



equalex

THE CAREERS &
ENTERPRISE
COMPANY



Insight briefing 1: Modern work experience pilots

Insights from the Year 1 pilots of the
equalex framework

Introduction

The rationale for modern work experience

The case for modern work experience is increasingly clear. When learning is linked to real workplaces, confidence grows, aspirations widen, and barriers for learners begin to fall.

More learners are now experiencing workplaces, with Gatsby Benchmark 6¹ performance improving by 22%pts between 2021/22 and 2024/25 (from 52% to 74%). Despite this progress, more needs to be done to ensure all learners have access to high-quality experiences that prepare them for their best next step.²

To address this, The Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) developed the equalex³ framework. Designed to meet the needs of learners, educators, employers, and providers, the framework enables a wide range of high-quality activities through a whole-school approach, effectively bridging the gap between the curriculum and the world of work (see Appendix A). This framework aligns with the revised Gatsby Benchmarks, which also state that careers programmes should be underpinned by clear learning outcomes. equalex supports the Government's vision that every learner should access at least two weeks' worth of high-quality, meaningful work experience. It helps:

- Learners to build confidence, skills, and insight for future study, work, and career choices.
- Schools and colleges to plan progressive experiences for their students and demonstrate impact against Gatsby Benchmarks.
- Employers to engage meaningfully, understanding how their contribution fits within local and national priorities and how it can maximise impact.

Why equalex?

Insights collected from over 3,100 schools in 44 Careers Hubs across England in 2024/25⁴ highlight challenges to overcome in delivering high-quality work experience at scale:

- Capacity constraints: schools and employers have limited time, resources, and staff to coordinate placements and employer activity.
- Barriers to inclusion: opportunities still depend heavily on family and social networks, disadvantaging some learners.
- Disconnect with the curriculum: experiences are often isolated from classroom learning and not linked to learning objectives which include skill development.

The CEC designed equalex to address these challenges and test whether and how a national framework could:

- Increase access and flexibility for learners, schools, and employers.
- Reduce burdens, while improving quality and consistency.
- Integrate with the curriculum, linking experiences to learning outcomes.



This report uses numbered in-text citation to indicate the source of supporting evidence and data. To maintain readability, all hyperlinks and full references can be accessed by scanning the QR code or clicking here.

National policy ambition

The Government's ambition for work experience is featured in the Department for Education's updated statutory guidance (May 2025)⁵, which sets expectations for schools, colleges, and providers to achieve the revised Gatsby Benchmarks. It adopts the updated definition of what constitutes "meaningful" work experience and emphasises the importance of a learner having multiple, progressive encounters throughout secondary education.

This ambition is also restated in the Government's Post-16 Education and Skills White Paper⁶, which sets out a clear national mandate for high-quality work experience, recognising its role in harnessing the talents of learners from all backgrounds to meet the skills needs of the future. It commits to:

- A minimum of two weeks' worth of work experience by Year 11, made up of:
 - › At least one week of work experience activities in Years 7–9
 - › At least one week of placements in Years 10–11
- Access for all learners, regardless of background, ensuring equitable participation.
- Flexibility for schools, learners, and employers to design experiences that meet local and individual needs.

The Government's response to the Curriculum and Assessment Review⁷ highlights initial results from the equalex piloting, which have shown that this approach allows children to access multiple workplace experiences across different industries and occupations and offers greater flexibility to schools and employers.

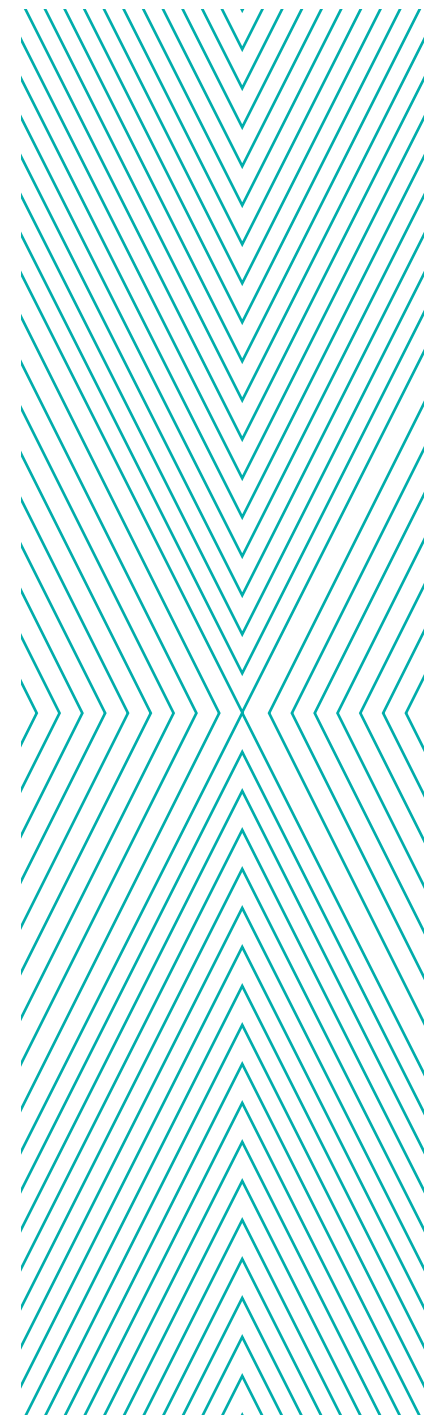
Evidence on the value of modern work experience

