Virtual Work Experience in Higher Education: Mapping the Environment, Evidence and Perspectives

Funded Report Prepared for:

ASET

Prepared by:

Yazmin Baron (Student Research Assistant)

Prof. Fay Short

Dr. Rebecca Jones

October 2026

PRIFYSGOL BANGOR UNIVERSITY

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge the use of Gemini AI for the creation of images. The authors provided prompts describing the intended output, which Gemini AI used to create the image. The AI-generated output was critically reviewed and edited for accuracy. The AI-generated image was used solely for illustrative purposes. The authors take full responsibility for the final image. Similarly, we acknowledge the use of Perplexity AI, Copilot, and ChatGPT. The research was conducted by the authors, and the written work was produced by the authors, but AI was used in a supportive role to ensure a professional and engaging flow to the report. The authors take full responsibility for all content. We acknowledge the use of Canva for creating the infographics. The content for these infographics was created by the authors, and they assume full responsibility for this content.

We would like to express our sincere gratitude to the Virtual Work Experience Working Group at Bangor University, the Employability and Placement Leads across the University's Schools, the Student Success Team, and Bangor University Students' Union for their invaluable support, collaboration, and contributions to this initiative.

Table of Contents

Executive Summary 6

Aims and Objectives 7

Objective 1: Literature Review of Virtual Work Experience 8

Introduction 8

Conceptualising virtual work experience 8

Approach to the structured literature review 9

Theme 1: Access, equity and inclusion 10

Theme 2: Flexibility and adaptability 13

Theme 3: Quality, authenticity and design 15

Theme 4: Communication, relationships, and belonging 18

Theme 5: Support, supervision and feedback 20

Theme 6: Professional development and employability 21

Cross-cutting limitations in the evidence base 22

Synthesis and research gap 23

Recommendations from the Literature Review 23

Objective 2: Environmental Scan for Types of Virtual Work Experience 25

Employer-Led Virtual Work Experience 25

Capital Placement 27

Practera 27

The Intern Group 27

Mindless Academy 28

Virtual Internships 28

Pagoda Projects 29

Police Support Volunteers 29

Riipen 29

Aspiring Allies 30

Extern 30

Intern Abroad HQ 31

Simulated Virtual Work Experience 32

TargetJobs – GradSim 34
SpringPod 34
The Forage 34
The Dig Data 35
Skills Builder through Work Finder 35
Bright Network 35
REVAS 36
Hybrid Virtual Work Experience 37
A&O Shearman 39
White and Case 39
Cross-Platform Comparison 40
Virtual Work Experience current usage in UK universities 43
Objective 3: Stakeholder Survey of Virtual Work Experience 60
Method 60
Staff perceptions of Virtual Work Experience 61
Staff reported benefits of Virtual Work Experience 63
Staff concerns about Virtual Work Experience 64
Encouraging staff engagement with Virtual Work Experience 65
Student perceptions of Virtual Work Experience (students who have completed VWE) 71
Student motivations for undertaking Virtual Work Experience 72
Student experience of Virtual Work Experience 75
Student reported challenges of Virtual Work Experience 77
Student suggestions for improving Virtual Work Experience 78
Student perspectives on university priorities for Virtual Work Experience 79
Student perceptions of Virtual Work Experience (students who have not completed VWE) 82
Student perceived barriers to participating in Virtual Work Experience 84
Factors encouraging participation in Virtual Work Experience 87
Preferred timing for Virtual Work Experience 89
Student perspectives on university priorities for Virtual Work Experience 90

Summary of stakeholder perspectives **94**
Objective 4: Recommendations ***96***
Conclusion ***99***
References ***100***
Appendix A: Staff Survey ***110***
Appendix B: Student Survey ***112***

Executive Summary

Virtual work experience (VWE) is an increasingly prominent, yet diverse, form of work-based learning. This report examines the current landscape of VWE provision, critically reviews the existing evidence base, and explores staff and student perspectives to identify how higher education institutions can integrate VWE effectively into their provision. The project draws on a structured review of literature published between 2016 and 2026, an environmental scan of 19 providers, and survey data from 97 staff and 63 students.

Findings from the literature and surveys highlight the potential of VWE to widen access, offer greater flexibility, facilitate career exploration, and support the development of skills and confidence. However, these benefits are not guaranteed. Barriers relating to digital access, home working environments, social isolation, limited networking opportunities, unclear expectations, and inadequate feedback can undermine student engagement and learning. Both staff and students emphasised the importance of authentic, career-relevant activities, clearly defined expectations, meaningful interaction, timely feedback, and accessible support in ensuring a positive and credible VWE experience. The environmental scan also revealed considerable variation in delivery models, costs, levels of employer engagement, and assessment practices, highlighting that VWE encompasses a range of approaches rather than a single, standardised model.

Overall, the evidence suggests that VWE is best positioned as a valuable complement to in-person work experience, while also offering an alternative pathway to work-related learning where face-to-face opportunities are unavailable or inaccessible. To maximise its effectiveness, higher education institutions should establish clear quality assurance processes, communicate the purpose and expectations of VWE, prepare students and supervisors for virtual engagement, address digital and accessibility requirements, and embed opportunities for meaningful interaction, feedback, and structured reflection. Students should also be supported to recognise, articulate, and demonstrate the skills and learning gained through their experiences. These conclusions should nevertheless be interpreted with caution. The survey findings are indicative rather than representative, given the relatively small, self-selecting student samples. Furthermore, the wider evidence base remains constrained by a reliance on self-reported outcomes, small or discipline-specific studies, and short-term evaluations. Further longitudinal and comparative research is therefore needed to establish the longer-term impact of VWE on employment outcomes, explore employer perceptions, and assess its effectiveness in promoting equitable participation.

Aims and Objectives

This study aims to develop a clearer understanding of the current landscape of virtual work experience (VWE) within higher education, examining the diversity of provision, the existing evidence base, and the experiences of key stakeholders. By bringing together evidence from research, current practice, and stakeholder perspectives, the study seeks to identify opportunities, challenges, and considerations for the effective integration of VWE into higher education provision.

The specific objectives are:

1. **To critically review and synthesise** existing research on VWE and digitally mediated work-based learning, identifying key findings, limitations, and gaps in the evidence base (literature review).
2. **To map and categorise** existing models of VWE within higher education, examining variation in their design, delivery, and implementation (environmental scan).
3. **To investigate** staff and student experiences and perceptions of VWE through survey research, exploring perceived benefits, challenges, and support needs (stakeholder survey).
4. **To integrate findings** from the literature review, environmental scan, and stakeholder surveys to develop evidence-informed recommendations for the design, delivery, and quality assurance of VWE within higher education (recommendations).

Objective 1: Literature Review of Virtual Work Experience

Introduction

Virtual work experience has become increasingly prevalent in response to changing labour markets and digital transformation, and continues to evolve (Hora et al., 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the development of virtual work experience provision (Hora et al., 2021; Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024), particularly within vocational degrees, such as nursing, where alternative arrangements were needed to enable students to complete their studies (Houghton et al., 2023). This led to an expansion of different forms of virtual work-based learning, including virtual placements, remote internships, digitally mediated employer projects, and simulated professional environments. Although these forms of provision have the potential to improve access, particularly for students with caring responsibilities, disabilities, financial constraints, or geographical limitations (Bell et al., 2022; Lee, 2025), considerable gaps remain in our understanding of virtual work experience.

The current literature review explores existing research on virtual work experience, with particular attention to pedagogical design and the ways in which different forms of provision may support students' skills development and access to work-related learning opportunities. Alongside the literature review, the report includes an environmental scan of virtual work experience platforms and providers, bringing together theoretical insights and current practice to develop a broader understanding of existing provision. The report also presents primary research investigating the perspectives and experiences of staff and students, addressing gaps in the existing evidence base. Together, these components provide insight into the practical application of virtual work experience and the factors that may contribute to its effectiveness or limit its value.

Conceptualising virtual work experience

Work-based learning is a broad term used to describe learning that occurs in a real work environment (UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Bailey et al., 2004, as cited in Lee, 2025). Work-based learning can be undertaken either in person or virtually. The COVID-19 pandemic saw a rise in remote working and the further development of virtual work-based learning (Hora et al., 2021; Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024). However, although work-based learning broadly describes experiences that develop students' knowledge and skills, there are different formats of work-based learning with important distinctions to consider.

Placements are one form of work-based learning. These are usually structured around a specific company and role, enabling students to apply theoretical knowledge through practical experience in a work environment (British Council, 2022). With the development of remote working, placements can now be completed either in person or remotely, with the latter requiring a suitable device and an internet connection. Placements typically differ between organisations

in terms of delivery, structure, and duration. However, they can generally be considered a medium- to long-term form of work-based learning.

Work experience is often regarded as a short-term, unpaid experience through which students can learn about the world of work (UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training, n.d.-a, n.d.-b). Work experience provides insight into jobs, skills, and workplace processes. Similarly to placements, work experience can be undertaken either in person or virtually.

The current report defines virtual work experience (VWE) as a short, structured online activity that enables learners to explore a job, career, or organisation by completing realistic tasks, guided activities, or simulations. These activities may be designed by employers, university staff, or specialist external providers, including commercial providers of virtual work experience programmes. Such experiences are specifically designed as learning activities, with the purpose of developing career insights, enhancing understanding of workplace practices, and building relevant skills. This is supported by Bayerlein and Jeske (2018), who suggest that work experience enables students to focus on developing their skills and understanding of a career rather than a specific organisation, as this form of work experience does not necessarily involve direct engagement with an employer.

However, it is important to recognise that there is no universally accepted definition of virtual work experience in the literature, with terms such as virtual work experience, virtual placements, virtual internships, and virtual work-based learning used in varying contexts. Although the current report focuses specifically on virtual work experience, literature relating to virtual placements and internships may provide useful insights into its design and delivery. Where evidence is drawn from studies examining these related forms of provision, the distinction is acknowledged throughout the review.

Approach to the structured literature review

A structured literature review was undertaken in August 2026 to identify and synthesise research relevant to virtual work experience and related forms of digitally mediated work-based learning. Initial searches were conducted using the Scopus database, with the terms “virtual work experience”, "virtual placement", "remote internship", "digital work-based learning", "online integrated work", and “online work-integrated learning” searched individually to capture literature across the different terminology used in this field. The search was restricted to publications from 2016 to 2026 to provide an overview of research published during the preceding decade.

Formal inclusion and exclusion criteria were not established in advance due to the lack of a universally accepted definition of virtual work experience and the considerable variation in terminology and delivery models across the literature. A flexible approach to screening was therefore adopted to ensure that potentially relevant evidence from related forms of digitally mediated work-based learning was not prematurely excluded, while allowing the relevance and transferability of individual studies to be critically considered.

Although formal inclusion and exclusion criteria were not established in advance, a structured screening process was undertaken to assess the relevance of the retrieved literature. Records identified through the database searches were documented and retained for screening. Titles and abstracts were reviewed and categorised according to their relevance to the research objectives, using three classifications: 'very relevant', 'somewhat relevant' and 'unclear'. Studies classified as very relevant were prioritised for full-text review, while those categorised as somewhat relevant or unclear were also examined in full to determine their contribution to the review. Additional publications were identified through the reference lists of retrieved papers and included where they provided relevant empirical or conceptual insights.

Given the absence of a universally accepted definition of VWE and the variation in terminology across the literature, the review adopted a deliberately broad approach to identifying relevant evidence. While the present study distinguishes VWE from virtual placements and internships, research examining these related forms of provision was included where findings offered transferable insights into the design, delivery, or experience of VWE. Attention was given to differences in the purpose, duration, structure, and level of employer engagement associated with these models, recognising that findings from extended placements or internships cannot necessarily be generalised to shorter, structured VWE activities. These distinctions are acknowledged throughout the thematic discussion.

The literature was synthesised thematically to identify recurring findings, areas of agreement and divergence, and gaps in the existing evidence base. The review focused particularly on accessibility and inclusion, flexibility, quality and authenticity, communication and belonging, supervision and feedback, and professional development and employability. As the review was not conducted as a systematic review, and no formal methodological quality appraisal was undertaken, it does not claim to provide an exhaustive account of all available evidence. Rather, it offers a structured and critically informed synthesis of relevant literature to contextualise the environmental scan and primary research undertaken as part of the wider project.

Theme 1: Access, equity and inclusion

There is an emerging body of literature examining access, equity, and inclusion in virtual work experience (Bell et al., 2022; Lee, 2025). Lee (2025) analysed data from a large-scale national survey of college students in the USA, focusing on students from groups typically underrepresented in internships due to factors such as race, ethnicity, gender, socioeconomic status, and rural geography. While previous research has suggested that virtual internships can increase accessibility (Reid et al., 2023), Lee (2025) sought to investigate whether these benefits extended to underrepresented students. Their findings suggested that virtual internships could reduce some gaps in internship participation, although this was highly dependent on recruitment pathways and students' individual circumstances. For example, Frenette (2021) found that financial and employment commitments could constrain students' internship choices, with some undertaking fewer desirable opportunities to accommodate paid employment, highlighting potential access barriers that may otherwise receive limited consideration. Lee (2025) also

discusses reduced interpersonal stressors as a potential benefit of virtual internships for underrepresented students. This may be associated with improved psychological safety, as traditional workplaces can expose individuals to implicit and explicit biases, including microaggressions (Dovidio et al., 2018) and biased task assignments (Gracia, 2009). Lee (2025) suggests that reduced distress could contribute to improved learning outcomes for marginalised students. However, virtual provision may also reduce opportunities for incidental learning due to limited social interaction (Jeske & Axtell, 2014). Students may consequently have fewer opportunities to develop transferable skills, such as collaboration and networking, which are important in professional environments (Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024). This suggests that while virtual internships offer potential benefits, some of the features that improve accessibility may also limit other aspects of the learning experience. However, these findings concern comparisons between virtual and in-person internships, which should be recognised as distinct forms of provision with potentially different purposes.

A further benefit of virtual work experience is the reduction of geographical restrictions, enabling students to participate in a wider range of opportunities, including international experiences (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Bell et al., 2022; Jeske & Axtell, 2014; Jeske & Linehan, 2020; McNeill et al., 2024; Samson et al., 2025). For example, Edgar et al. (2023) investigated virtual simulated international placements for optometry students and found that participants valued opportunities to access expert perspectives beyond their geographical location. This can broaden access to knowledge and professional experiences that might otherwise be unavailable (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018; Froese et al., 2025). Virtual provision can also reduce costs associated with travel and relocation (Bell et al., 2022). Nevertheless, geographical barriers are not eliminated. Rural areas may experience poor broadband coverage (Taylor, 2024), which can limit participation in activities requiring reliable internet access and suitable digital devices (Jeske & Axtell, 2014). Lee (2025) found that students from rural areas were more likely to participate in in-person rather than virtual work experiences, while Salje and Moyo (2023) reported that poor internet connectivity negatively affected some students undertaking virtual placements. These findings highlight the importance of considering digital infrastructure when evaluating the accessibility and equity of virtual provision.

Access to appropriate technology and the digital skills required to use it are further considerations that may influence participation in virtual work experience. Prasad et al. (2024) investigated work-integrated learning among health information management students in Australia during the COVID-19 pandemic. They found that most students (91%) had access to appropriate equipment for their placements, although some lacked the necessary resources and had not disclosed this before commencing their placements. This suggests that technological barriers may be accompanied by concerns about disclosing difficulties, potentially including feelings of embarrassment or shame. Similar challenges were identified by Brook et al. (2023), who examined virtual placements undertaken by nursing students. Some participants reported difficulties associated with multiple household members working remotely and needing access to the same device. These findings demonstrate that, although virtual provision may improve accessibility, practical barriers can remain. Beyond access to equipment, differences in digital competence may also affect participation. Prasad et al. (2024) identified variation in

technological skills among students enrolled on the same programme and suggested that practical experience with digital tools helped develop confidence in their use. This indicates that opportunities to familiarise students with relevant technologies may be beneficial before they undertake virtual work experience.

The suitability of the home working environment is another factor that may influence students' experiences. Prasad et al. (2024) found that students completed virtual placements in various locations, including bedrooms, living rooms, dining rooms, kitchens, and studies or home offices, with 55% working in shared spaces. Felstead et al. (2026) suggest that working from home can blur the boundaries between professional and personal life, particularly when work takes place in communal areas. Distractions may arise from interruptions by family members or domestic responsibilities within the working environment (Felstead et al., 2026). Similarly, Schifano et al. (2021) investigated wellbeing among individuals working from home across several European countries during the COVID-19 pandemic. Their findings suggested lower levels of wellbeing among home workers, although those living in more spacious accommodation reported more favourable outcomes, while individuals with young children were less satisfied with home working arrangements. However, this research examined remote employment rather than virtual work experience, and the findings may not be directly transferable. Employees working from home may undertake longer and more demanding working days than students participating in short-term virtual work experience. Khin et al. (2021) also suggest that prolonged screen use may be associated with psychological distress, which could further affect wellbeing, particularly during periods of uncertainty such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Nevertheless, the flexibility and adaptability associated with virtual work experience may result in different experiences of home working, depending on the duration of activities and individual household circumstances.

Disability is also an important consideration when examining access to traditional work experience, although it has received relatively limited attention in the virtual work experience literature (Bell et al., 2022). Bayerlein and Jeske (2018) note that virtual formats can incorporate accessibility features, such as voice control and visual enhancement, while Kraft et al. (2019) suggest that accessible technologies can facilitate participation that may be difficult in some traditional settings. However, these opportunities should not be assumed to guarantee inclusion. Bell et al. (2022), in their qualitative research synthesis, found that disability and physical and mental health were rarely examined within the online work-integrated learning evidence base. Virtual delivery may remove travel or physical accessibility barriers for some students while creating or intensifying others, including inaccessible platforms, prolonged screen use, sensory demands, fatigue, and the need for suitable equipment or a quiet workspace. Institutions should therefore consider individual accessibility requirements and ensure that platforms, materials, communication channels, and reasonable adjustments are accessible by design.

Although virtual work experience can reduce costs associated with travel (Bell et al., 2022; Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024), other financial barriers may remain. Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) highlight that working from home can increase household expenditure on heating, electricity, IT equipment, and high-speed internet. Francis-Devine and Booth (2026) report that 66% of adults in the UK experienced increased energy bills in July 2026, although this finding

does not distinguish between individuals working from home and those working elsewhere. Furthermore, given the relatively short duration of virtual work experience, these additional costs may be less significant than those associated with longer periods of remote working. Nevertheless, students may experience other financial pressures that influence their participation. The Student Academic Experience Survey (Neves et al., 2025) reports that 68% of undergraduate students undertake paid employment during term time, representing a 12% increase from 2024. Consequently, the unpaid nature of work experience may present difficulties for students who would need to reduce their paid working hours to participate. Financial pressures may also encourage students to prioritise more flexible opportunities, even where these offer fewer developmental benefits (Frenette, 2021). These considerations highlight the importance of examining flexibility alongside accessibility when evaluating virtual work experience.

Theme 2: Flexibility and adaptability

Throughout the literature, flexibility is identified as a key benefit of virtual work experience (Bell et al., 2022; Edgar et al., 2023; Lee, 2025; Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024; Samson et al., 2025). Given the prevalence of students undertaking paid employment alongside their higher education studies, Lee (2025) suggests that virtual placements can enable students who might otherwise be unable to participate due to caring responsibilities, employment, or other commitments to access work-based learning opportunities. Students are often allocated a timeframe within which to complete virtual work experience, such as a particular semester of their degree, without necessarily being assigned specific working hours. This flexibility allows students to undertake activities around their existing commitments.

Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) investigated electronic work-based learning (eWBL) from the perspectives of higher education institutions and employers, identifying factors that influence the quality of virtual provision, including flexibility. The study suggests that remote working can improve learner productivity by enabling individuals to choose the times of day when they work most effectively and, to some extent, their preferred working environment. This is further supported by Prasad et al. (2024), who explored the experiences of health information management students undertaking virtual placements, alongside the perspectives of their supervisors. When examining flexibility and autonomy, the researchers found that half of the students had not been provided with a work schedule by their supervisor, illustrating the flexible and autonomous nature of these placements. Previous research has suggested that virtual placements can support the development of time management skills and self-directed learning (Donnelly, 2003). However, providing students with example schedules may be beneficial, particularly as only 4.2% received a written work schedule following a meeting with their supervisor. Prasad et al. (2024) found that students experienced difficulties and poorer performance when they lacked clear goals and direction. Similarly, Werner and Jeske (2021) suggest that having a schedule can help students remain focused and achieve their goals. Overall, Prasad et al. (2024) found that, although students experienced challenges associated with the autonomy of virtual placements, they valued the flexibility provided. It is important to note,

however, that students had mentors with whom they communicated regularly via email, which may have helped them remain focused and clarify expectations when necessary. These findings suggest that the flexibility and autonomy associated with virtual placements can support the development of transferable skills, including time management and digital communication, provided that appropriate guidance and support are available.

Nevertheless, the literature suggests that students may benefit from having already developed certain skills before undertaking virtual placements (Franks & Oliver, 2012; Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024). Franks and Oliver (2012) identify teamwork, online communication, and time management as particularly important skills for successful participation. This is consistent with the findings of Prasad et al. (2024) and suggests that preparatory training, particularly in the use of relevant digital platforms, may help students engage more effectively with virtual work experience and develop the intended skills. Furthermore, previous research indicates that students may initially focus on the benefits of flexibility, such as being able to organise activities around their existing schedules, while subsequently experiencing difficulties managing this autonomy in practice (Leath, 2009, as cited in Bell et al., 2022).

Virtual work experience may also provide a useful means of preparing students for in-person placements in vocational disciplines. For example, Brook et al. (2023) conducted a pilot study involving mental health nursing students who completed virtual simulations related to their professional roles. These experiences enabled students to develop confidence, strengthen their theoretical knowledge, and ask questions of supervisors in ways that may not always be possible during traditional placements. This may support the development of professional competencies and create additional opportunities for learning. However, the pilot study required students to undertake 7.5 hours of activity each weekday, from Monday to Friday. The authors identified this as a potential limitation due to the risk of information overload, which may be associated with more passive forms of learning. These findings highlight the potential value of flexibility in allowing students sufficient time to engage meaningfully with learning materials and reflect on their experiences.

A further limitation associated with the flexibility of virtual work experience concerns differences in communication schedules and response times. This is particularly relevant to communication with supervisors (Pretti et al., 2020), with Prasad et al. (2024) reporting that a response within three days was considered timely. Although flexible arrangements enable students to undertake activities at convenient times, they may also have implications for the wellbeing of both students and supervisors. Mendonça et al. (2022) investigated remote working and communication practices during the COVID-19 pandemic, identifying associations between these arrangements and increased stress and poorer mental health. Although this research examined remote employment rather than virtual work experience specifically, it raises questions about the potential pressures associated with flexible communication arrangements, particularly in employer-led experiences. Furthermore, international virtual opportunities may involve differences in time zones that affect communication and response times (Jeske & Axtell, 2014). Delayed responses can create difficulties when students are uncertain about the tasks, they are expected to complete (Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024; Pretti et al., 2020). These findings highlight the importance of clearly defined goals, expectations, and communication

arrangements in supporting students to benefit from flexibility while minimising uncertainty and potential stress.

Theme 3: Quality, authenticity and design

While the literature identifies key benefits and limitations of virtual work experience, differences in outcomes may be partly attributable to the design of the experience. High-quality virtual work experience is characterised by clear aims and objectives, meaningful tasks aligned with students' career goals, feedback from mentors, opportunities for skills development, and networking opportunities (Lee, 2025).

Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) proposed a framework for trainers in companies and higher education institutions to consider when designing and delivering virtual work-based learning. The framework aims to support students in developing skills relevant to the workplace, including interpersonal communication, teamwork, critical thinking, self-efficacy, and self-directed learning. Drawing on 24 international case studies, Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) identified five phases associated with high-quality virtual provision: design, preparation, onboarding, delivery, and assessment.

The first phase, design, concerns ensuring that the experience appropriately reflects the intended professional role. Activities should represent the work that students are seeking to explore or understand. This is supported by Edgar et al. (2023), who investigated virtual simulated experiences involving optometry students. Participants valued opportunities to engage in meaningful learning through realistic tasks, which also encouraged their participation. Although this study examined a virtual simulation, its findings suggest that authentic activities can provide students with valuable insights into professional practice. This reinforces the importance of ensuring that virtual work experience is relevant and authentic to students' intended career pathways.

Preparation is the second phase of the framework proposed by Perusso and Wagenaar (2024). This involves considering students' readiness to undertake virtual work experience and establishing appropriate online procedures. Student readiness includes capabilities such as time management and self-efficacy. Although these skills can be developed through virtual experiences, the literature suggests that students may benefit from developing them before commencing their activities (Franks & Oliver, 2012; Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024). This is particularly important given the physical separation between students and supervisors in virtual settings. Prasad et al. (2024) found that supervisors expressed concerns about students failing to ask clarifying questions at the beginning of their internships. Such difficulties may be compounded by delayed communication and response times, potentially affecting students' ability to complete their work. These findings support the importance of ensuring that students possess appropriate foundational skills before undertaking virtual work experience. However, virtual experiences also provide opportunities to develop meta-competence (Raelin, 2000), including through critical thinking, questioning, and independent problem-solving. It is therefore

important to establish an appropriate baseline of skills while allowing students opportunities to develop these capabilities throughout their experiences.

A further aspect of preparation concerns the establishment of appropriate online procedures and technological readiness. Although virtual work experience can support skills development, students require sufficient digital literacy to participate effectively and avoid unnecessary difficulties (Jeske & Axtell, 2014). Some studies highlight challenges associated with students' initial technological capabilities, while also recognising that developing these skills may enhance employability in an increasingly hybrid working environment (Bell et al., 2022; Prasad et al., 2024). Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) propose the use of self-assessments before commencing virtual experiences to establish students' readiness and availability. While this may be beneficial, Prasad et al. (2024) found that some students who lacked appropriate technological equipment did not disclose these difficulties. This suggests that barriers to participation may extend beyond access to equipment and could include concerns about disclosing difficulties or feelings of embarrassment. Such considerations warrant attention to ensure that students are appropriately prepared and supported to benefit from virtual work experience.

