



ACTIVATE
LEARNING

EMPLOYER PROJECTS HOW-TO GUIDE



INTRODUCTION

As a sector, further education faces the challenge of preparing all young people for the world of work through the development of technical skills, attitudes, behaviours, and numeracy and literacy competencies. The government's Post-16 Skills Plan (2016) sets out a clear vision for how this will be achieved:

Employers, large and small, will sit at the heart of a dynamic skills system to ensure the day-to-day training and education that individuals receive genuinely meet the needs of industry (p. 12)

In response to this, at Activate Learning our aim is to provide a talent pipeline for business. One of the ways we seek to do this is through working in partnership with local, regional, national and international employers. All young people deserve the opportunity to secure the meaningful work that will enable them to lead fulfilling personal lives and to fully contribute to society.

A significant aspect of the work we do with employers is the development of cross-curricular projects which enable students to develop the skills they need to make the transition into employment.

We are proud to work with employers including Beard Construction, BMW MINI and Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME) on the design and delivery of a variety of projects which aim to:

- advance students' technical knowledge
- develop key attributes for success, including resilience, confidence and professionalism
- increase students' English and maths skills (see pages 7-8 for case studies)

This work is underpinned by robust research highlighting the value of contextualised learning. See pages 5-6 for more information on this research.

Students and employers have responded positively to these projects. Course attendance and achievement have improved, and students have reported higher levels of motivation and enjoyment, including on compulsory resit programmes such as English. Meanwhile, employers have praised the work, attitudes and achievements of our students, and taken many of them on for work experience placements as a result of their successful project work.

As teachers, we have been able to see firsthand the transformative impact that regular interactions with employers has had on our student body. For more information on the impact of employer projects, see pages 9-10.

This guide is designed to provide a quick introduction to the rationale for undertaking employer projects, and to set out, step-by-step, the process for putting together a project - from first contact with an employer to creating a successful dissemination event.





“ Education and educators have a responsibility to prepare young people for career pathways. Similarly, they have a duty to support the local ecosystem and to contribute to local talent pipelines, developing high progression and skills networks. Given the benefits, employer engagements and employer encounters are essential and beneficial to all: win-win!”

Alex Warner

“ I work with employers because the ultimate goal of our full-time students is to find a job. As I teach apprentices, I have good relationships with many employers. Every year, this has proved an invaluable link to enable our students to enter employment on completion of their programme.”

Alex Gowney



“ Teaching ICT in collaboration with employers has given my students real-world experience of computing and has really helped to develop their confidence.”

Anshi Singh



“ As an English teacher, I find working with employers invaluable because it helps to show students the real-world relevance of the skills they are learning, and helps to boost their motivation.”

Alice Eardley

WHY EMPLOYER PROJECTS?

RESEARCH CONTEXTS

Soft skills

- In a competitive employment market, employers look beyond academic achievements when considering applicants for a job - but employability habits are learnable.
- Employers report gaps in personal skills relating to workload management and teamwork, specialist job-specific skills, and complex analytical skills.

Project design

- Project work should be focussed on students producing excellent work, through a structured process including redrafting, critique, and public display.
- Project-based learning relies on rigorous assessments, challenging questions, proven management methods, and exhibitions of knowledge and skills to ensure powerful learning.

Social mobility

- Collaborative approaches to learning, together with those that promote discussion and interaction between learners, consistently enhance academic achievement.
- Social mobility in young people is fostered by access to a range of high-quality education institutions, good careers advice, frequent interactions with universities and employers, and labour market preparation during school, college or university.

Motivation

- Student mindsets (including the ability to recognise what motivation looks like in day-to-day life) have more influence on academic achievement than socio-economic background.
- Students exposed to pro-social purposes for learning that go beyond their own personal benefits are more likely to persist with even the most basic of tasks.

Employer engagement

- The evidence suggests that enterprise competitions can have a significant impact on cognitive abilities, employability skills, personal effectiveness, knowledge, and career readiness.
- The curriculum should be linked to careers, and every student should have multiple encounters with employers.

