



UK Work Placements: A choice too far?¹

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Increasing expectations are being placed on higher education institutions to ensure the economic relevance of research and knowledge creation as well as developing the skill needs of workers in modern knowledge-based societies. In the UK, workplace learning has long been a feature of higher education in certain subject areas, and in the late 1990s the idea of work experience for all students re-emerged as a significant issue. Various studies have considered the relationship between work placement experiences during higher education and students' subsequent transition into employment after graduation, but there has been less recent research exploring how the placement experience translates into academic development. This article presents some of the findings of a study on the effects, as perceived by undergraduates themselves, of work experience placements on aspects of learning as well as employability. The majority of placement students indicate personal and intellectual development and report increased levels of confidence and enhanced motivation towards study. However, national data show a continuing decline in the numbers of UK students taking up placements, and the study suggests that more general moves towards flexibility within undergraduate programmes may be contributing to this decline.

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AQ1 Keywords:

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Introduction

Expansion of higher education has been justified largely on the grounds of improving economic competitiveness in a growing global knowledge economy. This growth of the knowledge economy has also been used to justify increased investment in research, to provide a human capital justification for widening participation in higher education, and to drive (at least in the UK) a more pronounced 'vocational' emphasis in teaching and the curriculum as well as raise issues of student employability.

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2 B. Little and L. Harvey

Higher education institutions are having to reconsider the boundaries between higher education and employment. There are increasing expectations placed on them to ensure the economic relevance of research and knowledge creation as well as developing the skill needs of workers in modern knowledge-based economies. As noted elsewhere (Brennan *et al.*, 2006), boundaries are becoming blurred between knowledge acquired within education settings and knowledge acquired in other social contexts. Though this may have often been the case for learners at later stages of the life-course (where it inevitably builds on substantial work and life experiences), in the UK, it is also increasingly the case for younger learners, most of whom now combine higher education study with substantial amounts of time spent in employment.

Across Europe more generally, policy drivers towards greater linkages between higher education and employment are similar to those found in the UK. In addition to moves towards enhancing student employability, and a recognition that knowledge creation is not the 'sole' preserve of higher education institutions, de Weert (2006) notes some other aspects of these drivers, including the recognition that 'workplace learning can be an important vehicle in developing knowledge networks; ...that learners' engagement with knowledge used in a workplace context can enhance the acquisition of abstract and generalised knowledge; increasing flexibility and enabling greater learner involvement in the learning process' (de Weert, 2006, p. 62). He also notes that higher education programmes that, by design, set-out to integrate workplace learning into the curriculum can be viewed as bases for exploring new definitions of the respective responsibilities of the state, the economy and educational institutions.

Within the UK, workplace learning has long been a feature of higher education: in the 1950s, the National Council for Technological Awards advocated that undergraduate programmes in engineering and technology should incorporate periods of industrial placement. Since that time, undergraduate programmes incorporating such work-based placements have been introduced across a wide range of subject areas. In some programmes, the placement is a year-long activity 'sandwiched' between significant periods of on-campus learning and the sandwich placement may be optional. In other programmes, often those seen as meeting both academic and professional development objectives, shorter 'blocks' of placements are interspersed through the undergraduate programme (and the blocks are compulsory).

During the 1990s, the idea of work experience for all higher education students re-emerged as a significant issue in the UK, and at the time the emphasis was seen as symptomatic of 'the ever-more rapidly changing world of work', with employers seeking to recruit graduates who could demonstrate a range of experiences relevant to the flexible workplace of the future (Harvey, Geall & Moon with Aston, Bowes & Blackwell, 1998, p. 1). Work experience was seen as the 'missing ingredient' in undergraduate education, at least from the perspective of employers (Harvey, Moon & Geall with Bower, 1997). In fact, as Harvey *et al.* (1998) note, the major government-sponsored review of UK higher education undertaken between 1996 and 1997 (the Dearing Committee)² placed considerable emphasis on work experience in its

AQ2

final report, concluding that ‘students can benefit from experience in many different settings, structured and informal, paid and unpaid. Their academic experience should help them understand how experience relates to their personal and future development’ (NCIHE, 1997, 9.30). In particular, the Dearing Committee made a number of recommendations about expanding opportunities for students to undertake work experience, developing employability skills and improving links between higher education and employers.

Of course, higher education’s relevance to employment is not necessarily limited to the explicit incorporation of learning derived from experiences of work (work-based learning), and recent wide-ranging curricular developments within the UK geared towards enhancing student employability (at both undergraduate and post-graduate levels) show that, in order to be relevant to the workplace, learning does not need to take place *within* the workplace (see for example, Harvey, Locke & Morey, 2002; Harvey and contributors, 2003).

