CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSIONS

The lack of evaluation studies creates a difficulty in making conclusive statements about work experience programmes. Admittedly, in some countries (e.g. Guyana and Jamaica) detailed criteria for assessment of students on work experience have been worked out. These are supplemented by summative evaluation forms completed by employers. The school-industry liaison officer in the British case study drew on reports by students and employers in his assessment of the various schemes. In Kenya, too, employers submit reports to the schools, but in Botswana we are told that what takes place is 'only verbal assessment randomly between institution - student - and workshop managers.' Part of the problem lies in the absence of clearly defined criteria for assessment of work experience programmes which could be used from country to country. Using the objectives as a criterion is clearly problematic since the range of objectives for work experience programmes is very wide and emphases differ from one country to another. Measuring the achievement of objectives is an additional problem as some, especially the social ones, are not directly measurable. Notwithstanding these problems, assessments of the worthwhileness of work experience have generally been made in terms of the benefits gained from doing work experience or being involved in the programme in some way. What are these benefits?

The Benefits of Work Experience Programmes

Cost-Benefits: Hidden Costs

Opinions vary on this. A British careers officer is reported to have said, 'It is difficult to see what benefit could possibly arise. Work experience is superficial and temporary, permanent employment is a worker's livelihood. Work experience cannot convey the pressure of having to go to work, to perform competently, to hold down a job. Work experience is a novelty, employment is a habit. Work experience cannot show to young people the pressures on workers any more than observing their own teachers in situations of stress.(1)

From a review of the results of several empirical studies of career education programmes for high school students in the USA, each of which had a substantial work experience component, Steinberg concluded that such programmes did not generally have any impact on the level of students' basic educational skills, employability or employment. Furthermore, he said, 'There is no evidence that information about the world of work cannot be as effectively communicated in the classroom.'(2) A respondent from India, however, wrote, 'Although the cost of providing work experience is more than any other regular subject in the school system, looking to its contribution to all aspects of learning, behavioural

changes, and employability, it has become indispensable in the school curriculum.'

That work experience programmes are costly is beyond doubt. This is particularly so in developing countries of the Commonwealth where they tend to be integral parts of vocational education geared to training in employable skills. This requires the provision of trained teachers in the vocational areas and well equipped workshops which are adequately maintained and supplied with equipment, tools and materials. There are also a number of 'hidden costs' - Australia, for example, pointed to 'risk of injury and need for compensation' and 'the need for protective clothing,' India identified 'raw materials brought by students from home,' and both India and Jamaica underscored 'the utilisation of community resources' and 'on-the-job experience in industry.' Guyana and Australia pointed to the cost of staff time in monitoring and supervising young and inexperienced students - a cost which is not usually budgeted for either by the firm or the Ministry of Education. Such costs are to some extent balanced out by benefits accrued in being able to make personal use of articles manufactured, and the sale of articles in school fairs and exhibitions (India). Both India and Guyana underscored how earnings by students could contribute to their being able to continue their studies. The case study of the high school on the West Indies College complex in Jamaica is a further example of this.

The cost benefits of work experience from the perspective of New Zealand is worthy of note:

> In the first instance the cost per pupil of catering for the needs of a student in a work experience unit is significantly costlier than providing for the same student in the main stream of the school. In the long term, however, there would be clear cost benefits. Many students in work experience units would find survival in the main stream particularly difficult. Their self images would be further damaged, and their sense of alienation against both the school system and the wider community would deepen. Cost benefits, therefore, arise principally from avoiding the social consequences of this kind of damage.

Student Benefits

Some countries identified personal and social benefits that students derive from work experience. India, for example, pointed to an 'acquaintance with problems and needs of family and community,' and the development of a co-operative attitude as well as 'change in attitudes towards work.' The Australian case study provided some support for the claim about the enhancement of the social development of some students. Most countries, however, saw student benefits in terms of what they had learnt about the world of work and how work experience contributed towards their getting employment. Some typical responses were:

(a) Opportunity to make practical contact with the world of work, to develop an understanding of the work environment and to broaden their perspective regarding work opportunities. (Australia)

(b) Being better prepared for future employment. (Botswana)

