

Somerset Careers Hub Youth Voice Project

Overview

As part of the Somerset Careers Hub commitment to ensure a high standard of careers education across the county, a Youth Voice project was commissioned to capture the views of young people about their experiences of careers education to date, as well as discussing wider policy changes such as the increase in hours of work experience to 50 hours between Year 7 & 11. This work also aligned with Somerset Council's Somerset Children & Young People's Plan 2024-2030 which aims to amplify the voices of Somerset's young people. One theme that emerged from the report was young people reporting they wanted to feel "Well Prepared for Adulthood" including wanting to be taught about life skills and support on their next steps after full time education. The aim was therefore to capture the views of young people to support the delivery of careers education in Somerset going forward to ensure that it would have the greatest impact on young people across Somerset, whilst also gauging their views on the current level of activity being delivered.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were used to capture the information with the following questions asked.

1. What have you learnt about careers so far at school?
2. Do you know what skills & behaviours employers are looking for?
3. Have you thought about what you want to do when you leave school?
4. Do you learn about careers or employability skills in lessons, not including PHSE?
5. Have you talked about how jobs/careers might change in the future?
6. When you were choosing your options/GCSE choices, was there any consideration to your future plans?
7. The government is planning to make it mandatory for students to up to 10 days of work experience/experiences of the workplace from Year 7 to Year 11, do you have any thoughts about that?
8. What would you like to learn more about?
9. How do you want to access this information?
10. Do you think you are prepared for independence?

Not every question was asked and sometimes the order of questions was changed, in response to answers provided and time restraints. As part of this project 45 young people were interviewed across 5 group interviews; 4 of which took place at the young people's schools and one which took place in a neutral venue with participants members of the Youth Parliament. The Young people's ages ranged from 11-19 (mean age 14.13) and attended 8 different schools within Somerset; with one young

person studying at an FE provider in Somerset and one young person currently studying an open university course having completed their further education at a provider in Devon, but who had been schooled in Somerset.

Results

The information captured was reviewed by the interviewer, with themes and individual points noted for each question.

What have you learnt about careers so far at school?

Young people referenced several careers related activity that they had taken part in including

- Careers fairs
- Employer led assemblies
- Further education led sessions
- Discussions around their options choices
- Employer led workshops
- Employers delivering content in curriculum lessons
- Options interviews
- Lessons on Career Pilot
- University visits
- UCAS conventions
- Work Experience
- Careers Advice
- Mock Interviews

Careers fairs got overwhelming positive feedback, and students appreciated the opportunity to talk to multiple employers. In the main young people were happy with the careers related activity they had received but they indicated they would be interested in more opportunities to explore careers education through their time at school. It was very apparent from discussions that the opportunities they had been presented with and their experiences varied drastically depending on what school they attended. Some young people indicated that they “barely had anything” and at times became incensed when their peers attending other schools listed off a number of activities, they had taken part in that they had not done, with one young person remarking “how is fair that x got to do all of that, and I didn’t?” Whilst most young people spoke very positively about their experiences several students voiced their displeasure at the levels of support they had received when considering their next steps. A young person who attended a 6th form indicated they felt “pushed” to continue their post 16

education with them & another indicated they were “pushed in to subjects teachers thought I was best at, not what I was interested in.” Young people indicated where they had positive relationships with staff; whether this was a teacher or careers advisors they felt they were more interested in “supporting my passion” which they appreciated. Very few young people mentioned apprenticeships; either they did not seem to be interested in them as an option or did not have enough of an understanding to know if it would be an option for them. One participant said they felt their school had a “stigma around apprenticeships” with another student mentioning that during one session with a provider, a single student indicated they were more interested in apprenticeships than a full time degree, to be then singled out and told “why would you want to do an apprenticeship, it’s a waste of time you aren’t going to earn any money.” Whilst these appeared to be two isolated incidents, as no other young people interviewed could recall incidents like this or didn’t feel their school favoured one pathway over the other, it is alarming to see that there are incidents like this occurring. Finally, three young people made some quite disappointing statements regarding their careers education experience throughout school remarking; “the school is invested in grades, not me,” “all I learnt is that grades determine your career,” & “I was told by a member of staff employers won’t want to speak to you if you don’t have good grades, your extracurricular activity is not important, employers don’t care about it.” These are quite disappointing statements to hear, particularly around young people’s perceptions of their school and that students are recalling being given inaccurate information that could potentially have a negative impact on their career aspirations and future progress.

Do you know what skills & behaviours employers are looking for?

