and 19. Typically delivered over five days, students engage with employers to learn about specific industries, hearing directly from employees about the field of industry, desirable working competencies, individual career stories and potential future opportunities. Students also engage in virtual workplace visits and complete assignments, sometimes working within small groups (OECD[13]). In Finland, Virtual TET was introduced in response to restrictions on traditional face-to-face work placements during the pandemic and retained thereafter as it provided students with greater opportunity to engage in internships which were not available locally. In the UK, a similar programme is managed by a non-for-profit organisation, Speakers for Schools. Its virtual Work Experience programme lasts three to five days and is available to students from age 14 and older. Employers agree a structure for the activity that typically includes interactive career talks with employees and the assignment of tasks. Virtual placements can be undertaken at times which are suitable to both student and employer (OECD[14]). Speakers for Schools also offer placements of shorter duration, notably Discovery Days of one to two hours and Virtual Insight Days which take place over a single day.

The purpose of internships

Programmes which enable students to gain experience of work while still in full-time secondary education are not new, being introduced into the education systems of many western and eastern European countries in the mid-twentieth century (Eggleston, 1982[15]; Miller et al., 1991[16]). At that time prior to the expansion of tertiary education, the great majority of young people in OECD countries entered the labour market directly from secondary education, often before completing upper secondary education. By consequence, episodes of school-mediated work experience were commonly designed to act as a taster of real types of employment open to school leavers often shortly before they completed their full-time education in order to ease their transitions into employment. More recently, as participation rates in upper secondary and tertiary education have risen and the full-time employment of teenagers declined, internships within general education have tended to serve a more complex purpose, enabling some still to gain experience of work relevant to imminent transitions into the labour market, but for many others to explore and confirm career (and educational) aspirations, to deepen understanding of the working world, to gain in maturity and self-confidence and develop specific skills, such as how to search for a job and secure experience of value to admission to tertiary education (Kettunen et al., 2023[12]; Miller et al., 1991[16]; SQW, 2022[9]).

The International Labour Organisation recognises the breadth of objectives which underpin engagement with workplace experience and defines internships as a short-term experience or series of experiences in the workplace, the purpose of which is to enable students “to gain insights into careers, work skills and job opportunities and inform career decision making” (ILO, 2024[17]). In such a way in the Australia state of Victoria, work placements undertaken by students aged 14 to 16 in general education are designed to provide “insights into industry and the workplace”, providing “students with the valuable opportunity to develop employability skills, explore possible career options, understand employer expectations and

increase their self-understanding, maturity, independence and self-confident." The state government notes that students "are placed with employers primarily to observe and learn – not to undertake activities which require extensive training or expertise" (Government of Victoria, 2024[18]).

Such broad objectives speak to the different interests that students may have in approaching internships, including aims which might not be mutually compatible (Huddleston, 2012[19]; Watts, 1991[20]). Moreover, students may approach internships with different capacities and needs. Consequently, while the content of internships remains the same (a school-mediated opportunity for students to undertake tasks under supervision within a workplace), it will be expected that effective delivery of provision will vary with student needs and aspirations.

The link between short internships in general education and later employment outcomes

To assess the long-term impact of career development activities on the long-term employment outcomes of young people, studies need to follow large numbers of participants from their teenage years into adulthood. In this field, a very small number of studies have used randomised control trials to assess the impact of interventions on participants, measuring differences in outcomes against those of a control group (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020[21]). An alternative methodology involves the use of longitudinal datasets. Here, young people (and sometimes their parents and schools) complete extensive questionnaires about their lives as children and teenagers and then again when they reach adulthood. Researchers use statistical tools to create intervention groups which engaged in a specific form of career development and comparable control groups which did not and then explore whether differences in outcomes can be measured after account is taken of other characteristics such as social background, educational attainment, gender and migrant status which commonly influence economic success. Analysis of longitudinal datasets in this regard has grown over recent years and many find evidence of better outcomes in adult employment related to forms of teenage career development (Covacevich et al., 2021[3]). In the field of workplace exposure, many more studies have explored outcomes related to teenage part-time employment and volunteering than participation in internships. In the first two fields, studies consistently find evidence of better employment outcomes than would otherwise be expected. In the case of teenage volunteering, seven out of eight longitudinal studies provide some evidence of better outcomes (OECD, 2025[6]) and this is the case in 27 of 31 studies undertaken with regard to part-time working (OECD, 2025[5]). Fewer longitudinal studies are available with regard to teenage participation in internships, when they are specifically undertaken within general education, rather than VET programmes (Covacevich et al., 2021[3]). A review for this paper identified eight relevant studies (see **Table 1**) from four countries (Australia, Germany, United Kingdom and United States).

Table 1. Longitudinal studies of teenage internship/work experience programmes in general secondary education in relation to outcomes in the adult labour market