(c) Even after one week pupils are much more mature and have a far more realistic attitude to their future employment.(3) (Britain)

(d) Students are able to focus their attention on the needs of specific sections of the world of work in a way their colleagues in the main stream of the school are unable to match. Their individual vocational needs receive more attention than do those of their peers in the main stream and it is very common practice for them to find employment directly as a result of their experience in their work experience units. (New Zealand)

School Benefits

Schools derive several benefits from having work experience programmes. They can respond more directly to special needs of students. This is summed up well in the response from New Zealand. 'It is the aim of most New Zealand schools to make every effort to meet the disparate needs of as many individual students as possible, and work experience units provide one mechanism for achieving this for a significant number of people. If the school were required to meet the needs of these young people within the main stream it would be a most testing exercise. In short, work experience units provide schools with the resources and the authorities required to meet the special needs of a group of students who would have great difficulty in coping with main stream education at the secondary level.' Australia also referred to 'greater motivation of students' as a school benefit.

A second benefit is that work experience programmes make it possible for students to receive training and exposure to equipment and facilities (in industry/private enterprise etc.) which the school cannot afford. Moreover the school can make use of the skills and knowledge of qualified members of the community to supplement and enrich vocational instruction - especially in cases where there is a shortage of teachers in vocational areas. The closer relationship with the world of work induces schools to adapt their curriculum so that it becomes more relevant to the needs of employers and the working world generally.

Promoting self sufficiency is of benefit to schools that have work experience programmes on their premises. India pointed to the fact that 'schools can become self-sufficient as regards cleaning, repairing, decoration etc.', and that they can produce articles for daily use - notebooks, files, etc. Elsewhere, the author has underlined the 'substantial degree of self-reliance' on the part of West Indies College in Jamaica and of the Jose Marti secondary school in its heyday:

> A visitor to these two institutions today cannot but be impressed by how they manage to thrive on their own initiative in an age when schools have to close because of lack of government funding to repair sanitary conveniences, repair vandalised buildings, broken furniture....(4)

Similar experiences are reported in Guyana where, through classes in woodwork, students in a large number of schools have begun fulfilling contracts for furniture not only for the Ministry of Education but for the general public. The income generated from such activities is spent on such things as fencing school compounds, and repairing and making school

furniture. 'The significance of this in an era of economic crisis is that financial dependence on central government will be reduced, and partial self-reliance among schools promoted.'(5)

Employer Benefits

Work experience programmes provide an opportunity for employers to participate in curriculum decision-making in schools, particularly by making suggestions for changes in the curriculum to meet their specified needs (Jamaica). Much still needs to be done, however, to promote this sort of participation. Australia considered that employers' benefits were 'probably minimal other than the long-term benefit of taking on new employees who have had some experience in the world of work. However, in some cases employers actually use work experience to select future employees.' Other typical responses were:

(a) Gets raw hands with positive attitudes towards work - cheap labour. (India)

(b) Getting better qualified trainees. (Botswana)

(c) Free and cheap labour. (Tanzania)

(d) Many employers provide permanent employment for young people whom they have met earlier on work experience. The employer, then, has had an opportunity to assess the strengths and weaknesses of a prospective employee in a way not possible when that employer is dealing with a normal member of the work force. (New Zealand)

Who, then, benefits most from work experience? This is difficult to determine in any precise way, but one tends to agree with the Australian viewpoint that the employers' benefits are minimal. Given that programmes are so short, it is hardly likely that in a work experience lasting one, two or even three weeks, employers can get as much from trainees as from their regular experienced employees. One suspects that the costs on the part of the employer outweigh whatever benefits accrue (e.g. the costs incurred in cases of injury while a student is on the job, and the repair of equipment damaged by inexperienced hands). In instances where tax benefits are given, clearly the employer wins the day; otherwise, it appears that most benefits accrue to the students and the school.

The Problems of Organising Work Experience Programmes

This study has shown that invariably a work experience teacher or officer organises work experience programmes for schools, although in some places there is a heavy reliance on the principal. In some developed countries, such as Britain, a school-industry liaison officer may have overall charge of the work experience schemes/programmes in a district or county.