Onboarding represents the third phase of Perusso and Wagenaar's (2024) framework. This involves an initial period, potentially lasting one or several days, during which students are introduced to the aims of the experience, colleagues and stakeholders, expected workloads, IT systems, and other practical arrangements. It is important to recognise that Perusso and Wagenaar's (2024) framework primarily concerns virtual placements and internships, whereas the current report focuses specifically on virtual work experience. Consequently, the relevance of these recommendations should be considered in relation to the shorter, structured activities encompassed by the definition adopted in this study.

A key consideration throughout the literature, which supports the inclusion of onboarding within Perusso and Wagenaar's (2024) framework, is the importance of clearly communicating the aims of the experience. Lee (2025) similarly suggests that high-quality virtual work experience should establish clear expectations and identify the skills that students are expected to develop. Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) also emphasise the importance of outlining feedback mechanisms. Providing this information at the beginning of an experience helps students understand the activities they will undertake and how these contribute to their learning and skills development. This is consistent with the emphasis on meaningful encounters and appropriate learning outcomes within the Gatsby Benchmark Framework (2024), particularly Benchmarks 6 and 7, which concern encounters with further and higher education. Establishing clear learning outcomes can help students understand the purpose of their virtual work experience and how it relates to their future career development. Similarly, outlining workloads and assessment arrangements at the outset enables students to understand the structure and expectations of their experience.

However, opportunities to meet colleagues and stakeholders may differ considerably between forms of virtual work experience. Students undertaking simulated experiences may have little or no direct contact with employers, stakeholders, or peers, while opportunities for

interaction may also vary between employer-led programmes, platforms, and providers. These differences should be communicated during onboarding to ensure that students have a clear understanding of what their experience will involve. Additionally, providing initial guidance on the relevant technologies can help students develop the foundational understanding needed to participate effectively. This may be more challenging in self-directed simulated experiences where opportunities for direct support are limited.

Delivery is the fourth phase identified by Perusso and Wagenaar (2024). This phase acknowledges the potential benefits of virtual provision, including reduced commuting and greater flexibility, while identifying three critical considerations: task briefing, task monitoring, and networking and socialisation. In the context of virtual placements, Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) found that weekly meetings to discuss tasks, deadlines, background information, and opportunities to ask questions were beneficial. However, such arrangements may not be feasible across all forms of virtual work experience, particularly self-directed simulations. This reinforces the importance of providing clear task instructions and expectations, regardless of the delivery model. Similar challenges arise in relation to task monitoring, networking, and socialisation. The remote nature of virtual provision can make it more difficult to monitor progress and facilitate meaningful interaction. For employer-led experiences, Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) suggest that shared platforms displaying colleagues' availability may support communication and opportunities for social interaction. Nevertheless, these features may not be available in all forms of virtual work experience, potentially limiting student engagement. The design and delivery of opportunities for interaction therefore require careful consideration and are explored further in subsequent themes.

The final phase of Perusso and Wagenaar's (2024) framework concerns assessment, which may involve self-assessment and reflection. These activities provide students with opportunities to consider their experiences and identify the knowledge and skills they have developed. The importance of reflection is supported by Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, which comprises four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation. Within virtual work experience, concrete experience may involve completing a task that reflects an aspect of professional practice. Reflective observation enables students to consider and interpret this experience, while abstract conceptualisation involves connecting their existing theoretical knowledge with the practical insights gained. Active experimentation then allows students to apply their developing understanding to new situations, continuing the learning cycle. This framework illustrates how virtual work experience can support learning beyond the completion of individual tasks by encouraging students to reflect, develop understanding, and apply new knowledge and skills. Salje and Moyo (2023) similarly suggest that opportunities to apply learning and subsequently reflect on experiences can contribute to more meaningful learning.

Taken together, the research suggests that effective virtual work experience requires alignment between authentic tasks, intended learning outcomes, learner preparation, appropriate technology, structured support, and opportunities for reflection. Authenticity does not necessarily depend on reproducing a physical workplace in a virtual environment, but rather on enabling students to undertake meaningful activities and understand their relevance to a

particular role or profession. However, these design considerations also highlight a potential limitation: where students work predominantly independently, receive limited feedback, or have few opportunities to interact with employers and peers, the benefits of flexibility may be accompanied by reduced opportunities for communication, belonging, and incidental workplace learning.

This raises an important concern regarding the role of communication and social interaction in virtual work experience. Students completing activities from home (Brook et al., 2023) may experience fewer opportunities for interaction (Bell et al., 2022), which some researchers suggest can reduce the effectiveness of virtual experiences (Irwin et al., 2021; Jeske & Axtell, 2014). These issues, including peer interaction, networking, and social isolation, are considered in the following theme.

Theme 4: Communication, relationships, and belonging

Virtual work experience has been identified as a potentially isolating experience (Pretti et al., 2020). Several studies have explored how virtual work experience and associated platforms can encourage peer interaction and networking. For example, Fletcher (2023) drew on the work of Wenger et al. (2002), who conceptualised learning as a collaborative process involving three features: domain (where students are brought together by a shared learning need), community (where relationships develop through this shared need), and practice (where learners develop knowledge and understanding through communicating their experiences).

Fletcher (2023) conducted a study involving 19 BSc Sports Science students undertaking four-week placements across different organisations. Students were provided with access to a shared virtual learning environment in which they could communicate and reflect on their experiences through weekly discussion topics. Engagement with the virtual learning environment was monitored, revealing that most activity occurred within the discussion forum (68% of overall activity), followed by the announcements and communication areas (16% each). However, engagement was predominantly passive, with a ratio of 13 accesses for every post. Focus group findings indicated that students had hoped to gain social and emotional support through the platform, although this expectation was not necessarily fulfilled. Nevertheless, students reported that the virtual learning environment encouraged self-reflection and helped them recognise what they were gaining from their work experience. Some students also suggested that greater tutor presence within discussions could encourage more active participation.

The findings of Fletcher (2023) suggest that shared virtual learning environments may provide a useful mechanism for supporting reflection and peer interaction during work-based learning. Although the study did not specify whether students undertook in-person or virtual placements, it offers relevant insights into how discussion forums might be incorporated into virtual work experience. Bringing together students undertaking different experiences could create additional opportunities for networking, shared reflection, and the development of a sense of belonging, potentially reducing feelings of isolation. However, the predominantly passive

engagement observed in the study suggests that these benefits cannot be assumed and may depend on the level of facilitation and participation.

Rioga et al. (2026) similarly highlighted that virtual work experience can leave students feeling disconnected and proposed a group-based approach described as a peer-enhanced e-placement. The study involved nursing students and drew on Vygotsky's (1978) social constructivist theory, which emphasises the role of social interaction in learning. The approach combined simulated scenarios reflecting situations encountered in mental health nursing with opportunities for peer learning and reflection. This was intended to provide a safe and supportive environment in which students could discuss their experiences and develop their understanding collaboratively.

The findings indicated that students were initially sceptical about the virtual placement and experienced some structural difficulties associated with its remote delivery. These challenges were identified as important limitations of the programme. However, as students became more familiar with the placement, their perceptions became more positive, with many recognising benefits associated with this mode of learning. Students also reported improvements in their communication skills, which may have been supported by opportunities for peer interaction. Collaborative discussions may also have contributed to the development of problem-solving skills by enabling students to consider different perspectives and reflect on their learning. Although these findings suggest that peer learning can support skills development, the study provided limited detail about how students interacted with one another or their specific perceptions of the peer-learning component, as its primary focus was on students' experiences of the virtual placement more broadly.

A frequently identified limitation of reduced social interaction in virtual work experience is the potential loss of incidental learning opportunities (Bayerlein & Jeske, 2018). Incidental learning often occurs through informal conversations with colleagues and observations of workplace practices (Crisp, 2018). Incorporating mechanisms such as discussion forums or shared virtual platforms may therefore provide additional opportunities for communication, reflection, and learning. This is consistent with Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle, particularly the stage of reflective observation, through which learners consider and interpret their experiences. Discussions with peers may help students develop their understanding of workplace activities, connect experiences with existing knowledge, and apply these insights to subsequent tasks.

Taken together, the findings suggest that virtual platforms and structured opportunities for group discussion, such as those examined by Fletcher (2023) and Rioga et al. (2026), may provide valuable opportunities for peer interaction, reflection, and collaborative learning within virtual work experience. However, the extent to which these approaches support meaningful relationships and reduce isolation is likely to depend on how they are designed, facilitated, and used by students.

Theme 5: Support, supervision and feedback

Feedback connects participation to learning by helping students understand the quality of their work, identify areas for development, and maintain momentum. It is also a recurring concern in virtual provision, as distance and asynchronous communication can delay clarification. In Prasad et al.'s (2024) study, 86.4% of health information management students reported receiving feedback within three working days. However, what constitutes timely feedback will depend on the urgency and complexity of the task. Bell et al. (2022), Morgan et al. (2024), and Kakkar et al. (2024) collectively suggest that regular communication, meaningful feedback, and accessible support are associated with stronger student engagement. This places the supervisor-student relationship at the centre of effective employer-led virtual work experience (Jackson, 2015; Jeske & Axtell, 2014; Lee, 2025). Prasad et al. (2024) found that supervisors and students often communicated daily, with both students and supervisors initiating contact.

Although supervision is recognised as a key element of successful virtual work experience, several challenges are associated with its delivery. Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) suggest that students can struggle with a lack of direct support. However, supervisors may also experience difficulties, particularly when they are unaware of the tasks that students are undertaking. The remote nature of virtual provision creates additional challenges, as effective supervision depends on the availability of both students and supervisors and their ability to communicate. Pretti et al. (2020) suggest that these difficulties can affect students' productivity, as delays in receiving responses to clarifying questions may hinder their progress and motivation. It is important to note that this study examined virtual internships rather than virtual work experience. While virtual internships typically involve students undertaking work for an organisation, virtual work experience focuses more specifically on career exploration and skills development. Nevertheless, the findings offer relevant insights, as supervisors may struggle to provide appropriate feedback when they have limited awareness of students' activities and progress.

The importance of supervision is also reflected in the support students receive throughout their virtual work experience. As discussed previously, students may experience feelings of isolation due to the remote nature of their activities. Kakkar et al. (2024) suggest that effective support can reduce isolation and improve motivation. This may partly reflect the role of discussions with supervisors in helping students recognise their competencies and develop confidence in their ability to complete tasks. Such interactions can also provide greater insight into professional roles and workplace practices, creating additional opportunities for knowledge and skills development.

Bell et al. (2022) suggest that students undertaking virtual work experience may require support in developing online communication skills, which supervisors can help facilitate. Regular communication with supervisors provides opportunities for students to become more familiar with professional online interactions. It also enables supervisors to provide feedback on students' strengths and areas for development in relation to their digital communication skills.

Furthermore, Bell et al. (2022) highlight the responsibility of supervisors to provide opportunities for both formal and informal learning. Although informal learning may be more

difficult to facilitate in virtual work experience, supervisors can support this through regular conversations and opportunities for social interaction. Prasad et al. (2024) suggest that supervisors can organise remote social activities to provide students with opportunities to develop their social skills while undertaking virtual work experience.

Jeske and Linehan (2020) analysed the experiences of 158 virtual interns and found that students who received mentoring reported greater development in communication, collaboration, and strategic problem-solving than those who did not receive mentoring. Although these findings were based on self-reported development rather than objective assessments of competence, they suggest that supervision can influence both engagement and perceived skills development. Effective support therefore requires more than supervisor availability. Students need clear points of contact, agreed communication channels, regular check-ins, timely and task-specific feedback, and opportunities for both formal and informal interaction. These arrangements can also help students recognise and articulate their professional development, which is considered in the following theme.

Theme 6: Professional development and employability

VWE is commonly presented as an opportunity to develop professional knowledge, employability, and transferable skills. Across the literature, reported outcomes include digital competence, online communication, teamwork, self-management, adaptability, confidence, career awareness, and, in professional courses, readiness for subsequent practice. However, these outcomes should be interpreted cautiously, as most studies capture learners' perceptions shortly after completing an experience. Such findings do not necessarily demonstrate objectively assessed competence or longer-term employment benefits.

Prasad et al. (2024) reported that virtual placements enabled health information management students to practise using digital tools and engaging in remote professional communication, while Perusso and Wagenaar (2024) identified proactivity, time management, and self-directed learning as capabilities that virtual formats may help develop. Collaborative approaches, such as the peer-enhanced model discussed by Rioga et al. (2026), may also create opportunities to practise communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. However, skills development depends on task design and opportunities for interaction. Activities conducted primarily through email or undertaken independently may not provide the same opportunities to observe colleagues, collaborate in real time, or develop professional networks. Claims regarding transferable skills should therefore specify which skills were practised, how their development was evidenced, and whether outcomes were formally assessed or self-reported.

Autonomy can support the development of self-management and adaptability, as students are required to organise tasks, manage their time, and seek clarification remotely (Perusso & Wagenaar, 2024). However, Edgar et al. (2023) and Prasad et al. (2024) also demonstrate that learners may experience difficulties when autonomy is not accompanied by clear goals and accessible support. Self-direction can therefore be considered both a potential outcome and a prerequisite for effective participation. Institutions should provide appropriate guidance and

support at the beginning of an experience, gradually reducing this as learners develop confidence and independence, rather than assuming all students possess the same initial capacity for remote working.

Several studies report increased student confidence, particularly in profession-specific simulations involving optometry, mental health nursing, and digital clinical education (Brook et al., 2023; Edgar et al., 2023; Houghton et al., 2023). Simulations can provide a supported environment in which students practise applying their knowledge without presenting risks to clients or patients. Houghton et al. (2023) found that participants commonly perceived digital activities as useful preparation for subsequent in-person experiences. This supports a complementary approach in which VWE provides opportunities for preparation, career exploration, and skills development before or alongside direct workplace experience. Nevertheless, increased confidence remains a perceived outcome and should not be equated with demonstrated competence, career progression, or employment. Although evidence concerning professional identity development is promising, it remains largely discipline specific. Furthermore, the literature reviewed provides limited longitudinal evidence linking VWE to employment outcomes, including job attainment, retention, salary, or sustained career benefits.

Cross-cutting limitations in the evidence base

The evidence base remains emerging and uneven. Many studies draw on small, self-selecting, or discipline-specific samples, with nursing and other health professions particularly prominent. Several studies are pilot evaluations developed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which limits the extent to which their findings can be generalised to established post-pandemic provision, other disciplines, or shorter forms of VWE. The substantial reliance on post-experience surveys and qualitative reflections also means that reported confidence, satisfaction, and perceived skills development are more commonly examined than independently assessed performance.

Longitudinal evidence remains limited, making it unclear whether short-term satisfaction or perceived readiness translates into improved employment outcomes, career progression, or sustained professional identity development. Employer and supervisor perspectives are less extensively explored than those of students, while direct comparisons with in-person provision are complicated by differences in programme purpose, task type, duration, learner characteristics, and discipline. Inconsistent terminology, including virtual internships, remote placements, online work-integrated learning, and simulations, further complicates comparisons between studies and risks treating distinct forms of provision as equivalent.

Claims relating to equity also require caution. Although the literature identifies potential benefits associated with geographical accessibility, reduced travel requirements, flexibility, and some accessibility needs, less attention has been given to disability, health, race, gender, caring responsibilities, paid employment, digital poverty, and the suitability of the home learning environment (Bell et al., 2022; Lee, 2025). Evidence concerning institutional implementation, quality assurance, cost-effectiveness, and the sustainability of virtual platforms also remains limited. These gaps suggest that, while the existing literature can identify promising principles

for the design and delivery of VWE, it cannot establish that VWE is uniformly accessible, equivalent to in-person work experience, or causally associated with improved employment outcomes.

Synthesis and research gap

The literature suggests that VWE can expand opportunities and support career exploration, digital capability, and confidence when it is intentionally designed. However, its effectiveness is conditional rather than inherent. Meaningful tasks, clear learning objectives, appropriate preparation, interaction, supervision, feedback, and reflection all influence whether flexibility becomes a learning benefit or a source of isolation and uncertainty. The evidence therefore supports viewing virtual and in-person provision as related but distinct approaches that may serve different learners and educational purposes.

Important gaps remain in understanding the range of VWE models currently available, how higher education institutions select and quality-assure these experiences, how staff and students perceive their value, and whether reported benefits translate into longer-term employment outcomes. The present project addresses some of these gaps by mapping current employer-led, simulated, and hybrid models; providing a structured synthesis of the existing evidence; gathering staff and student perspectives, including those of students with and without previous VWE experience; and integrating these findings to develop practical recommendations. Although the project does not assess equivalence between virtual and in-person provision or evaluate longer-term employment outcomes, it identifies priorities for the design, delivery, and implementation of VWE within higher education, alongside areas requiring further research and evaluation.

Recommendations from the Literature Review

The literature indicates that providers and higher education institutions should:

- Define the purpose, intended learning outcomes, duration, workload, assessment arrangements, and communication expectations before participation.
- Use realistic, career-relevant tasks that have clear educational value and, where appropriate, produce outputs learners can discuss or use to demonstrate their learning.
- Identify and address barriers relating to digital access, accessibility, remote-working readiness, and the suitability of learners' working environments, recognising that flexibility does not automatically ensure equitable participation.
- Provide structured onboarding, including platform orientation, expectations, points of contact, and an introduction to the relevant organisational or professional context, as appropriate to the delivery model.
- Provide appropriate opportunities for guidance or supervision, timely task-specific feedback, and accessible communication channels, tailored to the structure and duration of the experience.

- Create purposeful opportunities for peer interaction, employer engagement, and networking, where feasible, to support learning and belonging and help address the limitations of incidental workplace learning in virtual environments.
- Include guided reflection and support students to identify, articulate, and demonstrate their skills, outputs, and learning to future employers.
- Use VWE as a complement to in-person work experience, or as a targeted alternative where it meets the intended learning objectives, rather than treating it as an automatic substitute for in-person experience.
- Evaluate access, participation, completion, learner experiences, assessed learning outcomes, and longer-term outcomes, disaggregating findings where possible by student characteristics and type of VWE provision.

These principles inform the interpretation of the environment scan and primary survey findings later in the report.

Objective 2: Environmental Scan for Types of Virtual Work Experience

The environmental scan identified 19 providers offering a range of virtual work experience (VWE) opportunities. However, the research, conducted between May and August 2026, also highlighted the changing nature of this provision. During this period, at least one provider, GVI, entered liquidation, affecting the availability of its VWE opportunities. GVI had operated for nearly three decades, offering opportunities in wildlife conservation and community development through both traditional and virtual work experience. In addition, another platform, Skills Builder through Work Finder, was undergoing rebranding, meaning that information collected earlier in the research period may no longer accurately reflect its provision. These developments highlight the evolving nature of the VWE landscape and the potential for provider information to become outdated. Where possible, steps have therefore been taken to ensure that the report reflects the most current information available. **All information relating to platforms is accurate as of August 2026**.

The environmental scan also revealed considerable variation in the nature and structure of the VWE opportunities available. Building on the definition of VWE adopted for this project, the report distinguishes between two main types of provision. This classification is based primarily on the nature of the tasks undertaken by learners and the extent of their direct interaction with the employer or organisation, particularly in relation to feedback. Some opportunities combine characteristics of both types. For example, an employer may develop the VWE activities without having any direct contact with learners during their participation. For the purposes of this report, these opportunities are classified as hybrid VWE.

Employer-Led Virtual Work Experience

Employer-led virtual work experience refers to opportunities in which learners have direct interaction with an employer or organisation, for example, through supervision, communication, or feedback. This may involve learners completing tasks and submitting their work to the employer for review, providing opportunities to receive feedback on their performance. Of the VWE models identified, employer-led provision may most closely resemble traditional in-person work experience, as it offers opportunities for direct communication with employers, supervisors, and colleagues. However, the nature and extent of this interaction can vary considerably between platforms and experiences. The environmental scan also identified hybrid forms of VWE that combine elements of employer-led and other forms of provision. These are considered separately within this report. As there is no standardised approach to the design or delivery of VWE, the characteristics of individual experiences may differ between providers. Table 1 presents the employer-led VWE platforms identified through the environmental scan. Ticks (✓) indicate ‘yes’, crosses (✗) indicate ‘no’, and question marks (?) indicate that information was either unavailable or unclear. The building symbol (🏢) indicates that the associated costs are borne by the university.

Table 1.

Current employer-led virtual work experience platforms and features.



Capital Placement

https://capital-placement.com/

Capital Placement is a platform that connects students with virtual work experiences, although they phrase them as virtual internships.

Target audience/ eligibility: This platform works with students and recent graduates on an individual basis, rather than through an institution.

Features: They have the option to choose between full-time or part-time virtual work experiences through an array of global companies.

Cost: The fees that an individual has include a £50 application fee, £750 programme deposit and £750 remaining fees. However, they state that if an individual does not get a placement in 8 weeks, they will get their money back.

Entry criteria: The student must have an interview to secure a placement.

Additional note: This platform also provides in-person internships.

Practera

https://practera.com/

Practera is a platform that is used by an array of people to provide learners with experiential learning opportunities, defined as real-world tasks designed to develop employability skills. This therefore matches our definition of virtual work experience.

Target audience/ eligibility: This platform works primarily with higher education institutions, governments and employers rather than individual students. Educators can access the platform to provide students with the opportunity to enhance their employability skills and integrate it into the curriculum.

Features: Practera offers a wide range of experience categories for higher education, including team projects, internships, mentoring, skills credentialing, work simulations, professional development and experiential learning tools. Institutions can create unique experiential learning experiences or choose from the existing programmes.

Cost: Educators can trial the platform for free. No explicit pricing is published for universities or other institutional users.

The Intern Group

https://theinterngroup.com/

The Intern Group is a platform that enables students and graduates to find and access virtual work experience of varying lengths with a diverse range of global companies.

Target audience/ eligibility: This platform is more specific to individual students and graduates compared to institutions.

Features: They offer virtual work experience for over 20 industries. The internship programmes include guaranteed remote internship, career advancement training, global community and network, professional development materials, CV improvement tool, 24/7 emergency support, exclusive workshop series, remote social events, alumni success coaching and dedicated 1-1 supervisor. Whilst the experiences are flexible, there are varying start dates and lengths of time, which therefore incur different prices.

Cost: There are varying costs depending on the time of year in which students partake in the experiences. August to mid-May programmes of all time lengths (4 weeks, 6 weeks, 8 weeks, 10 weeks, 12 weeks, 16 weeks, 20 weeks, 24 weeks) cost £1,476 to partake. Late May to July programmes of all time lengths (4 weeks, 6 weeks, 8 weeks, 10 weeks, 12 weeks, 16 weeks, 20 weeks, 24 weeks) cost £1,847 to partake.

Entry criteria: Students must apply and attend an interview to secure a placement.

Additional note: This platform also provides in-person internships.

Mindless Academy

https://mindlessacademy.com/

Mindless Academy is a platform which seeks to develop students' mindset, skills and experience, including future ready skills and AI skills. This encourages personal development as well as skills development. The personal skills which Mindless Academy seek to improve include self-awareness, confidence, resilience and emotional intelligence.

Target audience/ eligibility: Mindless Academy work with universities, employers and regional and local authorities.

Features: Their 10 programmes include data analytics, digital marketing, content writing, social media, E-commerce, influencer marketing, business leadership, startups, web3 and generative AI. There are three varying programmes that universities can offer with Mindless Academy: *curriculum integration* (40-120 hours engagement per student), *co-curricular delivery* (20-60 hours engagement per student), and *extra-curricular access* (self-paced, 10-40 hours engagement per student).

Cost: They mention being more cost effective than traditional work placements and mention a saving of up to 70%. However, no explicit pricing is published for universities or other institutional users.

Virtual Internships

https://www.virtualinternships.com/

Virtual Internships offer internship opportunities that span globally.

Target audience: This platform is used by educators, companies and interns to provide students and interns with real work experiences with companies in the learners' chosen career field.

Features: This platform offers flexible virtual work experiences based on the length of time that the learners would like to participate for.

Cost: If an individual applies for a virtual internship through this platform without a university, they will encounter a fee. However, no explicit pricing is published.

Pagoda Projects

https://pagodaprojects.com/

Pagoda Projects is a platform that helps to provide learners with placements, either as part of the university courses, summer placements or extra-curricular activities.

Target audience: Pagoda Projects work with students, universities and companies around the world.

Features: This platform offers four different options: Sustainable Global Experience (SGE), Industry Experience (IE), Global Experience (GE) and Internship. However, it was extremely difficult to find much information about the different options.

Cost: Pagoda Projects partner with universities to ensure that the students do not incur a fee for using the projects, therefore there is a fee to the institution. There is also mention of government funding on their website. However, no explicit pricing is published.

Additional note: This platform also provides in-person internships.

Police Support Volunteers

https://www.police.uk/pu/careers-and-volunteering/

Police Support Volunteers are citizens who wish to volunteer through their local area.

Target audience: This is a valuable opportunity to those who desire to pursue a career in policing, as the tasks can often complement the roles of police officers and police staff.

Features: The role of the volunteer varies but can include front counter services and administration to following up on crime reports. This may vary depending on locations, so if there is an interest, it is important to follow up with the local services.

Eligibility: A background check is required for this role.

Cost: There is no known cost as this is a voluntary position.

Riipen

https://www.riipen.com/work-based-learning-programs

Riipen is a global platform that connects learners, universities and companies to collaborate on real industry projects, developing employability skills whilst also creating meaningful work for employers.

Target audience: This platform works with universities, learners and companies globally. Access is arranged through educational institutions rather than individual students.

Features: Universities can use templates to build their own experience task or connect with employers to provide students with a project that has been created by the employer themselves. Higher education institutions can access experience management tools, feedback and assessment tools, and easy-to-use report features through the platform. There are a multitude of projects with many varying on availability.

Cost: Riipen do not publish any fees for universities, but it may be possible to assume that the institution would incur a fee from the use of the platform following a demo.