Students were able to name several skills and behaviours they thought employer were looking for such as;

- Problem solving
- Teamwork
- Communication skills, such as clear speaking and listening
- Eye contact
- Leadership/responsibility
- Being polite/ kindness
- Respect
- Time management
- Creativity
- Working to the best of your ability
- Being able to deliver on specialised tasks

In terms of whether young people felt they had learned about these skills in school and whether they could demonstrate them was again mixed. Most young people indicated they would feel confident to showcase the skills they had, through their CV or through an interview but others, particularly the older participants were less certain. Comments included “these skills get mentioned a lot, but they never teach you how to use or improve them” and “we never really did anything around employability.” Several young people mentioned their extracurricular activity outside of school had significantly improved these skills, more so than from school. Several young people also felt that schools were more interested in their grades than developing their skills, which is why they felt they hadn’t done enough on them. Young people also discussed how you could, “struggle in an interview but be really good at the job” and wanting to be better prepared to get through an interview or demonstrate they would be good at the job. Discussions around this topic again, highlighted that whilst most schools had mentioned soft skills, one participant said, “I don’t think our school has ever talked about soft skills or core skills or anything like teamwork or loyalty.” It is also worth noting how the skills young people mentioned compare to the core skills mentioned in the Future of Jobs Report (2025). Of the top 10 skills identified young people did not mention the following: analytical thinking (1), resilience & flexibility (2), technological literacy (6), curiosity/lifelong learning (8), talent management (9) & service orientation/customer service (10). Whilst some of these might be more challenging to prepare for or identify, such as talent management, it is interesting to note that the top 2 skills identified by employers were not identified by young people, which indicates there is still work to do on ensuring young people can identify the skills that employers are looking for, but more importantly have the confidence and ability to demonstrate them.

Have you thought about what you want to do when you leave school?

Young people had a general idea of what they wanted to do; most indicated they were interested in doing A Levels and knew of at least 1 A level they were keen to do. Some knew what other subjects they might be interested in but were considering which would be best for their preferred job or sector. A small number mentioned apprenticeships as route they were considering, and they were very confident this was the route for them. Most young people indicated that they were considering going to university and they discussed the different approaches their school/college had taken in encouraging people to consider higher education. One young person indicated that at their school the “statistically academic students” got opportunities to visit universities, saying that because they had decided against going to university they got “very little support, I just got told to go work in the corner whilst all the UCAS stuff was going on.” Another young person mentioned that the “disadvantaged group” got to go on visits to universities. The young person said this approach had not a positive impact, as they knew peers in the group who had said “well I know why I have been selected”

indicating they knew they had been chosen because of the disadvantage label, which in turn caused them to disengage with the opportunity. Two young people also recalled an event where they were being discouraged from going to university because “it costs too much to go, so you shouldn’t bother.” Whilst it is positive to see young people having strong convictions in their next step and the main feel supported, it is disappointing to hear of disparity of opportunities and support, as well misinformation still prevalent.

Do you learn about careers or employability skills in lessons, not including PHSE?

Responses were very mixed around whether they had experienced any careers learning within the curriculum; their response was influenced by which school they attended and what year group they were in. For example, in one school core subjects (English, Maths, Science), were indicated as having careers discussed in more regularly than other subjects. Sporadic examples were given from subjects such as computing, PE and languages, geography and history from across the interviews. Young people also mentioned the following;

- Science saying if you study the subject at university, the types of job you could get
- Languages discussing how learning a language can be a great employability skill
- Certain subjects having careers boards outside the classroom
- Posters in classrooms with ex-students, what they studied and what they are doing now.
- Careers related slides in specific lessons
- Teachers talking about careers when the options process begins

Responses were very mixed around careers in the curriculum. Some young people saw it as a positive and wanted more than they were currently getting; they were particularly interested in the context of their learning and thought this was pivotal to embedding careers in the curriculum. Those at the older range of the age scale, were slightly more negative, with several of their comments themed around the lack of time and pressures they felt during Year 11. A couple of young people indicated they had been told that staff couldn’t fit careers into their lessons, with one saying “we don’t even have enough time to study the actual content, I went on study leave without finishing the science curriculum!” Young people felt careers in the curriculum should come much earlier in their education, somewhere around Year 8 or 9. Another young person also commented “our teachers aren’t passionate about the subjects, they just want you to finish the content, so there aren’t any opportunities to go beyond.” This topic saw the largest level of discrepancy, not just between schools but between individual year groups and subjects throughout the entire range of interviews.

Have you talked about how jobs/careers might change in the future?

