

# Reimagining and operationalising 'meaningful' work experience in England: The PERE model – An illustrative case study

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## Abstract

This practice-led case study introduces the PERE (*Prepare, Execute, Reflect, Evaluate*) Model as a practical framework for delivering meaningful experiences of workplaces in secondary education. While the Gatsby Charitable Foundation and Careers & Enterprise Company (CEC) define *what* high-quality career learning should achieve, and professional bodies, including the Career Development Institute (CDI) and National Institute for Career Education and Counselling (NICEC), articulate *why* careers education matters, PERE focuses on *how* to operationalise these intentions through repeatable routines, adaptable tools, and clearly defined roles for schools and employer partners. The paper presents an illustrative example to demonstrate the model's feasibility and transferability.

**Keywords:** work experience, Gatsby Benchmark 6, PERE model, UK careers education, equitable access, reflective practice, hybrid delivery

## Introduction

This paper introduces the PERE (*Prepare, Execute, Reflect, Evaluate*) Model as a theoretically grounded and practice-informed tool for reimagining how work experience is

conceptualised and delivered in secondary education in England. It addresses persistent inequities and inconsistencies in how opportunities are accessed, organised, and translated into meaningful outcomes for young people.

Traditional work experience has centred on short, one-off placements (SQW, 2022). While these can offer valuable insights into the world of work, they are often inconsistently organised, weakly connected to the curriculum, and highly variable in quality (Magee et. al, 2022). From September 2025, schools are expected to provide a week's worth of experiences of workplaces for Years 7-9 and an additional week for Years 10-11, strengthening Gatsby Benchmark 6 (Department for Education, 2025). Without a clear operational framework, schools risk approaching compliance as an administrative requirement rather than as meaningful careers education that supports informed decision-making. The PERE model addresses this gap by embedding routines that drive sustained and high-quality career development practice. While work experience is devolved across the UK, this discussion focuses on England and the Gatsby Benchmark 6. Nevertheless, PERE's core mechanisms, such as equity routines, curriculum integration, preparation artefacts, guided reflection, and rapid feedback loops, are transferable across different policy contexts. While these principles align with shared practice in Scotland and Wales, their successful adaptation will necessitate aligning analogous routines with the distinct national frameworks and accountability measures in those devolved nations.

Terminology used in this paper is briefly clarified to support coherence. Work experience traditionally refers to a one-week supervised placement involving observation or participation in workplace tasks. Workplace experiences encompass a broader range of activities, such as site visits or employer-led projects. Experiences of workplaces, as defined in current policy, describe cumulative, varied and structured activities that build career awareness, skills, and identity over time. Statutory definitions used by the Department for Education and Gatsby Benchmark 6 are adopted, while recognising the pedagogical value of all three and arguing for a coherent developmental model that connects them.

## Development of PERE Model

The PERE model was developed by synthesising personal experiences of careers education practice over 30 years. It responds to systemic and operational challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic, when traditional work experience models became unworkable as employers shifted to remote or hybrid operations, disrupting school provision. In one UK study, 76 per cent of Careers Leaders reported the pandemic had negatively impacted workplace experiences, and 70 per cent said it impaired meaningful employer engagement (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2020), highlighting lasting disruption.

In this context, PERE emerged as a robust method enabling Careers Leaders to sustain meaningful workplace experiences. Informal feedback from Careers Leaders, learners, and employers shaped its refinement, ensuring the model operationalised Gatsby Benchmark 6 through a structured, stakeholder-centred approach. Development drew on practitioner reflection, policy review, and simulated programme design exercises to test feasibility and transferability, supported by principles of reflective professional practice (Schön, 1983; Finlay, 2002).

Rather than prescribing *what* to deliver or *why*, PERE shows *how* to enact high-quality experiences of workplaces. By centring collaboration, reflection and iterative design, it shifts work experience from a transactional requirement into a developmental process that builds confidence, capability and aspiration for all young people.