Aspiring Allies

https://aspiringallies.co.uk/virtual-work-based-learning-programme/

Aspiring Allies run virtual work experiences that guide participants to learn about the core aspects of working as an Allied Health Professional.

Target audience: This platform can be accessed by individual students or by schools based in the Northeast of England and Yorkshire. It is aimed at those interested in pursuing a career as an Allied Health Professional prior to applying to university or an apprenticeship, as it is mentioned that this experience can be used to support these applications.

Features: The programme consists of 6 modules and roughly equates to 8 hours of work. Learners complete most of the work self-paced but also participate in 2x 1-hour live sessions with an Allied Health Professional.

Cost: There is no published price associated with this platform.

Extern

https://www.extern.com/externships

Extern is a platform that connects learners to virtual work experience platforms.

Features: There are global companies that learners can work with through this platform. They apply to the virtual work experiences that they find, some of which can be paid experiences. Extern provides the learner with the opportunity to complete multiple virtual work experiences to ensure that they can build their competitive skills. This allows for further development in the job market.

Eligibility: There is an application and interview process for these experiences.

Additional note: This is an employer-led virtual work experience as they have direct contact with the companies and often have meetings. Whilst it remains a flexible experience, it is important to note that those on these experiences do have to attend the meetings and meet potential deadlines.

Cost: There is no published price associated with this platform.

Intern Abroad HQ

https://www.internhq.com/

Intern Abroad HQ offer different pathways and opportunities to develop employment skills.

Target audience: This platform is accessed by university students, high school students, those on gap years and having a career change.

Features: Their remote internships include accounting and finance, agriculture, architecture, business administration & start-ups, computer science & information technology, education & youth development, engineering, environmental & marine sciences, law & human rights support, marketing & communications, psychology & social work and sport & exercise science remote internships. These are offered from a variety of countries, but they are designed as remote internships. Intern Abroad HQ state that in their packages, learners can access support before, during and after the internship, sourcing and securing the internship, personalisation of the internship plan, orientation and coaching with a dedicated supervisor, documented portfolio of the experiential learnings, academic credit facilitation, international reference letter and a certificate of internship completion.

Cost: The cost is associated with the duration of the remote internship; however, this remains flexible between full time or part time. Please keep in mind the cost is provided in USD. 100 hours (3 weeks full time or 5 weeks part time) is $1,099, a 250-hour internship (8 weeks full time or 12 weeks part time) is $1,499, and a 350-hour internship (13 weeks full time or 17 weeks part time) costs $1,799. It is important to note that a deposit is required once the individual has been accepted onto an internship, but this will be deducted from the total cost.

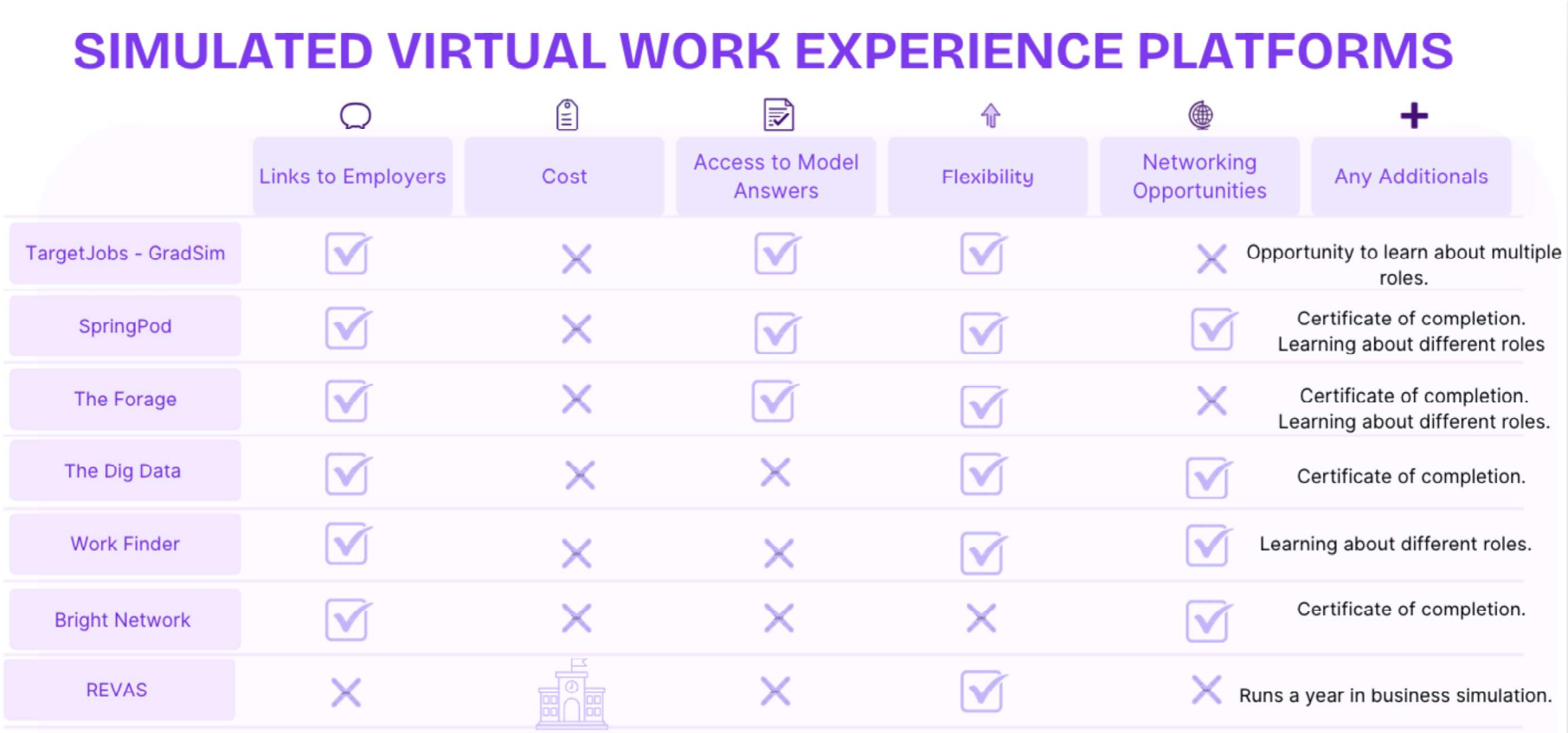
Additional note: For further consideration, this platform does offer abroad placements as well as remote opportunities.

Simulated Virtual Work Experience

Simulated virtual work experience refers to opportunities in which learners complete realistic tasks designed to replicate activities undertaken within an organisation or professional role. Unlike employer-led VWE, learners do not have direct interaction with the employer or organisation and therefore have limited opportunities to develop professional connections or receive personalised feedback from employers. However, the environmental scan identified alternative approaches to providing feedback within simulated VWE. These experiences typically involve structured activities with predefined tasks, and some platforms provide model answers or example responses against which learners can compare their own work. This enables learners to reflect on their performance and identify areas for improvement, although it does not provide the same level of individualised feedback as direct employer interaction. Table 2 presents the simulated VWE platforms identified through the environmental scan. Ticks (✓) indicate 'yes', crosses (✗) indicate 'no', and question marks (?) indicate that information was either unavailable or unclear. The building symbol (🏛) indicates that the associated costs are borne by the university.

Table 2.

Current simulated virtual work experience platforms and features.



TargetJobs – GradSim

https://targetjobs.co.uk/gradsims

Through the GradSim section of TargetJobs, students can find simulated virtual work experiences. Target audience: This platform is used by higher education institutions and students individually. Features: There are six different sectors: finance, property and construction, accountancy, law, science, and engineering. Through these varying sectors and the different opportunities, the students will gain an insight into the area. Learners on the platform hear from graduates who have entered these fields. Learners complete tasks that emulate daily tasks of a particular role. GradSims has previously partnered with many companies including HSBC, Farrer & Co, EDF etc (please check the website link for current partnerships). Cost: This platform is free to use, therefore ensuring accessibility to learners.

SpringPod

https://www.springpod.com/

SpringPod helps to connect learners with top employers to provide them with virtual work experiences.

Target audience: There are a multitude of ways in which SpringPod can be accessed. This can be through an individual learner, an institution, or other bodies. SpringPod have been known to do partnerships with organisations such as the Global Geographic Society.

Features: The job sector collections they have include Hospitality, Catering & Events, Creative Arts & Design, Business, Administration & Consulting, Law & Legal Services, Publishing & Journalism, Energy & Utilities, Social Care, Accounting, Business & Finance, Media & Film, Marketing & Communications, Animal Care, Healthcare & Medicine, Engineering, Construction & Trades, Government & Policies, Digital, IT and Computing. There is also the opportunity to work with a range of companies. Additionally, learners can access networks of the companies that they have an interest in, to be able to view their pathway and access opportunities.

Cost: There is no published price for higher education institutions with this platform. This platform has been known to be free to use for students.

The Forage

https://www.theforage.com/

Forage is an online platform that provides the opportunity to complete job simulations with an association to a company. Some companies that Forage have previously worked with include British Airways, BCLP, Bloomberg, EY, Life Arc etc.

Target audience: This can be used by students individually or through a higher education institution. It further works with companies to create the opportunities for learners.

Features: At the time of writing, Forage offer 288 job simulations for many fields of work including law, engineering, Forensic and Integrity Services, Data Science, Sales etc. These vary in time length depending on the chosen simulation. The time lengths vary from around 30 minutes to over 9 hours. When looking at job simulations, users can filter by industry, career interest, company and duration. The benefits to using Forage as an educator are that it provides access to many online projects with a range of companies, the ability to curate personalised projects to the needs of the students and track the use of the pages through the analytics dashboard.

Cost: There is no published cost to using this platform.

The Dig Data

https://digdata.online/

The Dig Data is a platform designed to provide virtual work experience to those hoping to pursue a career in data.

Target audience: This is achieved by connecting students, educators and data industry professionals.

Features: There are two options for educators to work with: live online challenges and adaptable classroom resources. There are also different kinds depending on the age of the students. This brings together the opportunity to go through real business problems to develop the individuals' skills. The skills that completing the online challenges (or virtual work experiences) provide include problem-solving, data literacy, storytelling and presentation.

Cost: Learners can register for free to access the platform. There is no published cost for higher education institutions for using this platform.

Skills Builder through Work Finder

https://www.skillsbuilder.uk/programmes/workfinder-work-experience

Since initially conducting the environmental scan of virtual work experience providers, it appears that Work Finder has undergone a rebrand and their information is currently undergoing a review. Their new website (Superpower) will have further information. However, at the time of writing (August 2026), the author was unable to obtain this information.

Bright Network

https://www.brightnetwork.co.uk/

Bright Network is a company that allows learners to browse to find virtual work experience through internships and placements.

Target audience: This is typically used by students individually.

Features: The platform enables learners to connect with global employers in a range of career fields, allowing the students to branch out and build hard skills required in their chosen field. It is important to note that they do provide in-person work experience, so it is important to filter for remote options when considering virtual work experience opportunities.

Additional note: Learners must complete an application for the specific virtual work experiences.

Cost: Bright Network is free for students and recent graduates to become a member. There are no published costs to the virtual work experiences provided by this platform.

REVAS

https://www.revas.online/en/

REVAS is a company from Poland who have developed a simulation of a year in enterprise.

Target audience: Students who are interested in entrepreneurship.

Features: There are 20 industries to choose from: accounting services, beauty salon, boutique hotel, car service & repair, digital marketing agency, electronics store, event agency, factory, farming supplies, fitness club, hair salon, home renovations, IT services, restaurant, school canteen, shipping company, spa & massage salon, travel agency, and vet clinic. Here, either the learner or the teacher of a class (depending on the simulation mode chosen) sets the time assigned to each 'month in business' which allocates the time for each task to be completed in. Each 'month' is a different task and demonstrates a new part of setting up a business from scratch. Some examples of these tasks include creating the name and logo of the company, hiring employees, buying stock, marketing etc. The two different models include against the computer, or against the class. The learner/s compete on the scoreboard to see who is performing the best. The scoreboard acts as feedback to the students to inform them of the outcomes depending on their business decisions chosen at each stage/month. If the mode of a classroom is chosen, this will be against their peers, but if this is against the computer, then it is as the name suggests.

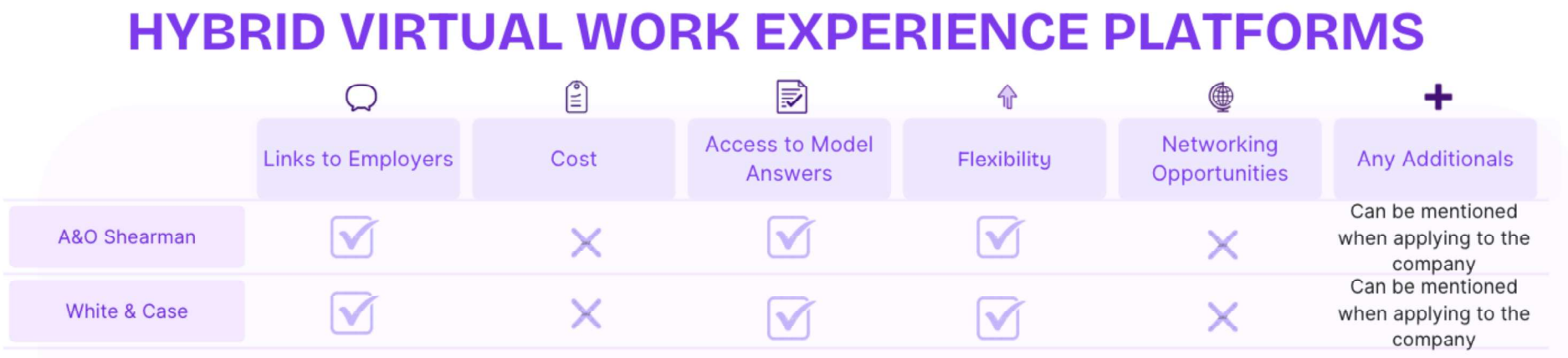
Cost: Access to this platform comes at a cost to the institution, but there are no published prices for this platform.

Hybrid Virtual Work Experience

Hybrid virtual work experience combines characteristics of employer-led and simulated VWE, whereby an employer or organisation develops realistic tasks designed to provide learners with insight into its activities, roles, and working practices. However, unlike employer-led VWE, learners do not have direct interaction with the employer and therefore do not receive personalised feedback or supervision. Hybrid VWE consequently combines employer-developed content with the self-directed nature of simulated VWE. Table 3 presents the hybrid VWE platforms identified through the environmental scan. Ticks (✓) indicate 'yes', crosses (✗) indicate 'no', and question marks (?) indicate that information was either unavailable or unclear. The building symbol (🏢) indicates that the associated costs are borne by the university.

Table 3.

Current hybrid virtual work experience platforms and features.



A&O Shearman

https://careers.aoshearman.com/en/global-virtual-work-experience-program

A&O Shearman virtual work experience appears to be more of a hybrid of an employer-led and simulated virtual work experience. This is administered through Forage.

Target audience: Students who wish to pursue a career or have an interest in law can take part in this virtual work experience, which was made in partnership with Forage.

Features: There are four different variations of the simulated virtual work experience depending on what the legal interests are. This experience builds the skills that a commercial lawyer at A&O Shearman would need. Furthermore, completing this virtual work experience can be mentioned in applications to A&O Shearman, which can not only provide an understanding of how the person may find working in the company, but may support their application.

Eligibility: There are no requirements for taking part in this experience, making it hugely accessible.

Cost: There is no known cost associated with this experience.

White and Case

https://www.whitecase.com/careers/locations/uk/early-careers/our-offer/virtual-learning-programme

White and Case are another legal company which provides a hybrid of employer-led and simulated virtual work experience, which is also administered through Forage.

Target audience/ Eligibility: Their accessible virtual learning programme allows anyone to participate.

Features: Those who participate gain understanding and skills through completing tasks that employees at White and Case would be doing as a lawyer or a trainee. Additionally, the completion of this programme can be mentioned in applications to White and Case, which may improve chances of employability.

Cost: There is no associated cost with this experience.

Cross-Platform Comparison

One of the principal potential benefits of virtual work experience is the flexibility and accessibility it offers learners. This is evident across employer-led, simulated, and hybrid forms of VWE. Such flexibility enables learners to explore career interests and develop skills while managing other responsibilities, including caring commitments, education, and paid employment. VWE can also reduce geographical barriers associated with traditional work experience by removing the need for travel or relocation. Furthermore, some platforms provide opportunities to engage with organisations operating internationally, potentially broadening the range of careers and professional environments that learners can explore.

A central aim of VWE is to provide learners with opportunities to develop their understanding of careers or sectors while acquiring relevant knowledge and skills. However, the nature of these opportunities varies according to the delivery model, platform, and individual programme. Employer-led VWE typically involves learners completing work-related projects with opportunities for direct employer interaction. In contrast, simulated VWE generally involves predefined activities, which may include videos, structured tasks, and model answers. Although these activities are designed to replicate aspects of professional practice, the extent to which they reflect authentic workplace tasks varies between programmes. For example, Forage offers job simulations developed by employers, providing insight into the tasks associated with specific occupational roles. Similarly, The Dig Data focuses on data-related activities, offering opportunities to explore and develop skills relevant to data-focused careers. The authenticity and educational value of these experiences therefore depend on their design and the nature of the activities provided.

Certificates of completion are another feature identified across the platforms. Most simulated VWE platforms offer certificates, while some employer-led programmes also provide formal recognition of participation. These certificates may help learners demonstrate their engagement with VWE and communicate their experiences to potential employers. They may also be shared on professional networking platforms such as LinkedIn, which reported having more than one billion users across 200 countries (LinkedIn, 2025). LinkedIn enables users to present their experiences, establish professional connections, and explore employment opportunities. This may be particularly relevant to learners completing simulated VWE, where opportunities for direct employer interaction and networking are often limited. However, sharing a certificate does not necessarily result in professional connections or employment opportunities.

Feedback is another important consideration when comparing VWE models, although the nature and extent of feedback differ. Employer-led VWE may provide opportunities for personalised, task-specific feedback through direct communication with employers or supervisors. Some programmes also offer formal reports evaluating learners' performance or experiences. Where supervision is available, learners may benefit from ongoing guidance and opportunities to seek clarification throughout their participation.

In contrast, simulated VWE generally provides feedback through predefined resources, such as model answers or example responses. Learners can compare their completed work with these examples to reflect on their performance and identify areas for improvement. Although this

approach does not offer the same individualised guidance as direct employer feedback, it can support self-assessment and the development of relevant knowledge and skills. The suitability of each approach depends on the intended learning outcomes and the level of support required.

The environmental scan also highlighted differences in the potential costs and accessibility of VWE provision. Simulated VWE may offer higher education institutions a scalable way to provide students with access to a broad range of career exploration and skills development opportunities. Depending on the platform, learners may be able to complete multiple experiences across different sectors or occupational areas, supporting exploration of their interests and the development of varied skills.

Some simulated VWE platforms work directly with higher education institutions to provide access to students without an individual participation fee. However, this does not necessarily mean that provision is free to the institution. The environmental scan found that institutional pricing was not always publicly available, making direct comparisons of cost-effectiveness difficult. Although institutionally funded access may reduce financial barriers for participating students, differences in institutional resources and purchasing arrangements could create inequalities in the opportunities available across higher education institutions. This is particularly relevant in the context of financial pressures affecting the sector (Luzajic, 2026).

Nevertheless, employer-led VWE may offer additional benefits, particularly where programmes include direct employer interaction, supervision, networking opportunities, and individualised feedback. These features may provide learners with opportunities to develop professional communication skills and gain insight into workplace expectations. Simulated VWE may be particularly useful for structured career exploration and the development of knowledge and task-specific skills, while employer-led VWE may provide greater opportunities to apply learning through direct engagement with employers. However, these distinctions are not absolute, as the nature and quality of learning opportunities vary between platforms and individual programmes. Hybrid VWE may also offer employer-developed tasks and occupational insight without direct employer interaction.

These findings highlight the importance of higher education institutions establishing clear objectives when selecting VWE opportunities for students. Where the primary aim is to develop practical skills through work-related projects, provide opportunities for professional networking, and offer personalised feedback, employer-led VWE may be particularly appropriate. The environmental scan identified several employer-led opportunities accessed by individual learners, although Mindless Academy and Pagoda Projects may also warrant consideration by institutions seeking this type of provision.

Conversely, where the primary aim is to support career exploration, increase understanding of occupational roles, introduce realistic workplace tasks, and develop transferable skills, simulated VWE may be more suitable. Platforms such as Forage, GradSims through targetjobs, and SpringPod may support these objectives. Ultimately, platform selection should be guided by the intended learning outcomes, the characteristics and needs of students, the availability and accessibility of programmes, and the level of interaction and support required.

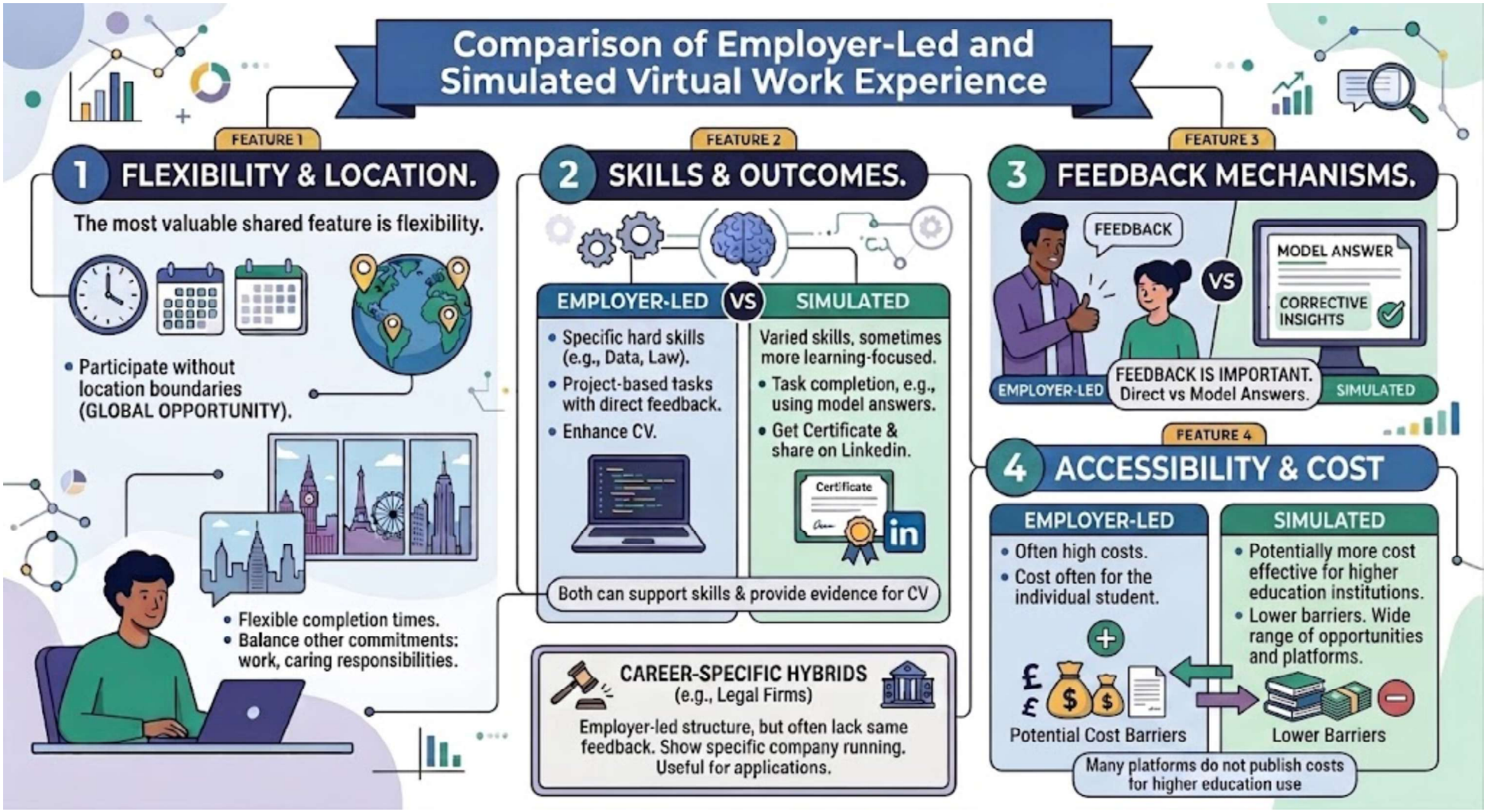


Figure 1.

Comparison of Employer-Led and Simulated Virtual Work Experience.

Virtual Work Experience current usage in UK universities

Understanding how virtual work experience is currently promoted and supported within higher education provides insight into its position within university employability provision and the platforms being recommended to students. To explore this, publicly accessible information was collected from university employability webpages in August 2026. As the review was limited to information available online, universities may offer additional VWE opportunities or support that are not explicitly described on their websites. Furthermore, provision and website content may change over time. The findings should therefore be interpreted as a snapshot of publicly available information as of August 2026. Table 4 presents the findings from this review, highlighting variation in how universities communicate VWE opportunities. Several institutions identified specific platforms that students could access, while others provided more general information or directed students to their employability teams for further guidance. For example, Bangor University, Nottingham Trent University, and Cardiff University encouraged students to contact their careers or employability services for additional information. Such support may provide opportunities for personalised guidance based on students' career interests, goals, and development needs, although the nature of this support could not be established from the webpages alone. Several universities also referred to course-specific work experience opportunities without explicitly identifying whether these included VWE.

The most frequently mentioned VWE platforms were Forage, Bright Network, and SpringPod, as illustrated in Figure 2, although not all universities identified specific platforms on their websites. Forage was the most frequently mentioned, appearing on the employability webpages of eight of the 15 universities reviewed: the University of Reading, King's College London, the University of Exeter, the University of Strathclyde, the University of Edinburgh, the University of Manchester, the University of Lincoln, and the University of Nottingham. Its prominence may reflect the accessibility and range of opportunities available through the platform. Forage offers free, employer-developed job simulations that students can complete flexibly, with certificates awarded upon completion (Forage, 2021). Further details are provided in Table 2. Bright Network was mentioned by four universities: King's College London, the University of Strathclyde, the University of Manchester, and the University of Nottingham. The platform provides information about work experience opportunities, including employer-specific activities and virtual job simulations. The review also found that some university employability webpages appeared not to have been updated since 2024 or 2025. Given the changing nature of VWE provision, this highlights the importance of maintaining accurate and current information to support students in identifying available opportunities.