Study	Findings
Australia: Covacevich et al. (2021[3]), Longitudinal Surveys of Australian Youth (LSAY), 2933 respondents surveyed between ages 15 (2009) and 25 (2015).	No significant associations identified between teenage work experience and likelihood of NEET, earnings or career satisfaction.
Germany: Covacevich et al. (2021[3]), The National Educational Panel Study (NEPS), 5589 respondents surveyed between ages 14 to 16 (2010) and 23-25 (2018).	Teenagers who reported having undertaken an internship of several days' duration in a company were 0.24 times less likely to be NEET at age 23-25 than comparable peers not having done an internship. Young people who agreed that they had participated in an additional voluntary internship earned 10% additional earnings and reported greater job satisfaction at age 23-25.
United Kingdom: Covacevich et al. (2021[3]), British Cohort Study (BCS70), 5511 respondents surveyed between ages 16 (1986) and 34 (2004).	No significant associations identified between teenage work experience and likelihood of NEET or career satisfaction. However, students who described their work placements as being 'useful in career planning' earned 12% higher wages at age 34.
United Kingdom: Mann, Denis and Percy (2020[21]), British Cohort Study, 5511 respondents surveyed between ages 16 (1986) and 26 (2004).	Young women who undertook work placements while in school were employed in higher proportions at age 26. If students saw placements as 'useful in career planning' at age 16, higher levels of life satisfaction were observed at age 26. Impacts were greater for students with no experience of part-time working.
United States: Covacevich et al. (2021[3]), Educational Longitudinal study (ELS), 13,250 respondents between ages 15 (2003) and 25 (2012).	No significant associations identified between teenage internships and likelihood of NEET, earnings or career satisfaction.
United States: Luecking and Fabian (2000[22]), Marriott Foundation Bridges programme dataset, 3,024 respondents who attended special education high schools followed two years after final year of secondary education in cohorts between 1993 and 1997.	Participation in 12 week paid internships are significantly associated with being in employment 12 months after leaving secondary education with impacts much weaker at 24 months.
United States: Neumark (2004[23]), National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97), 8,900 respondents surveyed from ages 14 (1997) to 21 (2003).	Participation in internships/apprenticeships increased employment rates among respondents up to age 21 by 5-10 ppt, with effects strongest among young men and socially disadvantaged students.
United States: Neumark and Rothstein (2005[24]), National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY97), 5,966 respondents surveyed from ages 14 (1997) to 21 (2003).	Participation in internships/apprenticeships) by more socially disadvantaged respondents up to age 21 is linked with higher earnings of 5-10% (for young women) and lower NEET rates and higher employment rates (young men) than is experienced by more socially advantaged students.

Six of the eight studies provide some evidence of better employment outcomes for young people after they had entered the adult labour market. However overall, the data is less conclusive than is the case with studies related to part-time working and volunteering. There are fewer studies available and four of the studies relate to two datasets explored from different dimensions. Ambiguities are also evident. Neumark (2004[23]) and Neumark and Rothstein (2005[24]) review data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth 1997 which asked young people at age 14 if they had engaged in a range of career development activities introduced within the US School to Work Transitions Opportunities Act (1994). That questionnaire asked students aged 14 within a single question if they had taken part in an "Internship or apprenticeship, which is to work for an employer to learn about a particular occupation or industry."[1] Consequently, it is difficult to judge whether what proportion respondents were engaged in a non-VET placement and this is also the case with data from the review of the German National Educational Panel Study (Covacevich et al., 2021[3]). In the two analyses of the British Cohort Study by Covacevich et al. (2021[3]) and Mann, Denis and Percy (2020[21]), it is notable that results are strongest where students, at age 16, agreed that their work placement had been "useful in career planning", a perspective which was endorsed by 77% of participants (Covacevich et al., 2021[3]; Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020[21]). Luecking and Fabian (2000[22]), do look for and find evidence of employment benefits after completion of work placements in secondary education, but in relation to the participation of students with disabilities attending special schools in the United States who engaged in internships of at least 12 weeks duration within a short programme of preparation for transitions from education into employment. Further reviews explore outcomes which can be related to Career Pathway programmes which commonly include periods of work experience within a broad array of learning approaches undertaken intensively typically over two or more years, but which are analysed in terms of programme completion rather than workplace engagement (Herdman et al., 2024[25]).

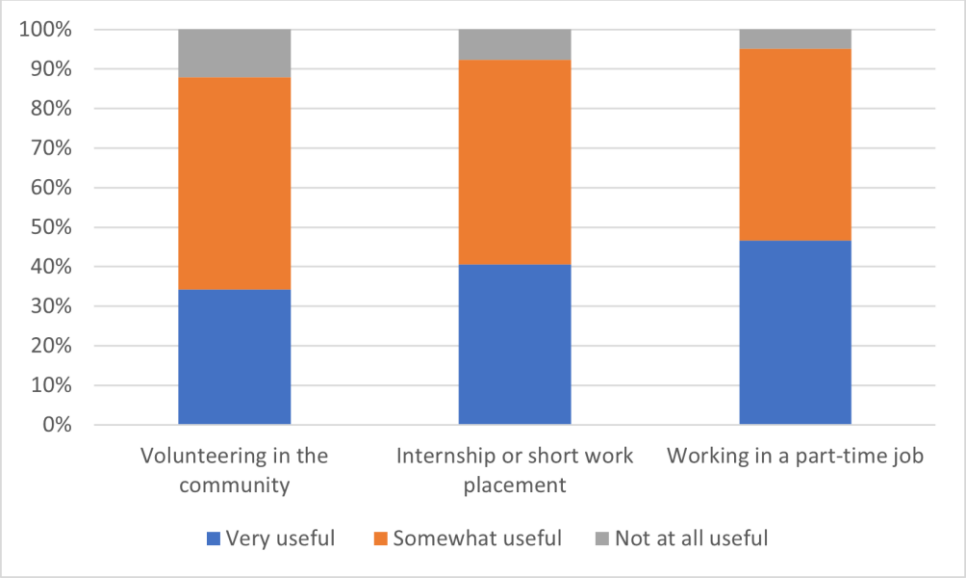
By necessity, longitudinal studies reflect activities undertaken within schools a decade or more ago (and often longer) and depend upon the appropriate questions being included within student surveys usually designed with limited interest in career development. Recently, studies have sought to deepen understanding of the potential impact of teenage career development by exploring the perspectives of young adults and asking them to recall the activities which they undertook whilst in secondary schools (Moote et al., 2024[26]). Mann et al. (2017[27]) for example, find statistically significant relations between lower rates of being NEET at the time 1 744 young British adults aged 19-24 responded to a survey and their recalled participation in work experience programmes undertaken at both ages 14-16 and 16-18.