Vocational

- Employers must play a leading role in the reformed technical education system, working with expert education professionals to define the skills, knowledge and behaviours required for skilled employment.
- People are good at and enjoy solving problems and understanding new ideas, but to be successful at this we need adequate information (facts and knowledge about procedures) firmly embedded in our long-term memory.

English and maths

- Motivation and achievement in English and maths can be improved by making the subjects more relevant - using relevant contexts or embedding the subjects in wider learning.
- English and maths are fundamental to young people's education and employment prospects.

CASE STUDIES

Employer partner: Cisco

Project: Mobile Banking 'Branch in a Box'

Curriculum link(s): BTEC Level 3 Computing: Computer Networking

Overview: Cisco are working with a number of banks to develop flexible, mobile branches as a result of the closure of high street branches. Students were asked to find ways of making mobile networks more secure.



Employer partner: Royal Electrical and Mechanical Engineers (REME)

Project: Innovative Engineered Solutions

Curriculum link(s): BTEC Level 3 Engineering: a Specialist Engineering Project

Overview: Students were exposed to engineering problems that the British Army face on a daily basis, and were tasked with developing innovative engineering solutions. Examples included developing a robotic load-carrying system, armament modifications, and drone modifications.

Employer partner: Beard Construction

Project: University of Buckinghamshire Development

Curriculum link(s): GCSE English and maths; City and Guilds Level 1 Brickwork and Level 1 Carpentry and Joinery

Overview: Students acted as sub-contractors submitting a bid, including materials and labour costs, for work on a live development project being undertaken by the company.

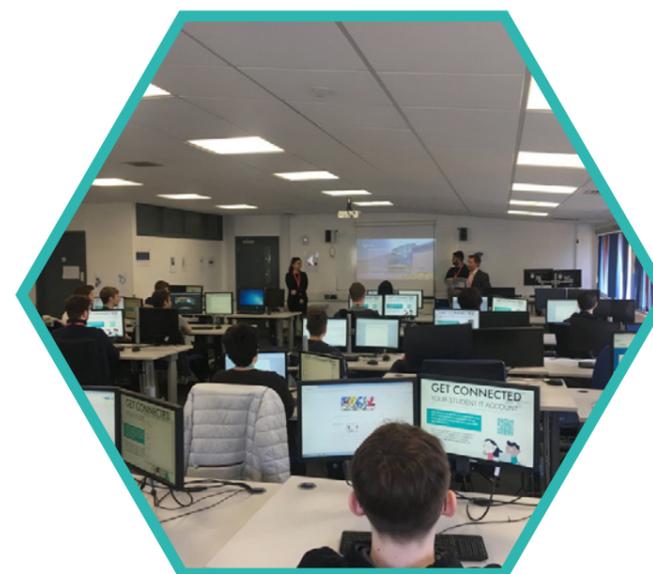


Employer partner: Peter Brett Associates

Project: Oxfordshire 2030

Curriculum link(s): GCSE English; BTEC Level 2 Engineering; City and Guilds Level 2 Plumbing and Electrical Installation

Summary: Students were required, in the context of the national housing crisis, to identify a location in Oxfordshire for the development of 2000 new houses. They then had to present a persuasive report to the company outlining why their chosen site was the best choice.



Employer partner: Holybrook Associates

Project: Reading College Takeover

Curriculum link(s): BTEC Level 3 Computing: Business Applications of Social Media

Overview: Students were asked to take over the social media accounts of financial organisation, Holybrook Associates. They conducted research on the content, timings and target audiences of social media posts, posted to the company's Twitter, Instagram and Facebook accounts, and created new social media policies for the company.

Employer partner: BMW MINI

Project: The Future Car Industry

Curriculum link(s): GCSE English and maths; Level 1 Motor Vehicle Maintenance

Overview: Students were tasked with reviewing future developments within the car industry, such as the increase in electric vehicles. They then presented a report to BMW making recommendations for future car production.