But where the focus is on work experience and higher education UK studies have tended to distinguish between three main categories of work experience, namely organised work experience as part of a programme of study; organised work experience external to a programme of study; *ad hoc* work experience external to a programme of study.

In this article we focus on the first category, whereby a period (or periods) of work experience is designed ‘in’ to the overall programme of study, there is an expectation that students will derive learning gains from that work experience and such learning is formally recognised within the assessment of students’ overall achievements.

Previous Studies of Gains from Work-based Learning

AQ3

Various studies in the UK since the late 1980s have considered the impact of placement experience on students, with most focusing on how that experience makes students ready for, and more effective in, the workplace once graduated (Brennan & Little, 1996; Harvey *et al.*, 1997; Little, 2000).

A key finding of a large-scale study of graduates’ early career paths (Purcell, Pitcher & Simm, 1999) was the relevance of work experience in gaining appropriate employment after graduation, and similar positive associations between relevant work experience and subsequent employment was found in a more limited study on art and design students (Blackwell & Harvey, 1999). Other large-scale studies focusing on the relationship between work placements in sandwich courses, and subsequent employment outcomes, tend to find sandwich students are advantaged in the labour market, at least in the early part of their careers (Bowes & Harvey, 1999; Mason, Williams, Cranmer & Guile, 2003). Employers tend to have positive views about graduates who have undertaken periods of work experience during their undergraduate programme, particularly their personal skills development and an appreciation of linking theories to practical applications (Harvey *et al.*, 1997), and some studies of graduate recruiters in the late 1990s were citing evidence of recruiters paying a graduate ‘premium’ for relevant work experience (AGR, 1998).

4 *B. Little and L. Harvey*

From a higher education institutional perspective, the provision of programmes involving work-based learning can demonstrate the implicit (if not explicit) functional inter-connectedness between (for example) an institution's teaching and learning strategy and its research and development activities, with the institution putting effort into establishing and sustaining a network of employers who 'offer' placement opportunities; tutors visiting students on placements and, at the same time, identifying with employers potential areas of common interest which may lead to joint research and development activities; regular employer contact ensuring the vibrancy and work-relatedness of taught curricula; and the institution building up notions of 'preferred supplier' status with a cluster of employers (Brennan *et al.*, 2006).

Notwithstanding the above studies, very little recent research has explicitly explored how the placement experience translates into academic development from the point of view of current students. Bournier and Ellerker (1994) are unusual in providing some examples of students' reflections on the integration of work experience and academic work. In general it seems that much is taken for granted, the observed maturity of undergraduates returning from a period of work placement is assumed to carry over into a more studious or reflective approach to learning but there is little direct evidence to be found of this in the literature.

AQ4

Decline in Placement Take Up

The study described below revealed that, in a number of cases, the placement element was (now) optional and some staff in some of the 'case study' institutions reported decreasing numbers of students opting to do placements. In other institutions, it was clear that sandwich placements were still a compulsory element of the first-degree programme, and even where it was optional, the majority of the relevant cohort chose to undertake a placement.

While the study described below was being undertaken, a separate analysis of national data on sandwich students (albeit only a sub-set of students on work placements in any one year) was being carried out as part of an internal enquiry by the Higher Education Funding Council for England (see Little & Harvey, 2006, Annex for details). The data analysis showed that since 1999, there has been a steady decline in the number of undergraduates taking up placements, in both pre- and post-1992 universities. In 1999–2000, sandwich students accounted for just under 10% of all undergraduates, but by 2004–05, this proportion had dropped to just over 7%. The largest part of the decline has been in the post-1992 universities. This is perhaps surprising given that sandwich degrees were once seen as a distinctive characteristic of undergraduate provision in the former polytechnics (now the post-1992 universities).

Another contemporary review of a sample of UK higher education institutions' strategies towards work-based learning (Brennan *et al.*, 2006) found that whereas some institutions were reporting a decline in the take up of sandwich placements, other institutions were maintaining their long-standing commitment to such sandwich provision, or seeking ways to make more explicit their commitment to such provision.

There have been one or two recent studies that have investigated the decline of placement take up amongst certain groups of students (see, for example, Aston University, reported in HEFCE, 2006; London Metropolitan University, 2004). Such studies point to a cluster of reasons why students might now more readily opt 'out' of doing a placement, including the perceived difficulties of 'fitting in' the placement with other commitments such as term-time work and family responsibilities, and the perceived costs of extending the total duration of study by one year. Further, the difficulties of securing suitable placements for the ever-increasing numbers of students entering higher education, and for other higher education initiatives (in the UK) that seek to integrate work-based learning into the curriculum (for example, the introduction of foundation degrees) should not be downplayed.