Young people did not really have much knowledge around this and did not think they had ever discussed this. When prompted, they discussed working from home and provided very polarised responses to this notion. Some believed this was not an effective way of working and would not want to have a job where they had to work from home, suggesting it would be stressful; whilst others suggested they could see the positives working from home and believed they would have the confidence to do so and believed you would be more motivated and less stressed working like this. When delving further in to this, young people's viewpoints seemed to come from their experiences of learning from home during Covid and their parents/carers experience of working from home; with students offering a negative view on working from home talking about how learning from home had not been a good experience or how they saw how stressed their parents were during that time. Where viewpoints were more positive, this primarily came from students whose parents had continued to work from home, with one young person saying, "my mum loves it!" They also discussed AI in future careers, saying that they had discussed this in their computing classes; with one young person saying "because of AI certain jobs wont exist and others have not been invited yet" When prompted, there was also discussions around growth sectors and skills gaps; they had never heard of either phrase but found them interesting and thought this is something they should be learning more about. From these discussions it is clear that more work needs to be done across the board around regarding preparing young people for future careers and making them aware of the job marketplace they are going to be entering.

When you were choosing your options/GCSE choices, was there any consideration to your future plans?

There were overwhelmingly positive comments about the support and information received around careers education during their options process including;

- Being directed to a website that had a directory of all their choices
- Options booklets
- Subject specific presentations
- Options evening
- Discussions with their tutor/individual teachers
- Options specific assemblies
- Pre-options interviews

Young people appreciated the opportunity to ask questions throughout this process and generally felt well supported from their schools. Some indicated they just picked the subjects they liked the most, but the vast majority picked at least one subject based on their future careers plans. This was the area where there appeared to be the most parity in terms of support and experience across participants; however, it was evident that some schools were delivering more than others.

The government is planning to make it mandatory for students to up to 10 days of work experience/experiences of the workplace from Year 7 to Year 11, do you have any thoughts about that?

All of the young people interviewed were overwhelmingly positive about the idea of additional work experience/experiences of the workplace and believed it would be beneficial to them and shared several thoughts around the topic. Young people believed additional experiences would allow them to learn about a variety of employers; variety was brought up often as something they would value. Choice was mentioned frequently; young people felt that if they were expected to do additional work experience hours that they should be able to choose from several options so they could do things they were interested in. One young person suggested tying this into the careers fair; could they pick one employer they really liked from this to then go and visit and complete an experience with them which got a very positive response from other students in their interview group. Young people were very adamant they would want to keep the block week of work experience in Year 10 as they valued this and that the additional work experience hours should be days throughout the rest of their time at school. Young people in Year 10 also remarked that additional experiences in previous years would have helped them when considering their Year 10 placement. Young people were positive about completing smaller experiences in groups but did not think placements should start in Year 7, but instead Year 8. They believed that you wouldn't be ready or mature enough in Year 7 to benefit from the experience or that they might misbehave and ruin the experience for others. Some young people were concerned about the logistics of the increased hours, believing they might have to find these additional hours but through conversation these fears were reduced. They were keen to explore collaborative work experience on these additional days with their peers and believed they should be built into their enrichment weeks; for example, could work experience activity tie into mock interviews or sessions around work readiness. They also discussed virtual work experience and had mixed responses; they would only value the opportunity if it was for an employer they could not physically access. Young people in the older age groups were concerned around the role employers would play in increased work experience; one young person mentioned that their placement got cancelled last minute by the employer, so they ended up not doing anything; they wanted employers to be "held to account." There was also some negative feedback around the processes of work experience for those

that had completed it, feeling they weren't supported or prepared enough to speak to employers, particularly when things weren't going well, "I was having an issue with sorting out my placement, so my careers advisor just phoned the employer and handed me the phone and told me to solve it." Young people also felt their teachers had set views on what a good work experience was; they said that they felt things were getting better, but some teachers were not as supportive of their choices. Young people who completed work experience also discussed their work experience booklets, which many felt were a waste of time as no one ever discussed it back with them. Some also indicated they didn't have any preparation beforehand so weren't quite sure what they were meant to do with it. One young person indicated that they had become a work experience prefect to share their experiences; students indicated that student voice and hearing from their peers about experiences was beneficial. One student was also interested in whether this change of policy would have any metrics around quality "if the policy details the quality the experience must have then the 10 days work experience will actually be helpful & impactful, but if it's a vague decision the quality of the 10 work experience will vary. Whilst students overall reacted positively to the proposed changes, there still appears to be work to do around preparation for work experience, which will only increase with the increased time students will be required to complete.

What would you like to learn more about?