That there is a considerable amount of work involved in organising work experience emerges in all accounts. Often the demands on teachers are such that workplaces cannot be visited with sufficient frequency and students are inadequately supervised. The phasing of work experience is often subject to the dictates of the employer. This can lead to the loss of involvement on the part of the teacher, as in the case of the Australian school that operated a 'rolling' programme (see page 43).

Meeting the travel costs of the work experience teacher/officer who has to make arrangements with several employers is a problem for Ministries of Education, particularly in developing countries. But perhaps the chief problem is the lack of sufficient employers who are willing to participate. To overcome this the government of Jamaica has made it a legal requirement for employers to participate in the HEART programme once their earnings reach a certain limit. They must either take HEART trainees for on-the-job experience in return for tax benefits or contribute a sum to the HEART Trust.

Improving the Cost-Effectiveness of Work Experience Programmes

Work experience programmes are expensive educational activities. Straton and Murray conclude that this is particularly true in the case of schools operating a 'rolling' programme where normal teaching has to be maintained for students in each class who are not away on work experience. Expense is also underscored in a national study on work experience in India, which identifies lack of resources, equipment, trained teachers, funds, material and space, as being reasons for schools being unable to implement work experience programmes.(6)

Are there any ways in which the effects of work experience programmes might be enhanced and the costs of these programmes reduced? What seems clear from this study is that too much is expected of work experience programmes. Can a one, two or even three-week programme be expected to make any significant impact on a student's 'self-concept'? A reappraisal of objectives needs to take place, be it at the state, county, government or school level to determine what achievements can reasonably be expected within a given time. The results should be made clear to all participants in the programme so as to avoid the unrealistic expectations that students often have of the programme and that employers invariably have of the students. In general, employers need to be given more detailed information (perhaps through seminars/workshops) about how work experience fits into the general curriculum of the school. They also need to be given insights into the level of skill training which takes place in pre-vocational preparation so that they may be better able to gauge what inputs should be at the workplace. In the light of the frequent criticisms of inadequate supervision at the workplace, guidance in supervision is vital for those employers who lack supervisory skills. Providing employers with assistance in developing appropriate on-the-job work experience procedures (e.g. forms of assessment that are easy to use and not time-consuming) could help to reduce employer costs.

In a further effort to enhance what students get out of work experience, placements need to be more closely tailored to the area of vocational training in school. This is not easy in countries where not enough employers are willing to participate. In such cases, some incentives for employers should be seriously considered. Additionally, particularly in developing countries, not only is it necessary to increase the numbers of work experience placements, but it is also vital to institute strategies for generating youth employment. Work experience programmes are unlikely to succeed in motivating young people towards employment if employment opportunities do not exist.

Work experience programmes could also be made more effective by undertaking a more comprehensive and systematic follow-up of students'

work experiences such as the de-briefing session in Guyana. Such follow-up should include a review of the students' reactions to their experiences so that adjustments to the programme can be made.

The organisation of work experience programmes, including liaison with employers, is a costly process in terms of the time, energy and effort expended by the work experience teacher/officer, particularly where teachers in individual schools have to make their own arrangements. Such efforts tend to be unco-ordinated and invariably result in frustration when several schools vie for the same employer. Centralisation of services for the organisation of work experience is a step that developing countries may wish to consider. The experience of Australia and Britain suggests that, when effectively maintained, such a centralised system helps to contain school costs.

Summary of Main Points in the Study

1. In capitalist countries of the Commonwealth, work experience tends to be seen as a means of preparing the young for the world of work in an effort to avoid the problem of unemployment. In socialist countries, the inculcation of a healthy work ethic emerges as a stronger ideology and work experience programmes tend to be viewed as a means of solving the problem of social inequality in the society. WEP on school premises is often seen as a way of linking education with production - an ideology which itself is geared ultimately to a process of transforming education within a wider strategy for social change.

2. Work experience programmes have a range of objectives:

Philosophical/pedagogical objectives relate to ideals of equalising opportunities, facilitating the transition from school to work, and the motivation of young people through the study of curricula which are more relevant to their experiences.

Social objectives relate to the development of positive attitudes towards physical/manual work, learning the nature of social relations at work and the nurturing of such desirable attributes as punctuality and co-operation on the part of employees.