Post-COVID, three recurring barriers emerged: inconsistent employer availability; financial/logistical constraints on visits; and weak curriculum linkage. PERE's routines respond directly: hybrid options and in-school simulations when site access is limited; preparation artefacts and inclusive delivery guidance to reduce participation costs; and employer/educator co-designed briefs/workbooks/evaluations to tie tasks to curriculum aims. These tactics stabilise delivery quality across contexts.

This is a conceptual, practice-informed paper presenting an illustrative example. Insights were derived from practitioner reflection, sector consultation, and simulated programme design. The paper does not report a formal study or associated aspects such as sample size or statistics. Forthcoming pilots will supply empirical data in due course.

## Conceptual foundations

The PERE Model is underpinned by experiential learning theory (Kolb, 1984), social constructivism (Vygotsky, 1978), and reflective practice (Schön, 1983; Finlay, 2002). These theoretical foundations inform its focus on how schools, employers, and learners can co-construct meaningful workplace experiences that lead to tangible developmental outcomes for young people. PERE's cyclical design echoes Kolb's experiential learning cycle, where learning arises through the dynamic interplay of experience, reflection, conceptualisation, and experimentation. Each stage translates these processes into structured routines: preparation, execution, reflection, and evaluation.

The model also draws on sociocultural learning principles (Lave & Wenger, 1991), recognising that work experience is inherently relational. By involving teachers, parents, and employers as co-educators, PERE establishes a collaborative learning ecosystem that supports equity of access and engagement. This multi-stakeholder alignment responds to structural inequalities in English careers provision, particularly those affecting disadvantaged learners (Education and Employers, 2024).

Reflective practice provides the interpretive bridge between theory and action. Drawing on Schön's concepts of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, learners and practitioners critically analyse experience to generate adaptive insight. Additionally, teachers and employers refine practice through evaluation feedback loops. PERE also integrates implementation science principles (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020), ensuring that change is staged, monitored, and refined over time.

## The PERE Model

# THE PERE MODEL

### 4. EVALUATE

**Purpose:** Individual and Programme level learning through feedback capture for continuous improvement

**Key Tools:** Comparison of pre and post placement briefings, Stakeholder feedback forms, One-page review templates, Destination tracking tools, Focus group, employer and parent feedback (Ofsted, 2024)

### 3. REFLECT

**Purpose:** Personal learning consolidation & identity development

**Key Tools:** Structured journaling, STAR prompts, strength based storytelling frameworks, visual reflection boards, peer discussion and identity-exploration. Post placement briefings (Pham et al., 2024; Donald & Straby, 2024; Hooley, Hanson, & Clark, 2022).



### 1. PREPARE

**Purpose:** Readiness & alignment of all stakeholders

**Key Tools:** Goal-setting templates, Labour Market Information (LMI) workbooks, Pre-experience briefings, Scenario-based workshops, SEND Vocational tools and profiling and Employer and Parent Briefings (Percy & Hooley, 2024; Rice & Hooley, 2025; Nasen, 2020; Careers & Enterprise Company, 2019).

### 2. EXECUTE

**Purpose:** Authentic workplace tasks and skill development

**Key Tools:** employer-informed task sheets, curriculum-linked briefs, in-school simulations or on-site placements, mentoring, journals (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020).

**Figure 1: Overview of the PERE Model outlining key tools needed to ensure a Gatsby-aligned experience of the workplace.**

The traditional approach to work experience constrains learning to a one-off experience rather than a developmental process. PERE differs by embedding a continuous learning cycle that begins well before each placement and extends beyond it. It adds four core enhancements: front-loaded preparation shared by learners, parents, and employers; authentic tasks delivered in person, in school, or virtually; guided daily reflection that includes processing misfit or negative moments; and light-touch evaluation loops that allow schools and employers to enhance quality delivery in real time. These routines are format-agnostic, functioning in in-person, hybrid or fully in-school simulations. The following section explores the four core elements in detail.

**Prepare:** This phase focuses on the readiness and alignment of all stakeholders. It ensures that learners, parents, educators, and employers share a clear understanding of objectives, roles, and expectations. Activities within this stage equip learners with the knowledge and contextual understanding needed before entering a workplace experience (Careers & Enterprise Company, 2019). Preparation establishes a shared foundation that promotes informed engagement.