It is likely that many institutions and departments that have traditionally put an emphasis on work placements for undergraduates will be examining carefully the impact of changes in tuition fee arrangements introduced in English higher education from September 2006³ on student choices in relation to placements.

A UK Study of the Impact of Work Placements on Academic Development

In this paper, we present some of the findings of a study⁴ that focused on the effects, as perceived by students themselves, of work experience placements on learning as well as employability (Little & Harvey, 2006). In particular, the focus is on students' perceptions of their learning gains including subject knowledge and skills in addition to gains in personal development. It concludes by raising concern about the wider take up of work-based learning across UK higher education.

Aims of the Study

The study had a number of aims, but the main focus was on the academic learning from placements, which is under-researched and under-reported, rather than the development of workplace skills, which is more widely reported. The study investigated:

- students' perceptions of learning from placements (planned as part of the undergraduate curriculum);
- the extent to which students try to transfer and build on such learning in subsequent stages of the taught curriculum; and
- what aspects of the students' subsequent taught curriculum facilitate or hinder the continuing enhancement of knowledge, skills and attributes developed through placements.

Methodology

Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were undertaken with 82 students in 7 higher education institutions. All the students had recently returned from a period of work experience and they were interviewed between November and December 2005.

6 *B. Little and L. Harvey*

Additional interviews, 10 in total, were undertaken with key members of staff who had responsibility for placements.

Face-to-face interviews were used because we wanted to get the student view on their experience without curtailing the scope of the answers, which would have occurred with a questionnaire. Further, we wanted to explore the nuances of their answers, which required a face-to-face conversational approach. The interviews were semi-structured in as much as we had a series of prompts to ensure that we covered all phases of the placement experience from selection of placement, through adjustment and training to engagement and outcomes, both academic and employment-related.

First-degree programmes were chosen that reflected a range of curriculum designs involving planned placements (compulsory and optional) but excluding those subjects, such as teacher training, nursing, medicine, social work where the placement is wholly integrated.

Although there are now a variety of types of work placements in UK undergraduate programmes, we focused on three different types of work placements planned as part of a first-degree programme:

- compulsory short (6-week) placements within a first-degree programme covering a broad range of subjects;
- compulsory thin (2×6 months) sandwich placements within a general business administration programme; and
- year-long sandwich placements (compulsory or optional) within a range of programmes including science-based programmes, general business, accounting and finance, and computing programmes as well as more specific programmes, for example, transport and logistics; economics and international development.

Students' Reasons for Choice of Placement

Although in some of the programmes the work placement was a compulsory part of the curriculum, in others the placement was optional.

Students indicated that they had chosen to enrol on a programme that included a placement (or had chosen to take up the option of a placement) for a number of reasons. For many, the placement had offered an opportunity to get an insight into an industry or type of work. They had wanted to test whether they would like to work in that particular job role, or industry. Further, some mentioned that the placement experience is seen as 'saleable' in the graduate job market (and for some, 'more' saleable than just the part-time work they had already done during term-time in earlier years of study).

Alongside these overtly employment-related reasons, students also cited a number of reasons linked to their academic studies, namely the possibility of linking academic study to the world of work; the opportunity to gain more experience of areas not covered by degree course. A few students mentioned that they had been told that a placement increased their grade.

Finally, for some students the placement was seen as a break from an academic career, which had started with examinations taken at the end of compulsory secondary education and had meant them taking examinations every year since then.

Type of Work and Evolution of the Job

Two-thirds of the jobs were in private companies, a very small number in charities and the remainder in public-sector organisations; principally educational establishments, but also the police, local authorities, and central government departments (Table 1 shows the type of organisation and general area of activity).

Table 1. Indicating type of placement organisation and general area of activity, by broad programme area

Programme area	Type of organisation			Type of activity
	Private	Public	Not-for-profit	
Arts/Humanities		4	1	Classroom assistant; local community assistant
Accounting/ Finance	3			Accounts assistant; in-house corporate communications
Business/ Management	37	5	2	General administration; accounts database maintenance; auditing assistance; estate agent assistance; public relations; human resources; marketing; business analysis; competition analysis; financial analysis; product development; website development; import/movement of commodities; general business logistics/distribution; stockbroker assistance
Computing (+ Information Systems; Multi-media; Software development)	16	4		Applications; business analysis; client support; technical/product development and support; website design; systems configuration support; software engineering; network administration
Science (Biochemistry; Pharmacology; Biology)	4	1	1	Wild life researcher; crime scene investigation; laboratory assistance; drug development/regulatory aspects.
Social Science (Economics; Psychology)	1	8	1	Classroom assistance; crime data research; scientific research assistance; data analysis; political lobbying; financial analysis; website development
Total (of which four undertaken outside the UK)	61	22	5	

8 *B. Little and L. Harvey*

Although the majority of students were initially in supporting roles, providing assistance to particular functional teams, more often than not these roles changed and developed during the course of the placement.