To provide additional context, the review considered the Forage UK Awards List for Institutions for Work-Based Learning (Forage, 2023), which ranks institutions using three criteria: student engagement, faculty involvement, and early participation. Student engagement reflects the extent of student participation in work-based learning, while faculty involvement concerns the integration of work-based learning into teaching and curricula. Early participation relates to students' engagement in work-based learning during their first year of university or at

an early stage of their studies. Table 5 presents the 2023 Forage Awards List alongside information about whether the institutions explicitly mentioned VWE on their employability webpages. Of the 30 universities included in the list, seven explicitly mentioned VWE, with these institutions distributed across different positions in the rankings rather than being concentrated among the highest-ranked universities. Several universities also promoted employability initiatives and awards, such as the Greenwich Employability Passport and the Bristol PLUS Award, which recognise students' engagement in extracurricular activities and the development of employability skills. Although VWE could potentially contribute to such initiatives, this was not explicitly confirmed in the information reviewed. It is also important to acknowledge that the awards data relate to 2023, while the university website review was conducted in August 2026. Consequently, these findings represent information collected at different points in time and should not be interpreted as a direct comparison of provision during a single period.

To explore the relationship between work-based learning indicators and graduate outcomes, the review also considered professional outcomes data reported in The Times Professional Job/Study Outcomes (2025/26). Although the difference in reporting periods is a limitation, these datasets provide an opportunity to explore descriptive patterns across institutions. Figure 3 compares the mean scores for universities included in the Forage Awards List, grouped according to Russell Group membership. The chart indicates that Russell Group universities generally recorded higher scores for student engagement, faculty involvement, and early participation in work-based learning. The largest difference was observed in student engagement, with Russell Group institutions generally recording higher scores than non-Russell Group institutions. However, non-Russell Group universities recorded a higher mean professional outcomes score. This suggests that higher scores on the work-based learning indicators do not necessarily correspond to higher professional outcomes scores within this sample. Nevertheless, the measures represent different aspects of student experience and employability, and no statistical analyses were conducted to determine whether the observed differences were significant. Furthermore, the Forage Awards List relates to 2023, while the professional outcomes data relate to 2025/26. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted cautiously, and no causal relationships can be established.

As the Forage Awards List concerns work-based learning more broadly, further analysis was undertaken to explore patterns associated specifically with the visibility of VWE. Figure 4 therefore compares universities according to Russell Group membership and whether VWE was explicitly mentioned on their employability webpages. Student engagement and professional outcomes scores were relatively high across the groups, while greater variation was observed in faculty involvement and early participation. Student engagement was highest among Russell Group universities that explicitly mentioned VWE, with early participation following a similar pattern. In contrast, faculty involvement was highest among non-Russell Group universities that mentioned VWE and lowest among Russell Group universities in the same category. Professional outcomes scores were relatively consistent across the groups, with the highest mean score recorded among Russell Group universities that did not explicitly mention VWE. This group also recorded a comparatively high score for faculty involvement. These findings highlight

the complexity of the relationship between institutional characteristics, work-based learning engagement, and professional outcomes, suggesting that differences cannot be explained by the visibility of VWE alone.

The descriptive comparison also indicated that universities explicitly mentioning VWE tended to record higher student engagement and early participation scores than those that did not. One possible explanation is that making VWE opportunities visible through university employability webpages may help students identify and access work-related learning opportunities. However, this interpretation remains tentative, as the analysis does not establish whether students participated in VWE specifically or whether their engagement related to other forms of work-based learning. Notably, Russell Group universities that mentioned VWE recorded the highest student engagement and early participation scores despite having the lowest faculty involvement score among the groups compared. This may indicate that some students access work-based learning opportunities independently of formal curricular integration, although the available data cannot establish how these opportunities were identified or accessed. Overall, the findings highlight variation in how universities communicate VWE opportunities and suggest that the visibility of provision may be relevant to student engagement. However, differences in reporting periods, the descriptive nature of the analysis, and limited information about actual VWE participation mean that these patterns should be interpreted cautiously. Further research would be required to establish whether explicitly promoting VWE increases participation or contributes to improved employability outcomes.

Table 4.

Virtual work experience provision as per university employability pages.

University	**Russell Group/ Ranking**	**Times 2025/26 Ranking**	**Platform/s Mentioned**	**Employer-led or Simulated**	**Cost**	**Comments**	**Times 2025/26 Professional Job/ Graduate Study (%)**
University of Reading	No	33	Forage	Both	Free	Accessible to current students and graduates.	80.4
University of Sheffield	Yes	13	No specifics but states partners with providers	Not stated	Not stated		82.9
King's College London	Yes	19	Forage, Dig Data and Bright Network	Both	Not stated		85.1
University of Liverpool	Yes	18	SpringPod	Both	Free	Information from 2025, so may not be accurate.	82
University of Exeter	Yes	14	Forage	Both	Not stated		81.9
University of Strathclyde	No	11	Forage, SpringPod, Bright Network, Targetjobs, Prospects	Both	Cautions students to check costs before signing up.	Mentions the platforms as a source of information but unclear of partnerships with the university.	83
University of Edinburgh	Yes	25	Pagoda Projects, Workfinder, U21 Micro-Internships, Forage	Both	Not stated	Website states the differences between the programmes and provides clear definitions.	81.3

University	Russell Group/ Ranking	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Platform/s Mentioned	Employer-led or Simulated	Cost	Comments	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/ Graduate Study (%)
University of Manchester	Yes	27	Practera Microinternships, Forage, SpringPod, Bright Network, Internship Experience UK, GradSims, Shortlist.Me	Both	Not stated	MicroInternships via Practera and Shortlist.me are specific to the University of Manchester.	80.8
University of Lincoln	No	64	Forage	Simulated	Not stated	Provides extra credit and contributes to the Lincoln Award.	72.9
University of Nottingham	Yes	30	Forage, Bright Network, Barclays, Think Specific	Both	Not stated		83.3
Bangor University	No	59	Does not mention specific platforms but points towards information	Not stated	Not stated	University works with the students to support them to find work experience through 1-1 conversations.	71.6
University of Aberystwyth	No	42	TARGETjobs, Gradcracker	Both	Not stated	Comprehensive list provided of work experience in different categories: UK, Voluntary Work/ Charities, Overseas, Voluntary Work Abroad. However, must click on the link to find out whether it is a virtual work experience.	72.4
University of Chester	No	109	Not listed	Not stated	Not stated	Informative website but virtual work experience is not explicit and does not provide links to the different platforms.	76.3

University	Russell Group/ Ranking	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Platform/s Mentioned	Employer-led or Simulated	Cost	Comments	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/ Graduate Study (%)
Swansea University	No	37	Not listed	Not stated	Not stated	Does not provide any information on virtual work experience.	81
Cardiff University	No	28	Not listed	Not stated	Not stated	Website signposts their employability team with no mention of virtual work experience.	85.1
Nottingham Trent University	No	46	Not listed	Not stated	Not stated	Website signposts their employability team with no mention of virtual work experience.	71.5

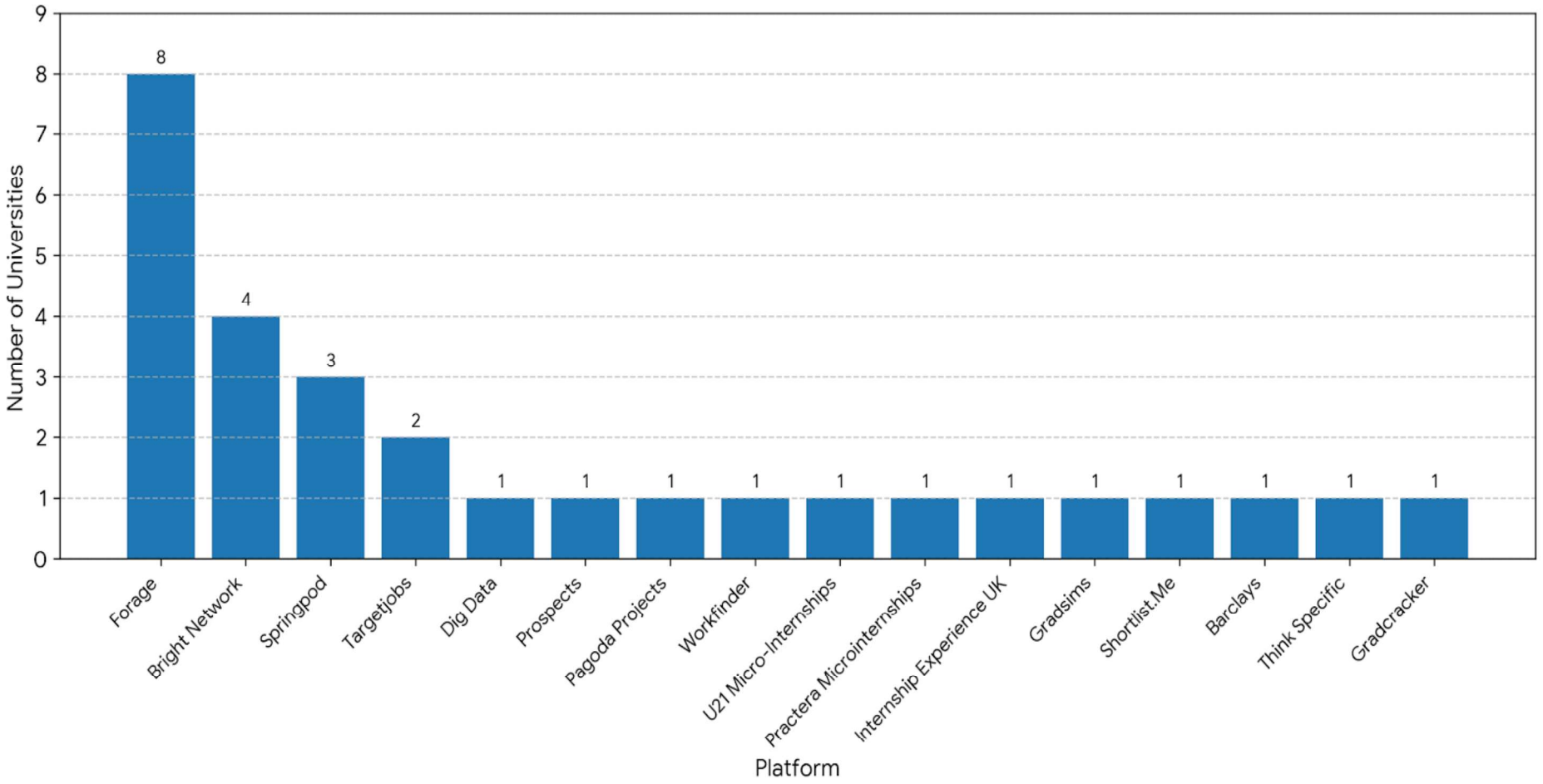


Figure 2.

Universities hosting/signposting virtual work experience platforms.

Table 5.

Comparative analysis of UK Universities' Work-Based Learning Provisions according to the Forage UK Awards List for Institutions for Work-Based Learning (Forage, 2023).

Rank	University	Russell Group	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Included in curricula	Extra-curricular	VWE available	Student Engagement Score	Faculty Involvement	Early Participation	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/Graduate Study	Work-based learning / placements
1	University of Westminster	No	115	Yes	Yes	Yes	95.2	92.6	78.3	61.2	WBPL across undergraduate courses; minimum 35 hours; placements, internships, work shadowing westminster+1.
2	University of Greenwich	No	100	Yes	Yes	Not stated	92.2	89.4	70.3	70.6	Career-focused degrees; Greenwich Employability Passport; employer engagement.
3	University of Wolverhampton	No	121	Yes	Not stated	Yes	74.9	94.5	81.8	73.4	WEEA embedded in 100% of undergraduate courses; job simulations.

Rank	University	Russell Group	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Included in curricula	Extra-curricular	VWE available	Student Engagement Score	Faculty Involvement	Early Participation	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/Graduate Study	Work-based learning / placements
4	University of Warwick	Yes	8	Not stated	Yes	Not stated	84.5	74.2	89.2	86.4	Warwick Award recognising work-based learning, placement, and enterprise.
5	University of Bristol	Yes	10	Yes	Yes	Not stated	72.1	95.8	74.5	83.7	Bristol Futures; real-life research projects; external engagement; Bristol PLUS Award.
6	Queen Mary University of London	Yes	35	Yes	Yes	Yes	85	68.8	84.1	78.6	Year abroad/in industry options; placements; work experience; simulations.
7	University of Huddersfield	No	102	Yes	Yes	Yes	75.2	89.1	65.4	75	Sandwich placements; placement learning; virtual work-based learning programmes.

Rank	University	Russell Group	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Included in curricula	Extra-curricular	VWE available	Student Engagement Score	Faculty Involvement	Early Participation	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/Graduate Study	Work-based learning / placements
8	University of East London	No	114	Yes	Yes	Not stated	86.6	72.3	65	63.6	Employer partnerships; curriculum placements; Mental Wealth modules; legal advice centre.
9	Durham University	No	3	Not stated	Yes	Not stated	80.5	67.9	89.5	88.8	Work experience placements; placement years; internships; collaborative enterprise.
10	University of Cambridge	Yes	4	Yes	Yes	Not stated	74.7	84.6	69.2	90.4	Career events; MBA Global Consulting Project.
11	University of Reading	No	33	Not stated	Yes	Not stated	67.4	91.9	74	80.4	RED Award; internships; UROP; mentoring; part-time work counted toward hours.

Rank	University	Russell Group	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Included in curricula	Extra-curricular	VWE available	Student Engagement Score	Faculty Involvement	Early Participation	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/Graduate Study	Work-based learning / placements
12	University of Oxford	Yes	4	Not stated	Yes	Not stated	74.8	84	65.1	90.4	Summer internships; micro-internships; mentoring programmes.
13	University of Manchester	Yes	27	Yes	Yes	Not stated	74.4	86.7	66	80.81	Stellify Award; assessment-linked career development; service learning projects.
14	King's College London	Yes	19	Yes	Yes	Yes	81.6	65.5	80.2	85.1	Accredited internships; work shadowing; Kings' Insights; global internships; simulations.
15	University of Leeds	Yes	26	Yes	Yes	Not stated	72.6	85.2	63.5	81	Internship programme; accredited employability modules; employability support.

Rank	University	Russell Group	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Included in curricula	Extra-curricular	VWE available	Student Engagement Score	Faculty Involvement	Early Participation	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/Graduate Study	Work-based learning / placements
16	Edinburgh Napier University	No	51	Yes	Yes	Yes	69.3	87.5	67.8	80	Forage virtual internships; employability skills programme; reflective report; group project.
17	University of Lincoln	No	64	Not stated	Yes	Not stated	68.2	90.4	62.6	72.9	Horizons; Talent Programme internships; Lincoln Award.
18	Loughborough University	No	12	Yes	Yes	Not stated	69.7	88.4	60.8	86.3	Employability embedded in curriculum; Talent Match Micro-Internships; Graduate Internships.
19	University of East Anglia	No	40	Not stated	Yes	Not stated	69.9	87.7	60.9	81	Employer events; mentoring; Knowledge Transfer Partnerships; UEA Award.

Rank	University	Russell Group	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Included in curricula	Extra-curricular	VWE available	Student Engagement Score	Faculty Involvement	Early Participation	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/Graduate Study	Work-based learning / placements
20	De Montfort University	No	108	Yes	Yes	Yes	67.1	91.2	58	69.3	Guaranteed work experience; placements; mentoring; virtual and in-person internships.
21	University of Birmingham	Yes	16	Yes	Yes	Not stated	76.6	70.5	72.6	84.2	Birmingham Project; Personal Skills Award; mentoring.
22	Aston University	No	41	Yes	Yes	Yes	76.4	61.3	87.9	82.6	Global Advantage Scheme; industry events; virtual job simulations in Law.
23	Southampton Solent University	No	76	Yes	Yes	Not stated	63	90.7	61.7	66	Employability in all courses; placements; Solent Creatives live briefs.

Rank	University	Russell Group	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Included in curricula	Extra-curricular	VWE available	Student Engagement Score	Faculty Involvement	Early Participation	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/Graduate Study	Work-based learning / placements
24	University of Nottingham	Yes	30	Not stated	Yes	Partly / indirect	71.8	77	62.4	83.3	Internship Scheme; Consultancy Challenge; work experience grants; Digital Marketing Academy.
25	University of Essex	No	44	Yes	Yes	Not stated	75.7	65.9	72.6	72.1	Experiential learning; placements; live projects.
26	Brunel University	No	117	Yes	Yes	Not stated	71.1	72.8	70.8	69.4	Work-based learning on over 95% of courses; placements team; Brunel+.
27	University of Bolton (name changed to University of Greater Manchester in December 2024)	No	126	Yes	Yes	Not stated	66.4	82.4	64	74.8	Employability structured across three stages; GAME framework.

Rank	University	Russell Group	Times 2025/26 Ranking	Included in curricula	Extra-curricular	VWE available	Student Engagement Score	Faculty Involvement	Early Participation	Times 2025/26 Professional Job/Graduate Study	Work-based learning / placements
28	Lancaster University	No	15	Yes	Yes	Not stated	77.1	67	63.1	82.1	Lancaster Award; embedded employability; creative enterprise module.
29	Birmingham City University	No	113	Not stated	Yes	Not stated	65.8	80.8	64.3	70.4	Mentoring; placements; Graduate+ initiative.
30	University of Edinburgh	Yes	25	Yes	Yes	Not stated	76	64.9	62.9	81.3	Centre for Experiential Learning; Design Agency Project; Experiential Learning in Communities; Living Lab.

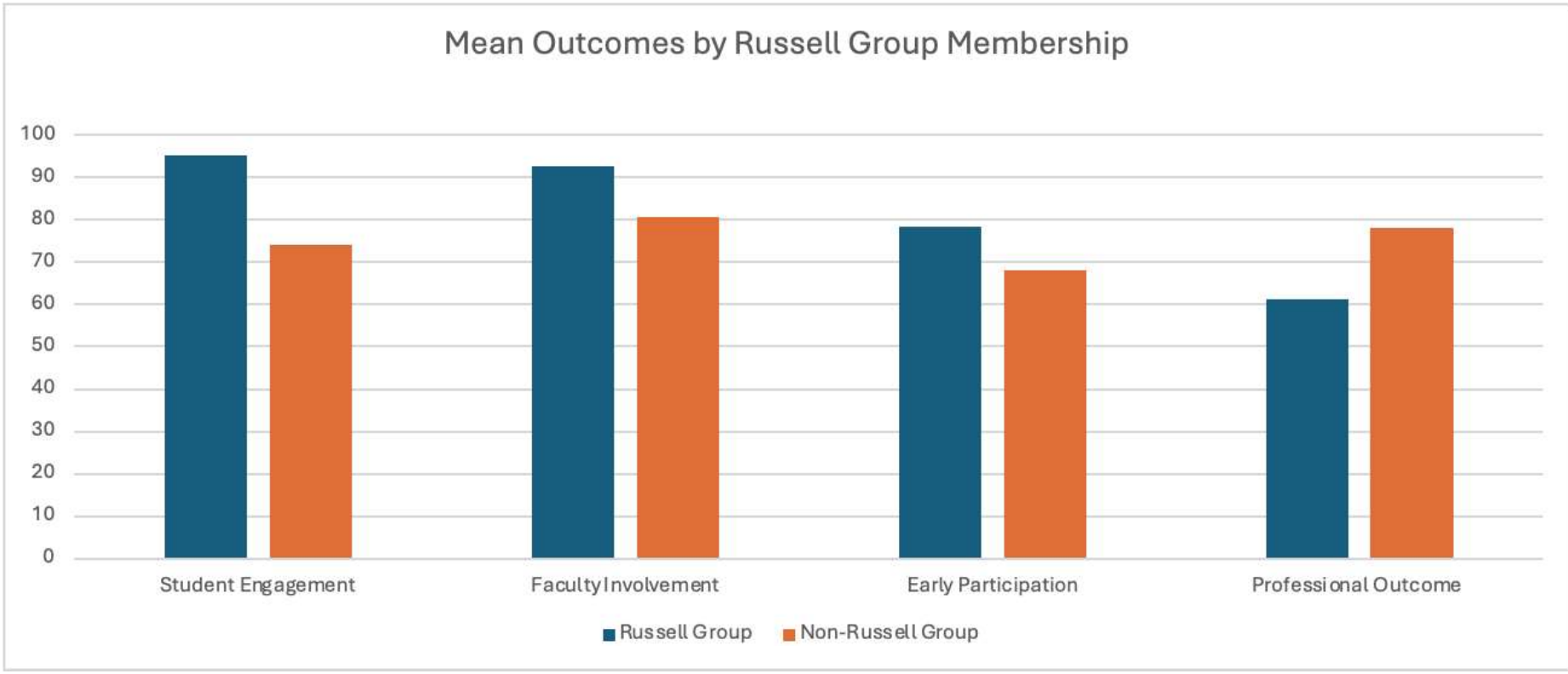


Figure 3.

Outcomes of the Forage Awards List and Professional Outcomes separated by Russell Group membership.

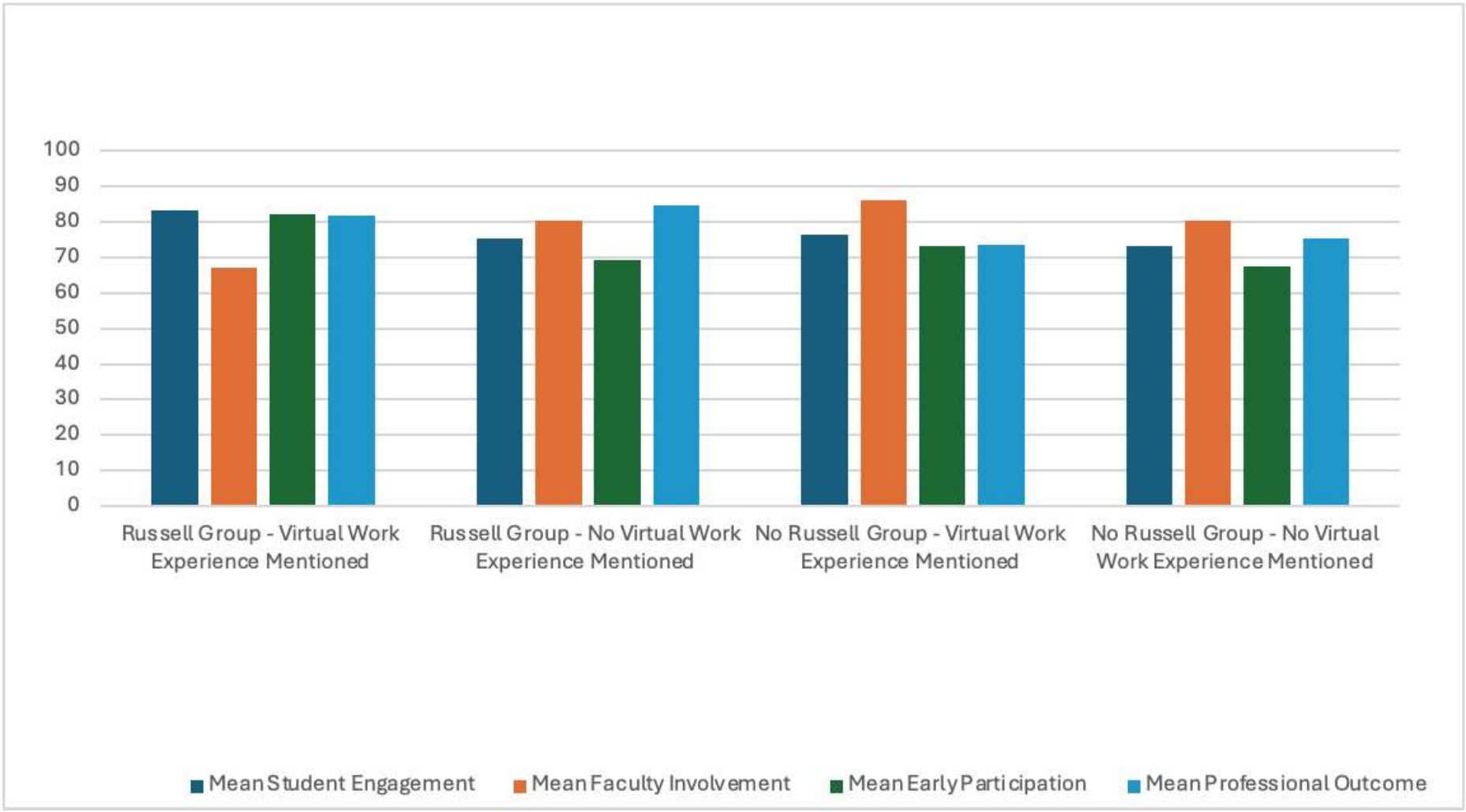


Figure 4.

Mean student engagement, faculty involvement, early participation, professional outcome scores, and VWE mentions by Russell Group status.

Objective 3: Stakeholder Survey of Virtual Work Experience

The primary aim of this research was to investigate higher education staff and students' perceptions and experiences of virtual work experience (VWE). Given the limited research examining stakeholder perspectives, the study explored perceived benefits, challenges, and considerations for implementing VWE in higher education. It also examined the views of students with and without previous VWE experience, allowing comparisons between experiences of participation and expectations of this form of work-related learning.

Method

Two online questionnaires were developed and administered using PsyToolkit (Stoet, 2010, 2017). Separate questionnaires were designed for higher education staff and students. Both began with a standardised definition of VWE, describing online activities involving realistic tasks, projects, or simulations that support students' understanding of careers and workplaces. This distinguished VWE from placements, where students contribute directly to an organisation's work, and established a consistent understanding among respondents.