OECD surveys of young people aged 19-26 in the US state of Virginia and in Madrid (Spain) shed further insight into associations between workplace exposure, the perceptions of young adults and their participation within the labour market. In Virginia, respondents within a sample of 1 100 young adults aged 19-26 who had undertaken an internship were significantly more likely than peers who had not, with controls in place for other characteristics to agree (with controls in place for age, gender, social background, ethnicity and education level), that their school had prepared them well for working life, that it had been easy to progress in their career since secondary school and were less likely to be NEET (OECD, 2023[28]). The Spanish study shows that 60.4% of 867 young adults aged 19-26 who had undertaken general secondary education within the Madrid region stated that they had participated in an internship or short work placement between the ages of 15 and 18. Of these, 92.5% agreed that the experience had been useful to them "in planning and preparing for working life after secondary school" with 51.9% agreeing

[1] In the NLSY97 school administrator questionnaire, internships are defined as "For a specified period of time, students work for an employer to learn about a particular industry or occupation. Students' workplace activities may include special projects, a sample of tasks from different jobs, or tasks from a single occupation. The internship may or may not include paid work experiences" and apprenticeships as "Typically, apprenticeships are multiyear programs that combine school- and work-based learning in specific occupational areas or occupational clusters designed to lead directly into either a related postsecondary program, entry-level job, or registered apprenticeship program. They may or may not include paid work experiences." (Neumark, 2004[23])

it had been “somewhat useful” and 40.6% that it had been “very useful”. In this regard, young adults who had undertaken an internship were more likely to say that it had been very useful to them was the case with volunteering in the community (34.2%), but less so than experience of part-time working (56.7%) (see **Figure 1**). While the study did not explore relationships between internship participation and later NEET outcomes, it did find that greater engagement with employers in general terms through guidance activities while in education could be linked with higher levels of participation in education, employment or training in adulthood (Mann and Diaz, 2025[29]).

Figure 1. Perceptions of young adults (aged 19-26) educated in general secondary education in Madrid, Spain on the usefulness of internships or short work placements, volunteering in the community and part-time working undertaken during secondary education on planning and preparing for working life after secondary school.



Source: (Mann and Diaz, 2025[29])

A UK study by Kashefpakdel and Percy (2022[30]) uses a similar methodology, surveying 2 098 individuals aged 18 to 30 with questions focused on their participation in both face-to-face and virtual internships (known as work experience placements in the UK) whilst in secondary schooling. Controlling for a range of social, demographic and educational factors which might influence employment outcomes, the study finds significant associations between recalled participation in work placements between the ages of 14 and 18 and lower rates of being NEET and higher wages (if in employment). An earlier comparable UK study undertaken with a sample of 1 744 young adults aged 19 to 24 also found a significant relationship between lower likelihood of being NEET and such internship participation, but no statistically significant evidence of wage premia (Mann et al., 2017[27]).

This review of quantitative studies highlights the needs for greater study of the long-term impacts of teenage workplace experiences on adult employment through a wider range of longitudinal studies in a broader range of countries. This is notably the case because internships of one week or more duration commonly represent the most intense form of career development with employers that most teenagers will complete while still in secondary education. Internships are more demanding of schools, students and employers than other forms of employer engagement in career development. They come with higher costs and their organisation typically demand considerable staff time. However, it is important to note that while it is possible to assess impacts of specific career development activities, such as internships, their value

(as discussed below) can be expected to be optimised if they are delivered within multi-year programmes of career exploration and reflection. As noted, in studies of the British Cohort Study, internships which are perceived by students to have been useful to them can be related to better outcomes in adulthood and coherent programmes across secondary education will increase the chances of such utility being found.

What makes an internship useful: How teenage internships can contribute towards the career development of young people

The international research literature on internships undertaken within general education is particularly rich in the United Kingdom. Many studies include surveys school staff, students and employers about their perceptions of work experience programmes, commonly undertaken by teenagers for one or two weeks, typically between the ages of 14 and 16, but increasingly within upper secondary education. Reviewing these studies provides insight into the likely value of internships and how schools can optimise benefits for young people. Kashefpakdel and Percy (2022[30]) notably survey young adults aged 18-30 to build understanding of their perceptions of the usefulness of work placements from their perspectives as full members of the labour force. The study aligns with a wide range of works which have contextualised such experiences of work-based and work-related career development within theories of human, social and cultural capital accumulation (Coté, 2016[31]; Jones, Mann and Morris, 2015[32]; OECD, 2024[33]; Stanley and Mann, 2014[34]).

In the study by Kashefpakdel and Percy (2022[30]), around half of respondents who completed an internship at 14-16 argue that the experience allowed them both to "work on real-life projects" and to "develop and practice transferable skills such as creativity, problem solving and teamwork." One in five felt that their digital skills had been enhanced by the experience. In such ways, students can be seen to develop knowledge and skills relevant to the world of work. By engaging in meaningful tasks, students gain the opportunity to both to practice new skills, but because they were deployed in an authentic workplace and not a classroom, to demonstrate them in a more convincing way to a potential future employer. Indeed, the single most valuable aspect of work experience to young adults when asked to reflect on the long-term utility of this form of career development was that it gave them "something to add to my CV or talk about during an interview." Around one in five also felt that the experience informed their decision-making about future engagement in education and training, potentially shaping human capital accumulation as codified by qualifications in light of new information secured through internships. A 2010 UK survey of 694 young adults aged 19 to 24 who had undertaken an internship between the ages of 14 and 16 while in secondary education found that 27% of those with experience of full-time work felt it had helped them 'to get a job after education' (9% of the total respondents agreeing strongly). Of respondents who had progressed to higher education, 27% felt that their internship had helped them 'to get into higher education' (7% agreeing strongly) (Mann and Kashefpakdel, 2014[35]). Within the UK historically, universities have actively encouraged and in some cases required prospective students to describe relevant workplace experiences to support applications (Jones, 2014[36]; Waite, Kashefpakdel and Patel, 2024[37]). Notably, the study finds that respondents who recalled completing an internship at 16-18 were much more likely to see it as having been of value to the post-secondary transitions: 39% (16% agreeing strongly) agreed that the experience had been useful in getting a job and 54% (22% agreeing strongly) that it had been useful in getting into higher education. Slightly stronger positive results were recorded for young adults who completed internships at both ages (Mann and Kashefpakdel, 2014[35]). Contemporary evaluations also suggest that students feel strongly at the time they completed their work placement that it had provided opportunity to develop new skills of relevance to their ultimate progression into employment (Fullarton, 1999[38]; National Support Group for Work Experience, 2008[39]; Smith and Green, 2005[40]; YouGov, 2010[41]). Messer (2018[42]) reviews results from 296 students and 240 employers completing pre- and post-placement questionnaires to find that both students and employers agree that students improved employability skills, related notably to self-management, team working, business and customer awareness and attitude over a two week placement.

