
EVALUATION OF NEW APPROACHES TO WORK-RELATED LEARNING AT KEY STAGE FOUR

Andrew Watson, Neil Stuart and John Ferguson

SWA Consulting

Introduction

This research brief presents the findings from the national evaluation of work-related learning projects at Key Stage 4. It was prepared by SWA Consulting (SWA) for the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

The principal focus for the study was the 21 work-related learning action research projects (ARPs), which ran during the academic years 1998/99 and 1999/2000. However, findings from two other groups of projects were also taken into account. These were the 86 Standards Funds projects during 1998/99, which focused on work-related learning; and 14 Education Action Zones, which featured work-related learning components - these ran during both 1998/99 and 1999/2000.

Key findings

- Knowledge of post-16 options improved among the project group, compared with their baseline stage (+2%) and the comparator group (a higher starting point, but no change over the life of the project). Similar progress was made in 'willingness to learn new things' (+6% in project group but -5% among comparator group).
- Both fixed term and permanent exclusions were lower in the second year (1999/2000) than the first year for project group students. The latter dropped from 0.28% days lost due to permanent exclusions to 0.03%, whereas the equivalent comparator group data showed an increase in permanent exclusions from 0.08% to 0.14%.
- Statistical analysis of attendance data revealed a slightly improved record on authorised absences but no significant impact from the projects on unauthorised absences.
- In eight of the 21 projects, the distance travelled in improved attainment at Key Stage 4 (KS4) by the project group was greater than that of the local comparator groups. In half of these, it was also greater than that predicted by projections based on national Key Stage 3 (KS3) and KS4 results. For example, in the two projects where the enhancements were linked to specific GCSE subjects, the average *actual* points score at KS4 for the project group were higher than the *projected* scores by 7.05 and 4.16. However, on average, point scores at KS4 for project group students were slightly below those for the comparator group.
- The percentage of the project group leaving school with no accredited awards (12.2%) was lower than for the comparator group (15.8%).
- For project and comparator group students, the percentage entering 'positive destinations' post-16 (i.e. involving learning and/or work) was high. Relative to the year cohorts as a whole, project group students were more likely to enter Government-supported training or employment, and less likely to stay in full-time education.

Objectives of Action Research Projects

The objectives of the ARPs were to:-

- improve motivation and attitudes;
- increase skills and knowledge;
- improve attendance and behaviour;
- raise attainment.

Project groups and comparator groups

Across the 21 ARPs, there were originally 103 participating schools. However, a small number "dropped out" during the two years; a figure of 100 schools represents the most reliable picture. The number of schools within each project varied from 1 to 18.

There were 878 students in the project group at the outset, although this fell to 655 by the end of the end of the second year. The equivalent figures for the comparator group were 764 and 723. The number of students within each project varied from 13 to 117. The average number of students per project was 42 (baseline) and 31 (at end).

Basis for selection of students

Indicators of actual or potential disaffection were the principal criteria used for selection of students for the projects (in approximately 80% of participating schools). This is a crucial contextual point since the project groups were *not*, in most cases, a cross-section of the year cohort (e.g. as measured by KS3 scores or unauthorised absences).

There were some significant exceptions to this general picture on selection criteria, however. In the remaining 20% of participating schools, students were selected on other criteria, often linked to curriculum choice (e.g. those taking a specific KS4 option). This enabled additional insights to be gleaned, since it was possible to compare and contrast the impact of work-related learning on different types of students. However, the obverse of the same coin was that aggregated findings at national level were potentially misleading since they masked a very wide divergence of practice and impact at the levels of individual student, school and project.

Impact on students' motivation and attitudes

In general terms, evidence from adults observing students (e.g. employers and teachers) has been stronger and more positive than evidence from students themselves (principally from the national questionnaire). In nearly every project, the picture was mixed, in the sense that some students' attitudes and motivation improved considerably, others modestly, but for some there was no progress at all. The latter were very likely to drop out at some stage.

Whilst there were several examples of attitudes becoming more positive about the enhancements themselves, these did not always extend to attitudes towards school and learning in general. Indeed there was a small increase (from 15% to 20%) in the percentage of students who felt that 'school is a waste of time for me' over the life of the projects. By far the majority, however, (over 90%) agreed with the statement that 'it is important to come to school every day'.

Impact on students' skills and knowledge

The skills and knowledge explored were those relating to the post-16 world. Most students started from a low base in terms of knowledge of the options, understanding of their own strengths and weaknesses, and the self-confidence to try new opportunities. For example, around 25% of the project group said they knew nothing about any of the possible options at the baseline stage.

Knowledge of post-16 options improved among the project group, not only compared with the baseline stage (+2%) but also compared with the comparator group (a higher starting point, but no change over the life of the project). Similar progress was evident in 'willingness to learn new things' (+6% in project group but -5% among comparator group). However, slight reductions over time were noted for both project and comparator groups in their views on the importance of qualifications for getting a job.

There were small improvements over time in project group students' own assessment of their knowledge of local labour market factors. Whilst the comparator groups generally showed small improvements as well, there were two items where only the project group made progress; these were knowledge about 'jobs you could get in your local area' and 'where to look for the kind of job that you have chosen'.

Students seemed to have benefited most from their direct experience of the adult world through the extended work experience. This brought a more informed view of the behaviour and attitudes expected. Several students remarked that they responded better to being treated like adults. Improved self-esteem was another key outcome for many.

Impact on attendance and behaviour

Statistical analysis of attendance data revealed no significant impact from the projects on unauthorised absences, but a slightly improved record on authorised absences. Project group data for Year 11 in 1999/2000 shows the average authorised absence rate dropping to the same level as that of the comparator group (project group absences had been

higher in Years 9 and 10). The project group average was also slightly below the year cohort average for the participating schools during 1999/2000.