The staff questionnaire invited responses from academic, professional services, careers and employability, and placement or work-based learning staff. Participants identified their roles and evaluated the potential contribution of VWE to employability skills, confidence, career awareness, accessibility, and learning. Open-ended questions explored perceived benefits, concerns, factors encouraging staff support or promotion, and considerations for effective design. Respondents also reported their prior awareness and experience of VWE.

The student questionnaire used branching logic to direct respondents to different questions depending on whether they had previously completed VWE. Students with prior experience reported the nature and relevance of their VWE, motivations for participating, perceived outcomes, satisfaction, challenges, and potential improvements. Those without prior experience reported their interest in VWE, perceived benefits and accessibility, potential barriers and incentives, and preferred timing within their studies. Both groups identified important considerations for universities designing VWE opportunities.

Both questionnaires combined five-point agreement scales, ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree, with open-ended questions to capture more detailed perspectives. A 'prefer not to answer' option was also provided for the agreement scales.

Data collection took place during summer 2026. The sample comprised 160 respondents: 97 higher education staff members (n = 97) and 63 students (n = 63). Of the students, 15 had previously completed VWE, while 48 had not. Data collection coincided with the university summer break, potentially affecting student participation and contributing to the relatively small student sample. Consequently, findings should be interpreted cautiously, particularly comparisons between student groups, and should not be considered representative of the wider higher education population.

Staff perceptions of Virtual Work Experience

Of the 97 staff respondents, 62 (63.9%) reported being aware of virtual work experience before participating in the survey. However, the nature and extent of their previous engagement varied. Among those reporting prior awareness, 18 described a general familiarity with VWE, while 17 had directly delivered or used it. A further 10 reported involvement in promoting VWE opportunities or supporting students to access them, and nine had contributed to the design or integration of VWE within the curriculum. Eight respondents did not provide sufficient information to establish the nature of their involvement. These findings indicate that, although most staff were familiar with VWE, their experience ranged from general awareness to direct involvement in its delivery and curriculum integration.

Staff perceptions of VWE were generally positive (Figure 5). Overall, 43.3% agreed and 34.0% strongly agreed that VWE could be a valuable part of students' learning experiences. The strongest support concerned accessibility, with 40.2% agreeing and 49.5% strongly agreeing that VWE could provide opportunities for students who experience difficulties accessing in-person work experience. Respondents also recognised its potential to support career exploration, with 51.5% agreeing and 35.1% strongly agreeing that VWE could help students learn about different career options. Similarly, 45.4% agreed and 35.1% strongly agreed that VWE could help students develop skills relevant to their future careers. Greater uncertainty was evident regarding its potential to improve students' confidence in the workplace, with 23.7% selecting neither agree nor disagree. This suggests that, while staff generally recognised the value of VWE for accessibility, career exploration, and skills development, they were less certain about its contribution to workplace confidence.

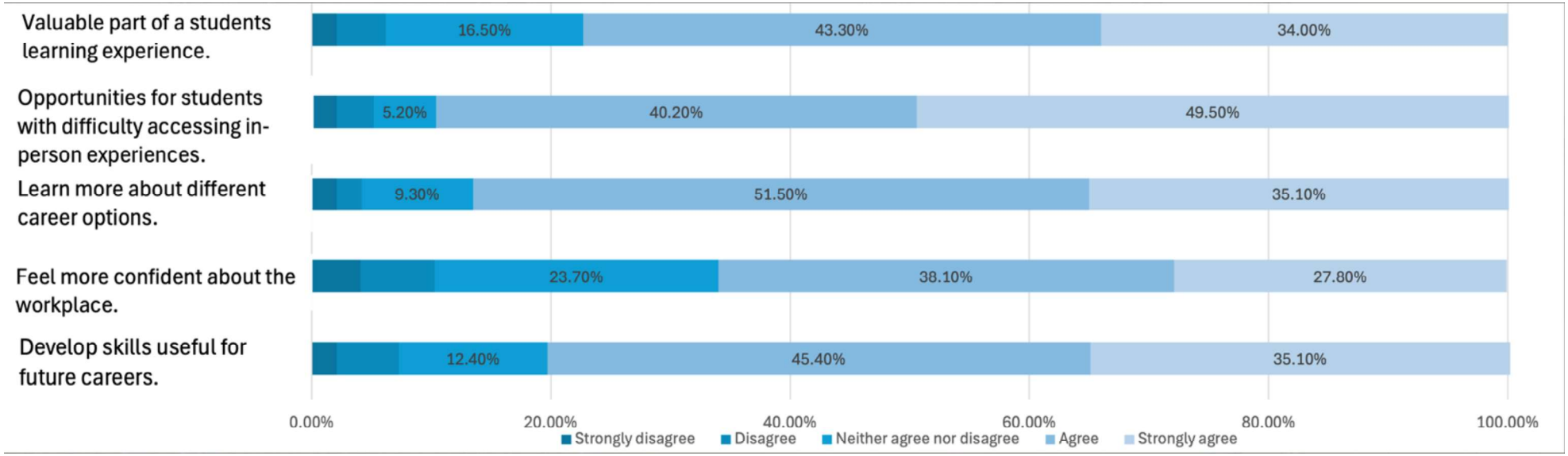


Figure 5.

Attitudes of Staff towards VWE.

Staff reported benefits of Virtual Work Experience

Responses to the open-ended question about the perceived benefits of VWE revealed several recurring themes (Figure 6). Accessibility and inclusion were particularly prominent, with respondents recognising the potential for VWE to reduce barriers to participation, including those experienced by students with disabilities. Career exploration was another key theme, with VWE perceived as providing opportunities to investigate different careers and workplaces in a relatively low-pressure environment. Respondents also identified benefits relating to flexibility, work-life balance, independent working, and access to a wider range of opportunities. Further themes included employability skills development, the opportunity to demonstrate experience on a CV, and preparation for remote working.

Other potential benefits, including curriculum integration, professional networking, and the development of professional identity, were mentioned less frequently. Although these were recognised by some respondents, they were less prominent within the overall responses. Taken together, the findings suggest that staff primarily associated the benefits of VWE with improved accessibility, career exploration, and employability development, while its potential contribution to wider professional and educational experiences was less consistently identified.



Figure 6.

Word map highlighting staff perceived benefits of VWE.

Staff concerns about Virtual Work Experience

Staff concerns about VWE are presented in Figure 7. A key concern was the potential for VWE to replace rather than complement in-person work experience. Respondents identified practical barriers, including unequal access to technology, unreliable internet connections, and unsuitable working environments. Concerns were also raised about student engagement, motivation, accountability, and passive participation, highlighting potential challenges in maintaining meaningful involvement. Further concerns related to student safety and wellbeing, including screen fatigue, social isolation, data security, unpaid work, and potential exploitation. These issues emphasise the need for appropriate safeguards, clear expectations, and effective student support.

Respondents also questioned the quality and authenticity of VWE, particularly whether activities would offer meaningful tasks and genuine workplace exposure rather than generic or simulated experiences. Related concerns included reduced opportunities for social interaction, professional networking, and interpersonal skills development. Staff highlighted the risk of students missing opportunities to observe workplace dynamics, understand organisational cultures, and build professional confidence. Collectively, these findings suggest that staff concerns extended beyond accessibility and engagement to the wider educational value of VWE, emphasising the importance of well-designed, appropriately supported experiences that provide meaningful insights into professional practice.



Figure 7.

Word map highlighting staff perceived concerns about VWE.

Encouraging staff engagement with Virtual Work Experience

The factors that would encourage staff to support or promote VWE closely reflected the concerns identified in the preceding findings. Five themes emerged from the responses: evidence of student benefit, quality and authenticity, employer interaction and support, clear information and quality assurance, and institutional support and integration. The frequency of each theme is presented in Table 6. Collectively, these findings suggest that staff were generally receptive to VWE but that their willingness to recommend or support opportunities depended on confidence in their quality, educational value, and suitability for students.

The most frequently identified theme was evidence of student benefit (n = 20). Respondents emphasised the importance of demonstrating positive student outcomes, including through testimonials, case studies, and evidence of successful transitions into employment. Specific benefits included improvements in confidence, employability skills, career-related knowledge, and opportunities to demonstrate relevant experience on a CV. These responses suggest that staff valued tangible evidence of VWE's effectiveness and wanted reassurance that participation would offer meaningful benefits before recommending opportunities to students.

Quality and authenticity were also important considerations. Respondents emphasised the need for VWE to provide realistic, purposeful activities that reflected genuine workplace practices. One participant wanted reassurance that opportunities were *"here to stay, applicable to a range of sectors, and not just a post-Covid hangover"*. Another highlighted the importance of students undertaking "*genuine work, rather than 'making the tea' type tasks, which increases engagement*". Respondents also expressed a preference for opportunities involving teamwork and activities that replicated professional environments. Clear information about the tasks students would undertake, their responsibilities, and how activities reflected "*authentic work environments*" was considered important. These findings suggest that staff associated quality with the relevance, realism, and structure of the learning experience.

The importance of employer interaction and support was identified by 13 respondents (n = 13). Participants emphasised opportunities for students to communicate with employers, colleagues, and mentors, rather than completing activities entirely independently. As one respondent observed, "*casual interactions do not happen organically online, top-tier virtual opportunities build them in*", suggesting structured coffee chats and interactive team activities as possible approaches. Another indicated greater willingness to endorse VWE when students "*have to communicate with others as part of the experience*". Alongside opportunities to develop communication skills, respondents highlighted the importance of clear task expectations, accessible supervision, and regular feedback. These responses indicate that meaningful interpersonal interaction was regarded as an important component of effective VWE.

A further 17 respondents (n = 17) identified clear information and quality assurance as factors that would encourage their support. Some wanted guidance on how to introduce VWE to students, with one participant requesting "*extra information and guidance about it for me to lead students through it as best as I can*". Others emphasised the need for transparency regarding

student responsibilities, assessment arrangements, and the structure of opportunities, including "*clarity about expectations on students and a fair structure*". These findings highlight the importance of accessible information that enables staff to understand, evaluate, and confidently recommend VWE opportunities.

Finally, institutional support and integration were identified by 16 respondents (n = 16). Some expressed interest in incorporating VWE into existing teaching and learning activities, including opportunities to embed it within modules or assessments. One participant described wanting "*something I could potentially embed into my module (e.g., in class, as part of the assessment)*". Others identified the need for additional resources or formal institutional endorsement, with one respondent indicating that they would be more likely to engage "*if my university or school was to take it up*". These responses suggest that staff engagement may be strengthened when VWE is supported through institutional provision, appropriate resources, and opportunities for curriculum integration.

Overall, the findings indicate that staff willingness to promote VWE was influenced by several interconnected factors. Evidence of positive student outcomes, authentic activities, meaningful employer interaction, clear guidance, and institutional support were all identified as important considerations. These priorities closely align with the concerns reported in Figure 7, suggesting that addressing perceived limitations through effective design, quality assurance, and support could increase staff confidence in recommending and integrating VWE within higher education.

Table 6.

Thematic review of staff perceptions about encouraging staff engagement.

Theme	**Respondent Emphasis**	**No. Extracts**	**Quotation**
Evidence of student benefit	Ensuring that students get a benefit from the experience (responses ranged between experience, confidence, access to more opportunities) and wanting to see proof of this. It was reflected that the staff would feel better about endorsing virtual work experience when there was evidence of student benefit.	20	*"More information and testimonials, more examples of the variety of virtual work experience, and evidence it can lead to further success in the workplace"*
Quality and Authenticity	Staff describe their interest in promoting virtual work experience, but only after getting reassurance that	16	*"I would be most supportive of virtual work experience that is well structured, clearly*

Theme	Respondent Emphasis	No. Extracts	Quotation
	students will be participating in authentic work tasks, or tasks that genuinely replicate a role. Staff members reflect the importance of engaging work rather than passive.		*targeted, interactive, and focused on developing practical employability skills through realistic workplace activities and constructive feedback."*
Employment interaction and support	Participants reflected the importance of the engagement from the employer to ensure that the student can receive support and understand what the expectations are from the experience. Interaction with others was noted as a key point to ensure support.	13	*"Virtual shouldn't mean "alone." Programs that stand out pair participants directly with dedicated mentors or "buddies" for regular, scheduled check-ins. When a host company sets clear expectations for mentors to offer guidance, real-time feedback, and career advice, it bridges the distance gap completely."*
Clear information and quality assurance	Participants reflected they would be likely to support virtual work experience if they have clear information regarding the tasks the students will be completing and the value and purpose of the work. Many participants reflected wanting to see how the different virtual work experiences work to ensure that it is appropriate for their students.	17	*"Understanding the purpose, level, and intended audience helps ensure that students are matched with opportunities that are relevant to their needs and stage of development."*
Institutional support and integration	Participants reflected an interest in adding virtual work experience to modules, and the importance of having systems within the university to support students as they engage in	16	*"Easily accessible and something I could potentially embed into my module (e.g. in class, as part of the assessment)"*

Theme	Respondent Emphasis	No. Extracts	Quotation
	virtual work experience opportunities. Some issues of practicality were raised and discussed in relation to its integration.		

Figure 8 presents staff perspectives on what universities should prioritise when designing and providing VWE. Five themes emerged: authenticity and realism, relevance to students, meaningful learning and skills development, interaction, support and feedback, and accessibility and inclusion. Together, these highlight the importance of providing educationally valuable, engaging, and accessible experiences.

Meaningful learning and skills development were important priorities. One participant emphasised that "*the most important consideration is ensuring that the experience is meaningful and closely reflects real workplace activity*", while another suggested that "*students should be given clear learning outcomes*". These responses highlight the importance of clearly defined educational purposes and opportunities to develop skills relevant to professional practice.

Closely related was authenticity and realism, with respondents expressing concerns that VWE could feel artificial or disconnected from workplace practices. One participant suggested that "*an actual task within simulated workplace constraints that produces a piece of work rather than answers to a question bank would make for a more realistic experience*". This reflects a preference for practical activities that replicate workplace expectations and produce tangible outcomes, suggesting that authenticity contributes to meaningful learning.

Relevance to students was another consideration, particularly aligning opportunities with their courses, interests, and career aspirations. One participant suggested that "*participation is optional, giving students the choice to apply for opportunities that match their interests and career goals"*. Another emphasised ensuring that VWE was relevant to students' studies and that students were involved in selecting suitable opportunities. These responses suggest that staff valued student choice and relevance, although further research would be needed to establish their influence on engagement.

Interaction, support and feedback were also considered important. One participant highlighted the need for "*opportunities to interact with professionals, ask questions and receive constructive feedback*". This suggests that staff valued opportunities for students to engage with workplace professionals and receive guidance, supporting their understanding of professional expectations and workplace practices.

Finally, accessibility and inclusion were identified as priorities. One participant stated that VWE "*should be accessible and inclusive*", while another emphasised the importance of "*appropriate technical support*" to enable full participation. These responses suggest that staff

recognised VWE's potential to broaden access while acknowledging that virtual delivery does not automatically eliminate barriers to participation.

Overall, the findings suggest that staff prioritised authentic workplace tasks, clear learning outcomes, relevance to students, professional interaction, and inclusive delivery. These priorities align with characteristics often associated with employer-led VWE, particularly realistic tasks, professional engagement, and feedback. However, the findings do not establish a clear preference for employer-led provision over other models. Instead, they suggest that staff placed greater importance on the quality and educational value of the experience than on its delivery model.

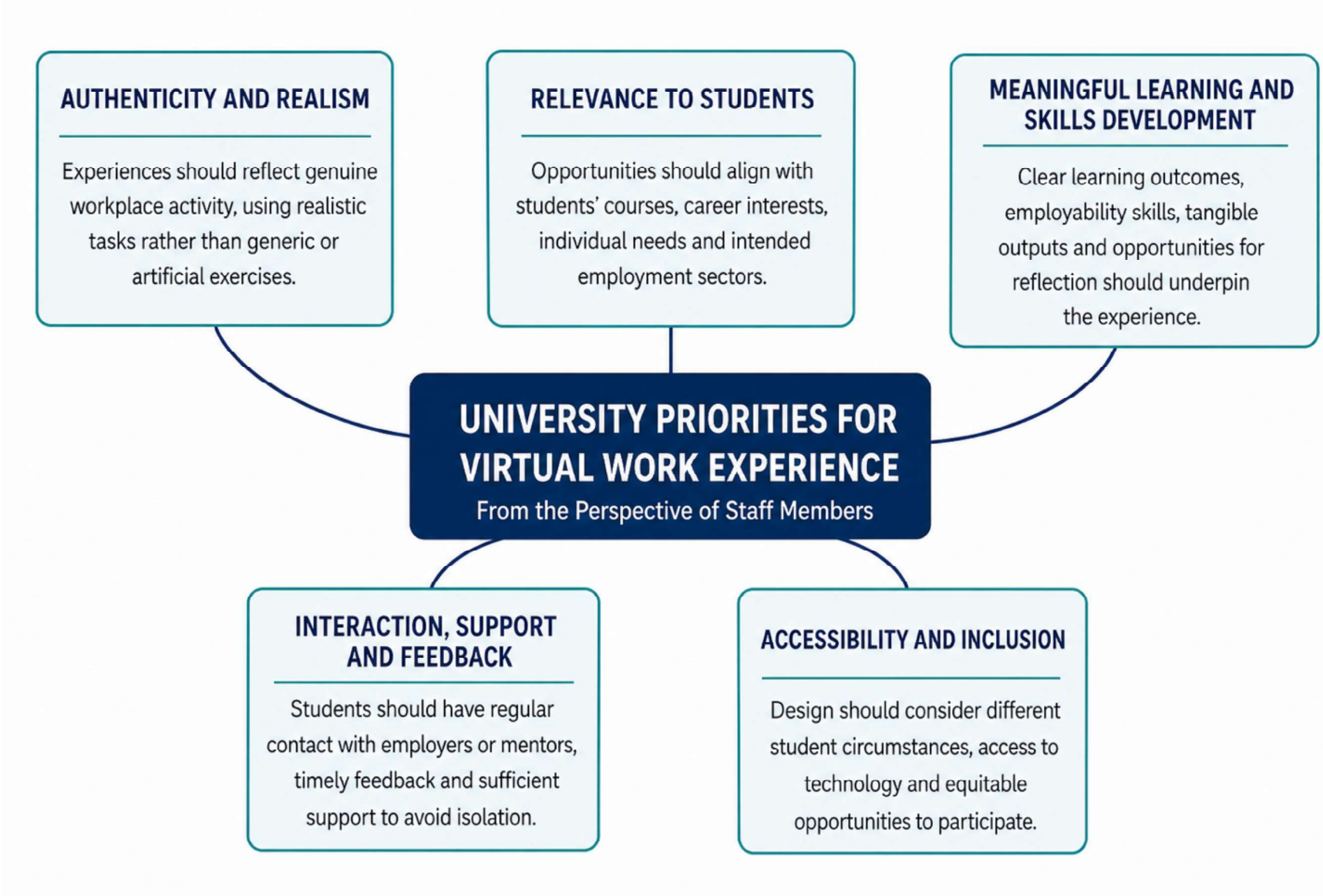


Figure 8.

Staff perceptions of university priorities for VWE.

Student perceptions of Virtual Work Experience (students who have completed VWE)

Students who had previously completed virtual work experience (VWE; *n* = 15) were asked to describe the type of experience they had undertaken (Figure 9). The most frequently reported category was virtual internships or professional work experience (*n* = 6), followed closely by online courses or skills development activities (*n* = 5). These experiences broadly align with the employer-led and simulated VWE models identified earlier in the research. Other reported activities included virtual workshops or workplace activities (*n* = 2) and a virtual ambassador role (*n* = 1). One response did not provide sufficient detail to determine the type of experience undertaken. Overall, the findings indicate that students had participated in a range of virtual opportunities, although internships and structured skills development activities accounted for most reported experiences.



Figure 9.

Types of VWE completed by students.

Participants were asked to indicate their level of study when they completed VWE (Figure 10). The most frequently reported levels were undergraduate study (n = 5) and postgraduate taught study (n = 5), followed by school or college (n = 3) and postgraduate research (n = 1). One response could not be clearly categorised. These findings indicate that participants had undertaken VWE at different stages of their education, although most reported doing so during undergraduate or postgraduate taught study.

Participants were also asked whether their VWE aligned with their course of study. Most respondents (n = 9) reported that their experience was relevant to their course, while four indicated that it was not and two were unsure. This suggests that VWE was generally perceived as relevant to participants' studies, although some had undertaken opportunities outside their academic discipline.

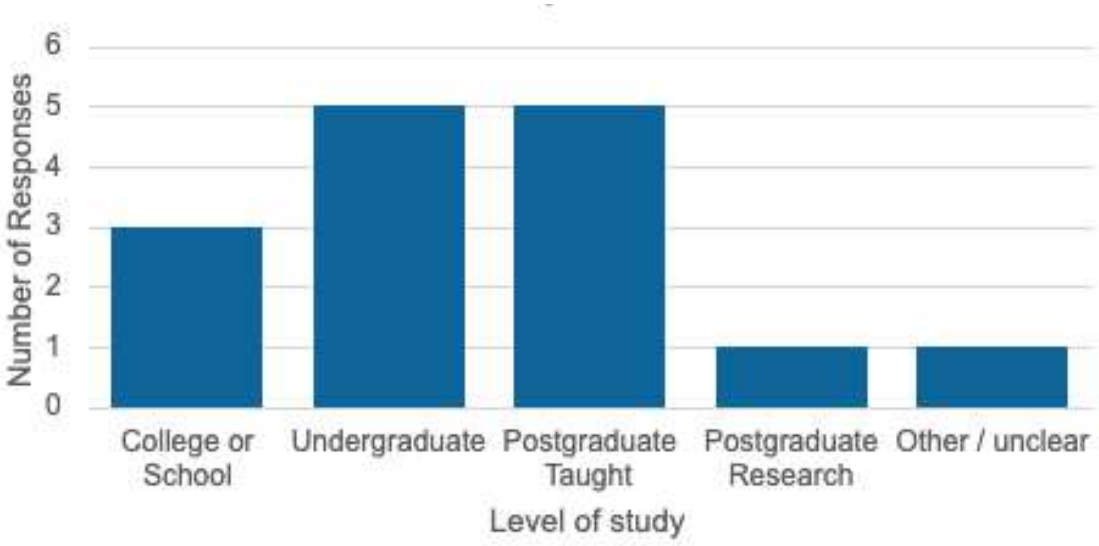


Figure 10.

Level of study when participating in VWE.

Student motivations for undertaking Virtual Work Experience

Analysis of the qualitative responses regarding students' motivations for undertaking virtual work experience identified four themes: future-focused development, accessible participation, institutional or workplace requirements, and personal and social development (Figure 11).

Future-focused development was reflected in responses highlighting the perceived value of VWE for employability and career exploration. Some participants viewed VWE as an opportunity to strengthen future applications, describing their motivations as wanting to "*strengthen my applicant profile*" or gain "*something to add to my CV*". Others were motivated by the opportunity to explore specific career paths and develop a better understanding of

professional environments. Examples included wanting "*to gain first-hand experience with my targeted career in law*", "*to help with jobs in environmental science*", and "*I needed work experience to understand the world of health*". These responses suggest that students were motivated both by the potential value of VWE to future employment applications and by opportunities to explore their career interests.

Accessible participation was another theme, with students identifying the practical advantages of virtual delivery. Participants referred to factors such as "*due to the distance*" and "*to save time and money*", suggesting that VWE provided opportunities that may otherwise have been difficult to access. Two respondents also reported undertaking VWE during the COVID-19 pandemic, when restrictions limited opportunities for in-person participation. Additionally, one participant described accessing an experience based in Africa that aligned with their personal interests but would have been difficult to undertake in person. These responses highlight the potential of VWE to reduce geographical and financial barriers while broadening the range of available opportunities.

In contrast, institutional or workplace requirements emerged as a motivation for some participants, indicating that participation was not always voluntary. One respondent explained that "*it wasn't a choice, it was compulsory to pass the modules at university*", while another stated, "*I had to for work*". These responses demonstrate that VWE was sometimes undertaken to fulfil educational or employment requirements rather than solely through personal interest. Such experiences were reported by participants who had completed VWE at different stages of their education.

Finally, personal and social development was identified as a motivation. One participant highlighted a desire to develop confidence in professional settings, particularly in "*leading conversations and activities*". This suggests that, alongside career-related motivations, some students viewed VWE as an opportunity to develop interpersonal skills and confidence in workplace interactions. However, the responses reflect students' reasons for participating rather than providing direct evidence that these outcomes were achieved.

Overall, the findings indicate that students undertook VWE for a range of reasons, including career preparation, exploration of professional interests, improved accessibility, compulsory requirements, and personal development. While some participants actively sought opportunities aligned with their goals, others participated because of institutional or workplace expectations, highlighting the diversity of motivations within this group.

