



North
Central
LLEN

Work Experience Programs in the North Central Cluster Schools

Summary of research into secondary schools and students' experience in 2023.

From data collected from the schools in the North Central Cluster:

- Birchip P-12 School
- Boort District School
- Charlton College
- Donald High School
- East Loddon P-12 College
- Pyramid Hill College
- St Arnaud Secondary College
- Wedderburn College
- Wycheproof P-12 College



Acknowledgment

The NCLLEN office is on the land of the Dja Dja Wurrung and we acknowledge them as the first peoples and Traditional Owners and custodians of the land and waterways of our region.

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Work Experience in North Central Cluster Schools



This report provides an overview of research undertaken by the North Central LLEN on how schools manage work experience programs in the region. It examines who is providing work experience, the hurdles they encounter, and the disadvantage rural students face.

The research (2023) involved:

- Interviews with staff involved in work experience programs in the 9 schools in the North Central Cluster (Appendix 1).
- Surveys of 87 students who did work experience across these 9 schools.

This report documents the challenges faced by students and schools and makes recommendations to ensure that young people gain valuable work experience opportunities.

It begins with an introduction on the importance of work experience in schools and the key issues this research found. Sections 2 and 3 outline our findings for schools and students. The report concludes with recommendations to enable better work experience in secondary schools.

The importance of work experience in school

Work experience is vital. A review of global studies has shown internships help young people develop an understanding of work/workplaces, help them set career goals, and build networks which means young people are more likely to:

- Do well at, and finish, school
- Experience less time un- or under-employed and searching for a job
- Secure jobs with better salaries
- Better match their skills with jobs, and, therefore find greater job satisfaction.

The International Labour Office has also argued the reasons young people are *specifically* disadvantaged in labour markets, is because they lack job seeking and career management insights, work experience and networks with the world of work (ILO in Mann 2012a). Our own research by young interns of local employers (*How Work Works*) confirmed that work experience was critical (but they did not mind what it was and included volunteering and other community projects).

Despite the benefits it brings young people, an Australia-wide study has estimated that only 58% of 18–29-year-olds have participated in work experience, with work experience less common for groups that may benefit from it most, including those in regional areas and from lower income households.

[1] Mann A (2012) *It's Who You Meet: Why employer contacts at school make a difference to the employment prospects of young adults*. Education and Employers taskforce: London

[2] Pope J (2020) *How Work Works: getting young people employment in our growing industries*. NCLLEN, CCLLEN and CRLLEN

[3] Oliver D, McDonald P, Stewart A and Hewitt A (2016) *Unpaid Work Experience in Australia: Prevalence, nature and impact*. University of Technology: Sydney.



Summary of Findings

Our research across the North Central Cluster found:

- All schools offer work experience and report it is immensely valuable in the development of young people.
- Students highly value work experience, even if their placement was in a field that they then decided was not their career path, the majority would still recommend the experience to others.
- Placements that are less 'structured' commonly result in a negative experience for students including them being bored, involved in repetitive tasks, or just observing. This impacts on the likelihood of young people further exploring this industry as a pathway.

There are challenges for schools related to:

- coordination and administration of work experience
- the number of placements on offer in rural localities
- access for students with disability
- the quality of placements (and the lack of information about industry challenges)
- the readiness of students.

Recommendations for addressing these challenges to better enable schools are provided at the end of this report.

“A job isn’t just working hard to make money, it’s a lot about meeting new people learning skills and having something different to do everyday.”

School's Reflections

All schools in the North Central Cluster offer work experience

All 9 schools in the cluster (Appendix 1) offer work experience:

- 4 provide local work experience only;
- 4 provide local work experience as well as work experience camps in Melbourne or Ballarat, giving the students 2 work experience opportunities; and
- 1 provides the external camp only.

Seven of the schools offer the program to multiple year levels, these typically are local placements for Year 10 students and camps for Year 11 students. One P-10 school offers their program to Year 9 students.

Schools that offer local work experiences reported strong ties with local industry.



