

Appendix C

Research work: The extent and variety of forms of work-related learning

1. This appendix summarises the research work commissioned via HEFCE (for our statistics and research sub-group). The full research, entitled 'Nature and extent of undergraduates' work experience' is published separately and contains the formal detailed references.

2. Work experience can take a variety of forms. It includes experience that is embedded in the curriculum; experience (perhaps project-linked) that is assessed and accredited; and part-time vacation and term-time paid and voluntary work. It also includes the term-time paid and voluntary work that students are increasingly undertaking. In the main, the research took the term 'work experience' to include any form of work that an undergraduate undertakes during his/her period of study. As such, three main categories of work experience were examined:

- 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.

3. The researchers acknowledge that there are inevitably overlaps between the three categories, particularly the second and third. In estimating current levels of activity it is important to remember that for any single student the experience may include any or all of the various elements.

4. The research work suggests that in 1998/99 some 180,000 UK undergraduates were engaged on full-time and sandwich programmes that included organised work experience as part of the programme of study. This represented 17.5% of the total full-time undergraduate population (HESA statistics). This statistic almost certainly

underestimates the full extent of such organised work experience. It excludes, for example, students on programmes such as nursing that include compulsory blocks of work experience. Surveys carried out by our researchers found that, in addition to students on sandwich programmes and full-time programmes that include compulsory blocks of professional practice, a significant minority of full-time students were involved in organised work experience in the form of short placements or 'live' projects with employers. Centrally-held institutional data tends to exclude information on the number of students involved in these other forms of organised work experience.

5. Surveys by academic subject complement this overall picture. For example, a 1998 survey of art and design graduates found that 29% had undertaken a period of work placement as part of their degree. A 1999 survey of sociology courses found that almost 40% offered placements.

6. In addition to organised work experience as part of a programme of study, the research noted a variety of forms of work experience that are external to any specific programme of study. This might include structured activity geared to undergraduates with some relevance to work such as courses offered by private organisations to enhance students' personal skills and/or introduce them to the world of work. However, as these did not involve work experience as such, they fell outside the researchers' remit.

7. There was some difficulty in distinguishing between organised work experiences (in that help is given in finding the work opportunities) and those where the work experience is to some extent structured to maximise the benefit to the participant, particularly in terms of learning from it. The lack of centrally available data about the range of activities of this type meant that the researchers were unable to estimate overall levels of activity.

8. Some employers encourage students to work on schemes they sponsor themselves and give some form of recognition. The Asda Flying Start and Shell STEP schemes are examples. Lloyds TSB has recently funded schemes to place Cambridge students in entrepreneurial companies in the Cambridge area and to place students, especially ones from ethnic backgrounds, in small companies in London.

9. The researchers noted that little is reliably known about the numbers of undergraduates benefiting from initiatives like those described above. However, the researchers conclude that numbers on schemes offering organised work experience (external to the programme of study) and support for learning are probably low. This might be because of a lack of capacity or because of a lack of student interest. The limited numbers involved on schemes that offer support for learning and some form of independent certification suggest that the certificate does not carry enough weight in the labour market to impress employers and so motivate students to seek certification.

10. When institutions offer assessment of learning derived from *ad hoc* work experience, the researchers conclude that students fail to make the most of the opportunities available. This is because they seek this kind of work mainly for financial reasons. The level of student participation in this kind of work experience is nevertheless substantial.

11. The Income and Expenditure Survey for 1998/99 suggests that just over 60% of full-time students worked during the year, with 30% working for the same employer throughout. Some 46% of full-time students were employed during term-time, working on average 11 hours per week. Over 80% of full-time students worked over the summer vacation (against 71% in 1995/6). The overall percentages may well have increased again since 1998/9.