



# EVALUATION OF WORK EXPERIENCE IN CONSTRUCTION FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH CANCER: BRIEF REPORT

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## ABOUT THIS REPORT

Cancer Care Research Centre, University of Stirling was commissioned by Teenage Cancer Trust to conduct an evaluation of work experience. This is a brief report of the evaluation.

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1. INTRODUCTION .....</b>	<b>4</b>
1.1 About this report .....	4
1.2 About work experience .....	4
1.3 Impact of cancer on employment .....	4
1.4 Aims .....	5
<b>2. METHODS .....</b>	<b>5</b>
2.1 Evaluation design .....	5
2.2 Inclusion criteria .....	5
2.4 Assessing employability skills .....	5
2.5 Assessing work self-efficacy .....	5
2.6 Rating work experience .....	6
2.7 Analysis .....	6
<b>3. FINDINGS .....</b>	<b>6</b>
3.1 Participant characteristics .....	6
3.2 Employability skills and work self-efficacy.....	6
3.3 Rating work experience .....	6
3.4 Most enjoyable aspects of work experience .....	8
3.5 Least enjoyable aspects of work experience .....	9
<b>4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>5. REFERENCES .....</b>	<b>12</b>





# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 ABOUT THIS REPORT

This report presents the findings of an evaluation of work experience for young people with cancer. Dr Gill Hubbard,<sup>1</sup> co-director Cancer Care Research Centre, University of Stirling<sup>2</sup> led the evaluation.

Work experience comprises a partnership between Teenage Cancer Trust and organisations. The aim of this partnership is to give young people with cancer a chance to gain knowledge about workplaces and develop employability skills. Work experience may address some of the negative impacts of a cancer diagnosis on employment (see section 1.3).

## 1.2 ABOUT WORK EXPERIENCE

Nine young people with cancer participated in work experience with Mace in September 2014.

Mace is an international consultancy and construction company, offering highly integrated services across the full property and infrastructure lifecycle.<sup>3</sup>

The work experience opportunity was titled 'Experience Construction'. It involved a week of facilitated workshops at Mace HQ and site visits to iconic venues that Mace manage around London. During the week the young people also engaged in a next steps/employability skills session as a way of preparing them to move on into employment or training.

The Partnership with Mace is the first time Teenage Cancer Trust has delivered work experience to young people with cancer in this way. This pilot 'Experience Construction' will hopefully form the blueprint of future 'Experience...' programmes for Teenage Cancer Trust. The evaluation is therefore likely to be of great interest to others who are considering developing work experience for young people.

**The Partnership with Mace Foundation is the first time Teenage Cancer Trust has delivered work experience to young people with cancer in this way.**

## 1.3 IMPACT OF CANCER ON EMPLOYMENT

A cancer diagnosis during adolescence and early adulthood has been found to be associated with negative educational and vocational impacts in the longer term, including difficulties mapping out future career pathways.<sup>4</sup> In particular, due to the potential negative impact of treatment on cognitive function, survivors of brain and central nervous system (CNS) cancers are at increased risk of later initiation of careers.<sup>5</sup>

The negative impact of cancer on employment is a major concern because good quality work experience is linked to positive mental well-being.<sup>6</sup> Achieving good mental health is critical because it enables young people to flourish and function. Mental health is defined by the World Health Organisation as, *'a state of well-being in which every individual realises his or her own potential, can cope with the normal stresses of life, can work productively and fruitfully, and is able to make a contribution to her or his community.'*<sup>7</sup> Yet, teenage cancer survivors compared to people who have no history of cancer have a significantly higher prevalence of poor mental health.<sup>8</sup> Thus, increasing a young person's employment prospects is a key aim of Teenage Cancer Trust because it will contribute to positive mental health.

Work self-efficacy, which is the degree of confidence a person has in their ability to work, has been linked to employment in adult cancer survivors.<sup>9</sup> In social cognitive

theory efficacy beliefs are conceived as the foundations of human action.<sup>10</sup> Based on this theory of human behaviour, people who are efficacious expend greater effort to reach desired goals and persevere longer when they encounter challenges. Thus, it follows that improving work self-efficacy will increase the likelihood of being employed.