5 I think the level of responsibility was definitely what you earned and how much you were willing to take on. I wanted to get as far as I could and therefore took every opportunity I could to get more responsibility; and I definitely think it was worth it. (T2, junior software engineer, software company)

10 For some students, the increased responsibility was a natural part of the planned development of the placement. Greater responsibility also came about through unplanned events, for example, having to cover for staff absences and changes in staffing levels.

Such evolution was, in the main welcomed by students, though some obviously found the prospect of specific responsibilities quite daunting initially.

15 However, a small number of students also acknowledged that though they were kept busy throughout their year-long placement, the activities themselves were relatively easy and unchallenging.

20 Those students who indicated they had specifically asked for or sought out more challenging activities were also rather critical of other students who had also been on placements with the same organisation or department (either concurrently or previously) but who (in their opinion) had not made the most of the opportunities for developing the role, or who had been content to 'do the minimum' and not seek out additional tasks and responsibilities.

25 At first I was a bit wary [about doing an optional placement] and I know it's all a personal experience. It is really what you put in, you do get out. If you do want more work, and you push, and show that you are enthusiastic, it does make a difference. My other colleague wasn't so interested, wasn't so keen on the topic and it showed and he didn't get that much out of his placement because he didn't push things forward, he didn't show a proactive attitude ... (B4, junior analyst, government department)

30 Evolution of placement jobs was usually supported by some form of training. Although 10 students, mostly on 6-week placements, indicated that they had received no training at all during their placement, most students had experienced *ad hoc*, or systematic on-the-job training, and had attended in-house training sessions. Ten had also been sent on external training courses.

35 Several students who had taken up year-long placements in large companies had taken part in general induction sessions being laid on for all the new (graduate) staff starting around the same time. Such inductions ranged from two- or three-day events to six weeks and included induction into company-specific database and IT systems, job-specific training and more general awareness about overall company aims and objectives and its place in the industry and wider markets.
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Personal Development: Skills, abilities and subject knowledge

The study also explored the extent to which the students considered:

- they had developed as a person during the placement period;
- their subject knowledge had increased as a result of the placement; and
- their academic abilities and approaches to learning had changed.

Perhaps not surprisingly, students found it rather easy to identify specific skills they had developed (particularly IT skills) and could also identify development in a range of personal and interpersonal skills. The analysis of interview transcripts identified three broad clusters of skills (Table 2).

Communication and Networking

Most students indicated that their communication and interpersonal skills in general had improved as a result of the placement situation.

I'm more able to speak in a group and give my opinions, whether they're right or wrong! It's [the placement] just brought me out as a person, because ...you have to communicate with other people. I had to go to meetings with people I'd never met before ... So, I was representing the library basically. I don't know why they chose me! I was sure I wasn't going to go, but she [line manager] said, 'Go! Go!' So, I just went. (C3, help-desk, learning exchange)

About one-third of students referred to networking skills they had developed on placement.

Table 2. Interpersonal, personal and intellectual skills developed, by number of students citing such development

Skills cluster	Particular skill	No. students
Interpersonal	Oral communication	57
	Written communication	38
	Client liaison	30
	Networking	28
	Reporting to senior management	24
Personal	Phone/e-mail protocols	18
	Confidence	54
	Personal organisation	50
	Time management	32
	Adaptability	22
	Flexibility	20
	Maturity	9
Intellectual	Risk taking	2
	Subject knowledge	55
	Confidence with subject matter	36
	Project management	28
	Analysis	26
	Synthesis	16
	Critique	8
Foreign language development	5	

10 *B. Little and L. Harvey*

In [the trading firm] I wanted to make it clear that I didn't want to mix with the students ... Lots of students ... sat like a student group, whereas I usually break off and sit with people who actually work there because I am going to see the students probably in Bath anyway. So, what is the point of wasting my time here when I can build relationships for the future? I always think that relationships are so important in business ... your placement is all about getting a job ... getting contacts for the future. So that's what I was more conscious of. (B2, financial support for manufacturer trading function)

But the prospect of networking did not always seem appealing, and depended to some extent on the individual student's overall level of confidence.

S: Networking—horrible word. I hated it at the beginning ... You'd just get thrown into a conference and you'd be walking around between presentations and you'd just have to talk to people.