Over half the schools run work experience camps in Melbourne or Ballarat

Five of the nine schools have implemented work experience trips or camps to Melbourne or Ballarat. An additional school is launching a work experience camp in 2024.

Schools report camps offer several benefits beyond the work experience itself, including:

- Confidence in navigating city environments and using public transportation
- Interaction with students and community members from other schools, broadening social circles
- Exposure to different cultures and experiences
- Formation of stronger friendship groups, and
- A broader perspective on career opportunities ("you can't be what you can't see").

Reasons a small number of students miss out on work experience

While most students in our region secure at least one work experience opportunity, schools report that a small number miss out because of:

- Shyness, anxiety, or reserve among students.
- Family circumstances, such as issues at home and low socioeconomic status.
- Transportation issues, where families are unable to facilitate local placements.
- Disinterest or lack of understanding of the value of work experience among some families.
- A preference for students to stay local due to familial concerns.

Additionally, students with disabilities were reported to face barriers in accessing work experience due to a lack of support and systems in place to accommodate their needs.

There are barriers to schools running work experience programs

The schools that provide programs highly value work experience and put significant effort into ensuring their students can access it. However, they encounter several barriers:

- Increased staffing costs due to time-in-lieu to undertake the time-consuming process of organising placements, especially in fields where schools and families lack industry contacts
- Administrative burden, including non-electronic paperwork (forms)
- Difficulty finding suitable employers or workplaces, especially in niche fields, and particularly in smaller towns, and with competition between schools for few placements
- A low level of work experience readiness (including safety training) among some students
- A lack of understanding of the benefits of work experience to encourage students, parents, and employers to support these programs.

Student's Reflections

The positives students get a lot out of work experience

Of the 87 students interviewed that had done work experience 97% (84) would recommend it to others, and only 2% would not recommend it to others.

Almost all (96%) of the students that found they would not want to work in the industry they experienced, reported they would still recommend work experience to others.

96% of students would still recommend completing work experience to others, even if they don't want to work in that industry.

Students identified that engaging in work experience provided them with: Realistic insights to inform future career choices including:

- Showing them there "are lots of opportunities out there", "There's more about a zoo than just the animals", "I realised there is a lot more work to kindergarten teaching than I thought"
- Allowing them to explore options: "I was able to identify that I would like to work in the tech industry but not that area", "It has opened my mind on what the job would be like to do on a daily basis"
- Helping them relax about not knowing exactly what they want to do: "It has showed me there are endless opportunities and it is ok that I don't know what I want to do"
- Helping them set goals, which research has shown connects them better to school

Value to resumes, a head start in industry, and new skills including:

- Customer Interaction and networking: gaining experience talking to customers, meeting new people and professionals, creating connections and building relationships
- Task accomplishment: successfully achieving assigned tasks
- Team work: feeling part of a team and working with good people
- Independence: experiencing independence and decision-making.
- Transportation and exploration: learning to use transportation and exploring new places

An understanding of actual work conditions and the daily life of a full-time job including:

- Showing them work can happen in different ways: "A job isn't just about working hard to make money, it's a lot about meeting new people, learning skills and having something different to do every day ", "I can have a cool city job but still be able to live in the country".

A valuable opportunity for personal growth, encouraging them to step out of their comfort zone, improving stress responses.

Individual testimonials highlight the **fun, unique,** and **educational aspects** of work experience, emphasising its significance in shaping one's understanding of life after school.

"It was awesome!"

"I loved the independence and being able to make decisions for myself, getting to know everyone at my placements."

Work experience allows students to work out what they do and do not want to do

Work experience gives students an opportunity to experience industries they may want to work in, but also lets them eliminate things they might have thought they wanted to do, but work experience gave them the insight that the pathway isn't for them.

Of the 87 students surveyed:

53%

would like to work in the industry they completed work experience in

30%

would not like to work in the industry either after completing work experience, or it wasn't their area of interest

17%

are unclear as to if they would like to work in that industry. They are either undecided or their answers were not definitive

The negatives: students did not get work experience in the industry they wanted

Some students were unable to do the placement in the industry that they wanted due to:

- A lack of opportunities – limited choice
- They did not know where else to go or to find what they wanted and some ran out of time to organise the placement
- The placement was chosen by their family
- They were unable to travel as parents were working.