Work experience has a positive impact on employability.<sup>11</sup> Employability skills include a positive approach to employment and personal skills of self-management, thinking and

solving problems, working together and communicating and understanding the business.<sup>12</sup> Work experience also helps broaden career aspirations and helps young people progress well towards meeting their career ambitions.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, work experience reduces likelihood of NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) status.<sup>11</sup>

**Work experience has a positive impact on employability.**

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 EVALUATION DESIGN

In Autumn 2014 an evaluation of work experience was conducted using a quasi-experimental pre and post test design. This involved collecting data twice: once before participants attended work experience and immediately after. There was no control group. Relatively simple and inexpensive evaluation designs are particularly appropriate when there has been very little research conducted on a subject. It can give an indication whether an intervention and programme is making a difference and whether it is likely to be well received by participants.

Self-report questionnaires were used to establish in what ways participants' knowledge and understanding, skills, qualities, experience, attitudes and attributes changed by attending work experience. This method was chosen because it had been successfully used in previous studies of employability in healthy young people.<sup>11,12</sup> It is recommended that survey data on employability should be supplemented by more qualitative evaluation with young people.<sup>12</sup> Open-ended questions were therefore used to also used to allow for more subjective viewpoints about issues, needs and concerns.

### 2.2 INCLUSION CRITERIA

Participants met the following criteria:

1. Diagnosed with cancer between ages of 15 and 24 years
2. Currently between the ages of 18 and 29 years
3. Could communicate in English

### 2.3 SAMPLING AND RECRUITMENT

Young people were recruited through Teenage Cancer Trust units at University College Hospital in London and The Royal Marsden. An advert was also placed on social media.

Posters, flyers and Teenage Cancer Trust funded staff were used to promote the programme. The sample was based to a London population as this was the location of the programme and budgets would not allow for overnight accommodation.

The young people that registered an interest were then asked to complete an application form to provide a first assurance check that they would be suitable for the programme.

Once the application process was complete nine young people were asked to attend the taster session. This would complete the recruitment process.

### 1.4 AIMS

The aim of the evaluation was to examine the impact of work experience on:

- Young people's employability skills
- Young people's work self-efficacy

A further aim was to find out young people's viewpoints of work experience and in particular, what they enjoyed least and most.

Teenage Cancer Trust did not have to turn any young people away from the programme due to ineligibility or suitability but three young people showed an interest however did not complete an application form.

England census questions were used to provide information about age, ethnicity, gender and employment status in order to describe the sample.

### 2.4 ASSESSING EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS

To assess the impact of work experience on employability skills we adapted a tool developed by the National Support Group for Work Experience. This tool has previously been used to evaluate the impact of work experience on over 15,000 young people.<sup>13</sup>

The tool is a 16-item questionnaire, which uses a 4-point Likert scale to assess if young people 'strongly agree', 'agree', 'disagree' or 'strongly disagree' with a statement relating to employability. The tool was developed for school students but to make it suitable for use among post-school young people we made the following changes:

- Item 5 we have deleted the example: 'I developed my spoken communication skills, e.g. ~~talking to adults~~'
- For item 11 we have added college/university at the end of the sentence: 'I understand better why it is important to do well at school'
- Item 12 we have deleted the end of the sentence: 'I am more prepared to work hard ~~in lessons and my coursework~~'
- Item 16 we have deleted the words in parenthesis: 'I am clearer about what I want to do in my future education and career ~~(post-16)~~'

This adapted questionnaire was administered using Bristol survey on-line<sup>14</sup> approximately one week before and after participants attended work experience.

### 2.5 ASSESSING WORK SELF-EFFICACY

To assess the impact of work experience on work self-efficacy we used the WSES – Work Self-Efficacy Scale, which has been tested among young adults aged 20-26 years.<sup>15,16</sup>

WSES measures two key dimensions related to the capability to behave in an efficacious way in the work context, namely

the ability to manage interpersonal relationships and the ability to achieve assigned goals. WSES includes 10 items. For each item, participants are asked to evaluate how capable they feel in carrying out the described action or behaviour on a Likert scale, from 1 (Not well at all) to 5 (Very well). Items 1 to 5 relate to the perceived abilities to manage interpersonal relationships and items 6-10 relate to perceived abilities to achieve assigned goals.