I: *why did you hate it?*

S: At the beginning, because I didn't understand my job, so I wasn't going to add anything to the conversation. Towards the end, I understood what I was talking about, so I could go with the conversation. I like talking to people, but if I don't know what I'm talking about, I don't enjoy it in the slightest. Once you understand what you're doing then you can make contacts and be useful to them. (B21, assistant globalisation desk officer, government department)

These students provide contrasting views of networking. For the former, networking was about making business contacts that might prove useful for her future job prospects, whereas in the latter case, underlying the student's reluctance to networking was a sense of needing to be useful to the contacts he made (rather than the contacts necessarily being of use to him).

Organisational Skills, Responsibility and Confidence

Personal skills development centred on increased confidence and personal organisation. Taking on responsibility for specific tasks and gaining the trust of work colleagues are aspects that increase an individual's level of confidence, as was evident from several of the discussions with students. Aspects of personal organisation were also developed through students taking on more responsibilities and being seen as the person 'leading' on specific aspects of team-based tasks.

The development of time-management skills was frequently mentioned as a benefit of working on placement.

Linked with improved organisation and communication, improved self-confidence was widely cited by students as an outcome of their placement experience.

I think I'm more prepared now to go into work life because I know what to expect ... I won't be so, sort of, worried and things like that when it comes to looking for jobs and getting jobs. I think when I go to interviews for proper jobs I'll have that extra bit of confidence knowing I've done a year. (T3, product tester, software company)

Team Working

A specific aspect of working life was the nature and extent of team working. All students had experienced some form of team working, and in most cases this had been a positive experience.

Although you are doing teamwork here at university you are quite aware that you are working just with your group. Whereas when I went to [the insurance company] in the same state of mind, my manager said, 'Look, you are not just part of the individual team, you are part of the whole company—you've got to get involved in everything'. (K25, administration assistant, large insurance company)

... we were a team of six, there was the community liaison officer and the five of us, so although we had different themes ... we were all working for the same goal at the end, and there were parts of it where our responsibilities crossed and we had to ... work with the other person and then we'd go off again in our own direction. (K4, assistant to community liaison officer (art), secondary school)

Overall, nearly all students considered they benefited from team working but in a small number of cases students were also concerned about their input to teams and how they were perceived by other members of staff (and how this affected the value of their own inputs). For some, there was a real sense of working towards a 'bigger' team effort, and needing to put in additional hours as and when it was needed. Even though students were often having to work with people older than themselves, from different backgrounds and with different experiences, they nevertheless realised they had to make the effort to fit-in and be a part of the team.

For a few students, good experiences of team working on placement contrasted with their rather negative views of team working within their taught programmes at university.

I've realised I won't accept slacking any more, I'm afraid. I've gone into work and it's a case of if you're not doing your job you're going to be fired or you're going to get reprimanded ... Working with students [in group work] often 21 year-olds who don't have many cares ... it's a case of 'Your future's coming up. Sort yourself out, man!' It's a case of sitting down and saying, 'We've got a job to do, let's just get it done' ... You try not to lose friends, but obviously if someone's not pulling their weight you can't fire them ... so you've got to find ways to deal with people [in group work]. (G5, software developer, data processing company)

Development of Subject Knowledge

As part of the study we also aimed to gain an understanding of the extent to which students considered they had gained and developed subject knowledge and understanding during the placement. Opportunities for gaining such subject-specific knowledge varied greatly between placements, along a broad spectrum. For example, the subject-based learning gains for the accounting and finance student who spent a year with a local accountancy firm working in a general book-keeping role were rather different to those of the psychology student whose placement was basically a research assistant post engaged in researching language development and

12 *B. Little and L. Harvey*

developing and evaluating methods of transcription coding systems. Nevertheless, each of these students was able to articulate aspects of subject knowledge gained during the placement.

Students were able to identify both general and more specific aspects of subject-based knowledge they had gained during their placements (Table 3). Students