While student capacity for skills development over a one or two week internship may be limited, studies show that it is meaningful to participants. However, it can be often expected to be sufficient to allow young people to gain insight into an industry and form an opinion about their suitability for future employment within it and demonstrate an affinity for such work (Kashefpakdel and Percy, 2022[30]; Messer, 2018[42]). Where that perception can be endorsed by an employer or placement supervisor and/or students can gain new insights concerning routes into careers of interest, students gain access to a resource of further potential long-term value (Fullarton, 1999[38]; Jones, Mann and Morris, 2015[32]; Smith and Green, 2005[40]; UKCES, 2014[43]).

In comparison to other forms of school-mediated career development with the possible exception of mentoring, internships have the capacity to bring students into close and extended interaction with working professionals. Consequently, work placements provide students with the opportunity to build their social capital. As Kashefpakdel and Percy (2022[30]) reports, young adults when reflecting on their teenage experiences of workplaces often see benefit in such engagement. Of those who undertook an internship between the ages of 14 and 16, 61% highlighted the value of "interacting with real employees and hearing their stories", 58% "interaction with more than one employee" and 41% "interaction with senior staff." Such relationships can provide bridges to sources of information and advice which may not be available within family and school networks (Jones, Mann and Morris, 2015[32]). Drawing on the conceptualisation of US sociologist Mark Granovetter of the 'strength of weak ties', a range of studies have explained employment boosts linked to teenage engagement in career development activities with employers through the opportunities presented for gaining new and trusted career-related information (Jones, Mann and Morris, 2015[32]; Kashefpakdel and Percy, 2017[44]; OECD, 2021[4]; Raffo and Reeves, 2000[45]; Stanley and Mann, 2014[34]). More than that, employers and supervisors can provide references, recommendations and part-time or full-time job offers to young people based on the confidence that they gain in them through first-hand interaction within a workplace setting (Ahier, 2000[46]; Estyn, 2024[47]; Mann, 2012[48]).

Jones, Mann and Morris's study (2015[32]) of written comments by young adults aged 19 to 24 explores what value, if any, they feel they had secured from engaging with employers within their secondary education. Using textual analysis, the perceived value of 190 positive testimonies were codified in terms of human, social and cultural accumulation. Of the three forms of value, it was the last which was most commonly expressed by respondents. This included enhanced personal confidence, the clarification of career aspirations, including the elimination of options, and motivation to engage more seriously in educational provision (see also, (Mann, 2012[48]). In a similar fashion, the young adults discussed by Kashefpakdel and Percy (2022[30]) highlighted value in terms of "increased confidence to work in an adult environment" (69%), "gaining authentic insight into the world of work" (77%) and the "day-to-day tasks of employees" (75%), "increased aspiration for certain industry or job role" (39%) and "increased motivation for selecting non-academic pathways to employment" (21%). As illustrated by Payne and Gollings (2024[49]) from their recent survey of young people aged 15-21, many have poor understanding of workplace culture, processes of career planning and recruitment procedures. Through experiences in workplaces, young people have opportunity to gain new insight into forms of 'assumed knowledge' which underpin successful transitions, and which are shaped by the social background of individuals (Payne and Gollings, 2024[49]).

A UK survey of 390 teaching staff overwhelmingly with experience of students engaging in work placements found strong beliefs that such engagement contributed positively to student understanding of the world of work and what is needed to get a job, broadening aspirations and increasing self-management and chances of getting a part-time job (Mann, Dawkins and McKeown, 2017[50]). In such ways, students can be seen to gain more confident understanding of the 'rules of the game' as they approach potential entry into careers of choice.

While many former participants in school-mediated internships within general education can describe why they were useful them in their transitions into the labour market, many cannot. In the study by Jones, Mann and Morris (2015[32]) while 190 respondents felt they could articulate what they gained from their

engagement with employers typically through work experience placements, an equal number felt that they gained nothing of value at all. Other studies find similar results. While 58% of young adults aged 19 to 24 felt that their teenage internships had helped them to decide on a career (20% agreeing strongly), 42% did not see such value (Mann and Kashefpakdel, 2014[35]). A further UK study explains lack of value in terms of capital accumulation. A 2010 survey of 1 123 students who had completed a work experience placement and 424 teachers who had been involved in such programmes, presented respondents with a list of nine potential reasons for a poor placement, the three most popular responses relate to diminished opportunity to benefit: having an unfriendly or unhelpful team or manager (reducing scope for the development and leverage of new social networks), only doing routine or mundane tasks (limiting the capacity to gain knowledge, skills and experience of value) and no structure or plan for the placement/employer not prepared (reducing opportunities for authentic workplace learning) (YouGov, 2010[41]).

How can schools optimise benefits for students?

Research evidence on the delivery and expected impacts of internships undertaken by students while in general education is limited but growing. Available evidence points towards the likelihood of participants gaining demonstrable benefit in the labour market from their school-mediated teenage work experiences in ways that are similar to participation in part-time working and volunteering in the community (OECD, 2025[6]; [10]). Participant perspectives on why benefits can be secured focus around the greater accumulation of human, social and cultural capital linked to career progression. However, many young people feel that they gained nothing or very little from their experiences. Insights from the evidence aid understanding of how schools can optimise the likelihoods of students securing benefit from internships.