This questionnaire was administered using Bristol survey on-line<sup>17</sup> approximately one week before and after participants attended work experience.

## 2.6 RATING WORK EXPERIENCE

Young people were asked to rate their experience of work experience using a scale of 1 to 4 (1=Poor, 2=Fair, 3=Good, 4=Excellent). Young people were also given the opportunity to respond to the following two questions:

1. What did you enjoy most about your time at Mace?
2. What did you enjoy least about your time with Mace?
3. What could we have done better?

Young people completed this questionnaire approximately one week after participation in work experience.

## 2.7 ANALYSIS

Changes in the proportion of young people reporting 'not well at all/not well/well/very well' for each work self-efficacy statement were analysed using Bristol survey on-line, which provides a descriptive report of comparative surveys.<sup>14</sup> The proportion of young people 'strongly agreeing/agreeing/strongly disagreeing/disagreeing' with each employability statement were also analysed using Bristol survey on-line. Ratings of work experience were reported numerically on a scale of 1 to 4. Qualitative data was analysed thematically and described.

# 3. FINDINGS

## 3.1 PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

All 9 participants responded to the survey and completed the questionnaires before and after work experience. The oldest participant was 24 years old and the youngest 18 years old; 6 were male and 3 female; 7 were in full-time education or currently working and 2 were not in work; 4 described their ethnicity group as white, 4 as Asian and 1 as African.

Given the very small sample size, the following findings should be interpreted with caution.

## 3.2 EMPLOYABILITY SKILLS AND WORK SELF-EFFICACY

Improvements in employability skills were observed in 4 out of 12 employability skill. After work experience, participants reported that they could perform 'well' or 'very well' as opposed to 'not well at all', 'not well' or 'in between not well and well' for the following employability skills:

- Look for information that you need
- Understand the information found
- Plan your own professional project
- Take new opportunities in the job market

This observed change indicates that work experience may help young people develop certain employability skills but a larger sample size is required to draw a more definitive conclusion about whether this observed change was by chance or can be attributed to the work experience programme. No improvements were observed in the other employability skills.

No improvements were observed in work self-efficacy.

The most likely explanation for not observing improvement is that participants reported strong levels of employability skills and work self-efficacy before they attended work experience, thereby leaving very little room for improvement. Conducting the evaluation with a larger sample that includes young people

with low employability skills and work self-efficacy therefore may yield a different result. As future work experience programmes are evaluated it will be possible to see if the improvements reported in this small evaluation are consistently observed.

## 3.3 RATING WORK EXPERIENCE

Eight young people gave an overall rating of work experience as 'excellent' and 1 rated it as 'good.' Such a good overall rating suggests that young people with cancer value this type of work experience programme. The following comment encapsulates how much participants valued work experience.



**'An amazing opportunity that during student years you don't normally get. Excellent overview of the roles in the company, would highly recommend it to others as the week was so diverse, would appeal to students interested in lots of different areas. Overall a fun and well constructed week. Thanks Mace and Teenage Cancer Trust!!!'**



Young people individually rated various parts of the process of engagement in work experience, rating them all as either 'good' or 'excellent' and several young people also provided a written comment on aspects of the process, which were overwhelmingly positive.

**'I felt every effort was made for the talks and site tours to be interesting as well as informative.'**

**'The Mace employees had an excellent knowledge of the company, their job roles and what they were currently doing/involved in. I received clear and comprehensive answers, every time I asked a question.'**

**'Very interesting, really different things everyday.'**

**'Had a very diverse array of activities ranging from marketing to pre-planning to sustainability. Found it excellent.'**

These comments illustrate that young people found work experience informative, interesting and enjoyed the activities that they engaged in.

#### **Changing perceptions about a career in construction**

A key finding from this evaluation was that work experience at Mace changed all 9 young people's views about a career in construction. Prior to the work experience all young people reported that they had not considered a career in construction, rating their consideration as either 'poor' or 'fair'. They reported that work experience had made them re-consider a career in construction, rating their consideration as 'good' or 'excellent.' The following written comment highlights how work experience shifted participants' perceptions about the construction industry:

**'Although I am going on to study a Masters in logistics, the construction industry was not an area I considered a career in. It is definitely an industry I am keen to explore once I have finished my Master's degree. I found the industry to be very vibrant and full of opportunities.... In conclusion to my weeks work experience, I now have a better idea of what I would like to do when I finish my Masters and how I can get there.'**

Indeed, 1 young person immediately negotiated a 4 week programme with Mace and 1 young person secured a temporary role with Mace with the hope it will become permanent. Thus, work experience widens young people's work horizons, thereby potentially improving their chances of employment and careers and most importantly facilitates further work experience and employment.