Economic objectives include facilitating young people in getting employment, undertaking job-exploration activities within commerce and industry, and contributing towards the development of the agricultural basis of a developing country's economy.

3. Some evidence exists that in-school work experience has succeeded in creating a balance between the academic and the practical in school curricula, enabling schools to become at least partially self-sufficient, and impacting on the lives of children and their families (e.g. influencing their diet).

4. In-school work experience programmes often encounter difficulties on account of lack of adequate inputs initially (e.g. inadequate land space for agricultural programmes; inadequate water supply; inadequate finance to purchase foodstuff; tools, machinery; and lack of trained personnel to effectively implement the programme).

5. Work experience chosen by the school for educational ends is the approach to work experience adopted by most of the Commonwealth countries sampled in this study.

6. The subjects which lend themselves best to work experience are 'practical subjects' (e.g. woodwork, metalwork, automechanics, building construction, home economics, agricultural science and business studies). Cultural studies, language arts, science, biology and environmental studies have also been identified as 'practical subjects' suitable for work experience.

7. There is a tendency for work experience programmes to be organised for the less academically able, despite a declared policy against this practice in some countries. The examination system therefore has relatively little effect on work experience except that where it is not 'examinable' many students consider it to be a less important educational activity than subjects which are examined.

8. A block release of two to three weeks is the way in which work experience programmes in Commonwealth schools are most commonly phased. Block releases tend to be preferred as they allow for a better understanding of the world of work and facilitate better assessment of the students.

9. The problems most commonly experienced in work experience programmes are lack of incentives for students, poor supervision at the workplace, employers' unrealistic expectations of students, students having to do menial tasks, and difficulties in getting transport to and from the workplace in rural areas.

10. Students and schools appear to benefit more from work experience programmes than do employers. However, the evidence for this is not conclusive. Student benefits include the development of an understanding of the work environment and being better prepared for employment. School benefits range from greater motivation of students to making it possible for students to receive training and exposure to equipment and facilities in industry etc. which the school cannot afford. Employers' benefits include getting better qualified trainees and being able to use work experience to select future employees.

11. Apart from actual costs of providing, equipping and maintaining workshops, and supplying adequately trained teachers, there are 'hidden costs' that are often not budgeted for in work experience programmes (e.g. compensation for injury, the use of community resources, the time spent by staff in monitoring and supervising students). These hidden costs are balanced out to some extent by such benefits as being able to make the school more self-sufficient by the sale of goods and service, by providing 'earn as you learn' opportunities for some needy students, and by avoiding the social consequences of damage to the self-image of less academically able children who find it difficult to succeed in the system.

Conclusion

The brief for this study did not require any recommendations to be made. But if I were to make a recommendation it would be that the best policy in both developed and developing countries is not 'to leave work experience

programmes severely alone!' (Sinclair), but that Commonwealth countries should endorse them as worthwhile educational activities. They are indeed costly enterprises, but due to weaknesses in the way in which they have been organised and implemented in the past, insufficient attention has been given to reducing the cost of these programmes and maximising their benefits. The benefits to be derived are considerable, and it is likely that we will see more attempts to integrate work experience with traditional curriculum subjects as the approach through social studies in a comprehensive boys school in London described by Fortune et al.(7) More directly, if the cutbacks in educational expenditure in developing countries like Jamaica continue, schools will have no alternative but to work their way out of the economic morass by their own efforts, particularly if their pupils come from families which cannot finance school programmes. In-school work experience which links education with production (with the thrust on the educational being promoted) seems to me an inescapable reality for the very near future. As Van Rensburg(8) has maintained, all school subjects can be given a practical and productive orientation.

The benefits of off-school work experience as outlined in this study underscore the worthwhileness of programmes of this kind. To improve their effectiveness, consideration could be given to introducing schemes for seconding into industry/private enterprise those teachers who have responsibility for work experience programmes.

Finally, a vast amount of knowledge of work experience programmes in Commonwealth countries and other parts of the world remains untapped. This study has barely touched the surface. Much of this knowledge, however, has been lost due to lack of documentation. It is the writer's hope that in future those who undertake initiatives in work experience will make provision for evaluation of these programmes and that the knowledge gained will be widely disseminated.