OECD research⁸ shows that structured workplace experiences are strongly associated with improved long-term employment outcomes. Evidence from tailored work experience in Wales further demonstrates that early intervention can reduce the risk of a learner becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training) and improve post-16 destinations.⁹

CEC analysis indicates learners in schools with higher benchmarks are less likely to be NEET¹⁰. Those in schools fully achieving 8 Gatsby Benchmarks also gain career readiness 2.1% pts faster and essential skills 1.9% pts faster than peers in schools with minimal provision.¹¹

Further analysis shows that learners make encouraging gains in career readiness throughout their time at secondary school. Progress accelerates in Year 10, coinciding with when work experience typically takes place.¹² There are persistent gaps between learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds and those facing other barriers and their more advantaged peers. This evidence indicates there is scope for earlier, targeted intervention to strengthen learner career knowledge and skills.

CEC Employer Standards¹³ data shows that providing meaningful opportunities for learners is a relatively high priority for employers.¹⁴ Employers providing workplace experiences are on average 77% more likely to report business benefits (such as recruitment, diversity or cost efficiencies) than those who do not.



About the pilot evaluation

Focus and methodology

The first year of piloting (2024/25) focused on how well equalex works across the education and employer system, supported by Careers Hubs. With funding from Department for Education, pilots engaged:

- Over 2,500 learners
- 4 Mayoral Combined Authorities and 5 multi-academy trusts
- Employers and providers

Each pilot explored how equalex could be embedded within different local contexts, focusing on access, quality, and scalability (Appendix B). They considered whether and how equalex could help them to overcome barriers, increase flexibility, and deliver meaningful experiences. York Consulting LLP were commissioned by CEC to work with the pilots to design and implement a common evaluation framework. The approach was developmental, focusing on three key stakeholder groups, also considering the local strategic role of Careers Hubs:

Employers	Learners	Education providers
Does equalex facilitate flexible, meaningful engagement and sustainable partnerships?	Does equalex improve equitable access, engagement, and skills development for all learners?	Does equalex raise quality, strengthen curriculum links, and reduce operational burden?

Pilots included a range of activities by Careers Hubs, schools and employers to review and adapt practices and deliver more structured experiences. In acting as the insights partner, York Consulting worked in partnership with CEC to utilise evidence collected from a variety of sources including primary data (interviews, focus groups, and document reviews) and secondary data (collected by pilot areas and evidence from CEC staff). This briefing was developed by CEC drawing on the year 1 report, co-authored with York Consulting.

We would like to thank our Strategic Authority partners, Careers Hubs, multi-academy trusts, schools, employers, delivery providers, and the learners themselves for their enthusiasm, engagement, and insights.

A national logic model offering a common evidence base

A national logic model was developed by York Consulting, identifying six conditions for success to achieve the level of change required across the careers system to deliver impact for learners, educators, employers, and Careers Hubs. The model, and the insights it has enabled us to capture, offers a structure for a common evidence base for Careers Hubs, educators, employers, and providers to guide future implementation and ensure the equalex framework is embedded consistently and equitably across the country (see Appendix C).