Table 3. Programme area and subject learning

Programme area		Learning gains
Arts and Humanities	Broad	Applicability of subject (Geography) in broader context Making subject knowledge (Geography) accessible to non-specialists
	Specific	Exploration of new materials and additional dimensions (of sight and texture) to artefacts (Art)
Accounting and Finance	Broad	Auditing processes and hierarchy of tasks; 'life of a trade' within investment banking. Confidence in reading figures and balance sheets
	Specific	Aspects of management accounting, VAT returns
Business and Management	Broad	Analysis of data to support business decisions. Use of financial data to underpin strategic management. How different functions within business work together to support overall objectives. Use of value chains and supply chain. Application of theories to practice (e.g. buying and selling commodities). Understanding of how actual practice differs from concepts and theories (and consequences of not adhering to good practice). Analysis of business activities in terms of corporate and social responsibilities. Business 'know-how'. Greater awareness of cultural differences relating to business practices (and role of politics in business)
	Specific	Auditing in practice (rather than theory). Creative side of marketing. Financial aspects of company restructuring. Legal aspects of business. Negotiating within business environment. Knowledge of government policies for, and regulatory aspects of, national parks. Knowledge of HTML code to create website. Technical knowledge of business products
Computing	Broad	Consolidating IT knowledge. Essential use of documentation to support user requirements. Enhanced understanding of networking systems. Efficient and effective searching of data sources
	Specific	C+ programming. Extended knowledge of Java and HTML. 'Extreme programming' method of tackling software development
Science	Broad	'Living and breathing' research on daily basis, and gaining confidence in evidence base. Better understanding of basics of scientific research and difficulties associated with animal observation. Seeing how psychological theories relate to practice (e.g. behavioural disorders, eating disorders). Appreciation of specific company role within wider/global picture
	Specific	In-depth knowledge of drugs and harmful side-effects. Language development and coding systems. New aspects of Parkinson's disease. Knowledge of 'in vivo' biology. Greater knowledge of pharmacology and respiratory pharmacology. Increased knowledge of mathematics and application of statistics (to underpin pharmacological work)

Table 3. (continued)

Programme area	Learning gains		
Social Science (Economics and International development)	Broad	Appreciation that practice may be very different from theories. Greater understanding of perspectives and views of different social partners (operating at different levels) relating to specific issues. Appreciation of role of power relationships in human rights issues. Greater understanding of day-to-day workings of government and processes of policy formulation	5
	Specific	Impact of December 2005 tsunami on world economy. Legal aspects of business. Techniques of qualitative research in the field. Understanding of specific economic models (e.g. global growth models). Role of World Bank in international development	10

regularly spoke of an awareness and a broader understanding of how their own specific tasks and activities fitted-in to a 'bigger picture', either within their own organisation or the industry within which the organisation operated. 15

Although some of the more specific subject knowledge arose from undertaking specific tasks (and on occasion was supported by particular training activities), much of the students' broader knowledge was accumulated over time as they gained more varied working experiences within their placement, and were able to draw, from those, a sense of the 'bigger' picture. 20

... it is that in a way that helps me understand other aspects of the bigger picture, especially when it comes to toxicology when you're assessing how the drug is going to impact: how bad effects of the drug are going to impact and to affect a large population. You do feel aspects of that in regulatory affairs. I mean, you're telling people that it is a safe drug, so if the toxicology tests aren't up-to-scratch, if they don't cover the same breadth of people then obviously you can't submit the drugs; so it does help me academically, as well. (B6, regulatory affairs support officer, large pharmaceutical company) 25

Many students also referred to the positive aspects of being able to see theories 'come to life' when engaged in certain activities, and the realisation that actual practices, in for example business, finance, international development, can be rather different from theories espoused in textbooks. Students involved in scientific research and laboratory work spoke of their sense of personal engagement with the issues being investigated, 'living the research' and hence acquiring a personal construction of the subject matter rather than 'just' reading the information from text books. 30

Higher-level Academic Skills 40

Despite the positive message provided by students about their personal development and the enhancement of their subject knowledge in various ways, there was little indication of a feeling of having developed 'higher order' academic abilities, such as

14 *B. Little and L. Harvey*

critique, synthesis or analysis. Perhaps students were not aware of this development, maybe they took it for granted, or perhaps the placement provided so much else by way of enhancement that intellectual development did not stand out. Indeed, two students mentioned that in writing up their placement experiences for an assessed report they had indicated that analytic and critical skills had been enhanced but along with a raft of other skills. In the interviews, these students did not dwell on the intellectual abilities.

The main area mentioned, apart from the development of subject knowledge, was project management. About a third of the respondents talked about developing better project-management skills. Several students went on project management courses:

Other aspects of intellectual development focused on specific abilities, such as being able to find things out and identifying core information. As can be seen from Table 1, the jobs of many of the students on placement involved considerable amounts of analysis of one kind or another.

For a few, there were noticeable developments in their critical abilities and, indeed, their ability to take criticism.