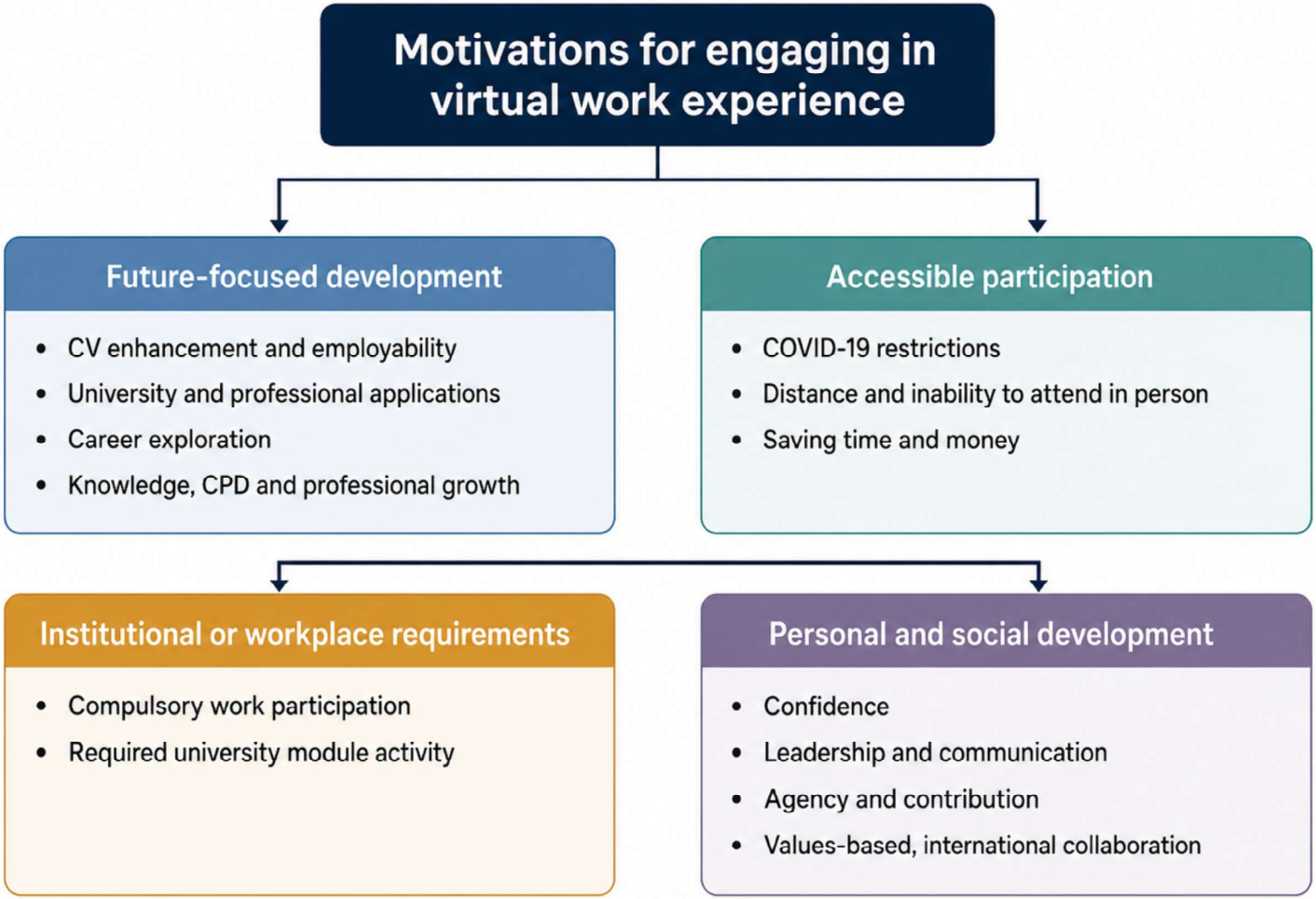


Figure 11.

Student reasons for participating in VWE.

Student experience of Virtual Work Experience

Figure 12 presents the responses of students who had completed virtual work experience to statements concerning overall satisfaction, career awareness, support, confidence, and the development of career-related skills. Responses were generally positive, with no participants strongly disagreeing with any of the statements. However, some variation was evident, particularly regarding the support received and the perceived contribution of VWE to confidence and skills development.

A small proportion of respondents (13.3%, $n = 2$) disagreed that they had felt supported during their experience. The same proportion disagreed that VWE had improved their confidence or helped them develop useful career skills. Further examination of individual responses suggested that some less positive evaluations were associated with experiences described as text-heavy, with limited guidance or feedback. Another respondent who expressed fewer positive views had undertaken VWE as a compulsory component of their course. Although these observations do not establish a direct relationship between experience design and student satisfaction, they suggest that opportunities for interaction, guidance, and feedback may influence how students perceive the value of VWE.

The strongest positive response concerned career-related skills development, with 46.7% of respondents ($n = 7$) strongly agreeing that their experience had helped them develop skills useful for their future careers. Examination of the experiences reported by these students suggested that some involved structured courses or opportunities for interaction with others. This may indicate the value of clearly defined activities and opportunities to apply or develop specific skills. In contrast, experiences characterised by extensive text-based activities and limited feedback appeared among some of the less positive responses.

Overall, the findings suggest that students generally valued their completed VWE, particularly its contribution to career-related skills development. However, the variation in responses highlights the potential importance of experience design, meaningful engagement, and appropriate support. As the survey relied on self-reported evaluations from a small sample, it is not possible to determine which specific features contributed to positive or negative perceptions. Nevertheless, these findings are consistent with the priorities identified by staff regarding authentic activities, clear learning outcomes, interaction, and feedback.

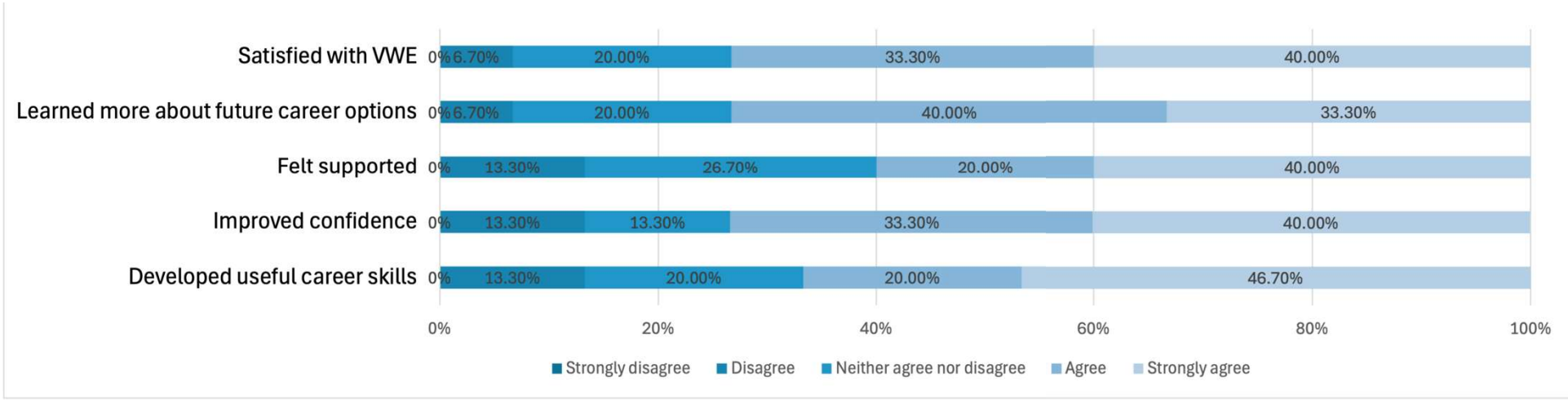


Figure 12.

Perspectives of students who have completed VWE.

Student reported challenges of Virtual Work Experience

Figure 13 presents the main challenges reported by students who had completed virtual work experience. The most frequently identified theme was technical difficulties, with participants reporting issues such as "*the courses not loading properly*" and "*some technical issues with software*". One respondent, who was already familiar with the software, suggested allowing students "*1-2 weeks to practice pupils how to use it*". These responses highlight the importance of reliable technology and adequate preparation to ensure that technical difficulties do not hinder participation.

Two further themes emerged with equal frequency (n = 3 each): time and self-management, and limited support, feedback and practical value. Challenges relating to time management were reflected in comments such as "*managing own time and staying committed to learning*". This suggests that the flexibility associated with VWE may also require students to demonstrate considerable independence and self-discipline. Although flexible participation can be beneficial, some students may require additional structure or guidance to manage their learning effectively.

Concerns regarding support, feedback and practical value were reflected in several responses. One participant questioned the employment value of their experience, stating that "*none of the employers I have applied to were interested*", while another reported that they "*was not given enough information to list in my CV*". These comments suggest that some students were uncertain about how to communicate the skills and experiences gained through VWE to prospective employers. Clearer information about learning outcomes, completed activities, and transferable skills may help students recognise and articulate the value of their participation.

Other respondents highlighted difficulties accessing support during their experiences. One participant explained that "*too many people in the virtual space makes it hard to ask for help*", suggesting that the organisation of online activities may affect opportunities for individual guidance. Another reported that "*there was never any feedback*" and expressed uncertainty about whether their completed work had been acknowledged. These responses indicate that limited interaction and feedback may reduce students' sense of engagement and achievement, potentially affecting their overall evaluation of VWE.

Overall, the findings suggest that students encountered challenges relating to technical accessibility, independent learning, and the availability of meaningful support and feedback. While the small sample limits the extent to which these experiences can be generalised, the responses highlight the importance of appropriate technical preparation, structured activities, accessible guidance, and clear feedback mechanisms. They also reinforce the need to help students understand and communicate the skills and experiences gained through VWE, particularly in relation to future employment opportunities.

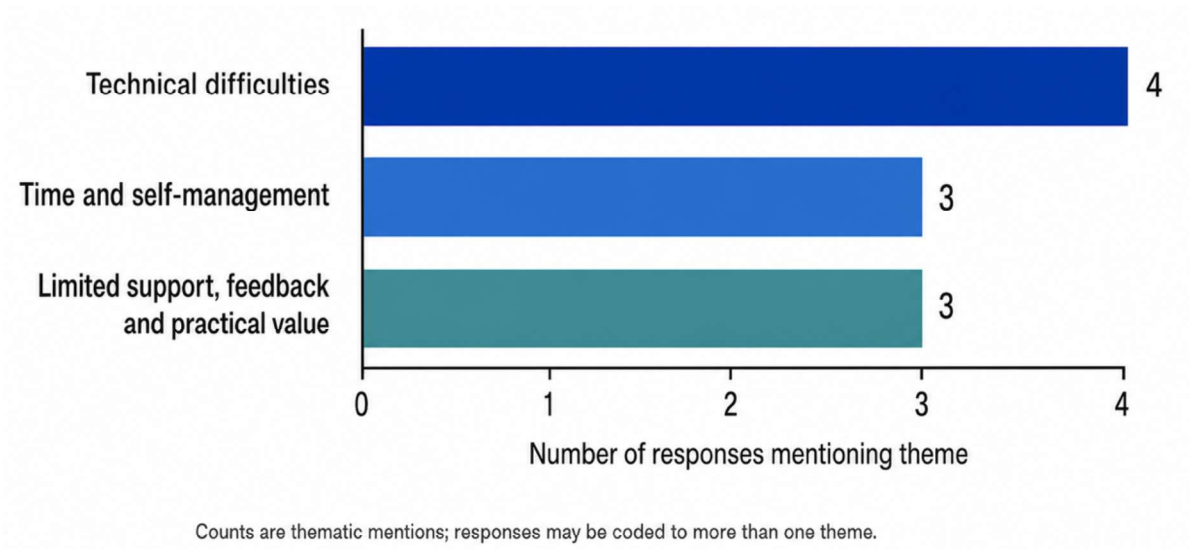


Figure 13.

Challenges experienced by students whilst completing VWE.

Student suggestions for improving Virtual Work Experience

The challenges identified by students were also reflected in their suggestions for improving VWE. Three themes emerged from the qualitative responses: increased feedback and support, greater interaction and engagement, and improved structure and organisation.

Increased feedback and support were identified as an important area for improvement. Although some participants had received support during their experiences, their responses suggested that the frequency and format of feedback could be improved. One participant stated that "*regular one-on-one feedback sessions would have greatly improved my experience*", while another highlighted the importance of "*direct feedback*". These responses suggest that students valued opportunities for personalised guidance and feedback to help them understand their progress and the outcomes of their work.

Greater interaction and engagement were another theme, although participants appeared to emphasise different forms of interaction. Some responses may reflect a desire for increased engagement with employers or those facilitating the experience, particularly when considered alongside requests for additional support and feedback. However, other comments focused on opportunities to interact with fellow participants. For example, one student suggested that "*a few informal virtual team building activities could have strengthened collaboration and team spirit across time zones*". Another recommended "*making it more interactive and rewarding*", although the specific improvements envisaged were unclear. These responses highlight the

potential value of incorporating opportunities for active participation, collaboration, and meaningful engagement within VWE.

Finally, improved structure and organisation emerged as an area for development. One participant recommended "*a more structured onboarding process, clearer task expectations*", suggesting that students valued clear guidance and preparation before undertaking their experiences. Another stated that they "*would opt for a better system*", although the response did not specify which aspects required improvement. These findings suggest that well-organised activities, clear expectations, and effective onboarding may contribute to a more positive experience.

Overall, students' suggestions for improvement closely reflected the challenges they had previously identified, particularly those relating to limited feedback, difficulties accessing support, and managing their participation. Although the small sample limits the generalisability of these findings, the responses highlight the potential importance of regular feedback, meaningful interaction, and clear organisational structures in supporting students throughout VWE.

Student perspectives on university priorities for Virtual Work Experience

Building on their suggestions for improving individual experiences, students were also asked what universities should consider when providing or supporting VWE opportunities. Three themes emerged: relevance and authenticity, accessibility and clear expectations, and support and meaningful interaction (Figure 14).

Relevance and authenticity were identified as important considerations. Participants emphasised the value of "*being able to offer a range of experiences*" and ensuring that opportunities matched students' interests and career aspirations. One participant suggested that universities should "*make sure that the virtual placement aligns with the individual students interests or/ and future career*". Authenticity was also highlighted, with another recommending that experiences should be designed "*to make them as close to what you will do in the job as possible*". These responses suggest that students valued opportunities involving realistic workplace activities that were relevant to their individual goals.

Students also considered how the value of VWE could be demonstrated to prospective employers. One participant highlighted "*CV use and skills for future jobs*", while another suggested providing "*certifications for completion*". These responses indicate that students valued opportunities to document their participation and communicate the skills developed through VWE. Universities may therefore have a role in helping students recognise and articulate the relevance of their experiences to future employment.

Accessibility and clear expectations formed another theme. One participant highlighted the importance of access to suitable technology, explaining that "*some universities allow their students to borrow laptops, which is incredibly useful to people who are not able to afford one*". This suggests that, although virtual delivery may reduce geographical and financial barriers, access to appropriate equipment remains an important consideration. Participants also

emphasised the need for clear information about available opportunities, including application processes, expected time commitments, and the organisations providing the experiences. These responses highlight the potential role of universities in ensuring that VWE is both accessible and clearly communicated to students.

Finally, support and meaningful interaction were identified as priorities. One participant suggested that VWE should "*in some way to contain a connection to a human which would replicate the real-world of remote working*". This highlights the importance of interpersonal engagement, even when professional activities are undertaken virtually. Another emphasised "*meaningful integration – ensuring students are treated as real contributors, not observers*", suggesting that students valued opportunities to participate actively and make meaningful contributions. The importance of ongoing support was also reflected in a recommendation that "*universities should prioritise strong supervisor-student check ins*". Together, these responses suggest that students expected universities to consider not only the availability of VWE opportunities but also the quality of interaction, supervision, and participation they provide.

Overall, the findings suggest that students wanted universities to prioritise relevant and authentic experiences, equitable access, clear expectations, and meaningful opportunities for interaction and support. While these priorities overlap with students' suggestions for improving their completed experiences, they extend the discussion to the role of universities in identifying, evaluating, and supporting VWE opportunities. The responses indicate that students considered the quality and educational value of an experience important considerations alongside its accessibility and availability.

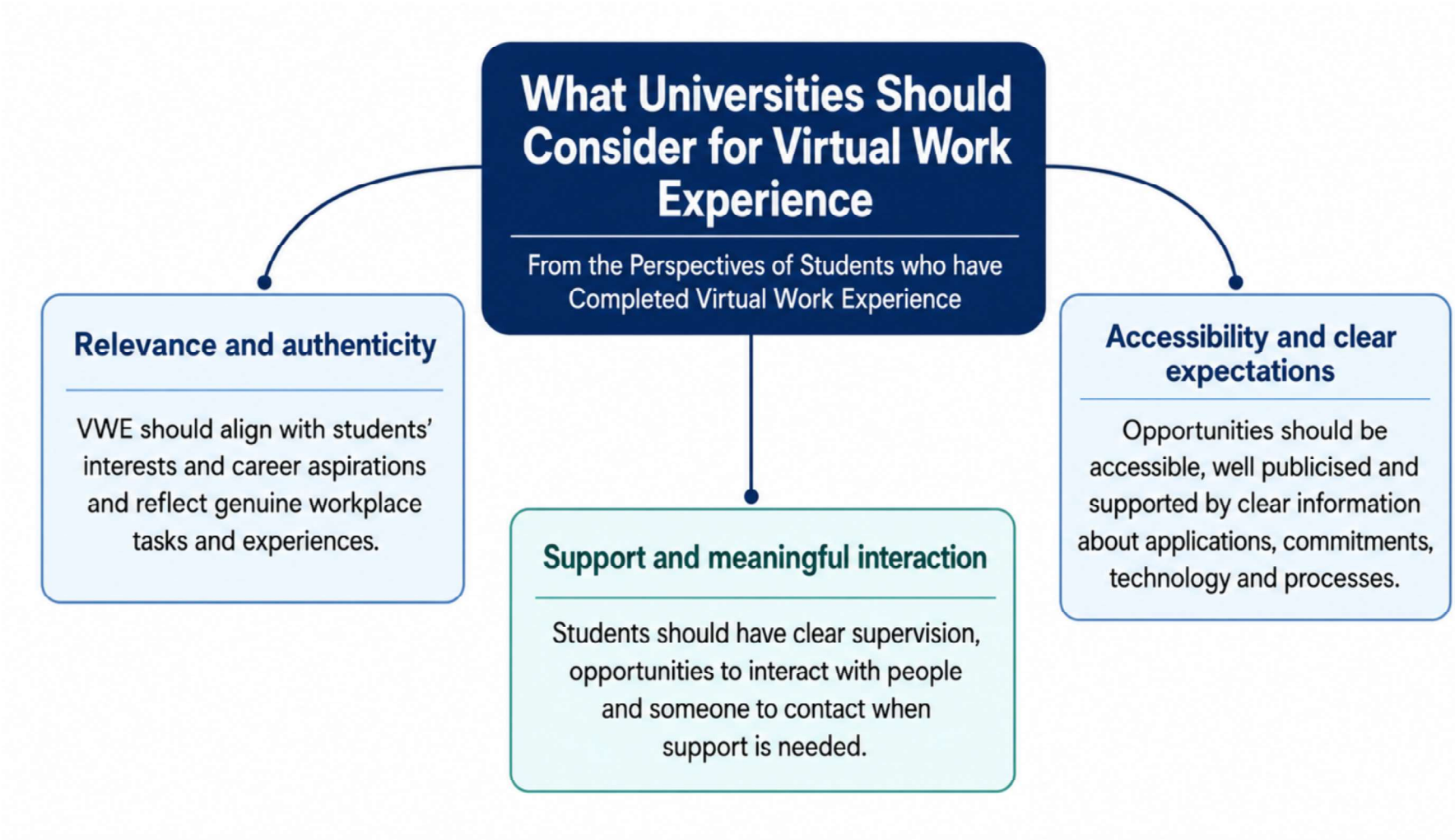


Figure 14.

Student perceptions of university priorities for VWE by students who have completed VWE.

Student perceptions of Virtual Work Experience (students who have not completed VWE)

Figure 15 presents the perceptions of students who had not previously completed virtual work experience. Responses were generally positive, particularly regarding its potential contribution to career exploration and learning. Most respondents agreed (41.7%) or strongly agreed (39.6%) that VWE could help students learn about career options. Similarly, 37.5% agreed and 39.6% strongly agreed that VWE represented a valuable learning opportunity. However, this statement also attracted the highest proportion of strongly disagree responses (8.3%), suggesting some variation in students' perceptions of its educational value.

Interest in undertaking VWE was also generally positive, with 35.4% agreeing and 33.3% strongly agreeing that they would be interested in participating. Nevertheless, 16.7% disagreed, 4.2% strongly disagreed, and 10.4% neither agreed nor disagreed. These findings suggest that, although most students who had not previously undertaken VWE recognised its potential benefits and expressed an interest in participating, a proportion remained uncertain or uninterested. This highlights variation in students' attitudes towards VWE and suggests that positive perceptions of its potential value do not necessarily translate into a willingness to participate.

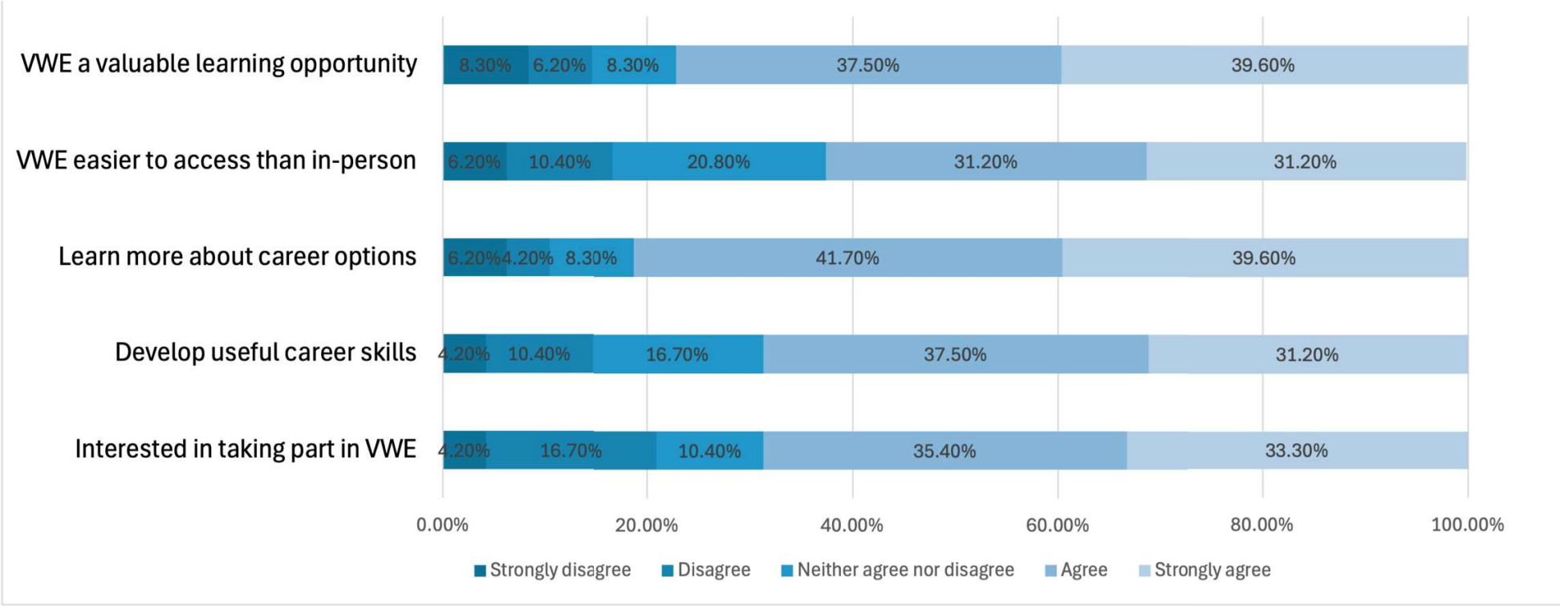


Figure 15.

Perspectives of students who have not completed VWE.

Student perceived barriers to participating in Virtual Work Experience

Understanding the barriers that may prevent students from participating in VWE is important, particularly among those who have not previously undertaken it. Analysis of the qualitative responses identified several concerns, including the authenticity and perceived value of VWE, time and competing commitments, limited awareness of opportunities, preferences for in-person experiences, practical and technological barriers, and financial considerations (Figure 16).

Authenticity and perceived value emerged as prominent concerns. Some participants questioned whether VWE could provide meaningful exposure to professional environments. One student stated that "*it doesn't feel like I'd be getting any real experience of the working world*", while another commented that it was "*not really work experience if you aren't contributing to the work*". These responses suggest that students may associate valuable work experience with opportunities to undertake genuine workplace tasks and make meaningful contributions. Concerns also extended to how employers might recognise VWE, with participants questioning whether "*employers did not value it as good experience*" and "*whether law firms would regard this as substantial work experience*". Together, these responses indicate that uncertainty about both the educational and employment value of VWE may discourage participation.

Time and competing commitments were another concern, appearing in 27% of responses. Some students highlighted difficulties balancing VWE with existing academic, employment, or personal responsibilities. Others emphasised the importance of flexible opportunities, particularly when managing disabilities or part-time employment. These responses suggest that flexibility may be an important consideration in enabling participation, although students' circumstances and requirements vary.

Limited awareness and availability of suitable opportunities also emerged as barriers. Participants referred to a "*lack of opportunities and information about it*" and a "*lack of awareness of suitable virtual work experience opportunities*." Others questioned whether relevant experiences were available in their areas of interest, with one participant identifying "*not having relevant opportunities to jobs I'm interested in*" as a concern. Additionally, 23% of responses reflected some form of uncertainty about VWE or indicated that participation was not currently a priority. These findings suggest that limited information, uncertainty about available opportunities, and perceived relevance may influence students' willingness to participate.

Preferences for in-person work experience were also evident. Although some participants recognised the potential value of VWE, they indicated that they would prioritise in-person opportunities where available. One student explained, "*I wouldn't want to replace an in person work experience opportunity with a virtual one but I would see value in doing a virtual experience in addition to a practical work experience*", while another stated that "*while it would be valuable, in-person would be much preferred*". Some participants also questioned the suitability of virtual delivery for specific career paths, with one noting that "*especially when working in psychology often in person roles are beneficial*". These responses suggest that some students viewed VWE as a useful complement to, rather than a replacement for, in-person experience.

Practical and technological barriers were identified by some participants, including access to suitable devices, distractions when working from home, and difficulties maintaining motivation. One student stated that "*it's difficult to stay motivated*", highlighting the potential challenges of independent participation. Others expressed concerns about online interaction, including "*anxiety about being on camera*" and "*fear*". These responses indicate that the virtual format may introduce barriers of its own, despite its potential to improve accessibility.

Finally, financial considerations emerged as a concern. Participants referred to "*expenses relating to funding the placement*" and questioned whether VWE could involve unpaid work that primarily benefited employers. One student stated, "*I am concerned that it is simply another method of creating work for companies without financially compensating the individual*" and expressed concern about situations "*where the subject pays for the opportunity*." These responses highlight potential concerns about the fairness and financial accessibility of VWE, particularly where students are expected to undertake unpaid tasks or pay to participate.