Place-based pilots with Careers Hubs

- Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)
- West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), delivered with Wolverhampton City Council
- Liverpool City Region Combined Authority (LCR)
- West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)

Multi-academy trusts (MATs)

- Coop Academies Trust
- The Priory Federation of Academies Trust
- Lift Schools
- Three Spires Trust
- Hartlepool Aspire Trust

Employer pilots

- Led by KPMG UK and The Talent Foundry in collaboration with Mace, HSBC, Canary Wharf Group, United Airlines and Salesforce
- Small and medium enterprise (SME) engagement events (West Midlands and Liverpool)



Insight 1:

The equalex framework was valued by schools, as a progressive, inclusive and practical model

The equalex framework raised quality

equalex provided a national, inclusive model for delivering high-quality, equitable and progressive work experience. Its phased design ensured experiences are purposeful, skills-focused and reflective, rather than one-off activities, leading to measurable quality gains.

...Responded to local labour market needs

The framework strengthened curriculum links to real-world employer opportunities, enabling schools to connect learning to priority sectors and growth industries. Careers Hubs used equalex to coordinate employer activity, map gaps, and make experiences more relevant.

... Strengthened collaboration between schools and employers

equalex acted as a catalyst for stronger partnerships. Its shared language and outcomes reduced duplication, expanded employer engagement and supported sustained relationships.

+10%pts initial increase in Gatsby Benchmark 6 at Castleford Academy (West Yorkshire Careers Hub) following the adoption of the equalex framework.

120 active employers engaged in Three Spires Academy Trust.



Insight 2:

Early evidence showed equalex delivering positive outcomes for learners and employers

Early positive impact was seen for learners

Year one pilots reported strong gains in confidence, teamwork and employability skills.

...With inclusivity and meaningful engagement for disadvantaged learners

equalex expanded access for disadvantaged learners through structured preparation, guided reflection and differentiated resources. In the West Midlands Combined Authority pilots, 240 learners participated in tailored sessions, with 83% reporting increased self-awareness and 72% greater confidence.

...Valued by employers and sustainable engagement models

Employers reported meaningful benefits with reduced administrative burden. Its structured, skills-focused design supported flexible engagement, including SMEs, and long-term partnerships. Careers Hubs coordinated across multiple schools and employers, reducing duplication and widening access.

92% of learners in a KPMG UK-led pilot reported a better understanding of the types of skills employers are looking for; while employers valued equalex's flexibility and reduced administrative burden.



Insight 3:

To realise its full potential, equalex needs sustained, committed and collaborative leadership and consistent support across the careers system

The equalex framework requires resources and support to be embedded across the curriculum successfully

Lasting impact requires senior leadership commitment, resourcing and staff CPD to integrate equalex outcomes across Key Stage 3-4 and ensure consistent delivery.

...Strengthening employer-school collaboration through shared intent

Long-term, curriculum-linked partnerships coordinated by Careers Hubs can ensure encounters are progressive and align with learning outcomes. Employers co-designed placements that helped reduce duplication through shared frameworks and sustained engagement.

...Ensuring equitable access through parent and carer engagement

Parental and carer involvement is key to equitable access. Flexible communication, home visits and approaches emphasising youth voice build trust, remove barriers, and ensure all learners can participate meaningfully in work experience.

"Involving curriculum leads in these co-design discussions with employers has been pivotal ... the most exciting thing ... is the fact that equalex works alongside us to create actual modules that we can build... within our curriculum, from Key Stage 3 until they leave."
(Education Leader)



Insight 1: The equalex framework was valued by schools, as a progressive, inclusive and practical model

The equalex framework raised quality and equity

equalex offered a national solution for delivering high-quality, equitable and progressive work experience. Schools and providers consistently described it as a clear, inclusive framework that raises the quality and consistency of their work experience provision. Its phased structure supports skills-building, preparation and reflection, ensuring workplace experiences and placements are purposeful, rather than one-off activities.

+10%pts initial increase

in Gatsby Benchmark 6 at Castleford Academy (West Yorkshire Careers Hub) following the adoption of the equalex framework.

Careers Leaders highlighted how the framework creates intent-driven experiences that are more inclusive and relevant to learners' needs. For example, in the Liverpool City Region Careers Hub, Belvedere Academy used the framework to pilot a learner evaluation tool, ensuring employer encounters were purposefully linked to learning outcomes and not delivered in isolation. Teachers noted that this approach helped learners recognise and articulate the skills they had developed.

“Learning outcomes help with pathway design for learners with special educational needs... the equalex framework provides a progressive model where outcomes ensure pathways are intentional, progress is tracked, and all stakeholders are guided.”

(CEO at multi-academy trust)

...Responded to local labour market needs

equalex enabled schools to strengthen curriculum links with real-world employer opportunities, ensuring experiences are meaningful and aligned to local and regional growth sectors. Teachers can map lessons to workplace skills, while structured activities, preparation, and post-experience reflection reinforce the connection between education and employment.

