



General Education Reimagined: Connecting Learning with the World of Work, November 19 2025

The Benefits of Work Experience for General Secondary Education Students in Estonia

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FEWL
ENHANCING RESEARCH
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AND WORKPLACE LEARNING

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↓ Click on each section below to expand and explore the research findings ↓

1 Research Background, Questions & Student Agency

Research Background and Methods

In 2022, **9060 students** from general secondary education schools across Estonia (grades 6-12) participated in a survey about their work and school experience. Additionally, **12 interviews** were conducted with upper secondary students who had work experience.

? Main Research Questions

1. What do students learn through work experience?
2. How are work experience and competencies learned at work related to student agency at school?

What is Student Agency?

Student agency is the student's **capacity to direct their own life** (OECD, 2019): to set goals, make choices and informed decisions, and solve problems. It operates in response to the changing opportunities and constraints of the social environment and culture.



Teacher Support for Agency



Capacity to Agentic Behaviour

(agentic engagement + ability to resist injustice)



Perseverance

2 Competences Developed at Work

Skills Learned at Work, According to Students

Skills Learned	Percentage	Respondents
1. Social skills	32%	1148
2. Specific skills	26%	940
3. Self-management	19%	673
4. Work skills	12%	445
5. Self-related skills	9%	320
6. Sense of responsibility	7%	243
7. Self-confidence	7%	254
8. Gave nothing	6%	201
9. Other responses	3%	102

Unexpected Finding

In upper secondary school, no relationship was found between any of the mentioned skills and student agency in school!

This suggests that schools have not always created a favorable environment for the expression of agency and the transfer of skills acquired in the workplace.

Additional Skills Mentioned in Interviews

- Communication skills
- Understanding others
- Courage in communication
- Conflict resolution
- Patience
- Teamwork skills
- Leadership skills
- Self-regulation
- Time planning

"I also learned some leadership skills, because I always used to wait for an order, like give me an order and I'll get things done, but now people ask me what they need to do. So I'm kind of the one who has to start giving orders."

— **Student quote**

"At first it was difficult with time planning; it was hard to find time to study... afterwards that issue was resolved, I was able to go to work normally, so I had time to study as well."
— **Student quote**

3 Main Research Findings

Work Experience and Agency

Work experience is positively related to student agency in school - the more work experience, the bolder and more proactive students are in school!

Gender Differences and Impact of the Language of Instruction

- Boys have slightly more work experience than girls.
- Students in Estonian-language schools have slightly more work experience, significantly more teacher support for their agency and slightly more agency in school.

Significant Experiences of Students

- Students find work through **personal contacts**, applying for temporary jobs, through youth work camps and volunteering.
- The initial motives to earn pocket money can change with time: focus on **reflecting on their future career**.
- Students develop many **generic skills and competences**: social skills, problem-solving, conflict management, language skills, leadership, overcome their anxieties and laziness, learn to plan their time and develop self-regulation skills.
- Work experience helped to better understand **the rules of working life** and one's own post-school prospects. Negative experiences can shape career awareness: what to avoid in the future.
- Learning at school and work is understood as **two separate worlds**. However, some schools analyse work experience and bring work topics into lessons in the form of practical projects or work shadowing.

Impact of Age

Older students perceive more agency in school than younger students.

Student agency in school is most influenced by:

1. **Student's own perseverance**
2. **Teacher support**
3. **Work experience**

Also somewhat by gender, age, school culture related to different languages of instruction, and students' socio-economic background.

4 Conclusions and Recommendations

✓ Main Conclusions

1. Work experience develops agency

Work experience and student agency in school are related. Although more proactive young people are more likely to seek employment, work experience can also develop agency. Therefore, young people's contact with the world of work should be encouraged.

2. Gender and cultural differences

Food for thought: Why do boys and Estonian-speaking youth have more work experience than girls and Russian-speaking youth? Why is the agency of Estonian-speaking boys higher in school?

3. Skills transfer problem

Unexpected: Why are specific agency-related competencies developed at work (self-management, self-awareness, self-confidence, social skills) not related to student agency in school?

Apparently, schools have not always created a favorable environment for the expression of agency and the transfer of skills acquired at work.

💡 Recommendations

1. Integration of the world of work into learning

Schools should integrate more knowledge acquired in the world of work and reflection on gained experience into learning.

2. Support for girls and Russian-speaking youth

The agency of girls and Russian-speaking youth should be supported more.

3. Supporting reflection

Create systematic opportunities for reflecting on learning from work experience and connecting it with school knowledge.

4. Developing the learning environment

Shape the school environment so that skills acquired at work can be expressed and developed.

Food for Thought

Despite very good examples of how learning from work can be applied in school, these two worlds still remain rather separate.

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