Some work experiences are poorly structured

The negative aspects of work experiences they reported fell into 3 categories:

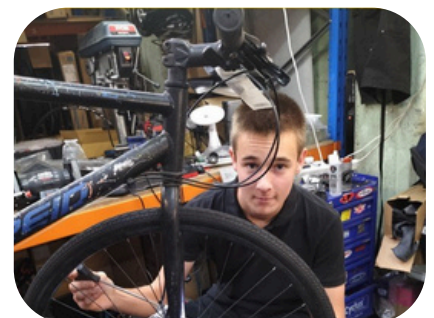
- **51%** did not like **aspects of the work**: for example, the customers, heavy lifting/manual work, working with children, workplace setting ('clinical, dull atmosphere'), and spending too much time at a computer.
- **41%** had an **unstructured work experience**: some students indicated there wasn't much for them to do, or there was no structure/plan for their experience. For some, this led to a lot of down time observing or waiting around. Some students indicated they weren't able to do as much as they had thought or there were tasks that require certain certificates to be able to complete so they had to just observe.
- **35%** did not like the **work conditions**, for example, long days and tiring work. Many students indicated how exhausted they felt after each day, both from the actual work but also waking earlier than normal to be at work on time. Commutes added to their long days. A lot of students found standing all day, which they are not used to, to cause their feet to be sore, and some students mentioned being too hot or too cold (depending on the time of year they completed work experience).

Unstructured work experience can have dire impacts on how students view an industry, preventing them exploring it as a future pathway.

Anecdotally, through separate conversations with Industry (and not the subject of this research), the NCLLEN has heard industry faces challenges providing the amount of work experience needed (and may therefore give priority to University and TAFE placements) and providing the staff supervision for a full week.

“Not having much to do, so I was just sitting around doing nothing for a while.”

Further investigation is needed on industry barriers and challenges, so that we can support industry to build their future work experience opportunities.





Some students did not feel prepared

While some students reported they had called ahead and were prepared for the work experience, others did not feel prepared, including because:

- They didn't know what to wear: "I was confused about 'business casual' and 'neat casual'", "I wish I had known to just be calm and wear comfy shoes" "except for the attire"
- They were not sure what to expect or what work would be like: "I didn't feel prepared because I wasn't really sure what was going to happen, and I didn't get to call them",

"I definitely didn't think I would be this tired. I wish I knew this beforehand", "I was prepared for the kids but not how exhausted I would feel after work. I wish I had known how tired I would feel at the end"

"I wish I knew to take everything in as much as I could, and not take the experience for granted."

Student's advice to others: make the most of a great opportunity

The advice students would give to others before work experience included:

- Get a placement you really want to do: "Find the best work placement in the industry you want"
- Research the workplace and call ahead of time for information about what you will be doing
- Go in with a positive attitude and be nice because people will be inclined to have a higher opinion of you: "Don't be nervous, it's fun. Try and make a good impression", "Don't be shy. It's not as daunting as what you think it will be",
- Put yourself out of your comfort zone and explore different things: "Don't take the easy road, do something you really want to do", "Be prepared for anything, make the most of it", "Take it all in and make sure you enjoy it. If you don't feel like you are enjoying it, it will only make the week feel longer. Also pack lots of snacks as you will get hungry."
- Ask! "Don't be shy/scared to ask questions", "Ask the employer questions",
- "Keep your phone away. If there are other apprentices, ask them about the job",
- Don't be upset if you mess something up the first few times. "It's your first time! Give yourself a break! "
- "Wear comfortable shoes".

Recommendations for NCLLEN action to enable schools



The research highlights the significant amount of work experience offered by schools in the NCLLEN region, and the profound impact it has on students' personal and professional development. There are, however, challenges for schools of providing work experience in rural areas including limited industry options, socio-economic factors, and logistical issues. The task of providing work experience to all students is complex.