Overall, the findings suggest that barriers to VWE extend beyond practical accessibility. Students also expressed uncertainty about the authenticity, relevance, and recognition of virtual opportunities, alongside concerns about competing commitments, technological requirements, and financial fairness. While these responses reflect perceptions rather than necessarily demonstrating shortcomings in existing provision, they highlight factors that universities and providers may need to address when promoting and designing VWE. In particular, clearer information about available opportunities, realistic workplace activities, employer recognition, and appropriate support may help students make informed decisions about participation.

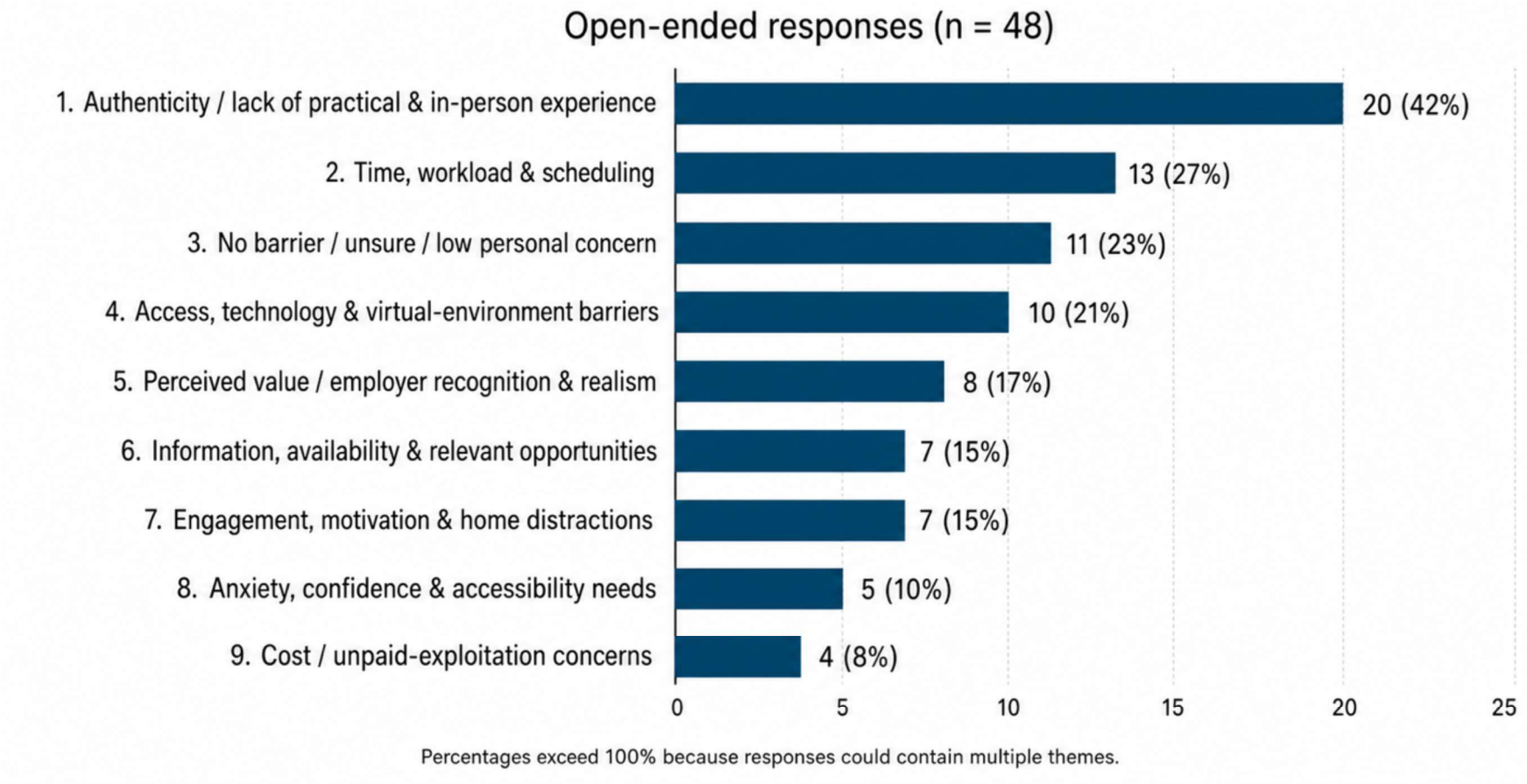


Figure 16.

Perceived barriers to participating in VWE by students who have not completed VWE.

Factors encouraging participation in Virtual Work Experience

Students who had not previously completed VWE were asked what would encourage them to participate. Four themes emerged from the qualitative responses: career relevance and skills development, flexibility and accessibility, inclusive participation, and clearer information about available opportunities (Figure 17).

Career relevance and skills development emerged as key factors encouraging participation. Students emphasised the importance of opportunities aligned with their career aspirations, highlighting motivations such as "*getting relevant experience*" and securing "*a position related to the field*". However, some respondents wanted greater clarity about the potential benefits of VWE, with one identifying "*being able to see what the benefits are*" as an important consideration. These responses suggest that students may be more willing to participate when the relevance of an experience and its potential contribution to their professional development are clearly communicated.

Flexibility and accessibility were also important considerations. Students valued the convenience of remote participation, with one stating that "*the online aspect makes it easy to engage with*". Another highlighted the advantages of "*being able to do it from home, anytime, different options that may not be in the area around me*". These responses suggest that virtual delivery may reduce geographical barriers and enable students to access opportunities that would otherwise be difficult to undertake. Closely related was inclusive participation, particularly the ability to engage in ways that suited individual needs and preferences. One participant explained, "*I find independent learning more comfortable than group work or public speaking, so an inclusive environment with different ways to participate would help me engage fully*." This contrasts with concerns raised by other students about the limited interpersonal interaction associated with virtual experiences. These differing perspectives highlight the importance of recognising individual preferences and offering varied approaches to participation, rather than assuming one format will suit all students.

Finally, clearer information and awareness of opportunities emerged as factors encouraging participation. Students highlighted the importance of "*knowing what is available and how to find them*" and suggested "*promotion through the university careers channel*" as a way of improving awareness. Another participant identified "*being able to pilot it to see if it's something I would like*" as a potential encouragement. These responses suggest that students valued accessible information and opportunities to understand what participation would involve before committing. They also highlight the potential role of university careers services in promoting VWE and helping students identify suitable experiences.

Overall, the findings suggest that students would be encouraged to participate in VWE if opportunities were relevant to their career interests, offered identifiable skills development, and provided flexibility and inclusive participation. Clear information about available opportunities and their potential benefits was also important. These findings complement the barriers identified in Figure 17, suggesting that improving awareness, communicating the value of VWE, and accommodating different participation needs may help encourage student engagement.

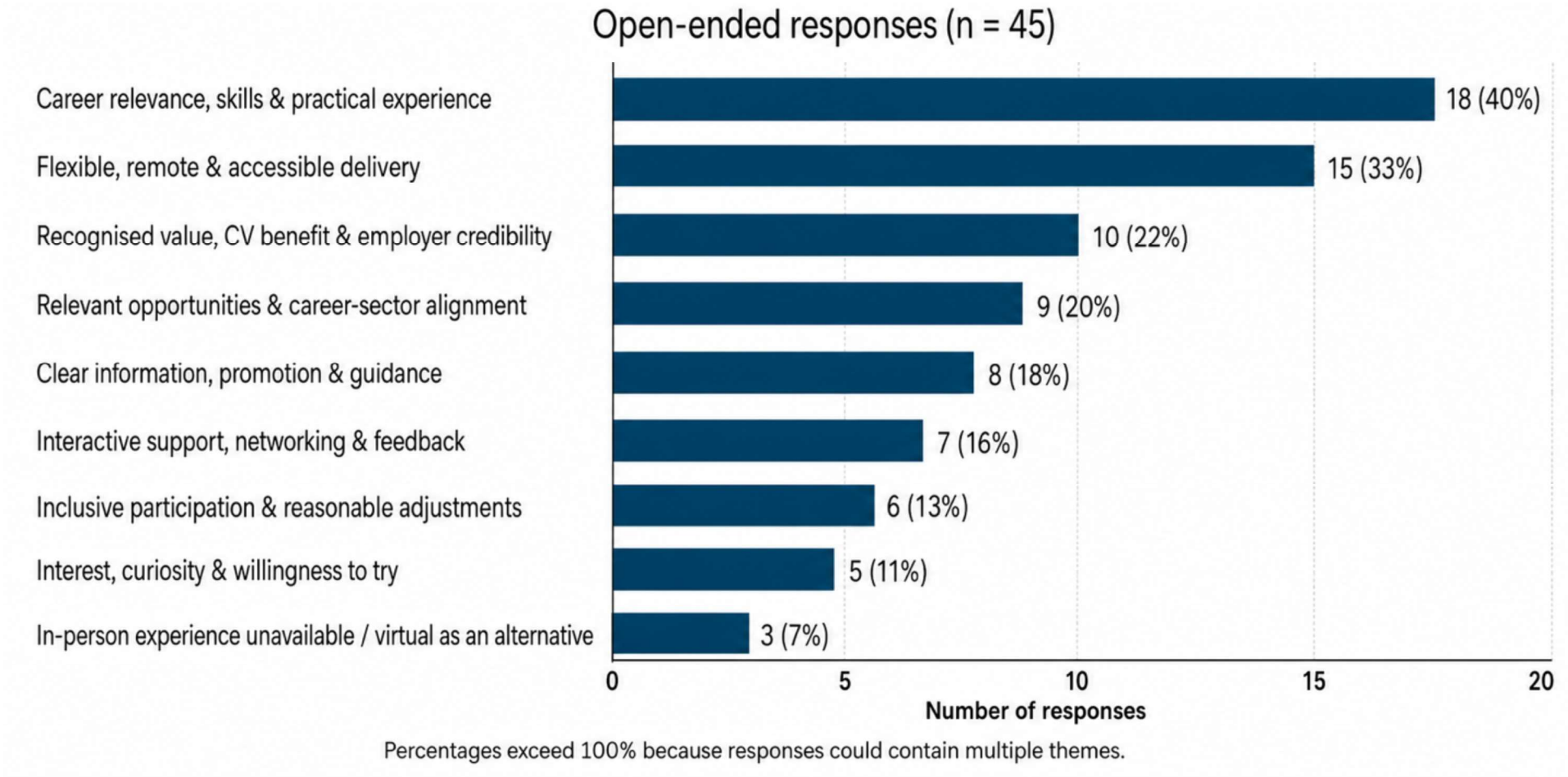


Figure 17.

Factors encouraging participation in VWE by students who have not completed VWE.

Preferred timing for Virtual Work Experience

Students who had not previously completed VWE were asked when they would prefer to participate. Responses varied, although many students favoured undertaking VWE after gaining some familiarity with university study or during periods when academic commitments were reduced (Figure 18).

First year was the most frequently identified stage, although six of the eleven responses in this category specifically favoured the end of first year. This preference appeared to reflect the importance of allowing students time to adjust to university life and develop foundational knowledge before undertaking work experience. One participant suggested that "*maybe first year could be too intense with adjusting to a new course and teaching style added on top*". Another indicated that completing VWE later in the year would allow students to acquire sufficient subject knowledge to benefit from the experience. These responses suggest that the timing of VWE may influence students' confidence and perceived readiness to participate.

Summer and longer academic breaks were the second most frequently preferred period. Although participants did not provide specific reasons for these preferences, undertaking VWE outside teaching periods may offer greater flexibility and reduce potential conflicts with academic commitments. This is consistent with concerns about workload and time management identified elsewhere in the survey.

Some students favoured completing VWE towards the end of first year or during second year, particularly to support their preparation for employment. One participant explained that "*it would give me the opportunity to build the skills and evidence them before I start looking for work at the end of my degree*". Another highlighted potential benefits across different stages, suggesting that "*first and second year could be beneficial to develop skills when workloads are smaller, but third year would ensure graduates receive recent work experience for when they commence job searches*". These responses indicate that students recognised different potential advantages depending on when VWE was undertaken.

Third year was also identified as a suitable time, particularly because of its proximity to graduation and employment. One participant referred to "*all of third year opportunities as we enter the real world.*" However, others acknowledged the potential difficulty of balancing VWE with final-year academic demands. One respondent suggested that "*your third year or summer breaks are also great options, especially if you can balance it with your academic workload*". This highlights the importance of considering academic workload when determining suitable opportunities for participation.

Individual circumstances also influenced preferences. One participant favoured third year because "*during first year it was difficult to do anything but adjust to uni life due to chronic health issues*". Conversely, some students felt that the year of study was less important than the availability of suitable opportunities. One respondent stated that the "*year of study doesn't matter, as long as it is at an available time/day (evenings or weekends).*" Another simply responded "*whenever*", suggesting that flexibility may be more important than a particular stage of study.

One participant also suggested that VWE could be beneficial before entering university, helping students "*get some idea before going into first year where you get hands on*". This indicates a potential role for VWE in early career exploration and preparation for higher education, although this perspective was less commonly expressed.

Overall, the findings suggest that there is no single preferred stage for undertaking VWE. While first year, particularly towards its end, was the most frequently identified period, students also recognised benefits during academic breaks, later years of study, and before university. Preferences appeared to reflect a combination of academic readiness, career preparation, workload, and individual circumstances. These findings highlight the potential value of offering flexible opportunities at different stages of students' educational journeys.

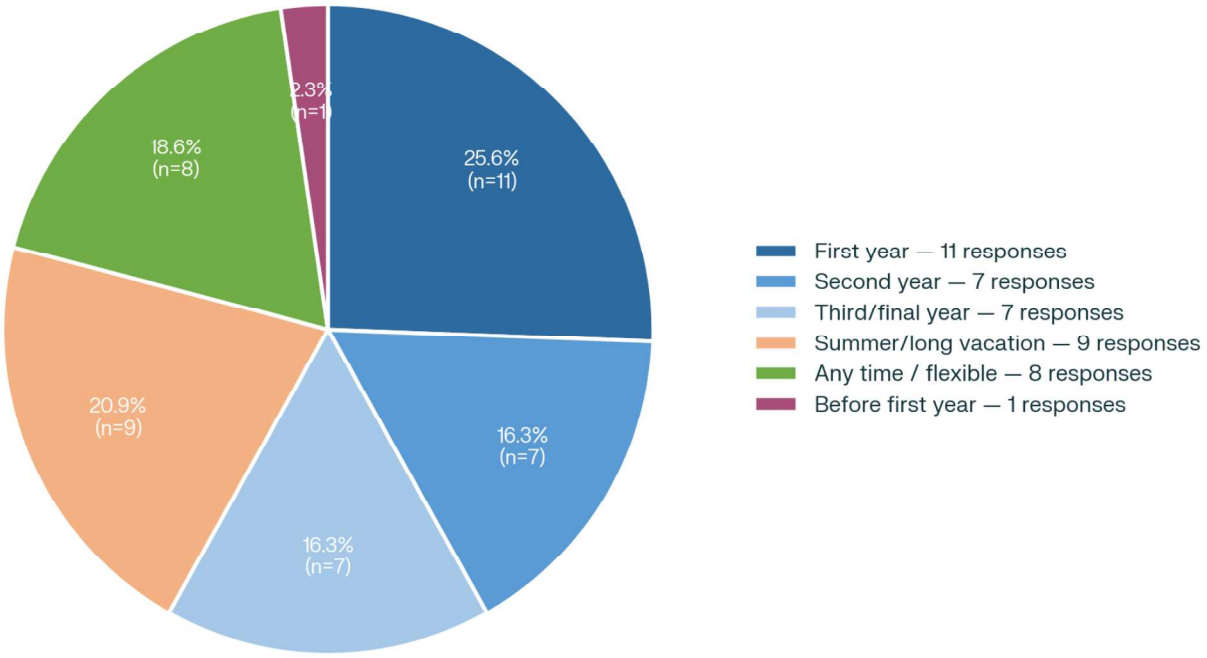


Figure 18.

Preferred timings for VWE by students who have not completed VWE.

Student perspectives on university priorities for Virtual Work Experience

Figure 19 presents the perspectives of students who had not previously completed VWE on what universities should consider when providing or supporting these opportunities. Three main themes emerged: authenticity and career relevance, accessibility and flexibility, and engagement and support.

Authenticity and career relevance were important priorities, reflecting concerns identified in earlier survey responses. Students emphasised that VWE should involve realistic workplace

activities, provide meaningful learning opportunities, and develop skills that could be demonstrated to prospective employers. One participant suggested that universities should ensure tasks were realistic, reflected the standards and expectations of in-person placements, and were tailored to students' future career interests. Similarly, others highlighted the importance of determining "*if it is providing actual value and real-life experience to the students and not just being a tick-box exercise*" and ensuring that experiences were "*to be as realistic as possible*". These responses suggest that students expected universities to consider the authenticity and educational value of VWE opportunities.

However, participants expressed differing views on how closely VWE should align with specific career aspirations. One student argued that "most *people do NOT know what they want to do. Work experience shouldn't be specific to the jobs we want to do it should instead introduce jobs and provide actual ways we can get there realistically*". This highlights the potential value of VWE for career exploration, rather than solely preparation for an established career goal. Another participant called for greater diversity in available opportunities, stating, "*not having them all be about business/finance/tech - make opportunities for people who are interested in going into other types of field*s". These responses suggest that universities should consider both the relevance and breadth of opportunities, recognising that students may be at different stages of career decision-making.

Engagement and support also emerged as important considerations. Several participants emphasised the need for activities that maintained students' interest and encouraged meaningful participation. One respondent suggested, "*make sure it's actually engaging and not just tasks that last 5-10 minutes. Makes class bonding more likely if you are able to spend a longer period of time problem solving rather than a short brainstorm/chat.*" Although this perspective may be particularly relevant to collaborative experiences, it highlights the potential value of sustained activities and opportunities for interaction. Other participants referred more generally to "*making it engaging*" and considering "*the variety of work and how engaging it is to students*".

Alongside engagement, students highlighted the importance of guidance and supervision. One participant stated that "*it is also super important to have support available, like mentors or clear instructions, so students do not feel lost or overwhelmed*". Another emphasised "*effective supervision/mentorship so students are able to grow/learn*". These responses suggest that students valued clear instructions, accessible support, and opportunities to learn from experienced professionals. They also reinforce concerns raised elsewhere in the survey about the potential limitations of VWE when meaningful interaction and feedback are absent.

Finally, accessibility and flexibility were identified as priorities for universities. One participant suggested that "*universities should offer flexible options, like letting students work at their own pace or in their own time, so it fits around their live*s". Another emphasised the importance of inclusive provision, recommending clear instructions, self-paced learning where possible, and different ways to participate. This participant noted that not all students were comfortable with group work or public speaking and suggested that alternative forms of engagement could help broaden participation. These responses highlight the importance of

accommodating different circumstances and preferences while maintaining meaningful opportunities for skills development.

Students also considered how VWE could fit alongside existing academic commitments. One participant identified "*how it will work around the lecture/assignment schedule*" as an important consideration. This suggests that universities may need to account for academic workload when scheduling or integrating VWE into students' programmes. Although preferences for flexibility varied, the responses indicate that students valued opportunities that could be undertaken without creating unnecessary conflicts with their studies or other responsibilities.

Overall, the findings suggest that students expected universities to prioritise authentic and relevant experiences, meaningful engagement, appropriate support, and accessible delivery. Importantly, the responses also highlight differences in students' needs and expectations. While some favoured opportunities aligned with established career interests, others valued broader career exploration. Similarly, preferences for independent and collaborative participation varied. These findings suggest that universities may benefit from offering a diverse range of VWE opportunities while ensuring that each provides clear educational value, appropriate guidance, and flexibility to accommodate different student circumstances.

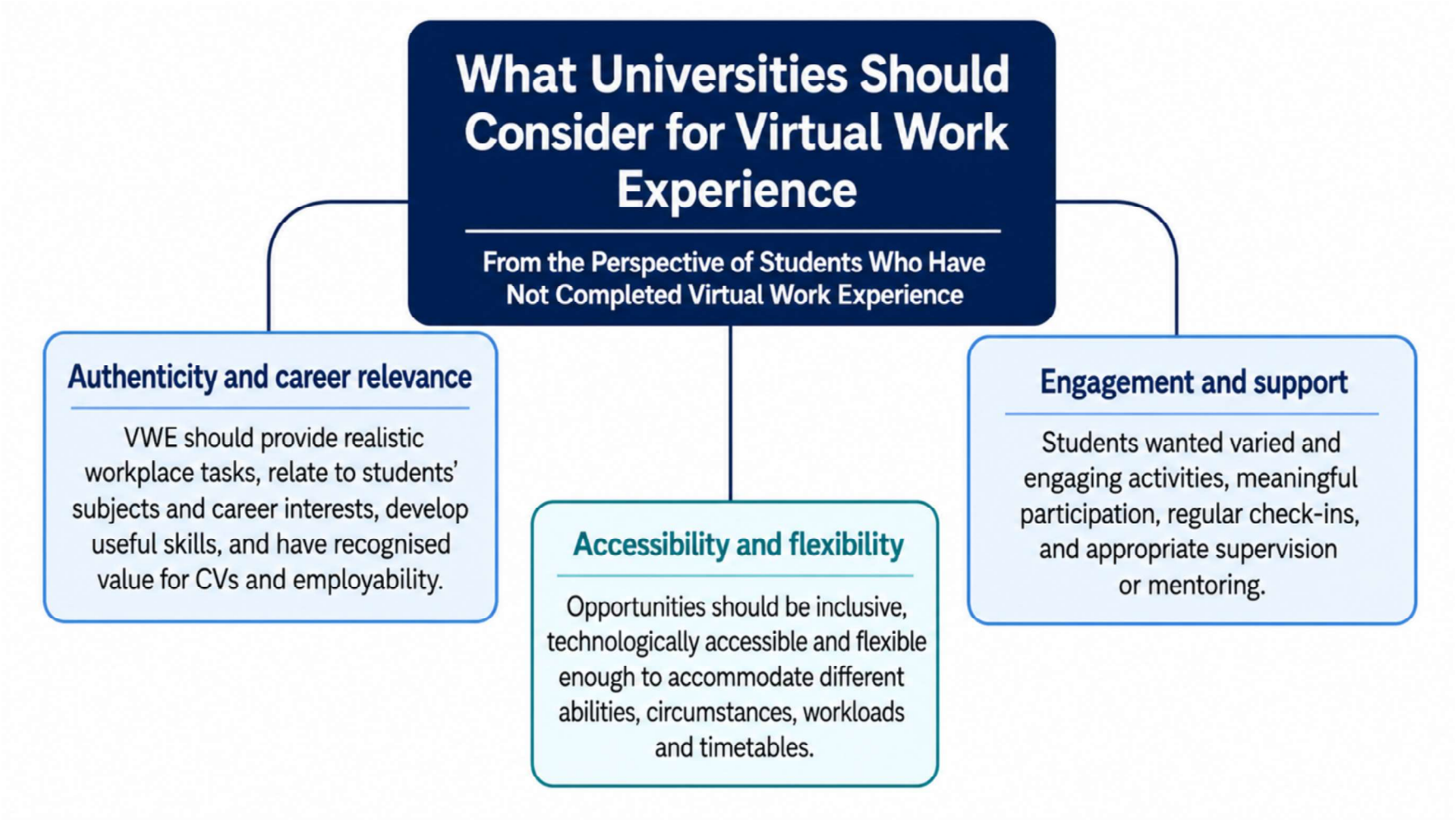


Figure 19.

Student perceptions of university priorities for VWE by students who have not completed VWE.

Summary of stakeholder perspectives

Across the three stakeholder groups, university staff, students who had completed virtual work experience, and students who had not previously participated, there was broad agreement about the potential benefits of VWE for career exploration, employability, skills development, and accessibility. However, the groups approached these benefits from different perspectives, with staff reflecting on their professional understanding of VWE, students with prior experience drawing on their participation, and students without experience expressing expectations and concerns.

Career exploration and employability were consistently identified as important benefits. Staff valued the opportunity for students to explore different professional environments and career pathways in a relatively low-pressure setting. Students who had completed VWE highlighted its potential contribution to their CVs, employment applications, and understanding of specific career fields. Similarly, students without prior experience expressed interest in opportunities aligned with their career aspirations and emphasised the importance of developing relevant skills. These findings suggest a shared perception that VWE can support career development, although the anticipated benefits may differ from those experienced by participants.

Accessibility and flexibility were also recognised across all three groups. Staff viewed VWE as a means of widening access for students who may face barriers to in-person work experience. Students who had completed VWE valued the reduced travel, time, and financial demands, with some reporting that virtual delivery enabled them to access opportunities that would otherwise have been difficult to undertake. Students without prior experience similarly identified remote participation and access to opportunities beyond their geographical area as potential advantages. However, concerns about suitable technology, technical difficulties, and the suitability of home environments were also evident. This suggests that while VWE may reduce some barriers to participation, virtual delivery does not automatically ensure accessibility.

A further area of agreement concerned the relationship between virtual and in-person work experience. Staff expressed concerns about VWE replacing rather than complementing in-person opportunities. Similarly, some students without prior experience indicated that they would prefer VWE as an additional opportunity rather than a substitute for practical workplace experience. Students who had completed VWE also described circumstances in which virtual participation had provided an alternative when in-person opportunities were inaccessible, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. Together, these perspectives suggest that VWE may be particularly valued as a complementary or alternative form of work experience, although preferences may vary depending on students' circumstances and career interests.

Concerns about authenticity and educational value were prominent across the stakeholder groups. Staff associated high-quality VWE with realistic workplace activities, meaningful tasks, employer interaction, and clearly defined learning outcomes. Students who had completed VWE reported fewer positive perceptions of experiences characterised by extensive text-based

activities, limited feedback, and restricted opportunities for interaction. Meanwhile, students without prior experience questioned whether virtual activities would involve genuine workplace contributions and whether employers would recognise them as credible work experience. These findings suggest that authenticity is important not only to the perceived educational value of VWE but also to students' willingness to participate.