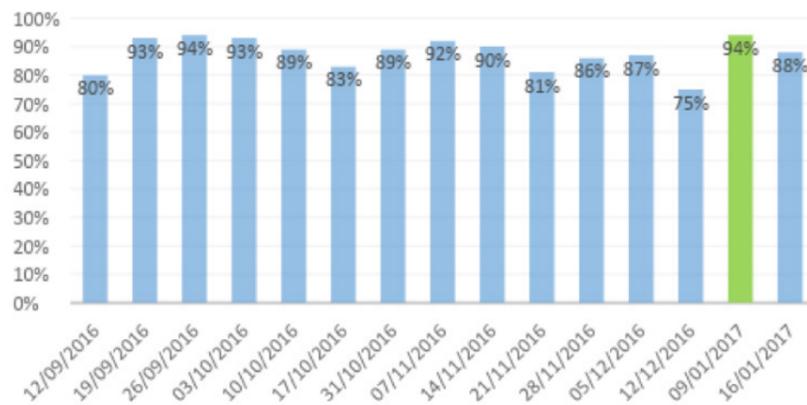
WHAT ARE THE BENEFITS OF EMPLOYER PROJECTS?

What's in it for students?

Attendance

During the Cisco 'Mobile Banking "Branch in a Box"' project, attendance in employer sessions was better than that in other sessions.

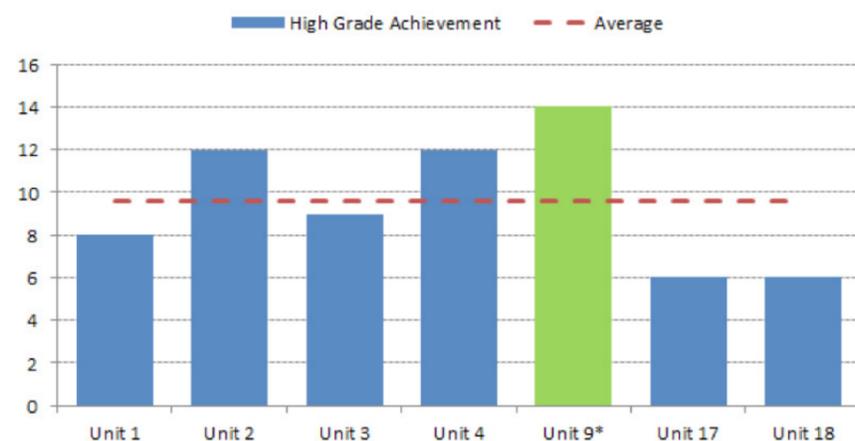
The graph on the right-hand side demonstrates the impact of employer engagement on attendance.



Achievement

When compared with all other units of study completed by the group, achievement was higher following employer delivery.

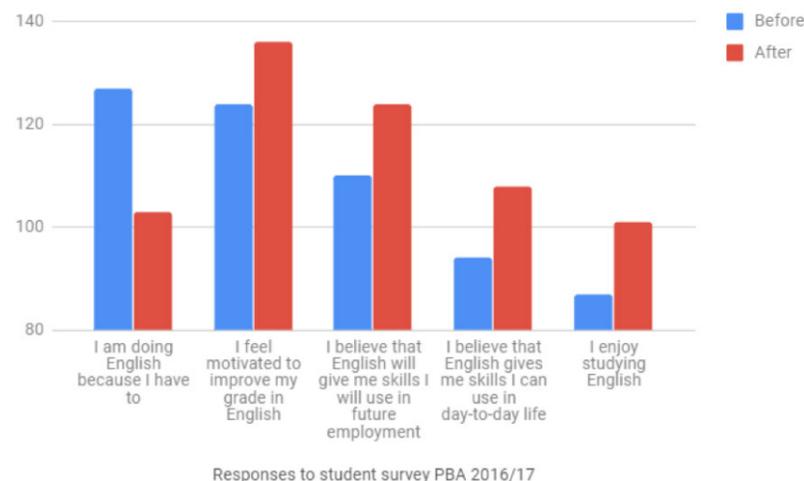
The graph on the right-hand side demonstrates the impact of employer engagement on achievement.



Motivation

Following the Peter Brett Associates 'Oxfordshire 2030' project, students reported improved attitudes to English across a range of measures.

The graph on the right-hand side demonstrates the impact of employer engagement on student motivation.