Ensuring informed student choice

For most students in general education, the internship represents the most substantial engagement with the world of work undertaken within secondary school programmes of career development and it is essential that students are well prepared to decide how to make fullest use of the opportunity. Typically lasting one or two weeks, work placements provide rare opportunity to explore a profession of interest, confirming or eliminating potential career aspirations and taking positive steps in terms of career development. Consequently, it is important that students approach the opportunity from an informed perspective, as in many (but not all) countries, education systems assist students in securing a single placement over the duration of their secondary schooling. One way to ensure informed decision-making is to locate internships within programmes of career development which encourage and enable students to explore and reflect on potential areas of occupational interest from the beginning of secondary school. In New Zealand, some schools follow the WE3 career development model (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020[21]). The programme begins with students aged 10 to 14 being exposed to the working world through career talks from working people, workplace visits, discussions with parents and integration of workplace examples within the curriculum. From 13 to 16, student engage in job shadowing, career talks with a more practical recruitment focus, CV and interview skills development and student research, including enabled career conversations, about occupational areas. In the last two years of secondary school, students undertake work placements, job shadowing and organise an employer forum where they have opportunity to ask questions and discuss expectations and opportunities (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020[21]). In Finland, a similarly staggered approach enables students to explore multiple occupational fields or a single field with increased intensity. At 13-14, students undertake a work placement of a single day often in a parental or school workplace setting and then at 14-15 and again at 15-16 undertake compulsory week-long work experiences (OECD, 2021[51]). An advantage of mandatory internship participation is that teachers often identify a lack of confidence among students as a primary barrier preventing engagement in optional programmes (Moote and Archer, 2018[52]; Natcen, 2017[53]).

Securing placements of interest to students and ensuring equity of access

A primary ambition for work placements is to help students explore occupational areas of interest, but matching students with placements which provide the opportunity for meaningful experiences is often challenging (YouGov, 2010[41]). In some systems, such as France and the United Kingdom, students are asked to find their own placement, approaching employers directly. As noted in a range of studies (Alexander, Skipp and Tanner, 2020[54]; Archer, 2016[55]; Hatcher and Le Gallais, 2008[56]; Huddleston, 2012[19]; Moote and Archer, 2018[52]; Waller et al., 2012[57]), such approaches increase the risk of students from more disadvantaged backgrounds securing less attractive placements as the social networks that they draw upon to search for placements tend to be more limited with fewer contacts who are in managerial positions which tend grant access to internship opportunities (Payne and Gollings, 2024[49]) or in the professions, which are overwhelmingly the field of employment which students across the OECD expect to work in. In a study of internships undertaken by students in five schools, (Hatcher and Le Gallais, 2008[56]) illustrate the ways in which quality of placement is linked to the social status of the student and highlight approaches where counsellors work closely with students to confirm an appropriate placement as more effective in challenging negative impacts linked to social background. In Finland, intermediary organisations engage directly with employers to source placements which are then made available to students through their schools. Students are still required to apply for the vacancy, developing skills related to recruitment processes (OECD, 2021[51]). In Finland, all students are also eligible to apply for virtual internships (see **Box 1**) broadening access to potential opportunities. Across the OECD, governments and non-governmental actors, such as the region of Hauts-le-Seine (OECD, 2024[58]) and the JobIRL programme (OECD, 2023[59]) in France, are making increasing use of the internet to collate and advertise potential placements to students who can also access resources to help in their application (Burke and Mann, 2024[60]).

Labour markets are heavily gendered across the OECD and young people who seek to work in fields where their gender is underrepresented require confidence, information and support in order to pursue careers in fields which might be hostile to people of their gender. Studies also indicate that internships within general secondary education tend to be highly gendered and limit opportunity for students to explore vocational fields where their gender is underrepresented (Hatcher and Le Gallais, 2008[56]; Osgood, Francis and Archer, 2006[61]). Francis et al. (2005[62]) review national data on 90 000 work placements by gender and economic sector in England and find that placements are effectively “segregated by gender” with few boys undertaking internships in childcare or education and few girls gaining experience in the skilled trades, IT or engineering. In such a way, placements can be seen to support patterns of gender, as social, reproduction (Osgood, Francis and Archer, 2006[61]). However, internships also present the capacity to challenge such occupational structures. A survey of 500 students by (Francis et al., 2005[62]) revealed strong interest in using work placements to explore less traditional careers of interest: 36% of girls agreed that they would like to try a non-traditional work placement as did 14% boys with further large proportions (33% and 38% respectively) undecided. Retrospective surveys of young adults find further evidence of student desire to explore such atypical careers: Mann et al. (2017[27]) find that 25% of young women and 16% of young men aged 19-24 in the UK agreed that they wished that their schools had helped them to learn ‘how common it is to do a job which people of your gender do not normally do’; OECD (2023[28]) finds that 44% of young adults, aged 19-26 in Virginia, wished that their schools had done a lot more to help them ‘to understand jobs which people of their gender or background do not normally do’; and, 41% of young adults aged 19-26 in Madrid would have welcomed ‘a lot more help in how to get a job that people of your gender or background don’t normally do’ (Mann and Diaz, 2025[29]). Opportunity exists to enable more students to explore fields of interest where their social networks or societal norms act as barriers to progression. In Germany, and many other countries, Girls’ Days and Boys’ Days programmes of job shadowing in fields which cross established gender lines provide an attractive opportunity to begin exploration of potential working lives (OECD, 2022[7]). Internships, providing trusted insight into non-traditional career aspirations, offers young people scope to explore their interests from the safety of

secondary provision. Opportunities for learning will be greater if students have opportunities to undertake more than one internship during their secondary education, exploring career options that include less traditional approaches. PISA 2022 shows however that 60.6% of the 33.2% of students who had completed an internship by the age of 15-16 had only done so on one occasion.