Students discussed a range of areas they would like to learn more about including;

- Pay & taxes
- Taster lessons for further education
- Information around transport to further education
- Studying outside of Somerset, including accommodation at post 16
- Studying abroad
- More information on university, including taster lessons, visits and the requirements to study there
- Employability skills
- Application process for jobs
- Apprenticeships
- The International Baccalaureate
- Learning more about different jobs
- CV & interview preparation
- Languages helping you work abroad
- Sign language
- What is a professional work environment
- How to use a computer in a job
- What is a transferable skill
- Networking

Across all groups, one topic dominated, and this was learning about topics associated with finance or “real life maths.” They indicated they wanted to understand taxes, loans, mortgages and money in general and how this was associated with jobs. Young people were very local about needing to learn about real life contextual skills that would link most closely with the maths curriculum. One young person remarked “PHSE is all about sex, drugs & social media” & another said, “I learnt about Al Capone; why, why wasn’t I learning about how to pay my bills instead!” with young people across all groups echoing that PHSE was very heavy on certain topics and not very careers related. Young people were also quite vocal about the need for specialist PHSE teachers to talk around these topics. Choice was also an important factor in being given more freedom to choose experiences they wanted; one example from a young person was that their school focused a lot on jobs that required you to study at higher education and they felt that a more diverse range of jobs that did not require you to go to university was needed to ensure a wider interest in careers. Young people also wanted to learn more about the “reality of having a job” and were interested in the challenges that employers are facing. There was a lot of talk around mock interviews and the benefits of these; however, some students felt that activities that took place outside of school had better prepared them. One young person suggested that we should flip the activity; could they lead the interviews and interview employers as they believed this made them think more about what a good employee would be. It is important to note that some of the activity students were asking for was present in their careers programme, they had just not received it yet. What this does highlight though is the importance of sharing the careers programme with young people so they understand what they will be doing.

How do you want to access this information?

The consensus across all groups was that they wanted things to be interactive, have more opportunities to ask question and to have dedicated days and time to explore and experience careers. Views on assemblies were poor; they mentioned no one ever asks questions in large groups and they would prefer activity to take place in smaller groups. They indicated having dedicated days in the timetables would be appreciated and they would want to have more visits to further education providers & universities. One young person commented “It would be better to have dedicated days around careers than trying to fit into our lessons, there would be less pressure that way.” Young people indicated that their careers sessions they currently have are too short; they indicated that they wanted more time with “staff who know about careers” as “they know the most!” Young people in year 11 and above suggested that there should be less focus on careers in Year 11, again referring to “pressure” and they would have appreciated it much earlier. One young person commented “careers is done at the wrong time” elaborating that through their experience they barely had anything in key

stage 3 when there was less time commitment. Being able to do more practical things was also mentioned frequently, as well as more visits to employers. Several young people suggested a “careers week” that would include “picking your favourite subjects and then you go to a dedicated room where people come in with jobs linked to that subject.” Others in this group indicated they would find this impactful and would welcome it more so than a generic enrichment week. There was a mixed reaction to the use of technology and virtual encounters; for example, some young people indicated whilst they wouldn’t mind doing a virtual experience, they would prefer it to be in person and that “people get too excited” when in computer rooms. Others suggested they would be willing to do a virtual experience, but this would be a “back up” option and they “want to go out.” There were several comments around the need for activity to be fun, competitive and interactive; the fun and gaming element was common across all groups for their preferred method of learning. Young people also indicated that they would want rewards for doing things as this would motivate them; young people from one school highlighted that an employer had brought milkshakes to their careers fair and this rewards for engaging was very motivating. Young people were also very vocal around who delivers this information, with some students saying they didn’t want to see anymore “middle aged people” or “middle aged bald men!”

Do you think you are prepared for independence?

There were mixed feelings around this question; most indicated they still would appreciate more activity to be better prepared, but it was noticeable that young people in the older age groups answered this much more negatively. Instances where there were positive comments, it was more a reflection of what they had done, “Prepared because of my own efforts, learnt life skills... but not had support learning them” & “I think my parents have taught me most of those life skills, not school.” They indicated they wanted to learn more about being an adult but also worried that some of their peers were nowhere near ready for a life after school & that their behaviour would not be appropriate in the workplace. They mentioned that they probably could do with some refreshment around Microsoft “if that’s what people use at work.” Young people also indicated that some of their peers found school stressful and they are more worried about their results than looking ahead. They felt like they needed to learn more about what it’s “actually like to go to work” and some felt they needed more trips to college to better prepare them for their next step. Young people in the older age groups mentioned that no one really talked to them about their next steps after post 16, particularly if you were not interested in going to university. “Whilst other students got support with their personal statements, I just got told to sit in the corner and carry on with my work.” This was further supported by others commenting that “in the short term I am prepared, such as the steps I will need to take to go to university... However, in terms of the long term and buying a house or a car I feel as though I lack the necessary life skills to complete this independently. I believe that this definitely needs to be a

priority, as although I am fortunate to be able to rely on my parents for support, many young people aren't as lucky and won't receive the same guidance."