Both fixed term and permanent exclusions were lower in the second year (1999/2000) than the first year for project group students. The latter dropped from 0.28% days lost due to permanent exclusions to 0.03%, whereas the equivalent comparator group data showed an increase in permanent exclusions from 0.08% to 0.14%.

Many teachers argued convincingly that the projects' main achievement in this field was in 'retaining' project group students in a learning environment. The likelihood is that many would otherwise have dropped out. The use of incentives (e.g. cash or leaving early) seems to have had a positive effect on attendance and behaviour, although they were only used in a minority of projects and are not without controversy.

The two projects, which featured theatre, music and dance, seemed especially effective in generating enthusiasm. This was translated into optional attendance during school holidays.

The majority of students who left the project during the two years did so as a result of their own decision, whether positively (e.g. to return to the mainstream curriculum) or negatively. There was, however, evidence of pressure from some teachers for students to resume GCSEs they had dropped to take part in the programme, giving rise to mixed messages as to whether work-related learning was a valid alternative in its own right or a "treatment" for those unable or unwilling to engage effectively in a more traditional KS4 environment.

Impact on attainment

In eight of the projects, the distance travelled by the project group was greater than that travelled by the respective local comparator groups. Indeed, in half of these eight projects, the distance travelled by the project group was also greater than that predicted by modelling based on national data of KS3 scores and KS4 results.

Value added at KS4 was clearly evident among students in the minority of projects following subject-specific enhancements. These projects also demonstrated that it is possible to provide an increased focus on a small number of subject areas and improve the results in those areas, *without* any apparent detrimental effect on the results achieved in other National Curriculum subjects. For example, in the two projects where the enhancements were linked to specific GCSE subjects, the average *actual* points score at KS4 for the project group were higher than the *projected* scores by 7.05 and 4.16.

The average point scores at KS4 for project group students across all projects were slightly below those for the comparator group. However, these mask wide variations at project, school and individual student levels.

The percentage of the project group leaving school with no accredited awards (12.2%) was lower than for the comparator group (15.8%). It was also apparent that the outcomes achieved by students who completed the enhancements provided by the projects were significantly higher than those achieved by non-completers.

For both project and comparator group students, the percentage entering 'positive destinations' post-16 (i.e. involving learning and/or work) was high. Relative to the year cohorts as a whole, project group students were more likely to enter Government-supported training or employment, and less likely to stay in full-time education.

Which element of work-related learning worked best?

Quantitative analysis was undertaken to assess whether one type of model could be shown to be more effective than another (e.g. employer placements compared with FE links). The outcomes (or more precisely the value added) assessed were KS4 attainment, unauthorised absences and post-16 destinations.

There were no clear patterns to emerge at the overall 'model design' level. It appeared that KS3 results, rather than the type of model followed, was the most reliable predictor of progress at KS4. However, students in projects featuring subject specific enhancements (e.g. linked to specific GCSEs) tended to show the greatest progress, although this might reflect the selection criteria adopted as well as the content of those projects.

At the next level of detail, factors such as the size of the group or the time spent on the enhancement did appear to make a difference. For example, higher value added in terms of reducing unauthorised absences seemed to be linked with models where the first year enhancements were on FE premises. However, it is important to note that different combinations of design detail led to different types of outcome. Indeed, they could even pull in different directions (i.e. an improvement in one measure but deterioration in another).

Critical success factors

The projects generated much valuable material on learning points at project and school levels. The following general themes can be distilled:-

- the importance of prior planning, insightful management and preparation of students and adult participants;
- the essential pre-requisite of sorting out timetabling issues and generally managing logistics effectively;
- the major contributions to be made by adults other than teachers in a variety of contexts;
- the importance of continuity of staff - or well-planned transitions where change is unavoidable. This helps to engender a sense of security, stability and confidence among students;
- the motivating effects of providing a fresh start in a new environment and celebrating success in a relevant, adult context.

Methodology for evaluation

The principal components of the national evaluation strategy were:-

- an evaluation framework which included definitions of outcomes to be measured and associated data sources;
- student questionnaires, administered at the baseline and project-end stages;
- a database for synthesis and analysis of data collected at individual student, school and project levels;
- fieldwork in all 21 ARP areas, undertaken primarily by local evaluators, but supplemented by the national team;
- reports from local evaluators, including quantitative and qualitative analysis which took specific local nuances into account..

Local *comparator groups* were identified, in order to enable valid comparisons on "value added" to be drawn at local, as well as national, levels. The comparator groups were selected to have students ideally from the same academic year, from the same (or comparable) school, and with similar characteristics (i.e. ethnicity, gender, and performance at Key Stage 3).

Data analysis was based on sub groups of students for whom complete (or near complete) data sets were held.

Biographical notes

Andrew Watson was a founding partner of SWA Consulting. Formerly a senior manager with Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Andrew has a background in research and education management (including posts in four LEAs).

Neil Stuart was the other founding partner of SWA Consulting. Also a former senior manager with Pricewaterhouse Coopers, Neil is a qualified chartered accountant who has specialised over recent years in management consultancy in the education and training sectors.

John Ferguson is a senior SWA associate with a distinguished career in teaching and local government. He is a former Director of Education and has experience as a director both of a TEC and a Careers Service company.

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Further information about this research can be obtained from Tim Shiles, Room W611, DfES, Moorfoot, Sheffield S1 4PQ.

Email: tim.shiles@dfes.gsi.gov.uk