Preparing for the internship: students

Internships have greatest value to students where they gain new and useful information, skills, contacts and/or experiences as part of their placement. Opportunities for students to gain value from their internships can be optimised through preparation activities that take place over secondary education, helping them to identify and confirm fields of career interest that warrant in-depth exploration and first-hand experience. PISA shows that many teenagers are uncertain about their career plans and greater engagement in career development activities is linked with lower levels of uncertainty (OECD, 2024[63]). On average across the OECD, students in general secondary education who had completed an internship are 7% less likely to be uncertain about their occupational expectations than peers who had not done so. As noted, effective multi-year programmes of career development beginning in lower secondary education provide students with plentiful opportunities to explore and reflect on areas of potential interest, notably through career talks from visiting speakers, workplace visits and online investigation (Mann, Denis and Percy, 2020[21]). Some schools begin active preparation for the internship up to a year in advance with dedicated events for whole year groups and parents' evenings followed by practical sessions in such areas as CV and letter writing, advice on securing placements if it's the student's responsibility, employer research and interview practice as well as classes on employability skills (Alexander, Skipp and Tanner, 2020[54]; Natcen, 2017[53]). As ILO (2024[17]) encourages, as internships approach, schools to work with students to agree learning outcomes for the placement with school staff also discussing employer expectations, including dress, behaviour and time keeping. Such activities can help clarify the aims of placements which for students can be unclear (Eddy Adams Consultants Ltd, 2008[64]) and enhance opportunity for them to gain understanding of what to expect from their placement, increase their confidence in engaging in it, and augment the likelihood of opportunities for learning being secured (Huddleston, 2012[19]).

Preparing for the internship: employers

Just as the internship represents the most substantial engagement with the world of work that many students are likely to undertake within schooling, it is also the greatest commitment that employers are asked to provide within their support for school-mediated career development. Employers cannot be expected to understand school curricula and may have little experience with school-age employees. It is important consequently that employers are properly prepared for the placement. On a practical level, this is likely to include assuring that students are appropriately insured to undertake work tasks and that they will be working in a safe environment, the definition of which might vary given student characteristics (ILO, 2024[17]). More than this, some school staff ask to speak with employers prior to the internship to discuss opportunities for optimising student learning (Huddleston, 2012[19]; Natcen, 2017[53]). In the Canadian province of British Colombia, students, schools and employers sign an agreement confirming hours and responsibilities (British Colombia Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024[65]).

Studies show that employers offer work placements to school students for a mixture of reasons. Some are altruistic and others relate to direct benefits, such as in future recruitment and reputation (Ahier, 2000[46]; Shury et al., 2017[66]). Most importantly, employers need to be asked and then need support in ensuring that they meet any requirements in terms of insurance and child safety. Intermediary organisations can reduce costs by liaising between schools and employers to source placements. However, it is important that schools, which are closest to understanding student needs, maintain ownership over the process of student placement. For a recent discussion of the logistics of introducing a national work experience

programme, see (Regan and Bhattacharya, 2023[67]). As well as securing economies of scale in enabling internships and responding to equity challenges, an advantage of national or regional intermediary approaches is that they can actively seek to enhance the availability, and awareness, of attractive placements in fields of strategic importance where employers face recruitment difficulties that may relate to poor student understanding (Dutta et al., 2021[68]; Kennedy and Belgamwar, 2014[69]; Millard et al., 2019[70]).

In Scotland, a work placement quality charter (**Box 2)** provides a helpful articulation of how internships can be optimised to enable positive benefits for students from the employer perspective. The charter highlights the importance of the internship within an individual students journey of career development, the significance of skills development, engagement in meaningful work, career exploration and the enhancement of social networks. Such an approach may be adapted to align with the more specific needs of some students.

Box 2. A Work Placement Quality Charter (Scotland) – an employer perspective

1. As an employer we are committed to offering consistently high-quality work placements in line with the latest guidance and standards.

2. The placement is tailored to the young person's needs and circumstances. This includes finding out what the young person wants to get out of the placement, which skills they want to develop, what barriers they face and what their career aspirations are.

3. We clearly explain to the young person, up front, what our expectations of them are: to show an interest in the organisation and the industry and make the most of the opportunity; to demonstrate a willingness to learn; to respect the values of the organisation and abide by the rules.

4. The young person is introduced to the structure of working life; they supported in learning and developing a range of transferable skills, personal qualities and competencies which will contribute towards their employability.

5. Expectations are managed, the young person knows what they will contribute and how we might be able to help them for example build their CV, mentoring, references and future employment.

6. There is clarity about the role that the young person plays in the organisation and how they will be supported, supervised and mentored by our employees.

7. The young person is treated as an active member of staff but the placement is not used to fill a vacancy.

8. The young person is encouraged to relate their existing experiences and skills to the workplace and supported in making a more informed decision about their future. They receive open and honest feedback about what went well and what areas need to be improved and, if possible, advice on how to do this.

9. We work closely with the young person to make sure they use the placement to find out about the different employment options available and how to access them, including recruitment processes, and we support them in building a network of contacts.

10. Our aim is for the young person to have an enjoyable and positive experience of work that encourages them to become more confident in their abilities. We celebrate success.

Source: (Education Scotland[71]).

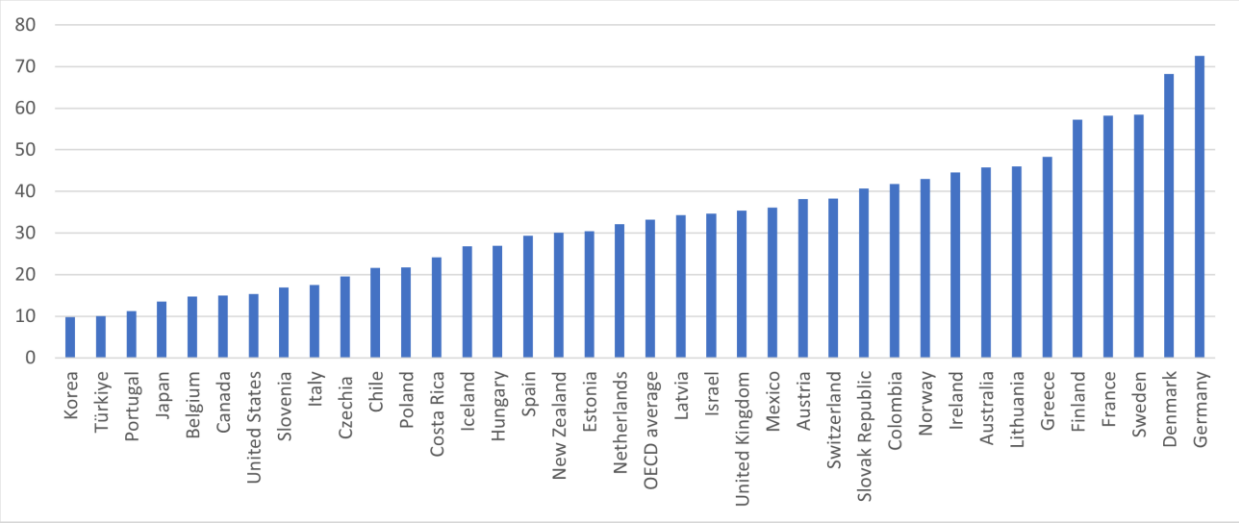
Encouraging reflective learning within the internship