EMPLOYER FEEDBACK



It's fantastic for us to be involved in supporting a local college with such a progressive and exciting initiative. Hopefully, as well as providing engineering support and advice to the students around the design of their cars, we're helping them to draw a link between the work they're doing in college and its application in industry, and inspiring them to think about a future career in engineering."

Luc Jolly, Technical Account Manager at BP



The students' work is fantastic quality, eco-friendly and beautiful. The students themselves have been great to work with and we have been impressed at every stage of the project. We do a lot of work with early-career artists and designers, and hope to continue the process with these talented young people."

Harriet Peacock, Visual Arts Retail Co-ordinator at the Old Fire Station



We know that the demand for people to work in the care sector across Oxfordshire is growing fast. Our population is ageing and the number of people facing complex issues is on the rise. We want to support Activate Learning in ensuring that students get the best possible education, backed-up with real work experience and direct career opportunities."

John McLaughlin, CEO of mental health charity RESPONSE



Working with students in this way provides us with new sources of inspiration. We are a skilled, craft-based business, and developing new talent in this way is essential to protecting the future of the industry. That is why courses such as these are so important, and why we are delighted to be involved."

Rob Hamilton, Head of Business Development at Hands



"The students have worked really hard to produce high quality proposals in a very short time. We are impressed by the depth that they have gone into, in particular thinking about the sustainability of the proposals and the impact on the environment."

John Murray, Strategic Manager at Skanska



As an employer, it's important for us to see both a solid education and good experience from our prospective colleagues. This is why we're working with Activate Learning to ensure these kinds of opportunities are being created for students embarking on their careers in the sector."

Mike Abbott, Group General Manager at The Co-operative Childcare



Our residents have loved the company of the students. Residents have looked forward to the Monday afternoon sessions and I have personally enjoyed seeing the interactions between the different generations and watching relationships flourish. The involvement of the students has had a positive impact on our residents' wellbeing."

Wendy Martin, Activities Co-ordinator at Green Pastures Christian Nursing Home

HOW DO I PLAN A PROJECT?

Stage one: making contact with an employer

- What does the employer want to gain from this partnership, personally and as an organisation?
- What time and resource commitments are the employer able to make?

Stage two: establishing knowledge and skills

- Match assessment frameworks to employer/industry requirements: what do students need to know/be able to do?
- How do you embed English, maths and ICT?

Stage three: determining the authentic driving question

- What will be the driving question of the project?
- How does this link to real-world problems in industry?
- Think 'bigger context': what are the bigger social issues at stake?

Stage four: information and inquiry

- How are students going to find the information they need?
- According to the needs of students, how do you balance direct instruction with the opportunity for independent inquiry?

Stage five: developing attributes and soft skills

- Identify the key attributes, behaviours and soft skills that students need to develop
- Plan activities (including group and independent work) that will introduce and build on these

Stage six: student voice

- Provide students with opportunities to make decisions about work undertaken and products produced
- Ask for regular feedback throughout the project and at the end

Stage seven: critique and revision

- Develop a 'culture of critique' with students reflecting on the quality of their own work and giving feedback to others
- Build in opportunities for formative assessment and feedback from the teacher

Stage eight: the publicly-presented product

- Create a professional scenario in which students get to present work to employers and receive feedback
- This can include final written documents, artefacts, websites and presentations

HOW DO I DELIVER A PROJECT?

Opening event

1. Prepare students in advance
2. Create a fanfare!
3. Can the employer introduce the project?
4. Give students an introductory task
5. Remember to get photos and videos of your events

Schedule of employer activities

1. How often will the employer attend? How many sessions have they committed to? Will it be the same person or different people within the organisation?
2. What activities will employers engage in? Formal presentations? Demonstrations? Informal chats with students? Mentoring and coaching? Skyping into the classroom?
3. Are there opportunities for students to visit the company or related sites and businesses?
4. Will students be able to contact employers between visits, i.e. through a designated email address or social media?

Closing event

1. Have students submit assignments in advance
2. Have exhibitions and presentations
3. Create an opportunity for positive public feedback from employers
4. Award prizes and certificates for participation
5. Invite senior managers



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

How much time will all of this take?

At the start, time will be required for developing schemes of learning, creating project materials such as work books, administration, and communications (email and phone calls). However, you will save time on planning and delivery of the event later on.