“It provided lots of information about the future and how AI is also connected to us.”

Learner

equalex provided a forward-looking, system-wide approach that supports Industrial Strategy¹⁷ priorities and helps learners explore both existing and future opportunities. In the West Yorkshire Careers Hub, employers used learning outcomes to design structured activities, workplace visits and interactive sessions, aligned with curriculum and sector-specific skills. This gave learners meaningful exposure to careers in advanced manufacturing and food production while challenging outdated stereotypes. Employers valued equalex for providing a consistent framework with clear learning objectives tied directly to workplace skills.

Careers Hubs played a critical coordinating role in brokering these connections. They mapped local employers, identify gaps in provision, and coordinate events, workplace visits, and provide CPD for teachers to embed labour market insights into lessons. By mobilising SMEs, school alumni, and community networks, Careers Hubs widened access for learners who might otherwise have limited exposure to career opportunities.

...Strengthened collaboration between schools and employers

equalex has been widely recognised as a catalyst for stronger partnerships. Careers Hubs and MATs reported that the framework provides a shared language and clear learning outcomes, reducing duplication and enabling more consistent employer engagement.

Work experience delivery providers, such as Ahead Partnership and C&K Careers (West Yorkshire Careers Hub), reviewed and redesigned employer experiences (such as McVitie's, Lloyds Bank, HSL), aligning them to equalx outcomes, extending workplace experiences and placements time, and creating reflection logs. This demonstrated structured collaboration between schools, providers, and employers, moving away from "ad hoc" activities to building sustainable, meaningful relationships.

By creating a consistent model and shared outcomes, equalx also helped strengthen and diversify the employer pipeline, supporting Careers Hubs to engage new sectors, sustain relationships, and expand opportunities for learners over time.

120 active employers engaged

Three Spires Trust (WMCA) expanded its employer directory from minimal contacts to 120 active employers. The multi-academy trust (MAT) used equalx outcomes to co-design experiences, transforming previously ad hoc encounters into structured, progressive opportunities aligned with learner learning goals.

"Sustained partnerships with a diverse range of employers are essential for offering varied and relevant work placements. This can be done through effective collaboration with external providers which can help meet placement demand and ensure quality assurance mechanisms."

Careers Leader





Insight 2: Early evidence showed equalex delivering positive outcomes for learners and employers

Early positive impact was seen for learners

Early feedback from the Year 1 pilots demonstrated encouraging changes in learner confidence, skills, and engagement by providing a structured, progressive framework. Through guided preparation, employer engagement, and post-experience reflection, learners were able to connect work experience to curriculum learning, workplace skills, and future career aspirations.

92% of learners

...from high deprivation schools engaged in a KPMG UK-led pilot, reported they better understood the types of skills employers are looking for.

83% of learners

...in the same pilot also reported greater awareness of their skills and talents.

Teachers highlighted stronger curriculum links, improved employability knowledge, and even “life-changing” outcomes for some SEND learners. Proactive communication with parents and carers improved understanding of the new approach and increased engagement, particularly for learners who might otherwise have limited access.

“Learners who wouldn’t usually lead in discussion felt confident to take the lead in the work experiences.”

Teacher

Best practice: guided preparation and reflection

- **Structured preparation:** schools used tailored resources to build learners’ confidence and readiness before placements.
- **Inclusive design:** differentiated and SEND-adapted materials supported all learners and reflected the core principles of Gatsby Benchmark 6.
- **Reflection and progression:** employer feedback and learner reflection tools helped learners connect experiences to curriculum learning and future aspirations.

...With inclusivity and meaningful engagement for disadvantaged learners

The pilots demonstrated that equalex is increasing access to meaningful work experience for learners facing significant barriers. In West Midlands Combined Authority, 240 disadvantaged learners successfully participated in 16 tailored sessions.

equalex supported this by providing structured preparation, guided reflection, and differentiated resources that ensure every learner, including those with SEND, can engage meaningfully. Careers Hubs and providers helped identify learners using risk of NEET indicators, such as persistent absence, low attainment, or limited engagement with careers activity. This enabled targeted support to remove barriers, widen access, and create supportive pathways.

Learners reported increased self-awareness and confidence, while teachers noted improved motivation and classroom engagement. Employers observed tangible skill development and meaningful connections with learners who might not otherwise access workplace experiences.