Effective preparatory activities will help students to make clearer sense of their internship experiences, identifying potential learning opportunities. Encouraging or requiring students to complete reflective journals will enhance this process, helping students to keep sight of their ambitions within the constraints of employer priorities and work requirements (Huddleston, 2012[19]). In some systems, school staff visit students on site to discuss their progress. After the completion of the internship, students benefit from discussing their experience with school staff who may also facilitate classroom discussions, written reflections and presentations (Alexander, Skipp and Tanner, 2020[54]; SQW, 2022[9]). Through these activities, students can be encouraged to reflect further on their career aspirations and the implications of new insights for ongoing engagement in education, training and further career development activities. Some schools also provide feedback to employers on students' perceptions of the internship and seek to identify what went well and areas for improvement. Students are commonly expected to write thank you letters to help maintain the positive relationships which underpin future internships (Natcen, 2017[53]). In the Canadian province of British Colombia, school staff draw on employer feedback and on-site observations to inform reflective discussions with students whose internship performance is ultimately evaluated and graded (British Colombia Ministry of Education and Child Care, 2024[65]). The recent guide to work experience placements by ILO (2024[17]) provides useful templates for use in a monitoring visit, student diaries, a questionnaire to help gauge the value of the experience and forms for teaching staff and employers to aid reflection.

How common are short internships among students in general education?

PISA 2022 provides extensive opportunity to explore the engagement of students enrolled in general education in internships. As **Figure 2** indicates, participation levels vary extensively between countries by 15 to 16 years old, the age that students completed the survey. It is likely that in many countries, students will be presented with further opportunity to participate in internships during upper secondary education.

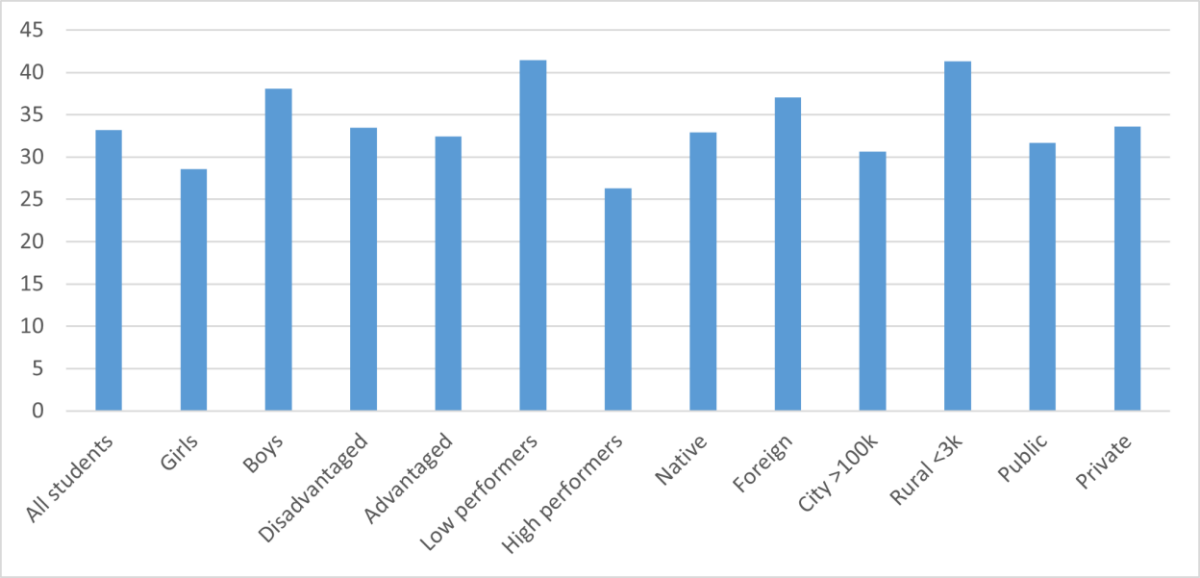
Figure 2. Percentage of students enrolled in general education who had participated in an internship. OEDC countries. PISA 2022.



Source: OECD PISA 2022 data

Looking across PISA 2022 data for OECD countries, some variations are apparent linked to the characteristics of students. Boys are more likely than girls to have undertaken an internship. This gendered pattern of engagement is also seen in other forms of career development which bring students into contact with employers and represents a structural barrier to the engagement of girls in more effective career progression (OECD, 2024[33]). Low performers on the PISA academic assessments in mathematics, reading and science are substantially more likely to have completed an internship than their high performing peers which may reflect the interests of students who seek earlier entry to the labour market. On average, social distinctions however are limited, with students from the lowest quartile by economic, social and cultural status marginally more likely to participate than their peers from the highest quartile and students attending private schools slightly more likely to engage than peers from public schools.