So I definitely question my work a lot more and why people say certain things and how things are looked at from a different angle, which is useful in my essay writing because it makes me a lot more critical ... [and] made me also question a lot more why certain people write the text books and why they're written in that manner and whether they're actually correct. (K10, research assistant, micro-finance firm, Zambia)

Another thing was learning to take on board criticism because a lot of our work, people came back and said, 'I don't think it works like that' or 'You can do better' or 'I don't agree with you'. Some people would be really quite harsh and they really, like, have a go and we get some nasty e-mails from people. (B2, financial support for manufacturer trading function)

Going Back into the Final Year

A key area of concern was how students related their experience back to the final year of their course and, linked to that, how they adapted back to final-year student life. The timing of the fieldwork for the study (from early November to early December) meant that some students felt they were only just getting 'back' in to their final year. Often, replies to specific questioning about building on subject knowledge indicated that they might be doing a relevant taught unit in the next semester, rather than current one, or that the choice of units was quite tightly prescribed and so opportunities for linking units to broad subject areas relevant to placement activities would be limited. Nevertheless, students were able to reflect on their placement experiences and relate them back to their ongoing course.

This section examines whether and how student's approaches to learning changed in the final year as a result of their placement experiences; how they related to other students; and whether and to what extent they were able to build on their subject knowledge in later stages of their undergraduate programmes.



Approaches to Learning

Many students explained how their approach to learning had evolved. The following is a small selection of the impact of the placement experience on attitudes and learning behaviour:

My approach to work is very, very different now and, just things like getting references and reading and even though some days I have lectures and some days I don't and some days I'm in half days, I do tend to work a lot more as if I was nine to five, you just get out of the habit of being able to sleep in all day! ... I'm a lot more confident with statistics just because I've been using them day in, day out ... the skills I picked up over the year have made me more able to cope with it. (K7, laboratory researcher, large pharmaceutical company) 5

I understand and I listen. I listen a lot more in lectures than I used to do in my second year and I attend my lectures a lot more. I know for a fact that I'm going to do well because I listen now ... I must admit I was a lazy student in my second year so the placement's ... moulded me into, like, I want to get my degree done, I want to get out there and I want to work and I want to earn some money. (C10, web designer, large pharmaceutical company) 10

Enhanced Understanding

For some students the impact of the placement had been substantial, not least because the work experience had enhanced understanding. 20

[I understand] all the processes you have to go through from collecting all the evidence, where it goes off, if it goes off what lab it goes to, coming back, all the administrative work. I know all the processes now so if I talk to anyone I know what I'm talking about as well, so it has made me feel better about my course ... So it's more background knowledge of things I can put into essays just when I read through books and talk about visiting a crime scene and the people that have to be there I know how it works now, I've seen it so it makes me envision it a lot better ... (K14, forensic assistant at a police HQ) 25

For one psychology student, the placement provided an understanding of research. 30

I think that what I've taken away is a better understanding of what research is about and what the point of it is really. I think it's hard to really see the point of doing all this research if you're just repeating what someone else is doing, but when you're repeating someone's research for a reason, to validate a newer bit of research, then I see the point ... I think what it showed me a lot is that research is actually forward moving and that it's not static, it doesn't stay in the same place and that it's constantly changing. (B17, research assistant, university department) 35

Assessed Work, Taught Sessions and Group Working

Several of the students made a point that they could add in their experiences of work to seminar discussions and assignments: 40

It's the case that I've been working with these things now, so I'm almost ahead of what we're learning at university, so it's really contributing to what I'm doing on my dissertation because of the areas that I've been in and I've actually researched and investigated

16 *B. Little and L. Harvey*

into these new technologies that are coming out and how they are actually used. The good thing is I've worked with them in an actual business environment. (G5, student software developer, data processing company)

5 What many of the above quotes point to is students becoming more actively engaged in their learning, as a result of their placement experiences. Where the placement was compulsory part of the programme, some students commented that tutors expected them to draw on their placement experiences to illustrate and explore themes being addressed in coursework assignments.

10 However, even without that explicit expectation, students referred to enhanced understanding of their subject and how it fits into a broader 'picture' as well as a willingness (and expectation also) to draw on wider literatures and not 'just' rely on resources and materials provided by tutors. Students perceived they were more focused on their studies, and in a sense adopting a more mature and independent approach to learning. Many were also much more prepared to question and challenge information being conveyed in lectures.

Building on Learning from Placement

20 From interviews with some 80 students (from 7 different universities, and studying a range of different programmes) who had undertaken work placements, it is clear that students continue to draw very tangible learning gains from work experiences planned as part of their overall programme.

The placements undertaken varied considerably in length, size and type of placement organisation, as well as range and complexity of work activities undertaken.

25 Not all students in the sample viewed their experiences as wholly successful but, for all, the positive aspects outweighed the negative ones, and only one regretted having undertaken a placement and he regretted starting a degree course at all. Further, it is clear that the majority of students were aware that, regardless of the actual job of work being carried out, the personal and intellectual development they were able to derive from the placement period depended, to some extent, on what they were prepared to put into it. In a significant number of cases, students indicated that they had been prepared to undertake a wide range of tasks, take on greater responsibility or take the initiative and 'grow' the placement by seeking out opportunities to gain more responsibility.