### 3.4 MOST ENJOYABLE ASPECTS OF WORK EXPERIENCE

Young people were asked to comment on what they found most enjoyable about work experience. Their comments fell into three categories.

#### Seeing construction in action: the value of site visits

By far the most enjoyable aspect of work experience was site visits. Almost all participants referred to this as one of the most enjoyable parts of work experience. Participants found real work in action interesting, informative and exciting. Being given the opportunity to see major London sites also made participants feel very special and privileged. Future work experience programmes should therefore include site visits or their equivalent.



**‘The site visits were a huge highlight of the experience too. Getting special access to the construction sites was such a privilege for which I’m extremely grateful for... It was fascinating seeing the construction process that follows after the design stage.’**

**‘Finally I really relished the different site visits, as I never been to a construction site before this was brilliant, exciting opportunity for me. I particularly enjoyed the visit to the Emirates Air Line and the flight simulator.’**

**‘The site tours were most definitely the most interesting part as we got to see the nitty gritty of the work. I very much enjoyed seeing the hands on working being done and being shown the behind the scenes of the work place.’**

**‘Really enjoyed the cable car visit, and discussing the potential emergency plans in place.’**

**‘Seeing the sites was amazing to get in close like that.’**

**‘A fantastic opportunity to see the sites and learn about the aspects involved within construction and the diverse roles available.’**

#### Feeling valued

Participants clearly liked that people were friendly and willing to spend time and effort informing them about the construction industry. Having experts giving up their time to be with them clearly made young people feel valued. A cancer diagnosis can knock young people’s confidence and self-esteem, thus being made to feel special and being valued is an important part of the process of moving forward. Thus, future work experience programmes should ensure that young people are made to feel special and welcome. Having experts giving up their time to spend with participants sends a clear message that young people with cancer are important and engenders confidence.



**'I really enjoyed getting to know all the roles people are in and meeting so many people happy to talk to us.'**

**'I also enjoyed working in a warm environment with friendly people which made it easier for me to integrate and interact with others; the Mace employees made it a point to know everyone's name and made those personal connections.'**

**'The opportunity to have questions answered by very experienced people was great.'**

**'Lastly, the fact that everyone at Mace was so friendly and welcoming, I think I speak for us all when saying we felt like everyone catered to us and what we wanted to do and learn about.'**

**'Overall it was great! I learned a lot and made friends and I feel more confident in myself.'**



#### **Social support from peers with cancer**

Several young people enjoyed the fact that they were on work experience with peers with cancer. There was something intrinsically supportive about being with others who had been diagnosed with cancer. This shared experience of cancer brought young people together and made them feel comfortable in each other's company. Thus, work experience programmes exclusively for young people with cancer should be promoted.

**'The thing I enjoyed the most was the fact that everyone had unfortunately had an illness and in a way it brought us together more and added another dimension to the week, by the end of the week we were down the pub together!'**

**'Moreover, I loved meeting the others we all got on so well and it would certainly not be as enjoyable without them. I also felt comfort in the fact we were all in the same boat and shared facing many similar difficulties of having had treatment and returning to normal life.'**



#### **3.5 LEAST ENJOYABLE ASPECTS OF WORK EXPERIENCE**

Young people were also asked to point out what were the least enjoyable aspects of work experience and what could be done to improve work experience. Least enjoyable aspects of work experience fell into two main categories.



### Practical problems

Some young people found work experience physically and mentally demanding. Whether this was due to cancer and treatment is unclear. Future work experience programmes should therefore consider discussing physically and mentally demanding challenges in advance so that modifications to the programme can be made to support those who may find work experience difficult. The following comments suggest that work experience was a challenge for some young people due to mobility difficulties or certain activities making them feel particularly tired.