Interaction, feedback, and clear expectations were further shared priorities. Staff indicated that they would be more willing to promote opportunities involving employer contact, structured mentoring, meaningful activities, and feedback. Students who had completed VWE identified limited support and feedback among their challenges, recommending more regular guidance, clearer onboarding, and greater opportunities for interaction. Students without prior experience similarly emphasised the importance of supervision, accessible support, and clear information about what participation would involve. Across the groups, these responses highlight the perceived importance of meaningful engagement and appropriate guidance throughout VWE.

Some differences between stakeholder perspectives were also evident. Staff placed greater emphasis on educational quality, institutional support, and the resources required to promote or integrate VWE effectively. Students who had completed VWE provided more specific insights into practical challenges, including technical difficulties, time management, and insufficient feedback. In contrast, students without prior experience expressed uncertainty about the availability, relevance, and employer recognition of opportunities. These differences suggest that universities may need to consider both the quality of existing provision and how opportunities are communicated to prospective participants.

Overall, the findings indicate that stakeholders generally recognised the potential value of VWE but emphasised the importance of its design, delivery, and support. Accessible and flexible participation, authentic workplace activities, clear learning outcomes, meaningful interaction, and regular feedback emerged as consistent priorities. The findings also highlight a potential role for universities in identifying suitable opportunities, communicating their educational and career relevance, and helping students demonstrate the skills developed to prospective employers.

Nevertheless, the findings should be interpreted as indicative rather than representative of wider staff and student populations, particularly given the small sample of students who had completed VWE. Furthermore, expectations expressed by students without prior experience cannot be directly equated with evaluations based on participation. Despite these limitations, the shared priorities identified across the stakeholder groups provide useful insights into how universities might strengthen the quality, accessibility, and perceived value of VWE provision.

Objective 4: Recommendations

The literature review, environmental scan, and stakeholder survey findings demonstrate that virtual work experience (VWE) encompasses a diverse range of opportunities rather than a single, standardised intervention. The 19 providers identified through the environmental scan varied in their target audiences, duration, cost, task structure, employer involvement, feedback, and assessment. Consequently, universities should evaluate the quality and educational value of individual opportunities rather than assuming all forms of VWE provide comparable experiences.

Across the three strands of research, four potential benefits emerged: improved accessibility, flexibility, career exploration, and skills development. However, concerns were also identified regarding digital exclusion, authenticity, limited interaction, and insufficient support. The survey findings reinforced the literature's emphasis on meaningful tasks, clear expectations, supervision, and feedback. Students who had completed VWE reported practical benefits alongside challenges involving technology, time management, and limited support. Those without prior experience valued career relevance and flexibility but expressed uncertainty about the credibility and employer recognition of VWE. Staff similarly recognised its potential benefits while raising concerns about quality and the possibility of replacing in-person opportunities.

Together, these findings suggest that VWE may be most appropriately positioned as a complement to in-person work experience rather than a direct substitute. It can support early career exploration, provide access to opportunities beyond students' geographical locations, and facilitate professional skills development. Different delivery models may serve different purposes. Employer-led opportunities may offer greater professional interaction and organisational insight, while simulations can provide structured, repeatable activities in a lower-pressure environment. Hybrid approaches may combine elements of both. However, no single model is inherently superior, as suitability depends on learning objectives, disciplinary context, student needs, and implementation quality.

For universities, the findings highlight the importance of considering educational quality alongside accessibility. Effective provision requires careful selection of opportunities, inclusive design, clear student guidance, meaningful interaction, appropriate support, and opportunities for reflection and recognition of learning. Evaluation should also distinguish between participation, satisfaction, perceived skills development, and demonstrable educational or employment outcomes.

Although the relatively small, self-selecting student samples and descriptive analysis limit the generalisability of the survey findings, the convergence of evidence across the three research strands provides a useful foundation for institutional practice. The following recommendations identify priorities for selecting, integrating, supporting, and evaluating VWE opportunities within higher education.

1. **Adopt a complementary model.** Position VWE as an additional and, where appropriate, alternative route to in-person work experience. Recognise its potential for career exploration, preparation, and skills development without assuming that it can replace the social, cultural, and practical learning available in every in-person setting.
2. **Quality-assure individual opportunities.** Evaluate each opportunity against its intended learning outcomes, task authenticity, employer involvement, accessibility, supervision, feedback, safeguarding, workload, and costs. Consider the provider's reliability, the fairness of unpaid activities, and the educational value offered before promoting or embedding an experience. Review approved opportunities periodically as provision changes.
3. **Communicate the offer clearly.** Explain whether an opportunity is employer-led, simulated, or hybrid, and provide accessible information about eligibility, duration, expected commitments, technology requirements, costs, learning outcomes, assessment, feedback, and available evidence of completion. Clearly distinguish employer involvement from employer endorsement.
4. **Improve awareness and support informed choice.** Promote VWE through university careers services, academic departments, and other appropriate student communication channels. Provide opportunities across different disciplines and career interests, including experiences designed for students who are still exploring their options. Help students compare opportunities and understand their potential benefits and limitations before participating.
5. **Design for accessibility and equity.** Use accessible platforms and materials, provide reasonable adjustments and alternative participation formats, and consider students' access to suitable equipment, connectivity, and working environments. Account for disability, caring responsibilities, paid employment, financial constraints, and screen fatigue, recognising that virtual delivery does not automatically ensure inclusion.
6. **Prepare learners and supervisors.** Provide appropriate onboarding covering digital platforms, online communication, time management, help-seeking, confidentiality, learning expectations, and professional conduct. Ensure supervisors or facilitators understand their responsibilities for providing inclusive guidance, monitoring progress, and supporting students remotely.
7. **Build in meaningful interaction and feedback.** Where appropriate to the duration and delivery model, provide named contacts, regular check-ins, timely task-specific feedback, peer collaboration, and opportunities for professional interaction or networking. For self-paced simulations, offer clear exemplars, structured feedback, and guided reflection to support learning where direct employer contact is unavailable.
8. **Make learning authentic and demonstrable.** Prioritise realistic, career-relevant tasks with clear purposes, learning outcomes, and opportunities for meaningful participation. Support students to recognise and articulate the skills developed through appropriate work outputs, feedback, reflective records, or certificates. Provide guidance on presenting

these experiences in CVs, applications, and interviews without overstating their equivalence to employment or employer endorsement.

9. **Integrate VWE flexibly and purposefully.** Consider opportunities for early career exploration, progressive skills development, and preparation for later placements or employment. Offer flexible access across different stages of study, including academic breaks and, where appropriate, curriculum-based activities. Align the timing, duration, and intensity of experiences with students' academic workloads, prior knowledge, and individual circumstances.
10. **Monitor quality, participation, and outcomes.** Evaluate accessibility, participation, completion, withdrawal, satisfaction, interaction, feedback, and learning outcomes. Where feasible, examine longer-term career and employment outcomes, alongside differences between student groups and VWE delivery models. Use findings to improve provision while distinguishing self-reported benefits and descriptive associations from demonstrated skills development or causal effects.

Conclusion

Virtual work experience (VWE) is a diverse and evolving form of work-based learning with the potential to widen participation, support career exploration, and develop students' confidence, professional understanding, and employability-related skills. Through a structured literature review, an environmental scan of 19 providers, and surveys of university staff and students, this report has examined the opportunities, challenges, and considerations associated with VWE in higher education. The findings demonstrate considerable variation in provision, including differences in task structure, duration, costs, employer involvement, interaction, and feedback. Consequently, the educational value of VWE cannot be determined by its delivery model or platform alone.

Across the three strands of research, several consistent priorities emerged. Authentic and purposeful activities, clear learning outcomes, accessible technology, appropriate preparation, meaningful interaction, supervision, and feedback were identified as important features of high-quality provision. Flexibility and accessibility were widely recognised as potential benefits, particularly for students facing geographical, financial, or personal barriers to in-person opportunities. However, virtual delivery does not automatically ensure equitable participation. Technological difficulties, unsuitable working environments, competing commitments, limited interaction, and insufficient support may create additional challenges. Staff and students also expressed concerns about the authenticity and credibility of VWE, including whether the experiences provide meaningful learning and are valued by prospective employers.

Taken together, the findings support positioning VWE as a complement to in-person work experience, while recognising its potential as an alternative where traditional opportunities are inaccessible or unsuitable. Universities have an important role in selecting and quality-assuring opportunities, communicating their purpose and expectations, supporting informed student choice, and ensuring that provision is inclusive and educationally meaningful. Students should also be supported to reflect on their experiences and communicate the knowledge and skills gained to prospective employers.

Nevertheless, the conclusions must be considered alongside the limitations of the evidence. The existing literature remains heavily reliant on self-reported outcomes, while the relatively small, self-selecting student samples in the present study limit the generalisability of the survey findings. Further research is needed to examine employer perceptions of VWE, compare outcomes across different delivery models, and investigate whether participation contributes to demonstrable skills development and longer-term employment outcomes. Greater attention should also be given to accessibility and the experiences of students from different backgrounds.

Overall, VWE offers opportunities to broaden access to work-related learning within higher education, but its benefits depend on the quality, relevance, and accessibility of individual experiences. A considered, evidence-informed approach to its selection, delivery, and evaluation will be essential to ensuring that VWE provides meaningful opportunities for students' learning and career development.

References

Bailey, T. R., Hughes, K. L., & Moore, D. T. (2004). *Working knowledge: Work-based learning and education reform*. Routledge-Falmer.

Bayerlein, L. (2015). Curriculum innovation in undergraduate accounting degree programmes through "virtual internships." *Education + Training*, *57*(6), 673–684. https://doi.org/10.1108/et-09-2014-0110

Bayerlein, L., & Jeske, D. (2018). The potential of computer-mediated internships for higher education. *International Journal of Educational Management*, *32*(4), 526–537. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijem-11-2016-0254

Bell, A., Bartimote, K., Mercer-Mapstone, L., & Norman, P. (2022). Equity and online work integrated learning: A qualitative research synthesis. *Teaching in Higher Education*, 1–17. https://doi.org/10.1080/13562517.2022.2152191

Bordi, L., Okkonen, J., Mäkiniemi, J.-P., & Heikkilä-Tammi, K. (2018). Communication in the digital work environment: Implications for wellbeing at work. *Nordic Journal of Working Life Studies*, *8*(S3). https://doi.org/10.18291/njwls.v8is3.105275

British Council. (2022). *What are work placements?* https://study-uk.britishcouncil.org/why-study/succeed-your-career/work-placements

Brook, J., Kemp, C., & Abbott, S. (2023). Evaluation of a virtual placement for mental health nursing students: A pilot study. *The Journal of Mental Health Training Education and Practice*, *18*(5), 366–376. https://doi.org/10.1108/jmhtep-10-2022-0082

Cimatti, B. (2016). Definition, development, assessment of soft skills and their role for the quality of organizations and enterprises. *International Journal for Quality Research*, *10*(1), 97–130. https://doi.org/10.18421/IJQR10.01-05

Crisp, P. M. (2018). Coaching placements and incidental learning - how reflection and experiential learning can help bridge the industry skills gap. *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education, 13*. https://doi.org/10.47408/jldhe.v0i13.442

Dean, B. A. (2025). The employability agenda: Embedding work-integrated and Career Development Learning in every degree. *Change: The Magazine of Higher Learning*, *57*(6), 14–21. https://doi.org/10.1080/00091383.2025.2568347

Donnelly, A. (2003). Creating virtual placements for student nurses. *Nursing Management*, *10*(4), 19–21. https://doi.org/10.7748/nm2003.07.10.4.19.c1932

Dovidio, J. F., Pearson, A. R., & Penner, L. A. (2018). Aversive racism, implicit bias, and microaggressions. *Microaggression Theory*, 16–31. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119466642.ch2

Edgar, A. K., Armitage, J. A., Arambewela-Colley, N., Chong, L. X., & Narayanan, A. (2023). Virtual simulated international placements as an innovation for internationalisation in undergraduate programs: A mixed methods study. *BMC Medical Education*, *23*(1). https://doi.org/10.1186/s12909-023-04260-x

Felstead, A., Davies, R., Gallie, D., Green, F., Henseke, G., & Zhou, Y. (2026). The spatial anatomy of working at home: Concepts, measures and types of spaces used. *Industrial Relations Journal*, *57*(4), 274–286. https://doi.org/10.1111/irj.70032

Fennell, A. (2024). Entry level jobs statistics & report | UK 2024. StandOut CV. https://standout-cv.com/stats/entry-level-jobs-statistics-report

Fernandez, M. E., Gonzalez, V. I., Torrejon, P. S., & Nurski, L. (2025). *Work in the digital era: How technology is transforming work and occupations*. JRC Publications Repository. https://doi.org/10.2760/0956105

Fletcher, T. (2023). Using a virtual learning environment to enhance reflective practice in work-based learning. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, *13*(6), 1339–1353. https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-10-2020-0231

Forage. (2021). *Forage*. https://www.theforage.com/

Forage. (2023). *UK awards list*. https://education.theforage.com/uk-awards-list

Francis-Devine, B., & Booth, L. (2026). *High cost of living: Impact on households*. House of Commons Library. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/CBP-10100/

Franks, P. C., & Oliver, G. C. (2012). Experiential learning and international collaboration opportunities: Virtual internships. *Library Review*, *61*(4), 272–285.

Frenette, A. (2021). Growing divides: Historical and emerging inequalities in arts internships. SNAAP special report. *Strategic National Arts Alumni Project*.

Froese, F. J., Blay, T., Gibson, C. B., Shaffer, M. A., & Benitez, J. (2025). Global virtual work: A review, integrative framework, and future research opportunities. *Journal of International Business Studies*, *56*, 691–719. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41267-025-00775-1

Gatsby Benchmarks. (2024). *Gatsby benchmarks explained.* https://www.gatsbybenchmarks.org.uk/

Gill, R. J. (2020). Graduate employability skills through online internships and projects during the COVID-19 pandemic: An Australian example. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability*, *11*(1), 146–158. https://doi.org/10.21153/jtlge2020vol11no1art946

Gracia, L. (2009). Employability and higher education: Contextualising female students' workplace experiences to enhance understanding of employability development. *Journal of Education and Work*, *22*(4), 301–318. https://doi.org/10.1080/13639080903290454

Hora, M. T., Lee, C., Chen, Z., & Hernandez, A. (2021). Exploring online internships amidst the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020-2021: Results from a multi-site case study. WCER working paper no. 2021-5. *Wisconsin Center for Education Research*.

Houghton, N., Williams, L., Baptista, A., Thakerar, V., & Dharmarajah, A. (2023). Digital clinical placements: Student perspectives and preparedness for placements. *The Clinical Teacher*, *20*(1). https://doi.org/10.1111/tct.13558

Institute of Student Employers. (2026). *Virtual work experience aids underrepresented students*. https://ise.org.uk/knowledge/insights/377/virtual_work_experience_aids_underrepresented_students/

Irwin, A., Perkins, J., Hillari, L. L., & Wischerath, D. (2021). Is the future of internships online? An examination of stakeholder attitudes towards online internships. *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning*, *12*(4). https://doi.org/10.1108/heswbl-05-2021-0102

Jackson, D. (2015). Employability skill development in work-integrated learning: Barriers and best practice. *Studies in Higher Education*, *40*(2), 350–367. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2013.842221

Jenny, L. Y., Cho, D. Y., DeSanti, R. L., Kneib, C. J., Friedrich, J. B., & Colohan, S. M. (2021). Resident experiences with virtual education during the COVID-19 crisis. *Journal of Plastic, Reconstructive & Aesthetic Surgery*, *74*(8), 1931–1971.

Jeske, D., & Axtell, C. (2014). e-Internships: Prevalence, characteristics and role of student perspectives. *Internet Research*, *24*(4), 457–473. https://doi.org/10.1108/intr-11-2012-0226

Jeske, D., & Linehan, C. (2020). Mentoring and skill development in e-Internships. *Journal of Work-Applied Management*, *12*(2), 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1108/jwam-09-2019-0028

Kakkar, S., Ghulyani, S., Kuril, S., & Chaudhuri, M. (2024). Understanding factors shaping engagement in remote internships: The role of institutional communication, faculty support and intern cynicism. *International Journal of Educational Management*. https://doi.org/10.1108/ijem-08-2023-0378

Khin, Y. P., Matsuyama, Y., Tabuchi, T., & Fujiwara, T. (2021). Association of visual display terminal usage with self-rated health and psychological distress among Japanese office workers during the COVID-19 pandemic. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health, 18*(17), 9406. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph18179406

Kirk-Wade, E., Wong, H., & Stiebahl, S. (2024, October 2). *UK disability statistics: Prevalence and life experiences*. UK Parliament. House of Commons Library. https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-9602/

Kolb, D. A. (1984). *Experiential learning: Experience as the source of learning and development*. Pearson Education Inc.

Kraft, C., Jeske, D., & Bayerlein, L. (2019). Seeking diversity? Consider virtual internships. *Strategic HR Review*, *18*(3), 133–137. https://doi.org/10.1108/shr-12-2018-0100

Lee, C. (2025). Virtual internships as equitable alternative work-based learning spaces: Examining access, quality, and outcomes for underserved students. *Computers & Education*, 105439. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.compedu.2025.105439

LinkedIn. (2025). *About LinkedIn*. https://about.linkedin.com/

Luzajic, J. (2026). *The financial impact of government policy decisions on universities*. Universities UK. https://www.universitiesuk.ac.uk/latest/insights-and-analysis/financial-impact-government-policy

McNeill, L., Uddin, M. M., & Regalado, L. (2024). Virtual pathways to authentic learning: Exploring instructional technology intern experiences online. *TechTrends*, *69*(1), 201–214. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-024-01030-4

Mendonça, I., Coelho, F., Ferrajão, P., & Abreu, A. M. (2022). Telework and mental health during COVID-19. *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health*, *19*(5), 2602. https://doi.org/10.3390/ijerph19052602

Morgan, K., Wagg, A., Purssell, E., & Kilburn, A. (2024). Evaluation of a virtual practice placement: A model to increase student capacity. *Nurse Education in Practice*, *75*, 103884. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.nepr.2024.103884

Morris, T. H. (2019). Self-directed learning: A fundamental competence in a rapidly changing world. *International Review of Education*, *65*(4), 633–653. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-019-09793-2

Neves, J., Freeman, J., Stephenson, R., & Rowan, A. (2025). *Student academic experience survey 2025*. Higher Education Policy Institute & Advance HE. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/reports/student-academic-experience-survey-2025/

Perusso, A., & Wagenaar, R. (2024). Electronic work-based learning (eWBL): A framework for trainers in companies and higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, *49*(11), 1805–1821. https://doi.org/10.1080/03075079.2023.2280193

Philippe, C. (2018, April 30). *Research - University of Chichester*. University of Chichester. https://eprints.chi.ac.uk/id/eprint/3455/

Post, H. G. (2025, June 12). *More than two-thirds of full-time students now undertake paid work during term time, major survey reveals - HEPI*. HEPI. https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2025/06/12/more-than-two-thirds-of-full-time-students-now-undertake-paid-work-during-term-time-major-survey-reveals/

Prasad, N., Maloof, M., Gjorgioski, S., & Riley, M. (2024). Work-integrated learning for health information management students: Lessons learned from literature, and experiences of supervisors and students on virtual or remote placements. *Health Information Management Journal*, *54*(2), 121–130. https://doi.org/10.1177/18333583241227002

Pretti, T. J., Etmanski, B., & Durston, A. (2020). Remote work-integrated learning experiences: Student perceptions. *International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning*, *21*(4), 401–414.

Raelin, J. A. (2000). *Work-based learning: The new frontier of management development*. Prentice Hall.

Reid, K., Butler, D., Comfort, C., & David, A. (2023). Virtual internships in open and distance learning contexts: Improving access, participation, and success for underrepresented

students. *Distance Education*, *44*(2), 267–283. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2023.2209029

Rioga, M., Hill, B., Anjoyeb, M., Rawcliffe, D., Wilcox, H., & Ayo-Ajayi, H. (2026). Innovating nursing education through peer enhanced e-placement. *British Journal of Nursing*, *35*(1), 26–30. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2024.0339

Salje, J., & Moyo, M. (2023). Implementation of a virtual student placement to improve the application of theory to practice. *British Journal of Nursing*, *32*(9), 434–441. https://doi.org/10.12968/bjon.2023.32.9.434

Samson, J., Gilbey, M., Taylor, N., & Kneafsey, R. (2025). Virtual simulated placements in health care education: Scoping review. *JMIR Medical Education*, *11*, e58794. https://doi.org/10.2196/58794

Schifano, S., Clark, A. E., Greiff, S., Vögele, C., & D'Ambrosio, C. (2021). Well-being and working from home during COVID-19. *Information Technology & People*, *ahead-of-print*(ahead-of-print). https://doi.org/10.1108/itp-01-2021-0033

Stoet, G. (2010). PsyToolkit - A software package for programming psychological experiments using Linux. *Behavior Research Methods, 42(4)*, 1096-1104. doi:10.3758/BRM.42.4.1096

Stoet, G. (2017). PsyToolkit: A novel web-based method for running online questionnaires and reaction-time experiments. *Teaching of Psychology*, 44(1), 24-31. doi:10.1177/0098628316677643.

Taylor, R. (2024, October 11). *Rural communities: Issues and support*. House of Lords Library. https://lordslibrary.parliament.uk/rural-communities-issues-and-support/

The Times. (2025). *UK University league table 2025*. https://www.thetimes.com/uk-university-rankings/league-table

Tribepad. (2025). *Applications per job up 286% YoY as UK job market faces ongoing challenges*. https://tribepad.com/article/recruitment-insights-applications-per-job-up-286-yoy-uk-job-market/

UCAS. (2025). *Why work experience is so important for your students*. https://www.ucas.com/article/why-work-experience-so-important-your-students

UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training. (n.d.). *Work experience*. UNEVOC Connect. Retrieved August 21, 2026, from https://connect.unevoc.unesco.org/home/TVETipedia+Glossary/lang=en/show=term/lang=en/term=Work+experience#start

UNEVOC International Centre for Technical and Vocational Education and Training. (n.d.). *Work-based learning.* UNEVOC Connect. Retrieved August 21, 2026, from https://connect.unevoc.unesco.org/home/TVETipedia+Glossary/lang=en/show=term/term=work-based+learning

Vygotsky, L. S. (1978). *Mind in society: The development of higher psychological processes*. Harvard University Press. https://w\.pauldowling.me/rtf/2021.1/readings/LSVygotsky_1978_MindinSocietyDevelopmentofHigherPsycholo.pdf

Wang, Q., Xun, J., Li, N., Huijser, H., Shen, J., & Chen, J. (2023). Examining gains and pains of a new virtual internship design. *Distance Education*, *44*(2), 246–266. https://doi.org/10.1080/01587919.2023.2198495

Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A., & Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press.

Werner, J., & Jeske, D. (2021). Ten simple rules for running and managing virtual internships. *PLOS Computational Biology*, *17*(2), e1008599. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pcbi.1008599

Appendix A: Staff Survey

Which of the following best describes your role/s (tick all that apply)?

Academic staff

Professional services staff

Careers and employability staff

Placement/work-based learning staff

Other (please specify)

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

(Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

Virtual work experience can help students develop skills that will be useful for their future careers.

Virtual work experience can help students feel more confident about the workplace.

Virtual work experience can help students learn more about different career options.

Virtual work experience can provide opportunities for students who may find in-person experiences difficult to access.

Virtual work experience can be a valuable part of a student's learning experience.

What do you think are the main benefits of virtual work experience?

Open text

What concerns, if any, do you have about virtual work experience?

Open text

What would encourage you to support or promote virtual work experience opportunities?

Open text

What is the most important thing universities should consider when designing virtual work experience opportunities?

Open text

Before today, had you heard of virtual work experience?

Yes

No

Not sure

IF NO, or NOT SURE = EXIT, IF YES:

Please describe your experience with virtual work experience?

Open text

Appendix B: Student Survey

Have you ever completed any virtual work experience?

Yes

No

IF YES

What was your virtual work experience? Please provide details such as the University name, provider or platform, type of virtual work experience, etc.

Open Text

What was your level of study when you completed your virtual work experience?

College or School (GCSEs, A Levels, Access, Diploma, etc.)

Undergraduate Year 0 (foundation)

Undergraduate Year 1

Undergraduate Year 2

Undergraduate Year 3

Undergraduate Year 4+

Postgraduate Taught (Masters, PGDip, etc)

Postgraduate Research (PhD, Doctorate, etc)

What course/s were you studying when you completed your virtual work experience?

Open Text

Did your virtual work experience align with the course/s you were studying?

Yes

No

Not sure

Why did you decide to do this virtual work experience?

Open text

Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:

(Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

My virtual work experience helped me to develop skills that will be useful for my future career.

My virtual work experience improved my confidence.

I felt supported during my virtual work experience.

My virtual work experience helped me learn more about the type of work I might like to do in the future.

Overall, I was satisfied with my virtual work experience.

What were the biggest challenges you experienced during your virtual work experience?

Open text

What would have improved your virtual work experience?

Open text

What is the most important thing universities should consider when designing virtual placements?

Open text

IF NO

2. What is your level of study?

Undergraduate Year 0 (foundation)

Undergraduate Year 1

Undergraduate Year 2

Undergraduate Year 3

Undergraduate Year 4+

Postgraduate Taught (Masters, PGDip, etc)

Postgraduate Research (PhD, Doctorate, etc)

3. What subject are you studying on your degree?

Open Text

4. Please indicate how much you agree with the following statements:
(Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neither Agree nor Disagree, Agree, Strongly Agree)

I would be interested in taking part in virtual work experience.

Virtual work experience could help me develop skills that will be useful for my future career.

Virtual work experience could help me learn more about different careers.

Virtual work experience would be easier for me to access than an in-person placement.

I think virtual work experience could be a valuable learning opportunity.

5. What might stop you from taking part in virtual work experience?

Open text

6. What would encourage you to take part in virtual work experience?

Open text

7. When would be the best time to take part in virtual work experience (e.g. end of first year, during third year, etc)?

Open text

8. What is the most important thing universities should consider when designing virtual work experience opportunities?

Open text