To address these challenges, the report makes recommendations for NCLLEN to better enable schools and support their ongoing efforts to offer such opportunities.

Improve coordination and administration of work experience

- Create a calendar that shows when each school is out on work experience to facilitate collaboration among school, decrease competition, and coordinate work experience schedules.
- Increase training for, and usage of, the SWL portal by schools and employers. This shared database, provided by the Department of Education, is a place where work experience opportunities can be added and paperwork pre-filled.
- Advocate to the Department of Education to continue to consolidate work experience forms and streamline administrative processes to reduce the burden on both schools and employers.
- Update work experience booklet and supportive curriculum.

Increase the number of placements on offer

- Develop and implement a widespread promotional campaign to highlight the benefits of work experience, targeting:
 - Students and parents
 - Employers
- Explore initiatives to increase the diversity of available industry options within the region and provide students with a broader range of work experience opportunities including:
 - group work experience such as Broader Horizons and Youth Take Over
 - virtual reality experiences (VicVice) that allow students to experience particular industries they are unable to find placements in.
- Begin thinking about work experience in year 9 and involved parents/caregivers in the conversations.

“I loved getting to experience a work environment and being treated like an adult.”

Recommendations for NCLLEN action to enable schools



Increase access for young people with disability

- Advocate for the development and implementation of support systems specifically tailored to students with disabilities to ensure equal access to work experience opportunities.

Improve quality of placements and explore industry challenges

- Collaborate with industry partners to structure work experience through the development of weekly timetable templates and building awareness of the negative impacts on future workforce of poor placements
- Facilitate an industry round-table with a focus on work experience to discuss the challenges, benefits and barriers for industry providing work experience, and follow through with actions raised to improve work experience.



Recommendations for schools



Improve student readiness for work experience

- Continue to provide & improve on comprehensive guidance to students about the work experience process, including what to expect, what to wear, and the importance of calling ahead, through the Schools & supported by the Careers Education Partnership.
- Collaborate with community organisations to provide additional support to address barriers faced by students, such as shyness, costs, and transportation issues.
- Continuously review and update work experience programs, incorporating feedback from students, schools, and employers

Collaborate with industry partners

- Collaborate with industry partners to enhance the readiness of students for work experiences, especially in niche fields, by providing industry-specific training and skills development
- Advocate to the Department of Education to update the “Safe at Work” modules, to be industry specific.



Appendix 1: Schools Work Experience Program Overview



SCHOOL	YEAR LEVELS	WHEN/HOW LONG	WHERE
Birchip P-12 School	10 & 11	Week 3, Term 2 5 days	Mainly local or where students have accommodation /contacts
Boort District School	10 & 11	Last week, Term 1 5 days	Year 10 - mainly local or where students have accommodation/ contacts Year 11 - Melbourne Camp
Charlton College	10	Last week November/1 st week Dec 10 days	Melbourne Camp
Donald High School	10 & 11	Year 10s – Week 3, Term 4 Year 11s – Late Term 1 5 days	Year 10 - local Year 11 - Ballarat Camp
East Loddon P-12 College	10 & 11	Last week Term 2 4 days	Year 10 - mainly local or where students have accommodation/ contacts Year 11 - Melbourne Camp
Pyramid Hill College	9 & 10	Term 4 (December) 5 days	Mainly local or where students have accommodation/contacts
St Arnaud Secondary College	10	Last week, Term 3 5 days	Mainly local or where students have accommodation /contacts
Wedderburn College	10	Last week, Term 2 5 days	Mainly local (looking at starting Melbourne Camp for 2024, students would attend 5-days locally and 5-day camp)
Wycheproof P-12 College	10 & 11	Last week, Term 2 4 ½ days	Year 10 - anywhere Year 11 - Melbourne Camp

Term 1	Term 2	Term 3	Term 4
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Boort District School Donald High School (Year 11s) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> East Loddon P-12 College Wedderburn College Wycheproof P-12 College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Birchip P-12 School St Arnaud Secondary College 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Charlton College Donald High School Pyramid Hill College