**Execute:** This phase represents the practical application of learning through authentic workplace tasks and skill development. Preparation becomes lived practice as students engage in employer-informed activities, whether on-site, at external venues, or within structured in-school simulations. The focus is on building teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills that connect directly to curriculum aims (Education Endowment Foundation, 2020). Here, equity is addressed through flexible delivery models. Schools and employers collaborate to create inclusive environments – such as offering in-school or hybrid experiences, providing resources where necessary, and designing tasks that recognise diverse starting points and strengths. When effectively implemented, this stage transforms abstract preparation into an authentic experience (Percy & Tanner, 2023).

**Reflect:** The reflection phase consolidates learning, enabling students to make sense of their experiences, regardless of whether those experiences were positive, challenging, or unexpected (Donald & Straby, 2024; Pham et al, 2024). Structured and purposefully created reflection space within the classroom encourages learners to understand and articulate their own growth, identifying strengths, skill development, and areas for improvement. Students who encounter disappointment or discomfort are guided to reframe these as opportunities for insight, understanding what environments or roles best align with their values and learning styles. Facilitated discussion, journaling, and mentoring ensure that all forms of experience contribute meaningfully to professional and personal development (Hooley, Hanson, & Clark, 2023).

**Evaluate:** Evaluation measures the broader impact of the experience across four dimensions: learner reactions, skill development, behavioural change, and longer-term outcomes, aligning with Ofsted’s emphasis on personal development (Ofsted, 2024). Whereas reflection focuses on individual interpretation and meaning-making, evaluation measures personal progress against starting points. At an individual level, evaluation informs next steps: learners identify roles to pursue (e.g., in construction), and employers refine placements (e.g., by adding more LMI). Evaluation also captures programme-level learning (Moote et al, 2025). It examines the effectiveness of delivery methods and curriculum alignment, drawing on both quantitative data (e.g., surveys, attendance, outcomes) and qualitative insights (e.g. student and employer feedback). A key feature of this stage is closing the feedback loop. Findings from the evaluation are shared with participating stakeholders, allowing them to see how their input shapes future iterations and improvements. Through this cycle of continuous improvement, the PERE model cultivates not only individual growth but also systemic advancement in how work experience is designed and delivered.

## Implementing the PERE model

The following example, lightly informed by a real event during the pandemic, illustrates how the PERE Model could be applied within a secondary school to embed meaningful employer engagement and support career readiness. It models good practice and demonstrates how the framework might operate effectively in context.

**Context:** A secondary school partners with local and national construction employers to deliver a co-designed, week-long hybrid experience that raises awareness of built-environment careers and strengthens local skills. Combining in-school learning, virtual

engagement and on-site visits, the programme supports students at different stages of career readiness to complete authentic, employer-informed tasks while developing core employability skills.

**Prepare:** A co-design process ensures the programme is purposeful, inclusive, and responsive to student needs. Using the PERE checklist, educators and employers refine structure, outcomes, and the balance of in-school, virtual, and workplace activities. Planning meetings produced an employer briefing pack outlining expectations, safeguarding measures, and inclusive delivery guidance, while building strong relationships between teachers and industry partners. Co-design involved careers leaders, subject leads and employer supervisors, with weekly teacher–employer check-ins and a pre-placement student induction clinic to keep roles, tasks and support aligned. Parent and student briefings explain aims and practical requirements, and students complete a pre-placement form to identify prior knowledge and support needs. A co-developed placement workbook, tailored to each employer’s brief, includes sector terminology, practical worksheets, and reflection prompts aligned to each day’s focus. This collaborative approach keeps the placement relevant, adaptive, and aligned with Gatsby Benchmarks and student aspirations.

**Execute:** The programme is delivered through a hybrid model, combining classroom and virtual learning with employer site visits. This blended approach enables safe, equitable, and authentic engagement within the construction industry, removing financial barriers to participation. Teams respond to a sustainability and design brief set by local employers, drafting proposals that balance accessibility, safety, and cost, reflecting the link between sustainability and career development (McMahon & Knight, 2024) and demonstrating how hybrid engagement can widen access while maintaining authenticity (Percy & Tanner, 2023). Students participate in hands-on workshops, construction-themed challenges, and live Q&A sessions, all linked to the placement workbook to develop teamwork, communication, and problem-solving skills. Employers provide structured feedback and mentoring, helping students apply their learning.