35 Personal development is clearly a major element of the placement experience. In interviews, students were well able to articulate their sense of increased confidence, and development of interpersonal skills, and their sense of now being better organised and having good time-management skills. Their increased levels of confidence seems to derive from a blend of different experiences: through having sought and taken on responsibility for specific tasks and projects within their job, and acquitting themselves well; through a realisation that their communication skills had developed to a level where they felt comfortable communicating with people of different ages, interests and levels within and outside the organisation; through a more informed sense of how generic skills can be applied to a variety of working situations.

They are also more self-aware and perhaps self-critical (in the sense of having discovered how to take criticism) and more aware of others and how to work effectively in teams, made up of diverse people with different strengths and outlooks, to achieve an objective within a fixed timescale.

Intellectual skills development can be seen as the development of higher-level academic skills (of, for example, analysis, critique and synthesis) linked to increased subject knowledge. During the interviews, students put less emphasis on these aspects than on personal development. However, when questioned further, the majority were able to cite examples of both general and more specific aspects of subject-based knowledge they had gained during their placement (as noted in Table 3). Moreover, most now had a better sense of how their studies might fit into the broader picture of working life. Many spoke of the positive aspects of being able to see theories ‘come to life’, linked to their ‘lived’ experiences of trying to use prior knowledge in work situations, which are often much messier and more complex than the ideals portrayed in course materials and texts.

Notwithstanding the seeming lack of articulation of intellectual development, the overwhelming majority of students perceived positive changes in their approaches to study, as a result of the placement experiences. Such changes related both to issues of confidence and motivation to study generally, and to a sense of more active engagement with learning tasks. This included a better personal sense of the subject matter, or of a wider reading around a topic, or a greater readiness to question and critique taught material. In this way, students were now more likely to ‘own’ the learning rather than ‘just’ accept it.

Not all students interviewed had such positive views, and a small number spoke of the challenges of moving back into university life. These challenges related both to lack of motivation for further study and, for many, the fact that most of their original cohort had now completed their studies (having chosen not to undertake a placement). However, these drawbacks did not outweigh the benefits.

The study has demonstrated the positive messages from students about the impact of work placements on their subsequent learning experiences and, in particular, their increased levels of confidence and enhanced motivation to study. This raises the question of why more students are not actively seeking to undertake a placement? Further detailed studies would need to be undertaken to answer questions such as ‘do students know what they’re missing?’, and ‘do higher education institutions or departments do enough to ensure other students ‘hear’ the positive messages about work placements?’ The likelihood is that instrumental pressures to complete their studies quickly and obtain jobs to pay off debts override the gains to be had in the slightly longer term by doing a placement.

The research suggests that more general moves towards flexibility within study programmes that allow students to choose between units and follow different routes through programmes has also contributed to the decline in take up of placements. It would indeed be unfortunate if such developments, geared, at least in part, towards increasing students’ ownership of their learning process were at the same time removing opportunities for students to enhance their learning.

Notes

1. Support for the empirical work came from HECSU, Manchester.
2. The Dearing Committee was set up in 1996 to 'make recommendations on how the purposes, shape, structure, size and funding of higher education, including support for students, should develop to meet the needs of the United Kingdom over the next twenty years, recognising that higher education embraces teaching, learning, scholarship and research' (NCIHE, 1997, p. 3).
3. From September 2006, the tuition fee arrangements for students in English higher education institutions have changed: in particular, institutions have been able to increase the tuition fee from a standard rate (c. £1,200 in 2005–06) which was paid up-front, up to a maximum of £3,000 per year, paid on completion of higher education. Institutions had tended to charge students 'out' on year-long placements 50% of the tuition fee for the year 'out'. It is not known how such arrangements have been changed by individual institutions to reflect the overall increases in tuition fees.
4. The study 'Learning through work placements and beyond' was commissioned by the Higher Education Academy's Work Placements Organisation Forum (see www.heacademy.ac.uk for further details of the academy's work) and funded by the Higher Education Careers Service Unit (www.hecsu.ac.uk). The study was undertaken jointly by a research team from the Centre for Research and Evaluation, Sheffield Hallam University and the Centre for Higher Education Research and Information, the Open University.

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AQ2 – NCIHE 1997 not in refs list, please give details

AQ3 – Brennan & Little 1996 not in refs list, please give details

AQ4 - Bourner and Ellerker (1994) not in refs list, please give details

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