“Many learners said the visit helped them gain confidence, communication skills and a clearer understanding of career paths in engineering, manufacturing, and apprenticeships.”

Careers Leader

83% of learners

involved in the Wolverhampton pilot (West Midlands Careers Hub) reported increased self-awareness and 72% said they felt more confident.

These early results suggest that with multiple, progressive work experiences throughout secondary school, gains in confidence and self-awareness could increase further and be sustained over time.

“For some of us, we cannot open the doors ourselves, we need others to do it for us.”

Learner

Case study: engaging learners through equalex

At St Regis CE Academy (Wolverhampton Careers Hub), a small group of Year 9 learners had been identified as disengaged learners, reluctant to take part in employer activities and lacking confidence.

Using the equalex framework, the Careers Hub and NHS Black Country ICB created a structured, dialogue-based workshop linking public health to learners' own experiences. Through guided preparation and reflection, learners realised their views could shape real health campaigns across Wolverhampton.

All participants contributed ideas on teenage health priorities, and several joined the NHS “Get Involved” youth voice network. Teachers reported that previously quiet or hesitant learners were “animated and purposeful,” showing a clear shift from passive to active engagement.



...Valued by employers and sustainable engagement models

Employers reported that equalex delivered meaningful benefits while reducing administrative burden. Its structured, skills-focused design allows flexible engagement, including for small and medium enterprises (SMEs), and supports sustainable, long-term partnerships. Team-based activities enabled employers to observe learner development in problem-solving, communication, and collaboration.

Careers Hubs coordinated across multiple employers and schools, reducing duplication, increasing efficiency, and widening access. Collaborative approaches, such as the KPMG UK cross-sector pilot, engaged multiple employers and high-deprivation learners in structured, skills-focused activities, demonstrating efficient, scalable, and equitable engagement.

Employers highlighted the benefits of learning outcomes for structuring high-impact experiences and developing future talent.

“equalex really helps across the board. Employers love it because they get learners who are ready for the workplace, with skills that matter. And for learners? It boosts confidence, opens doors, and ensures their efforts lead to real opportunities.”

Employer

Best practice: embedding equalex

Early evidence from the pilots demonstrated practical ways schools have successfully embedded equalex:

- **Leadership and accountability:** senior leaders champion equalex, allocate resources, and drive consistent delivery.
- **Curriculum integration:** schools developed structured Key Stage 3-4 modules aligned to equalex outcomes.
- **Professional development:** CPD supports staff to embed learning outcomes across lessons and extracurricular activities.





Insight 3: To realise its full potential, equalex needs sustained, committed and collaborative leadership and consistent support across the careers system

Embedding equalex across the curriculum requires resource and support

The statutory duty for schools to ensure work experience for all learners aged 14-16 was removed in 2012. Pilots showed that, even in the short term, implementing equalex can achieve positive outcomes. However, fully embedding the framework across the curriculum requires sustained effort across school approaches and Key Stages 3 to 4. Senior leaders play a critical role by championing equalex, allocating time and resources, and holding teams accountable to ensure consistent delivery.

Educators will need dedicated time and professional development to map equalex learning outcomes into lessons and extracurricular activities, enabling skills such as teamwork, problem-solving, and employability to be progressively developed. Whole-school planning ensures encounters are sequenced and scaffolded, with reflection tools helping learners consolidate learning and connect experiences to future career aspirations.

After post-experience reflection, learners were able to connect work experience to curriculum learning, workplace skills, and future career aspirations.

“Senior leaders must model and champion equity, allocate resources, and hold teams accountable.”

Strategic Careers Leader, multi-academy trust



...Strengthening employer-school collaboration through shared intent

Strong, long-term partnerships between schools and employers are essential to delivering meaningful, progressive work experiences. Careers Hubs played a central role in brokering these connections, reducing fragmentation, and ensuring alignment with learner learning outcomes. Successful collaboration relies on mutual respect, shared intent, and sustained commitment from all parties.

Best practice: employer and school collaboration

These approaches illustrate how schools and employers can work together to create structured, purposeful, and progressive work experiences for learners:

- **Curriculum-linked experiences:** employers co-designed STEM-based placements embedded in the science curriculum.
- **Progressive experiences:** education providers align activities to equalex outcomes, ensuring each encounter builds on the last.
- **Sustained engagement:** Careers Hubs coordinate ongoing employer relationships to reduce duplication and expand access.

... Ensuring equitable access through parent and carer engagement

Parents and carers are critical in widening access to work experience, particularly for disadvantaged or harder-to-reach learners. Effective engagement builds trust, offers flexible access, and provides wrap around support to remove barriers and ensure participation.