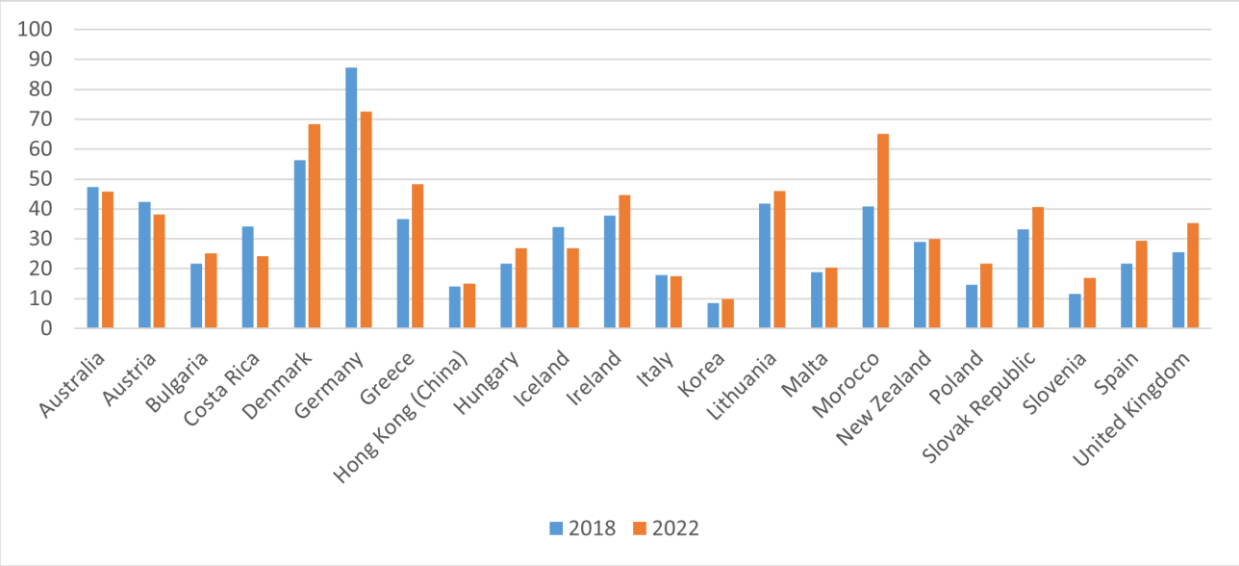
Figure 3. Participation in internships by student characteristics. OECD average. PISA 2022.



Note: The Economic, Social, and Cultural Status (ESCS) index, as defined by PISA, classifies students based on their socioeconomic background, with students in the top quartile of ESCS within their country or economy categorised as "advantaged" and those in the bottom quartile as "disadvantaged." Performance is measured using PISA scores in reading, mathematics, and science. High Performers are students who achieve at least Level 4 proficiency in one core subject while maintaining at least Level 2 proficiency in the other two, whereas Low Performers are those scoring below Level 2 proficiency in any subject. Geographical classifications include Urban areas, defined as having populations of 100,000 or more, and Rural areas, defined as having populations of up to 3,000. Student origin/migrant background is categorised as Native-Born, referring to students who complete the PISA test in their country of birth, and Foreign-Born, referring to students born outside the country where they complete the test.
Source: OECD PISA 2022 data

For some countries PISA data on the participation of students enrolled in general education in internships is available for both 2018 and 2022. Over the period which included the COVID-19 pandemic, participation levels in internships were largely maintained and in some cases, most notably in Morocco, increased substantially.

Figure 4. Participation in internships in PISA 2018 and PISA 2022, selected countries.



Source: OECD PISA 2018 and 2022 databases

Conclusion

This short paper explores the role of internships (or work placements) on the career development of students in general secondary education. Within an internship, students undertake work tasks under supervision by a working professional who is not a teacher in a workplace. Consequently, internships are forms of career development that have many similarities to volunteering in the community and part-time working. In these two areas, extensive studies point to young people securing long-term benefits that are visible in adult employment. Longitudinal studies on the links between internships in general education and long-term outcomes are fewer but point in the same direction. The primary objective of internships for students varies with their individualised journey of career development: some will seek direct entry to employment after secondary education or experiences of value to progression into tertiary education, others will seek to explore and confirm career aspirations, to gain maturity and skills or enhance related programmes of learning, for still others, the overriding aim is to help them to reengage in educational provision. In effective provision, students will demonstrably learn things which are new and useful to their career development. Many surveys have explored where such value lies. It can commonly be related to student accumulations of human, social and cultural capital linked to progression with utility underpinned by the authenticity and relevance of their workplace experience. Internships represent a significant investment from students, schools and employers and greater research is required, from a much wider range of countries, to better understand how they can be used most strategically to support the progression of students. Existing evidence, especially when considered alongside results from longitudinal studies of teenage part-time working and volunteering in the community, suggests strongly that internships can be expected to improve employment outcomes for many students making them more attractive recruits to potential employers. However, often student opportunities for such career development are limited. Integrating placements into multi-year programmes of career guidance, optimising opportunity for students to engage in internships in vocational areas of confirmed interest and preparing students and employers well for the placement will optimise chances of success.

The bottom line: good quality internships can be expected to enhance the career development and employment outcomes of students in general secondary education

Good quality internships provide students with opportunities to learn things which are new and useful to their career progression. Quality can be enhanced by locating internships within multi-year programmes of career development, careful consideration and sourcing of internships which relate to student interests and inclusion of preparatory and reflective activities for both students and employers. Through such means, opportunities are increased for students gaining useful career information, experience, skills and networks through trusted exposure to authentic workplaces.

Career Readiness

This document was prepared by the Career Readiness team at the OECD.

The OECD Career Readiness project provides policy makers and practitioners with evidenced guidance on how schools can best prepare young people for employment. The project makes particular use of the results from PISA, analysis of national longitudinal datasets and insights from practice within jurisdictions.

For more information, visit: https://www.oecd.org/education/career-readiness

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Key papers include:

OECD (2025), “Voluntary work in the community: a guide to delivering an effective career development activity”, *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

OECD (2025), “Teenage Part-time Working: how schools can optimise benefits and reduce risks for secondary school students”, *OECD Education Policy Perspectives*, OECD Publishing, Paris.

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The team also manages the **OECD Observatory on Digital technologies in Career guidance for Youth**: https://www.oecd.org/en/about/programmes/odicy.html

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