

1. The Case For Career Conversations and Re-Imagining Work Experience

Three recent Employer Led initiatives from the UK clearly indicate that there is a need, and great value, in developing the concept of career conversations and in re-imagining (or diversifying dependence upon) work experience placements.

1. The “Employer and Education Taskforce Research – “It’s who you meet that stops you from becoming a NEET”. The research reveals that a young adult (19 – 24), who can recall four or more interactions with an employer whilst at school, is five more times less likely to be unemployed at this point in time. The Taskforce is a NGO which has emerged from the previous governments Centre for Education and Business Excellence. Strongly supported by the Confederation of British Industry (CBE) large employers and education peak bodies, the Taskforce is making an impact on British opinion and policy. The same Taskforce has also researched work experience for young people, and determined that it is the social capital (familiarily, mutual understanding, trust, clarity of expectation) generated between employers and young people that is a more significant return, than the development of human capital (i.e. the skills and knowledge of the individual young person developed by the student whilst on placement.

At the same time, the “Learning to Work” campaign of the British Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development (CIPD) is seeking to engage HR professionals within business to work with schools. It proposes that employers not only develop the employability of young people, but also encourage their businesses to create more “youth friendly pathways” and a culture” that facilitates youth transition. CIPD has produced a discussion paper (May 2012) on this two pronged strategy, called “Engaging Employers in Tackling Youth Unemployment” and in that paper refers to, and supports the research findings of City and Guilds that young people feel that “the most useful advice on employment and careers comes from a (young person) visit to an employer”.

Thirdly, Business in The Community (a business member NGO) continues to develop the Work Inspiration (WI) campaign; an employer driven program to re-imagine work experience. Whilst work experience has been largely perceived as being about testing a particular job, and developing work skills, WI is seen by business champions as enabling young people to

- 1) Reflect upon their aspirations and values – **All About Me**
- 2) Explore a range of jobs and tasks – **Behind the Scenes**
- 3) Discover how employers have developed and/or navigated their career – **Careers Happen.**

These (boldly printed) three core insights of WI, combine to shape a program that is able to offer students a range of “career conversations”. In fact all three of the above mentioned employer led initiatives are suggesting that the new “centrepiece” of both career development and education – industry links is a career conversation, rather than a work placement.

There are a number of immediate and practical challenges that are also pushing many companies to re-imagine work experience. They include

- The ever increasing demand for quality placements from schools, job network providers, youth services, colleges, universities, etc
- Internal company structures that no longer lend themselves to a placement i.e. staff not using a particular space or desk, home based workers
- Privacy and legal requirements to access IT systems and data
- Organisations using team based structures, not having individuals working to a clearly defined hierarchy i.e. who is the supervisor of a placement?
- employees becoming concerned that the placement has become stale and tired, and they are challenged to find work tasks that are real, satisfying for the student and above “base-entry”
- New models and ideas are being designed/tested that have revitalised the “old product” of the placement, and are an attractive option to those companies who know about them e.g. Work Inspiration (UK and now Australia), Try-a-Trade and WOW (Australia) and the young person led program of career education Career Search. They offer choice to the employer, especially when he/she may not be in a position to support a quality placement
- Public policy wanting to emphasise the importance of post 16 pathway placements whilst pre 16 work experience is seen to be more about “career exploration” e.g. the UK Wolf Report.

However it is somewhat difficult to move the debate forward, without a replacement or alternative vehicle to the placement. Career conversations offer that vehicle. British companies are ready to re-imagine work experience and career conversations are seen as an important way forward. Clearly there are indications that Australian employers are also ready to engage in such a debate (a debate recommended by the **Business Education Roundtable**).

2. What Are Career Conversations

They are dialogue between a young person at school and an employer representative (manager, employee and apprentice). Students can participate in a number of career conversation thereby exploring a range of occupations and career development stories (of adults in the workforce). These career conversations can happen from primary school onwards, but they are particularly valuable before, and just as the student is making their transition from school to work.

Quality career conversations are developed through interactive models of communication, such as active listening, two way communication, review and feedback. Models that combine rich tasks, where the young person and adult are doing something active together are particularly helpful. Models that enable the students to reflect upon their conversations and relay their conclusions to others, are also important. The best way to

retain information, insights and learning is to “teach it” i.e. to relay it onto others. Industry – education link programs can be structured so they more fully promote such quality conversations.

GTA has already begun work on defining what is a **quality** career conversation. **It is about dialogue, then student reflection, and then young people making the connection between what they have discovered (information/insights) to their own career plans and aspirations. Learning** to do this will continue to be at the very heart of the career development process, and it is lifelong!!

Clearly every young person should be supported to enter a range of career conversations with an employer (employee, apprentice etc) thereby exposing them to a range of occupations and career stories. Any education – industry link/partnership activity could be reviewed and refined in order to build its capacity to offer students quality career conversations. There is a need to develop models/programs that combine rich tasks and quality conversations and thereby “reach out and touch” less confident, articulate and mature young people. The Try-a-Trade program and its creative mix of “hands-on” activities and alongside, informal discussions with a “tradie” is an excellent example of such a model. Models and programs that enable students to acquire, internalise and then relay onto others their career conversation insights are also important. Some mentoring programs will also offer young people the chance to enter a “deep” career conversation with that adult. However the answer is not simply “putting speakers in schools”. Too many speakers “talking to” a class room of students, rather than schools and employers developing “one-to-one or small group conversations” followed by reflection and feedback are unlikely to generate quality career conversations.

The career conversation concept may offer the various champions of career development programs a common bond; a means of uniting agencies who are promoting various programs/products (that often are competing for funding) in one change movement. Career conversations may offer Australia a means to not only “re-imagine work experience, but more generally, to develop a future for career development programs in schools. Certainly, it has profound implications for the design of the NTC Foundation level. However it is **vital** that employers play a key and strategic role in these developments. As has been the case in the UK, Australia needs to tap the creativity, resources and strategic thinking of business/employers, and encourage them to have ownership over the agenda. If Australia can do this, it may also help educational jurisdictions to make clearer strategic sense of the use of the placement. GTA senses that the way forward is to cherish the extended and quality placement post 16 (likely to be a **pathway placement**), and therefore successfully free-up demand being placed upon employers for placements. Replacing the pre 16 placement with a set of career conversations (perhaps with the exception of the placement that enables a very “at risk” student to work and learn with a nurturing group of adults in order to rekindle their motivation to learn) may assist our goal to expand and enhance post 16 pathway placements.