**Reflect:** Structured reflection enables students to make sense of learning, consolidate skills, and develop self-awareness. A suite of tools, informed by established reflective models (Schön, 1983; Rolfe et al, 2001; Donald & Straby, 2024), guides this process. Students use daily journals and STAR (Situation, Task, Action, Result) prompts to capture achievements, challenges, and teamwork examples. Peer discussions promote shared learning and support evolving ideas about workplace identity and confidence. Integrated into the placement workbook, reflection is continuous rather than retrospective. The week concludes with debriefings where staff and employers help students reframe experiences as valuable learning opportunities, supporting personal growth and career awareness.

**Evaluate:** Evaluation processes capture evidence of impact and inform ongoing improvement. Pre- and post-placement briefings identify shifts in student confidence and readiness, while end-of-week pulses mirror the baseline to track short-term change. Short teacher and employer forms record perceived skill gains and task fit, with one-page reviews noting adjustments for the next cycle. Schools may include light-touch destination or aspiration tracking to explore whether effects persist over time (Moote et al., 2025). The emphasis is on gathering practical evidence to refine delivery rather than conducting a formal evaluation (Hooley & Rice, 2019). Feedback from students, employers, and parents

provides insight into relevance, inclusivity, and quality, while focus groups offer qualitative depth. Indicative signals might include more students naming unfamiliar roles, connecting classroom learning to real contexts, and showing greater confidence in professional interactions. Employers may value the structured briefs and visible outcomes; precisely the kinds of meaningful indicators the PERE framework aims to surface and strengthen (Percy & Hooley, 2024; Ofsted, 2024).

## Limitations

The above illustration demonstrates the operational logic rather than reporting empirical findings. Its purpose is to show how the PERE model can be applied in practice through structured stakeholder roles and iterative learning cycles. A formal pilot is in early development. The example demonstrates how the model would operate under optimal conditions where processes and records are systematically maintained, serving as a design prototype for future testing.

Moreover, while the PERE model has been shaped through reflective professional practice and sector consultation, it is conceptually grounded, particularly in Kolb's experiential learning, and expected to scale, but this still requires testing. Scalability is anticipated because PERE relies on lightweight checklists/briefs and short feedback pulses that travel well across contexts; forthcoming pilots will test replication and iteration across multiple schools and Careers Hubs. Anticipated scaling frictions include timetable pressure, employer capacity, and safeguarding logistics. PERE mitigates these through modular planning templates, hybrid delivery options, and standardised brief/consent packs. Since the PERE model is designed for England's policy context (Gatsby Benchmarks; 2025 statutory guidance), it will require adaptation before using elsewhere.

## Conclusion

The PERE Model offers a structured yet flexible approach for delivering high-quality experiences of workplaces that move beyond compliance toward genuine learner development. It provides educators and employers with a clear process to translate the ambitions of the Gatsby Benchmarks and the Department for Education's (2025) careers guidance into tangible, repeatable actions.

By guiding stakeholders through a continuous cycle of preparation, implementation, reflection, and evaluation, PERE transforms work experience from a one-off event into a developmental learning journey. Its cyclical nature means that each stage informs the next, embedding improvement over time. Practically, schools should expect gains from their young people in career confidence, role awareness (including lesser-known roles), transferability of skills to curriculum tasks, and professional interaction readiness; with parents engaged through structured briefings and follow-up signposting as part of wraparound support.

The illustrative case presented in this paper demonstrates how PERE can be applied to design coherent, hybrid experiences that respond to real-world challenges and local priorities. While future research and reports will test its impact empirically, this conceptual framing shows how the model functions as the *how* of workplace learning, translating policy

ideals into meaningful practice. Ultimately, PERE provides a practical, scalable method to help schools and employers create consistent, reflective, and transformative experiences that prepare every learner to be 'first day, first hour' ready for the world of work.

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