

WORK EXPERIENCE PROGRAMMES – THE HEALTH AND SAFETY IMPLICATIONS

Work experience programmes play a vital role in preparing students for adult and working life and also create an important link between schools and local employers.

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The focus on practical, 'hands on' experience, however, when combined with the age of the students taking part means that the health and safety implications and risks have to be considered very carefully.

This article looks at the roles and requirements of the main interested parties, to include the school, the placement providers and the students. All of these parties must co-operate and communicate effectively in order for the work experience process to run smoothly for the maximum benefit of the student.

The school

The school has overall legal responsibility for health and safety. The duty of care is not just owed to the students, but also to any members of staff involved, the



placement providers and also the other employees at the placement provider. The school's overall responsibility for health and safety cannot be delegated.

The fundamental responsibilities of the school include:

1. Ensuring that the school has a clear and comprehensive work experience policy which sets out the detailed procedures and also how the procedures are to be monitored. This policy must be reviewed regularly.
2. Ensuring as far as possible that students are not exposed to risks to their health and safety whilst on the placement. This includes the students being properly briefed and later de-briefed. The students will also require effective support during the placement. The level and nature of the support is likely to vary and there are several factors to be taken into account, to include the nature of the placement, (some placements of course contain higher risks than others), and also any particular needs or characteristics of the student.
3. Carrying out appropriate due diligence with regard to the suitability and competence of the placement provider. This will be covered in greater detail later on in this article.
4. Ensuring that placement providers are given all relevant information about the student.

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5. Ensuring that any members of staff who may make site visits during or before the placement are provided with sufficient information, instructions and training so as to ensure their safety as far as reasonably possible.
6. Ensuring that parents are suitably involved in the process.
7. If the school is using an external work experience provider, or independent placement agency, the school must do all it reasonably can to assess the competence and suitability of the provider.

Assessing the suitability of the placement provider

The legal onus is on the school to do all that is reasonably practicable to ensure the suitability of the placement and the placement provider.

The school should discuss with the placement provider what they are trying to achieve on behalf of the students and the implications of accepting the student into their work place, making it clear to them that they owe the same health and safety responsibilities to the student as to their other employees. If anything they owe a greater duty of care given the age and relative inexperience of the students.

Other checks should include:

1. Ensuring that they have a comprehensive health and safety policy (they are legally obliged to have such if they have more than five employees).

2. Ensuring that the placement provider has assessed the risks to health and safety of their own employees arising from their work, taking particular account of young workers. A specific risk assessment for young workers needs to have been carried out before any placement commences with students, with parents being informed of any significant findings. It is up to the organisers of the work experience scheme to advise placement providers of any individual students who have particular requirements, for example students with specific health issues or learning difficulties.
3. Ensuring as far as reasonably possible that the placement provider has communicated to its employees, to include the work experience students, any significant risks to their health and safety as identified by the risk assessment, as well as notification of the control measures that have been put in place. This communication also demonstrates the existence of a positive health and safety culture.
4. Ensuring as far as possible that the student, whilst undertaking the placement, will have colleagues of appropriate competence and responsibility.
5. Undertaking a site visit can also be good practice. Such a visit can provide a general indication of the possible provider's general attitude towards health and safety and also identify any possible risks and the control measures in place. Ideally it will also be possible to meet the person who will be directly supervising the students.
6. Making sure as far as reasonably practicable that the initial assessment in respect of each placement provider is reviewed on a regular basis, and amended as required should new information come to light, for example with regard to significant changes in the placement provider's procedures. Full detailed checks are not required every single time a student is placed with a regular provider, but there can be no room for complacency and the feeling that everything will be fine because there has never been a problem before. During the placement, and depending



on the nature of the risks involved, and the individual characteristics or requirements of the student, it may be necessary to arrange for a support visit to the student during the placement. Alternatively, support can be provided by telephone. Each case must be treated individually as to the level of support required. If the feedback during the visit is that health and safety arrangements are no longer satisfactory then the student may need to be withdrawn from the placement.

The students

It can be all too easy to overlook the fact that the students themselves have health and safety responsibilities. They owe a duty to themselves, the school, the placement providers and the other members of staff at the placement provider. Their main responsibilities are:

1. To take care of their own health and safety and that of anyone else who might be affected by their actions.
2. To co-operate with the placement provider in complying with their legal duties.
3. To not ever intentionally interfere with or misuse anything that has been provided in the interests of health and safety.
4. To work in accordance with the instructions and training provided to them, particularly in relation to the use of any machinery, work equipment or dangerous substances.
5. To inform the placement provider immediately of any work situation

which might present an imminent and serious danger.

6. To advise the placement provider if they are of the opinion that there is any shortcoming in the protection arrangements in place for health and safety.

Students should be briefed as soon as possible prior to the commencement of the placement, with an emphasis on the importance of health and safety controls in the work place. This helps to foster in the students an early understanding of the importance of health and safety and therefore provides an opportunity to influence the attitudes of the future workforce.

Conclusions

Once the school has a suitable policy and procedures, there is no reason why work experience programmes cannot run smoothly. It is certainly not in anyone's interest for the paperwork or administration to be unnecessarily cumbersome, either for the school or the placement provider. The main priority is that students get a valuable experience of the world of work.

The key things to remember are:

- Firstly, the legal focus remains on doing what is "reasonably practicable";
- Secondly, that any child and placement are viewed individually, rather than an over reliance on generic assessments; and
- Finally that communication channels between all of the involved parties remain open and well used. ←