How do I make and sustain contact with employers?

Educational institutions will have governors and advisory boards who will each come with connections - or you might reach out to your personal network and contacts. Have you worked in industry previously? Do you have friends, family, or associates who you could reach out to? You must also not rule out college-wide contacts. Who in your staffroom may have contacts? Similarly, students' parents also provide a source of contacts. Try scripting a letter and handing it out at parents' evening or sending out en masse.

How can I assess the impact of my project?

You may want to give students a short questionnaire at the start and end of the project asking for their views. If you want to delve a little deeper, attendance data can be a useful way of gaining some insight into student motivation. Are they more likely to attend employer-led sessions? Similarly, what do you want students to learn either during a specific employer-led session or after an entire project. Do an initial assessment with them before the start and follow this up with another assessment at the end. It's also very useful to get employer views on how things went. If you have time, a meeting or phone call for reflection at the end of a project can be an invaluable way of thinking how to develop future projects.

What are the models of delivery?

The options here are endless and will largely depend on the nature of the project you are delivering, your subject area, the facilities available, and the number of students you want to involve. This will also depend on your students. Some students will benefit most from employer talks and independent working time, while others will need more traditionally structured sequences of lessons. Similarly, what are you and the employer most comfortable with? Some employers may feel most confident circulating around the room talking to small groups of students. Others may prefer to deliver to a larger audience because that is what they are used to doing in the workplace.

How can I open up conversations with employers about the links between college qualifications and the skills and knowledge needed for the workplace?

We would recommend not going in to initial meetings with a fixed idea of what you want; this should be negotiated. Make sure you know the employer, their industry, and their lines of work, and also that you are confident of your knowledge of the context in which you work, your organisation's strategic plan, your study programme and the units and modules you deliver. These will act as your foundations.

How do I make the project relevant for students and the employer?

Knowing the employer and your curriculum is essential. Through dialogue, crossovers between business functions and curriculum will emerge. Be prepared to be flexible and creative in the ways you make links between industry and course/qualification requirements.

How do you facilitate a guest session?

Before the session you will need to prepare your learners, making sure they know about the company, the project, and the benefits for them in participating. You will also need to find out what the employer you are working with will be comfortable with. You might need to lead sessions, at least initially, but some employers are happy doing this themselves. Generally, employers should be free to deliver content while you attend to classroom management, including timings, behaviour, and distribution of materials.

How can I sustain the project?

Begin with a realistic assessment of what you can manage, in relation to your own time and energies, that of your students, and the rhythms of the academic year. If necessary, consider running a project over a week, or one session a week for several weeks. Where possible, plan a schedule of employer visits in advance, and aim to keep to it. Similarly, plan to be flexible but not too flexible! Decide on a deadline for the completion of your project, schedule in a little additional time in case things don't go according to plan, but always keep your absolute final end date in mind and commit to not going beyond it.

How can I motivate students?

Some students will relish the opportunity to engage with employers and undertake independent projects, and they will go the extra mile to create something really impressive. But don't expect less motivated students to suddenly transform just because an employer is in the room. They may still need all the support, encouragement and motivational strategies you use in other sessions. This does not mean however that employer engagement is not having an impact on levels of motivation, both in the long and short term.



WHERE CAN I FIND OUT MORE?

Websites

- **Association of Colleges Teach Too Programme:**
www.aoc.co.uk/teach-too-programme
- **The Careers and Enterprise Company:**
www.careersandenterprise.co.uk
- **Careers Development Institute (CDi):**
www.thecdi.net
- **Class Careers:**
www.classcareers.co.uk
- **Commission on Adult Vocational Teaching and Learning (CAVTL):**
www.cavtl.excellencegateway.org.uk
- **The Edge Foundation:**
www.edge.co.uk
- **Education and Employers:**
www.educationandemployers.org
- **Education Endowment Foundation (EEF):**
www.educationendowmentfoundation.org.uk
- **Founders4Schools:**
www.founders4schools.org.uk
- **Gatsby Foundation:**
www.gatsby.org.uk
- **Inspire the Future:**
www.inspiringthefuture.org
- **Work Finder:**
www.workfinder.com

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