Recommendations & Conclusion

Whilst it was evident that most young people had positive experiences, it was disappointing to see such a difference in the quality of experiences or opportunities afforded to them and that they were aware these differences existed. Several young people highlighted the need for standardised education across schools and were surprised that this wasn't already the case. It was brilliant to see young people were interested and invested in their learning and futures and offered several suggestions of what they would like to see. The most mentioned themes were around choice & interactivity; it was evident they really value choice; for example, being able to choose an employer to visit or talk to as opposed to being dictated to. They also value these encounters being interactive in nature; they want to be given the opportunity to do something and not just talked at. They were incredibly positive about their options process, which is a real positive as transition periods are notoriously difficult period in a young person's educational journey. They also seemed incredibly positive about additional work experience and understood the benefits of starting earlier; but their perceptions around Year 7s not being ready was interesting to hear. Young people's recollection around careers in the curriculum was very mixed; with an expanded focus on this from the 25/26 academic year for this to cover all curriculum areas in, there should be considerations to standardised the learning and opportunities across all subjects. It must be noted that some of the activity students were asking for are available as part of their careers programme at a later date; it might be beneficial to provide learners with an overview of the careers programme so they are aware of planned activity, which would also tie in to the proposed changes around the inclusion of learning outcomes to the careers programme from the 25/26 academic year. Further recommendations for Somerset Careers Hub and its schools should include

- Consistency: Work towards ensuring that all schools & colleges provide a standardised level of careers education to avoid disparities in opportunities and experiences among students.
- Curriculum Integration: Embed careers education consistently across all subjects, not just during PHSE lessons.
- Interactive Sessions: Move away from traditional assemblies and lectures to more interactive sessions where students can engage directly with employers
- Student Choice: Work towards a system that allows students to choose which employers or career paths they want to explore, fostering a sense of ownership and interest in their career education.
- Early Exposure to Work Experience: Introduce work experience opportunities starting earlier in their education.
- Variety and Quality: Provide a diverse range of work experience options and ensure the quality of these experiences is maintained. Consider collaborative work experiences and tie them into the existing system.
- Financial Literacy: Incorporate lessons on taxes, loans, mortgages, and other financial topics into the curriculum to prepare students for real-life financial responsibilities.
- Employability Skills: Teach and reinforce employability skills such as problem-solving, teamwork, communication, and technological literacy.

- Apprenticeships: Promote apprenticeships as a viable and valuable career path, addressing any stigma associated with them.
- Diverse Career Options: Highlight a range of career options that do not require higher education, ensuring students understand the breadth of opportunities available to them.
- Focused Time: Allocate dedicated days or weeks for careers education, allowing students to immerse themselves in career-related activities without the pressure of regular academic content.
- Student Voice: Regularly seek feedback from students about their career education experiences and involve them in planning and improving these programs.
- Next Steps: Ensure students have access to support systems and resources to help them navigate their next steps after school, whether they choose higher education, apprenticeships, or direct employment.

It is important to note that the Somerset Careers Hub is here to support schools & colleges in delivering and achieving these goals; through hub led projects and the day-to-day support available. It would be beneficial for all schools & colleges to review the upcoming Gatsby Benchmark changes and the Equalex model with their Enterprise Co-Ordinator, with a particular focus around the careers programme being progressive, embedding learning outcomes, meeting the needs of each young person and ways in which we can ready the system for the increased hours of work experience. One final suggestion would be completing an Internal Leadership Review as part of the Careers Impact System to enable the school or college to address their individual strengths and weaknesses; this way they will be able to identify areas of improvement, as well as areas they can support others in for the upcoming peer to peer review process.

In conclusion, The Youth Voice Somerset Careers Hub Report highlights the diverse experiences and perspectives of young people regarding their careers education. While many of them have had positive interactions and opportunities, significant disparities exist between their experiences, leading to unequal access to valuable career-related activities. Young people expressed a strong desire for more interactive and engaging career education, emphasising the importance of choice and practical experiences. They value opportunities to interact directly with employers, participate in work experience, and learn about real-life skills such as financial literacy and employability. By listening to the feedback and considering the recommendations, we can work towards creating a more equitable, engaging, and effective careers education program that better prepares young people for their future careers and adult life. The commitment to amplifying the voices of young people and addressing their needs will be crucial in achieving these goals and ensuring that all young people across Somerset feel well-prepared for their next best step.