Best practice: parent and carer engagement

These approaches show how proactive communication and support can widen access and ensure all learners are ready to engage meaningfully:

- **Flexible access:** pilots used home visits, virtual pre-visits, and multiple points of contact to support participation.
- **Building trust:** ongoing communication helped alleviate anxieties and encouraged buy-in from families.
- **Youth voice:** learners contributed to planning and feedback, ensuring experiences met their needs and interests.



Where next?

Early piloting of the equalex framework during the 2024/25 academic year has shown clear potential to deliver positive outcomes for learners, educators, and employers.

With the Government's vision of two weeks' worth work experience ambition now featured in statutory guidance, there is growing momentum and shared commitment across the system to make high-quality, equitable work experience a reality for all learners.

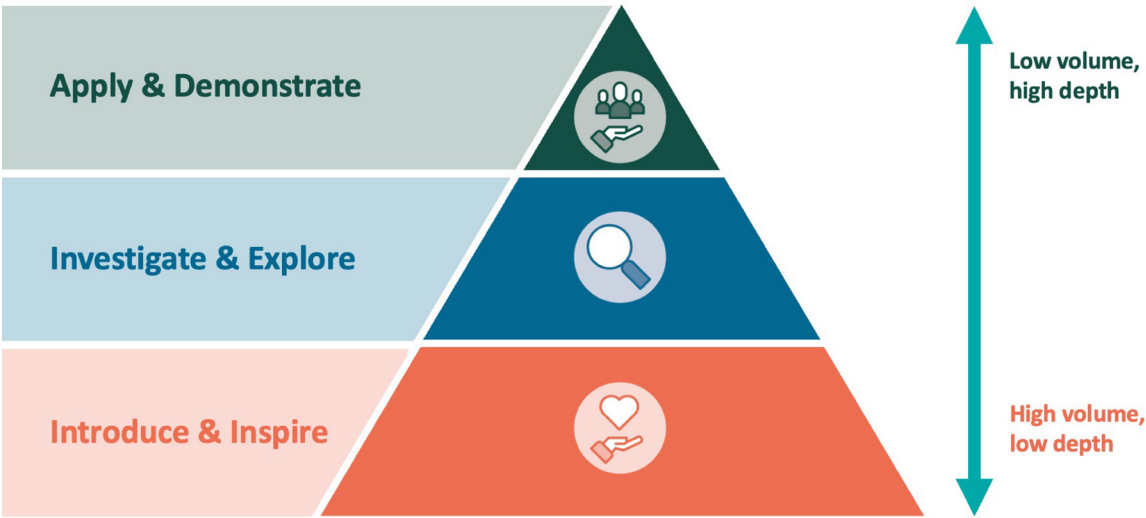
Year 2 of piloting (2025/26) will build on this foundation, focusing on how schools and employers can integrate equalex more deeply into the curriculum to drive stronger learner outcomes and sustained employer engagement. Working with six partners, the next phase will continue to test scalable delivery models and strengthen alignment across local systems.¹⁵

In parallel, The Careers & Enterprise Company, supported by the JPMorganChase Foundation's Future Ready Fund,¹⁶ will extend the evidence base by tracking the longer-term impact of equalex on learner progression and career readiness. This will provide valuable insights to inform national practice and support the system-wide implementation of high-quality, progressive work experience.



Appendix

Appendix A: equalex approach



Appendix B: equalex pilot focus

Pilot area	Focus
Greater Manchester Combined Authority (GMCA)	equalex as a keystone of the Greater Manchester Baccalaureate (MBacc)
Liverpool City Region (LCR)	Local growth sectors and cluster stakeholder engagement
West Midlands Combined Authority (WMCA), delivered with Wolverhampton City Council	Engaging disadvantaged students
West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA)	Provider commissioning and delivery
Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs)	Curriculum models testing equalex learning outcomes and objectives
Employer projects	Collaborative delivery and SME engagement in work experience

Appendix

Appendix C: national logic model



THE CAREERS & ENTERPRISE COMPANY

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Modern work experience

Full insights report

With thanks to our equalex year 1
delivery partners:



Academies Trust

GMCA
GREATER
MANCHESTER
COMBINED
AUTHORITY



Three
Spires
TRUST
'Life in all its fullness'

Lift
Schools

CITY OF
WOLVERHAMPTON
COUNCIL

Calcote
Academy
working together, achieving success



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