**‘At times I struggled with the physicality of getting around and between sites. I think people less able should be warned and a greater use of public transport should be used between sites compared to walking.’**

**‘This point does not affect me as much, but for some team members it was difficult to complete all tasks and activities as they were tired etc. Maybe smaller more manageable tasks toward the end of the week, for next time?’**

**‘I felt that there was a lot more walking than I expected. We were always offered drinks and I never felt bad for sitting down which was great. But some of the suggested walks from places were further than I was totally comfortable with for example, from Greenwich square to the cable car. In this case a few of us took a bus. Perhaps a list of bus routes could have been added to the information pack?’**



### Improving the content

Some young people would have welcomed more information about Mace and how to start a career in construction. Thus, providing participants with information about the particular organisation hosting work experience and information about careers in that industry in advance may be helpful. Only one young person recommended a longer period of time on work experience. Thus, providing opportunities for those who would like to extend work experience may be welcome.

**‘Prior to the construction week, more information could have been provided about Mace in general.’**

**‘More information could have been provided on how I can enter into working life, through the construction industry.’**

**‘In my personal opinion, I think everything was perfect during my week at mace. However if there was one thing I could put my finger on, I would say that we may not have had enough time with Mace. Would have rather enjoyed two weeks than one.’**





## 4. DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This evaluation suggests that work experience is overwhelmingly positive for young people with cancer. Work experience is likely to help young people address some of the employment and career difficulties they may face due to cancer.<sup>4,5</sup> Indeed, the evaluation shows that work experience widened young people's career horizons and provided some of them with further work experience in the industry and employment. The evaluation also suggests that work experience improves some employability skills. Improvements in work self-efficacy were not found but this is most likely because the group of young people attending work experience already had strong levels of work self-efficacy. Thus, evaluating the impact of work experience involving young people with low levels of employability skills and work self-efficacy should be conducted. These participants may reap most benefit from work experience in comparison to young people who already possess high levels of employability skills and work self-efficacy.

Moreover, work experience is likely to have a positive impact on mental health and well-being. A cancer diagnosis can knock young people's confidence and being made to feel special and valued will almost certainly contribute to helping young people move forward.

Young people with cancer welcomed the chance to meet with other people of the same age who also have been diagnosed with cancer. Participants gained intrinsic support by being with peers who were 'in the same boat.' Work experience provides an ideal opportunity to foster social support from peers who are a key source of social support for teenagers with cancer.<sup>18,19,20,21</sup> Thus, work experience exclusive to young people with cancer should become a key feature of Teenage Cancer Trust's Membership Offer.

Work experience may also be of benefit to industry. This evaluation suggests that work experience changes young people's perceptions of a particular industry. Indeed, participants following work experience were seriously considering a career in construction whereas they had not contemplated working in this sector previously. Thus, Teenage Cancer Trust should inform industry of this outcome because it may encourage work experience partnerships.

There were some difficulties faced by some participants and these should be addressed in future work experience initiatives. In particular, problems relating to mobility and tiredness should be taken into consideration and discussed with young people prior to attending work experience with a view to managing these difficulties.

### Recommendations

The evaluation suggests that the following recommendations for future work experience initiatives should be taken into consideration.

- Ensure that work experience projects include site visits or their equivalent. Participants found real work in practice interesting, informative and exciting. Being given the opportunity to see sites also made participants feel very special and privileged, which may contribute to building confidence and self-esteem.
- Make participants feel valued by welcoming them and being friendly. Involve experts in work experience because this sends a clear message that young people with cancer are important. Going the extra mile for these young people will make a difference.
- Provide opportunities for young people to get to know each other within work experience. This will facilitate social support from peers, which is appreciated and is likely to have a positive impact on participants' health.<sup>22,23,24,25</sup>
- Address practical problems such as, tiredness and mobility difficulties prior to work experience. This will support young people's participation without impediment.
- Give information about the particular organisation hosting work experience in advance. Also, provide participants with a step-by-step guide how to start a career in the industry that the organisation is part of (in this instance construction).
- Provide a pathway for an extended period of work experience for those young people who are particularly interested in finding out much more about having in a career in the sector associated with the work experience placement.

**Two of the young people secured employment with Mace on completion of the programme.**

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**Programme and all questionnaires available on request**

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